

LISETTE MARSHALL



SILVER

THE QUEEN & THE ASSASSIN
PART II

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PROLOGUE



‘Evening,’ Runo said as he stepped into the fire-lit bedroom with a clean shirt, a Cuvrian almanac, and a bag of almond cakes under his arm. ‘Survived the past three hours on your own, I see?’

Tamar looked up from the pile of letters on her desk and gave him a quick smile – a tired smile, too. Had she been working late again last night?

‘Just barely,’ she said, turning back to her work as he flung his shirt over the nearest chair and put his book and cakes down on her bed. ‘If you could subtly have slit Pridon’s throat before dinner, I’d have been a much happier woman.’

‘Still not giving up on his marital ambitions?’

She groaned. ‘Does he strike you as a man likely to give up on anything soon?’

‘Fair point,’ Runo said. ‘Which is why I personally wouldn’t jump into bed with the bastard, but to each his own, of course.’

Tamar gave him a foul glare, and he laughed out loud. Averting her face, a moment too late to hide her own amusement, she said, ‘Let’s just say I was desperate enough to behave like an idiot.’

Runo shook his head and ambled towards her, laid his hands on her shoulders and kissed the crown of her head. Her laugh had already melted off her face again. Her shoulders were too tense under his fingers, too. A quick glance at the parchment before her told him she had been working on a letter to King Ulrick of Copper Coast, but apart from a quick greeting, she hadn’t written down a single word.

‘Sanction trouble?’ he said.

With a muffled curse she rested her head against his midriff and closed her eyes. ‘Of course.’

‘What is it this time?’

‘Emrys wrote back.’ She gestured at the pile of letters on her desk. ‘That he still agrees the Empire’s attempt at my life calls for some sanctions, and so forth, and so on – but he’s also not going to attend any Five Kingdoms summit where Donovan will be personally present.’

A stance Runo could sympathise with, considering that Donovan’s marriage to Emrys’s niece had ended with Donovan proclaiming her dead and locking her in a tower for

two years – but after witnessing the numerous hours of sleep Tamar had sacrificed to convince the bastard to even attend at all, he couldn't help a sting of annoyance at Emrys and his bloody family values.

‘Would he agree to stay away and let you and the others agree on some reasonable sanctions?’ he said slowly.

‘Emrys would.’ She groaned. ‘Which would solve most of the issue, except that Ulrick’s latest letter also just arrived, and he insists that he doesn’t see the sense in organizing a summit where we won’t all be present. Argues that it will only lead to more backhanded deals and mutual distrust down the road.’

Runo scoffed. ‘Unhelpful. Ask Donovan to send someone else to represent him?’

‘Already did,’ she said, her eyes still closed. She sounded drained. Worse, she sounded on the brink of giving up, and that, Runo knew by now, was a point she didn’t reach easily. ‘Which is unacceptable to him. He’s not going to – what did he say? He’s not going to hide away like some criminal just because the rest of the world insists on believing his wife’s poisonous lies about him.’

Donovan’s story, Runo recalled, involved some convoluted tale about Ysabel faking her own death in order to run off with a lover. ‘For the bloody gods’ sake.’

‘And we can’t afford to have this dragging on for months on end,’ Tamar added flatly. ‘Jaghar warned that Maiva’s spies are likely catching up on our attempts already. If we’re not careful she’ll be prepared to work around our measures before

we have even started.’ She sat up straighter again, more agitated suddenly. ‘So I’ll have to write Ulrick. He might still change his mind if—’

Runo sighed and pressed his thumbs into the hard knots of her shoulder muscles. She cramped up with a sharp breath, then cautiously relaxed under his hands as he massaged her neck, her shoulders, her upper back, in slow circles moving down along her spine. Only when reached the lacy bodice of her dress did she stiffen again.

‘Runo...’

‘You can write that letter tomorrow,’ he said, untangling her lacing. ‘This has been going on for months. A single day isn’t going to make the difference. You’ve sacrificed enough sleep on politics already.’

‘But if I can’t convince them...’

‘Then you invite Jaghar and Viviette for a two-nation summit, figure out some sanctions you know Emrys and Ulrick will agree to, and tell Donovan he has no choice but to join. The alliance treaty still obliges him to act when another monarch is attacked, much as he likes to forget about that.’

She opened her mouth, then abruptly closed it again when he pried her bodice off her. A violent shudder ran through her as he trailed his fingers down her back, then slipped them around her body and found the curve of her breasts.

‘You make it all sound so easy,’ she muttered.

‘I wouldn’t say it’s easy, but you and Rock Hall together should be capable enough to figure something out.’ He cupped her breasts, savouring their softness, their fullness in his hands. Her nipples were small pebbles against his thumbs. ‘Forget that letter for a few hours, Tamar. You’ll have better ideas tomorrow, and you definitely have better things to do tonight.’

A small smile tugged at the corners of her mouth. ‘Do I?’

He bent over and pressed his lips to hers in reply, pinching one nipple between his fingers at the same moment. With a stifled moan she answered his kiss, soft lips melting into his. Her body still resisted for a few last heartbeats, spine and shoulders struggling against his hold; then she relented and wilted in his arms, with a soft, mewling sound that sent a bolt of arousal through him.

‘Yes,’ he muttered, lifting her from her chair to carry her to the bed. ‘You do, Your Majesty. You definitely do.’

CHAPTER I



The royal visit arrived on a late spring morning, a day so bright that it seemed like summer had arrived a month early. The woods around the Red Castle were blossoming, a sea of pink and white as far as the eye could see, and when Tamar opened the doors to her balcony, the scent of sweet flowers and sun-drenched grass hung heavy in the air.

A day like a dream, if she hadn't been so unspeakably nervous.

'So,' she said, and flattened her skirt with anxious, jumpy hands as she turned back to her bed. Runo sat leaning back in the pillows, shirtless and rumped from the night, an almanac of the Cuvri War in his lap. The sight of him alone made her skin tingle with a pleasant yet nerve-wrecking warmth. Not a warmth she could use right now, minutes before she'd have to welcome her visitors under the watching eyes of her full court.

'So?' he said.

‘You’ll stay away from them, yes?’ It had to be the fifth time in the past hour alone she repeated those words. ‘Even if you get curious or – or hell, just tired of following instructions – you’ll make sure not to—’

‘Not to get on anyone’s nerves, not to kill anyone, not to flaunt my southern face in front of anyone taking objection to southern faces...’ He sounded unusually irritated for a moment. ‘Did I forget anything?’

‘It’s not a *joke*, Runo.’

He looked up from his book, a joyless smile around his lips. ‘You think I find it funny?’

‘I’m not sure if you realise how much it might damage our international relations if they figure out what’s going on,’ she said, closing her eyes for a heartbeat. ‘You’ve never met Jaghar. He’s really – not very fond of the Empire.’

‘Neither am I, in case that slipped your mind.’

‘No, but you killed a few dozen people in the Empress’s name nonetheless. I don’t think he’ll gloss over that fact so easily, and by the time he figures out how much you know – how close you are to...’

‘You?’ he said, a little too suggestively, and again that dangerous warmth curled through her, paying no attention at all to the more sensible parts of her mind.

‘To the centre of power. He’s not going to be happy about it, and I can’t afford to alienate even *more* of my allies, alright? So stay away from him, and for the love of the gods, please

stay away from Viviette too, because she is ten times more clever than she wants you to believe, and she'll damn well figure out what's going on from three innocent words at most. Yes?'

'It is of course possible,' Runo said, resting his arms on his knees, 'that they already know.'

She sank down into her desk chair and rubbed her face, barely able to suppress her curse. A possibility she didn't really want to think about. Could they know? She'd been careful, very careful since his return two months ago. No more than three nightly visits to her bedroom in any given week, no public meetings if she could avoid them... She barely even met his gaze in public. To her court Runo was simply a Taavi deserter who trained with her men in the mornings and slept in one of the small, cell-like rooms in the wing occupied by her landless knights. Not even Amiran seemed to suspect more was going on.

Then again, even before he married Viviette, even when he was still just the Spymaster of the Peaks, Jaghar had rarely waited for the rest of the world to make his discoveries. She didn't expect he would be any less observant with a crown on his head, and of course he hadn't forgotten she'd written a dozen times to inquire about Runo's whereabouts before his return to the Red Castle...

Again she nearly cursed. The thought of the king and queen of the Peaks riding into Redwood in the full knowledge of this impossible affair was nearly enough to make her crawl

underneath her blankets again and just forget about the whole hopeless visit.

‘It doesn’t have to be *that* bad,’ Runo said, reading her thoughts from her face with maddening accuracy. ‘They can hardly call you a Taavi whore and ride straight back to Rock Hall, even if they’d like to. It’s in their interests too to get those sanctions figured out – they want to weaken the Empire as much as you do. They should be happy this whole situation is giving them an excuse to get the alliance together for the effort.’

‘You’re supposed to be the assassin here,’ she said with a joyless chuckle, ‘not the political brain.’

He shrugged. ‘Everyone who lives past thirty in Raulinna is a politician of sorts. If this is the only argument you have not to admit I’m right...’

‘No, you’re right.’ She grimaced. ‘But then it would still be helpful not to squander their goodwill before we’ve even started the negotiations.’

‘Which is why I won’t be shoving my arm under their noses the minute they arrive,’ Runo said, glancing at the lines inked into his skin. ‘I’m on guard, and so are you – that’s all we can do. Now come here and stop looking like we’re all about to die, will you?’

She let out a laugh and stood up, then sank down on the edge of the mattress. He came up from the blankets and pulled her into his embrace, into the reassuring scent of sun and warm spices, into a world she didn’t need to control. Resting

her head against the smooth skin of his chest, surrounded by strong arms and the slow beat of his heart, she forgot for a moment about the frantic preparations of the last weeks, the discussions and deliberations and disagreements, the piles of requests and demands that Lasha placed upon her desk each morning.

Then knuckles tapped against her bedroom door, and she could no longer hide.



Amiran already stood waiting at the gate when she hurried onto the courtyard, ignoring the stares and whispers of her knights and nobles. As she positioned herself by his side, he gave her a quick nod and muttered, ‘Was afraid you’d never show up at all.’

‘Apologies,’ she said with a mirthless smile. ‘Had to answer a few last letters.’

Which wasn’t a lie, but certainly not the full truth either – the letters only accounted for a few minutes of the delay. But Amiran seemed content with the explanation, and at least she *was* still in time to receive her visitors.

Although, admittedly, she shouldn’t have been a minute later.

Below her, halfway up the hill, the horses and coaches were rapidly approaching the castle, the banners of the Peaks

waving in the mild spring breeze. First came a row of knights. Then a row of people looking like clerks and assistants, whose actual profession probably involved a rather different type of information processing – once a spy king, always a spy king, after all. It was behind that slightly suspicious group of visitors that Tamar found the two people she'd been looking for.

They rode side by side in the middle of their company, leaning over to each other every now and then to share some thought or observation. Jaghar was dressed in modest, inconspicuous black that nearly made you forget he was the crowned king of a sovereign kingdom these days, his silver-blond hair still worn long in Androughan style, his knife still at his belt despite the sizeable armed company around him. Next to him, looking deceptively harmless, Viviette wore a burgundy travelling dress that would quite shock the fashionable segment of their audience with its striking lack of silk ribbons, pearls, and lace.

For a fraction of a moment Tamar couldn't suppress her smile. At the Taavi court, Runo had informed her last week, the general opinion held that the young queen of the Peaks was a vain, empty-minded doll who managed to perform her duties only under her husband's strict supervision. Somehow Tamar suspected the girl would be quite amused to hear about that reputation, despite the source of the news.

Although it might be better not to take the risk until she was very sure of Viviette's opinion on defecting Taavi assassins.

Finally the first knights reached the top of the hill, and she forced that concern back into the shadows of her mind. She could *probably* trust Jaghar not to throw anyone off her towers without warning. There was no sense in brooding about Runo's wellbeing as long as he was sitting safely in her own rooms, and with the Empress potentially still out for blood, she had better things to worry about.

Jaghar dismounted as soon as the official welcome of the trumpets died away, and reached his wife a hand she didn't seem to need but accepted quite cheerfully nonetheless. With most royal visitors Tamar would have felt obliged to first go through the full sequence of mutual bows and curtsies, formulaic greetings, and polite inquiries on the journey. These two, however... Even if she wasn't quite so sure what to expect from them in the coming days, there was too much history, most of it a little too undignified to pretend she was still the unaffected Iron Queen around them.

'Viviette,' she said, and smiled. The queen of the Peaks, yes – but first and foremost the girl who had covered up Tamar's role in Anzor's death, then spent a full night listening to her rambling about her late husband's offenses. 'I'm so glad to see you. And...' She turned to Jaghar, raising her eyebrows. 'Colleague.'

Something suspiciously like a smile hovered at the corners of his lips. 'One day I'll stop flinching at that word, I hope.'

Tamar laughed. Viviette gave the both of them a bright smile and moved on to Amiran, greeting him with what

sounded like a little too much amusement – as if she were aware of secrets he might not even know about himself. Jaghar threw her a quick glance, looking no less amused, then glanced up at the castle towering over them. For a moment his expression darkened.

‘It seemed larger, last time I was here.’

She knew their thoughts strayed towards the same memory – the day he had, barefoot and dirty and close to starving, stormed into her parlour, nearly killed a guard or two in the process, and then delivered a meticulous account of all the ways in which the Taavi Empress was trying to swindle her. When he looked back at her, the shadows had vanished from his face, although there was still something unusually wistful to his expression.

‘You seemed smaller, too,’ Tamar said, and he grimaced.

‘And muddier, I’m quite sure.’

She laughed. ‘Absolutely, and you smelled of goat sheds. Shall we go inside, or would you like me to dwell on the memories a little longer?’

‘Much as I appreciate your enthusiasm,’ he said dryly, ‘I don’t mind getting away from this audience. If you can think of a slightly calmer place to recover from the journey...’

‘I have a rather comfortable parlour available. You may remember it.’

He followed her inside the castle, shaking his head with obvious amusement. Behind them, Tamar just heard Viviette

broach the subject of Taavi assassins to Amiran. Despite all warnings to the contrary, her cousin had already started a rather extensive report of the developments of the past months, making no effort whatsoever to hide the fact that Runo was currently still residing at the Red Castle.

When she glanced aside, Jaghar's faint amusement had grown into a full smile, and it was a smile that somehow made him look twice as dangerous as usual.

Gods be damned.

This was not at all how she'd planned for this to go.



At least she didn't see a trace of Runo for the rest of the day as she got through some quick routine tasks and took her guests for a walk through the blossoming forest. Perhaps, she tried to reassure herself, they'd assume the assassin had simply joined the ranks of her soldiers if they found no evidence to the contrary. That was at least a situation she could justify...

But he stood loitering in the dinner hall when she walked in that evening with Jaghar and Viviette by her side.

She nearly stopped dead in her tracks, despite the dozens of eyes around her. It really was him, standing there as if she hadn't warned him a hundred times to stay away – hands in his pockets, the usual leisurely smile on his face, chatting with a few of the knights who shared his lodgings. Making no effort

whatsoever to look like just a simple soldier. Worse – he met her eyes as soon as she noticed him, too quickly to pretend he hadn't stood there waiting for her.

For two heartbeats Tamar dared to hope that perhaps, if he just looked enough like a man who felt perfectly at home in the Red Castle, the two royals beside her would simply overlook his presence. Then she glanced aside and saw Jaghar's eyebrow come up, slowly but meaningfully, and knew she'd lost control.

Oh, for hell's sake.

'Give me a moment,' she said, glancing around. Where was Amiran? Could she instruct him to manoeuvre Runo out of here? Not that *he* liked to deal with the man he clearly still suspected to be an Imperial pawn, but that was at least better than letting Runo take a seat at those same knights' table tonight – a table that would immediately prove he was more than a simple soldier to her.

'Tamar?' Viviette said beside her. 'Are you looking for someone?'

'I need to discuss something quick with Amiran,' she said vaguely, gesturing at the main table. 'Please take your seats, I'll be with you in a moment – so sorry for the confusion...'

She could feel their gazes on her as she changed course, but didn't look back. Amiran couldn't be far away. She'd caught a glimpse of him just five minutes ago...

Without a trace of hesitation, Runo broke off his conversation and sauntered towards her.

What in the world was he doing? She rarely exchanged a word with him in public, and now, with *Jaghar* watching along, he thought it would be a fine idea to come promenading around her evening meal? While giving her that inviting smile he *knew* made her knees quiver under her skirts?

‘Evening, Your Majesty.’ He sounded too amused, and her glare only brightened the twinkle in his eyes. ‘Had a good day?’

‘What in the world,’ she said between her teeth, her voice low enough to be audible only for him, ‘are you doing here?’

‘Don’t give me that murderous look, Tamar. And calm down.’ He was far too close to her now – close enough for his scent to reach her, and that really didn’t keep her knees any steadier. He smelled of inescapable kisses, of freedom, of waking up with strong arms around her body. If she only stretched out her arm, she could run her fingers along his chest, feel the sculpted lines of his body below his shirt.

The thought only fanned her despair now.

‘Don’t start telling me to calm down. I *told* you to—’

‘To stay away,’ he said, and shrugged. ‘Wouldn’t help me. They know too much anyway.’

She stiffened. ‘What?’

‘Some terribly polite Peak girl got a hold of me when I sneaked out of your room a few hours ago. Lost her way to the

guest tower, or so she said. Was extraordinarily interested in my name and function at the court. But to be honest...’ He shrugged, still not bothering to take his hands from his pockets. ‘I doubt they even needed her to locate me. Pretty sure she knew exactly where to find me in the first place – she practically stood waiting for me in the corridor.’

Tamar closed her eyes. People were watching her, she knew. Not the moment to fall into his arms and curse Jaghar with his bloody spies and Viviette with her bloody questions into oblivion. But it took unnerving effort to still look like the usual unaffected, undisturbed Iron Queen and say, ‘Well.’

‘Yes,’ Runo said, chuckling. ‘So then I thought I might as well have a decent dinner down here. But don’t mind me too much – you have your guests to entertain.’

She opened her mouth and made the mistake of hesitating. Don’t mind me. He was right, that was the worst of it – if she sent him away now, that would draw infinitely more attention than if she just ignored him for the rest of the night. As a matter of fact, she should have ignored him from the moment she stepped into this hall. And now she had to have dinner with the people who were shamelessly sending spies around her castle, and somehow she had to look like she didn’t care they had just found a Taavi assassin spending his time far too close to her bedroom.

‘Don’t look that frightened, Tamar,’ he said.

‘I’m not looking *frightened*.’

‘You’re looking like someone trying not to look frightened, which is basically the same thing.’

She gave up. He knew her too well anyway. ‘Hell’s sake, you *know* how much trouble this may cause. You don’t want to get Jaghar after yourself either, and...’

‘Would prefer not to, no.’ His grin abruptly vanished, replaced by that calm, golden earnestness she felt stirring deep in her guts. ‘But there’s little you or I can do about them knowing about me, so why would you get upset about it before you even know how bad it will get?’

‘Because—’

‘I know, I know, because you want to be in control of all possible trouble that might arise.’ His grin was nearly endearing. Tamar felt like slapping it off his face, and also like laughing – both of them equally impossible in this hall, with this audience.

Again she closed her eyes for the shortest moment, breathing in the scent of him. A faint headache was emerging behind her eyes. It probably wouldn’t disappear for hours – not until she retreated to her bedroom tonight, where he’d lovingly and unyieldingly force her mind to let go of the world’s weight on her shoulders again.

‘You’re insufferable when you’re right,’ she muttered, and he laughed.

‘At your service, Your Majesty. Anything else I can do for you?’

There was a little too much suggestion in his voice, and far too much temptation. Despite herself she nearly smiled; if not for the watching eyes, her self-restraint may have lost the fight.

‘If you could be so kind to repeat that question in a more private location later...’

‘Will be my pleasure,’ he said, his lips quirking into a smile that took the breath from her lungs for a moment. ‘Not just mine, perhaps. Go enjoy that bloody dinner, Tamar. And stop worrying about me.’ A quick glance at the table behind her; his grin grew a dangerous shade of wicked. ‘I’m pretty good at surviving royal wrath, after all.’

Which he was, she had to admit that much – but she caught Jaghar’s stone-hard look as she turned back to her guests, and somehow she suspected he might be significantly less susceptible to the dangerous charms of a Taavi assassin gone rogue.



Neither Jaghar nor Viviette spoke a word about Runo during the entire dinner, however. Even when the pleasant chatting about mutual acquaintances turned political, the presence of a former Taavi assassin five tables away was stubbornly ignored; instead, they filled the time after dessert with the last rumours from the Copper Coast court, speculations on Donovan’s plans for the future, and some first suggestions for

the measures the alliance of their kingdoms might be taking against the Taavi Empress. Limitations on the grain export. Taxes on Taavi jewellery. All ideas Runo had already predicted in the past weeks – but then again, what hadn't he predicted?

Tamar suppressed the urge to glance at the knights' table – he had left with his companions just after finishing his meal. Did he realise she'd effectively be echoing his ideas for most of the night? He quite possibly did. *Everyone who lives past thirty in Raulinna is a politician of sorts...*

'Tamar?'

She jolted up. Jaghar sat staring at her, his dark eyes unnervingly knowing. Gods be damned. Fine, omniscient allies were helpful enough, but he'd been a damn lot easier to handle when he was still a ragged beggar boy and didn't yet have the power to ruin half her economy with a few royal orders.

'Hm?' she said.

'I'm off to bed, if you don't mind. Long day.' He didn't look tired in the slightest. 'Do I see you tomorrow morning?'

Tamar held his gaze for a heartbeat, then turned to Viviette, who showed equally little signs of exhaustion, and plentiful signs of a disconcerting smile she only barely suppressed. She looked back at Jaghar. He raised an eyebrow – an invitation, nearly. Yes, that look said, we both know I'm lying through my teeth, but are you really going to make a *point* of it?

Making a point of things, thankfully, was something she excelled in.

‘Ah,’ she said slowly, leaning back into her chair. ‘Exhausted from the effort of steering your spies around?’

‘My spies?’

‘I understand one of your people was found wandering around my rooms this afternoon.’

His eyebrow came up another fraction. ‘Really? Probably lost their way. It’s a pretty sizeable castle.’

‘Am I to believe you didn’t have them learn the full castle plan by heart before you even left Rock Hall, Spymaster?’

Viviette sniggered between them, and something suspiciously close to a grin rose around his lips. ‘I’m not sure if you’re trusting me too much or too little now, Tamar.’

‘You damn well know I trust you, generally speaking. But you should know better than to stick your nose into my personal matters, and I really don’t see why else you’d want anyone around my rooms. Keep your spies out of that tower from now on, will you?’

‘Fair,’ he said as he got to his feet with a quick nod. ‘No more spies, then. Regardless – I’m off to arrange a thing or two. Enjoy the rest of the evening.’

He was gone before she could object, with a last quick hand on his wife’s shoulder. Viviette stayed behind, looking a little too unfazed for Tamar’s comfort, and a little too amused as well.

‘A thing or two?’ Tamar said, taking care to sound properly displeased.

‘Oh, you know him.’ Viviette waved that question away as she reached for the nearest jug of wine and refilled both their glasses. ‘Can’t sit by idly if he has a world to save. Don’t worry about it. He’s being careful.’ A sip of wine, followed by an inquisitive glance, uncomfortably bright green eyes. ‘So. Speaking of personal rooms – how’s that assassin of yours doing?’

CHAPTER 2



Runo locked the door to Tamar's bedroom with a little more care than usual, threw a habitual look around, and didn't find any polite Peak girls lying in wait for him with drawn daggers. Well. That could have been worse, after the glances he'd caught from the royal visitors over the course of his dinner.

He couldn't suppress a curse as he walked over to the balcony doors and threw them open to let the fresh spring air in. Tamar preferred to keep them closed in the evenings – preferred to keep out the sounds of the castle, at least, the shouts of guards, the whinnying of horses, the blacksmith's hammer pounding on the anvil. Personally, Runo quite enjoyed those sounds. There was something to be said for lying in the silk blankets of a queen's bed with a pile of priceless books and a glass of fine wine at hand while the rest of the world was still labouring around him.

Then again, he vaguely suspected this particular evening might end up being less peaceful than most.

Shaking his head, he snatched his chronicle off the floor, dropped down on the bed, and kicked off his boots. The question was what it was going to be. One of those unnervingly polite young men and women with the daggers they were doubtlessly hiding in their sleeves? A knight lying in wait for him on the way to the privy? Not very likely. Even with that repelled look Tamar had given him in the hall downstairs – a throb of annoyance ran through him – her visitors should know that his death would cause a diplomatic madhouse. And yet...

Viviette had been glancing in his direction a little too often during dinner, with those clever green eyes that didn't fit the mindless little girl Raulinna believed she was. Jaghar hadn't given him a single glance, on the other hand, and somehow that seemed equally meaningful. So what was it they were planning to do?

He should probably be nervous at this point. The spy king had a reputation. He had a reputation in *Raulinna*, more specifically, which was an honour only few inhabitants of the Five Kingdoms could claim. He walks through walls, they said at home. Watches you through your mirrors. Hears every word you speak if you make the mistake of saying his name out loud, knows your secrets before you know them yourself. Which all sounded terribly intimidating, Runo had to admit that much – but even if the bastard walked through a hundred walls, Tamar would still be asking unamused questions if she

were to find a corpse in her bed after dinner. Which Jaghar and Viviette should know better than anyone, after the letters she'd written them during his trip to Noviisa.

Runo sighed and opened his book. No choice but just to wait and keep his knife at hand.

With his eyes on the writing of Redwood's chroniclers and the soothing cacophony of the castle life in the background, the time at least passed in a reasonably pleasant way. He read, and remembered – the hills of Cuvri and the huts in which he'd spent the first seven years of his life, the shreds of the language, the hot sun on his face and the smells of dry grass and clay... The more he read about the land, the more he realised he had never forgotten much of his youth at all – just forced himself to forget.

The more he read, the less he saw the empty eyes of Sidra in the world around him, too.

He finished a full chapter on Cuvrian pre-war economy – endless descriptions of shepherding and harvest quantities, calling up the comforting memory of the fields surrounding his village. He skipped the chapter on the start of the war with the Taavi Empire; he'd read it some fifteen times already. Just when he browsed to the next chapter – a report of the first doomed peace negotiations – a glimpse of movement in the corner of his eye made him look up.

And freeze.

And blink.

In the second doorway to Tamar's room – the doorway to which the only key was currently sitting in the pocket of his trousers – the king of the Peaks stood leaning against the doorframe, arms folded, one eyebrow raised to rather impressive heights.

Well. That was an option too, of course.

Runo blinked one more time, just to make sure his eyes weren't deceiving him – but the silver-blond, black-clad man fifteen feet away from him still didn't vanish, nor did he give the impression he was about to vanish. If anything, Jaghar's sharp face turned another few degrees cooler – and yet he didn't speak. How long had he been standing there already? Seconds? Minutes?

'Ah,' Runo said.

He had to say something, after all, and in his own humble opinion, he could be excused for lack of decorum under these circumstances.

'Ah?' Jaghar repeated.

'I understand you're bringing me a surprise visit? What an unexpected joy.' He coughed, then nodded at the doorway. 'Pretty sure that door was supposed to be locked.'

'Was it?' Jaghar said coolly, slipping something long and thin and silvery into his boot as he took a single step forward. Lockpick. That explained a thing or two. 'It wasn't very vocal about it.'

Runo chuckled. ‘Surprisingly unobservant for a man who apparently knows what’s happening at the other side of the world at any given moment.’

‘Can’t pay attention to everything. I’m sure you’ll forgive me.’

‘I might just forgive you if you could be so kind to stay where you are.’ Estimating the distance between himself and the other man, he slowly sat up straighter and swung his feet over the edge of the mattress, making sure to avoid any sudden movements. His knife was mere inches away from his hand, but he didn’t reach for it yet. ‘Something tells me we’ll get along better with a few feet between us.’

Jaghar tilted his head but didn’t move, studying him for a few quiet heartbeats. Runo gave his most amiable smile, just for the hell of it. He wasn’t sure if he would win if this came to a fight, he had to admit – the man may be built surprisingly slender, and seemed to carry only the single ivory knife at his belt, but then he was still the former Spymaster of the Peaks. Somehow it seemed unlikely he’d be so easily defeated. But what was the sense in retreating before the battle had even started?

‘Well?’ Jaghar said curtly. His face didn’t betray a trace of curiosity, or anger, or indeed any emotion at all. Runo smiled even broader to compensate.

‘Oh, you want *me* to carry on this pleasant conversation? I assumed you had something to say to me. Most people don’t commit burglary for the joy of it.’

‘I wouldn’t say I’m overjoyed to find myself in this company, no.’

‘Well, you know the way to the door,’ Runo said, shrugging. ‘Anything else?’

The other man’s face was a stone mask, as if he didn’t even hear the taunting, the thinly veiled scorn. ‘Care to explain what you’re doing here?’

‘Depends,’ Runo said. ‘I don’t suppose you feel terribly inclined to explain your own invasion of a queen’s bedroom first?’

Jaghar narrowed his eyes. ‘Seems to me I have about as much reason to be here as you have.’

‘I beg to differ, brother. I have the key to the room, you don’t. I’m here with her permission, you aren’t. So all in all...’

‘And why would she give you permission to loiter around in her rooms?’

Runo shrugged again. ‘Don’t see why that would be any of your concern.’

‘You’re idling around in the bedroom of my kingdom’s primary ally,’ Jaghar said, somehow barely moving his lips at all, ‘mere months after you tried to kill her in name of the Empire we’re currently trying to keep away from our borders. I consider it my concern to make sure you’re not making unpleasant use of that situation.’

‘And you assume Tamar isn’t capable of dealing with unpleasant situations herself?’

‘Let’s say she doesn’t sport the most brilliant track record when it comes to removing troublesome characters from her rooms.’

‘Ah,’ Runo said. ‘Afraid I’ll follow in dear Anzor’s footsteps?’

Jaghar’s expression turned even colder. Perhaps that was how the man dealt with surprise. ‘You know about Anzor.’

‘Of course I know about Anzor.’

‘Don’t see why she would ever tell a Taavi assassin about —’

‘A *former* Taavi assassin,’ Runo said cheerfully. ‘Small difference, but then again, all the difference in the world. Any more questions, or are we...’

‘Show me your arm.’

It wasn’t a question, or even an attempt to disguise the command as such. Runo sighed, glanced down at his right arm, and considered his options. He could refuse, of course, and allow the scene to turn significantly more unpleasant. But what would it win him? The other already knew enough about his past. It wouldn’t look any more innocent if he hid the killing marks, and if anything, being so secretive about them would suggest the existence of more guilty secrets than he was actually trying to keep.

Or he could cooperate and follow the instructions. Which went quite against his instincts, but then again – so did dying without a decent reason.

He stood and rolled up his sleeve. Jaghar's hawkish eyes rested on the inked skin for five quiet heartbeats, his face showing no trace of emotion. Then, looking up to meet Runo's eyes, he coldly said, 'Forty-two?'

'Bit of an underestimation, really,' Runo said. 'They only consider the direct targets – collateral damage is kindly ignored. I'd say it's closer to sixty. Not sure about the exact numbers. I didn't keep perfect count, to be honest.'

Something twitched in Jaghar's face – the first hint that he was capable of human emotions other than stoic annoyance. 'I see.'

'No.' Runo lowered his sleeve again without releasing the other man's gaze. 'To be honest, Your Majesty, or whatever I'm supposed to call you – I don't think you see.'

'You don't?'

Runo smiled, sticking his hands into his pockets without relaxing his arms. A mere ten feet between them. Not the moment to get distracted. 'You're assuming the good old enemy of your enemy, aren't you? Everyone killed in the name of the Empire must have been someone you'd rather have kept alive, and therefore I effectively killed sixty of your closest friends – honourable thought, I will admit, but Raulinna doesn't do honour. In the Empire, the enemy of your enemy is still your enemy. As a matter of fact, your friends are your enemies too. Just the fact that I killed them doesn't mean you'd have liked them. Actually, I'm pretty confident you wouldn't have.'

‘You seem pretty confident of quite a lot, for rather unfathomable reasons,’ Jaghar said, raising his eyebrow, and Runo chuckled again.

‘You tossed Mauno out of that window, didn’t you?’

‘Don’t know why I’d do such a thing.’

‘Oh, please. You’re the person supposed to know everything.’ He shook his head, unable to suppress another joyless laugh. Never had he expected Raulinna court gossip to come in this handy – the dozens of theories making the rounds on the unexpected death of one of Maiva’s primary diplomats, all of them involving the name of the man standing before him right now. ‘You know he was sent to the Peaks to kill your king. You know what he was doing to farmers’ children in his free time, too, if I’m not mistaken.’

Again that twitch of emotion. ‘I suggest you stop there.’

‘I already made my point,’ Runo said, slowly cocking his head. ‘You can hardly congratulate yourself on removing Mauno from this world and then blame me for these forty-two kills – do you realise these people were no different from the one you threw off that tower? Backstabbing, power-hungry pests, all of them. I wasn’t sent to kill them because they were decent people. I was sent to kill them because they were as rotten as the rest of the Empire, but slightly worse at the game. And...’

He hesitated. Jaghar didn’t move, didn’t even blink.

‘Look,’ Runo continued, his voice lower now. ‘I won’t claim I’d have refused to kill any target with a grain of decency in their body. I never got the chance to find out. But I do know what happened when I got the order to kill this particular target, and it was her decency that threw me off her trail before anything else. Do with that what you want, ignore it if you must – but don’t give me that melodrama about me killing the enemies of your enemies. They were your enemies, too.’

Again Jaghar was silent for several long heartbeats. Then, abruptly, he said, ‘Sit down.’

Runo raised his eyebrows. ‘If that’s your attempt at a friendly invitation, you still have some work to do, brother.’

‘I have no intentions to be particularly friendly, thank you.’

Runo sniggered and fell back down on Tamar’s bed. Only then did Jaghar step away from the door, pull the desk chair closer, and sink down into the seat, silent for another few moments. When he eventually looked up, his expression had turned stoically pensive rather than stoically furious.

‘I was told you’re Cuvrian by birth.’

‘Who told you?’

A quick raised eyebrow. ‘Does it matter?’

‘Suppose it wasn’t Tamar,’ Runo said, ignoring the question. ‘Who else knows – only Amiran, I think? Who isn’t particularly fond of you, as far as I’ve seen. Not sure why he’d

give you that information unless you pressed a knife to his throat.’

‘I can assure you I didn’t, in case you were worried about him.’

‘Not necessarily.’ Runo scratched the back of his head. Little chance Jaghar had somehow managed to elicit the story from Amiran during a casual chat. Then again, Jaghar wasn’t here on his own, and from Tamar’s stories, Viviette was hardly less harmless...

‘He told your wife, didn’t he?’

Without word or warning a smile rose on Jaghar’s face – a quick, fleeting one, gone in the blink of an eye, but a smile nonetheless. His wife. Despite his annoyance, despite this unwelcome interrogation, despite the ivory knife still gleaming dangerously at him, Runo caught himself feeling a spark of sympathy for the bastard.

‘Well,’ he said, and sighed. He might as well get this over with. If he refused to tell the story, they’d doubtlessly figure it out in some other way. ‘I was born in Cuvri, yes. Anything in particular you wanted to know?’

‘How any Cuvrian worth a dime ends up in the service of the Empress, mostly.’

‘Does the name of Sidra ring any bells?’

Jaghar’s eyebrow shot up. Of course he knew the name, never mind that the massacre had happened twenty-seven years ago – long before he was the Spymaster of anything.

‘I seem to remember no survivors were reported from Sidra.’

‘There was one,’ Runo said flatly. ‘They didn’t seem to find it worth the hassle to put a starving seven-year-old in their annals and almanacs.’

‘Ah.’

A short pause. He could hear the pieces being rearranged in that silence, old questions shoved aside, new questions moved in position. He waited. This was not a subject on which he gladly took the lead.

‘How did you end up in Raulinna?’ Jaghar eventually said.

‘They told me the village was poisoned by rivalling clans, and I was an idiot and believed them without further questions. Then grabbed the chance to survive.’

Jaghar studied him for a moment – piercing dark eyes, and yet the stare wasn’t as painfully thorny as it had been a moment before. His gaze moved to the Cuvrian chronicle on the bed, then back to Runo’s face.

‘But a seven-year-old idiot, then,’ he said, and although his voice still sounded flat, it seemed to be a different flatness this time. Runo shrugged.

‘Admittedly.’

‘How did you find out the full story?’

‘Tamar.’

Again that look, fishing for the thoughts behind his eyes, the memories his mind was hiding. Then Jaghar folded his arms and leaned back in his chair. His hands hadn't been so far away from the ivory knife at his belt yet.

‘She was quite desperate to find you for some time.’

Although it was technically a statement, it clearly was far more of a question too. Runo leaned forward, resting his elbows on his thighs, and considered the point. Desperate to find him. A sentence that came close, very close to the full, scandalous truth of the situation – but then again, what were the chances that the other didn't yet suspect the full truth after finding him on Tamar's bed?

‘It hadn't occurred to me that she'd be concerned for my wellbeing after I nearly killed her,’ he said, evading the full answer. Perhaps he'd get away with it. ‘Also, I was temporarily busy setting Taavi archives on fire.’

Jaghar tilted his head. ‘Noviisa?’

‘Ah, you heard about that one?’

‘Of course I did.’ He sounded faintly amused. ‘They lost all records of five northern provinces. The Empress—’

‘You still use her title?’

‘What?’

‘Maiva,’ Runo said, gesturing vaguely at the south. ‘She has a name. Hates it when people use it, too. It makes her sound so human. So if I may kindly make a suggestion to Your Majesty...’

For a moment Jaghar seemed to hesitate, his lips about to form a word he didn't speak. Then he sat up with a brusque, determined movement that suggested he'd reached some conclusion, some decision in that single heartbeat of silence. No amusement anymore, but the hostility was gone as well, that curt stiffness in his movements that somehow kept drawing attention to the weapon he was wearing.

'Fair point.'

'Thanks,' Runo said brightly. 'That was all, then?'

'Sorry to disappoint. I'd still like to hear why you returned to Redwood after your short career as an arsonist.'

No avoiding answers with this man, he should have known. So what was he supposed to say? It wouldn't be too hard to lie – oh, I was jobless and starving, and this was the last place I could think of to go. Which did make sense, or at least some sense. But it wouldn't account for Tamar's desperate attempts to find him. It wouldn't account for the undeniable fact he had the key to a queen's bedroom in his pocket, and somehow it seemed unlikely that Jaghar would kindly let that point go if it was just ignored for long enough.

The truth seemed no less dangerous than any lie he could tell, though.

He parted his lips, hesitated. Words he'd never spoken even to Tamar herself, now that he thought of it – never needed to speak. Was he really going to say them out loud *now*? To the man who had stepped into this room with his hand at his knife and all too obviously murderous thoughts on his mind?

Then again – he *had* smiled, a moment ago, at the mention of Viviette’s name.

‘If you want to know,’ Runo said, a decision made in less than the time it took to blink, ‘because I fell in love with her.’

Jaghar looked at him.

It wasn’t a stare, or a glare. It was just a look, a blank, motionless look, thoughts put on hold while the world was recalculated and realigned with itself. Runo smiled back. No drawn knives, he noted, no vehement denial. That in itself was a victory already.

‘That is – unfortunate,’ Jaghar eventually said, pursing his lips. ‘Highly unfortunate, really.’

‘In what sense?’

‘In the sense that I just lost a bet to my wife, mostly.’

Runo burst out laughing, unable to suppress the triumph bursting through him. A few feet away, leaning back in Tamar’s desk chair, Jaghar allowed a slight grin onto his face, and somehow that looked like a surrender more than any elaborate apology could have done.

‘Very little sympathy with my plight, I see.’

‘Sorry, brother,’ Runo said, still sniggering. ‘I’ll try to look a little more commiserative. What did you bet, if I may ask?’

‘Anything else, really. You could have returned from the Empire with a new mission and talked your way into the Red Castle somehow. I also considered the option that you figured

out the truth of Anzor's death and were using that to blackmail your way to her.'

'Would have been unpleasant, I must admit that.'

