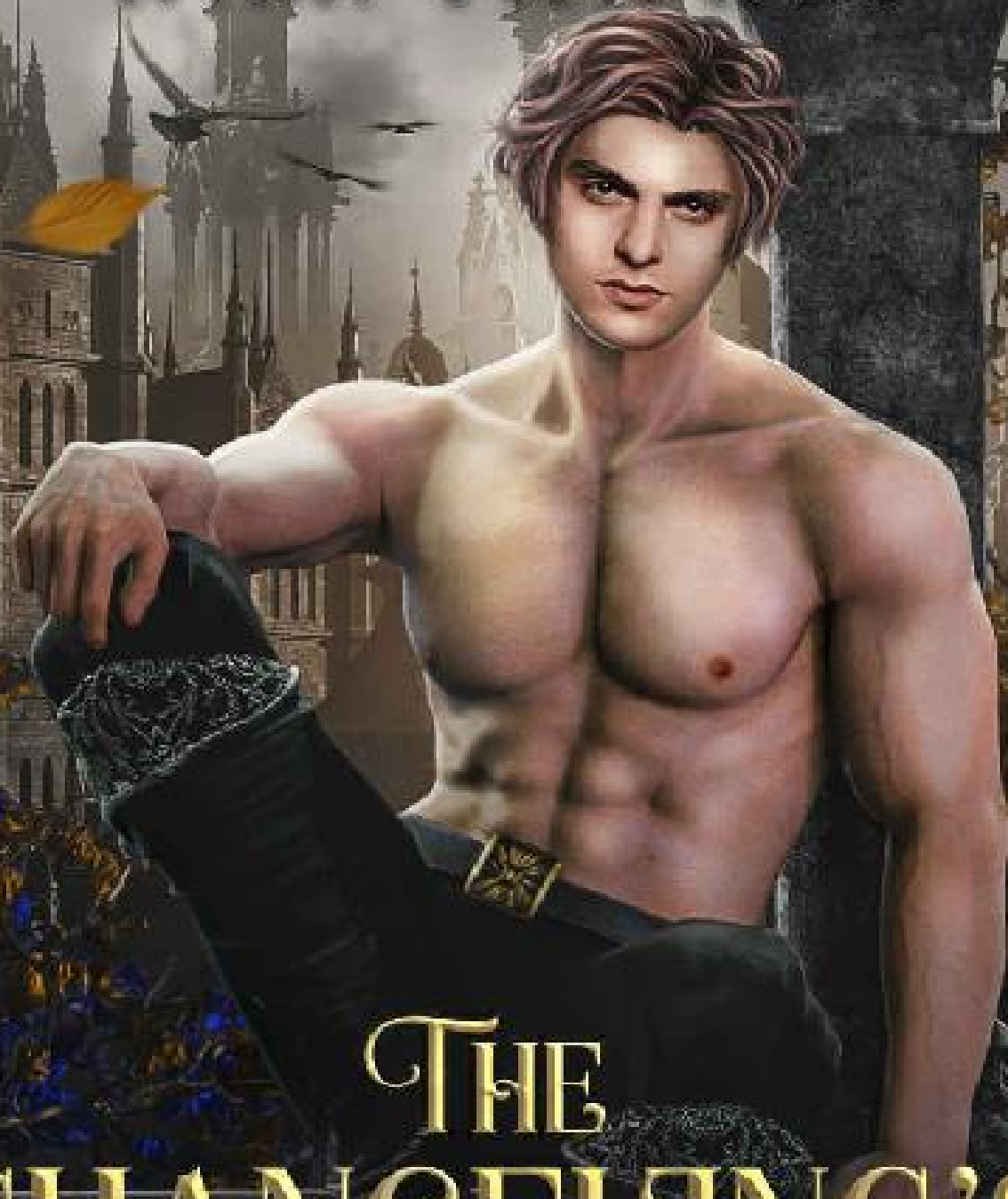


SAM BURNS
W. M. FAWKES



THE
CHANGELING'S
BOND



THE CHANGELING'S BOND

A POOL OF DREAMS STORY

SAM BURNS
W.M. FAWKES



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Books

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CHAPTER I

VOSS

The king had left Trierent Keep for the coast, and he'd brought a whole retinue with him. That was twice in as many months that we'd had to tack nearly every horse in the stables, set up supplies for weeks at a time, reshoe dozens and hope the roads were even.

First, King Audric had taken his retinue to the wilds, and he'd returned with a silk-clad fae.

This time, the knights were responding to a call from a small village where a boy had died, rumored to be murdered by yet another fae monster.

Since they'd left, it was like the keep held its breath in waiting, each of us knowing that there would be more enemies coming and dreading the day when our grandmothers' nightmarish fables became reality once more.

I was no fighter myself, but I'd moved out of the stable house and back into town proper—into the small house that my mother and sister shared.

It comforted me, thinking that I could protect them if trouble came knocking.

Though I'd no skill with a sword, I had a strong back and could swing a hammer. Already, I was weighing my chances, trying to imagine what decisions I could make to give Mother and Matilde a chance to escape. Whatever became of us, as the rumors had trickled into the city, it'd become impossible for me to leave them unguarded every night.