'Generous of you,' Jaghar said, looking faintly amused, and Runo laughed.

'I'm not *that* bad, as you see.'

'You're significantly worse than I feared. But if I can at least assume that you're not here with any unsavoury intentions towards Tamar or anyone else...'

'Think you can safely assume that much, yes.'

Jaghar crossed his arms and nodded slowly, pursing his lips. 'We need to have a word, in that case.'

'Even more words?'

A quick raised eyebrow. 'I supposed you might want to know she sent another assassin to the Red Castle.'

'She – what?'

'As I said.'

'*Maiva*? Sent another...'

'Yes.'

Runo blinked. 'What in hell? She should know she's about to get buried in sanctions – she really can't afford to make another attempt at Tamar's—'

'Not at Tamar,' Jaghar interrupted him. 'At you.'

'She sent an assassin after *me*?'

‘That’s correct.’

‘After...’

He let that sentence drift off, unable to make sense of the world for a moment. After *him*? Sure, he’d known from the start Maiva wouldn’t be too happy about his disappearance from the Empire, or about his re-emergence at the Redwood court. But he was just a simple assassin, not even one of her elite Silver Daggers. Why in the world would she go through the trouble of setting her people on his trail if she could also just... forget him?

‘You knew this,’ he said, dazed, ‘and you still thought I might be here under her orders?’

Jaghar shrugged. ‘Could have been a double plot to ease our suspicions about you. You know, if she appears to still be targeting you, surely you must be a real traitor after all.’

‘Very damn convoluted, brother.’ Runo fell back into the blankets and stared at the ceiling. An assassin. After him. Hell be damned. Was he an example now, a demonstration of what might happen to Taavi deserters?

‘Wouldn’t be the first time,’ Jaghar said, and Runo cursed. It wasn’t even untrue – he knew several people who had been sent on similar fake missions, with very similar intentions.

‘No. Admittedly.’

‘But you don’t give the impression you were waiting for this news.’

‘Oh, piss off,’ Runo said with another joyless chuckle. ‘I wasn’t, no. Quite the opposite. Do you have any idea who she sent? Silver Dagger or not? Name?’

‘Silver Dagger, yes. My source mentioned the name Eelia, if that’s—’

Runo jolted up again, his mind imploding once more. ‘She sent *Eelia* after me?’

‘Ah.’ Jaghar raised an eyebrow. ‘I sense somewhat of a history here?’

‘Well, a history...’ He managed a grimace. Eelia. Who wore more daggers than coins on her body. Who moved quicker than smoke and was twice as untouchable. Who hated him like the pest, too. ‘I *may* have killed the man she was planning to marry.’

Jaghar tilted his head. ‘At the orders of the – of Maiva?’

‘No,’ Runo said, closing his eyes. ‘Before I was doing that work. When they were still trying to mould me into a decent soldier. A certain lieutenant wouldn’t stop mocking my Cuvrian accent, and I got a little tired of it.’

‘So you killed him?’

‘Well, in my defence – he did stop after that.’

Jaghar seemed to be suppressing a grin. ‘Can imagine not everyone was immediately convinced by that argument.’

‘Oh, no. They should have executed me. But a few people higher up were rather impressed with the kill, and as I said,

they don't do honour in Raulinna. I was potentially useful to them. So they kept me alive and moved me to the corps of Maiva's personal assassins.'

'Must have been a decent piece of work.'

'It was,' Runo said, too bewildered to look modest. 'Also, they quite appreciated I didn't insist on all that throwing up and wailing that's apparently obligatory after a first kill.'

'Is it?' Jaghar said wryly.

'You weren't aware either?'

'I was a little too busy staying alive for that kind of nonsense, to tell you the truth.'

Runo uttered a chuckle, then fell silent again, staring at the floorboards with a sensation like a heavy weight slowly sinking down on his brain. Eelia. With her burning stares and her deadly little hands. To think he'd considered Jaghar the greatest threat to his wellbeing half an hour ago – and now he had a vengeful Silver Dagger on his trail, the woman who had waited seventeen years for her chance at revenge? Gods be damned. As if Redwood court politics and the conflicting interests of the Five Kingdoms weren't enough trouble yet...

'Do you have any idea when she might be here?'

'We heard about it a few weeks ago. She had probably already left Raulinna by that time, though, so...'

'So she may well be in Redwood already,' Runo numbly concluded.

‘Yes.’

‘Well.’ He closed his eyes for a moment as something hardened in his chest, a determination breaking through the bewilderment. He’d been given a few weeks of recovery time – a few blissful weeks, but he could have known it wouldn’t last. It was time to get back to work. ‘Thanks for the warning, in that case. Do I owe you anything?’

‘Just keep Tamar safe.’ Jaghar got to his feet in one quick, cat-like movement. ‘I’d hate to lose her to some Taavi knife swinging in the wrong direction.’

‘Yes,’ Runo managed. Not an image he wanted to allow into his thoughts. ‘Yes, that sentiment is mutual, brother.’

‘Glad to hear.’ He paused a moment, his face a careful mask of habitual scepticism. ‘Brother.’

And with that, as if he’d never even stepped into the room, he was gone.

CHAPTER 3



‘She sent an *assassin* after you? After *you*?’

Tamar heard her own voice crack at that last word, and didn’t manage to bring it back in line. Sitting at the foot of her bed, looking uncannily grim in the falling twilight, Runo closed his eyes.

‘Yes.’

‘According to Jaghar.’

‘Yes.’

‘He could just have told me that from the beginning,’ she said numbly, falling down in her desk chair. Gods be damned. *No more spies*. She could have known he would simply walk into her rooms by himself with that wording. ‘At least I suppose they already knew when they left Rock Hall.’

Runo shrugged. ‘I assume he first wanted to rule out the possibility I would actually be working together with the

assassin in question.’

He sounded too bitter, too gloomy. Tamar threw him a glance, and he didn’t look up to meet her eyes.

‘And you managed to convince him of that much?’

A minuscule grin broke through on his face. ‘Told you I’m pretty good at surviving royal wrath.’

She managed a laugh. So what did you tell him, she wanted to ask. Anything contradicting the series of ridiculously shallow answers I’ve been feeding Viviette over the course of the evening – anything from which they might conclude just how much you mean to me? But confronted with the dimness in his eyes, she had to accept that was likely not the first question she should ask now.

An assassin after him. He knew, better than anyone else, how far the Empire would go to get a hold of its targets. Knew better than anyone else, too, what fate may await him if he ever crossed those borders again.

Her heart cramped in her chest and wouldn’t stop cramping.

‘So what do we do now?’ she said.

Not a question to which she expected a clear answer, or at least nothing clearer than some general suggestions on gate security and an extra knife in his pocket. But he looked up without hesitation, a gleam of dark regret in his eyes.

‘I should leave the Red Castle.’

Tamar stared at him for a good ten heartbeats. Sitting cross-legged between her pillows, shoulders sagging, he made no attempt to explain, to elaborate. *Leave* the castle? On his own? After this news – with a murderer on his trail?

‘What?’ she managed. ‘Why?’

‘She didn’t just send any assassin after me. Eelia...’ He looked away, took deep breath. ‘Do you remember I told you about the incident that got me kicked out of the Taavi army when I was seventeen?’

‘That little shit of a lieutenant?’

A small chuckle. ‘Arto. Yes.’

‘What in the world does that have to do with...’

‘They were planning to get married.’

She blinked. ‘Arto and...’

‘Eelia. Yes.’ He rubbed his face, with a frustrated groan. ‘Suffice to say she wasn’t very happy when they transferred me to her corps rather than hanging me. Couple of higher-ups paid her a good amount of silver and told her to get over it. I will say she was quite successful in giving the impression she got over it – to the rest of the world, at least.’

Tamar stayed silent. Again that eerie shadow slid over his face – looking like regret, but deeper and infinitely more painful. Not a look she remembered from the night when he’d told the story of Arto’s violent end. He hadn’t seemed terribly apologetic about the young lieutenant’s death, and she had

trouble imagining it was Eelia's suffering that caused him such anguish.

'She – did not get over it?' she said eventually.

'No.' He muttered a curse. 'Tamar, she wants to hurt me more than she wants to kill me. If she somehow figures out what's going on here – what's happening between us – she might target you as much as me.'

A mirthless laugh fell over her lips. 'That would be ridiculous. Maiva can't possibly want to take that risk again after—'

'I'm pretty sure Maiva doesn't know about that history between Eelia and me,' he interrupted, 'and I doubt Eelia is going to give a damn about what anyone else wants as soon as she has the chance to get to me. Don't underestimate how much she hates me.' His voice grew sharper. 'She's a vicious little bitch, and she's been brewing her hate for seventeen years. She's going to take whatever she can find to hurt me. And I have no desire to see you end up on top of that list.'

'Alright,' Tamar said, heart cramping in her chest again. 'Alright, but there's no reason to run off before you *have* to, yes? We can wait and see how far she gets first?'

'Tamar...'

His voice died away to what was barely more than a whisper, a fragile sound that hung in the air like a spider's web. Again that nearly desperate shadow slid by in his eyes. Not because of Arto. Not because of Eelia. But what else...

‘Did I ever tell you about Vedisa?’ he said, his voice still so quiet a rustling tree could have drowned out his words.

Vedisa.

A Redwood name, a woman’s name, and at once the shadow made sense. What had he said that night, months ago? *Knew a girl from here once. She’s dead. I didn’t care much about her. And yet – leave it be.*

Which she had done. Perhaps she shouldn’t have.

‘You didn’t,’ she said.

‘No,’ he muttered. ‘Suppose I didn’t.’

‘Runo...’

‘She died,’ he cut in. ‘She died and she shouldn’t have died, and if I hadn’t been a spineless coward she *wouldn’t* have died. I could have gotten her out of there. I could have taken out the bastard who wanted her dead. But he was on Maiva’s good side at the time and I didn’t dare to risk it, so I told her to figure it out on her own, and next time I saw her she was dangling from a noose.’

‘Oh, gods – Runo...’

‘So I’m not going to do that again.’ His voice was too high, too hoarse. ‘I’m not going to stand by again while she ruins whatever I hold dear in life. You’ve got to stay safe, and if that means I have to leave...’

He sucked in a breath, fists trembling. Then he’d leave, the lingering silence said, clearer than any words he could have

spoken. Then he'd disappear from the Red Castle for as long as he needed to, leave her to deal with the mess of court politics on her own, without any guarantee he'd ever even return.

'No,' she said.

A joyless laugh. 'What do you mean, *no*.'

'Stay here.' Somehow the sound of those words was enough to clear her mind – enough to make her heart stop writhing in her chest. He couldn't leave. He wouldn't leave. She'd deal with the rest. 'I don't want you to go.'

'You don't want to die either.'

'I won't die,' she said sharply. 'The Red Castle is the safest place in Redwood. She won't even be able to get in in the first place, let alone...'

He scoffed. 'I wasn't supposed to get in either.'

'You only got in because of Gocha, and he's dead.'

'She might find someone else to betray you this time.'

'She won't,' Tamar said, clinging to the sound of those syllables with desperate certainty. 'We can prepare – take safety measures – we—'

'Come on, Tamar.' He bit out a laugh. 'It's never watertight. You know it isn't. You're deluding yourself if you want to convince me it is, and you know it as well as I do – if she wants to get in, sooner or later she'll—'

‘Fine!’ she snapped, the fear bursting free. ‘Let her get in, for all I care. You’re staying here, and that’s the end of it, do you understand?’

He slowly tilted his head back, his eyebrows raised, his expression a mirthless, mocking imitation of a grin. ‘Oh, you think you’ll solve this by unleashing the Iron Queen at me?’ A snigger. ‘Your Majesty?’

The air abruptly left her lungs. She sagged back in her chair and buried her face in her hands, that scornful laugh echoing in her ears – unleashing the Iron Queen. At *him*. Not what she wanted to do – not at all what she wanted to do – but she was losing control again, she could feel it in the room turning around her. And losing control over his safety...

‘I’m sorry,’ she whispered, not daring to look up. ‘I just don’t want you to go out there on your own. You’ll be so much more vulnerable without a castle to protect you. I just...’

I just want you here. I just want you with me. But she didn’t speak the words, and the silence that fell was not an inviting silence by any means. Runo was ominously silent. When she eventually lowered her hands from her eyes, he sat staring at her, his face a battlefield of shadows in the near dark of her room. She should have told the servants to light the fire. Already the cold came slithering in through the windows, the night outside reminding her that winter wasn’t long behind them yet. But Runo held her gaze, and it was not a gaze that allowed her to move as much as a finger.

‘I just want to keep you safe,’ she managed. ‘I just...’

‘And what am I to you then, Tamar?’

‘What do you...’

Her voice drifted off. He looked dangerous, all of a sudden, darker. Around him the room shrunk to a narrow, shadowy cell, a space that far too small, to contain this conversation.

‘What do you mean?’ she finished, whispering.

‘You’re risking your life to keep me here. The lives of your people, too.’ A joyless laugh, a wide gesture at the castle below. ‘And yet I’m barely even allowed to *look* at you outside this room?’

She averted her eyes, unease stirring in her gut. ‘That’s something entirely different.’

‘Is it?’

‘Gods’ sake – of course it is. Amiran and Terenti are making enough of a fuss about you as it stands. If they had the slightest *hint* of an idea...’

‘Then what?’ he said. ‘They could give you dirty looks?’

‘Don’t play stupid, Runo.’

‘I’m not playing. It’s an honest question.’ Another joyless laugh. ‘I’m not asking you to tear my shirt off me in public. Just asking you why it would be so bad to look at me as if at least you don’t *hate* me, next time I show up to pass on some helpful information.’

‘The illusion of authority,’ she muttered.

He groaned. ‘Tamar, your authority is far more than just an illusion by now. Even if you don’t look like a tyrannical monarch every moment of the day, I can promise you that people will still remember you can be one if you put your mind to it.’

‘The only reason it’s no longer an illusion is that people like Terenti respect me enough to do as I tell them most of the time,’ she said sharply, closing her eyes. And even Terenti hadn’t wanted to, those first days – those first months. She still remembered the displeased lines around his lips whenever Anzor told him to stop whining and take orders. The moments for which she’d married the bastard. The mask of iron had won his approval, eventually – but she knew how quickly that approval would come crumbling down if she took to cheerful chatting with former Taavi assassins in public.

They’d see her. They’d all see her – the people who had grown up to know her as an unfeeling, unwavering presence on that damned throne, the people who had been old enough to snigger at her behind her back in the first powerless weeks of her reign. They’d see her. They’d see Runo. They –

Her mind turned into a blank sheet of terror.

‘I just – can’t risk it,’ she added feebly.

Runo stayed silent. He still hadn’t moved when she looked up, still sat staring at her with that same, inscrutable look in his eyes.

‘Look,’ Tamar added, more desperate now, ‘we’ve talked about this. Whatever I do – whatever you do – I can’t go in

against the interests of Redwood. You've always known...'

'Keeping me in the Red Castle with a bloodthirsty murderer on my heels doesn't sound like the optimal choice for Redwood's interests, Tamar.'

She opened her mouth, closed it again. He cocked his head at her, observing her every movement, every expression without mercy. When she didn't speak, he slowly continued, 'So I take priority over Redwood sometimes? But not always? What's the difference?'

'Oh, please – the risks are so small here...'

'You should know better and I think you do know better. Eelia is not some amateur with a pocketknife. Also, small risks have never kept you from grasping for control.' A wolfish grin. 'What else?'

'It's about you *dying!*' she snapped, flinging a hand at him. 'That's a little different from just having to look the other way every now and then, isn't it?'

He narrowed his eyes. 'That's what it is to you? Looking the other way every now and then? You're glaring at me as if you'd still be just as happy to kill me, Tamar.'

Which was the only alternative she had to throwing herself into his arms and kissing him into oblivion, the only way to keep herself in check under his intoxicating influence. But before she could open her mouth, he added curtly, 'Do you even mind?'

'Of course I mind! But...'

‘But you won’t do anything about it.’

‘I told you,’ she said, her voice too stiff to compensate for the doubt gnawing at her, ‘that I won’t endanger the stability of—’

‘And we already concluded that the stability of Redwood isn’t always the determining factor.’ He leaned forward. ‘So are you really sure you mind that much about it?’

She let out a desperate laugh. ‘What are you trying to get from me?’

‘I already asked you. What am I to you?’ His chuckle was sharp as a knife. ‘Because if I’m just your pleasant distraction in the background, you shouldn’t be risking your life for me. And if I’m enough to risk a life for, then why in the world aren’t you leveraging all that bloody power you have to be able to just *smile* at me every once in a while?’

Only in the ringing silence did she realise how loud both their voices had grown. He still sat unmoving between her blankets, no more than a silhouette in the darkness now – and yet she still felt his eyes on her, burning with merciless accuracy. Leveraging all that bloody power. If he wasn’t just a pleasant distraction in the background...

He was not just a pleasant distraction in the background.

But he was dangerous. So damn dangerous. Making her knees shake whenever she caught a whiff of his intoxicating scent. Obliterating every rational thought whenever he just smiled at her. Would she ever utter a sensible word again if she

stopped keeping him at a distance in public, if he were around all the time?

‘Listen,’ she said, stammering, trying to find the words for the almost painful yearning burning in her heart. ‘I’m happy to have you here, alright? I very much appreciate your presence at the...’

‘You *appreciate* my presence?’ he repeated, his voice heavy with sarcasm.

‘Oh, for hell’s sake – what do you want me to say?’ She stood up, began to unlace her dress with quick, frustrated yanks at the ribbons. ‘That I’m glad you’re here? That you calm me down like nobody else does? That I like fucking you? What else are you looking for?’

He bit out a laugh. ‘Nothing, I suppose.’

‘Runo...’

‘Never mind. Leave it be.’ His voice was tense with restraint; when she turned around, he had averted his face in the darkness. ‘Let’s go to sleep. You’ll be busy enough tomorrow.’

She pulled her dress over her head, then sank down in the blankets beside him, anxiety churning in her guts. He didn’t move to take her in his arms. He didn’t even look her way. Not the right thing to say – not at all the right thing to say – but what had he wanted to hear? Immediate permission to break every rule he’d like to break, to ignore every sensible order and instruction she’d ever given?

‘Runo, what did I—’

‘Could you give me a moment to think?’ he interrupted, turning away to unbutton his shirt as well. ‘A night, I mean? A few?’

‘About – leaving?’

He muttered a curse. ‘Amongst other things, yes.’

‘You’re not going to...’

With a groan he fell back into the blankets beside her, flinging his shirt aside. ‘I won’t leave without a word, Tamar. You know me better than that.’

She sucked in a breath that didn’t manage to soothe her writhing stomach. She remembered those six weeks waiting for him, unsure whether he was even dead or alive. The pile of useless letters, every morning again. The endless days of emptiness. The nightmares. Not leaving without a word, no – but if he decided tomorrow he *would* go, he was perhaps the only man in Redwood she wouldn’t be able to stop.

‘Tamar,’ he said quietly.

Then his arms were around her, finally – stable and safe, and in some miraculous way persuasive enough to wipe the menacing images of her mind at once.

‘Please don’t go,’ she whispered, clasping her arms around his chest as he pulled her into the blankets. ‘Please – please don’t go...’

He didn't speak. He didn't promise to stay. But he wrapped the blankets around them both and held her against his chest, face buried into her hair and fingers caressing her neck and shoulders, and in that blissful silence, that little cocoon of warmth and safety, even her whirling thoughts eventually dwindled down.

CHAPTER 4



‘Well,’ a gravelly voice groused behind Runo. ‘Up early again?’

Runo turned around just in time to see old Ninefingers sink down on the bench beside him. The main hall was only just filling up around them, the first knights and guards sauntering in with bread and bowls of porridge; most nobles, he knew from experience, would appear only in half an hour, with the sun well above the horizon already. Even Tamar had still been fast asleep when he sneaked out of her bed half an hour ago, much too awake to ever fall asleep again, and too restless to lie still until she’d wake as well.

‘It’s the Taavi schedule,’ he said. ‘If you get up early, you still have the time to poison a handful of enemies in the afternoon.’

Ninefingers snorted a laugh. ‘Eaten already?’

‘Not yet.’

‘Thought so.’ The other man shoved a napkin with two hastily buttered slices of dark bread towards him. ‘Brought some extra.’

‘If you go on like this I’ll stop missing my mother one day.’

Another snort. Runo gave him a mirthless grin and took a bite of bread – not that he was hungry, but he knew himself well enough to realise he wouldn’t be more sensible on an empty stomach. And he needed to be sensible today. His life might not be the only one depending on it.

Oh, hell’s sake. Eelia.

He had to leave. It had all been very clear last night, in the hour between Jaghar’s visit and Tamar’s return to her bedroom – he couldn’t take the risk of staying at the Red Castle, not if there was even the faintest of chances Eelia would figure out the most poetic way to take her revenge. He had to lure her away from the court, play the game of cat and mouse in the blossoming forests outside, and hope he’d be clever enough to find her before she found him. But then...

Please don’t go.

She’d clung to him throughout the night, grabbed for him in her sleep when he merely tried to turn to his other side, muttered his name in her dreams until he wrapped his arms around her again. His heart seemed to swell and shrink simultaneously at the memory. Never in the past months had she been so outspoken about her desire to keep him near, barring perhaps the evening of his return. And yet –

What do you want me to say?

The worst of which was that she truly hadn't known. Was it *that* unthinkable, all he had wanted to hear from her?

'You're quiet,' Ninefingers grumbled next to him. 'Planning any mysterious disappearances again?'

Runo forced himself to laugh. Disappearing in mysterious fashion was an art he'd deliberately perfected from his first official day at the Red Castle – getting up at ungodly times and vanishing for a walk through town, or for an exploration of the castle's cellars, or for a few hours of undisturbed reading in the royal archives... After some two weeks, by the time they had found him in enough ridiculous places, people stopped asking questions when he was nowhere to be found again. He rarely received more than an amused headshake now when he returned from a night spent in Tamar's bedroom.

'Won't spoil the surprise for you, brother.'

Ninefingers sniggered. 'Old Haro will be unamused if you miss training again.'

'Haro is unamused about everything I do,' Runo said. 'I doubt one training more or less is going to make the difference.'

'Fair point,' Ninefingers admitted, tearing off another bite of bread. 'Might be the lovely southern face.'

'I'm pretty sure it's the southern face. Although I suppose knocking his sword from his hands didn't help.'

A chuckle. 'Hope the beer was worth it.'

Runo grinned, this time a little more genuinely. They had bet on a beer that he wouldn't be able to win a duel with only his knife, that first training after Tamar announced to her weapon master that the miraculously returned Taavi assassin was now to be treated as one of her men. It hadn't made him more popular with Haro himself. It had definitely broken the ice with most of the men sharing his corridor, though.

'The beer was never a reason for doubt,' he said. 'The company, on the other hand...'

Ninefingers pointed his middle finger at him; the index finger of his right hand was missing. 'I got you breakfast, you ungrateful little Taavi rat. You better—'

His sentence stopped dead in its tracks; the amusement sank from his weathered face. Around them the few muttered conversations faltered at the same moment. Runo jolted around, half expecting to see Eelia's slender figure slinking into the hall, two silver knives in each hand, that venomous smile on her face she reserved only for him. Instead –

Tamar.

Looking so gloriously like herself as she strode into the hall, so utterly majestic, that his breath caught in his throat for the shortest instant. No trace of last night's panic on her pale face, no sign of hurry or distress. Just a faint, confident smile around her lips, a cold austerity in her eyes. Her hair in long copper locks over her shoulders, her back straight under her black widow's dress, every inch the Iron Queen of Redwood... There was a frightening edge to her this way – he was the last

to deny it – but it was an edge that somehow made her twice as admirable, and ten times as desirable.

She met his eyes as his gaze found her, no more than a fleeting glimpse – but enough to notice the flash of relief in her expression. Still here. Still not fleeing the Red Castle. Her eyes swerved to the other side of the hall before he even had the time to send her a quick smile, though, ignoring him for the eyes of the world like she'd ignore every other poor sod at this table.

Gods be damned, Tamar. Terenti wouldn't end the world over an acknowledgement of his *existence*.

For a moment he was tempted, so dangerously tempted, to jump up and take a seat beside her at the main table – an experiment rather than a plan, admittedly, but interesting enough to take the risk. She'd have to do *something*, and kicking him out of the Red Castle didn't seem a likely reaction after the conversation of last night.

She didn't make for that table, though. Instead, her path led straight to the hardwood throne at the far end of the hall. There she sat down, smoothed her skirts, and waited, without impatient orders or announcements – simply waited for the court to come.

Ah. She wasn't going to give him time to make new plans to leave.

The court came indeed, much earlier than usual, knights and nobles whispering urgently to each other as they took their places at the breakfast tables. Some of them looked curious,

others undeniably frightened. An interesting difference with Raulinna, Runo had noticed in the past weeks, was that innocent people were generally safe at the Red Castle, and knew it, too. At the Taavi court, *everyone* paled in Maiva's vicinity. Here you could distinguish the guilty consciences from the blameless ones by simply reading the faces when Tamar sat down on that throne.

Even the innocent ones still displayed a healthy dose of caution, though. Next to him, Ninefingers was chewing significantly more quietly than before.

Amiran arrived after a few minutes, with a habitual murderous glare at Runo. Terenti walked in shortly afterwards, and it was at his arrival that Tamar abruptly sat up and said, 'Ah, Terenti.'

She hadn't raised her voice, but the last whispered breakfast conversations fell silent at once. In the middle of the hall, Terenti came to an abrupt halt, clasped his hands on his chainmail-clad back and coolly said, 'You needed me?'

He'd been easier to handle for a few weeks after Gocha's death, Tamar said – had at least been grateful for her silence on his family's involvement in the Taavi assassination attempt. The gratefulness had quickly diminished after Rusuvan was judged guilty and banished, though, and Runo's return hadn't helped either.

'A quick warning,' Tamar said, sounding equally cool and flat to the point of sounding bored. 'I thought it might be

useful for you to know that the Taavi Empress sent another assassin to the Red Castle.’

A shocked silence fell, far more silent than even the cautious quiet of a moment before. For a few moments even Runo barely dared to breathe. To the Red Castle. Not after *him*. Oh gods, Tamar.

‘*Another* assassin?’ Terenti repeated then, his voice significantly sharper, and Tamar pursed her lips.

‘One slightly less likely to turn her back on the Empire, that is.’

Runo chuckled out loud in the dead silence. Terenti, turning around to send him a single pointed glare, certainly didn’t.

‘I see,’ he said, sounding even colder. ‘Unpleasant. Do we have any more information?’

Tamar glanced at Runo without speaking, one eyebrow a little higher than the other – the look a decent housewife might give the spider that has built its web over her clean windows. Again he was overcome for a moment by a violent urge to smile back at her, call her by her first name for the court to hear, and tell her they had already exchanged most of the details last night. Being a slightly more reasonable man, he kept the smile, but omitted the rest.

‘Her name’s Eelia,’ he said, turning to Terenti and ignoring the dozens of eyes staring at him. ‘Barely reaches to my shoulder, could still kill most of your men with her eyes closed and her hands cuffed. You can recognise her by the scar just

behind her left ear. Or by the seventeen knives she carries in her clothes. Also...' He stripped up his sleeve, threw a glance at the inked lines. 'Marks. Couple more than I have.'

Terenti scoffed and turned his back on him without a reply. Runo tugged down his sleeve again and brightly added, 'You're very welcome.'

'Tamar?' Terenti snapped.

She folded her hands in her lap, tilted her head at him. 'I do assume you'll be able to keep the castle safe despite this minor surprise?'

Putting him on the spot with the full court whispering along – no better way to keep a proud man to his promises. A skewed sense of awe flowed through him, breaking through the uneasy concern still lingering in his chest. She shouldn't be doing any of this. She should just let him go and let him deal with the trouble himself – but she *was* damn well doing it, and doing it well...

'We will obviously be on guard,' Terenti said stiffly. He, too, had to know exactly where she was pushing him. 'I can't imagine she'll find a way in.'

'The last one found a way in.' She still didn't even glance in Runo's direction, even as half of the hall once again turned to steal a look at him.

'The last one had inside help,' Terenti retorted.

'A fair point.' A point she'd waited for, judging by the hint of smugness in her voice. 'I should make use of the occasion

to remind the court that I expect every inhabitant of Redwood to assist us in dealing with this unfortunate situation. Anyone with helpful information on the assassin's whereabouts can expect to be properly rewarded. On the other hand, if anyone were so unwise to help her in any way...' She pursed her lips. 'I suppose you all remember Lord Diraved's tragic end. I'd hate to repeat that episode.'

A collective shudder ran through the hall. Runo glanced at Ninefingers, who abruptly looked like he regretted his breakfast.

'Lord Diraved?' he muttered.

'The one who killed the king,' Ninefingers grumbled under his breath. 'Her father.'

Runo sucked in a breath through his teeth. 'What happened to him?'

'She put him in a cage and had it hung above the castle gate. Took him about a week to die. Then she kept him there for another few weeks.'

'Right.' He glanced at Tamar, cold and beautiful on her throne, and was overcome by an impossible urge to smile once again. That's my girl, he wanted to say. Again he restrained himself, and instead muttered, 'Seems to have gotten the message across.'

Ninefingers' face suggested the message had come across well enough, indeed. As a matter of fact, even the younger attendants around them, the ones who really couldn't have

been over five years old at Tamar's crowning, looked positively green in the face.

Not a routine threat at all, then – and only then did it occur to him she'd just equated her father's murderer to whoever would assist Eelia in sticking a knife through his heart.

'If there are no questions,' he heard her say, 'I must go see my visitors now. In the meantime I trust you to show the Empire exactly how unhospitable Redwood can be.'

Some mutters of agreement drifted through the hall, some heads nodded in the edges of Runo's sight, and only then did she meet his gaze again. A quick look, barely more than a single piercing glance as she stood from her throne and made her way to the exit of the hall. The message was clear, however. Don't think I underestimate this threat. Don't think I'll slack in keeping you safe. Stay here.

Again her majestic grace grabbed him by the throat a little too violently, a grandness he couldn't help but admire. And hell be damned, she was far too beautiful, even with her jaw tensed and her breasts heaving a little too fast against her bodice...

Following her with his eyes as she strode past their table, he was hit by the nonsensical thought that he'd rarely been so jealous of a corset in his life.

Next to him Ninefingers abruptly let his breath escape the moment Tamar disappeared through the doorway. When Runo turned around and gave him a questioning glance, the other man still looked a shade paler than usual under his tan.

Runo nearly groaned. If Tamar's warning had that effect on everyone in the castle, Eelia might have a hard time finding a way in indeed. But still, the risk...

Ninefingers muttered a curse under his breath, interrupting his thoughts. 'She doesn't frighten you at all, does she?'

'Beg your pardon?' Runo said.

'Saw you walk up to her yesterday.' Ninefingers nodded at the doorway where Tamar had just left. 'She was staring daggers at you.'

'Yes,' Runo said grimly. Hell's sake, Tamar. How hard could it be to *not* look like she would be just as happy to crush him under her heel? 'I noticed.'

'And that didn't convince you to keep your distance?'

'I'm used to Imperial glares. And I had information she needed to hear.' He got up before Ninefingers could ask more, and added, 'I don't think I'll be there for the training. Pass on my apologies to Haro.'

The other man narrowed his eyes at him. 'Where are you going?'

'Developing a habit of forest walks,' Runo said, striding off without waiting for an answer.



The forest surrounding the castle was quiet at this time, but he made sure to run into at least a dozen passers-by before he finally left the main paths behind and took one of the many twisty trails running through the woods. Once the dense rows of gnarled trees and white-pink blossoms had swallowed him, he didn't run into a single soul again.

Elbowing loose vines and nettles aside, he made his way deeper into the forest, until even the sounds of town had disappeared in the distance and only the rustling of trees and the incidental squeaking bird still disturbed the silence. Then he sank down onto a mossy patch of earth and rested his back against the nearest tree, allowing his thoughts to turn to the conversation of last night again.

Please don't go.

He bit out a curse. It came from the tips of his toes and didn't soothe the ache gnawing at his guts in the slightest. With another curse he slid down over the moss until he lay flat on his back, staring at flecks of blue sky peeking through the cover of bare branches and white blossoms above him without seeing much. *What do you want me to say?*

'You idiot,' he muttered to himself, and realised only then he was speaking in Cuvrian, echoing his mother's reprimands at his childish stupidities. A hollowness grew inside him, too dark for the pleasant spring sun to wash away. 'You thick-headed, half-witted *idiot*. What did you think...'

He fell silent, his reflexes hesitating between bitter chuckles and another load of curses. In the end, neither came out. What

had he thought?

He wasn't sure what to think anymore.

She could deal with the court. He *knew* she could. Which would take time, and patience, and some cleverly crafted occasions to steer the public opinion on reformed Taavi assassins in the right direction – but he could handle time and patience as long as *something* was happening. It had been two months since his return, however. Two months of blissful late-night chats and shared secrets, of endless banter and insatiable passion, and yet she'd never shown the slightest inclination to make him more than – whatever he was to her now.

Which was a thought he'd made sure to keep at a safe distance for all this time. Facing it would have forced him to also face the simplest explanation – that she simply didn't care enough, didn't find him worth the risks of the game. Which made sense – but then he hadn't expected her to react so desperately to his plan to leave. Hadn't expected her to *beg* him to stay. And for a few moments, a few painfully hopeful moments –

What had he thought she'd say? That she loved him?

I appreciate your presence.

Again he cursed. Idiot. He should have known better. Should never even have wondered what exactly it was she felt about him – what exactly it was he wanted. Getting attached meant getting hurt; just because it was Taavi wisdom didn't mean it wasn't true. Now the question was out of its cage, and

the long, sleepless hours of the past night told him clearly enough that it wouldn't be stuffed in so easily again.

Please don't go...

He had to go. He knew he had to go. He could see Vedisa's face before him when he closed his eyes, joining the dead figures of his family in his memory after all these years – eyes closed, white cheeks blotted, messy blond hair trembling in the wind as her body swung gently from the gallows. Bile rose in his throat. He couldn't remember the sound of her voice anymore. He knew he'd been fond of it, her voice – knew it was the first thing he'd liked about her when he ran into her in the pub near the theatre, that pleasant Redwood lilt, the rather charming way she stumbled over her Taavi sentences while she routinely beat him at five card games in a row. But it didn't matter how hard he tried to remember now. The only sound that came to him was the creaking of ropes and wood.

Perhaps he'd forced himself to forget. He knew he'd heard her in his dreams for weeks after she died. Repeating the last words he heard her speak. Crying and pleading with him to save her life as he packed his bags and fled her sunny little attic apartment where he all but lived with her for months.

Coward, she'd shouted. He did remember that.

He had to leave. It really shouldn't be more complicated than that. For once he had to protect the people around him from the Empire's wrath, no matter the risks to himself. But Tamar had begged him to be a coward last night, and his resolve was cracking at the memory of her despair. It was so

sweet, so tempting, that stupid idea of staying... He didn't want to spend weeks sleeping in cold hostel beds, waiting for Eelia's knife to come, with no way to know whether Tamar would actually be safe. He wanted to be here and watch her wage war for him, see her unleash the full force of her fury on the Empire – he wanted to fight by her side and know exactly how much she needed him.

The question, though...

Was it *him* she needed? Was it him she had begged for? Or did she merely need the relief he offered her, the diversion, the quick interludes of freedom?

You calm me down like nobody else does...

Hell's sake. He had wanted her already when he returned to the Red Castle after his Noviisa excursion, wanted her with enough vehemence to risk a life in her cellars for it. Now, an infinite two months later... He hadn't fully realised how much his want for her had slowly turned into a need, a craving he could feel running through him like stings of poison now. It hadn't even felt dangerous, losing his entire rotten heart to her. It had seemed she would always be here, sincere and stable and safe.

In return, she appreciated his presence.

Perhaps she hadn't spoken her full truth – perhaps she was too scared of her court's reaction, or too ashamed of his role in her life, to allow any deeper feelings to surface even in private. But what reason did he have to believe those feelings even existed? She was the queen of a sovereign kingdom, brilliantly

powerful, incomprehensibly honourable, clever and quick-witted and beautiful, and even if he was an arrogant bastard, he wasn't mad enough to forget he was broke and landless, a coward who bowed to his family's murderers for nearly three decades, and a man who killed people and shrugged at the corpses. Of course she had no desire to treat him as more than a convenient tool whenever anyone else was present. In the end, it may well be exactly what he was to her – a tool that calmed her down like no one else did, a tool that fucked well, but a tool nonetheless.

And yet, what if...

He rubbed his hands over his eyes, cursed once again to interrupt his own thoughts. He should never have asked. He should never have wondered.

And now?

He needed to know, eventually. He couldn't keep digging his heart even deeper into this mess without reason; if he allowed himself to keep doubting for weeks, for months, he'd drive himself to insanity in the end. But storming into her bedroom and demanding an answer to his questions wouldn't do – not if there was a chance she was hiding the truth of her feelings even from herself. He needed time. Patience. A steady level of annoying questions. All of which he wouldn't have if he rode out into the wilderness to find Eelia tomorrow.

A shiver ran through him. *Coward*. But he knew he'd been defeated – had defeated himself, perhaps. He couldn't ride out

of the Red Castle if he meanwhile had to fear Tamar would simply forget him in his absence.

The forest walks would have to make do. If he hoped hard enough, he could nearly believe they would.

CHAPTER 5



‘The problem here,’ Jaghar said, strolling back and forth between the parlour door and the portrait-filled wall opposite the window, ‘is that we’re just a couple of pretty small kingdoms, and she’s ruling a bloody big empire.’

Tamar permitted herself a laugh. ‘You’ve always had a keen eye for geopolitical details.’

‘Glad you appreciate the analysis.’ He exchanged an amused look with Viviette, who sat sniggering on the broad couch in the middle of the room, pencil and parchment in her lap. ‘The point I’m trying to make...’

‘You don’t want to provoke the Empire *too* much?’

‘Exactly.’ Again that look exchanged between him and his wife, a quick confirmation of a conclusion Tamar knew they must have reached before – this morning, or last night after the full first day of discussions. ‘It’s all fine if your sources insist Maiva doesn’t want to start a war with us, but whatever we

choose to do, we should be careful not to be so annoying that starting a war suddenly looks like a sensible option to her.’

Your sources. That assassin I found in your bedroom the day before yesterday. Both of them had kindly ignored the point of Runo’s existence during the past day, or even the point of Eelia’s mission around the Red Castle – but knowing they knew and not hearing about it was almost worse than her earlier blissful ignorance. Tamar closed her eyes for a moment, leaned back against her windowsill, and slowly said, ‘What you’re trying to say, in your usual roundabout way, is that you find the grain option too risky.’

The grain option had been Runo’s suggestion too. She hadn’t told them that much.

‘Not necessarily *too* risky,’ Viviette said, tapping against a pursed lip with the back of her pencil, ‘but it is a risk. It’s really going to cause her a lot of trouble if we raise the prices on all our grain export to the south.’

‘Good,’ Tamar said dryly.

A grin slid over the girl’s face. ‘Yes, of course. But she’ll remember the Armiger riots from when the Omesti harvest failed three years ago, and I doubt she wants to risk high grain prices causing another round of national unrest. So if we force her to pay more...’

‘She’ll have to pay the difference from her own treasury.’

‘Or frame the whole situation as a good excuse to finally rally her armies against us.’

Tamar rubbed her hands over her face. ‘She’s had enough of those excuses over the past years, and she’s never actually done it.’

‘She tried with the Forgotten Battle,’ Viviette said slowly.

‘The Forgotten Battle was one of her governors’ individual ideas, wasn’t it?’

Jaghar raised an eyebrow. ‘She said so afterwards, yes, but I’m not sure that would have been the story if the Riverlands hadn’t been able to hold that army off their borders.’

‘She had the governor and his entire family killed,’ Tamar said, and his eyebrow went up another fraction.

‘Did she? Interesting. Could be a punishment for failing her as easily as a punishment for disobeying her, though.’

Tamar suppressed a curse. ‘Admittedly.’

‘Don’t get me wrong – it could be true that she doesn’t want a war.’ Jaghar considered his own words for a moment, frowning slightly. ‘But just the fact that she tells the Raulinna court she doesn’t want a war – that’s a very meagre basis to gamble our own kingdoms on, I’d say.’

‘So you prefer some of the less effective alternatives?’ she said slowly.

‘I don’t particularly like the sound of *less effective*,’ he said, the ghost of a smile around his lips. ‘But less risky might be wise. Some of the options we discussed yesterday will probably already cause some reasonable annoyance – banning her jewellery from our markets will be a blow to that industry

without actually robbing our people of any food, and we might still try to limit the export on linen or wool, if...’

‘I doubt we’ll get far with wool, though.’ Viviette scanned the list in her lap. ‘I mean, Maiva would probably be displeased if we doubled our export taxes, but there are too many sheep in the Riverlands. Emrys won’t like it if he has to take most of the blow. And Donovan will tell us we’re only driving up the wool prices because we have about six sheep in all of the Peaks, and he wouldn’t even be *that* far off. So it doesn’t really sound worth the effort to me.’

Jaghar muttered an Androughan word Tamar didn’t know. As she spoke the politer registers of the language rather fluently, she assumed it was aimed at Donovan.

‘But Donovan is going to cause trouble over every suggestion we make,’ she said. ‘If we let his approval determine our steps, we’re not going to take any steps at all.’

‘Still has to please his dukes, though,’ Jaghar said. ‘The majority of them still wants to keep the alliance intact, as far as I know. If we make a reasonable proposal, they’ll probably force him to accept at least most of it.’

‘His dukes won’t like wool either, though,’ Viviette said, and he gave her a quick smile.

‘Point made. Tamar?’

She waved at the list. ‘I agree. Although I still think we might get somewhere with either linen or even unprocessed flax.’

Viviette nodded. ‘Let me put that on the list of reasonable options...’

For a few moments only the sound of the scribbling pencil and Jaghar’s measured footsteps disturbed the silence. Tamar sighed and shifted on the smooth windowsill to glance outside. A wagon full of grain had just arrived on the courtyard below, and men were hauling the heavy bags inside, their shouting loud enough to draw her attention even through the thick glass of the windows. She followed the swarming movements with her eyes, her tired mind oddly mesmerised by the circling routine, the perfectly organised chaos. Grain. Runo’s suggestion, but then again, what wasn’t Runo’s suggestion these days...

Then she saw him, as if her thoughts themselves had conjured him on the courtyard, making his way through the clutter of workmen as he walked towards the outside gate of the castle.

Her stomach gave the usual flutter, this time accompanied by a short but nearly painful sting of relief. She hadn’t seen him since dinner last evening, where she’d somehow managed not to stare at him throughout the meal; he’d spent the night in his own bed. And of course he promised he wouldn’t disappear without warning, of course she trusted him to keep his word – but still she had lain awake for most of the night and managed only with the greatest of efforts not to take a detour along the knights’ wing on her way to this bloody parlour.

But he was still here. Whatever his opinions on her public announcement of the new Taavi threat, at least he hadn't fled the castle over it.

'Tamar?' Viviette said behind her, and only then did she realise she'd missed at least a minute of the conversation.

'I'm sorry – what did you say?'

Jaghar appeared next to her, following her gaze outside. It didn't matter how quickly she averted her eyes; the glimpse of recognition that slid over his face told her he located Runo in an instant.

'Ah,' he said, his voice carefully neutral. 'One of his forest walks?'

Tamar blinked. 'What forest walks?'

He glanced over his shoulder at his wife. 'Who told you about that again?'

'That knight I spoke with yesterday – Sir Ketevan, I think?' Viviette shrugged. 'He said something about missing a training and a habit of forest walks.'

Ninefingers. Tamar nearly cursed. He should know – she'd spotted him next to Runo at her breakfast announcement yesterday. But since when did Runo skip his trainings for a stroll outside? She'd never caught him feeling very passionate about either forests or walks. But he was nowhere to be seen when she glanced at the courtyard once more, and she didn't spot him on the road leading down the hill either.

Clenching her lips to hide her growing nervousness, she turned to Viviette. ‘Why were you speaking with Ketevan in the first place?’

‘Oh, I ran into him,’ Viviette said, looking suspiciously innocent with her wide green eyes and the near pout around her lips. Tamar closed her eyes. Ran into him. That presumably meant the young queen had noticed Ninesingers sitting next to Runo two nights ago and grabbed the first chance to ask some innocent questions on the Taavi assassin residing in the castle.

‘Sometimes I’m not sure why I don’t just lock the two of you in your rooms for the rest of your stay,’ she muttered, looking up.

Jaghar raised an eyebrow. ‘You wouldn’t know where he was going without our meddling.’

‘I still don’t know where he’s going.’ She was all but snapping now. She wasn’t sure what infuriated her more – having to admit her ignorance to others, or the fact that Runo was once again the cause of her cracking shield. ‘He should know better, with...’

Her mouth slapped shut as the understanding hit her. Jaghar nudged his eyebrow up another fraction.

‘Eelia?’

Oh, gods be damned. She turned back to Viviette, her anxiousness a roaring fire now. ‘Did you say Ketevan mentioned a *habit* of forest walks?’

‘Pretty sure those were his words, yes.’

It took all her self-restraint to suppress her curse. There was no such habit – there had never been one, at least. But Runo had left during what was probably the busiest moment of this entire morning, passing dozens of people on his way to the gate. People who lived downtown, people who’d talk. If he planned to make a habit of his excursions outside the castle, it would be widely known soon enough.

Which was very pleasant news for an assassin looking for a way to him.

Tamar closed her eyes for a fraction of a moment, forcing herself to stay calm, contained. If it had only been yesterday and today, the rumours couldn’t have spread far yet. Even if Eelia was already near the Red Castle, she likely wouldn’t intercept him in the forests outside today. There was time to deal with this. There was still time to change his mind.

Hell’s sake, she really shouldn’t have stayed away from him for so long. *Give me a moment to think.* Clearly he had been thinking far too much already.

‘Never mind,’ she forced herself to say, looking up again. Viviette was looking concerned. Jaghar was looking sceptical. ‘I’ll sort this out later. Let’s get back to those bloody sanctions, shall we?’

But she couldn’t keep her mind focussed on the endless discussions of goods and quantities, laws and taxes, trade and threats of war. By the time Viviette suggested ending the meeting an hour early, Tamar was so relieved that it nearly

drowned out the persistent drone of her fear and anger and embarrassment.

‘Yes,’ she said, gathering her notes and barely suppressing the urge to tear them to shreds. ‘I’ll have a clearer idea of Redwood’s possibilities tomorrow.’

She’d have to work through the material in the meantime, look up the details and demands in the letters and reports that lay piled up on her desk. That part of the work would have to wait a few more hours, though – until tonight, if need be. First she had an assassin to locate.



Terenti practically stood waiting for her when she emerged from the parlour, intercepting her with ruthless efficiency before she could even send a servant to find Runo. ‘Could we have a word, Tamar?’

She didn’t want to have a single word with anyone until she’d figured out how in the world she was going to keep Runo safe from his own self-destructive tendencies. But her castle’s safety depended on the men defending it, and Terenti was still the direct employer of half of those men...

‘Of course,’ she said. There was nothing else she could say.

‘Very grateful,’ he said. He, too, knew it had been the only possible answer, and that grated her more than the lack of choice itself. Was everybody determined to outplay her today?

At least the walk to her study gave her a few minutes to gather her composure – and walking next to Terenti, she had no choice but to regain her composure. With Jaghar and Viviette she could get away with a moment of inattention. With her brother-in-law... He had perhaps been the only person unhappier about Runo's return than Amiran, and that said something. His attitude towards her had been icy at best for weeks, cooling to unbridled hostility whenever they had to discuss the consequences the presence of a Taavi deserter may have for the security of the Red Castle.

Concern for the wellbeing of his people, in theory. Still, Tamar was reasonably sure he wouldn't have been nearly so concerned about his people's lives if the deserter in question hadn't possessed such a sinfully charming grin.

She let Terenti step into her study first, then closed the door behind her as she followed him. He didn't sit down. The way he folded his arms over his chainmail-clad chest suggested he was preparing for objections.

Tamar steeled herself, and prepared to object. 'What is it?'

'I'd like to have a word about the assassin,' he grouched, his lips tightening at the last word, his eyes narrowed to slits.

Her heart sank a few inches in her chest, but she managed to raise an unperturbed eyebrow and say, 'Which one, exactly?'

'Both, I suppose.'

'Ah.' She sighed. 'Go ahead.'

‘Any idea why he’s suddenly sneaking off in the mornings since you told us about that Eelia woman?’ Every word came out with unmistakable spite, a sharpness she could feel cutting through her skin. A proud man’s reaction to mockery. At times like these she wished Runo had been a tad more diplomatic in his dealings with her brother-in-law. ‘My men tell me he’s not leaving in the direction of town, either. Just disappearing into the woods. He didn’t make a habit of that before, did he?’

‘If you say so,’ she said flatly.

‘You’re not surprised?’

‘Not quite, no.’

He grunted a curse and turned away from her, pacing around the room with curt, stomping steps. ‘Are you *sure* he can be trusted, Tamar?’

‘Yes.’

‘He might be fooling us all.’ It would have been a diplomatic way of wording things if he hadn’t snapped it with obvious accusation in his voice. ‘Might have snaked his way into the castle just to assist his friend in finishing the matter with you. Who knows who he’s meeting out there – why else would he make so much of an effort to get away from the eyes of our guards?’

Far from the guards, indeed. Far from the security of the Red Castle. Tamar swallowed the fear flaring up in the back of her throat.

‘If he wanted to kill me, he’s had enough opportunities without anyone assisting him by now. I trust him.’

‘Perhaps they’re planning to harm more than just you, now that they have access to the castle,’ he said sharply. ‘They might be getting extra manpower to kill Amiran too, or me – to thoroughly destroy our administration. I don’t see why you’d shrug his suspicious behaviour aside so easily.’

She closed her eyes for a moment. Eelia is coming for *him*, she wanted to shout. He’s putting his own life in danger here, not mine, not yours – what else do you need to be convinced he has truly cut ties with the Empire? But she had to be careful here. If Terenti knew that Maiva’s Silver Dagger was only here to take her revenge on Runo, he’d also know that he was risking his men’s lives to guard a former Taavi assassin whose wellbeing he was utterly indifferent about. He might as well refuse to protect Runo in that case, and she could hardly tell him why that might bring her own life in danger as well.

‘If it reassures you at all,’ she said, ‘Jaghar thinks he can be trusted too.’

Terenti snorted. In all likelihood he trusted former Spymasters of Androughan birth roughly as much as former assassins. ‘Can Jaghar tell me the meaning of those forest walks?’

‘I’ll ask him,’ she said coolly. ‘For now, please be so kind to focus on Eelia, will you? I’ll take care of the issue with Runo.’

‘As long as you stop him from taking those bloody walks...’ Terenti grumbled, and her heart stopped dead in her

chest for a moment. Stop him. Had she *ever* been able to stop him from doing – well, anything?

‘Let’s see if that seems necessary first,’ she said, even cooler to hide the fact it was a clear admission of weakness. ‘Thank you, Terenti. If you could have someone send him to my study, it would be much appreciated. I’ll keep you informed.’

CHAPTER 6



‘Looks like you’ll miss training again,’ Orzin announced as he ambled into Runo’s small bedroom, sword loosely in one hand, his other hand habitually raking his blond locks back into shape. The knight spent objectively too much time on his hair, it was commonly agreed, but apart from that he could be surprisingly decent company as long as nobody beat him at any card games.

‘Really?’ Runo said, shoving aside the shirt he had been repairing. ‘How so?’

‘The queen asks for you.’

‘Ah.’ He suppressed a stab of some painful emotion. ‘What did I do this time?’

Orzin sniggered. ‘Don’t know. Tried to kill her?’

‘Not in the last few days, as far as I remember,’ Runo said sourly. ‘We’ll see. Where does she want to see me?’

‘Study. Immediately. Although you should perhaps put that shirt back on first.’

Waste of time if I may as well take it off again soon after, Runo wanted to say, but swallowed his words. It probably wasn’t even true. She rarely summoned him to her working room by day; if she did it now, while Jaghar and Viviette were still around and she should be figuring out Taavi sanctions, there were likely serious matters going on. Not the time for naked intermezzos.

He muttered a curse and shot back into his half-repaired shirt. Only one way to find out.

Orzin gave him an encouraging pat on the shoulder as he made his way out – as if he were a schoolboy called to the headmistress’s office for pouring ink onto the teacher’s seat. Not for the first time he found himself wondering how long it had taken her to shape the court’s perspective of her like that. Had they already believed her an unfeeling piece of iron machinery when she married Anzor? Or had it come later, after years of stoically ignoring the bastard’s mistresses and progeny – years of cold, emotionless duty?

Until she couldn’t even remember what it felt like to smile in public...

A strange nervousness writhed in his stomach as he trudged up the stairs to her study, ignoring the usual curious glances with habitual nonchalance. How long had it been since that last private conversation – two nights? Which wasn’t unusually long. At times he went half a week without seeing

her. But at earlier occasions he hadn't pressured her to articulate her feelings for him, then left her to her own thoughts to stew on the matter for days... He wasn't sure what that did to her mind, mulling on him. Somehow he doubted she was calling him to her study to declare her undying love for him.

The guards at her door glared at him, but didn't stop him as he knocked and stepped in.

He found her with her back towards the door, staring at the window. His heart gave its usual little flutter at the sight of her, unburdened even by the memory of their last conversation. Then he closed the door behind himself and she still didn't turn around, and far more unpleasant flutters got hold of his intestines.

'Tamar?'

Only at the sound of her name did she sigh and turn to face him. The stiffness of her shoulders told him she had, indeed, not summoned him to tear his shirt from his shoulders and kiss him into oblivion against her wall.

'Anything wrong?' he said.

There was a slight unease to the way she ran her eyes over him, too – reassessing where they stood, what the rules of their interaction were after the last conversation. Questions he should never have asked. What was he to her? Had she even considered it at all since he had sneaked out of her bed yesterday morning?

‘So,’ she said. Her voice was a little too stiff, a tension that had never haunted their conversations before. ‘I heard something about forest walks.’

‘Ah.’ Runo stuck his hands into his pockets. The news spread even quicker than expected. Probably thanks to bloody Jaghar again. ‘Yes. Very healthy habit, I’ve been told. Excellent for breakfast digestion.’

She closed her eyes. ‘Runo.’

‘You started talking around the matter here,’ he said, raising his eyebrows. ‘I’m just following your lead.’

‘Oh, for hell’s sake.’ She turned away with a frustrated gesture, pacing to the high bookcase along the wall – looking absolutely glorious in her formal black dress, and perhaps a tad frightening, too. ‘You know exactly what I’m trying to say. I asked you to stay at the Red Castle.’

Runo shrugged. ‘I’m still here.’

‘Walking out into the woods every morning?’ Her voice rose. ‘Where she may as well attack you without anyone else around to—’

‘That is precisely the idea, yes.’

‘Not *my* idea.’

‘No,’ he said, sucking in a breath. ‘Not my idea either. It’s called a compromise, I believe.’

‘*Runo.*’

She came to a halt again, standing in the middle of her working room with her fists clenched and her lips pressed to a thin line, something very close to despair glittering in her hazel eyes. Her breasts were heaving in a most tantalising way under her bodice – her body betraying the control slipping from her hands more clearly than any word she could speak. Some of the frustration melted from his mind at the sight. Being annoyed at the Iron Queen was easy. Being annoyed at the human behind, the woman tearing up at the thought of his life in danger, was a different story entirely.

He groaned, rubbing his face. ‘Are you angry or concerned now?’

‘Of course I’m concerned!’ she burst out. ‘You’re walking straight into the arms of a woman who will be happy to kill you slowly and painfully if she gets the chance – and you’re *giving* her the chance! What in the world do you think...’

Three long strides forward and he was close enough to wrap his arms around her, press her against his chest and smother the rest of her tirade into his shirt. She clawed her hands into his sides to escape, but he wouldn’t let her – he didn’t want to let go of her again. He didn’t want to give her the chance to say anything else, to ruin that simple truth of her worry for him.

‘Tamar...’ he whispered.

She gave up her struggle, sagged against his chest with her fists clenched in his shirt. A shiver ran through her as he ran his fingers along the back of her neck and curled them through

the loose locks of her red hair. Her breath didn't slow, but the jagged edge of it softened. Some of the stiffness in her shoulders loosened.

'Listen,' he muttered, pressing his lips against the crown of her head. 'You seem to forget I don't want to die either. I'm not dallying out there without a glance over my shoulder. Even if she finds me, she still needs to get past my own knife, and she's never managed that easily in the past. We had the same training, after all.'

'She's a Silver Dagger,' she grumbled, her voice muffled in his shirt. Runo sighed.

'And I would have been one too, had I been a little better at following Maiva's instructions. It has little to do with either of our abilities to stick a knife through the other.'

'But...'

'Tamar, please. I'm still not an idiot.'

She jerked up her head, eyes burning. 'You might *die*.'

'I might not,' he said, closing his eyes. 'History shows I'm terrible at dying, generally speaking.'

'And if I don't want you to take the risk?'

He muttered a curse. 'We've had this talk already.'

'I'm not yet done with—'

'No,' he said, forcing himself to stay calm, 'of course you aren't, because I'm still not doing what you want me to do. Which is your problem, frankly, not mine.'

‘I’m the queen here,’ she muttered. ‘If I tell you not to take any risks—’

‘And *stop* dragging the bloody Iron Queen into this, Tamar.’

‘I don’t care about the bloody Iron Queen if she might save your life!’ she snapped, stiffening in his arms again. ‘What else am I supposed to do? Look away while you’re walking straight into Death’s arms?’

‘You’re supposed to accept I want you to take risks as little as you want me to take them. Is that so hard?’

‘Is it so hard to trust the people paid to protect you and just stay at the Red Castle?’

‘Oh, so it’s my fault I won’t blindly trust a handful of Sungarden guards with both our lives?’ His own voice was rising now, and he couldn’t bring it down again. He never shouted – he never cared enough to shout – but the frustrated edge in his words came frighteningly close. How had they ended up here, their usual effortless banter evolving into this dangerous, bitter disagreement? ‘I’ve been *trained* to outsmart exactly those people, Tamar, and so has she. How am I supposed to trust them, knowing what I know?’

‘But she can’t—’

‘And stop acting as if you know her – stop acting as if you have *any* idea what we’re dealing with!’ He pushed her backwards as if to press the words into her mind, until he held her tight against the plastered wall and she could move no further. His voice dropped to a low, pressing hiss. ‘Want to

know why I'm being so damn stubborn about this? I'm absolutely terrified of waking up to the sight of Eelia carving her name into your face. Of having to hear you cry for mercy while she's skinning your fingers one by one. Of having to pull her bloodied daggers from your chest and know it's *my* fault. Still think I should just sit on my arse in the Red Castle until she inevitably finds her way in?'

She pressed her lips tight together, holding his gaze for three heartbeats with dark, defiant determination. Then, forming the words so carefully he could read them on her lips, she said, 'It wouldn't be your fault if I were the one keeping you inside the castle.'

'Don't you dare, Tamar.'

'Terenti wants me to keep you inside. Is afraid you're conspiring with...'

Runo bit out a sharp laugh, heat flaring through his body in a maddening mixture of fury and arousal. 'Oh, you're going to let Terenti decide your wishes for you once again?'

Her eyes flashed. 'That was unnecessary.'

'So is keeping me prisoner because I refuse to agree with your safety estimates,' he said. 'Don't try to force my hand, Your Majesty. I won't listen anyway, and I might hurt people if they try to stop me on my way outside. Then the court will expect you to send me away after all – is that what you want?'

She sucked in a hissing breath. 'Are you trying to make the point that I'm still utterly unable to control you, or is this...'

‘Oh, you want me to make a *point*?’

‘What are you...’

He slammed his mouth into hers.

It was a challenge, a confession, and a command at once – a kiss demanding full and instant surrender. She didn’t resist. He knew she couldn’t resist. Locked between his burning body and the wall, she moaned that small moan of surrender against his lips and grabbed his shoulders to keep standing, drawing him closer, pressing herself even tighter against him. Runo wrapped his hands around her hips and dug his fingertips into her soft flesh, nibbling at her bottom lip in the same moment. She opened her mouth to him without further urging. Their tongues met, twisting together in wet, hot desire, a battlefield as much as a dance of passion.

He poured all he had into that kiss, all he didn’t dare to tell her – I love you. I need you. I want you to love me enough to kill for it, enough to brave whatever political consequence; I want you to defy the gods themselves for me if need be. A truth he didn’t dare to reveal in words, his heart laid bare for her to shatter – but his lips were as elaborate as any plea, any lyrical poem, and this confession she did answer. With panting breath and hungry lips. Breasts and hips pressed against him. Fingers knotting in his curls. He groaned and slid his hands up along her body, her waist, until he could stroke his thumbs over the onset of her breasts through the firm silk and lace of her dress. Her kisses grew harder, more urgent. Angling his hips, he pressed his hardening erection against her lower belly,

his body screaming at him to lift her here against the wall and take her, drown his fears and sorrows into her hot tightness and forget about the world for just a moment...

She drew back from their kiss with a ragged gasp, breathing heavily. Her lips were swollen from the assault, a breathtakingly kissable shade of glistening pink.

‘Runo...’

‘Don’t think,’ he groaned, kissing the spot just below her ear. She shivered. He knew that shiver – a need she wouldn’t allow herself to feel. ‘Don’t be sensible now. You know you want more than that.’

‘I don’t have the time.’ She breathed the words against his neck. ‘Work to do – these bloody sanctions...’

He suppressed the urge to yank her skirts out of the way anyway – all he needed to convince her, he suspected. ‘So much work you don’t have five minutes to spare?’

She let her head roll back against the wall, granting him an unexpected, smouldering grin. ‘As if you’re ever done with me in five minutes.’

‘Don’t blame me,’ he said, unable to suppress a breathless chuckle as he pulled her into his arms again and lowered his face in the hollow of her neck. She smelled of roses, and of lust. A scent he wanted to taste on every inch of her, drink from her until she lay powerless and screaming in his arms. ‘If you weren’t so bloody irresistible, it would be a lot easier not

to fuck you into delirious exhaustion whenever I get my hands on you.’

‘Not saying I’m complaining,’ she muttered, pressing a quick kiss in his neck, just above the collar of his shirt. ‘But our visiting royals may run out of patience with me at some point.’

At some point. Had they spoken about him this morning? Runo pressed that question aside and forced himself to concentrate on being reasonable first. Yes, he still wanted her, a desire running hot through his veins from every spot where their bodies touched. Yes, he could press, and she’d surrender within minutes. But she’d have to work late tonight, and exhausting her for his own pleasures was the only thing he wanted less than taking his hands off her.

He moved back a few inches, tucked a copper lock behind her ear that he’d likely pulled loose himself. Again she gave him that wry, faintly apologetic smile. At the very least his kiss had taken that dangerous edge from their conversation, the sharpness that was well on its way to escalate a disagreement into a fight. At least it had smothered her suggestions she may as well keep him inside by force. But whether that meant she’d agree with him in the end... He wasn’t sure. With work pressing her, this didn’t seem the moment to ask.

‘How are the talks coming along?’ he said instead.

She pulled a face, all but rolling her eyes. ‘It could be worse.’

Which meant it was pretty terrible nonetheless. Runo sighed and slowly released her, despite every inch of his body aching to keep his arms around her, to keep her to himself as long as he could. She still seemed a little dazed as she stepped away from him. He probably shouldn't feel so triumphant about that, but he couldn't help himself.

‘Anything I could help with?’ he said, and she stiffened as if he'd drawn a knife at her.

‘What?’

‘The negotiations. If they have any questions about the Taavi side of the issue...’

‘Oh, no,’ she said, a little too brusquely, turning away to avoid his gaze. Her hands abruptly became fidgety again, fingers searching for something to do and finding little. ‘I already told them all you said about Maiva's opinions. There's not much more you could add to that point. It's just – the details. I'll be fine.’

She was still an absolutely terrible liar. Runo didn't protest, however. If even this kiss couldn't convince her to be honest with him, he didn't suppose any words would be more successful.

Which meant it was time for more drastic measures.

CHAPTER 7



Work took too much time and left too few hours for sleep. When Tamar forced herself to roll out of bed in the dusk of the next morning, her head felt like someone had stuffed her skull full of down and dust.

Gods be damned. The last thing she needed today.

At the very least she had her notes from last night, neatly arranged on her desk beside the last inch of the candle that had shed light on her scribbling. A concrete proposal, finally, based on Jaghar and Viviette's comments of yesterday. But if she couldn't convince them of Maiva's aversion to open war, it would be of little use...

She shoved that thought aside, asked her guards to summon her maid, then sat down at the dressing table and closed her eyes. No sense in brooding. She'd just have to convince them. Runo had convinced her too, after all. It should be possible.

An already familiar twinge of worry wormed itself through her guts at the thought of him. This morning it was accompanied by an even more unwelcome twinge of arousal. Yesterday's kiss...

You want me to make a point?

What was the point he was trying to make? That she was powerless, absolutely laughably defenceless against him? That much was true, at least. She could feel it unfolding within her lower belly at the memory of that single kiss already, that dangerous desire to simply hand herself over to him and let him take the reins – hell, in the end he could probably make her do *anything* if he just kept kissing her like that for long enough... And of course she wanted him to kiss her. Of course she wanted his reckless allure, his unpredictable charm. But wanting to lose control of herself didn't mean she wanted to lose control of her entire damn court –

'Tamar?'

She jolted around. Amiran had emerged in the doorway, one of her maids behind him. He looked unusually grim below his short red beard, the shadow of a sleepless night under his eyes. Her state of attire – only a nightdress, and not her most chaste one either – seemed to elude him entirely.

'Is there anything urgent going on?' she said.

'About the assassin.'

It didn't matter much if he was talking about Eelia or about Runo. In both cases, Tamar didn't want rumours to spread.

With a nod at the maid she said, 'Please come back in five minutes.'

The young woman curtsied and hurried off. Amiran closed the door behind her and folded his arms over his chest, ink stains on his palms and fingers.

'I just had a word with Reziko. He said she may have been seen in a couple of towns, a few days away from here.'

'Oh, good gods.' She'd known this would happen, of course. There was no reason to expect Eelia wouldn't reach Redwood at all; if anything, it should be a relief she hadn't arrived yet. Still, the inevitable reality of her presence, of actual *sightings*, took the breath from her lungs for a moment. 'How certain is he it was her?'

'Not fully certain, of course. I think his people are reporting every southern-looking stranger at this point. But still...'

Tamar again closed her eyes for her moment. But still. There weren't usually *that* many southern-looking strangers roaming around in the vicinity the Red Castle. She'd have to ask Jaghar to write home about the matter today. Much as she disliked admitting it, his network usually had more accurate information than her own Spymaster's.

'Terenti is getting nervous about the other one,' Amiran said, interrupting her thoughts.

The other one. She nearly cursed. 'His name is Runo.'

'Whatever you prefer.' The tone of his voice left nothing unsaid about his own preferences. 'Did you have a word with

him on those forest walks?’

The urge to curse was even stronger. She had, yes – and she didn’t assume it had convinced him to simply stay safely inside the Red Castle from now on. Which she could hardly tell her cousin. Even if her utter lack of control over Runo’s activities wouldn’t send him into a furious outburst, she couldn’t take the risk that he’d inform Terenti.

‘I did.’ Her exhausted mind grabbed the first lie that occurred to her. ‘He’s taking a look at our direct surroundings, trying to see if there are any weaknesses in our security that she might notice. I don’t see much harm in it.’

Amiran snorted, clearly unconvinced. ‘Wouldn’t it be more secure to have literally anyone else do that inspection?’

‘Nobody else is looking from the perspective of a trained Taavi assassin.’

He muttered a curse. ‘Well. Don’t think Terenti will be all too thrilled with that news. Can’t we send a couple of guards with him, at the very least?’

Tamar nearly winced. *I might hurt people.* ‘That really doesn’t seem all that necessary to...’

‘Your trust in him is baffling, frankly,’ Amiran interrupted coolly. ‘And not shared too widely, at least among the men from Sungarden, from what Terenti tells me. I don’t think you’ll keep them all too motivated about the work this way, if that’s a factor worth consideration to you.’

‘Of course it is,’ she said, a faint headache breaking through the numbness. For the bloody gods’ sake, she hadn’t even had *breakfast* yet. ‘Well. Do you think it’ll reassure Terenti a little if we send one of the knights along with him? Like Ninefingers – Ketevan, I mean? That should probably keep everyone happy, if—’

‘You’re worried about keeping him *happy*?’ Amiran produced incredulous snort. ‘Hell’s sake, Tamar. What’s he going to do if you don’t – kill you anyway?’

‘Don’t be ridiculous,’ she said sharply. ‘But his knowledge is useful here, and I’d rather motivate him to keep sharing it. Anything else? If not, I need to get dressed.’

Another curse, but he turned away without further protest. ‘I’ll let Terenti know.’



Uneasy glances welcomed her as she made her way to the main hall mere minutes later. They did little to soothe her headache. These were the glances she knew from mornings before court cases and executions, the glances people gave her when they knew there would soon be blood on her hands – but was she going to kill anyone this morning?

Then she rounded the last corner, saw the table where she was supposed to have breakfast with whatever nobles had woken already, and understood.

Because Jaghar and Viviette were sitting at that table with plates of white buns and bowls of steaming cinnamon porridge. And in the chair at Viviette's side, chewing away at an apple –

Runo.

Looking so utterly comfortable, so utterly innocent. His most pleasant expression on his face, his shirt not even fully buttoned. As if he'd just taken a seat in a pub to have a beer with friends rather than sat down at a royal breakfast table to disturb the conversation of two people who still had all reason in the world to distrust him, and likely the power to severely hurt him.

He looked infuriatingly handsome, too, in that simple white shirt, sleeves rolled up to reveal the marks on his lower arm.

Jaghar noticed her first as she came closer, or at least he was the first to look her way. She couldn't with the best efforts read his opinion from the dark curtain behind his eyes. Runo and Viviette only interrupted their animated conversation as she came within hearing distance – something about the girl's last and only trip to the Empire when she was eight years old, and for reasons that eluded Tamar entirely, about dolls.

'Oh, morning, Tamar,' Viviette said brightly, looking a little too amused for Tamar's comfort. 'I hope you don't mind I momentarily borrowed your assassin?'

Tamar was lost for words for the shortest of moments, or lost for any kind of reaction except an overwhelming urge to throw a fork at Runo's satisfied face. His most oblivious

glance, ignoring the fire in her glare so completely that it had to be theatre. Borrowed him? At the sight of that expression, she could be sure he had at least made a determined effort to stumble over their Peak guests at the right moment.

‘Did you need him for anything urgent?’ she said, sounding a little too cool to compensate for the senseless fluttering of her heart. Viviette shrugged.

‘Apart from my urgent curiosity, not really, no. But I’m learning a lot about my reputation in Raulinna these days.’

‘Your curiosity,’ Tamar repeated, sinking down in her own chair and battling the urge to close her eyes once again and keep them closed for the next hour or so. Runo was still looking far too satisfied with himself. Jaghar was still not showing any opinion at all. ‘I see. I doubt you’ll be the only curious person in the Red Castle after this episode.’

‘I’d have had to walk into the knights’ barracks otherwise.’ Viviette shrugged. ‘Which wouldn’t draw less attention, presumably.’

Runo sniggered. ‘Oh, you’d have done that?’

‘Of course I’d have. It would be highly unfair if Jaghar were the only one allowed to have a word with you.’

‘Don’t flatter me too much,’ Runo said, shaking his head. ‘Tamar will tell you it’ll only worsen my already abominable arrogance, and she still has to live with it after you’ve run off again. And eat something,’ he added, turning towards Tamar. ‘You look like you could use it.’

Tamar opened her mouth to tell him she'd be significantly hungrier if he weren't embarrassing her in front of her guests or causing a stir at her court with his behaviour – but Viviette handed her a buttered bun already, her eyes gleaming with that dangerous interest Tamar remembered from the night the girl confronted her about Anzor's death. Next to the young queen of the Peaks, Jaghar still didn't speak, although his eyes followed Runo's every movement with what looked like a mixture of annoyance, inquisitiveness, and a hint of unwilling amusement.

Tamar shut her mouth again and accepted the bun, a sudden unease writhing in her guts. How had he outnumbered her by simply sitting down at a table?

'So,' Viviette continued, turning back to Runo as she brushed the crumbs from her fingers. 'The queen doll, you said? I quite like that, honestly.'

He chuckled. 'I'm glad you do, because that makes it the only pleasant thing I've ever heard anyone say about you in Raulinna. You know, vapid Copper Coast pupil, can barely get through a decent conversation about anything of sense. Only got onto that throne through a burst of luck, would already have lost it again if not for her husband...'

'Unexpectedly complimentary,' Jaghar said dryly. 'I suppose the common opinion on my person hasn't changed that much in the past few years?'

'Not really,' Runo said with a shrug. 'Murderous bastard, probably sold his soul to a witch a decade ago. All in all not

inaccurate, I'd say.'

Viviette laughed, and to Tamar's utter bewilderment, a faint smile slid over Jaghar's face. Oh gods. He was not just outnumbering her. Far worse – he was *outplaying* her. Employing those easy grins, that shameless cleverness, in a way she'd never witnessed before... Since when could he be so eerily amiable to the rest of the world? Fine, she had realised he wasn't provoking the knights and castle staff the way he seemed to enjoy his provocations towards Amiran and Terenti, and he wouldn't have survived decades in Raulinna at the rate he was antagonising nobles at the Red Castle. But this was far more than him not being his infuriating self. This was him being – charming. Worse, perhaps, irresistible.

Why did it feel like a threat, that sudden insight?

'Perhaps this is a subject for another moment?' she said, intervening before any of them could elaborate on the state of Jaghar's soul. 'I think we should take some decisions today, and there's enough we still have to...'

'Mind if I join?' Runo said, so quickly she knew he'd been waiting for the occasion.

'Runo.'

Another oblivious look. 'Are you going to pretend I don't know every detail of your opinion on Raulinna politics already?'

For hell's sake, she wanted to snap. Are you trying to make me look like an idiot? Did whatever I shouldn't have said two

nights ago hit you so unpleasantly that you're now taking your revenge in the most humiliating way possible?

But Jaghar and Viviette exchanged a single meaningful glance before she could speak, and she knew he had her cornered.

'I might be interested in the details of your opinion,' Jaghar said, turning back to Runo and sounding slightly displeased about the fact himself. 'Assuming you'll stoop to share them with a murderous bastard who sold his soul to a witch, of course.'

'You won't hear me complain about murderous bastards.' Runo got up and shoved his chair back into place with his foot. 'I'm not that much of a hypocrite. Will be waiting upstairs.'

Then he was gone, hands in his pockets and ambling steps, ignoring the bewildered stares of the court. At the table Viviette still looked disconcertingly amused.

Next to her, Jaghar breathed a curt, resigned sigh. 'I'm starting to see where Maiva's bloodlust is coming from.'

That, much to Tamar's discomfort, was all her guests would comment on the matter.



At least his momentary absence – more specifically, the absence of his teasing looks and his muscular forearms – gave her a few minutes to pull herself together. By the time they

returned to the parlour to continue yesterday's discussion, she'd come to accept that as usual, there was only one acceptable way to treat this defeat.

Like a victory. Like something she could control.

So she didn't flinch when she found Runo sitting in the heavy oaken windowsill of that round room, reading through a pile of unpleasantly familiar notes – her work of last night, which he must have taken from her desk before coming here. What would it help to flinch? It would only amuse him, and if Jaghar and Viviette insisted on assisting him in behaving like a loose projectile, they could hardly complain if he did.

'Your Majesties,' he greeted them, hardly looking up from his reading and sounding nearly bored. Tamar glanced over her shoulder to check whether Viviette had closed the door behind them, even though she'd heard the soft click of the lock.

'Enjoying the read?' she said.

He looked up, his most innocent expression on his face. 'I enjoy everything looking like Imperial troubles. Why the question mark after the grain suggestion?'

'You'd be in favour of the grain suggestion?' Jaghar said before Tamar could answer, sinking down in a lush green couch that looked too soft for his sharp face. Viviette fell down next to him in an unrestrained flutter of red silk. Her fingers wandered to his knee for just the shortest of moments before she propped her hands below her chin and turned to observe Runo again.

‘Of course I’d be in favour of the grain suggestion,’ Runo said, shoving the parchment aside. ‘It was my suggestion in the first place. The Omesti harvest will be even worse than you think, and she can’t risk another year of shortages or peaking prices. She’ll have to pay.’

‘Or go to war.’

He shrugged. ‘She’s not going to war.’

‘Which is the part on which I’d like to hear you elaborate,’ Jaghar said, raising an eyebrow. ‘How sure are you of her peaceful intentions? Because for someone who doesn’t want a war, she’s been targeting Five Kingdoms royals surprisingly often in the past years.’

‘One of those attempted murders was supposed to be blamed on you,’ Runo said with another shrug. ‘And nobody was even supposed to see me around Tamar’s death – I’m pretty sure Maiva accepted Gocha’s invitation only because it offered a way to get in and out without anyone knowing the Empire was involved. As long as the alliance is still standing, she doesn’t want an open war. Even if she’d win it, she knows it would weaken her too much to keep her hold on the southern provinces.’

Jaghar slowly leaned back, folding his arms. Somehow it looked like a challenge more than scepticism. ‘And this is something she tells a simple assassin?’

‘Not sure about the simple ones.’ Runo threw him a grin. ‘But she told me, yes. In a sense. I know who she wants to see dead, at least, and that’s a far more reliable indicator of her

opinions than anything you'll ever hear her say in public. There's a rather impressive list of nobles and politicians and army leaders who have met an unpleasant end after lobbying in favour of war with the Five Kingdoms over the last years.'

'Examples?'

'There was a fellow named Jurmi who suggested war last year, just after your wedding,' Runo said, nodding at the both of them. 'Claimed the Peaks would be at its weakest with a silly new queen on the throne and the Kingdoms divided. Got quite popular with the idea. Don't be mistaken – just the fact that Maiva isn't going to attack the alliance doesn't mean she doesn't want the Kingdoms, and she's far from the only one. Jurmi was just a little too violent in his suggested methods.'

'So he died a mysterious death?' Viviette sounded eerily cheerful about the suggestion.

'Very little mystery about it,' Runo said dryly. 'He's lying in a trench just outside Volti with a couple of knife stabs through his heart. Rather idyllic place, if you don't mind corpses too much.'

'Runo...' Tamar muttered, but Viviette sniggered, and Jaghar didn't bat an eye.

'Your knife, I assume?'

'Yes.' A grin. 'You know, one of those sixty close friends of yours I killed.'

Jaghar turned to Tamar, raising an eyebrow. 'Is he always like this?'

‘Generally worse,’ Runo said before she could even think of an answer. ‘Any other questions?’

‘You said she won’t attack as long as the alliance is still together,’ Viviette said immediately, leaning forward a little. ‘But if she wants the Kingdoms as Imperial provinces nonetheless, I suppose that means she’ll try to break the alliance.’

‘Oh, yes. She was in a nauseatingly bright mood after we got the news of Donovan locking Emrys’s niece in a tower for two years. Even in the Empire they realise that’s the kind of thing that tends to damage friendships.’

Jaghar muttered a curse. ‘As far as you know, how much of an attempt has she been making to draw Donovan to her side?’

Runo sighed. ‘There have been letters, and I was never instructed to kill the Riverlands messengers in their sleep. That’s all I know. But Donovan should know the alliance isn’t going to support him if they can help it, and yet he hasn’t welcomed a host of Taavi officials into his home yet. So I’m going to guess he’s still keeping her off.’

‘He’s not stupid, of course,’ Viviette said sourly. ‘He knows what he’d do to his own power, letting her in. If you can be a king, why would you settle for the title of some provincial governor at most?’

‘Maiva will promise him governorship of your land, though, I suppose,’ Runo said. ‘She’s fond of doing those things. So I’d suggest you don’t make him desperate enough to start believing the taste of revenge will be worth the loss of his

crown.’ A nod at the notes beside him. ‘I actually like your suggestion, Tamar.’