During the day, I continued work at the keep. There was little enough for me to do in the days between the king's departure and his return, but a messenger had arrived early that morning. The king would arrive before noon, and there was much preparation to be done before his company shuffled in, exhausted to a man, every shoulder slumped with worry.

It wasn't a heartening sight, but I supposed it was better than if their number had been reduced. Better still that they hadn't returned with another fae in tow. Lord Syren was quite enough to set my nerves on edge all on his own. The sound of him battering at the keep's walls with that sword, his furious shrieking, still sent a chill up my spine every time I thought about it.

The fae himself came in last, led by the king, and I drifted forward to help another. Never mind how my feet led me unerringly to one man in particular.

The king's squire sat straight in his saddle, his jaw clenched and eyes ahead. It wasn't until I reached his mount's side that I realized the other men gave him a wider berth than usual, but that was just as well. I hoped to steal a moment, perhaps to ask him how matters had been settled. Mostly, I wanted to hear his voice.

"Welcome back, my—" Words failed me as I finally stared up at him, my mouth hanging slack.

Garrett was the same man I'd known before—of careful, serious features and frequently furrowed brow—but also . . . he was different. He was lit from within, glowing like a star. There was a shine to him that I couldn't place, like he'd never once toiled, never suffered, never doubted. Even the high noon sun couldn't match him.

I had to wonder, for a moment, if I'd eaten a suspect mushroom for breakfast, to be so taken in with the brightness of his eyes or the curious rosebud pink of his lips—a color that swelled when he pressed his teeth into them and then pooled in mirrored spots on his cheeks.

He blinked at me, but seemed to shrink back. Swiftly, I glanced away.

“My lord,” I finished quietly, avoiding his gaze. Every question, every thought, scattered to the four winds and I forgot what I was about, beyond steadying his horse for his dismount.

Graceful in a way that seemed unnatural on Garrett’s long, gangly legs, he swung out of his seat and lit on the dirt with hardly a sound.

“Thank you, Voss,” Garrett muttered. I was not imagining the melody in his voice. I couldn’t be. Only one other voice in the keep made my hair stand on end like that, and it belonged to the king’s fae companion.

Everything gruff or plain about Garrett had disappeared. It wasn’t that he was gruff or plain to start, honestly. He was careful, attentive, and clumsy enough to make him the very worst would-be knight I’d ever seen.

But he had been gruffer and plainer before this trip, to be sure. Had whatever he’d seen matured him in some unfathomable way?

Since he’d come to Trierent, Garrett had struck me as a strange, industrious man. Certainly, a knight’s squire looked after his weapons and armor, but I’d never seen another apprentice up at the crack of dawn to shuffle outside and clean leather in the stables.

I’d asked him about it, once—why he didn’t leave those chores to the stable hands, at least while Audric was at Trierent Keep and there were so many servants to see it done. He’d simply shrugged and told me that our king was a heavy seat for any horse and that the leather needed to be supple and comfortable for them both. He’d said it so plainly that I hadn’t even thought to take offense that he didn’t think me equal to the task.

I spent most mornings brushing or watering the horses, moving hay, cleaning the stalls. While my hands were occupied, my thoughts fixed on Garrett at his work. I watched as he paid minute detail to each stitch, dee, and swell of his king’s tack.

I could not tell you when it happened, but at some point, I began to wonder what it would be like to have Garrett's focused attention on me. Each quirk of his brow transcribing his thoughts as he traced my every line and smoothed over every flaw. I imagined his hands cupping my cheek or tracing down my neck, quick and gentle and surprisingly dexterous for a man who could stumble over one stray piece of straw. He could consume me like that. He could know me fully, as he knew each plate of the king's armor or each thread on the king's saddle.

And I knew, deep in my marrow, that there was not a thing about me worth all of that concentrated focus, however much I wished I had some charm or wit to hold his attention. Garrett, though a merchant's son—as I found out through court gossip—had been raised in station when the king's bastard unexpectedly became king himself. Garrett still frowned my way when I called him lord, but I'd grown used to that and he'd ceased correcting me.

The point remained that his station far exceeded my own, both in proximity to the peers of Aranthé and in more practical matters. Any person who'd ever had a lean winter knew that a rich father was far better than a sire with a poor county seat and no income to show for it. Though Garrett did not flaunt his wealth, I had no doubt he possessed plenty. More than I could imagine.

I was no king. No knight. No squire.

Upon reflection, I decided that there was not a thing in the world about me more exciting than a saddle or a plate of armor. That thought sat uneasily, but once it'd crossed my mind, it stuck, the flames of my self-pity stoked by Garrett's kind indifference to me.

I could hardly blame him for it.

I was a peasant—a farrier's son with a steady hand and experience enough with horses to find work at Trierent Keep to put food on the table after my father passed. But I didn't learn his trade before he died, and I had no luxury to apprentice before Matilde came of age. Mother took in what

washing she could, but that was harder work than I wanted to put on her shoulders. While Garrett's star rose, I stayed with my feet planted firmly on the ground.