She was surprised anyone still remembered her presence. ‘What suggestion are you referring to?’

‘To add the wool to your initial suggested sanction package, just to take it out as soon as Donovan inevitably starts complaining.’ He looked up, glancing at her with his most innocent expression in his golden eyes. ‘Or at least that’s what I assumed you meant?’

It was what she’d meant, yes. But she hadn’t noted down more than three words in her hurry last night – *wool, temporary, Riverlands* – and how had he understood the full line of her thoughts from such a meagre source?

Not a simple assassin at all, indeed. She should have known, and yet the extent of it still was a surprise.

‘Ah,’ she said, suppressing a sting of senseless discomfort. ‘Yes. I thought he might agree with the rest more easily if he feels he has successfully driven us to concede on something else.’

Viviette snorted in a highly unladylike manner. ‘The idea of pleasing him makes me want to punch something, to tell you the truth.’

‘Try a knife,’ Runo suggested. ‘Draws more blood with less effort, generally speaking.’

‘A man of sense, after all,’ Jaghar said, giving him another unexpected grin. ‘I suggest we first keep Maiva off our

borders, then start thinking about knives in Donovan's back. In which case...'

'Yes,' Viviette finished with another snort. 'The wool idea would probably work. We should notify Emrys in advance that it will likely be dropped, though. And apart from that...'

Again a quick look went back and forth between them, like a full discussion conveyed within two silent heartbeats. Then Jaghar sighed and nodded. Viviette smiled.

'Let's go with the grain.' Her smile grew a little more devious. 'If she attacks us anyway, at least we'll know who to blame.'

CHAPTER 8



Four days went by, and Runo didn't exchange a word with Tamar.

He rarely stayed away from her bedroom for so long – could rarely stand more than two nights of her absence from his arms. But she looked so damn tired in the days following his uninvited interruption, discussions and negotiations keeping her up until too late and calling her from bed too early. He didn't want to take up more of the time she should spend sleeping. She'd been quite right to point out he rarely limited himself to his intended five minutes.

So he slept in his own bed, and cursed his own cold blankets every night again, and waited.

After four nights the royal company finally returned home, their departure drawing even more attention than their arrival. Two days earlier Tamar's messengers had gone on their way to the other three kingdoms, and the Red Castle buzzed with

rumours of war, of Taavi attacks, of assassination attempts. Whispers about his own person too, Runo knew. As it turned out, sitting down to have breakfast with the infamous spy king was indeed a quick way to pique the public's attention.

‘Shouldn't you be seeing them off?’ Ninefingers grumbled next to him as they leaned over the castle's battlements and watched the departing company of knights, diplomats, and polite girls with daggers in their sleeves. It was a joke, presumably. Then again, it was at least half of a question too.

‘Me?’ Runo gave the knight an innocent glance. ‘A simple assassin?’

An amused snort. ‘Too late to play that game, brother.’

‘Just because they need my information on the Taavi court doesn't mean we're the best of friends by now,’ Runo said, scratching the back of his head. ‘I doubt they were happy to need me, and it might have been mutual.’

Although Viviette was admittedly the kind of clever little conniver he couldn't help but like, and for a murderous bastard who probably sold his soul to a witch, Jaghar hadn't been terrible company at all. He could see them selflessly covering up Tamar's murder of Anzor, too, now that he had met them. That, more than any unwilling grin or clever remark, did wonders to improve his opinion of them.

‘Well,’ Ninefingers muttered, sounding unconvinced. ‘If they needed your information, do you by any chance know what the queen has been discussing with them? People are talking about war.’

‘There’s not going to be a war.’

‘Did they tell you?’

‘No,’ Runo said. ‘I told them. Don’t know the details, though.’

Which was a lie. He had a pretty decent idea of the contents of the letters sent to Emrys, Ulrick, and Donovan after reading through Tamar’s notes – a package of export sanctions, raising the prices on grain, wool, jewellery, and several other trade goods from the Five Kingdoms to the Empire. Not enough to cause a war, but definitely enough to hurt Maiva’s treasury. Some small kingdoms against a bloody big empire indeed, but with five of them...

Ninefingers said something. Runo realised it a moment too late.

‘Sorry, what?’

‘If you’re still determined to continue your morning walks.’ The knight nodded at Jaghar and Viviette’s company, which had nearly disappeared beyond town by now. ‘Or did you only keep up with the habit while they were here?’

‘Oh, no,’ Runo said, standing straighter and suppressing a curse. ‘I don’t suppose you’re any less determined to come along than you’ve been in the past few days?’

‘Mostly determined to keep my job,’ Ninefingers grumbled. ‘So yes, still coming along.’

‘I still won’t rat on you if—’

‘Brother, I’m pretty sure disobeying the queen is a bigger risk here than that assassin we might or might not run into.’ A scoff. ‘I’m picking the safe option, thank you.’

Runo grimaced and wondered what Eelia would do if she heard herself described as the safe option. Carve the words into someone’s skin, probably.

‘Well. After you, then.’

On their way down they passed Tamar, who looked straight past them, and Amiran, who gave Runo his usual murderous glare. Then they were out, sauntering down the castle’s hill with the eyes of Terenti’s men still itching in their backs. Ninefingers’ presence seemed to have calmed them down a little; their hostility was no longer so obvious, their glares no longer so sharp. But they were still curious enough, and Runo didn’t assume they’d stop being curious even if he told them a hundred times he was just looking for traces of Eelia outside.

Which had been a lie, at first. Then again, it was a pretty sensible lie, and since Ninefingers was now following him around like a loyal lap dog, he had decided he might as well make it the truth.

‘So,’ Ninefingers said next to him, throwing suspicious glances at the trees lining the road. ‘Any plans today? Studying leaves again?’

Runo sniggered. He’d tried to explain the purpose of his explorations to his friend – find the places where any sensible Taavi assassin might try to break into the Red Castle and see if he could find any footprints that shouldn’t be there, any long

black hairs sticking to branches. The explanation hadn't made much of an impression, it seemed.

'I was planning to take a look around town today,' he said.

'To ask if anyone's seen that Eelia woman? I suppose the queen's Spymaster is already looking out for her in town.'

'Sure he is,' Runo said curtly. He wasn't that fond of Reziko. Too old, too predictable, too attached to the methods he had used for decades. He had no idea how Jaghar outplayed even the Empress's network with such apparent ease at times – Tamar had no idea either, she'd told him with some obvious annoyance – but whatever the method was, Reziko hadn't figured it out yet and probably never would.

'You think you can do better?' Ninefingers said, his gruff voice half mockery, half curiosity. Runo shrugged.

'I'm mostly craving almond cakes at the moment.'

'Good gods. Are you ever not craving almond cakes?'

He chuckled. 'Rarely.'

Ninefingers shook his head but didn't ask questions as they made their way into town and towards Runo's favourite bakery, just behind a little market square. Here at least people had gotten used to the sight of a southern-looking man sauntering around their neighbourhood; he didn't receive more than a handful of curious glances, and two or three friendly greetings as well.

'Have you been paying these people handfuls of gold?' Ninefingers muttered behind him.

‘I’m not going to annoy the heroes baking my favourite snacks,’ Runo said brightly.

‘Says the man who has no issues annoying the Iron Queen herself?’

Who is admittedly delicious too, Runo wanted to say, restraining himself as usual. He didn’t want to talk about Tamar, not with four days of her absence itching in every thought that passed through his mind. Not if he still wasn’t sure about her feelings and intentions. She hadn’t bothered to tell him in person that Ninefingers would now accompany him on his walks, and he still wasn’t sure if the order had been intended as a compromise or as a way to outsmart him by sending one of the few people he probably wouldn’t hurt. Under normal circumstances he’d have sneaked into her bedroom to ask her. But with that tired look on her face...

He barely suppressed a groan. He should visit her tonight, now that all decisions had been made, all letters had been written, and the people keeping her awake had left the castle again. Until then, his nerves really preferred not to linger on the matter.

The bakery was empty around this time – too late for breakfast, too early for lunch. The old lady behind the counter gave him her usual toothless smile as he came in.

‘It’s Sir Runo again! I was already wondering if you’d died, staying away for longer than a day.’ She cocked her head at Ninefingers, looking like a clever bird. ‘Brought a friend this time?’

‘This is Ninefingers,’ Runo said with a quick gesture at the other man. ‘He refused to believe your almond cakes were by far the best between Andrough and Beyond the Desert, so I had to take him along to make my point.’

She blushed a little. ‘You’re flattering me, Sir Runo.’

‘As I should.’ He flashed his most charming grin. ‘I hope you still have some left?’

‘Eight of them.’ She sounded like a cat that could start purring any moment. ‘How many would you like?’

‘Let’s have – oh, hell, just all of them. There are some friends back up the hill who might need some convincing too.’

Ninefingers threw him an incredulous glance as the old lady scurried to the back of the shop and grabbed some scrap paper to wrap the cakes. Runo sent a bright look back and counted his coins while they waited.

‘I had a question, by the way,’ he added as the old lady handed him the package of pastries, which smelled deliciously of almonds and honey. ‘Don’t know if you heard about it already, but it looks like the Empire is sending more people this way. One woman in particular.’

‘Oh, yes, I heard the rumours.’ She glanced at Ninefingers, then back at him. ‘Are you looking for her?’

‘More or less. I was just wondering – considering that you see a lot of people in your shop every day... Did you by any chance hear anyone say anything about a Taavi woman arriving in town recently?’

The old woman frowned, so fixated on the question she didn't seem to notice the coins he laid out on the counter. 'Not that I remember. But I didn't ask around, of course – would it help you if I did?'

'It actually would,' he said, with a broad smile so genuine he surprised himself. 'She can be recognised by a scar behind her left ear, if anyone has any suspicions. Might be wise not to confront her directly, though. Better to let me know if you hear she's staying anywhere near.'

'Good of you to warn us, Sir Runo,' she said, very earnest now. 'I'll ask my friends, too. Perhaps the ladies of the knitting society will have heard some rumours. If you're back soon, I'll let you know.'

'You know I'll be back soon,' he said with a nod at the cakes. 'Can't do without these for too long.'

She swatted at him in an unsuccessful attempt at modesty, looking far too satisfied for the gesture to be anywhere near convincing. 'I hope I have news for you tomorrow, then. And good day to both of you!'

'Same to you!'

Ninefingers was muttering wordless syllables behind him as they left the narrow building and stepped back into the spring sun. When Runo threw him a glance over his shoulder, the knight abruptly became silent, snorted, then grumbled, 'You smooth bastard.'

Runo burst out laughing, grabbed an almond cake from his package and handed it to the other man. ‘Complaints?’

‘Wouldn’t call them *complaints*.’ Ninefingers sank his teeth into the golden brown cake and chewed rather violently for a moment, then added, ‘These are some bloody good cakes, I’ll give you that.’

‘Excellent,’ Runo said brightly. ‘Will tell her next time. That should get us some extra goodwill from the knitting society.’

‘For the gods’ sake. Do you really expect a couple of old crones to find that murderer of yours?’

‘People talk at that bakery. Knitting old ladies talk, too. I frankly wouldn’t be surprised if one of them has a grandson with a neighbour with a cousin renting out hostel rooms.’

Ninefingers considered that for a moment, eating his way through his cake at impressive speed. ‘Might work.’

‘Glad to have your approval.’ Runo nodded at the alley to their right, which lead to a narrow street full of taverns and restaurants. ‘Let’s see if we can recruit a couple of innkeepers too.’



They returned to the Red Castle just after noon, carrying four remaining almond cakes, promises of three different innkeepers to keep their eyes open, and notes of a few remarks

by tavern guests who thought they might have seen a Taavi woman walking through town in the past few days. Runo reported those to the Sungarden men on guard at the castle gate, then divided the almond cakes among them as well and promptly found himself invited to join a couple of them for a beer downtown tomorrow evening. Not all of Ninefingers' muttering was intelligible, but Runo was reasonably sure he heard the words "smooth" and "bastard" at least a handful of times.

He lingered at the gate for a few more minutes, chatting with his newfound friends as long as he thought necessary to soothe the last traces of their suspicions. Then he excused himself and made his way back into the Red Castle.

Towards Tamar's study, more specifically.

He had an excuse now, after all. Potential sightings of the Taavi threat in town sounded urgent enough. It didn't matter that he strongly doubted the reported woman had indeed been Eelia, who should know better than to saunter around town for days before making a move. As long as the rest of the court could reasonably believe it was a possibility, he could reasonably burst into Tamar's working room for it too. Which really sounded much, much better than waiting until she came to bed. Night still seemed an eternity away – a boring, colourless eternity.

Up the stairs. Past several groups of guards throwing him uncomfortable glances. He was only a mere two corners away

from his destination when a voice behind him snapped, ‘Hey! Taavi!’

In roughly the time it took to jerk around, Runo realised he knew that voice better than he liked.

Amiran came striding towards him, eyes narrowed, fists clenched, approaching him with such speed Runo thought for a moment the man would punch him into the face. Wisely, Tamar’s cousin changed his mind just in time, stomping to a halt two feet away from him instead. He smelt of burnt saltpetre and a whiff of vinegar. The man’s bloody experiments again. A shame he’d apparently left his study for just long enough to cause trouble.

‘Anything I can do for you?’ Runo said in his most aggravatingly polite tone.

Amiran scoffed. ‘What exactly are you doing here, Taavi?’

‘Don’t see how that’s any of your business,’ he said, even more politely. ‘Also, I’m terribly sorry to hear you have such trouble remembering my name, but it would be—’

‘Don’t start playing your games with me,’ Amiran snapped. ‘What are you doing here? On your way to bother Tamar again with whatever trouble you’ve come up with this time?’

Runo raised his eyebrows, considering that question for a moment. At least the man wasn’t accusing him of planning another murder attempt – that could be considered progress. Then again, it was a rather pathetic kind of progress. Bother Tamar again. Was that what he was doing at the Red Castle,

according to Amiran – spending all his time causing unnecessary trouble to the queen?

If it wouldn't have pleased the other so much, he'd have cursed. Hell be damned, Tamar. Would it be so hard to inform at least the person who'd *never* betray her of a few more details – enough detail to soothe his more murderous tendencies?

'As long as she's not throwing me out of the castle,' he said, stepping back with another radiant and utterly insincere smile, 'I doubt I'm causing that much trouble. Anything else?'

Amiran pressed his lips into a thin line, clearly barely restraining himself. 'What are you going to tell her now?'

'Assassin news.'

'Is it important enough to disturb her? She's busy enough.'

Runo sighed. 'Mind if I just let Tamar manage her own schedule, brother?'

He realised his mistake a moment too late, warned by the sudden narrowing of Amiran's eyes, the newfound sharpness in the other man's voice. '*What* did you call her?'

Oh, hell be damned.

Her Majesty, the Iron Queen of Redwood. Not Tamar. Not a human being. Not the woman he hadn't held in his arms for four nights, and missed with a vehemency that hurt – just Her Majesty for him. He sucked in a breath, suppressing the urge to plant a fist into the other man's face after all, and curtly said, 'Does it matter?'

‘She’s your *queen*, you...’

‘I’m well aware, thank you.’

Amiran barely seemed to hear him. ‘You can’t just go around speaking of her like you’d speak of some *friend*, for the bloody gods’ sake – you can’t—’

‘You’ve made your point,’ Runo interrupted, stepping back. Servants were staring on the other side of the corridor. This was more attention than he needed, even if he technically had an excuse to visit her. ‘Now if you don’t mind, I’ll be—’

‘You’re not going anywhere,’ Amiran snapped, jerking past him. ‘I was going to see her anyway. Don’t show your face around here anymore unless she explicitly asks you to.’ A last venomous glare. ‘Taavi.’

With that he stalked off, chasing the bewildered servants away with a few grumbled commands.

CHAPTER 9



The door flew open without warning, slamming into the wall with a bang that might well have woken the dead in the crypts below the Red Castle. Tamar nearly dropped her letters. Next to her Lasha cursed out loud and jumped from her chair, then froze and turned beet red as she recognised the invader.

‘Amiran?’ Tamar said, rising as well and grabbing for the knife in her skirts, just in case he’d be followed by an army of Taavi assassins. ‘What in the world—’

‘We need to have a word,’ he snapped, slamming the door shut behind him as furiously as he had opened it. Only then, stepping forward, did he seem to notice Lasha still standing next to the desk. For a fraction of a moment he stiffened, the anger faltering on his face; then, with a gesture at the door, he added in a slightly more restrained tone, ‘Please leave us alone for a moment, will you?’

Lasha produced a quick curtsy, grabbed her notes, and hurried off. Tamar waited until the door had fallen shut behind her secretary's back before she said, 'Is anyone dying?'

Amiran snorted. 'Not yet.'

'Did anyone declare war on us, then?'

'Not that I know of, either.' He brusquely stuck his thumbs into the band of his trousers and paced towards the window, breathing too heavily. 'It's about that assassin of yours.'

Oh, good gods. 'Again?'

'Are you aware he's calling you by your first name, Tamar?'

She stared at him, a hollow feeling rising in her stomach. Four long days since she'd last had a private word with Runo. Four days since he'd all but told her he wasn't going to obey her rules any more than he had ever obeyed the rules in Raulinna, or anywhere else for that matter. What in the world had he been doing in the meantime?

'My – name,' she said.

'Yes.'

'Habitually? Or—'

'How should I know?' He made a sharp turn towards her and bit out a laugh. 'It came out pretty damn casual while I was having a word with him, and if he is casual about it to *me*, I suppose...'

Tamar closed her eyes, the short flare of relief immediately drowned out by a far deeper, far more hopeless sensation of

frustration. A slip of the tongue to Amiran was at least not the same as shoving her titles aside in full view of her entire court. But what in the world was he thinking, to slip up to a man who was already looking for reasons to mistrust him, who'd never overlook any apparent disrespect aimed at her?

He hadn't done it on *purpose*, had he?

'Well,' she said, sucking in a breath. Hell's sake. After a full week of international politics, this nonsense was the last she needed. First priority was to calm Amiran down before he could get caught up in one of his furious outbursts. She could ask Runo what in hell was going on after she had at least managed her cousin. 'He's presumably heard people call me by my first name for most of his life. A slip of the tongue can happen to the best of us.'

'He's heard people call his bloody Empress by her title for most of his life too,' Amiran snapped, 'and I haven't heard him slip up on that even once since he's been calling her by her name.'

An unpleasantly good point. With more desperation than conviction, Tamar shrugged and said, 'I think I've heard him return to her title a handful of times. I don't see reason to assume there's anything more problematic going on.'

Amiran stared at her for a long moment of silence, brown eyes shooting daggers from below his messy red locks. Not the right kind of silence – not the silence of him calming down. She was rather reminded of the quiet just before a cloudburst.

‘If I may ask,’ he said then, his voice dangerously stilled, ‘why in hell’s name do you feel so ridiculously compelled to defend him after all the shit he’s put you through?’

‘What do you mean, all the—’

‘He tried to *kill* you, Tamar! Multiple times!’

‘Do we need to have this conversation again?’ she snapped, falling back into her chair. ‘I told you a hundred times already – he killed Gocha to save my life. If he’s ever truly been planning to kill me, it seems clear to me he changed his mind. Anything else?’

‘What do you mean, anything else?’ He swung a wide gesture at her, his voice rising again. ‘He’s walking around this bloody castle like he owns it. He’s still taunting you whenever you run into him – do you really think I don’t see it happening?’

Taunting her? Oh, for hell’s sake. It would be far too easy, indeed, to see traces of mockery in those brilliant smiles, those heart-stopping glances...

‘Do you really think I care much about that?’ she said coldly. ‘I know better than to let myself be provoked by—’

‘You’re staring *daggers* at him whenever you see him, Tamar! You’re not going to convince me you’re shrugging him off that easily.’

She pressed her lips tight, wrestling to keep her curses down. Shrug him off. Of course she couldn’t shrug him off – she hadn’t been able to since that very first night he’d laid

hands on her. But then what was she supposed to say now? Don't worry, he's been sleeping in my bed since he returned. As if that would lessen his distrust – it would probably only heighten it, really. All Taavi games and manipulations, she could hear him say it already. If she was unlucky he'd be so desperate to save her from Runo's dishonourable intentions that he'd involve Terenti in the mess, and *that*...

She nearly shivered. She didn't want to hear Terenti's reaction to the news that she replaced his brother with one of Maiva's former assassins.

'It's of no importance whether I like him or not.' She turned to her desk as if she was able to focus on her nobles' correspondence now. 'He has useful information, and we would be mad to throw it away. That's all there is to it.'

'How useful, exactly?' Amiran said, his voice still laced with thick suspicion.

'I told you, in the sanction issue...'

'Court gossip from Raulinna, yes.' He scoffed. 'Are you even sure his information is actually correct, Tamar? Are you sure he isn't here to whisper Maiva's lies into your ears and steer the politics of the Five—'

'For the bloody gods' sake,' she fell out, her frustration finally bursting free. 'Would you *stop*?'

'Not if you're not answering me!' He paced to the other side of the room with long, furious strides, wildly gesturing at the castle surrounding them. 'I'm telling you there's no reason to

blindly trust him, and you're not answering me properly – hell be damned, Tamar, you're too bright to overlook all of what I'm saying here and trust him on his pretty eyes. What are you taking into account that I don't know?'

She sagged back in her chair and closed her eyes, thoughts whirling in sickening circles of panic. What was it he didn't know? The delirious tenderness of Runo's hands, the blissful authority of his touches. His sweet lips kissing the weight of the world from her shoulders. His recklessness, his dangerous charm, his quick jokes that had her laughing about even matters of life and death – nothing she could tell her cousin without him declaring her mad...

'Eelia is here for him,' she said.

It came out too loud, too hard, in the tense silence. When she looked up, Amiran had frozen in his spot, staring at her with narrowed, confused eyes.

'What?'

'Eelia,' she repeated flatly. 'Maiva didn't send her after me. She's—'

'After *him*?'

'Yes.'

Amiran barked a joyless laugh, resuming his agitated steps. 'Who says so – Jaghar?'

She nodded.

‘It might still be some double-edged plot,’ he said, shaking his head. ‘Spilling the news to Jaghar’s people so they will tell you and make you trust him, while...’

‘Don’t be ridiculous, Amiran.’

‘*You* are being ridiculous,’ he snapped with another furious gesture at her. ‘*You know* it’s a possibility. It’s how they work in the Empire – you know that too. How can I make you see sense, for hell’s sake? This man might be dangerous. He’s at the very least suspicious. And you refuse to even keep an eye on him and make sure he isn’t sneaking off to...’

‘It’s about the precedent,’ Tamar interrupted, cursing the hint of shrill despair in her voice. ‘He’s not the only one in the Empire looking for an escape, and more Taavi deserters would be very helpful to us. We won’t convince them to come to us if we lock this one in a tower now.’

Amiran stood still, sucking in a heated breath. ‘That’s all?’

‘Isn’t it enough?’

‘To keep housing a man who’s going out of his way to humiliate you in public?’ he snapped. ‘A man who’s calling you by your first name like you’re the lass next door – while we know he uses Maiva’s first name to denigrate her? You’re letting him get away with things not even I or Terenti would get away with, and I damn well hope you realise we’re a little more vital for the wellbeing of this kingdom than a bloody *Taavi* deserter.’

‘Of course I do.’

‘Then why is he still here?’

Oh, good gods. Because I want him here. Because I’d go mad without him. Because sending him out into the woods on his own might be a death sentence, and I can’t even bear the *thought* of harming him. She sucked in an unsteady breath – what could she say?

What would Runo say?

Just tell him, if you trust him as much as you say you do. She didn’t even have to imagine it; he *had* said that, at numerous occasions. She already knew the answer, too – she couldn’t. He’d call her a madwoman, and he wouldn’t even be wrong. He’d lose all faith in her judgement, start doubting her decisions even when Runo played no role in them; he’d start counting on Terenti to keep Redwood safe, would follow the lead of her brother-in-law rather than hers when push came to shove. She’d be lost, then. With the two of them playing their own games, there would be far too much room around her, far too many ways to circumvent her.

If she’d ever tell him, she needed time to prepare. Time to convince him Runo wasn’t playing some dirty Taavi game, time to determine how she’d soften the blow of her dukes’ reactions. Blurting out the truth in a heated discussion was the worst way to reveal the secret.

So what could she say – what had Runo said once? *If you have to be unpleasant anyway, at least be pleasant about it...*

‘Amiran,’ she said, and tried to sound sensible, stable, like a woman who’d never even entertain the thought of fucking a

Taavi assassin on her own desk. ‘I understand your concern. I appreciate it, too. But I want to keep him at the Red Castle, and that’s all I’m going to say about it now. Could we please leave the matter at that?’

He gave her an incredulous stare. ‘Hell be damned, what does he have on you?’

‘Don’t be melodramatic.’ She bit out a laugh. ‘I know what I’m doing. It is for the best.’

Amiran still didn’t move; if anything, his shoulders stiffened even further. A disconcerting shade of red flushed over his face.

‘That’s exactly what you told me about Anzor.’

A punch in the gut – she was nearly surprised she didn’t double over as the full force of the words hit her. Vaguely she realised she had jumped up. There was parchment on the floor, suddenly. She may have thrown it there.

‘Don’t you dare bring Anzor into this.’ Her voice was a hoarse, frayed cry. ‘Don’t you dare...’

‘For hell’s sake – can’t you see I’m worried about you?’

‘Oh, you’re worried *now*? Not during all those years?’

For a last moment he stood frozen, staring at her as if she’d slapped him in the face. Then he bit out a curse that would have the average soldier paling, jerked around, and stormed off before she could bring another word over her lips.

CHAPTER 10



It was just after midnight when Runo made his way to Tamar's rooms again, habitually avoiding servants and knights and nobles as he slipped up the stairs, reached the rune-marked door to the series of vacant bedrooms, and locked it behind him. Even in the dusty darkness he found the door linking to the next room at his first try, a routine that had settled into his limbs after weeks of secret assignments.

There was none of the usual excitement glowing in his chest this time, however, none of the pleasant anticipation that marked most of these visits. An impatience, yes, but of the ominous kind – of wanting to know just how bad the situation was, because at least it could hardly be worse than not knowing and guessing. What Amiran had said. What she had thought. Why she hadn't asked for him yet. Why she hadn't attended dinner at all...

He muttered a curse and pushed open the last door with a little more force than necessary.

She was sitting at her desk, quite as expected. She did turn around at his entrance, abruptly so, the gesture suggesting she might have been as impatient to see him as he had been after these four empty nights. But her shoulders didn't loosen at the sight of him, and her smile was an unconvincing imitation of relief.

‘Runo!’

‘Evening,’ he said, closing the door behind him. ‘Survived the week?’

‘Once again,’ she said, her amusement a little more genuine, ‘I somehow seem to have survived the week. You?’

He no longer had the brain to be subtle about it. He had spent too many hours cursing the want for her aching on his skin. With a few steps he reached her desk and bent to lift her from her chair, ignoring her cry of surprise, her start of an objection. Work could go screw itself for the night. He wanted her close, now – needed her close, perhaps.

That last thought he shoved back into the shadows of his mind before it could take root too firmly.

‘I’ve missed you,’ he muttered, sinking down on the edge of her bed with his arms still around her. ‘Survived the week. But missed you terribly.’

For a moment she stiffened; then she muttered something he couldn't understand and curled closer against him, burying her

face against his shoulder. For a single moment – a blissful, unburdened moment – the world reverted back to the world of a week ago, before Jaghar and Viviette, before Eelia, before the disagreements and the questions he didn't want to ask. Suddenly the world outside her bedroom seemed utterly futile, a couple of nagging nobles, and nothing that would ever be able to keep her from his arms...

‘What in the world did you say to Amiran this afternoon?’ she mumbled.

The blissful moment of harmony shattered. It was the doubt in her voice, the hint of distrust. The faint but dangerous underlying suggestion that whatever Amiran had said to *her* may as well have changed her mind on matters Runo didn't want her to change her mind about.

‘I slipped up,’ he said.

‘He said you...’

‘Called you by your name.’ He closed his eyes. ‘He was doing it too, and I was agitated, and accidentally followed the example.’

‘It really was an accident?’

A sting ran through him. ‘Tamar, please.’

‘I just thought...’

‘I'd prefer for you to tell him what's going on, yes, but do you really think I'd resort to strongarming just because I'm getting a little tired of his murderous looks?’

She was silent for a moment. Then, slowly, she said, ‘You have to admit you did pretty much the same with Jaghar and Viviette.’

Runo sighed. ‘Because I knew they’d let me get away with it.’

‘You should have told me in advance.’

‘You’d have forbidden me to get involved.’

‘Of course I would,’ she grumbled. ‘It was a ridiculous idea.’

He couldn’t suppress a chuckle. ‘It worked, though.’

‘Oh, the gods have mercy on me.’ She looked up, her glare a little softer than he had feared. ‘You’re still utterly impossible.’

‘I know,’ he said, falling back in the blankets with his arms still around her, savouring the weight of her body against his chest. ‘It’s what makes me so utterly irresistible.’

She sniggered and rolled off him, nestling herself between his right arm and his torso, her head on his shoulder and her hand on his chest. ‘How many assassins is it going to take to humble you a little?’

‘That’s not how it works,’ he said, stretching out lazily. ‘Every person wanting me dead is just another person confirming the significance of my existence. Maiva is only fuelling my arrogance. You’ll have to hope Amiran doesn’t put a sword to my throat one of these days, because I’d become absolutely insufferable.’

She groaned. ‘Watch your words around him a little, Runo. Please. He has enough reasons to distrust you already.’

Runo closed his eyes and tried to think clearly, tried to think of a rational answer despite the seductive fragrance of her perfume drifting around him, the warm shape of her body pressed against his side. Part of him just wanted to nod, promise he’d be careful, and make bone-shattering love to her for the rest of the night. But he’d wake up tomorrow and still not know. It might be another few days before he’d get time with her again, and he didn’t want to spend another week with those agonising knots in his guts, unsure what to expect from her, unsure what to hope for.

If he wanted to have this conversation behind him one day, he’d have to start it sooner or later.

‘I don’t suppose you told him the truth?’ he said, pushing the words over his lips before he could change his mind. She stiffened next to him. He’d expected that, but it still hurt.

‘*Told* him?’

He shrugged, nearly shaking her head off his shoulder with that movement. ‘It would have been one way of handling the matter.’

‘It would have done more harm than good,’ she said, an iron edge sneaking back into her voice. ‘He’d never believe your intentions are anywhere near decent. He’s convinced you’re still some Taavi pawn, here to mislead me or – or blackmail me, or...’

‘Yes,’ Runo said, forcing himself to continue. He didn’t want to continue. He wanted to agree she’d done what was best, then wrap his arms around her again, strip her dress off her, and kiss her into mindless oblivion. ‘But you have to admit you’ve never really given him a reason to think better of me.’

‘What do you mean?’ The last traces of their simple, careless conversation went up in smoke. ‘I told him you’re not going back to the Empire, I told him I trust you, I told him...’

‘Yes, but what’s the poor man supposed to think if he only ever sees you glowering at me as if you’re hoping to kill me?’

She abruptly sat up, breaking away from his body. ‘Runo, please.’

‘Elaborate,’ he said, opening his eyes. She sat staring at the wall with burning eyes, her fists clenched in her skirts. ‘Why am I saying ridiculous things, exactly?’

‘I can’t act the way I act with you here when I’m out there – you *know* I can’t.’ Her voice turned shriller. ‘How many times do I have to tell you? Letting the Iron Queen go in private conversations is one thing, but I still have a court to keep under control. People are waiting for me to show them the tiniest bit of wriggle room. I can’t just start giggling like some silly sixteen-year-old damsel in full view of the kingdom.’

‘Can’t you?’ he said slowly.

‘Stop it!’ she fell out, her fists suddenly shaking in her lap. ‘Stop looking at me like that – this is where *you* have no clue

what you're dealing with – what I...' A sharp, shivering laugh. 'You have not the faintest shred of an idea what it was like. Those first days. Weeks. When they...'

'Tamar—'

'When they put that damned crown on my head and then laughed in my face,' she continued, her voice rising. 'Paraded my father's murderer around the court like a hero, and there was nothing I could do about it – the dukes controlling my army called me a pretty lass and leered at me if I tried to even *talk* to them. I had nothing. I *was* nothing. And I fought too hard – I sacrificed too much – for their respect and obedience to risk it on a gamble. So *stop* saying...' She gulped in a lungful of air, face contorted in her sudden fury. 'Stop saying it's easy. Stop telling me I'm a heartless bitch because I won't fall into a swoon whenever I catch a glimpse of you, because I'm *not*—'

'Tamar.' He grabbed her wrist and held it even when she jerked away. 'Tamar, please. I'm sorry. I didn't want to upset you. I—'

'How many times do I have to tell you I can't do it before you *understand*?'

He closed his eyes, hopelessness whirling through his gut. 'I'm trying to help you.'

'You're doing the opposite of helping!' She was full-out shouting now, her hair dancing around her face in furious twirls of copper. 'You're undermining me! You're embarrassing me in front of my own people! You're—'

‘I’m *embarrassing* you?’

Her mouth snapped shut, warned perhaps by the tone of his voice. Runo clenched his jaws and forced himself to breathe calmly for two heartbeats before he continued, not because he was anywhere close to calm, but because he doubted he would make anything better by shouting or tearing her dress off her in a bout of furious arousal.

‘Do I understand,’ he said, and he heard the dangerous edge even in his own words, ‘that you’re *ashamed* of me?’

‘I’m not.’ Too quick.

‘You just said...’

‘I’m ashamed of *myself* around you!’ she burst out. ‘Is that what you want to hear, then?’

‘Oh, you think that sounds any better?’

She yanked her wrist from his grip and jumped from the bed, messy and ruffled and painfully beautiful as she sucked in a breath, let it escape again, and made a frustrated gesture at nowhere, wrestling with her words. Runo managed to bite his tongue for perhaps a minute. Then his patience lost the fight.

‘I asked you, last week.’ The words tasted bitter on his lips. ‘What am I to you? Because if the answer is an embarrassment, I don’t think...’

His sentence died away there, cut short by his own heart shrivelling in his chest. Then I don’t think I should be here. Then I don’t think I *want* to be here. Frankly, I’d rather have you hate me than be embarrassed by me.

‘You’re not an embarrassment,’ she said, suddenly quiet.
‘You really aren’t.’

Runo averted his eyes. It almost hurt to look at her; he didn’t think he’d be brave enough to continue at the sight of her.

‘So.’ He sucked in a deep breath. ‘Asking you once again – what am—’

‘Runo, what do you want to *hear*?’

‘Isn’t that clear enough?’

‘Don’t play that game.’ He heard the frustration in her voice. ‘I can’t solve whatever your problem is if you refuse to tell me what I’m supposed to solve, and so far you—’

‘The problem is,’ he interrupted, too sharp, ‘that you’re treating me like a tool, and I like being a tool to you roughly as much as being an embarrassment to you. Is that what you wanted to know?’

She went silent. She was silent for so long that Runo lost count of his heartbeats, long enough that he eventually steeled himself and looked up. She hadn’t moved, still standing three strides away from the bed, her fists clenched by her sides, her wide brown eyes following his every movement. Their gazes met.

‘Of course you’re not a tool to me,’ she said. It sounded like a reflex.

‘You’re treating me like one all the same.’

‘But I—’

‘Tamar.’

She clenched her lips, looked away. ‘What exactly do you mean?’

‘You need me to fuck you and calm you down,’ he said, forcing the words out. ‘You need me for your moments of relief. Your temporary loss of control. But you’re still trying to control exactly when I’m allowed to do anything for you. The rest of the time I’m...’ He vaguely gestured at the knights’ wing outside. ‘Shoved back onto my shelf. Supposed to forget my own wishes and stay far, far away from you. As if you’d rather forget I even exist.’

‘You...’ A befuddled laugh. ‘You’re not actually questioning how much I care about you, are you?’

‘I think that’s exactly what I’m doing, frankly.’

Her eyes were too wide, her voice too shrill. ‘I’m risking my *life* for you!’

‘For me?’ Runo said bleakly. ‘Or for your own sanity?’

‘Oh, for the bloody gods’ sake – do you think it was my *sanity* I had nightmares about in those six weeks when you disappeared from the face of the earth? My own wellbeing?’ Her eyes shot daggers at him. ‘I watched you die a thousand times in a hundred different ways in my sleep, for hell’s sake, and I love you a little too much to risk...’

‘You – what?’

She fell silent. ‘What?’

‘Say – say that again.’

‘What – the nightmares?’

‘No. No, the part after.’

A frown grew on her face. ‘That I love you too much to risk you being torn to shreds by – Runo, you didn’t doubt *that*, did you?’

He blinked. Stared at her in what felt like bewildered paralysis, his mind a blank, white mist. Three feet away Tamar stared back, the frown sinking off her face ever so slowly.

‘You doubted that,’ she concluded numbly.

‘You – never said that before.’

‘Neither did you,’ she said with a dazed chuckle. ‘You didn’t need to. You told me in every way but with words.’

‘I’m just a simple assassin, Tamar,’ he said hoarsely. ‘I need those words.’

‘You...’ Another of those breathless laughs. ‘*Runo*. Why didn’t you just – if you’d said—’

He closed his eyes, inhaling slowly. This didn’t make sense. This was happening far too easily to be real. But something light was settling into his heart, something sweet and springlike, allowing him to breathe free for the first time in days...

‘I suppose arrogant bastards can be frightened too,’ he muttered.

‘Runo...’

He swallowed. ‘Come here.’

He didn’t hear her move. When he looked up, she still stood in the same place, her gaze fixed to his face. Love you. *Love you.*

‘Come here,’ he repeated, his voice cracking, and she only shook her head, as if trying to shake a bad dream from her mind.

‘You still think so little of yourself, don’t you?’ she said quietly.

He abruptly leaned forward and grabbed her wrist, tugged her closer. She stumbled into his lap with a cry of surprise, then swallowed her cries the moment he pressed his lips to hers and drank her sweetness with an intensity that blurred his senses. With a moan she weaved her fingers through his hair and arched closer. He tore open her bodice without breaking their kiss, nuzzled her lower lip, then bit lightly just for the joy of hearing her gasp – that quiet, shocked gasp, as if after all this time his debauchery still surprised her.

‘Runo...’

‘Tell me,’ he breathed. ‘Please.’

‘I love you.’ Such a breathtaking sincerity in her hazel eyes, piercing through him with the weight of her honesty. ‘You’re infuriating and reckless and an arrogant bastard, and I still love you, and you force me to think about things I never wanted to think about, and I still love you, and you might kill us all in

the end with that bloody madness of yours, but frankly, you're worth a couple of violent deaths at least.' A small smile curled around her lips. 'Enough?'

'For now,' he managed, resting his forehead against hers and closing his eyes, breathing the scent of her. Nothing made sense. Nothing made sense, and yet everything did – the world shoving back into the right place again. Not a tool. Not just the pleasant distraction in the background. 'For now that's enough – but you'll have to explain a couple of things to me, Tamar. Please.'

'More doubts?'

'Not doubts. Just questions. Because if you – if you...'

She waited, observing him with quiet brown eyes as he wrestled with the words for a moment. Runo swallowed, then forced himself to say, 'If you – love me...'

'Which I do.'

'Then how in the world are you planning to continue with this?'

She averted her eyes. 'Continue with what?'

'With us. With the rest of our lives. Do you want me to keep hiding myself around you until we grow old and die? Because that's going to be a bloody long time of hiding, and I'm already—'

'Runo, please, don't make this...'

‘I want more of you. More than this.’ He heard her inhalation, an inhalation sounding like a prelude to objections, and quickly put a finger over her lips. ‘Let me talk.’

She exhaled slowly, but nodded.

‘The problem,’ he said, wrapping his arms around her again, ‘is that I love you like the madman I am, and I want to love you whenever it damn well pleases me. I want to hold you when I know you’re frightened. I want to drag you out of this stupid castle and eat almond cakes with you in town and watch the sunset together. I...’

He sucked in a breath but didn’t finish his sentence. Tamar curled against him in his lap, resting her head against his chest with her eyes closed.

‘I – I don’t think I can.’

‘Because of the damn illusion of authority again?’

‘Don’t make it that simple,’ she whispered. ‘It’s not. A full kingdom’s stability depends on me – on the way people see me. If I take a gamble and lose, lives are lost. You...’ A slight tremble in her voice. ‘You have to understand I *want* to be the Iron Queen when I’m working. A little less iron than before, I’m doing my best on that, but...’

Runo waited. He should feel hopeless now, probably. Should feel like she was closing a door straight into his face. But his mind was spinning again, plans and thoughts welling up in him – some of them even nearly sensible. He suddenly felt like himself again. He had been walking on eggshells for

days, he realised only now, and he *hated* eggshells. Now, absorbing those little hesitations, those minuscule trembles, he found himself drawing conclusions he hadn't dared to dream an hour ago...

She *was* still a terrible liar.

'And being the Iron Queen means looking like you hate me?' he said when she didn't continue.

'If you insist on approaching me all the time, treating me in ways I wouldn't want anyone else at the court to treat me – to an extent, yes.'

He suppressed a curse. 'Look, I could stop interacting with you altogether in public – I'd hate it, but if it really is what you want, I could do it. I just don't think...'

'It really is what I want,' she said, a little too quickly.

'Are you very sure of that?'

She groaned. 'Runo.'

'You don't sound terribly sure.'

'I *am* sure, and you are insufferable.'

He laughed, feeling light enough to float. She *wasn't* sure. Which she didn't know herself, perhaps, didn't want to know herself – but he knew the way her voice strained and her shoulders tensed. There was a hint of doubt, there. A trace of something she wanted and didn't dare to want. Which wasn't all he wished for yet – not even close to all he wished for yet –

but it gave him a direction. Something to find. Something to free.

‘And if I still don’t believe you?’

She inhaled sharply, then moaned as he gently untied the ribbons of her bodice. ‘Don’t you dare go causing scenes in some unnecessary attempt to change my mind on this. I’ll be giving you a *lot* of dirty looks.’

‘Tempting,’ he muttered, and again she stiffened in his lap.

‘Runo...’

‘I won’t cause any scenes,’ he interrupted, peeling her corset off her. Her gorgeous body emerged below, begging for his touch. More plans sparked in his mind, plans she’d vehemently object to if she had the faintest idea of them – adding to the equally unacceptable desires that had been simmering in his mind for weeks. ‘I won’t be undermining you. You can have my word on that. But in return for that promise, you will allow me to try to change your mind.’

‘You’re...’ She faltered as he stroked his thumb over her ribs, the first curve of her breast. ‘You’re wasting your time. I’m not changing my mind.’

‘Of course you’re saying that now. I haven’t made an effort yet.’

She groaned. ‘You sound like you’re going to break the rules anyway.’

‘I wouldn’t dare,’ he said, circling his fingers around her breast, in slow spirals, closer and closer to her nipple. He

changed course just before he reached that pert red bud, pretending he didn't hear her sigh of disappointment. 'No public interaction, I can promise you that. No undermining your politics.'

'Your – oh, gods.' She tried not to moan as he slightly squeezed her breast, and failed miserably. 'Your word?'

'My word.'

'Well,' she muttered, relaxing slightly against him. 'In that case, if these are the arguments you'll be using, you may as well go ahead...'

He chuckled. 'Oh, not now, Your Majesty.'

'Not?'

'No. We need to sleep.' He kissed her forehead, her cheek, then took his hands off her and once again pretended not to notice the sting of disappointment in her eyes. 'Let's see where we get tomorrow.'

But he kept his hands on her throughout the night, caressing, tantalising – and never giving her the release she craved. He ignored her frustrated sighs, her unsubtle attempts to move his fingers in the right direction. Denying himself the pleasure of release, too, but with his sudden clarity of mind, that small sacrifice was the last thing he could care about...

He finally had a game to play. And he wasn't going to wait a minute longer.

CHAPTER II



Tamar had trouble focussing on her meeting.

In theory this could be blamed on the two men sitting at her desk, who were bickering about the possibility of a research team visiting the Forbidden Lakes and barely seemed to know what request they had actually come to make. Under normal circumstances she'd already have kicked them out and told them to come back when they knew what they were wasting her time for. But Amiran had asked her to receive them, and he was angry enough already without her shoving his scientist friends out of the door...

'More than five people is absolutely *out* of the question,' the short, grey-haired gentleman on the right snapped. 'It's a dangerous area even if—'

'But we'll need a secretary! A sketch artist! A guide! At least three men who can handle weapons, too!'

'Weapons? What's the use of that if it is indeed magic?'

Tamar closed her eyes. The two men opposite the desk didn't notice.

Clearly, it was their directionless squabbling that made her mind drift off to... elsewhere. To her bed, if she was a little more honest. To Runo's soft lips, his tender kisses waking her from her slumber this morning. His fingers teasing over her body, circling her breasts, roaming towards the sensitive flesh between her thighs – but never truly arriving...

She sucked in a breath, a hopeless attempt to cool down the heat flaring through her.

'It cannot be the edge!' The debate on the other side of her desk still raged on. 'These lakes are sitting in the middle of the continent! It cannot be edge magic!'

'But *if* it turns out to be edge magic—'

'The excursion will disprove it,' the pox-marked scientist on the left snapped. 'What we need is—'

'We can't go in having decided what we will prove! We are *scientists*, not...'

Tamar nearly groaned as she opened her eyes again. For the gods' sake, she had scheduled a full *hour* for this nonsense. They were ten minutes in, and already she was overcome by murderous urges... Could she cut the meeting short after half an hour? Amiran could hardly accuse her of disinterest in the subject of his study if she refused to listen to an hour of this drivel.

‘Could we return to the core of the matter?’ she interrupted the grey-haired man in the middle of an argument on lake depths. ‘I need to know how many people exactly need to be allowed into the area. No more than a dozen, I presume?’

‘No, Your Majesty, as I said, more than five people is—’

‘But listen to *reason!* We cannot just exclude the geologists if this is the *one* occasion...’

A knock on the door interrupted that passionate plea on geology. For a moment Tamar nearly found herself hoping Eelia would storm into the room and put a swift end to this ordeal – but it was just a servant, slipping in with a look of cautious confusion on his round face.

‘Your Majesty, a quick note from Lord Terenti.’

She frowned and stuck out her hand. Terenti never sent notes, to the extent she’d wondered for the first two years of her marriage whether the man could even write at all. The servant handed over the piece of parchment and clasped his hands on his back, waiting for a reply. Even the two scientists remained silent as Tamar unfolded the letter and let her eyes glide over the word.

It was very short.

It contained only a handful of words, really. *Library. Half past 12.* Below those curt statements, so messy it took her a moment to decipher the symbol, a scribbled *R*.

Her breath caught as a fiery warmth surged from her lower belly into the tips of her toes and fingers, burning so hot she

feared for a moment she might blush. Library. Half past twelve – in fifteen minutes. What was he thinking? It was the middle of a working day! Did he expect she'd just walk out of her meetings for some clandestine tryst in a library? She'd never even consider it if not...

She barely suppressed her curse. If not for the unfulfillment still burning on her skin. If not for a night of teasing touches and four lonely nights before that. Oh, hell be damned. Was this the plan that had suddenly lit that twinkle in his eyes again last night? Had he planned this from the moment he announced he would sooner or later change her mind?

The audacity. Scorching, tempting audacity – but audacity, nonetheless.

It wouldn't change her mind on anything either. Of course it wouldn't. He'd soon join her in her bedroom again. There was no reason to plan risky meetings before that time. She could do without him for a day. A day of frustration, thanks to his damned teasing – but she could survive a few hours of frustration. Best to just ignore that note and hope he wouldn't keep sending them throughout the day –

But what if he sent a second one? A third one? During her meeting with Reziko – or worse, while she was having a word with Terenti or another of her dukes?

She closed her eyes, keenly aware of the three men watching her with confused, expectant looks. Oh, gods. He might be planning to make this a regular occurrence. If that were the case, she should put an end to this madness as soon

as possible – before a sudden host of letters piqued the public’s interest, at least.

And if she had to throw today’s planning out of the window anyway, perhaps this wasn’t the worst moment. At least she could end this meeting early without missing much of interest.

‘I must apologise,’ she said, looking up and taking her decision within a single, unpleasantly eager heartbeat. ‘I have to look into a somewhat unexpected complication. Please contact my secretary to schedule a new appointment for the rest of this discussion.’ She stood up, flattened her skirts, and nodded at the two men at her desk, who seemed quite befuddled by this turn of events. ‘After you.’

They jumped to their feet and hurried out as if she might come after them with a rod of glowing iron. Tamar had to admit she felt tempted.

‘Thank you,’ she added to her servant, who bowed and left as well. Left alone for a moment, she again glanced at Runo’s note, muttered a heartfelt curse, and tried not to notice the enthusiastic twisting of her body. She wasn’t going to do anything ridiculous, she repeated to herself. She was just going to tell him to stop this nonsense immediately. Sending notes after her still counted as public interaction, and if he kept doing it, one of the damn things was bound to arrive at a moment when she really couldn’t afford to be distracted...

Sticking the note into the hidden pocket that also contained her knife, she steeled herself and walked out.



The library was silent as death when she entered, not a soul moving in the sunlight falling through the broad windows. She closed the door behind her and tiptoed forward to glance at the first aisle. Thirty feet of heavy hardwood shelves, packed with books bound in leather and beechwood, and no sight of any Cuvrian assassins.

More and more agitated, she snapped around and walked on, passing empty aisle after empty aisle. He wasn't going to play hide and seek here, was he? She certainly had better things to do than running after him while she ought to be working, and imagine someone would walk in and ask what in the world she was doing –

‘You’re early, Your Majesty.’

She shrieked and jerked around, heart already in her throat. He had appeared behind her without a sound, book under his arm, pencil behind his ear – looking unusually scholarly, in a way that made her knees wobble a little. Or perhaps the shameless smile around his lips caused most of the wobbling – or the twinkle in his golden eyes, shining brighter than she’d seen it in weeks. Or it could be the scent of him...

His lips curled up another fraction. Her skin flushed hot again, remembering the teasing of his tender hands a little too clearly.

‘What in the world are you doing here?’ she managed. It didn’t come out nearly as strict and composed as she’d wanted, and the dangerous edge to his expression suggested he heard her trembling knees in every word she spoke.

‘Reading books,’ he said, turning back to the aisle from which he had emerged. ‘As one does, in a library. Lovely of you to join me – would you like...’

‘*Join* you?’ She saw herself forced to hurry after him between the walls of dark books. He walked on and didn’t look back. ‘You effectively *summoned* me! Am I going to receive an explanation, or do you think it would be a fine idea to leave me guessing?’

Only when they reached the far end of the aisle did she see the pile of books lying on the small table in one of the many little alcoves, hidden half behind the heavy bookshelves. Runo turned around and smiled.

‘You could make a guess, now that you suggest it.’

‘For hell’s sake, you...’

‘I just thought you might need a little help getting out of that meeting, after you spent ten minutes complaining about it this morning,’ he said, giving her one of those infuriatingly oblivious glances. ‘Reading a book in silence for half an hour sounded like the better alternative to me.’

‘You tricked me into this place to – read a *book*.’

How could anyone look so innocent and so sinfully wicked at the same time? He smiled even broader. She had no doubt

he caught the hint of disappointment in her voice.

‘Of course. What else would I do in a library?’

Her body had several suggestions, it turned out. She clenched her teeth, battling the arousal, the memory of his hands skimming over her thighs this morning – not now. Not while she was working. She didn’t *want* this while she was working, had she forgotten that?

‘Well.’ She had to remember why she was here. It was far too easy to lose her mind around him. ‘Then at least I suppose you’re not planning to repeat this madness?’

‘Do you?’

She closed her eyes, avoiding his eyes. It was too inviting, that gaze. It screamed possibilities at her that she really shouldn’t think about. ‘I’m trying to stay optimistic.’

He chuckled. ‘Ah. I understand you don’t appreciate the invitation?’

‘Of course I don’t! Why would you think...’

‘You’re here,’ he said dryly.

‘To tell you to stop this nonsense, yes.’

‘I see.’ He shoved his book back onto his table without taking his eyes off her, shoulder muscles rippling under his shirt. ‘Well. You told me. Enjoy the rest of your meeting.’

She didn’t move. ‘I ended the meeting.’

‘You did? What a shame.’ Amusement quirked around the corners of his lips. ‘You must so have enjoyed it.’

‘Good gods – will you stop?’

‘I’m not keeping you here, Tamar. You just seem a little... reluctant to leave.’

She opened her mouth, hesitated, closed it again. Runo threw her another dazzling smile and stepped forward, fingertips brushing over the back of her hand as he passed her by. Barely suppressing a gasp, she jerked around to follow him with her eyes. Her hand tingled with the quick reminder of his touch. She hadn’t known her body could be jealous of itself, but there was no other name for the feeling curling through her now – every inch of her hips, her breasts, her lips yearning to share just a fraction of that caress. Nothing in his nonchalant movements suggested he was even vaguely aware of the battle waging within her. Then again – would he ever be that careless if he didn’t know?

She ought to leave. It was really very simple. People might find them here, and she knew the scandal that would cause. People would wonder where she was. She wouldn’t be able to speak a sensible word for the rest of the day. This was not the way she ruled her kingdom, not the way she gambled with her people’s respect.

But she didn’t manage to tear her gaze away from him as he ran his fingers over the leather book spines, carefully, nearly tenderly, his gaze charged with concentration. Those soft, strong fingers. She could feel them on her own skin, exploring her shoulders, her back, leaving a trail of goosebumps in their

wake – lower and lower, over her buttocks, her thighs, and the sensitive flesh in between –

A shiver ran through her. Runo looked up, golden eyes shining with an emotion she felt stirring deep in her gut.

‘Still here?’

That tone in his voice, that siren’s call, rich and sweet and gold like honey... She shouldn’t be here. She should never have come here. She should have left minutes ago.

Now she no longer could.

‘I ended that meeting,’ she said weakly. ‘Reziko only expects me in half an hour.’

He smiled, and it was that smile that sent her over the edge – a smile that contained a thousand different shades of desire. I want you, it said. I missed you. I need you.

I love you.

She forgot about the unlocked door. The piles of letters still waiting for her. All her plans and firm resolutions. Damn the Iron Queen – just this once. Even the iron shield around her heart couldn’t withstand a fire burning this hot.

‘So I suppose I have time to – read a book,’ she added, her voice barely more than a hoarse whisper.

‘You do? Excellent.’ He turned back to the leather spines, their gold letters glowing in the faint daylight. ‘It’s supposed to be a very relaxing activity. Reading, I mean.’

She managed a breathless laugh. ‘Is it?’

‘I’ve grown quite fond of this library, too,’ he added, ambling two steps away from her, his fingertips brushing over the books as he passed them. It seemed their hearts were connected by invisible threads; she felt every step as a violent tug at her own. ‘Such a lovely, *silent* place. It really is a shame you’re here so rarely.’

‘Are you going – somewhere?’

He slowed down, giving her an innocent glance over his shoulder. ‘I’m looking for something to read. Why?’

Oh, damn that harmless expression. Tamar pulled herself together, turned and passed two more aisles before she reached the shelves with work by ancient Redwood philosophers. ‘You should try some of the legendary works by Adina of Old Arches.’

He chuckled as he followed her. ‘Any specific recommendations?’

‘She wrote an impressive volume of essays called *On Modesty*,’ Tamar said, tapping against the gilt spine the moment he sauntered into view. ‘It might teach you a thing or two.’

He laughed out loud and stopped just behind her, reaching over her shoulder to take the heavy book from its shelf. His chest touched her back. His breath stroked past her ear. In a reflex she leaned back, resting her weight against his muscular body; his hand abruptly held still on the book cover as their bodies melted together.

‘Careful, Your Majesty.’ His whisper was a soft, sensuous warning. ‘You might give me ideas. Decidedly immodest ideas, I should add.’

She managed a laugh. ‘Imagine anyone would corrupt that innocent soul of yours.’

‘Oh, that would be a tragedy,’ he muttered, slowly releasing the book and lowering his hand. ‘In such a sacred place of learning and wisdom, too.’

Tamar closed her eyes. The warmth of his body seemed to seep through her skin and mingle with the fire that burned there, a tension winding her up so tight that she nearly moaned as his fingers wrapped around her shoulders – so warm. So strong. So overwhelmingly confident. His hands slid down along her body and settled on her hips, pulling her closer. Against her lower back his arousal stirred.

‘But of course,’ he added, his lips so close to her ear that she understood even his frail whisper, ‘you’d never want me to do anything immodest in a place like this, would you?’

Her breath caught. He slowly released her, moved away from her, allowed the cold air to reach her back and hips.

‘So.’ At his normal volume again. ‘Let’s take a look at that book you—’

Tamar whirled around, her heart hammering wildly against her ribs. He raised his eyebrows in a maddeningly convincing display of innocence.

‘Are you alright, Tamar? You look a little flushed.’

She flung her arms around his neck and yanked him into a kiss.

At once all innocence evaporated, all restraint, all feigned modesty. With a groan he grabbed her hips and drew her to him, pressing her against the heavy bookcase with the weight of his body. His lips moulded to hers, smothered her sighs and moans, took control of their kiss with a hunger she couldn't dream to resist. She dug her fingers into his dark curls and surrendered. To hell with the common sense and the danger and the incorruptible façade she presented to the court – right now she simply wanted him, all of him, a need so deep it turned to desperation.

And if it had to be here –

Hell be damned, then it had to be here.

Her hands found the buttons of his shirt all by themselves, yanked them open in a rush of primal instinct. Again he groaned. That raw, savage sound was enough to make her go slippery inside, her body welcoming his reckless advances. Over the ridges of his abdomen she lowered her hands, through the brush of dark hair below his navel, until she reached the band of his trousers and the bulge pressing forward below the linen. Two quick flicks of her fingers and his buttons sprang open. She wrapped her hand around his hard length and imagined his thrusts, his girth breaking her open –

‘Tamar...’ he growled against her lips. There was nothing honey-sweet left to his voice, nothing smooth – just pure, feral

lust. His heavy breath was the only sound disturbing the quiet of the library. ‘Arms over my shoulders.’

She loosened her fingers, reluctantly. ‘Why—’

‘Because I’m going to fuck you.’ He pressed her back against the bookshelves. ‘Here. Hard. *Arms*, Tamar.’

There was a tone to his voice that would not be disobeyed, and she no longer thought, no longer hesitated, just flung her arms around his broad shoulders and gave in to the savage strength of his desire. Again he kissed her, lips pinning her against the leather and wood. His hands disappeared from her hips to yank up her skirts so violently they might have torn. She gasped as he dug his fingers into the bare skin of her buttocks and lifted her against the bookcase, allowing her to steady herself with her arms on his shoulders. The hard steel of his erection slipped between her thighs. Had he not held her, she might have fainted at his feet.

‘You’ve gone *mad*,’ she whispered, lightheaded from the risks, the recklessness. A gorgeous, wolfish grin grew around his lips.

‘It’s your doing, Your Majesty.’

And he buried himself into her, a single, deep thrust, splitting her open in the most blissful way imaginable. She arched back against the bookcases, wrapping her legs around his hips and stifling a cry; behind her, books dropped to the ground with dull, broken thuds as they were pushed off their shelves. Runo laughed, impaled her once again. She closed her eyes and surrendered herself to him, caught between his hard

body and the wooden shelves, hanging powerless in the air, at the mercy of his arms. Thrust after thrust he claimed her, stripped every trace of iron off her, every trace of the woman she knew she ought to be. Their hot breath and panting filled every corner of the room, infusing the air itself with the lust that burned in her, the unbearable pressure that built in her toes and fingertips –

The door slammed open.

She froze, as did Runo – froze with her bare thighs around his hips and her back against a bookshelf, his cock still half buried inside her, her next moan on the verge of escaping. At the door, a mere handful of aisles away, the voice of one of her guards said, ‘Your Majesty?’

Tamar remained quiet, willed the breath in her lungs to stall, the blood in her veins to freeze. The twinkle in his eyes even more wicked, Runo leaned over, pressed his lips against her neck and nibbled tenderly. Every muscle in her body tensed with the effort of suppressing her gasp, her sheath clenching around his cock too, feeling him all the more rigid, all the more threatening.

‘Your Majesty?’ the guard repeated, taking two steps into the room.

She clawed her hands into Runo’s shoulders, nodding at him in wide-eyed panic to move, to hide. But he held her gaze and slammed into her again, his hands holding her perfectly still, keeping her from bumping into wood or books. The fear intensified every touch, every sensation, every inch of him

invading her; her body was liquid fire, burning for release. Behind her, the guard muttered a curse.

‘Not here’ – to some colleague, presumably. ‘Perhaps the archives.’

Then footsteps, and a door slamming shut.

Her breath escaped her in a shriek as Runo filled her one last time and she erupted, burst to shards around him as the relief and the release and the forbidden pleasure tore through every vein and muscle in her body. He cursed as she clenched tight around him, then groaned in violent surrender and spilled his seed inside her. Panting, shivering, they sagged against the bookcases together, laughter rocking through his muscular body.

‘Tamar...’

‘You *madman!*’ She’d have shouted if she’d dared to, and if the high of her climax hadn’t taken the breath from her lungs. ‘You – I...’

‘Tell me, Tamar.’ A hoarse, husky siren’s call. ‘Tell me what you think of me.’

‘You’re a reckless fool,’ she managed, ‘and an arrogant prick, and...’

His mouth smothered her words, kissed every insult, every word of righteous fury from her lips as he lowered her onto the floor, then wrapped his arm around her to keep her standing. A reckless kiss, yes. An arrogant kiss. But a kiss, too, that reassured her, caressed her, drowned her in his unconditional

devotion – a kiss that washed every fear or concern from her mind and left only bright, blissful wonder behind.

‘And?’ he muttered when he finally let go of her.

‘And I love you,’ she breathed.

Last night it had been shock that slid over his face, relief perhaps, a hint of incredulity. This time it was awe, pure, undiluted awe radiating from his golden eyes – tainted, still, by only the slightest trace of disbelief. An expression that made her wish, for the shortest of moments, that she’d be a brave enough woman to march into her throne room this very minute and declare him hers.

‘Good,’ he said softly, tracing the bend of her lower lip with his thumb. ‘Now tell me you enjoyed this.’

‘I enjoyed it,’ she whispered, and then, in a reflex, she imagined the disbelief on Amiran’s face and Terenti’s stoic fury and the sniggers of the court behind her seventeen-year-old back. ‘For this one time.’

He raised his eyebrows, a smile trembling on his lips. ‘For this one time, of course.’

‘I’m serious, Runo.’

‘I know.’ He gently tugged the collar of her dress back in place, then pressed his lips to her forehead one last time. ‘I know, Your Majesty. So am I.’

CHAPTER 12



A blessing that nobody in this company expected him to speak a sensible word over his beer, because Runo wouldn't have been able to.

There were seven of them, occupying a table in one of those inns that seemed to survive solely on the money of the castle guards frequenting it. Five men in the group hailed from Sungarden, Terenti's duchy. Some of them, the ones who hadn't been there when a bag of almond cakes had prompted the invitation, started the evening looking rather uncomfortable about Runo's presence. After a few hours of talking about nothing and card games he deliberately lost, even their glares softened, though.

Runo was glad the occasion didn't call for *winning* any card games, because he wasn't sure if he'd have managed that either.

She had completely, utterly undone him. There was no denying it. He still saw her every time he closed his eyes, still heard her moans in every heartbeat of silence, still tasted her on his lips – his senses clinging to the memory of her explosive climax against those bookshelves, her body tightening around him in dangerous, delirious pleasure. Only a small part of his mind was truly present in that little inn, with its smoke-blackened walls and the smell of beer soaked into the floorboards. The rest of him returned to the library again and again, his cock jolting at every detail that passed before his mind's eye –

Just this once, his arse.

He knew what last times felt like, and that wasn't it. That was more like the time he had tasted a single sip of Ghennekan honey mead at nineteen years old, then spent weeks combing Raulinna for every bottle of the stuff he could find – a foretaste fanning an insatiable hunger of which the intensity surprised even himself. He didn't just want her in that bloody library now. He wanted her against every single damn wall he could find. Wanted her on the dinner tables. Over her balcony railing. In Pridon's bed. In...

Triumphant cheering shook him up from those pleasant images for a moment; he'd once again lost a round to one of Terenti's men. Considering that he'd barely even glanced at his cards, he wasn't surprised.

He shoved his bet of two copper pieces to the happy winner and sipped his beer as the cards were dealt again. His mind

mercilessly mused on. In the garden. Under the stairs. On...

‘Hey!’ a voice he didn’t know said behind him. ‘Hell be damned! Aren’t you that Taavi fellow?’

Runo jerked around, forgetting his cards. Around him his new friends stiffened too, abruptly reminded of the more dubious parts of his history.

A lanky young man had appeared behind him, looking like an overly enthusiastic sheep dog in human form. Nothing about him looked even remotely familiar to Runo, so he momentarily shoved the thought of Tamar to the back of his mind, threw the other a bright grin to compensate for the potential offence, and said, ‘Have we met?’

‘Not directly, not directly,’ the young man hurried to say, grabbing an unoccupied chair from the nearest table and settling himself between Runo and the next guard. ‘You’re – let me see, my neighbour – sweetest old little lady, makes me soup once a week – my neighbour has a knitting club, and—’

‘Ah.’ Runo suppressed the urge to burst out laughing. ‘The infamous knitting society. She knows the lady from the bakery, I suppose?’

‘Exactly!’ The boy looked so elated that Runo nearly expected a wagging tail to appear. ‘What a coincidence I’m running into you now! My neighbour just brought me her soup a few hours ago and she told me that Nia – that’s another knitting friend – that Nia says there’s a Taavi lady looking like that lady you were looking for staying in her daughter’s

friend's lodgings. Arrived yesterday, she said. Isn't that grand?'

It had become very silent around their table, cards and coins forgotten.

Grand.

Runo felt the sound of it creeping up along his spine, like a very slow shiver. Sooner or later this was bound to happen, he had known that from the beginning. Still, he realised now, part of his mind had held on to some unreasonable hope that Eelia's horse would lose a shoe on the way and throw her head-first into a ditch, or that she'd catch the miner's pox, or...

The young man was still staring at him with the broadest grin, clearly hoping for an equally thrilled reaction.

'Do you have details?' Runo said.

The other's excitement came down a little. 'Details? Er – well, she had a scar. The lady. Behind—'

'Her left ear,' Runo finished numbly, and the young man brightened again.

'It *is* her, then?'

Oh, damn the bloody gods. In a reflex he checked his knife – still with him. He should have taken a second one along. Then he glanced at his companions. Seven tight faces, looking from him to their unexpected informant and back to him – faces of soldiers, all of a sudden, not faces of the men who had given detailed accounts of their love lives half an hour ago.

He turned back to the young man. ‘Did you have plans tonight?’

The boy’s face brightened. ‘Are we going to fight her?’

‘No,’ Runo said, closing his eyes. ‘You are definitely not going to fight her. Sorry, brother – I like the current uncut state of your neck a little too much. Do you know the address of those lodgings?’

The young man nodded, his hand absently rising to his throat to check whether the skin was indeed still unharmed. ‘Miller Street. The house with the blue shutters.’

‘Good. Get to the castle. Make sure you pass on the message to Lord Terenti himself – or if you can’t get hold of him, find Lord Amiran. Tell them your neighbour’s story, mention the scar. Give them the address, in case they want to go take a look.’

‘Of course!’ The boy bounced from his chair again. ‘Right now?’

Immediately after you heard the news would have been better, Runo wanted to snap, but he restrained himself – the poor fool could hardly have realised the urgency of his information, and he wouldn’t make anything better by taking out his anxiety on others. So he forced himself to lean back in his chair and said, ‘Depends on how many people you’d like to die first, brother.’

The young man chuckled, clearly still blissfully unaware of the full extent of the threat. ‘I’ll be off.’

‘Much appreciated,’ Runo said. ‘If you’re ever in need of more soup, I owe you some.’

Another laugh, and the young man trotted off, looking like he was already itching to recount the story to his friends. Runo closed his eyes for a moment, tried to calm the worry clawing through his chest, and didn’t manage well.

‘So,’ one of his companions said next to him. ‘Are we going to look for her, then?’

He jerked around. ‘No. We’re not.’

‘There’s *eight* of us. She can hardly—’

‘You don’t have your weapons with you,’ Runo interrupted – too curt, but he wasn’t going to allow this suggestion to win any popularity with the others. ‘She, on the other hand, is probably carrying roughly two knives for each of us, and then some. You’ve had three beers in the past hour. Your reflexes aren’t as they should be. Unless you have a death wish, I suggest you stay here and let Terenti deal with it as he sees fit.’

They didn’t even seem to realise he forgot their duke’s title. A few questioning glances went around the table; then one of them nodded, and a second too, and they hesitantly took up their cards again.

Runo didn’t finish his beer during the two games that followed. He won them both, because he had to focus on *something* to get through the hour he forced himself to wait, and at the thought of Eelia stalking through the night outside,

everything except card games made him want to roar and kill something. Only after that hour, when he was reasonably sure their tipsy minds wouldn't even consider following him, did he get up, announce it was time for him to return to the castle, and grab his coat before they could ask too many questions.

'Don't get knifed in the dark!' one of them yelled after him as he made his way to the exit. Runo grinned.

'Usually I'm the one knifing people in the dark, brother.'

A round of laughter. Then he was out, into the cold, silent air of the Redwood spring night, and not a trace of amusement remained on his face.



It took him twenty minutes to find Miller Street. It would have been ten if he hadn't felt the need to pause and hide at every shifting shadow, every rustling branch, every creaking door. The skin between his shoulder blades itched with every step he took, expecting any moment to feel the sting of her throwing knife cutting through skin and bone and lungs.

He reached the street unharmed, though, and found the house with the blue shutters at his first glance.

For a minute he hesitated, hidden in the shadows of the nearest alley – his heartbeat in his throat, his fingers clenched around the reassuring cold steel of his knife. Nothing moved behind the closed curtains of the small hostel. No way to tell

what room she might be occupying. No signs of Terenti's soldiers, either. Chances were the man was focussing first on his castle security rather than sending his men to face an unknown danger in the depth of night.

Remembering the silvery flashes of Eelia's knives, Runo felt momentarily tempted to get the hell out of this street and focus on castle security too.

Vedisa's dead face flashed before his mind's eye. Blotted skin, empty eyes. *Coward.*

With a muffled curse he stepped from the shadows and made for the hostel's front door.

The hall was deserted according to his first glance through the candlelit room. All furniture of cheap quality, but not a fleck of dust to be found. Some simple drawings of different Redwood castles on the walls. A small counter in the back with a little iron bell next to it.

Runo walked in, carefully closed the door behind his back, checked the shadows above the stairs a last time, and tiptoed to the counter. Only with his back against the wall, where he could oversee all entrances to the room, did he ring the bell.

It took a few minutes before he heard footsteps. Not Eelia's quick, nimble feet, but he still stiffened and didn't relax his fingers around his knife until a round, grey-haired woman with a sleepy expression on her face came shuffling into the room.

'Yes?' she said, eying him with healthy distrust.

‘I’m looking for a lady who’s staying with you,’ he said, and gave her his most harmless look. ‘A Taavi friend of a friend, she should have arrived yesterday or this morning...’

‘Miss Arta, I presume you mean?’

Runo nearly cursed. Gods be damned. She really wasn’t going to leave Arto out of this. But the hostess was still giving him suspicious glares from under her stiff grey curls, and he needed her help here – needed a room number, at the very least.

‘That’s her. Any chance I could have a word with her? I have a message from that mutual friend.’

‘I’m afraid your timing is just wrong,’ she said, pursing her lips. ‘Miss Arta left half an hour ago, you see.’

Left. Left the hostel in the depth of night. Oh, hell be damned – not a good sign at all. Pressing his nails into his palms to keep himself under control, Runo forced a look of disenchanted helplessness. ‘That’s a shame – did she mention anything about when she’d be back?’

‘No, you misunderstand me. She left the hostel, with her belongings.’ The hostess gestured at a messy cash book, loose pages sticking out on all sides. ‘Paid for her stay, too. So I think your mutual friend will have to reach her in some other way.’

Some of the white-hot alarm flaring through his body turned into confusion. Left *with* her luggage? That didn’t make sense if she had left to sneak into the Red Castle – she needed a

place to return to in case she failed, and in either way, walking around with a bag of travel accessories wasn't the best way to stay unnoticed.

'Oh, that's rather strange?' he said, mind spinning at full speed. 'I understood she was planning to stay for at least a week?'

'I think she was planning to stay longer, yes, but she received a letter just fifteen minutes before she left. Someone else offered her a place to stay, she said.'

'Well,' Runo said. Not good, his mind still droned. Not good at all. 'In that case I'll have to find her elsewhere indeed. Apologies for disturbing you, then.'

She mumbled something and shuffled off again without waiting for him to leave. Runo closed his eyes for a fraction of a moment – he didn't dare to keep them shut any longer – and sucked in a deep breath. Miss Arta. At least he had confirmed she *was* in town, that she had indeed been here. A triumph for the knitting society, surely. But where in hell...

A letter. Who in the world would send a Taavi assassin a letter to offer her a place to stay?

The answer formed in his mind before he could mentally prepare himself for it. Someone who wished to assist her. Someone who was indeed able to assist her, likely, if Eelia had accepted the offer. Someone who wanted Maiva to find her way into the Red Castle once again.

For a last moment he stood frozen, his mind adjusting to the new and highly unpleasant state of reality. Then he bit out a single curse and strode to the front door, flung it open, checked every shadowy corner and doorway in the street, and slipped out into the night.

Finally, the game had begun.

CHAPTER 13



It was at least an hour past midnight when someone knocked on Tamar's bedroom door – three taps against the wood, as she had instructed them. Still she couldn't help holding her breath as she quickly unlocked the door and opened it. A familiar servant stood waiting in the corridor, flanked by two equally familiar guards.

She slowly exhaled again. 'Yes?'

'He's returned to the castle, Your Majesty,' the servant said, bowing. 'You asked us to let you know.'

Another knot loosened in her intestines. Keeping her face strictly expressionless, Tamar said, 'Ah, thank you. No unpleasant incidents, as far as you know?'

'No, Your Majesty.'

'Good. And you gave him my note?'

'Yes, Your Majesty.'

‘Excellent. Please don’t disturb me for the rest of the night unless there is urgent news.’

Another bow. Tamar nodded at her guards and closed the door again, locking it very carefully before she walked back to her bed and fell down in the blankets. Not a sound came in from the corridor or through the thick glass windows.

Unharmful. Thank the gods. Now it was a matter of waiting. *The balcony door is locked*, she had written in the quick note Runo should have received by now. *Knock three times*. How long could he need to find a piece of rope and make his way to the deserted bedroom above her own?

Longer than three minutes, it turned out, which meant it was longer than her nerves appreciated.

She lay on her bed for what felt like an eternity, then paced from the bed to the desk to the door and back again for what felt like another eternity. Her anxious thoughts returned, the relief of his safe return soon drowned out by a new host of catastrophic possibilities – what if he hadn’t gotten her note after all? What if he was too busy running after Eelia to come to her room? What if someone had caught him sneaking off with a coil of rope? What if he had fallen to death trying to climb down to...

A knock on her balcony window. Then a second, and a third.

Tamar was already at the door.

He was chuckling as he slipped in with a bag over his shoulder and red welts from the rope on his palms, but there was something stiff about his amusement even as he said, ‘Significantly more welcoming than last time I took this route, Your Majesty.’

She laughed despite herself. ‘Perhaps you should have knocked last time.’

‘Ah, but I like to surprise,’ he said dryly, closing and locking the door behind him. Despite his nonchalant tone of voice, the smile slid off his face too quickly, and his quick glance at the other entrances to her bedroom didn’t escape her.

‘Yes,’ she said before he could ask the question. ‘We received your warning. All of them, more specifically.’

He blinked, hands faltering at the buttons of his coat. ‘All of them?’

‘That is to say – I’m not sure how many of them you’d expect.’ She couldn’t help sounding a little displeased with that sentence. She had no idea of the measures he’d been taking, the way he’d spent his morning walks in the past week. When the warnings started arriving in the early evening, she had been as surprised as any other member of her court, and this was not the kind of surprise she enjoyed. ‘But last time I counted, five utterly unrelated people had shown up at our gate to ask for you and tell us a Taavi woman with a scar behind her ear was staying in town.’

Runo stared at her for another heartbeat, then burst out laughing.

‘I fail to see what’s so funny about this.’ Tamar sank into her desk chair and rubbed her temples. ‘Terenti really wasn’t happy that you’ve apparently been mobilising half the town without him noticing.’

‘Terenti should be the last to complain,’ he said, still sniggering as he pulled his coat off his shoulders and threw it over her bed. ‘I was having a beer with half a dozen of his men for most of the evening – I’ve probably been the best guarded man in all of town while you were being stormed by well-meaning civilians.’

‘Then how in the world...’

He shrugged. ‘I bought a couple of almond cakes and treated a few people to a drink. Mentioned I was looking for her. Then the word spread, apparently.’

Tamar blinked. Just bought a couple of almond cakes. But all those people seemed to have been convinced they were doing him a personal favour by coming to the Red Castle – *my grandmother sent me to warn that Taavi customer who always buys her pastries. I’m here because some fellow from the Dragontooth Inn asked me to warn him. My neighbour’s knitting club talked about him.* If this was what happened if he just had a few words with people...

Oh, gods be damned. That dangerous charm of his again. A few dazzling smiles and half a town lay at his feet, apparently.

‘Did any of them have more recent information than Miller Street, though?’ he said, interrupting the disconcerting line of her thoughts.

‘What?’

‘She’s already left her lodgings,’ he said, and the amusement had definitively vanished from his face. ‘With all her luggage, too. Apparently received some letter from someone offering her another place to stay.’

Tamar stared at him. He fell down on the edge of her bed and gave her a joyless, nearly apologetic smile that made her guts twist a little. She wasn’t sure if it was arousal or fear this time.

‘You *did* go after her?’

‘More or less,’ he said with an unconvincing shrug.

‘More or less?’

He sighed. ‘I did.’

‘Oh, gods. With Terenti’s people? Or...’

He slowly shook his head, and Tamar abruptly shut her mouth. On his own. He had walked onto Miller Street without anyone to keep an eye on his back, walked into that hostel, ready to face Eelia with just the knife in his pocket. If Maiva’s assassin hadn’t already left...

She swallowed. Suddenly she was oddly relieved about the Silver Dagger’s decision to move to another accommodation.

‘Well,’ she said, a little too feeble. ‘And now?’

‘Now I’m staying with you,’ he said in that tone that made all objections sound futile in advance. ‘I don’t see why she’d try to break into the Red Castle with all her luggage on her, but

if she does it for whatever reason and somehow finds her way to your room...’ A shrug that didn’t look like a shrug at all. ‘You shouldn’t be alone for the night.’

She thought of Gocha, locking the door behind him as he drew his sword, and shivered. ‘Alright. But tomorrow...’

‘I’ll see if I can find her tomorrow.’

‘Terenti can take care of that just as well,’ she said, closing her eyes. ‘You already confirmed she’s close. You don’t also have to...’

‘She’s looking for me anyway, Tamar,’ he said. ‘I’d rather find her first.’

‘Yes, but...’

‘Tamar, I’m not going to sit here and wait for her to come to me. End of discussion.’

She looked up, the sharp answer already on her lips. What do you mean, end of discussion? I didn’t hear myself agree with any of this yet – what if I had another plan? But the look in his golden eyes hit her like a blow in the face, and the words dissolved before she could speak. A flicker of ruthlessness she rarely saw in his eyes, so rarely it was easy to forget it still existed below the carefree, nonchalant exterior – the look of the man who had killed, lied, and sacrificed his friends to survive the Empire for twenty-five years.

You seem to forget I don’t want to die either...

She swallowed. For the first time she realised, truly realised, that it might be Eelia who was walking into the last days of her

life here.

‘You – are really not toying,’ she managed, and her voice betrayed too much of the nervousness roaring through her. He raised his eyebrows.

‘It took you some time to figure that out.’

‘It’s just that you’re very good at pretending this is all some challenging game, rather than...’

‘Oh, it *is* a game,’ he interrupted, but the faint amusement around his lips didn’t reach his eyes. ‘It’s always a game – but it’s a game I’ve been playing for a very long time, and a game I don’t usually lose.’