What I had was hard labor, an idle mind, and an ever-warming regard for a man I did not quite understand but wanted to. Each time he stumbled and regained his footing, each ungodly early chore, made him all the stranger and more beguiling.

Why would a merchant's son, a rich lad, commit himself so arduously to his every assigned task? Why, even when surrounded by willing servants, did he not rest on his laurels and act, well, more like the king's apprentice than the road-weary squire of a knight at the very edge of the realm?

I'd become obsessed as I watched him from afar. And now, I could only stare after him as he turned away, none the wiser to my fixation.

As he walked through the courtyard, the men leaned back, away from him, as if he carried the plague.

Rolf, a royal retainer, shuffled past me with a roll of strapped fabric weighing him down—the king's tent no doubt, to be of such fine weave and so large.

I caught him by the arm.

“Has something happened?”

My gaze had caught on Garrett, and when Rolf followed it, he frowned.

“With young Garrett?”

I nodded.

Rolf sighed and adjusted the roll on his shoulder. “He saved the king. Nearly lost his life in the process.” Rolf's frown turned distant as he watched a maid plant herself in Garrett's path, batting her eyes and drawing the young man up short. “He was rescued by some fae magic.”

The line that furrowed Rolf's brow was not one I'd seen prior to King Audric taking the throne. Before the late king's

passing, Rolf had primarily been asked to set up camp for the king's hunts. He'd brought wine and hired musicians.

Now, under King Audric, he oversaw war parties, arranged weapons, set up supply lines. It was work that went unnoticed by many of the lords who were simply used to having their needs provided for, but I saw Rolf's worries grow each time they went out, unsure that he could trust even the ground he stuck their tents' stakes in not to change through some fae trickery at any moment.

Clearing his throat, Rolf shook himself out of his fugue. "I'd stay clear of it if I were you. It's unnatural. That boy's throat was slashed. He should've died, but that one"—he jerked his head at the king and his fae companion—"Syren, did something unholy and brought him back. Blood and sacrifice, it was. A curse'll fall on all our heads for it."

Air disappeared from my lungs with a vicious clench. Rolf said stay away, but he could not feel the ache in his chest to rush after Garrett, to see him once more and ensure he was truly whole.

The maid at his side brought me up short. She was laughing, leaning forward and touching Garrett's arm as he blinked, stiff and awkward as always. If Rolf thought he was cursed, there were surely those who didn't.

She pulled Garrett along, into the keep proper, and I stood there in the courtyard, sick to my stomach.

Garrett hardly knew me. In the whole of Trierent, I was one of the least suited to look after him in a time of crisis. And still, I wanted to.

"He's all right?" I asked, staring at the wooden door the maid had taken him through.

"Voss, I saw the fae we hunted with my own eyes. I doubt any of us will be all right for much longer. As for Garrett, he seems as much changed as any man who's brushed death. I suspect he's very far from fine, but he is breathing." Rolf moved to my side, but I did not see him until he tilted his

head, leaning into my line of vision. “Why do you care so much?”

He narrowed his eyes at me, but Derrick, the stable master, shouted when one of the young stallions reared up.

“Voss!”

“Coming, master!” With a grimace for Rolf, I rushed off to help get the beast in hand.

There was no place for me in the keep itself, but out here, in the stable, I had work to do and people who actually needed me.

And Garrett had a king and a fae looking after him.

Best I put him out of my mind and get to work.

CHAPTER 2

GARRETT

Just do your job, father had always told me. *Work hard, do your job, and the money I've paid for your education will do the rest.*

It had always made sense, to a point. Despite my clear and abiding incompetence with a sword, Audric had never complained about me. He sometimes got a bemused, slightly frustrated look on his face when I managed to do something especially clumsy in sword practice, but that was okay.

He liked me. When he'd just been Audric, I'd never felt especially insufficient. My lord, the relatively unimportant knight of the realm, was a good mentor, and would see to it that I was taken care of even if I never amounted to anything with a sword.

Most knights—lots of knights—okay, fine, *a few knights* weren't that good at fighting. The king used them for things other than battle, and that had always been fine. It had been my goal, in fact. I could manage to learn everything, still be a relatively incompetent swordsman, and have the king give me assignments that focused on diplomacy or common sense or heck, even strategy. I was good at all of those things, and Aranthé had been at peace for three hundred years. Even the memory of the fae had been deterrent enough to keep humans from killing each other often.

But then the king had died, almost all of his heirs with him, and it became “long live King Audric,” and what the hell was I supposed to do with that? What was *Audric* supposed to do with that? As king, his squire should have been the very

best Aranthé had to offer, not a clumsy peasant who had only managed to secure his place because his father was a clever merchant. The king should be teaching the son of some important noble, someone more skilled and talented and handsome and—someone simply superior to me in every way. Someone like himself, who had a chance of one day surpassing the king and becoming the best swordsman in the country.

Not someone who still wasn't allowed to use his own sword in practice because of the very real fear I would accidentally hurt someone.