‘But did you ever pit yourself against Eelia before?’

‘Where do you think she got that scar?’ he said, and the smile he gave her sent a shiver down along her spine. Still dazzling, still tantalising, still the smile of the man who had seduced and fucked her against the bookshelves of an open library mere hours ago – but something stone-hard lay beneath the superficial charm now. ‘We’ve had our squabbles before. I’m really not as harmless as I seem, Tamar.’

She stared at him and forgot how to breathe for a moment.

Harmless. *Harmless*. Him. The man who interrupted kings and queens at their breakfast table and lived to tell the tale, who could rouse a full town with a few pleasant remarks and a well-placed smile. Sitting on her bed with that merciless survivor’s instinct gleaming in the depth of his golden eyes,

the inked death marks staring back at her from his muscular forearms.

A cold fist clenched around her heart.

Not as harmless – but did he have the faintest idea how dangerous he truly was?

‘Lost your voice at the breathtaking sight of me?’ he said, twinkles breaking through the darkness in his gaze. Tamar tore away from her thoughts and got to her feet with something like a laugh, averting her face to undo her braids. Questions for another day. A day, at least, where no Taavi assassins were sneaking through the forest surrounding her castle at night.

‘We should probably get some sleep.’

‘Probably,’ he admitted. ‘And let me lend a hand with that, will you?’

She looked up, and he beckoned her closer, then pulled her into his lap as she stepped towards the bed. Tamar curled up against him, rested her head against his shoulder. With quick, clever fingers he pulled the pins from her hair, freeing strand after strand until her copper locks hung loosely over her back and shoulders. His hands lowered to her dress next, loosened the ribbons of her corset with the same gentle care, soft hands brushing over her neck, her back, her shoulders...

She closed her eyes, savouring his warm fragrance, the firmness of his muscular body. So endlessly familiar. So infinitely gentle. And yet...

How anyone could be so dangerous and yet so utterly safe?

CHAPTER 14



Runo woke up, Tamar's naked body curled up in his arms, and came to the remarkable conclusion that he was still alive.

It took a moment to remember why the heart beating in his chest felt like such a pleasant surprise to him – last night. Pub. Warning. Hostel.

Eelia.

Eelia.

He jolted up from the soft blankets, grabbing his knife from the nightstand – convinced for a single, half-dreaming moment that he'd find her standing in the shadowy corner of Tamar's bedroom, tauntingly twirling his own knife between her fingers and grinning her devious smile at him. But his weapon still lay where he had left it. The corners of the room were empty. The curtains and furniture hadn't moved.

With a muffled curse he sank back into the pillows, trying to calm his racing heartbeat. Next to him Tamar curled against him, muttering his name in her sleep.

‘I’m here,’ he whispered, wrapping his arms around her again. ‘I’m still here.’

She gave a satisfied murmur and slept on, snoring softly against his chest. Runo sucked in a deep breath and tried to let go of the lingering tension itching just below his skin, the feeling of approaching doom creeping up on him. A few more minutes wouldn’t make the difference, he told himself. He could hold her a little longer. Take a little more time to order his thoughts. Enjoy the safety of this bedroom for a few more moments before he’d have to leave and spend the rest of his day looking for the woman who’d kill him at first sight...

He barely suppressed a curse. *Miss Arta*. The damn nerve.

Outside the world was still dark. Which was good – he’d have to climb out before sunset, before anyone noticed the rope hanging to Tamar’s balcony. And then? He should have a word with Terenti, probably. Leave for his usual morning walk, just in case Eelia had to be lured away from the castle. See if any of his new friends downtown had more recent information about her whereabouts.

Keep Tamar safe.

He looked down. With her red hair in wild, fuzzy curls around her shoulders, her lips parted in sleepy innocence, she looked... softer than usual, calmer. His heart gave a painful twinge. He didn’t want to send her back into the whirlpool of

scheming and secrets, back into that world that didn't even allow her smiles onto her face – and if he really had to...

He definitely didn't want to stay out of sight for the rest of the day, avoid her for the face of the world until she retreated to her bedroom again.

He had given his word, though. No public interactions. No undermining. Swallowing another string of curses, he leaned over to kiss her forehead and muttered, 'Tamar?'

She groaned a few unintelligible syllables.

'Tamar, I have to leave before sunrise. If you still want to get a look at my pretty face before I disappear, you might want to wake up.'

Another groan, followed by sleepy snort. 'Arrogant bastard.'

He chuckled. 'Love you too.'

She blinked open her eyes with a faint grin on her face, then froze as the memories of last night returned to her conscious mind as well. Runo grimaced.

'Oh, yes, and congratulations on surviving the night.'

'Oh, gods.' She came up on her elbows, stifling a yawn. 'Terenti would've let me know if they had caught her during the night, wouldn't he?'

'Damn well hope so.'

'Well,' she said gloomily. 'That's a pity.'

Runo sighed. Not that he had expected Eelia to be caught that easily – but it would have been so, so helpful if she had...

‘Are you going out?’ Tamar added, her voice suddenly smaller – so much smaller that he felt guilty to nod. She averted her face in the dark, wrestling with her words in silence for a few moments before she muttered, ‘Alright.’

He felt oddly proud of her, in a way that stung through his soul. No objections. No threats to chain him to his bed. He knew the self-restraint that must have cost her.

‘Anything I can do for you before I leave?’

‘Just come back,’ she said quietly. ‘The rest – I’m not getting in your way. But for the love of whatever gods you’d like to believe in – please be back tonight.’



His round through town with Ninefingers was short and frustrating and utterly unhelpful.

Terenti’s men had arrived at the hostel with the blue shutters an hour after Runo had left – too damn late, he wanted to say – and not found any more information about Eelia’s hurried departure. Nor had their nightly tour along a few dozen other hostels yielded even the slightest sight of her. The guests at the inns Runo visited knew no more useful rumours, the bakery lady was nearly in tears about the assassin’s escape, and even the knitting society seemed to have reached its limits with the

case. He returned to the castle with a cursing Ninefingers at his ankles and the beginning of a headache pulsing behind his eyes.

Terenti was nowhere to be found, and Runo decided with a hint of regret that he wasn't going to disturb the man's meetings and squander the bit of goodwill he had earned by finding a trace of Eelia last night. If for no other reason, Tamar would probably consider it another example of undermining her authority. Instead he trudged to his bedroom, habitually checking all doorways and corridors he passed. At the very least he could use a clean shirt.

He hesitated in the cold corridor, his hand on his doorhandle. Then, with a swift movement, he swung open the door and stepped back in the same movement, ready to avoid any knife flying out of the room.

Nothing moved. Then again, Eelia would be wiser than to move at the first apparent opportunity.

He threw a glimpse inside – still no throwing knife diving at his face. Clutching his fingers around his own weapon he stepped inside, checked the shadowy corner behind the door, the hollow beneath his bed, the chest in which he kept his clothes. Still no Taavi assassins to be found.

But on his pillow...

He noticed the silvery gleam from the corner of his eye and grabbed for his knife as he jerked around. But the little piece of metal reflecting the sunlight wasn't a blade. Instead – a coin.

A single silver coin, shining innocently at him in the watery spring sun.

Runo inhaled slowly, very slowly, his senses tensed with dreadful anticipation. Still holding his knife in his right hand, he bent over and plucked the silver from his pillow, examining it in the light. An Imperial ducat. Maiva's likeness on one side, looking cold and uncaring even on that portrait as large as his thumbnail. On the other side –

A crown of stag antlers.

Jennimo?

Alarm flared through him.

He stared at that small crest of arms for half a minute, mind running along the possibilities twice, thrice, and then a few more times just to make sure he wasn't going mad. Then he cursed out loud, slipped the coin into his pocket and strode into the corridor, ignoring Orzin's shocked questions in the neighbouring room.

Hell be damned. Time to find Tamar. Time to cause some scenes after all.



The guards at her study door refused to let him in, grumbling something about the queen asking not to be disturbed unless it was urgent. Runo tried to convince them of the urgency of his message for half a minute, then decided he

didn't have the patience for this nonsense and just elbowed past them to knock before they could stop him. To his slight relief, the door opened before they could physically drag him away.

'What...?' Amiran started, then caught sight of Runo. '*You?*'

'Morning,' Runo said grimly. 'Mind if I come in for some urgent assassin news?'

Around him the guards hesitated. So did Amiran, staring at Runo as if he were a particularly unwelcome ghost. For a moment they all stood frozen, a nearly comical moment of collective indecisiveness; then Tamar's voice spoke up inside, her words unintelligible but the tone clearly displeased. A deep rumble answered – Terenti. Whatever their exact conclusion, it was enough to make Amiran nod at the guards and snap, 'I hope it's urgent indeed, then.'

'Depends.' Runo stepped in and nudged the door shut behind him. 'Would you call Eelia's potential presence in the castle urgent enough?'

A deadly silence welcomed him.

He leaned back against the door, sliding his eyes over the company. Tamar was sitting behind her desk, too pale for her black widow's dress, the bags under her eyes too dark – but at least alive and unscathed. Terenti had frozen at the hearth, apparently pacing between the window and the desk until his arrival. Standing closest to the door, Amiran paled up to the roots of his auburn hair.

‘Could you elaborate?’ Tamar said.

He fixed his eyes on her as he pulled the silver coin from his pocket and threw it onto her desk. It landed on the wood with a bright tinkle, Jennimo’s crest facing up.

‘Found this on my pillow,’ he said.

She stared at the silver for a moment, her face an impressive mask of stoic calm. An impressive lie, too – gods be damned, he wanted to wrap his arms around her and tell her she’d be fine, that he’d be happy to never leave her out of sight for the rest of the year if that would keep her safe... But she didn’t even meet his eyes as she sighed.

‘Just now?’

‘Yes.’

‘There might be another explanation for an Imperial ducat ending up in your bedroom,’ she said slowly. ‘Someone may have thought it an amusing reference to your past, or...’

‘It’s not just a ducat,’ Runo said, closing his eyes. ‘The antlers – they’re Jennimo’s crest of arms. One of Maiva’s previous masters of the Mint.’

‘How long ago...’

‘He left office some fifteen years ago. There aren’t that many coins of his in circulation anymore – most have been reminted to show a new image.’

He saw the realisation rise in her eyes as she finally met his gaze, but still the iron mask didn’t crack. ‘You’re saying

someone held on to this coin for fifteen years?’

‘Seventeen, I suppose,’ he said. ‘They paid Eelia in silver after Arto’s death.’

A curse fell over Amiran’s lips behind him. Terenti, looking from Runo to Tamar and back to Runo, said, ‘Who in hell is this Arto fellow?’

‘Eelia’s dead husband-to-be,’ Runo said curtly. ‘I killed him. Seventeen years ago.’

Terenti’s eyes flew to Tamar. ‘For hell’s sake – did he tell *you* about that?’

‘He did,’ she said, sounding tired. ‘I may have forgotten to pass it on to you, my apologies. It didn’t seem particularly relevant to me for the Red Castle’s security in general. Is there any possibility she may have gotten in, as far as you know?’

Terenti didn’t seem to hear that last question. Glaring at Runo, he grouched, ‘If that Eelia woman knows you’d recognise that coin, why in hell would she leave it behind in your bed?’

‘Because she’s a vicious bitch who wants me to panic for a few days before she slits my throat?’ Runo suggested, feigning more indifference than he felt. She was succeeding unnervingly well, as little as he wanted to admit it. The image of her rummaging around in his bedroom – in the corridor where his friends were sleeping... Hell be damned, he had to warn them to lock their doors tonight.

‘And why weren’t you in that bed?’

‘I was making my rounds around the castle.’ He shrugged, sending Terenti another smile he didn’t feel. ‘Trying to protect queen and kingdom, like an obedient civilian.’

In the corner of his sight he could see Tamar stiffen. Oh, hell be damned. Was that too much undermining already? He really wasn’t good at stiff, boring obedience, at knowing where he crossed the lines and limits of courtly rules. What an utterly stupid promise to make, if he had no idea how to keep it in these situations.

‘Well,’ Terenti muttered, staring at the coin with narrowed eyes, looking like he’d love to stick a blade through the silver. ‘Frankly, I don’t see how she could have come in. We’ve been checking every single person at the gate for the entire night, and the walls have been constantly guarded – unless you think she flew in...’

‘I suggest we try to exclude other explanations for that coin first,’ Amiran said. His fingers were drumming quick rhythms against his upper arms. ‘Someone may just be pulling some ridiculous joke here.’

‘Would be hysterically funny,’ Runo said coolly.

‘Now will you...’

Tamar coughed, and her cousin abruptly shut his mouth. Runo had to fight the scornful remark welling up in him – several of them, really – but somehow managed to turn back to the desk without speaking up.

She met his gaze immediately this time. Tired brown eyes gleaming with clear determination. Leave it to me, that look said – we both know you’re right, but your witty retorts aren’t going to make them any more susceptible to your line of argument. Which was presumably true, but he wished so, so hard that it wasn’t. He’d gladly have killed a few souls if it had taken some of that burden off her shoulders.

‘Any other questions I should answer?’ he said, biting down his frustration.

‘No, thank you. We’ll take care of the matter.’ For the shortest moment she hesitated; then, her voice a fraction softer, she added, ‘But stay on guard.’

Be careful – or the closest she could get with a cousin and a brother-in-law listening along. Runo forced himself to ignore the exhaustion in her eyes, the dullness in her voice. Forced himself to ignore that Terenti looked like he was about to cause trouble, and Amiran like he’d spend his next hour being sceptical just for the sake of being sceptical. No public interaction. No undermining. He had already broken one of those promises.

‘Will try,’ he said, turning around with a curt nod. ‘Let me know if there’s anything else I can do.’

Like getting her out of that exhausting, lethal hornet’s nest, preferably sooner than later. Which was not an idea he should entertain with too much enthusiasm, with Eelia potentially creeping through the Red Castle...

But an entertaining idea, nonetheless. Really a damn entertaining idea.

CHAPTER 15



‘Well,’ Terenti grumbled the moment the door fell shut behind Runo’s muscular back. ‘Glad to see you at least managed to get that insufferable smirk off his face, Tamar.’

She was hit by a sudden, violent nausea. No smirk, indeed. No charming grins, no clever jokes. Just a few nods and a single, minimally biting question, and he’d vanished again. Just as she had wanted, of course, just as she’d told him to do —

But it felt wrong all the same, terribly, irrationally wrong.

The flatness in his eyes. The tired resignation in his melodious voice. His shoulders slumping just a little, his hands hanging lifeless by his side. Defeated in a way he’d been only on the night of his unexpected return to Redwood, before he knew how much she wanted him, how much she had missed him — and now she had unwittingly defeated him again? Worse, forced him to defeat himself?

She swallowed the squirming unease away. It was for the best, she reminded herself. Most days they wouldn't see each other at all if he kept his word; there would be no need for this lifeless, dull compliance. And at least Terenti wasn't making trouble now, wasting precious minutes of their time with his complaints and questions about Runo's behaviour –

Oh, you're going to let Terenti decide your wishes for you once again?

She shoved that question to the back of her mind. Not now.

'He's not insusceptible to reason,' she said coolly, feeling the words like poison on her tongue. Betraying him. She was *betraying* him. Speaking those words with the same mouth that told him she loved him this morning. Why did it suddenly feel so filthy, this lie she'd been feeding the world for weeks or months?

Terenti snorted. 'Glad to hear, I suppose. And that coin?'

She looked up, meeting Amiran's gaze. He was still several shades paler than usual.

'It's impossible,' he said, nearly a reflex. His words didn't come out as well-considered as usual, or in that roar of anger that flared up if anyone provoked him too much. He spoke in a blur of confusion, nearly stumbling over his syllables. 'I don't think – why would it – how in the world would she have gotten in?'

'There may be some weakness in our security that we're unaware of,' Tamar said slowly, and something sharp slid over

his narrow face.

‘That she found after no one found it before? Within a day of her arrival?’

‘Don’t see why she’d aim straight for his bedroom either,’ Terenti grouched. ‘I’d say she’d have better people to look for if she managed to find her way inside.’

Amiran flashed him a shocked look, then turned to Tamar, his eyes still a little too wide. You didn’t *tell* him, that look said. She’s here for your assassin and for him alone, and you didn’t *tell* him?

Her heart stopped dead in her chest for a moment. If he opened his mouth now... She couldn’t pretend she’d just forgotten to pass on this bit of information to Terenti. Then they’d *both* be pressing about her reasons to keep Runo here, and having the two of them against her while they both knew they agreed...

‘Well,’ Amiran said, his voice a pool of ice. ‘I suppose Maiva would like to get rid of her traitor too. He may simply have seemed the most accessible target on her list.’

Tamar’s breath escaped a little too abruptly. Terenti was too busy rumbling another curse to notice.

‘Still...’ Amiran rubbed his face, giving a mirthless laugh. He seemed to have regained some of his composure. ‘It all sounds immensely far-fetched to me. There are enough people in the Red Castle who’d rather see him go, Tamar. Far more

likely to me that one of them just decided to send a message, now that we have all this trouble with the Empire going on...’

‘Where would anyone have gotten his hands on an Imperial ducat? And why would they sacrifice that much money on just a cruel joke?’

Another scoff. ‘Enough people here who wouldn’t mind parting with their silver to knock the bastard off his pedestal a little.’

She narrowed her eyes, inspecting him for a brittle heartbeat of silence – his fingers still too restless, his face still too pale, but the hate in his eyes unmistakable. Had *he* laid that coin on Runo’s pillow? Was the image of Jennimo’s antlers indeed just a simple coincidence?

‘Terenti?’ she said, not taking her eyes off her cousin’s face.

‘Yes?’

‘Please double check everything. Ask your guards if they allowed anyone in who might have been Eelia, even if they thought they had a good reason. Make sure nobody fell asleep at the wrong moment in the wrong place. Tell them there will be no punishments for honest mistakes, as long as they are admitted within the next two hours. There will be double punishments for lying, though.’

Terenti might be too proud for his own good, but at these moments, the sense of duty trumped the underlying suggestion he may have failed his job. With no more than a grunted ‘I’ll

let you know' he stomped out, leaving her and Amiran behind in a silence Tamar dreaded to break.

Thankfully, her cousin did before she could gather the courage.

'Before you ask – no, I didn't put that coin there, Tamar.'

She slumped back in her chair, closing her eyes. Even if he didn't understand her, he still knew her far too well.

'Can you blame me for suspecting it for a moment?'

'Not at all,' he said grimly. 'I'm inclined to agree with the person who did it.'

'For hell's sake – Maiva is trying to *kill* him, Amiran. He found out Eelia was here before Reziko or any of us did. He's been risking his life to find her. How much more do you need to convince you he's honestly turned his back on the Empire?'

He shrugged, stiffly. 'Oh, I suppose I believe that much.'

Tamar blinked. 'You do?'

'I had to listen to handfuls people rambling about how much he wanted to find her last night.' He snorted. 'He's made that point.'

'Then what in the world is your...'

'You didn't tell Terenti about Eelia's true mission.'

She shifted in her chair. 'Neither did you.'

'No, because angering Terenti against you is only going to drive you further into *his* claws,' Amiran snapped. 'Whatever he's holding over your head to make you sacrifice half a castle

to protect him, I'm not going to make it worse by turning that same castle against you.'

'He's not keeping anything—'

'Oh, *stop* it, Tamar.' He sucked in a heavy breath, visibly wrestling with his anger. 'You don't have to feed me the same list of lies again – it's clear enough you've gotten yourself stuck into something, it's clear enough he has you in a corner, and I frankly don't know why you can't bloody *tell* me what you're dealing with...' Another deep breath. A muscle twitched at his jaw. 'But don't expect me to sit back and let him do whatever the hell he likes to you. Don't expect me not to try to figure it out.'

She closed her eyes, heart pounding in her chest so fast that it turned her dizzy and light-headed. 'Amiran, I'm *fine*.'

'As always,' he said sharply. 'Fine, Tamar. Let me know if you have something more informative to tell me. Until then, I'll just do what I can, alright?'

She opened her eyes again to answer, but he was already at the door, and vanished without looking back.



Terenti stormed into the study half an hour later, his bulldoggish face flushed to a disconcerting red. Skidding to a halt before her desk, his large fist clenched around the sword at his hip, he snapped, 'She's been inside.'

Tamar froze.

‘Has been,’ Terenti added, as if to reassure her. Nothing about the growl in his voice sounded even remotely reassuring, though. ‘She left again. Hasn’t been inside for more than an hour.’

‘How?’ Tamar managed.

‘A letter with your seal.’

‘What – *again?*’

Terenti’s face darkened even further – she knew he didn’t like being reminded of his young nephew’s murderous plans, and with another Taavi murderer slipping through his defences, the memory seemed to sting in all the wrong ways. ‘Where’s your ring?’

She shoved open the little drawer at the top of her desk – two rings, hers and Anzor’s, both still in their usual place. Terenti’s scowl softened a fraction as his eyes slid over his brother’s seal.

‘Did you use it last evening?’

‘Don’t think so. Not after my meeting with Reziko in the afternoon.’

He bit out a curse. ‘So someone may have taken it in the meantime?’

Someone. Someone who had taken her ring and signed another letter giving the wearer access to the castle – just like Gocha had done, months ago. Someone who had received the

news of Eelia's arrival. Who had sent the Silver Dagger a letter to warn her to get out of that hostel in Miller Street, and then handed her a ticket into the Red Castle –

A ticket to kill her.

A shiver ran over her back. As far as anyone knew, Eelia was here for *her* – and she didn't suppose the assassin had informed her helper of the true nature of her assignment, if the lie offered her a way to Runo. If he hadn't slept in her room tonight...

She didn't want to imagine it and did anyway – the image of him in that narrow bed, eyes empty, hands clenched in sudden agony, blood soaking his blankets and pillow. Cold sweat trickled over the small of her back. Her stomach recoiled.

'So,' Terenti barked. 'What do we do?'

She closed her eyes. She knew what she *wanted* to do – find Runo, throw herself into his arms, and hold him until the steady beat of his heart convinced her that he was safe, healthy, alive. Until his amused comments and apparent carelessness lifted the worst of the fear from her heart, allowed her to think freely again...

But there was just Terenti, and the wide-eyed guards at the door, and she wouldn't see Runo until bedtime tonight.

'Close the door, please,' she said.

He did, then turned back to her without questions.

'The guard who let her through,' Tamar added. 'Didn't he have any suspicions?'

‘She posed as an innocent young woman bringing a message. The boys said she looked too weak to be a feared Taavi assassin – that they didn’t even consider the option. So they obeyed your seal.’

Innocent and weak. A bitter laugh welled up in her. ‘I see.’

‘We can change the protocol, of course,’ Terenti said, scratching his beard. ‘Simply check all women for scars and killing marks on their arm. That should keep her out.’

‘Yes, but it’s not going to tell us who betrayed me,’ Tamar said. Again. Someone had betrayed her *again*. It could be anyone – half the castle must have heard the news about Eelia’s arrival with so many people running in to spread the news, and any servant could have slipped into her study unnoticed... *Why?* More people trying to kill her over Anzor’s death? Or had she done anything else, offended anyone else?

Terenti sighed. ‘No. Alternative options?’

‘Create a weakness,’ Tamar said slowly. ‘And be loud about it – about the change in protocol. Announce publicly to your guards that they’re to search everyone, except for the people carrying your own orders and messages. Then keep your ring in your own room and have Reziko post someone near to make sure we know exactly who sneaks in. If our traitor tries the same trick again, we’ll find him.’

A small smile played around his lips as he took that in, then nodded. He hadn’t smiled at her since the year she married Anzor.

‘You’re beginning to sound like a Taavi schemer yourself, Tamar.’

‘By lack of a better option,’ she said sourly, ‘I’ll just take that as a compliment.’



But Taavi schemes or not, nobody had shown up to steal Terenti’s ring when the sun sank on Redwood again. By that time Tamar was nervous enough to make even her walk to the dinner hall an ordeal – even the four guards accompanying her couldn’t take away the faint anticipation of a knife landing between her shoulder blades any moment. And Runo... He was nowhere to be seen when she sat down at the far end of the hall, even while several of his usual companions were already seated at their table. No public interactions. Was he going to avoid dinner in this hall entirely because of that promise?

Her stomach was a gaping pit now.

He had to be safe. Someone would have told her if any incidents had occurred in the past few hours, if he had left the Red Castle and not returned. Someone would have noticed...

‘Your Majesty,’ a smooth voice said behind her. ‘May I request the pleasure of your company for this evening?’

Tamar’s first reflex was to grab her meat knife, stab in his general direction, and hope she’d at least hit a vital organ or

two. But a full hall of people was looking along, and the night threatened enough bloodshed already.

‘I doubt I’ll be pleasant company tonight,’ she said curtly. ‘But if that doesn’t deter you, take a seat.’

Pridon sank down in the chair next to her without hesitation, every part of him groomed to the point of looking slick – his light hair modelled into immaculate curls, his silk clothes folding to emphasise his shoulders and slender waist, his smooth-shaven smile the height of sympathy. Again Tamar had to suppress some violent urges. That annoyingly symmetric face of his made it so tempting to punch at least a bit of a crook into his nose...

Although it didn’t leave Runo any less handsome, that nose that had once been broken. Quite the opposite, really.

Warmth flickered through her, and for a moment she lost control of her cold, unfeeling expression. His eyes still sharp on her, Pridon looked even more satisfied.

Oh, gods be damned.

He wouldn’t shut up over the course of the meal, no matter how curt her answers or how glassy her stare as he talked and talked and talked. As far as Tamar knew, she’d never given any indications she was interested in falcon hunting, or in the art galleries of Sapphire Hill, or in the expensive jewellery his father had bought his moulder for their every anniversary... But perhaps Pridon liked the sound of his own voice enough to be convinced she’d be equally enamoured with it, or perhaps it was that flicker of a blush that had convinced him he was

finally winning ground in his attempts to secure her heart. After the exhaustion of this day – meetings and unanswered questions and the threat of Eelia looming around every corner of her home – she didn't have the energy left to free him from either illusion.

‘So,’ he interrupted himself as dessert was served, in a tone that would have been convincingly casual if not for the obvious satisfaction in his voice. ‘Something else entirely – I was thinking, if the Empress is now making a habit of sending assassins this way, should we reconsider the option of posting some extra men at the Red Castle? I'd still be glad to send some Sapphire Hill forces this way, if that would improve your peace of mind.’

We. A shame the servants had already taken the meat knives. Tamar gave him a mechanical smile and said, ‘You are of course free to reconsider whenever you feel like it, my lord.’

He gave an unamused chuckle. ‘I was perhaps unclear in my wording. What I mean to say – I have considered it, and realised I will be able to do without those men at home, if you...’

He let the sentence drift off – if you'd just be a little more receptive to my sympathetic attempts at conversation. If you'd just take me into your bed again, perhaps. Tamar nearly shivered.

‘Thank you,’ she said, and tasted a bit of the orange pudding, ‘but the number of men has never been our problem.

It's the quality of them that causes issues at times.'

Did he feel the sting? At least he was silent for the first time during the meal while she ate a few more bites of pudding and stared demonstratively at the hall before her. At the knights' table, which had already largely cleared. Where Runo hadn't shown up at any point during the evening.

'Do I understand,' Pridon said eventually, no longer sounding so silky at all, 'that you—'

'Your Majesty?' a servant interrupted.

Tamar turned away from the vexed duke of Sapphire Hill, more relieved than she wanted to show. The servant girl curtsied and handed her a folded piece of parchment. 'A message for you, Your Majesty.'

Her heart skipped a beat.

She shielded the note with her hand as she unfolded it, protecting it from Pridon's unsubtle glances as much as from the girl delivering it. As if he had expected a curious audience, the few words were written even messier than those on yesterday's message – harder to read from a strange angle.

Rose parlour. Now.

R.

CHAPTER 16



Tamar arrived even faster than Runo had anticipated.

A meagre few minutes went by between the moment he handed his note to the first servant he could find and the moment the door to the rose parlour flew open and candlelight streamed over the birchwood floor and the pillowy chairs. Sitting in a shadowy corner of the room, far away from the glowing embers in the hearth, Runo caught only a few glimpses of her as she commanded her guards to stay at their post and not disturb her under any circumstances. Only then did she slip inside, his bit of scrap parchment still clenched between her fingers. She didn't even look particularly irritated as her hazel eyes met his. She mostly looked exhausted.

He waited until the door shut behind her, then sat up a little straighter in his dawn-coloured fauteuil. 'You're quick.'

'You said *now*,' she said, a smile tugging up the corners of her lips. 'And the alternative was continuing my pleasant chat

with Pridon. So I wasn't too sorry to tell him I had urgent assassin business to attend to.'

Runo laughed. 'Such a lovely bit of truth.'

Her amusement didn't reach her eyes. 'It worked for now.'

'If you're looking for a slightly more permanent solution, let me know,' he said – partly a joke, but if he was honest, not a joke alone. There was little about the duke of Sapphire Hill that *didn't* grate him the wrong way. It wasn't just the bastard hounding Tamar. It was the scorn of their last conversation, too – *stay out of matters of nobility, you dog...* A contempt that ran far deeper than even Terenti's wounded pride or Amiran's hate.

It would be quite amusing, really, to see what that same contempt would do in the face of a sharpened blade. A shame that Tamar still insisted on decency and lawfulness and all those other lovely values that didn't mesh well with knives in the dark.

She smiled, though, and this time at least it looked honest. 'You know I can't do that.'

'I know.' He sighed, got to his feet, and pulled her into his arms. Still no protest, no mentions of the unlocked door or courtly obligations or people she'd have to see soon. She *really* had to be exhausted. 'But you'll forgive me for feeling a little tempted.'

'I'll just take his resolve as a compliment,' she muttered against his chest, not sounding entirely convinced herself.

Runo gave a chuckle.

‘Oh, I can imagine the bastard being rather smitten after spending a night in your bed. It’s the way he goes about it that bothers me.’

She scoffed. ‘He didn’t even spend a night in my bed.’

‘You’re not going to tell me he left early of his own volition.’

‘Of course he didn’t.’

Runo snorted a laugh. ‘You kicked him out?’

‘Of course I kicked him out,’ she said, her shoulders shaking with suppressed amusement. ‘He was *dreadful*. I was thinking about pancakes the whole time.’

He burst out laughing. ‘You never told me that part.’

‘You were annoying enough about the matter already.’ She looked up, sending him a warning glare that only tempted him to be much more annoying about it. The grin she was biting down didn’t help. ‘Not a *word* about pancakes, Runo.’

‘You can’t just hand me such perfect taunting material and then expect me to shut up about it, Your Majesty.’

‘I have high expectations of you. I’m sure you’ll manage.’ Was he imagining it, or was some of the colour returning to her cheeks – some of the light in her eyes? Her voice at least regained some of its usual edge as she added, ‘Do I need distract you from this nonsense by asking some pointed

questions about why in the world you decided to send me another one of your bloody letters?’

‘That sounds delightful,’ he said, letting the pancakes go for the moment. Here were the objections, at last. ‘Perhaps you could scowl at me a little, too. It always makes your little sounds afterwards so much more satisfying.’

He *felt* the arousal roar awake within her, the awareness of his body against hers. Could see it in the gleam in her eyes, the way her lips parted a fraction. He smiled at her, a smile that contained every plan he had for the night, and her cheeks darkened.

‘So.’ His nonchalance was driving her mad already, he knew. ‘Pointed questions, you said?’

‘I told you I wasn’t going to do this more often,’ she said, her voice just a tad too hoarse. ‘Why did you think it would be a good idea to ignore that, exactly?’

He shrugged. ‘Apart from the fact you’re currently here?’

‘You were lucky I had to escape Pridon,’ she muttered. ‘If I had been talking with literally anyone else, I’d have ignored you.’

‘Which would have been your loss,’ Runo said, smiling even broader. Her knees wobbled a little against him. ‘But you’re still free to leave, of course. I’ll just have to go by myself, in that case.’

Surprise flashed in her eyes. ‘Go where?’

‘You don’t expect me to spoil the surprise if you’re not even joining me, do you?’

For a moment she just stared at him, no longer looking even half as tired as mere minutes ago. Then, carefully, she said, ‘You’re not planning to go anywhere you might run into a Taavi assassin on the loose?’

‘No.’

‘Anywhere you might run into – anyone else?’

‘No.’

‘Anywhere...’ She sucked in a deep breath, averted her gaze. It didn’t hide the curiosity in her eyes, or her frustration at that curiosity. ‘Oh, gods. You’re terrible.’

He chuckled. ‘I’m well aware. Don’t pretend you don’t like it. Any other questions I need to answer, or can we get on our way?’

‘There are *guards* before the door. If they see us go wherever you want to go...’

Runo released her and stepped back, sauntering to the other side of the room. ‘You seem to forget I once earned my money avoiding guards.’

‘Runo – you’re not expecting me to climb through a window, are you?’

‘I have *some* manners, Your Majesty,’ he said, casually pulling the curtains aside and unlocking the high window frame. Large enough, and situated on the ground floor – he

had picked this location for a reason. ‘Wouldn’t think of making you climb. I can just lift you through.’

‘Don’t you dare...’

He swung the window wide open and muttered, ‘And better be quiet. The rose garden is secluded enough, but if you speak too loud, the guards at the battlements will hear you.’

She stared at him, her gaze a beam of iron, willing him to close the window again and stop this nonsense. Runo just beckoned her closer.

‘You’re *mad*,’ she whispered.

‘And you’re exhausted,’ he said, shrugging, ‘and looking for an escape, and desperate to get your mind off Eelia for a few moments. Are you sure a little madness isn’t exactly what you need?’

The battle was won already – he saw it in the fiery sparkle in her eyes, the frustration at his trap. She knew exactly what game he was playing. And perhaps she hated the defeat, but she’d hate not knowing far, far more.

‘Well.’ She clenched her lips as she took half a step forward, and then another one. ‘If this goes wrong...’

‘It won’t.’

Another step. She repeated, ‘Well.’

Runo laughed and scooped her into his arms.

She trembled against him as he stepped through the open window, into the rose garden, and pushed the window frame

shut behind him again. In the shadows of the rose trees and the high hedges he manoeuvred away from the castle's main building, crossed the garden, and then carried her along the outer walls. Above him he could hear the guards saunter back and forth along the battlements, but none of them looked down to see their queen sneaking through the shadows of the castle.

It was only when their destination loomed up from the darkness that she seemed to realise where he was taking her.

'Runo.' A stilled, urgent whisper. He didn't slow down. 'Runo, that door is locked around this time. You can't—'

'Hm?' he said as he nudged the door open with his foot and slipped into the bathhouse's antechamber.

Candlelight welcomed them, reflected in the smooth green and cream tiles on the walls and the polished copper of the racks and shelves. Soft pillows lay scattered over wooden benches, and a fragrance of citrus and rosemary hung heavy in the air. More than any other place in the Red Castle, the room seemed a world of itself – untainted by the scheming and bloodshed outside, untouched even by the threat of Eelia's presence.

He carefully lowered Tamar to her feet, then locked the door behind him. When he turned back, he found her still blinking at the antechamber – at the candles that shouldn't have been burning, the perfumes that shouldn't have drifted through the air.

She let out a dazed laugh as she caught his gaze. 'How in the world...'

‘Had a word with the lady who oversees this thing,’ Runo said, sticking his hands into his pockets. ‘Very pleasant conversation. Turned out she needed to get a thing or two off her chest – her daughter’s broken engagement and her husband’s rheumatics and also something with goats – anyway, after being sympathetic for an hour I slipped something about my curiosity for royal baths. Long story short...’

‘She left the door open for you?’

He gave her a cheerful shrug. ‘She was apparently rather charmed.’

Tamar closed her eyes, her lips trembling. ‘You *monster*.’

‘Glad to hear you’re nearly as enchanted by my unrivalled allure. A bath, Your Majesty?’

‘The water will be cold by now,’ she said – not a refusal, Runo sensed, but rather a request for clarification. He raised his eyebrows.

‘I just spent an hour throwing wood into those ovens. We might boil to death, but I dare to guarantee it won’t be *cold*.’

‘You...’ She rubbed her eyes, as if to rub her brain clean. ‘*That’s* why you missed dinner?’

‘Possibly.’

‘You – *Runo!*’

And her arms were around his neck all of a sudden – thrown around him with such force that he nearly stumbled back. He

pulled her closer and buried his face in her copper hair, ran his fingers over her back until she shivered. Then he stilled, one hand in the small of her back, one hand around her nape, and waited.

‘Let’s have a bath,’ she whispered eventually.

He smiled and shifted his hands to the lacing of her bodice.

He took his time undressing her. Time to play with the locks of her hair as he freed them from their pins, to gently rub her shoulders as he bared them, to run his fingers along every newly uncovered inch of her spine. She was stifling quiet moans by the time he stripped her dress down to her hips, arching against him with every turn of his hands. Still he continued slowly, lazily. When he eventually pulled the silk off her completely, there was nothing quiet about her moans anymore.

So willing. So tempting. Certain parts of his body were more and more inclined to ignore the steaming basin waiting in the next room and take her here over the benches, or on the hardwood floor for all he cared... But he hadn’t spent an hour hauling wood around for nothing, and he had no intentions to hurry her either. Not if he had days of exhaustion to wash away first.

So he restrained himself even as he knelt to untie her shoes and only pressed a single, long kiss to the spot where her thighs met before he came up. He enjoyed that kiss thoroughly, though. Judging by the low, guttural sound she made as she grabbed his shoulders, he wasn’t the only one.

‘Bath?’ he said sweetly, smiling up at her.

Her muttered answer was barely intelligible. He just assumed it was a confirmation.

With a few swift movements he pulled his own shirt and trousers off, threw them over the nearest rack. Her naked body was so soft against his chest as he lifted her again, so inviting, every curve and line shaped for his hands to explore – but still he held back as he carried her into the larger second room, tested the water in the marble basin with his foot, then lowered both of them in when his toes weren’t boiled to death. Tamar breathed a sigh of relief as he sat down in the warm water, curled against his chest. Around them her hair drifted off on the crystal surface like a wide copper cloak.

Careful not to let go of her, Runo reached for the nearest bar of soap in one of the small baskets around the basin. She quietly moaned when he lifted her a few inches from his lap, just enough to bring her shoulders and breasts above the surface.

‘Don’t worry.’ He kissed her forehead. ‘You’ll be warm again in a moment.’

He focussed only on his hands, on the slow circles of soap he drew over her chest and belly until every inch of her was covered in soft, citrusy foam. Then he eased her a little more upright and installed her between his legs, back towards him, to continue the work on her neck and shoulders. As soon as he had lathered up every last bit of skin he put the bar of soap away and continued to gently knead her back and shoulders –

found the hard knots of her muscles below his thumbs and palms and massaged them until they loosened a little. Her soft, involuntary moans were all the instructions he needed. She tensed and shivered under his touches, wincing whenever he pressed a particularly sore spot – but when he eventually pulled her back against him, her head lolled to rest against his shoulder as if she had fallen asleep.

He shifted his attention, ran his fingers along her waist and hips and thighs, savouring the warmth of the water as much as the softness of her skin. Against his shoulder, Tamar moaned. A soft, serene moan, one he rarely heard from her except in the last conscious moments before she fell asleep.

‘More of that?’ he muttered, looking down. Below the red veil of her hair, a small smile twitched around her lips.

‘More of that.’ It was barely a whisper. ‘More of you.’

He hadn’t thought she could dig herself even deeper into his heart. He had been wrong.

Stifling an acute surge of desire, he continued his circles over her hips and thighs, drawing closer now to the vulnerable flesh in between. A lazy caress over the inside of her thigh. A brush through the patch of red hair at the apex of her legs. A flick of his thumb over the sensitive spot below. She pressed even tighter against him in response, didn’t lift her head, but grazed her lips over his chest with feathery insistence. As Runo slipped his hand fully between her thighs, that tender kiss abruptly evolved into a gasp.

He chuckled. ‘I’d like to get more of *that*.’

A drowsy laugh fell over her lips. He gently nudged her legs apart, then ran his fingers along the lips between – slippery to the touch even under water. Her body easily gave way as he pressed two fingers into her at once, and again she gasped, pink lips parting in the most sensual expression he knew.