But King Audric was . . . well, he was still Audric. The knight who, when I accidentally threw my practice sword across the yard and hit someone with it, had sighed, shaken his head, and retrieved it for me without a single word. And then he had continued the lesson as though I weren't a menace in all the wrong ways. There had been no chance he would push me aside in favor of someone more appropriate.

He hadn't even considered the possibility until Lord Konrad had suggested it, and that had been the first time I'd ever seen Audric angry, let alone with someone important like Konrad. Konrad turning out to be a traitor had probably only confirmed his Majesty's thoughts on me. Even if he'd considered finding another, my place was now perfectly secure—for all the good that did either of us.

"Morning, Garrett," a sweet and sultry voice pulled me out of my thoughts, so I turned to look at who had spoken. Gretl, one of the maids who changed the king's bedding, and never missed an opportunity to bat her lashes at me now.

Her brother Hans was cleaning out the fireplace ashes, and also stopped to look me over in a less cute way, his gaze sliding over me like a physical touch. He bit his lip and then loosed it ever so slowly, finally giving me a knowing smile. "Garrett."

I returned their greetings with my own weaker, "Good morning," and turned my back on them to continue my work. The king's armor needed polishing, every single day, and it

usually had to be done between when he woke and when he finished bathing and breaking his fast.

After all, I couldn't sit about in his personal quarters, where it was stored, after he went to bed. And I couldn't do it in the morning before he woke, disturbing his sleep. But it also needed to be ready for him to wear every day.

He told me once in a while that I didn't need to do it so regularly. His warm eyes bored into me, constantly full of concern and charity, but he didn't understand. If I didn't do my job well, better than anyone else could, then what good was I? If I couldn't do everything that needed doing, then the king should replace me with someone more befitting his station.

So I polished like the wind, and ignored the other servants acting strange.

It had been the same with everyone since the incident.

The Kelpy incident.

I didn't even like to think her name, and it always made me reach for my throat uneasily, as though thinking of her would summon her up to finish the job she had started, when she'd torn my throat out.

Syren had killed her, and he'd promised me more than once that fae weren't truly immortal. They didn't come back from the dead. He was always apologetic when we talked about that, even though we both knew that he had lost as much as I had when his former friend had ripped my throat out.

He had killed her himself and used her blood to replace mine after it'd been splashed across the sand and was unable to keep my heart beating. He had killed her, the fae woman he'd considered friend, and perhaps a mother. For me. For Audric.

For himself, he would always say, dismissing my concerns outright and waving me off, but we both knew. I had lost my humanity, at least in part. To see the way some people treated me afterward, it had been all of my humanity.

But more important to both of us, Syren and I had each lost the last vestiges of innocence we had clung to that day.

I could have worried more about my humanity. Goodness knew the court gossips did, calling me the king's second pet fae and worse—far worse. Working with Syren had disabused me of that idea quickly, and anything he hadn't helped me understand, the practice yard had.

I was changed, yes.

I stepped lightly, my voice and face caught the attention of peasants and nobles alike, drawing them in and repelling them in equal measure. I had some small magic, the ability to manipulate water to a point.

And I was still the biggest klutz in all of Aranthe with a sword.

When I'd realized it, I had almost deliberately thrown my damned practice sword across the yard, because it wasn't *fair*. I was *changed*. I was preternaturally graceful. People looked at me like I was their loveliest dream and most horrible nightmare because there was fae blood in me. Why couldn't it have fixed that one thing?

Audric hadn't seemed bothered, of course. Somehow, of all the people in Aranthe, the king was the one who thought I was fine precisely as I was. Fae or human, competent or not, to him I was and would always be simply Garrett.

He was the saving grace of my new life—he and Syren. They both treated me precisely as they had before.

“Need any help?” Hans's voice made me nearly leap out of my skin, turning to face him, brandishing my cleaning rag like it was a weapon. I glanced around and found that his sister had left. We were alone. He put his hands up, languidly, a lazy smile on his face, like he wasn't actually afraid of me.

Because some people weren't. Or better put, even if they were, they wanted to fuck me more than they were afraid of me. All because of a little fae blood.

Lord Weber's daughter had told me that I was “pretty.” Her father had caught her cornering me in the hall, and for a moment, looked like he would beat me to death for daring

catch his daughter's eye. Then he'd realized who I was, *what* I was, and he'd grabbed her by the arm and dragged her away.

She'd left court with her mother the next day, along with every other woman from Weber's retinue.

Little did he know, his son was still trying to sneak into my bed.

"I'm fine, thank you," I told Hans, and I turned back to my task. The truth was that I was running behind and needed to focus on my work. I still had—

"Garrett," the king's voice somehow boomed in the mostly empty room, though I doubted he'd intended to be loud. He probably wasn't, either, I was just startled, and not finished, not ready. He smiled as he came to join me, Hans pouting as he slunk back to his work with the fireplace. "You don't need to work on that today if you don't want to. It seems I'm required to pretend to be something other than a knight for the day."