‘Kiss me,’ he whispered.

She merely tilted back her head, offering him an eager surrender. Runo pulled back his fingers, then drove them into her even deeper, kissing her in the same moment – mouths melting together, a slow, lazy kiss that burned a searing path through him and had him thrust his fingers into her with twice the force. Tamar moaned into his mouth. He only kissed her deeper. His senses drowned in the sensation of her, the taste of sweet orange on her lips and the hungry moans welling up in her, her warm weight in his lap and the tightness of her body around his fingers... Without breaking their kiss he lowered the both of them even deeper into the hot water, pressing her tighter against him with his free arm around her waist. Fucking her with his fingers. Rubbing his thumb over the soft bud between her lips. Far too soon her moans rose higher, hoarser, a melody of the purest pleasure – then with a last unrestrained cry she clenched to a climax around his fingers, struggling for breath between his kisses. Her sigh as she wilted against him turned his blood into boiling lust.

‘More,’ she breathed, lowering her hand to his crotch, wrapping her fingers around his tight erection with feeble, shaking fingers. ‘Please...’

He kissed her harder, finally allowing himself to release the hunger that had smouldered in his heart for hours. Her fist tightened around his cock, sending bolts of a burning, aching need through every fibre of his body – damn the restraint, then, damn the hours he could have spent toying with her... With a barely suppressed growl he lifted her, turned her over the edge of the basin and pushed into her in a single powerful thrust. Hot, irresistible wetness welcomed him, her body ready to receive every rigid inch. So tight – so velvety soft....

She gasped as the force of his invasion pressed her arms and breasts against the floor, nipples caught against the cold marble. He thrust even deeper, and her gasp turned into a groan of pain and pleasure – sleepy and hungry at once, delivering herself to every whim of his lust. It was that unconditional surrender that obliterated the last of his restraint, more than any breathless moan or glimpse of naked skin. Fingers digging into her waist, animal groan on his lips, he fucked her with all his passion, all his need, all his frustration, slamming into her over and over until she once again came and tightened like a fist around him. He could no longer hold back, then. With a cry that tore itself over his lips he spilled his seed into her, gave himself over to her as much as she had given herself to him...

He pulled both of them back into the warm water before the peak of his release had faded. Surrounded by steam and warmth and her shivering body, he felt for the shortest of moments like he might fall asleep beside her – sleep in her

arms for the rest of the night and wake to find the world safe and kind and free of Maiva's assassins again.

Tamar's sigh as she nestled herself against him nearly made him believe he would.

'So,' he muttered, wrapping his hand around the back of her head and holding her against his shoulder. 'Still not thinking about pancakes?'

She snorted a giggle that made his heart leap a little. 'Bastard.'

He gave her a lazy grin. 'Is that a yes? A no? A—'

A handful of water in his face interrupted him. Runo laughed out loud, shook the water from his eyes, and gave a quick yank at her leg, toppling her over so that she disappeared below the surface for a moment. Coughing and laughing she came up and repeated, 'Bastard.'

'Still not an answer to the question.'

'You know very well you've never given me a moment to think about pancakes,' she said, swatting another splash of water in his direction. This time he ducked away. 'For a man who claimed not to care about others, you've always taken surprisingly good care of me.'

He grimaced. 'Two sides of the same coin.'

'Would you say?' She abruptly halted her preparations for another splashing attack and pulled her knees to her chest, observing him with earnest brown eyes. Runo looked away, suddenly unsure of what to say – of what to think.

‘Runo?’

He groaned. The water grew colder around him, the candlelight sharper. ‘Do you want me to talk about this now?’

Her arms lay around him again before he realised it, safe and stable and without even a hint of reproach. She pushed him back against the side of the bath with the weight of her body, forced him to lie back and hold her in the whirling steam – her head against his chest, her hands playing with the lines of his spine until the strange coldness that had risen in his bones vanished again. Somehow she seemed to know. It was only when the bath had warmed to him once more that she said, ‘Do *you* want to talk about it?’

‘About what, exactly?’ he muttered.

She hesitated for only the shortest moment, then carefully said, ‘I suppose it has something to do with – with her. With Vedisa.’

Again the cold ran through him. It didn’t reach as deep this time.

‘Suppose so,’ he managed.

She didn’t answer. Her arms just tightened a little closer around his chest. Runo closed his eyes and drew in a slow, deep breath, steeling himself – allowed his thoughts to give words to memories he’d never allowed such conscious presence, such validity. Ropes and wood creaking in the silence of the gallows field. Somehow, in this candlelit room of cream and moss green, surrounded by lemony perfumes and

soft towels, the image no longer cut through his heart with the same cruel edge.

‘I convinced myself I didn’t feel guilty about her,’ he said eventually, his voice flat. ‘After she died – after they killed her. Told myself it was just business as usual, all of it. But even then it was always there in the back of my mind whenever I was with someone – that no matter how much I liked them, I might still just as well end up killing them the next day.’

Tamar didn’t move, didn’t even seem to breathe.

‘So...’ He hesitated. ‘I suppose I tried to keep that guilt at bay by making sure they always enjoyed themselves as much as possible. At my own expense, if need be. If they at least had a good time, I could reasonably convince myself that that compensated for the possibility that I’d be the death of them, too.’

She ran a single fingertip over his chest – a slow, gentle path towards his heart. ‘That’s why you had so little qualms about fucking me even if you knew you were about to kill me.’

‘Think so.’ He managed something like a shrug. ‘Call it a preliminary apology of sorts.’

‘Not such a heartless killer after all.’

Runo closed his eyes. ‘If you say so.’

‘No,’ she said quietly, her fingertip pressing a little tighter into his chest. ‘You’re not, Runo. You just spent decades looking for a place where your heart wouldn’t kill you.’

He swallowed – and swallowed again. The pressure of her finger against his chest seemed to double, multiply, until he could hear his heartbeat drumming against her touch.

‘I’ll have to do some very pleasant things to you for saying that,’ he whispered.

She trailed her hand up along his body, over his shoulder, along the lines of his neck, until she reached his hair and slowly combed her fingers through his curls. He leaned closer to her caresses, holding her tight. Their bodies moulded into each other until he barely knew where he ended and she began – skin to skin, heartbeat to heartbeat, the two of them against the rest of the world once again.

He allowed himself to believe it, then, as they sat in the cooling water and held each other in a bare, vulnerable silence – that his heart wouldn’t kill him here. Not with her. Not for her.

Now it was a matter of making sure nothing else would kill him, either.

CHAPTER 17



Tamar woke to shouting – familiar shouting, a mere doorway away.

In the dark, it took her a moment to figure out where she was. She wasn't supposed to wake up to any sound at all. Her bedroom doors and windows had been built to keep out all of it. But the soft pillows below her head weren't her usual pillows either, and this narrow, soft shape on which she lay sleeping wasn't her bed. The windows were in the wrong place, and so was the door –

'Of course she didn't order you to keep *me* out!' the voice outside thundered, too loud for her brain to comprehend the words at once. 'She's been gone for *hours*! Let me at the very least check...'

Amiran.

Gone for hours.

Tamar blinked, sat up. Her dress was stiff and ruffled; her hair was not wet anymore, but definitely still damp. Oh gods – the bath. Runo. The rose parlour. She must have fallen asleep just after he carried her back inside and sneaked away through the window again. *Don't let anyone disturb me under any circumstances*, she had told her guards.

How long had she been asleep? Long enough for even the last embers in the hearth to lose their warmth.

She staggered to her feet and made for the door, still sleepy, and a little shaky too. The arguing voices outside abruptly died away as she turned the handle.

Amiran was standing in the torch-lit corridor, his hair ruffled, his face too red. He was dressed for the chilly spring night, she noted in that moment – a heavy coat around his shoulders, gloves on his hands. Outside excursions seemed the last thing on his mind as he turned to her, though.

‘Tamar!’

‘Apologies,’ she muttered. Oh, gods. What would her guards think of her – what would he think of her? ‘I seem to have fallen asleep.’

‘You...’ He ran a hand through his hair and uttered a rather baffled laugh. ‘Gods be damned. Can I come in?’

She stepped back without a word and allowed him to stride into the small parlour, away from the listening ears. The bang of the door behind him proved that the worst of his anger hadn't left him yet.

‘Why did you even go here?’ he said before she could speak, his voice a strained hiss. ‘They said you got some note at dinner? Something about...’

‘The note was nothing important.’ Tamar sank down on the couch where she had spent the last few hours sleeping. ‘I just wanted to get out of Pridon’s reach for a moment. Thought I’d sit down here for a few minutes and then disappear upstairs, but apparently I was more tired than I realised.’

Amiran stared at her, eyes narrowed to peer through the darkness. At least the suspicious gleam to her damp hair wouldn’t be visible here, but then he still knew her unpleasantly well at times...

‘I was – rather worried,’ he said, his voice coming down a little. ‘Couldn’t find you for fifteen minutes when I realised you weren’t in your bedroom.’

She rubbed her face, suppressing a curse. ‘I’m sorry – I hadn’t planned to disappear on you. Why were you even out in the middle of the night?’

‘Oh.’ He glanced down at his attire. ‘Thought I’d get up early and make a round through town. See how the men looking for Eelia are doing. She still has to be somewhere out there.’

‘Get up – early?’

‘The sun is rising in an hour or so, Tamar,’ he said with a frown, and she produced an awkward chuckle.

‘Oh. I hadn’t realised. Are you – are you being careful, out there?’

He blinked. ‘Of course I’ll try to be – Tamar, you haven’t told me to be careful in a *decade*. Are you sure you’re alright?’

Was she alright? Better than that, really – her body was still tingling, wrapped in a lingering smell of citrus and rosemary and Runo’s body against hers. But she did feel... shaky. A little unsteady. As if something was shifting in the back of her mind, or turning away beneath her feet – as if soon, very soon, something was about to break.

Runo’s doing.

A glimpse of what she could have, if she just dared to take it.

If she dared... Her breath caught. If she dared to treat him like someone she liked. If she dared to laugh around him, dared to hesitate, dared to be *human* for once – but they’d see her, see her flaws and weaknesses and hopes. Worse, perhaps –

They would know who *he* was.

A thought she hadn’t wanted to think and couldn’t take back now that it had taken root in her mind. They’d realise it soon enough, the power-hungry dukes and the scheming diplomats, the knights with their wavering loyalties and the guild masters looking for gold – that if he could make her laugh, he could make her listen, too. That she could never even hope to control him. The man who charmed kings and servants into

cooperation, who saw straight through every machination of her court... What would he do with *them*?

A cold shiver ran through her, a glimpse of a fear she thought had died on a cold granite floor two years ago.

‘Tamar?’

‘I’m fine,’ she said, jolting up and cursing herself. ‘Just a bit tired. But – hell’s sake, please be careful. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t get yourself into trouble with any Taavi assassins.’

‘Mutual,’ he muttered under his breath, stepping back towards the door with a last curt nod at her. ‘Believe me – that’s mutual, Tamar.’



She slept the last hours of the night in her own bed, her dreams a mess of warm baths and dark castle halls, gentle smiles and sharp sniggers behind her back. When the sunlight eventually woke her a second time she found herself tangled in sweat-drenched blankets, her mind no steadier than it had been when she stumbled into bed.

Runo.

Hers – always, everywhere.

Thoughts she shouldn’t, *couldn’t* allow herself to think.

But she missed him with every breath as she hauled herself from the blankets, missed his jokes and his touches and those

smiles that made everything easy in life. The faint lemony fragrance still drifted through the air around her when she sat down in front of her mirror and took in her own face, bleary-eyed and ruffled as if she'd spent the last evening drinking her way through half a vat of beer.

She'd never felt safer in her life than in that bath, his arms around her, cradling her. She'd never felt so madly, utterly in love either.

So where did that sense of darkness come from, of a shadow crawling towards her from the cracks and corners of her room?

Tamar shivered. She wanted to see him. Needed to see him so badly it hurt. He had promised her last night that he wouldn't continue to stay away during the meals – that he'd attend and simply not interact with her. Which was better than having to wait until bedtime before she'd see him again. Still, the thought of not meeting his eyes during the entirety of breakfast, of knowing he was there with all his dangerous, irresistible madness and not being allowed to enjoy even a trace of it...

All for the court. All for Redwood. But even that resolute promise didn't sound as firm and stable as it had once done.

Her maids' careful ministrations of her hair and dress hid the worst of her exhaustion, and she sailed down to the castle's main hall as soon as they had finished powdering the bags below her eyes away. Looking like iron, despite the memories of last night still drifting through her in toe-curling bouts of arousal. But she didn't *want* to look like iron today – she

wanted to get another note pressed into her hands, wanted to sneak away to whatever room Runo had picked and forget about the world, forget about these damned queenly duties...

As by instinct she looked for him as she stepped into the hall. Some of his usual companions had already taken their seats at the knights' breakfast table, but Runo himself was nowhere to be seen.

He'd be here soon, she told herself as she tore her gaze away and walked on, unflinching even as she spotted Pridon sitting close to her own seat. He'd be here, and she'd catch a glimpse of him, and it wouldn't be enough by far to soothe the longing still gaping in her chest, but at least it was *something*. He'd be here soon. He had promised he'd be.

He still hadn't shown up when she sat down, however.

She cursed her own feeble heart, her own wandering mind. Of course he wouldn't be up this early – he hadn't had much sleep either. So she slowly ate a white bun with apple and cinnamon marmalade, staring demonstratively at her plate to avoid Pridon's hopeful glances. By the time she finished that bun, Runo still hadn't appeared.

Soon, she repeated to herself. He would be here soon. Just a glance. Then she'd get through the rest of her day and see him again tonight. She'd wake up with him tomorrow. And then she'd have to get through tomorrow again, as she'd have to get through the day after tomorrow, and the day after...

She shook that thought away and snatched a second bun from the plate in the middle of the table. Focus on today.

Focus on this morning. Her mind would be clearer tomorrow – she'd be more sensible then.

‘A glass of water, Your Majesty?’ an unknown voice said behind her. Eyes still focussed on the doorway of the hall, Tamar nodded and leaned back a fraction for the servant to reach over her shoulder. Only when the glass thudded against the wood did she look down, waiting for the servant to step back again.

The hand around the glass did not let go, however.

And only then – her brain turning too slowly to comprehend what her eyes were perceiving – did she realise that she knew the shapes peeking from below the simple brown sleeve on that arm. Small lines, ink black. Four of them, with a fifth crossed through – and four more, and a next group disappearing below that same brown sleeve.

Killing marks.

On the arm of – a servant?

Tamar blinked, reflexes frozen. No. No, she had to be mistaken. She had to still be dreaming, her exhausted mind coming up with observations of its own. It would make no sense – no sense at all...

She looked up. Dressed in servants' frocks and a modest apron, a small, dark-haired woman stood smiling at her, a dangerous triumph flickering in her narrow cat eyes. Behind her ear, partly obscured by the locks escaping her loose braid, traces of a crescent-shaped cut were still visible.

Tamar opened her mouth. The words remained frozen in the back of her throat. Around her the clamour of the breakfast hall continued undisturbed, the cacophony of shouts and laughter and clanking plates mingling to a nauseating blur in the back of her mind.

She just stared. That satisfied, snake-like smile broadened to dangerous proportions.

‘Hello, Your Majesty,’ Eelia said.

CHAPTER 18



Urgent, incessant knocking wormed its way through Runo's dreams.

They were rather pleasant dreams. Lemon foam and soft towels. Warm water and the sweetness of Tamar's lips. Really far more pleasant than the quiet but relentless rhythm of knuckles against the locked door of his bedroom –

Locked. Why had he locked it again?

Eelia.

His dreams paled as the state of reality got hold of him again. Eelia, who had been inside the Red Castle once already. Whoever was trying to reach him so desperately – they probably weren't here for a friendly chat about nothing.

With a curse he forced open his eyes, blinking to the bleak morning light. He felt like a wrung-out rag as he rolled out of bed and grabbed for his trousers – but a damn happy wrung-

out rag, with his mind still full of perfumed steam and smooth skin. The knocking, though...

Steeling himself, he knocked back. His visitor immediately stopped.

‘Runo?’

Not Eelia’s voice. She’d have better ways to come in, probably. He quickly untied the piece of rope he had spanned across his doorway at knee height, unlocked the door, and pushed it open. A broad-shouldered man stood waiting for him. Levan, Runo vaguely recalled, one of Terenti’s people, one of the men who had joined them in town two nights ago.

‘Morning?’ he said, glancing through the empty corridor. Still no Eelia in sight. ‘Is there anything wrong?’

‘Can I come in?’ Levan said in a hushed tone.

One look at the muscle twitching at the man’s temple convinced Runo not to press for more information. He stepped back, sank down on his bed. Levan slipped in after him, pulled the door shut behind him and threw a look through the small room – as if someone might stand hidden behind the rickety closet.

‘Are you planning to murder anyone?’ Runo said.

A joyless grin, but nothing more than that. With a cough, Levan said, ‘Look, just to be sure – we’re – well, we’re friends, right?’

Runo raised his eyebrows.

‘I just – don’t want to get in trouble,’ the guard clarified with a nervous laugh. ‘You’ll keep your mouth shut about this if I’m wrong, yes?’

‘You paid my last beer for me,’ Runo said, rubbing his face. ‘I owe you a secret. What is it?’

‘She...’ Levan sucked in a breath. ‘I think she’s inside.’

Runo stiffened. ‘What?’

‘That assassin. Eelia.’

Runo stared at him. The guard shifted to his other leg like a young boy trying not to piss himself.

‘There was a woman just like your description,’ he added, gesturing in the direction of the gate. ‘Half an hour or so ago. Just before sunrise. Didn’t see if she had a scar, but she looked Taavi.’

‘Why...’ Runo blinked, suppressing the urge to curse. ‘Why in hell didn’t you check her?’

‘She was a personal guest.’ The guard swallowed. ‘He wouldn’t let us.’

‘*He?*’

‘Yes – Lord Amiran.’

Runo stared at him, barely able to breathe.

‘So you understand I don’t want this to spread,’ Levan added, throwing him a pleading look. ‘If I’m wrong – if he finds out I’m doubting him – if the queen hears – I don’t want to be the one who...’

‘Oh, fuck that,’ Runo interrupted, his mind crashing into a whirl of undiluted panic. Fire was buzzing through his veins all of a sudden. Amiran. A letter arriving at Eelia’s hostel. Tamar’s seal on a fake entrance permit. *Amiran*. ‘The queen isn’t putting a hand on you. You—’

‘You don’t expect *me* to go warn her, do you?’

‘No.’ He rubbed his eyes, cursed. ‘Find Terenti. Tell him she’s inside. I don’t care how he finds her, but make sure he finds her.’

‘You think it *is* her?’ Levan sounded hoarse. ‘Why for hell’s sake would Amiran—’

‘Are you going to warn him?’ His voice cracked a fraction, and the guard abruptly shut up.

‘Right. Yes.’

‘Good. And thanks. I owe you a couple of beers.’

Then he snatched a shirt off his chair and sprinted off without waiting for an answer.



He had never set foot into Amiran’s study before. The room he found when he slammed open the door without knocking met all of his expectations, though.

Books. Books everywhere, in piles on the floor, the chairs, the windowsill – some of them large and impressive, some of

them barely more than well-thumbed leaflets. Maps and charts, scribbled full of notes in black and red ink. Rulers, compasses, and set squares. Shelves full of ticking and swaying measuring instruments, glass bulbs filled with glowing minerals, every inch of the room devoted to the study of the strange magical forces at the edge of the world.

Even in that chaos, he found the tall, red-haired man at the window immediately.

Amiran had been pacing back and forth between bookcase and desk – waiting for the confirmation of a successful murder, perhaps. Now he jolted towards the door, a look of impatient annoyance on his face, his mouth half-opened to object to the disruption.

Then he realised the nature of the disruption and froze.

Nothing else moved in the room. Wherever Eelia was, it wasn't here. Runo took a next step forward and flung the door shut behind his back, barely restraining the urge to fling a couple of instruments against the wall.

‘Where is she?’

Amiran blinked. A last moment to realign his thoughts with this twist of reality. Then, regaining some of his usual sharp authority, he bit out a laugh. ‘How dare you storm in here like some—’

‘Where,’ Runo snapped, ‘*is* she?’

Something about his tone of voice seemed to convince the other that further pretence of ignorance was of little use. For a

moment Amiran stood frozen. Then, slowly, like a man trying not to startle a skittish animal, his hand moved down, towards his hip, towards –

‘If you even *think* of drawing a knife at me,’ Runo growled, ‘I’ll be overjoyed to smash your head in with one of these nifty pointy instruments of yours. Make your choices wisely, brother.’

Amiran’s hand faltered. Runo clenched his fists so tight that it hurt and forced himself not to plant them into the other’s face. He didn’t have the time to wreck half the room first. He barely had the time to waste a moment cursing.

‘I knew you wanted me out of the Red Castle,’ he managed through clenched teeth, pushing back the panic pulsing through his veins. He had to be reasonable now, had to be convincing. ‘But teaming up with Eelia to handle it for you... Do you have the slightest idea of the havoc she could wreak while she’s in here?’

‘She won’t,’ Amiran snapped. ‘She agreed not to touch anyone else in the castle as long as she—’

‘I once heard her agree not to kill a handful of children,’ Runo interrupted, his voice rising at the memory, ‘and next thing we knew their house was going up in flames with the little ones locked into their bedroom. You’re the one who won’t stop blathering about Taavi games, but you’re going to believe *her* on her word?’

Amiran just glowered at him, eyes narrowed in burning hate. Oh, hell be damned. There was no sense in reasoning

with the fool – not with whatever Eelia had told him to fan his distrust, not if the man had to accept the consequences of his decision if he were to admit his mistake...

‘Tell me where she is,’ Runo said coldly, slowly. If he was supposed to be a heartless killer after all, he might as well do it convincingly. ‘Now.’

‘So you can kill her before the truth about you spreads? Subject Tamar to more of your lies?’ Amiran let out another cutting laugh. ‘I’d rather die than—’

It took no more than a burst of rage, flaring hot enough to momentarily make him forget about risks and consequences. A step forward. Another step. Amiran stumbled back, realising his mistake a moment too late – but Runo clenched his hand around the man’s throat before he could escape, slammed him back against the wall with a snarl of frustration. Under his palm, under the vulnerable skin and arteries, Amiran’s heartbeat was a furious rattle.

‘Don’t make me take you up on that,’ Runo hissed, squeezing a little tighter. Amiran’s breath caught, his eyes widening enough to pop from his sockets.

‘You – can’t...’

‘You tried to have me killed. Remind me why I shouldn’t return the favour?’

‘Tamar,’ Amiran wheezed, ‘Tamar will...’

‘Will have opinions about your deliberate insubordination, threatening her castle’s security and the wellbeing of her

people – anything else?’

Amiran clawed for the hand around his neck, face turning red as he struggled for breath. ‘Please.’

‘Where – is – she,’ Runo repeated, biting out every word.

A raspy inhalation. ‘No idea. You should know.’

‘What?’

‘She said...’ Another wrestling gasp. Runo loosened his fingers a fraction, and Amiran sucked in a desperate breath. ‘Said she’d go to a place where you’d arrive sooner or later. That’s – that’s all I know.’

He pressed his lips to a tight line, glaring at Runo with a hateful defiance burning in his eyes. There was something oddly familiar about that expression – not about the hate, perhaps, although he’d seen that before as well, but about the way the man tensed his jaws, jutted up his chin even with the little freedom he had.

Tamar looked that way too when she was lying, and desperately wanted to look like she wasn’t.

‘No,’ Runo said slowly, pressing a little tighter again. Amiran squeaked. ‘That’s not all you know, is it?’

‘It is! I...’

He applied more force. ‘Sure?’

‘Please,’ Amiran panted, clenching his hands around Runo’s wrist in a useless attempt to free himself. ‘Please – let me...’

‘Last chance. Where is she?’

A last defiant inhalation, then Amiran rasped, ‘Do you have a girl somewhere?’

Runo’s thoughts braked to a screeching halt.

As did his heart. As did the blood in his veins. Every fibre of his body seemed to still for a moment as he stared at the reddened, contorted face before him, pressed against the plastered study wall – a face so hateful, and so, so ignorant –

‘What?’ he managed.

‘She mentioned something like that. Paying your sweetheart a visit.’ Amiran somehow found the breath for a derisive chuckle. ‘Whoever the poor soul—’

Runo yanked back his hand, then jammed his knee up between the other man’s legs. Amiran doubled over with a muffled cry, still gasping for breath.

‘If you killed her with this lunacy,’ Runo hissed, turning for the door, ‘you can prepare for some more of that, brother.’

And he was running again.



The castle flashed by around him, statues and paintings and mortified servants. People were shouting around him, he vaguely realised, but over the rush of the blood pulsing in his ears, he couldn’t make out a single word. There was no room left in his mind for thoughts, or fears, or plans. Tamar. Where

he'd arrive sooner or later. He was running straight into Eelia's trap, he knew, and he couldn't give a damn – down the stairs, and more stairs, all these endless flights of stairs... More shouts. More running footsteps. Then, as he approached the throne hall –

Silence.

Cold, absolute silence radiating from the broad open doorway. The sound of dozens of people holding their breaths over their breakfast.

Straight into her trap. But he didn't slow down, didn't hesitate as he stormed around that last corner and found himself surrounded by a nightmare come true – the hall, quiet. The members of the court, frozen. And at the table furthest away from him, just before Redwood's hardwood throne –

Eelia.

Standing behind Tamar's chair.

A slender silver knife against the vulnerable skin of Tamar's throat.

He was given a moment, just a fraction of a heartbeat, to take in the scene before either of the two women noticed him – a strange, detached moment, as if he were observing a skilful painting rather than the true horrors unfolding before him. Eelia had bowed her head, speaking to Tamar, it seemed. Tamar's eyes were closed, her face pale as morning snow – but not a drop of blood to be seen. Not yet, at least. Not before the target had been caught.

Fear clenched his throat, left him unable to breathe for a moment. Yet somehow he managed to open his mouth. Somehow he managed to utter her name, too loud and too hollow in the dead silence of the hall.

‘Eelia.’

Her head snapped up.

Three chairs away, Runo saw Pridon jolt backwards at that motion – useless coward. Around the duke, the rest of the court remained frozen. Eelia didn’t seem to notice any of it as she met his gaze and smiled, a hateful, bitter smile that made him expect for a moment to see blood on her teeth.

‘And *there* he is,’ she drawled, sounding positively delighted. ‘Finally. Her Majesty wouldn’t tell me where to find you.’

Heads turned around the wall. How many of these people spoke Taavi at all? Tamar did, and presumably Terenti too, who stood pale and horrified in the corner behind her – but the rest? No more than a handful, Runo assumed.

He swallowed. *Her Majesty wouldn’t tell me.* Oh, Tamar...

His mind was a whirl of panic – that knife, that damned knife. Breathing was an effort already. But he forced himself to stand still and unwavering on that hardwood floor, forced himself to look her into those hateful cat eyes. Forced himself to shrug. He had to be careful now, he realised even through the tangle of screaming fear, had to pay heed to every word and expression. If Eelia had the faintest idea of the cold hand

squeezing his heart to pulp, she might slit Tamar's throat on the spot just to see him shatter

'I doubt she knew where to find me,' he said, and somehow managed to plaster a sceptical grin onto his face. 'I hardly make a habit of reporting my whereabouts to her every minute of the day. Frankly, the average kitchen maid would have been more helpful to learn about my movements.'

'Oh, I know.' She chuckled. 'But the average kitchen maid wouldn't be half so much fun to kill.'

In the corner behind her, Terenti sucked in a sharp hiss, his knuckles whitening around the hilt of his undrawn sword. Tamar still didn't move, didn't even blink, frozen into a statue under the sharp edge of that knife. Runo imagined the cut even though it was the last thing he wanted to do. Imagined the cold, silvery flash, the blood, the desperate gurgling and the life fading from her hazel eyes...

Bile rose in his throat.

But it brought a hardness with it, too, a certainty that sank into his bones and dulled even the nauseating panic writhing in his chest – that she wasn't going to die. That he wouldn't allow her to die. Not Tamar, *his* Tamar, the woman who had given his heart a place to stay alive – she wouldn't, couldn't die.

Even if he had to kill half of this hall to save her. Even if he had to kill himself to save her.

And in a flash his mind was clear again, a serene, razor-sharp clarity. This he could do. The price he'd have to pay – he'd find out soon enough. But the price didn't matter. First he had her life to save, and that...

'Ah,' he said, raising his eyebrows, some wry amusement in his smile. 'You're going to kill her? What an excellent idea.'

Tamar's eyes widened above Eelia's knife. He didn't dare to meet her gaze, kept his eyes fixed on Eelia's face as she blinked, and blinked once more. Her triumph came down a fraction.

'Would you say?'

'Oh, yes.' He gave her a bright grin. 'I doubt Maiva wants her dead. What do you think she'll do to you for disobeying her – hang you? Behead you? If she's pissed enough, I doubt she'll leave it at that, frankly. Do you remember that fellow she killed by cutting off inch after inch of his fingers and hands and arms until he bled to death?'

Eelia stared at him. He knew she remembered. She'd been the one taking care of the cutting.

'I must say I quite enjoy the thought of her hangmen poking your eyes out with glowing iron,' he added gleefully. 'So yes, by all means, kill Her Majesty. It will cheer up my last moments immensely to know you've already taken care of my revenge yourself.'

Eelia didn't move, but her eyes stayed fixed on him, scanning his face for some trace of weakness. Runo stuck his

hands into his pockets and said, ‘Changed your mind already? Such a shame.’

Her upper lip curled up. ‘You’re trying to save her life, aren’t you?’

‘*Her* life?’ Runo said, taking care to sound like it was the most ridiculous idea he’d heard in his life. ‘Oh, please. Her life isn’t the point. It’s just that I made some friends in this place, and I’d hate for you to start a war that might kill them just because you can’t get over that warty bastard of yours.’

A flush of red washed over her cheeks. ‘Don’t you *dare*...’

‘Seventeen years, Eelia. It’s been *seventeen* years.’ He laughed. ‘If he had regrettably survived my intervention, you’d already have fallen out of love with him years ago, do you realise that? But it’s easy to overlook his gambling and whoring while he’s rotting away in some grave ditch, isn’t it?’

‘Shut up,’ she hissed. ‘Shut up or I’ll make you *feel* what it’s like to lose—’

Runo snorted, interrupting her before she could blurt out whatever damning details she’d figured out about Tamar and him. ‘You think I don’t know? Did you forget about – what was her name again? Vedisa?’

A flicker of doubt gleamed in her eyes. ‘You didn’t give a shit about Vedisa.’

‘More than I ever gave a shit about anyone else,’ he said, forcing away the twinge of pain. Tamar would understand. He hoped she would, at least. ‘So what? She died. I’m not going

to cause all this bloody melodrama just for someone I fucked for a while.'

Eelia bit out a joyless laugh, but again he heard the doubt shimmer through. She *knew* he hadn't shed a single tear over Vedisa's death. Even if she'd figured out the full truth between Tamar and him – and hell's sake, how had she even figured that out? – that bit of information wasn't worth anything if he didn't care about his lovers' deaths anyway...

'But you do care about that peace, don't you?' she sneered, interrupting his thoughts. 'I might also just kill her to make sure the Kingdoms have to—'

'Yes,' Runo said, and rolled his eyes. 'Very creative. You could. Do I need to remind you of all the wonderful things Maiva would do to you if she heard you did this with the explicit intent to have her enemies declare war on her?'

Eelia licked her lips. 'What do you propose?'

For a moment the hall was silent, so painfully silent – as if his ears had already died before the rest of him could. Tamar's stare was burning into his skin. He still couldn't bring himself to look at her. He wouldn't be brave enough if he looked at her.

'You're here for me,' he said, slipping his hand into his pocket. The steel of his knife was cold against his palm. Cold as death. A last deep breath – how many did he have left?

Coward.

He flung the knife aside, ten feet out of reach. It hit the floor in cold, loud clatters. Again Terenti hissed a curse, but Runo didn't look aside, didn't take his eyes off Eelia's deadly, delicate face. He shrugged. Smiled.

‘So take what you came for.’

She examined him for five frozen heartbeats, a hungry triumph in her eyes. Seventeen years. He could see every single day of them gleaming in her stare. She was weighing her chances, he knew, considering if she'd overpower him fast enough to get away unscathed afterwards, even with the full hall coming after her. If she hadn't considered that question before... His blood ran cold. She *had* been planning to cut Tamar's throat in front of him, in front of all of the court.

‘Your beloved friends might come to your rescue as soon as I let go of Her Majesty, though,’ she said, nearly dreamily.

Runo closed his eyes for a moment, then sighed and turned to the closest table. ‘Put your weapons down and get to the walls.’

The company blinked back at him, stupefied as if he'd still been speaking in Taavi.

‘Oh, for hell's sake.’ He turned to Terenti, nodded at the tables around him. ‘You tell them.’

The duke of Sungarden met his eyes for only the shortest of moments – a cold, hard stare, but no longer heavy with the usual disgust. Then the man nodded and barked, ‘Weapons down! To the wall!’

At once dozens of people moved, like puppets whose strings were pulled. A loud clattering of knives and swords thrown onto the hardwood floor, and then the scraping of benches, the shuffle of footsteps. Still nobody dared to utter as much as a whisper, and as soon as the full court had moved to the wall, the silence sank back over the hall just as deep and deadly.

Runo turned back to Eelia. ‘Happy?’

‘You have not the faintest idea,’ she said, sending that venomous smile at him again, ‘how happy it makes me to see you prepare for death, Runo.’

He clenched his teeth but remained motionless. Eelia lazily rolled her shoulders, then pulled back her hand in a single rapid motion, releasing Tamar’s throat, skin untouched.

Even over the quiet gasps throughout the hall, Runo heard the shaky breath Tamar drew in, as if she had kept the air locked in her lungs all this time. He didn’t meet her eyes. Not yet. Not with Eelia’s knife still barely a foot away from her.

‘So *moving*,’ Eelia purred, stepping aside. Away from Tamar. That was all he allowed himself to focus on – not the threat coming closer, not the knife that would soon aim for his own chest, but the growing distance between that same knife and Tamar, sitting pale and alive before him. ‘So dramatic, too. I never thought *you* would end up sacrificing yourself for a handful of northern farmers.’

‘Clearly you underestimate the company of people who aren’t trying to kill you at every step,’ he said curtly.

She tittered. ‘Funny to hear you complain about murderous company.’

Runo shrugged. ‘Ever considered the possibility I’m not nearly so murderous when you’re not around?’

Behind her Terenti moved, creeping slowly in Tamar’s direction – placing himself between his queen and Eelia as the latter prowled closer to Runo. Pridon was equally slowly shrinking in the opposite direction, away from any potential danger. Eelia didn’t seem to notice any of it as she slunk forward, her eyes shining with victorious joy.

‘It’s a shame I don’t have a little more time to catch up with you, Runo. You’d be so much more amusing if you abandoned your witticisms and got some time to plead for mercy instead.’

Only some fifteen feet in between them now. Every muscle in his body tensed, preparing for a desperate, useless attempt to defend himself. He wouldn’t escape her knives, not unarmed, but if he was lucky he might at least break a bone or two before she ended him, hinder her escape a little... Twelve feet. Ten. Only then, with Terenti close enough to intervene if Eelia turned back around, did he dare to look up and meet Tamar’s eyes.

Wide, desperate eyes, lips parted as if to scream.

I’m sorry, he wanted to say. I’m so sorry. I should have done better, should have been quicker. I should have saved you from this. I should never have allowed you to leave that bath if I’d known it was the last time I’d ever hold you in my arms.

Eight feet. Six.

Tamar jumped up, breath heaving, hands clenched to fists. Before Terenti could stop her, she snapped, ‘A moment, please.’

She could sound impressively ironlike in Taavi too. Even Eelia faltered for a moment, although she didn’t turn around.

‘Unhappy with the bargain, Your Majesty?’

‘You should know you won’t leave the Red Castle alive,’ Tamar said through clenched teeth. Cool, cold facts. As if she hadn’t spent the last ten minutes with a knife pressed against her throat. As if she wasn’t seeing her nightmares unfold before her very eyes. ‘If that’s an unpleasant prospect to you, perhaps you should take a moment to re-evaluate your current course of action.’

Eelia sniggered. ‘Would you let me go in exchange for his life?’

‘I might consider it.’

‘So honourable.’ Eelia rolled her eyes, a small smirk around her lips. ‘But I’m very sorry, Your Majesty. Seventeen years is a long time. I’ll take the bet, if that is what it takes to finally slit his pretty throat...’

Another step forward. Runo clenched his fists, ready to launch into motion – to grab his one chance, make use of any little mistake she might make. Part of him expected Tamar to answer, to barter some more – but she froze behind that table,

eyes growing even wider. Her mouth snapped shut to a thin pink line.

‘So,’ Eelia purred, raising her knife. She, too, was eyeing his every movement, every breath, waiting for the inevitable counterattack. ‘Let’s begin, then, shall we?’

A loud click echoed through the hall.

Something whooshed past Runo’s right shoulder.

And before him, Eelia dropped her knife and staggered backwards, clawing at the slender arrow buried mere inches below her heart.

CHAPTER 19



It was like being seventeen and powerless again, like watching that arrow slam between her father's eyes again.

Nothing she could do. Nothing she could say. Locked in her place by the snares of her fear, or by the razor-sharp realisation that not even her most desperate attempts would improve the situation in the slightest – by her utter, pathetic helplessness. Tamar stood frozen behind that cursed breakfast table, struggling to make sense of the events unfolding around her through the fear-fogged chaos of her thoughts –

Eelia, inside the Red Castle.

The knife aiming for Runo's heart.

And in the doorway – Amiran, clutching his crossbow.

She wanted to scream. She wanted to shout at the world to help him, to *do* something. But Runo reacted faster than her tongue would, not a moment of confusion or hesitation as the

arrow struck; he didn't even turn to check where the projectile had come from. In a single supple movement he leaped forward, snatched Eelia's fallen knife off the floor, and buried the blade between her ribs, driving it in to the hilt.

A last gurgling shriek, and the assassin slumped motionless against the floor, her eyes frozen in an eternal expression of bewildered fury.

Followed by echoing silence.

Runo fell to his knees beside her before anyone could speak a word, broad shoulders tensed to fight as he laid two fingers against her throat to feel for a heartbeat, then tightened his lips and nodded. He met Tamar's eyes for only the shortest moment as he came up. Later, that look said – I'm fine, and thank the gods you're unharmed, and I love you, but later. Only then did he turn around. To the entrance of the hall, to the source of that arrow.

To Amiran, who still hadn't lowered the crossbow in his hands.

The hall remained silent as the grave, nobles and servants frozen alike along the wall. Then Runo glanced back at Eelia, and at Amiran again, and once again back at Eelia. When he looked up again, his shoulders finally loosened a little.

'Not a bad shot,' he said coolly.

There seemed to be more to that sentence than the words alone, and Amiran looked like he heard every single layer of it. His eyes flew to Tamar, lips moving in words she couldn't

quite make out – the look on his face that told her his brain was working at full speed, trying to keep up with its own conclusions. When he glanced back at Runo again, he had paled to the point of looking greenish.

‘Well,’ he said, breaking the uneasy silence. His voice sounded wrong, too – hoarse and choked, not the triumph of a man who just saved a handful of lives. ‘I seem to have – er – misinterpreted this situation a little.’

‘A little,’ Runo graciously agreed, sending him a smile so bright it looked like a threat. ‘How about you lower that crossbow? She’s dead enough by now.’

Amiran obeyed without a trace of protest. As he staggered into the hall and looked back at Tamar, the bewilderment in his eyes had turned into indisputable mortification. She tried to bring herself to move and still barely managed to even blink. That look in his eyes... What in the world had *happened*?

What in the world was happening now?

They seemed to expect something of her, the speechless eyes staring at her from around the wall. Seemed to wait for a reaction, a reassurance, or at the very least for permission to leave – but when Tamar opened her mouth, she didn’t manage to bring out a single sensible word. Her knees were shaking under her skirts, she realised only then. She still felt the sting of Eelia’s knife against her throat, the metal a mere layer of skin away from the blood flowing through the veins below.