He looked down at himself, in his finest azure silk emblazoned with the Marana family's raven crest, and gave a gusty sigh. "I suppose at least Syren likes all this formality."

I had to stifle a smile, and nodded to him. "He does like you in your court finery, Your Majesty."

Audric snorted and shook his head. "He just likes silk."

He reached out for his armor where it still hung on the dummy and ran his fingers over one pauldron longingly. I'd never known anyone so comfortable wearing pounds and pounds of inflexible metal plates, but the man clearly would have given anything to wear his armor instead of what he had on.

He turned, forced a smile onto his face, and gave me a nod. "A little less work for you for today, at least, right?"

I inclined my head. I wouldn't say it aloud, but I had no intention of leaving the task unfinished. It was good that I wasn't making him wait for me to finish my work, and perhaps it would save me a bit of time tomorrow, but that was a decision for tomorrow. "Of course, Your Majesty."

A throat cleared in the doorway—Lord Syren come to drag the king off to court.

Hans glanced over at me as King Audric left, but Syren caught him staring and sighed. “You too,” he announced, meeting Hans’s eye. “I’m sure you’ve work to do elsewhere. Leave Garrett to his.”

Hans pouted some more, but took his bucket and left, only glancing back at me once.

I nodded to Syren. “Thank you.”

He rolled his eyes and gave a dismissive, imperious wave, but I didn’t miss the tiny smile on his face. If my one relationship that hadn’t changed because of my fae nature was with the king, then the only one that had improved because of the incident was with Syren.

When I’d attacked him at his pond, I’d never imagined we’d end up important to each other, but I was a kindred spirit for him now. Maybe like an annoying much younger brother. Given how many people acted like the Webers or Hans, I couldn’t help but be grateful for Syren being a tiny piece of normality.

CHAPTER 3

VOSS

A battle had raged in the middle of Trierent itself. And now, the fae were gone. Defeated. Forever.

Of course, we'd wanted to think the first Breaking had been eternal, and that clearly hadn't been true.

Still, if this Breaking lasted another three hundred years, I wouldn't be alive to see the next time it shattered.

I did *try* to believe King Audric when he promised peace and safety. It was easier to take his words to heart when there was a new steely glint in his eyes.

I did not know what he and his fae had done to stave off our enemy, but whatever it was, they seemed confident it would hold. It would simply take time for me to forget the shrieking of fae as they tore through our soldiers.

But I would. One day.

In the aftermath, Trierent had been left in chaos. Repairs were still underway at the keep. Though we'd cleared the battlefield, the soil was still stained red.

And I went through the motions of my work because I did not know what else to do.

Each morning, I woke before Mother and Matilde and made my way to Master Derrick's side. There were fences to repair outside the city, horses that'd seen battle to attend to. They were more easily spooked now—and those were the lucky ones. There were plenty who'd not made it, or who bore permanent injuries from the final battle with the fae.

It was habit alone that kept me going, but that seemed true for every citizen in Trierent. The battle with the fae had brought us together in a way nothing else had. Even the finest bakers on the main thoroughfare were giving out free pies to every person who stopped to clear a bit of rubble out of the way.

That morning, however, a strange and welcome sight knocked me out of my hollow preparations.

Garrett was sitting alone in the stable yard, tucked into the corner of the fence and perched on a bench, glaring down at thick cloth in his hands as he worked his needle.

“Garrett, you’re back!” I caught myself smiling before I thought better of it and jogged across the yard to greet him.

In truth, I’d never been quite so excited to see the man, and certainly not so obviously, but he’d been busy lately.

More accurately, he’d been in the constant company of someone else, and it was one thing to greet a man sewing by the late-dawn light, and another thing to interrupt him when he was in the presence of nobility.

I often saw him going about his work, always trailed by someone, but I hadn’t had the chance to speak with him since his visit to the coast, and my heart leapt at the chance to remedy that.

Dazed, Garrett looked up at me, his smile tremulous. “I wasn’t aware I’d left.”

I ran my hand over my cropped, coarse black hair and laughed. “I haven’t seen you around the stables as often lately, and, well, this is basically my second home, so if I’m going to see you, this is where it’ll be.”

“Oh . . .” Garrett lifted the cloth in his hands. The sunlight glinted off his needle. “I noticed Eldwin’s saddle pad was fraying during the victory procession, so I thought I’d fix it.”

I bit my lip against the urge to apologize. That felt like something I should’ve seen to already, or at the very least, noticed before we sent the king of all Aranthé out to address his people.

“It’s no bother,” Garrett muttered, as if he could read my mind.

“I’m sure we could find the king a new saddle pad.”

“No need.” Garrett turned back to his work, leaving me to stand there feeling like nothing but an interloper.

Here was the chance I’d been waiting for, biting my tongue every time I watched some lord or lady lean into his space or saw Garrett’s subtle blush as he tilted away, and I had no idea what to say.

One might think in all my fantasies about catching him alone, I would’ve mused over what to say.

I hadn’t.

“I’ve, uh, been meaning to ask you—are you all right? Since everything happened.”

Garrett gave me the strangest look. Had all those lords and ladies trailing him around like ducklings not been asking that incessantly since he’d returned from the coast? There were always people at his heels. Hells, I hadn’t seen him by himself a single time since he’d returned.

He deserved the attention. He’d saved the king, and—and what had happened had given him a peculiar kind of glow that didn’t fade, even when the weeks had marched by.

Really, it was more startling that it was only now that the king’s apprentice, one of the closest people to him in the world, was only now being openly courted and pursued.

Still, what kind of pursuit was it when his admirers hadn’t shown any care for all he’d gone through?

“Do I not seem all right?” His tone was barbed. His jaw was set hard in a way that looked like another man—the king, maybe, or his serious merchant father. Even at his most focused, I’d never seen Garrett look quite so defensive.

I flinched back and stared at the loose, sandy brown dirt underfoot. “No, it’s not—”

Already, I was mucking this up. My first chance to talk to him alone in weeks, and I'd offended him right off. A wiser man would've conceded defeat then, but there was something brittle to the tense set of his shoulders and the way he hunched over his work that I couldn't turn away from.

And no one had ever called me wise.

I glanced at the upturned log beside the bench, more often used to split the firewood stored against the stable wall than as a seat itself, but unlike the empty space directly beside Garrett, this would allow me to look at him, and it'd keep me from tapping too hard on his fragile armor and doing more damage. "May I sit?"

Garrett swallowed, his luminous dark eyes following mine. He glanced up at me again, weighing something I could not guess, before he gave me one brief nod.

I took the time to settle down before trying again. "I did not mean to imply you seemed unwell or, um, less able. Just—from an outsider's perspective, it looks as if you've been holding the world together with both hands while it splits in two."

Garrett's face went red, but he fixed his eyes down on his work. Or on the stitching, at least. His hand had stilled. He still said nothing.

"It's not yet been a fortnight since the fae attacked Trierent. I never saw a single one. I only heard the sounds of battle." We'd listened—my mother, Matilde, and I—while the pair of them hid under the kitchen table and I stood between it and the locked door, an iron in hand, stolen from the very stable we now sat outside.

I . . . I hadn't returned it yet. There was some comfort yet in keeping iron at my bedside, even when the king swore the fae were gone for good.

"But I still have nightmares, every night imagining horrible tricks and brutal magic. My little sister wakes up screaming. And all from the specter of the fae." I leaned forward, my elbows on my knees, and tried to catch Garrett's

eye. His golden-brown hair fell in front of his brow as he bent, shielding his expression. “But I know that you’ve faced the real thing. Fought one. I heard you nearly died.”

Garrett had gone absolutely rigid. It was a look I’d grown accustomed to when Matilde woke up shaking. She’d still herself, doing her best to control her body even if that meant shutting everything else out. But when I pulled her against my side, she’d bury her brown curls against my ribs and sob until she was finished.

I couldn’t help wondering if Garrett had anyone to hug him and let him cry, or if I was picking at fresh scabs and making things so much worse. It was only my intention to let him know I was there for him, should he need me, but his scowl said that I’d erred already.

“I only mean, if you weren’t all right, that would be perfectly understandable. I’d even wager you weren’t the only person struggling with what’s happened these past weeks in the keep, let alone the whole of Trierent.”

“I’m fine,” Garrett said stiffly. His fist clenched around his needle. His lashes fluttered, but when he looked up at me, his eyes weren’t red or glassy.

I smiled, hoping it seemed sincere. “Of course.”

“Why are you so worried about me?” The sharpness had returned to his voice, his eyes narrowed in suspicion.

That drew me up short. I didn’t have a good answer.

We weren’t friends, precisely. We’d talked a few times, sure, but that wasn’t enough to go digging into a man’s traumas or offering him a comforting shoulder.

“I—”

There was nothing for me to say, but it appeared I needn’t bother.

“Is it because I am so changed?” Garrett demanded, eyes flashing in a way that reminded me—rather uncomfortably—of the king’s fae companion. “Do you . . . want something from me?”

Struck, I jerked back.

I wished I could deny it, because his accusation made it sound so crass and self-serving, and the interest I had in him felt more like the warm light of a candle than the ash and char he spat out. But I did—want things.

I didn't know how to ask for them, thought them well out of my reach, but I did want.

The effort it took to meet his iron-wall gaze had my stomach twisting in knots, but I forced myself to do it anyway.

“I simply wanted to express my concern. When you returned from the coast and I heard what had happened, I—I felt regret that you might've died and I didn't know you better.”

“So it was my return that got you thinking about me in the first place.”

Gods, the bitterness in his voice. Somehow, I had dug a trench and crawled right down in it like a worm, now every bit as low in his estimation.

“No. But you can only glean so much about a man watching him from afar while he is at his work, and I had imagined that one day, we might have another opportunity to talk about something other than—” Than tack and travel and stirrups and horses. “Never mind. It was a fancy. Clearly, I overstepped. I did not mean to offend you.”