‘Well,’ Runo’s voice broke through the pressing silence. He sounded unnaturally loud and too casual to be true. ‘I think

that was all for this morning, wasn't it? If someone could be so kind to clean our visitor out of here, I suggest we—'

'Could we first figure out how in the world she got into this castle?' Terenti interrupted, fury brimming in every word. 'The bitch shouldn't have been able to get through the gate. If there's a leak in our security – if anyone helped her...'

Runo shrugged. 'Even if anyone did, I doubt there are any more Taavi assassins around to take advantage of the leak. Don't think it's our most urgent—'

'I let her in,' Amiran said.

Ice-cold silence engulfed the hall once again.

Except that Runo didn't freeze, didn't even blink. Sticking his bloodied hands into his pockets, he threw Amiran a look of heart-felt exasperation and muttered, 'For fuck's sake.'

'You did *what*?' Terenti's voice was suddenly very quiet. A cold, lethal quiet – but Amiran looked up at him without blinking, dropping his crossbow to the floor.

'I let her in,' he repeated. 'I told your guards not to check her.'

This time even Terenti didn't answer.

Tamar stared at her cousin. At the face she'd known since the day she was born – looking grim and frightened, perhaps, but not in the least like he was about to confess a misplaced attempt at a joke. A few feet away, Runo had closed his eyes. She couldn't find a trace of surprise on his face either.

He had known, then, when he stormed into the hall to rescue her.

Which meant it had to be true.

Amiran. Told her guards not to check Eelia. *Amiran* – who would have given his life for her father, who'd taught her how to wield a knife, who'd fulminated about Anzor for even *looking* at her the wrong way. Who she'd trusted with her life and limbs and sanity like she'd never dared to trust anyone else in the long fifteen years after she took Redwood's crown –

Smuggling a Taavi assassin into the Red Castle.

'What in the damn world?' she managed.

She should have sounded more composed. More indestructible. But *Amiran* –

'I believe His Highness was trying to get rid of me,' Runo said, kicking Eelia's dead leg straight with an expression of fuming indifference. 'She wanted to find me. He wanted her to find me. So if you're happy enough to trust a Silver Dagger on her word, I suppose that could seem to be a reasonable deal.'

Amiran only shrugged when Tamar turned back to him, although he had the decency to lower his eyes with the gesture.

'Have you gone *mad*?' she said, her voice suddenly twice as loud – loud enough to drown out the first whispers around them. 'What for the bloody gods' sake were you *thinking*?'

'I was – trying to solve a couple of problems for you,' Amiran muttered, still stubbornly staring at the floor. 'I

suppose I hadn't fully grasped – well – the full extent of – of the situation.'

A few feet away, Runo looked like he was about to say something highly uncomplimentary, but he swallowed his words just in time. No interaction. No undermining. Tamar couldn't even be relieved about his restraint. The full extent of the situation – some reckless attempt to save her from a non-existent danger, some public disregard for her orders, and here she stood, grasping for wisps of sense as the world came crumbling down around her... A traitor. *He*, of all people, had made himself a traitor. And traitors were to be punished – that was perhaps the first rule she had installed into the court after she took the crown. So then what in the world was she supposed to do now?

Around her, whispering and murmuring, the court was waiting, gauging her reaction. Rarely had she been so sharply aware of every single pair of eyes following her words and looks and gestures – a test, all of this. How much did it achieve, pressing a knife to her throat? How badly would it cost anyone, smuggling Taavi assassins into her home? The illusion of authority, once again...

'Tamar?' Terenti said next to her, his voice adding to the cacophony of her mind. 'What do you want us to do with him?'

And it was then, in the murmurs and whispers of the gathered audience, that she heard the name, the reminder of a threat she'd all but forgotten –

Diraved.

She froze.

Diraved. Screaming in his cage, pleading, crying. The stench of his decaying body above the main gate. The memory rose in her like poison. Her words, on her own lips – *I'd hate to repeat that episode...*

Oh, gods.

Oh, *gods.*

Runo had known, hadn't he? He had, and tried to avoid this conversation at least for the eye of the public – too late, now. Their audience remembered, she could hear it in the breathless whispers, see it in the pale green faces, the way they stared at Amiran as if he were already a rotting corpse. Oh, hell be damned, they remembered...

And now?

Cold sweat trickled along her spine. Could she take it back? Change her mind, revoke the threat? The illusion of authority – who knew what anyone else would come up with if they knew that she might budge on her promised consequences, that perhaps the risk of her punishments was not nearly as dire as it once seemed. She could hear them in the back of her mind already, sniggering as she spoke – could feel the control slipping away like sand seeping through her fingers...

She didn't want to be here.

She didn't want to do this.

She wanted to curl into a little ball of misery and cry, or to hide herself in the bathhouse with Runo and soak in the warm water until the world had mysteriously repaired itself. She didn't want to hurt him. Not Amiran. Not *Amiran*. But if she hid she'd once again be powerless, and the court would know exactly when she caved – how to break her.

As in a reflex her gaze swerved towards Runo, who stood tense and quiet and beautiful next to Eelia's blooded corpse. His eyes were too wide when he met hers – do it, that piercing look said. Be brave now, Tamar.

Do *what*?

'Tamar?' Terenti said.

'You idiot,' she whispered.

Amiran flinched. 'Tamar, I—'

'You knew the consequences from the start.' Her voice wouldn't come out louder than that harrowing whisper. 'I told you loudly and clearly what was at stake. Why for hell's sake did you have to make me do this? Did you think I wasn't talking to you when I gave this court the explicit command to keep her out?'

He'd gone pale as death. 'Tamar, please.'

'You could have killed me. You could have killed so many of us.'

'A lapse in judgement,' he said hoarsely. 'You know I didn't intend to hurt any of you – you know I'd never—'

‘What was the lapse of judgement, exactly?’ Words sharp like a shard of glass. She didn’t seem to be able to soften their cruel edge. ‘When you heard the news of her arrival into town? When you decided to send a letter to her hostel before my guards could come for her, to warn her that she’d been found and tell her to meet you elsewhere?’

He closed his eyes. ‘I didn’t have time to think it through.’

‘But then you had two more days.’

He stayed silent now, his thin face the colour of soured cream, undeniable fear tensing around the corners of his lips. Every word felt like kicking a loyal dog in the side – a stubborn, quick-tempered, magic-obsessed dog, perhaps, but nonetheless one that would be loyal above everything else –

But she pressed her nails into her palms, forcing herself to stand straight and unwavering as she continued.

‘You stole my seal from my room to give her an entrance permit,’ she said, ‘and the thought of fraud still wasn’t enough to deter you? You gave her directions, told her where to find her targets. You got up before sunrise this morning just to look for her. All lapses of judgement? Days and days of them?’

‘She told me stories about him,’ Amiran said quietly. He didn’t point any fingers, didn’t open his eyes, but she knew who he was talking about. ‘The first time I met with her. She asked me why I wanted to get rid of him and I told her...’ His voice wavered. ‘Well. You know.’

She knew, yes. Runo's smiles and teasing remarks, his use of her first name and the utter lack of consequences to anything he did. Enough for Eelia to develop her own suspicions, even if Amiran didn't understand the full truth of what he was telling her himself. And then Maiva's assassin had found Runo's bed empty at her first attempt, and likely that had been the only confirmation she needed...

'Go on,' she said. Calm. Collected. The voice of a woman who wouldn't crumble even under treason within her own family. Amiran swallowed audibly.

'She had – disconcerting stories about his past. I...' He glanced at Runo and paled another shade when he caught his gaze. 'I'll spare you the details. I suppose they were all lies.'

Runo raised his eyebrows but didn't respond. Amiran turned back, swallowed again, and added, 'I was trying to help you, Tamar. Please.'

'Against my explicit wishes. Despite my explicit warnings.'

He flinched. 'Tamar – I'd die to keep you safe. You know I would. Please – don't – don't...'

His words drifted off, thoughts too dangerous to speak out loud. She still heard them in the silence that followed. Don't execute this threat, don't lock me to starve to death. Don't leave me to die the way we both know Diraved died, licking raindrops off his cage like an animal.

A bitter taste filled her mouth. Her stomach was turning, recoiling at the memory.

She tried to find a way to say it. Fine. You can go. Despite all I just said – every unforgiveable violation of my rules – you’re forgiven. You may be the fool of the decade, but I can’t hurt you, not *you*... But she imagined the smirks and the sideway glances. The mocking whispers. The commands they might silently ignore.

Treason. There had to be consequences.

She opened her mouth. Do it, Tamar. Be brave. But the command wouldn’t leave her lips, and around her the world seemed to shrink, its sounds and sights suddenly too large to fit her spinning mind... The murmuring along the walls grew unbearably loud, the sweat on her back unbearably cold. The light stung in her eyes, and so did the look in Amiran’s eyes, the shock, the first sprouts of a fear that wouldn’t fully materialise yet. His own actions. His own consequences. If she let him get away with it, others would follow. She knew all of that, all the merciless truths she had lived by for fifteen years, and yet her lips refused to make the movements.

‘You left me no choice,’ she whispered instead. ‘You forced my hand yourself. I don’t want – I’m sorry – if I had another option—’

He didn’t answer, stared back at her with the same look of horrified shock on his face. Tamar closed her eyes. Tried to gather the courage, the coldness, or at the very least the sense of duty to do what needed to be done. The whispering court – their voices so, so painful to her ears now...

‘Terenti—’

‘Oh, for hell’s sake,’ Runo interrupted, and at once the whispering voices were silent again, a stunned, stupefied silence. ‘You’ve made your point, Your Majesty. Can we stop this madness now?’

CHAPTER 20



She snapped around like a snake had bitten her on the ankles, sending him a look that could have pierced through steel.

‘Stay out of this.’

No interaction. No undermining. Runo knew he was ignoring both those promises, and for once he couldn’t give a damn. It was a strange kind of fury that flooded him – a fury so deep that it stopped being fury and rather turned into something close to apathy, something that didn’t mind even that he was tearing down the foundations of his very own livelihood. It wasn’t aimed at her. Rather at the lies the world had taught her. The lies she believed. The lies that kept her from wanting him, or from taking what she wanted – the lies that would hurt her so very badly if she allowed them to.

He had never seen them written on her face so clearly.

To hell with them. To hell with whatever she thought she had to do, because if this was it, he wasn’t going to let her.

Stay out of this – to hell with that, too.

‘Out of what?’ he said, with his most nonchalant scoff, the one he knew never failed to get under her skin. ‘Your misguided attempts to sentence this idiot to death? Or this whole assassin business?’

Something twitched around the corners of her mouth – the realisation of what he was about to do. A loss of control. A surge of alarm. The sight of that fearful spark in her eyes nearly made him abandon this entire intervention – but giving up on this endeavour meant allowing her to put the man who was as much as a brother to her in a cage to die a gruesome death, and he’d be damned if he let her take that much pain on her own shoulders.

Sorry, Tamar. He had to think in the long term here.

‘Your help with Eelia was much appreciated.’ Her voice was a cold, measured line. Much appreciated. That one could go fuck itself, too. ‘It doesn’t mean I now expect you to weigh in on every decision I make. Please stay *out* of this.’

He tilted his head at her, raised his eyebrows – that taunting, challenging expression that had doubtlessly contributed to Amiran’s reckless decision to involve Eelia in the fight. ‘Do I have to remind you you’d have been dead if I’d stayed out of ___’

‘That’s *enough*, Runo.’

A near inaudible crack in her voice – he inwardly winced, and forced himself to produce a careless shrug nonetheless. He

needed her to crack now. There was no convincing the Iron Queen on this. Tamar – he could do that. If he could get her to stop seeing the world in shades of duty and power for a moment. If he could get her to *feel* a damn thing. But with ten dozen people looking along...

‘With all due respect,’ he said slowly, ‘I don’t think it is.’

From the edges of his sight he could see a collective wince go through the crowd, dozens of eyes gaping at him with a fearful kind of awe – the look of people who’d have liked to applaud, had it not been so utterly useless to applaud a corpse. But he didn’t turn to look at them, didn’t take his gaze of Tamar’s pale, stone-hard face as she stood there stiff and majestic behind her breakfast table. Her iron stare back didn’t falter. It couldn’t hide the strange despair flickering in her eyes, though.

Undermining her – and they both knew there was nothing she could do about it.

‘You’ve gone mad,’ she said, barely moving her lips, hands clenched into fists.

‘Nothing new there,’ Runo said with a shrug. ‘So what are you going to do about it? Lock me in a cage as well? Hang me upside down from the castle walls? I could think of some rather creative Imperial execution methods too, if you’re looking for some more inspiration on—’

‘Get – out,’ she said from between clenched teeth, and Runo shrugged again.

‘No.’

The hall itself seemed to hold its breath around them, even the dust whirling in the sunlight pausing its movements in fearful expectation. Runo folded his arms and held her gaze. A battle was waging beneath the thin veneer of her superficial control – shock and fury and undiluted panic fighting for preference in those hazel eyes he knew so well. She could put him in that cage with Amiran, presumably. She *could*. But then again, he actually didn’t think she could at all, and if that were the case –

Her only other option was giving in. And listening.

‘I don’t know what rights I get from saving your life,’ he said when she stayed silent. Or what rights you should grant me for the damn fact that you love me. That you once begged me not to leave at all. That you kept silent on my whereabouts even with a knife against your throat. He kept that part quiet, be it with some effort. ‘But we all know it wasn’t you that His Highness here was trying to kill – it was me. So as the intended target of his treason, don’t you think I should be allowed to say a word or two about what happens to him?’

Next to him Amiran stiffened, preparing perhaps for examples of Imperial creativity in death sentencing. But Tamar slowly sank back into her chair, and although she kept her chin jutted up as if she were still looking down on him, the worst of the panic softened in her eyes. He had given her a reason. A justification she could feed the court. A way to regain control.

‘You have two minutes.’

Runo snorted. ‘You shouldn’t need two minutes to grasp the fact he did the opposite of betraying you. He betrayed *me*. In an attempt to save you from me.’ A grimace. ‘Which, frankly, sounds like something any decent person keeping your wellbeing in mind should have done. Are you really going to create a precedent of killing the people who are looking out for you?’

Something tensed around her lips. ‘His intentions are not the point.’

‘His intentions are the only point.’

‘I gave orders,’ she said coldly, ‘and he ignored them. That’s all that matters to me.’

‘Oh, really?’ Runo said, giving her his most infuriating sceptical grin. ‘So if you’d ever be mistaken in your orders, everyone correcting the error is a traitor from now on? That sounds like a healthy philosophy to encourage critical thinking.’

‘Did I ask for your opinion?’

‘Now,’ he said, sucking in a deep breath, ‘you’re just being ridiculous.’

Someone stifled a gasp behind him; Terenti was staring at him with eyes wide enough to pop from their sockets. Sitting stiff and ironlike in her chair, Tamar flushed. A dangerous sweep of red, looking nothing like her rosy blushes of last night, the safe, peaceful warmth on her face as she curled against him in the bath.

‘Your *manners*,’ she snapped.

Runo rolled his eyes. ‘You’re being ridiculous, *Your Majesty*.’

Somewhere in their audience a single, quiet snigger emerged, barely louder than Terenti’s heavy breathing. But no matter how quiet the sound, Tamar stiffened at once, the flush of red on her cheeks paling. The look in her eyes was a stinging accusation mingled with shock and betrayal. Undermining her. Embarrassing her. Again the sting of guilt nearly made him wince. But the mask was slipping away at last – the tiniest cracks, visible only in the trembling around the corners of her lips, the way her shoulders sagged an inch, but cracks nonetheless.

‘Look,’ he added, before she could regain her composure. More serious, now. He didn’t want her to lose control entirely and take some panicking decision both of them would regret. ‘Of course you can hardly let people get away with smuggling Taavi assassins into your home. But...’

‘Then what’s your *point*?’

‘My point is,’ Runo said, closing his eyes, ‘that taking the intention to save your life as a mitigating circumstance doesn’t mean anyone in this room will now assume they can start hauling murderers into the castle without consequences. Or at least...’ He glanced aside. They stood staring at him below the broad windows, eyes wide, mouths sagging open. ‘Any volunteers for some additional treason?’

A few people blinked. Nobody spoke.

‘Pleasantly patriotic.’ He turned back to Tamar, shrugged.
‘As I said, I think you’ve made your point. Anything else?’

She held his gaze for a last heartbeat, then abruptly looked aside, focussing her gaze on her cousin’s frozen figure twenty feet away from Runo. Next to her, Terenti shifted uneasily, or at least as uneasily as a bear-shaped man in full armour could ever appear to be.

A war waging behind her eyes. A dark, terrified war.

‘Give it a night,’ Runo said, and he threw every bit of persuasion he had into those words – the tone that had once convinced her to take him from his cell, to keep him alive. Every bit of honest concern, every bit of desperate devotion. ‘Just a single night. Nobody has ever taken a great decision with a knife against their throat. If your opinion remains unchanged tomorrow morning – by all means, get your cages. But if you owe him anything for a lifetime of loyal allegiance, let it be a few hours to reconsider whether you truly want him dead.’

He closed his eyes for a fraction of a moment, then met her gaze. Deep hazel eyes, not the Iron Queen’s eyes, and for a moment he could have sworn there was not another soul around – that it was just the two of them, fighting their silent battle of wills in a world where no one else could follow them.

‘Please,’ he said.

A last moment of cold, heart-stopping silence.

Then she jerked to her feet, a swift rush of silk and lace, and around them the court shrunk back a fraction. Even Terenti took half a step away from her, his beady eyes still too wide. But she snapped around and strode off without a word, pausing only when she passed Amiran by on a few feet distance.

‘Don’t leave the castle.’

Then she was gone, without meeting Runo’s eyes again, leaving only stupefied silence behind.



‘You – Runo?’

He turned around, taking his eyes off the flocks of people making silent attempts to return to their breakfast like nothing had happened. Amiran had approached him surprisingly quietly from behind, his face still a little too greenish to suggest he might also be helped by a slice of bread or two.

‘Ah,’ Runo said, forcing a smile. ‘You remembered my name?’

‘Piss off,’ Amiran muttered. ‘Also – thanks.’

‘Don’t feel too flattered. I’m doing this for her more than for you.’

‘I know.’ The other man cleared his throat. ‘It’s half of what I’m thanking you for.’

Runo considered that in silence for a moment. Around them, people were still giving him glances from every corner of the hall – bewildered, curious glances that he didn't suppose would stop anytime soon. Apparently his casual suggestion that they remove Eelia's body and continue their day in peace hadn't convinced them there was nothing remotely interesting going on around him.

They were giving Amiran glances too. Glances that were obviously wondering whether his next sunset would also be his last.

'You'd have taken that knife for her,' Amiran eventually said, in a tone suggesting he was still trying to convince himself of the fact.

'Gladly so.'

A sigh. 'Well.'

Again they were both silent for a moment. Apart from the guards circling them, nobody dared to come too close.

'She's probably – not doing very well now,' Amiran said.

Something twisted in Runo's guts. Not very well. The panic in her eyes, the sense of betrayal radiating from her pale face. How long had she been on her own now – five minutes? Closer to ten, perhaps? Some time to deal with the shock of the events for herself, he'd thought, but on closer consideration, perhaps that was the stupidest thing he'd thought all week.

‘I know,’ he said, not looking aside to meet the other man’s eyes. ‘So imagine I were trying to get out of this hall without anyone realising where I was going. How would I best do that, under the current circumstances?’

To his credit, Amiran was silent only for a fraction of a moment. Then, fumbling a key from the keyring in his pocket, he quietly said, ‘There’s a shortcut to our tower – the door next to the archive room. It’s usually closed.’

Runo raised his eyebrows at the key pressed into his palm. Amiran gave an awkward shrug and added, ‘I used it to sneak into the library at night when I was younger.’

‘Only when you were younger?’

‘Did I tell you to piss off?’

Runo gave him a sour grin. ‘As long as you make the point without involving assassins from now on, I won’t complain.’

He turned around without waiting for an answer. The laugh had already slid off his face again.

CHAPTER 21



‘Tamar?’

She stiffened, huddled away beneath her blankets, arms tight around herself in some attempt to control her breathing. The air still came raggedly through her throat, wheezing gasps she couldn’t silence no matter how hard she tried.

‘Get out,’ she managed.

‘Tamar, are you...’

‘Get *out!*’

His footsteps halted behind her back. Tamar squeezed her eyes shut and only saw the hall more clearly – dozens and dozens of eyes as she wrestled to keep a hold on herself, dozens of eyes to witness her utter defeat. That *snigger*, that damned bit of mockery rising from the crowd...

Her whistling exhalation evolved into half a sob.

‘Breathe slowly.’ Even his voice, still so dangerously persuasive, still so dangerously seductive, wasn’t the reassurance it had always been – *you’re being ridiculous*. ‘Three heartbeats in, five heartbeats out. If you...’

‘Get—’

‘I’m not going anywhere until you get your breathing under control, Tamar.’

She sucked in a rasping breath and tried to ignore him, tried to ignore the images her mind’s eye was spinning before her. Diraved, smirking at her as he lowered his bow. Golden eyes mocking her in full view of the world. Anzor’s drunken slurring, *you’re being ridiculous*, and she was slipping – thoughts sliding into something dark and warped and dangerous, something that didn’t allow her to think, to move, to breathe...

Runo’s hands wrapped around her arms before she could jerk away, pulled her from below the blankets like she was little more than a child. She tried to wrestle free but didn’t win the smallest bit of wriggle room as he pulled her against him and locked his arms around her – no matter how hard she kicked and elbowed and cursed, he held her tight against his muscular chest until she finally gave up and sagged against him, sobbing like a hurt child.

‘I’m sorry,’ he said quietly, laying a hand around the back of her head. ‘I’m so sorry. I—’

‘You promised!’ Her voice soared up, a cry of fury and helplessness and utter betrayal – *sorry?* He was *sorry?* ‘You

promised you wouldn't – wouldn't...'

'Tamar, please – I didn't make that promise in the expectation that you'd soon try to lock your closest family member in a cage to starve to death.'

'He *betrayed* me!'

'No,' Runo said, sounding so infuriatingly calm she wanted to slam her fists into his torso, 'he betrayed *me*. To save *you*. How many times do we have to repeat this exchange?'

'I made a threat,' she managed, still struggling for air. 'I can't just – if I just let it go – people will stop taking my threats seriously – will stop taking me seriously – will...'

'Yes, and if you go through with this people will definitely continue to take your threats seriously, but they will also think you're a heartless bitch. So...'

She jerked her head up, hitting his chin forceful enough to elicit a curse from his lips. 'Don't you dare call me—'

'I'm not calling you a heartless bitch.' He glanced down at her, eyebrows slightly raised. 'I'm saying only a heartless bitch would go through with this, and since you're not a heartless bitch, you probably shouldn't do it.'

'But...'

'Tamar,' he interrupted, his voice taking on a disconcerting edge. That tone she couldn't ignore, couldn't disobey – *please*, he had said, downstairs in the hall, and that stupid little word had cost her everything. 'We can discuss alternatives and solutions and compromises as much as you like, but he's not

going to die for caring about you. Period. If you lock him in that cage, I'm personally making sure he gets out healthy and alive again.'

'You can't,' she muttered, against her better judgement. He shrugged.

'I think I can. Pretty sure I could find some people to assist me too, if need be.'

She abruptly shoved away from him, heart slamming into her throat. 'Don't you *dare* conspire against me in my own...'

'I'm not conspiring,' he said wryly. 'I'm revolting in the clear light of day.'

'*Stop* it.' Only now did she realise she had somehow stopped crying in the past minute – but this breathless panic soaring up was far, far worse. Revolting. Oh, gods, he would – he *would* – and what could she do about it? Cry and beg him to change his mind? She couldn't hurt him, couldn't order her guards to throw him back into some ratty cell. She couldn't – do – *anything* –

'Tamar, keep breathing.'

'I'm – *frightened!*' she squeaked

'Yes, of course you bloody are!' He rubbed his hands over his face with a joyless laugh, sitting up straighter in her blankets. 'But the world is no longer what it was seventeen years ago, do you see that? They're not going to forget all you've done in the past decades just because you looked slightly less composed with a knife against—'

‘That’s not the point at all!’

He fell silent. Tamar averted her eyes and pulled her knees to her chest, breath whistling in her throat. Even avoiding his gaze she could feel the weight of it, golden eyes piercing through every layer of her – all his concern, the guilt, the deadly sincerity. She could see him standing there again in that moment, his lonely figure in the middle of the hall, nothing moving, no one speaking, as that knife came closer and closer –

Ready to die.

And then he’d challenged her in the face of the court. Rallied her people to agree with him, to laugh with him at *her* expense – *I could find some people to assist me, too...*

‘Do you realise you’re as frightening as any of them?’ she whispered.

He froze in the edges of her sight. ‘What?’

She averted her gaze, focussing on her breath. Three heartbeats in, five heartbeats out. She wasn’t going to panic again. She wasn’t going to...

‘Tamar – you’re not scared of *me*, are you?’

‘It’s just...’ Deep breaths. Three in, five out. ‘Just – you’re growing so powerful these days – you...’

‘What are you *talking* about?’

‘About everything!’ she burst out. ‘Do you really not see it? My soldiers like you more than they like me – my villagers

like you more than they like me. You're suddenly on friendly terms with my closest allies, using *them* to outplay me. There's no one else who...'

'No – you're exaggerating.' For the first time he sounded not nearly so calm anymore. 'There are loads of well-liked people in Redwood, Tamar. That has nothing to do with...'

'I can still stop those people.'

He went silent. When she dared to turn back to him, he sat staring at her with wide, bewildered eyes, his expression remarkably similar to the look on Amiran's face when he was trying to perform multiple complicated calculations at once.

'Did you really not think about this at all?' she whispered.

'I'm not *powerful*,' he said, a befuddled glance at his own hands. 'I'm just good at murdering people. And at annoying people. And at getting people to like me. That doesn't make me...'

'Not in itself, perhaps, but—'

She abruptly broke off. He blinked, blinked again, and said, 'But?'

'But you're the only person at this court I could never hurt,' she managed. 'Not in a hundred lifetimes. I couldn't kill you if you asked me to. I can't kick you out. I can't even say no to you, not really. And...'

She sucked in a breath, not sure of the next sentence. 'And I suppose – the only person who ever was – who ever had that power to defy me...'

She swallowed. A flicker of insight finally rose in his golden eyes, something so aghast she knew before he opened his mouth that he understood.

‘Anzor?’ he said slowly.

Tamar nodded.

‘Oh, gods. Tamar, I’m not Anzor.’

‘No! No, I know you’re not, but...’

‘This is what you’ve been frightened of all this time?’ He sounded utterly perplexed. ‘That I was accidentally getting too powerful for you to control?’

‘It’s just...’ She trailed her gaze over his body – the lean, muscular lines of his shoulders, the death marks on his lower arm. Traces of Eelia’s blood on his fingers. ‘*If* you ever wanted to hurt me, you could. You could hurt me very, very badly, and I – I honestly don’t think I could defend myself.’

‘You still see me as someone who could potentially turn against you,’ he said blankly.

‘I – I didn’t think of it that way. I didn’t think about it so – consciously.’

‘But...’

‘But I suppose – in a sense – yes?’

He fell back into her blankets, rubbing his hands over his face. ‘For hell’s sake, Tamar.’

‘It’s not that I *think* you’ll do anything!’ Speaking the words out loud, it seemed like the most ridiculous thought in the

world – *hurt* her? Runo? ‘I promise I don’t – it’s just...’

‘It’s just that you can’t stand the thought of there being something you can’t control,’ he finished from between his fingers. ‘Something capable of harming you. Yes. I know.’

‘I’m so sorry – I’m probably being nonsensical –’

‘You’re not being nonsensical at all.’ He still sounded a little dazed. ‘You dealt with the bastard for twelve years. I’ve been just as nonsensical to assume he wouldn’t still be haunting you. But...’

She swallowed. ‘I know.’

‘But do you?’ He came up on his elbows, giving her a cautious glance. ‘Because I don’t think you’d be so wary about me if you had the faintest idea how I’m feeling about you. I...’

He hesitated.

‘You did hurt me a moment ago,’ Tamar said, and hated how small her voice sounded. ‘You knew exactly what you were doing, and you still did it.’

‘And hated it. Hated myself for it.’

‘But...’

‘And I’d have stopped – I’d never have started – if you hadn’t been so well on your way to hurt yourself far, far worse with all your stubborn iron nonsense.’ He rubbed his face, muttering a curse under his breath. ‘I didn’t want you to beat yourself up over Amiran for the rest of your life. That’s all.’

Stop hurting yourself and I'll be here to stop anyone else who tries, I promise.'

Amiran. She swallowed the bile in her throat, pressed that thought back to the back of her mind. She didn't have to make her decisions now – she could ignore the mocking eyes in her memory a few hours longer.

'Tamar.' Runo sat up again, fixing his gaze on her. 'I'm not being poetic when I say I'd rather die than see you hurt. You might have noticed.'

She let out a breathless laugh. 'You really would have allowed her to kill you? You didn't know Amiran was...'

'Last time I saw Amiran before I found you with Eelia, I was knocking my knee into his balls,' Runo said wryly. 'Hadn't counted on any spontaneous help from that side, no.'

'Oh, gods,' she said, smothering an involuntary chuckle in her hand. 'You – oh, gods, how did you even know he...'

'One of Terenti's guards told me. Apparently Amiran just walked in with her and told them to keep their mouths shut about it.' A grimace. 'Pretty bold, I'll give him that.'

'And then they told you anyway?'

'Yes,' he said, raising his eyebrows at her as if to dare her, 'because as you just explained to me, they all love me to bits these days and would obey my every word even if I told them to murder you in your sleep. That's the idea now, isn't it?'

She stiffened. Don't you dare to ridicule me, she wanted to snap – don't you dare to turn my fears into one of your

careless jokes. But then she saw the look in his eyes and realised he wasn't mocking her; he was mocking *himself*... At that realisation, even the menacing image behind his words was not nearly so menacing anymore.

A laugh fell over her lips. It sounded half like a sob too. Runo rubbed his face again, then shook his head, the understanding still dawning on his face.

'So this is why you refuse to treat me like someone you give a damn about in public, too?' he said slowly. 'Not because of how the rest of the world would see *you*, but...'

'Both.' She swallowed. 'I don't want them to think I'm some easily charmed damsel, and I'm frightened of the moment they realise you're – you're...'

'Making good use of my new status as the most alluring man in Redwood?'

Another laugh escaped her. 'Oh, hell's sake. Can't you ever stop being terrible?'

'What else would you want me to do?' he said sourly. 'Nod in agreement while you tell me you want the world to keep seeing me as the Taavi rat I used to be?'

'No!' She jolted up again. 'No, but do you understand – the only thing that would make you more powerful right now is people *realising* how powerful you are. As soon as they know I actually like you – that I actually listen to you – they'll come flocking in to try to use you, do you realise that? And that will give you every opportunity use *them* in return.' She saw him

open his mouth and added, ‘Don’t give me that crap about only being a simple assassin. You’d use them so easily they wouldn’t even know it themselves.’

He burst out laughing. ‘Damn it, Tamar, you know me too well.’

‘But you understand it, don’t you? You see why...’

‘I do. I really do.’ He hesitated for a moment, then looked away and added, ‘But you should also understand – it’s still your power. Whatever munition they stupidly put into my hands, it’s yours to wield. *I’m* yours to wield. Just...’

He pressed his lips together, his gaze focussed on the blanket before him, his fingers thoughtlessly playing with the hem of his sleeve. Then, quieter now, he said, ‘Just trust me as someone working beside you, Tamar. Not as a potential enemy who might turn against you any moment. Because I very much won’t.’

She closed her eyes and drew in a deep lungful of air, breathing the scent of his body – sweat and fear and the tang of blood, but still his own scent, warm and reassuring. Again the memory returned, etched into her mind. The look in his eyes as he met her gaze moments before Eelia reached him, that look she had thought for a moment might be the last they’d ever share. Not a trace of hesitation in his golden eyes. The man who survived everything – sacrificing himself.

For her.

‘No,’ she whispered. ‘No, I suppose you won’t.’

He groaned. ‘Can’t you make that sound a little more convincing? Unless you want me to make the point a few more times, of course – I could probably invite another handful of Silver Daggers into the castle to...’

‘Please don’t,’ she managed, choking on a laugh. ‘I don’t think my heart will survive a next time.’

‘Would hate to take that risk,’ he said, giving her half a grin. ‘But if you need more evidence of my heart-felt resolution to throw myself between you and whatever danger...’

‘No!’ Somehow she was laughing again. She didn’t even *want* to laugh, and couldn’t help it nonetheless – a frantic relief that bubbled up in her and left her no other choice. ‘No, I do believe you, I really do—’

‘Tell me again, then.’

‘You – you won’t turn against me.’ And it was then, as she spoke the words, that she felt it for the first time – a strange firmness rising in the depth of her bones. Something that felt so steady, so safe, that she wanted to cry at just that first trace of it. A *certainty*. ‘You won’t hurt me. I know you won’t – I know...’

She looked up, finally. He still sat unmoving in the blankets, examining her with soft, wistful eyes – not the eyes of a potential enemy. Not the eyes of a man who’d harm her. Because even if he accidentally grew into the most powerful man of Redwood, he’d throw himself onto a sword before allowing that sword anywhere near her. Because he wouldn’t hurt her to save his life. Because he was *hers*.

‘I know you love me,’ she whispered. ‘You really do.’

‘Yes.’

‘And – even *if* you do somehow turn into the most powerful man of Redwood—’

‘You’ll have the most powerful man of Redwood fighting by your side,’ he said, a faint smile breaking through. ‘I’d say that could be worse.’

Another laugh fell over her lips. ‘Well, yes. It could be Terenti.’

‘It could be Pridon,’ he said, smile broadening, and Tamar reflexively swatted a hand at him. He grabbed her wrist so quickly she didn’t even see him coming.

‘I didn’t catch you trying to attack *me* now, did I, Your Majesty?’

‘Wouldn’t dare,’ she managed through her suppressed laughter, wrestling to pull her wrist from his grip. His fingers didn’t yield a fraction. ‘Why would you think...’

‘Premature conclusions. You must forgive me.’ He bent over and scooped her from the bed, pulling her into his arms. ‘I should of course have realised you were simply on your way to lock me into a passionate embrace – as you should, considering that I just saved your life from a dastardly—’

‘You *wretch*.’ She curled up against him, hiding her face against his shoulder in a hopeless attempt to hide her smile. Judging by his laughter, she wasn’t very successful. ‘We’re discussing life and death and power struggles that could shape

the future of a kingdom, and *this* is what you decide to focus on?’

‘Pridon and death are two closely related subjects for me.’

She tried to punch him again. He was still holding her wrist a little too tightly and grabbed the other one as soon as she moved it for a second attack.

‘Well. So much for our smooth and peaceful cooperation, Your Majesty.’

She sagged against him, laughing. Cooperation. Hell be damned, why in the world hadn’t she looked at it that way before – seen him as her unconditional ally rather than a looming danger in the back of her mind?

‘We would be pretty good at that, wouldn’t we?’ she muttered into his shirt. ‘Actually working together?’

He chuckled. ‘Oh, lethally good. Which is a good thing. I doubt Maiva is going to quietly sit back when this story *and* the news of your sanctions hit her.’

‘You think...’

‘Calm down, Tamar. We’ll be fine.’

She groaned. ‘Why do you sound so cheerful about this? It’s dead serious.’

‘Of course it is,’ he said, nudging her chin up with a single finger, so that she had no choice but to look him in the eyes. Dead serious, indeed – but there was a twinkle in his eyes as well, one that made her feel like giggling, and like kissing him

quite vehemently. ‘But it’s going to happen anyway. So we might as well have a little fun with it.’

‘But...’

‘Hush.’ His smile broadened. ‘We get to annoy the Empire to death together. Don’t tell me you’re not looking forward.’

She felt the corners of her mouth twitch up despite her best attempts to keep them down. ‘You make it sound tempting, I’ll admit that.’

‘Good.’

‘But we’ll still have to be careful,’ she added quickly. ‘Not just about the Empire. About this court, too. As it stands – I’m not sure how many of my nobles would still support me if they knew everything. Perhaps – if we give it some time – but I’m still not going to kiss you senseless at breakfast tomorrow morning.’

‘Pity,’ he said. ‘I was so looking forward to Pridon’s face.’

She burst out laughing. ‘Runo...’

‘I’m just kidding,’ he said, the twinkle in his eyes only vaguely reassuring. ‘I don’t care much about kissing you senseless at breakfast as long as I’m able to do it elsewhere. I just don’t want them to think you hate me. I just want to be able to drag you out of the castle for almond cakes and forest walks.’

‘Still the forest walks?’

He shrugged. ‘I’ve quite come to appreciate them.’

‘Well.’ She drew in a deep breath. A lightness, an unimaginable lightness was swelling in her chest. ‘I suppose – I think we could go out for forest walks. Terenti will make trouble about it, but after today...’ She shrugged. ‘I could probably say I’m taking you along to keep an eye on my safety.’

Runo grinned. ‘If that doesn’t work, you could always try the good old “You’re not jealous of a Taavi assassin, are you, Terenti?”’

She snorted a laugh, and then couldn’t stop laughing – slumped with her face against his chest and laughed some more, in senseless, ridiculous waves of blissful relief. Just the thought of it – of strolling out into the forests with him in the morning, of greeting him whenever she ran into him, of treating him not like a lover, but at least like a *friend* for the eye of the world... Why was it so strangely addictive, that thought?

‘That’s better, Your Majesty,’ he muttered, pressing a kiss to her temple. ‘That’s much, much better.’

She stifled a moan as his next kiss found the sensitive skin just below her ear. ‘You really don’t care about how powerful this is going to make you, do you?’

‘Not really.’ He kissed the zone between her neck and shoulder, then peeled a few inches of her dress off her to continue to her collarbone. ‘I don’t give a damn about power. I just want you. And to reassure you...’ He looked up, a devilish smile around his lips. ‘If it ever gets to my head and I start

imitating Anzor all of a sudden, all you need to do is press a crossbow into Amiran's hands. Assuming you don't starve him to death at this occasion, of course.'

She shivered, and wasn't sure if the memory of Diraved or the caresses of Runo's hands playing along her spine and hips were to blame. 'I don't even want to...'

'No, of course you don't.' He sounded infuriatingly satisfied. 'Glad you see it too.'

'But...'

The exploration of his hands reached the hem of her dress, and the brush of his fingers over her bare skin made her swallow her words at once. He kissed her neck again, trailing his fingers up along her leg. 'But?'

'People are going to be so confused if the both of you just walk free after this episode.'

He laughed. 'They are. They're also going to realise you might be a little more lovable than they thought you were. It's going to be a better reason to obey you than just fear alone.'

'You know,' Tamar said, suppressing a moan as his fingers reached her inner thigh. 'For a simple assassin, you really are quite the politician.'

'Oh, I know.' He abruptly pulled back his hand to grab her around the waist and pull her closer, lowering his head to keep her gaze. His eyes were twinkling, that wicked twinkle that made the breath stop dead in her lungs. 'It's one of the many things that make me so annoyingly irresistible.'

She tried to give him a tired stare for a moment and found that she couldn't. Not after this morning. Not after Eelia. The corners of her lips wouldn't cooperate, coming up no matter how hard she tried to suppress them, until she had no choice but to give in and answer the dangerous smile he gave her.

'Yes,' she admitted, closing her eyes. 'Yes, it is.'

And his groan of satisfaction as he pulled her into a kiss wiped all thoughts of resistance from her mind.



Hi dear reader! I hope you enjoyed this second installment of Tamar and Runo's story. Can't wait to find out how their struggle with the Empire ends? The final book of their trilogy, *Gold*, is available [HERE](#).

And if you can't get enough of steamy fantasy romance, you'll find Viviette and Jaghar's story in the *Princess & Spy* trilogy. It starts with *Velvet*, which you can get [HERE](#).

Last but not least: to get all the latest updates about my new releases, bookish bargains and other news, you can sign up for my bi-monthly newsletter [HERE](#). As a welcome present you immediately receive a free copy of *The Spinster & The Thief*, which tells the story of Zovinar of Tanglewood.

Happy reading, and see you in book 3!

Love, Lisette