Garrett stared at me then, gaping like a fish. It was the first time since I'd approached that I saw a crack in his armor. Was it really so shocking that he'd piqued my interest? Perhaps I had no right to fixate on him, but I'd never been untoward.

At least he wasn't glaring anymore.

My palms had turned slick and sweaty. When I stood, I wiped them on my trousers, though that only served to make them sticky with dust.

“I apologize for interrupting you, my lord.” When I rose, every sane part of me wanted to flee—the affront I'd offered him, the embarrassment of my overreach, the shame at being

struck down—but I was frozen and words stuck in my throat until I sighed and they tumbled out on the stable yard at my feet. “Thank you for the part you played in protecting Aranthe. I’ve no doubt my family is safe due to your efforts, but I am sorry for all that it cost you.”

With that last bit out, I could finally tuck tail and run. Heat swept up the back of my neck, turning my ears and cheeks ruddy. I ducked my head and rushed to disappear into the stable’s shadows and out the far side, ignoring how Garrett called out after me.

“Voss!”

CHAPTER 4

GARRETT

I didn't follow him.

That would have been silly, right?

Voss was . . . complicated.

Technically I outranked him, and many of the palace servants acted as though that behind-the-scenes pecking order was important. The cook who made the king's dinner was more important than the cook who made the knights' dinners was more important than the cook who made the servants their food, and no one dared forget that the cook who made the king's food was the most important, or she would remind them, sometimes quite cruelly.

Tiny differences were significant, and people with no power were rewarded with tiny changes. Gretl changing the king's bed sheets every day was a reward for good service, when before she had only changed the sheets for visiting lords.

It was all nonsense, and forgot that everyone was just cooking and changing sheets.

It was, perhaps, easier for me to see the absurdity of it, since I'd been doing the same job for years—*precisely* the same job—but when Audric had become king, everything had changed. Everything but Audric and the job.

So it was harder for me to take the hierarchy seriously when I was doing the same things for the same man in the same way, and being treated differently for it.

When I had met Voss the first time we'd visited Trierent, I had only barely outranked him. I would eventually be a knight, which made me more than a peasant, but as a squire to a bastard no one, it wasn't exactly a position of immense power and clout. And Voss had smiled and nodded at me every morning.

His smile was always shy, like he expected someone to take offense to him being pleased. Maybe like he thought he wasn't supposed to be pleased. But he clearly loved the horses—he was one of the few stable hands who had never called Audric's mount "Monster" before he'd been named, because of his size. No, I'd once found him feeding the immense sable horse in the morning, calling him a "sweet boy" as he offered him a carrot.

When Audric had become king, Voss's attitude toward me hadn't much changed. Others had started jumping when I asked for something, acting as though I'd become something other than lowly Garrett, Audric's mediocre squire. He'd just continued to give me his shy smile, offered help whenever he had a free moment, and just . . . been there. Done his job. The way we were all supposed to do, and so few of us did, too interested in politics and not interested enough in our actual vocations.

So maybe I should have gone after him.

Surely Voss wasn't like the others. He'd never given me sly looks or cornered me in the stable or touched me without permission because I had changed. Because I was, what, prettier? I looked in the mirror and didn't see anything different. My skin was a little brighter, maybe, and so were my eyes. I didn't seem to get blemishes anymore. But I still looked like Garrett.

I sat there for a while, staring after where Voss had disappeared into the stable, but I didn't follow him. It would be too depressing, I decided, if I found out that he truly was only interested because of my sudden fae nature. If I left things as they were, I could continue to try to believe that he was just a nice person who didn't hate me for being part-fae.

Even if maybe he didn't like me much because I'd gotten defensive and rude.

I sighed and let my head fall against the wall, trying to hold in a groan. I wasn't focused on my work, so it was time to move forward instead of sitting there staring into space.

I picked up the pad—mostly finished, if not quite perfect yet—and packed away my supplies. I would finish it tomorrow. His Majesty wasn't going anywhere right that moment, so he wouldn't need it in the next day. In the meantime, I had to go do my daily sword practice.

It was an exercise in frustration and futility, but it was my job, so I would do it, even if I continued to do it wrong every day forever.

Better an hour of wasted time than letting Audric down.

I put the saddle pad away in the stables, slipping it into its place, and tucked my little sewing kit under it. That would save me a few minutes tomorrow, not having to go to my quarters and retrieve it before getting back to work.

Passing the rows of stalls on my way back out toward the practice yard, someone reached out and snatched my wrist, pulling me into a darkened empty stall.

Before I could move, or breathe, or shout to unhand me, I was shoved up against a wall, a warm body pressed against mine. "Well, well, what have we here?"

It was a phrase right out of every bad children's tale warning to stay away from strangers and dark places, but I wasn't a child acting out. I was in the middle of Trierent Keep, doing my job and minding my business.

I looked up and my stomach swooped in horror.

Lord Redmond's oldest son.

Kurt Redmond was, frankly, probably the person I'd have chosen for my position, if I were the one choosing such things. He was the eldest son of one of the most powerful nobles in Aranthé. Tall, handsome, and with a reputation for cleverness, he was the perfect sort of person to be the king's squire.

He outranked me by more than I cared to consider, regardless of whose squire I was, and here he was cornering me in the stables.

I tried to pull back, only to be reminded that he'd pushed me against the wall. So I slid to one side and then the other, searching for a way to escape, any way. He boxed me in with a firm arm on either side of me, his lips peeled back in a pleased smile.

It wasn't nice like Voss's smile, my panicked mind pointed out. It was a cruel thing; he was well aware that he was frightening me and pleased by that fact. "A little fae, all on its lonesome. Hasn't anyone ever told you it's dangerous to be out on your own, faerie?"

"The king's squire," I corrected him. "I'm the king's squire."

He snorted and rolled his eyes, leaning in until our chests touched and breaths mingled in the few inches between us. "Barely the king's squire, and only because the king is too sentimental for anyone's good. But that's fine, little fae. You keep your position. It isn't as though the king needs a proper squire, and you're pretty enough to justify the waste of a position."

"I need to get back to my duties," I informed him, jerking my head back and smacking it against the unforgiving wall behind it when he leaned even farther toward me.

That actually made him laugh. "Your duties? We both know you're about to go to the practice yard and wave a sword around, as though you ever have any chance of getting better at it. If becoming a fae didn't help, nothing can."

It stuck in my gut like a poisoned dagger, and I clamped my mouth shut. I couldn't respond to that. Kurt was far too important for me to give him a piece of my mind, no matter how he twisted the knife.

And maybe he was right, but dammit, so what? So what if there was one thing I couldn't do? It didn't make me bad at my job. I was a good squire. I blinked and looked away from him,

turning my head to stare into the shadows in the back of the stall.

“Aww, are you going to cry little fae?” He leaned in even farther, and I felt something wet on my face. He was . . . he was licking my cheek. Again, I tried to jerk back, and got next to nowhere. “It’s all right, I don’t mind if you cry,” he whispered right into my ear, his voice breathless and—what the hell was he doing? “It’s probably best, in fact.”

Why would—

He pushed against me, pressing his whole body into mine, and his cock was hard against my belly.

Oh hells. That was why he’d dragged me into the empty stall. Because like so many of his peers, he resented my tiny bit of fae-ness and hated that it made his cock hard. He hated me and wanted me, and unlike most of them, he meant to take it out on me.

I could have thrown up on him right then, and I was tempted to just do it. He might get angry with me, might beat me, but I doubted his cock would stay up if he was covered in vomit. It might save me from the worst of what he had planned.

“Nothing to say, little fae? Not going to cry and beg?”

Beg. Of course that was what he wanted. He was a head taller than me, stronger by far, and to try to stop him, I would have to use my evil fae magic, which I had only the scarcest understanding of. If I could manage it, it would just make him go running to his father, who would demand my head on a pike, and no matter how much His Majesty liked me, one of the most important lords in Aranthe wanting me dead meant that my remaining days would be few and unpleasant.

He reached up and wrapped a hand around my throat, suddenly snarling. “Look at me, fae dog. I asked you a question.”

He thrust his free hand beneath my tunic and palmed my completely soft cock, as though he could coax it to life when I

was trembling in fear and trying not to be sick. As though any part of me could ever want him.

Even if it could, I would not give him that. Not ever. Water magic was blood magic, as Syren had proven when he'd saved my life, and I would see my cock shrivel up and fall off before I'd let it react to Kurt Redmond's touch.

"Let me go," I hissed at him. "The king is expecting me."

Quicker than a blink, he moved a hand to my arm, spinning me around and shoving me face first against the wall. "You'll simply have to explain to His Majesty why you're late."

I tried to back up, to free myself of his grip, but he shoved my head into the stable wall, producing a loud thunk and making me see stars. There was a rush of air as he ripped my hose, the sound of him spitting and then something like skin on skin and oh gods, he was really planning to . . . to . . .

"Move again and I'll break your neck, fae. We'll see if you can magically heal from that."

I couldn't breathe, couldn't force my lungs to take in air, and tears finally started to slide down my cheeks. He was bigger and stronger than me, and I was—and he was—what the hell could I do?

CHAPTER 5

VOSS

How long did I need to hide in the far yard, staring out at the moat, waiting for Garrett to leave?

I'd gotten started early that morning, due primarily to the fact that Matilde had woken me up again, and I couldn't go back to sleep knowing she was still afraid. But at some point, Derrick would appear and there'd be no time left to hide.

Surely I'd mucked things up so thoroughly that Garrett would make a quick escape and spare us both any further embarrassment.

And if he didn't, well . . . Would that really be so bad?

He'd called after me, and I'd run off anyway. If he was still sitting there, waiting for me to stop being so strange, I could perhaps tolerate that. He could sit there, and I could go about my work, and it might be awkward, but it would be far better than offending him then fleeing from him only to risk ruining things between us forever.

With my shoulders, I pushed off the back wall of the stable. I could be a man about this, surely.

That wouldn't stop me from dragging my feet through the door I'd fled through, into the comparative dark.

I blinked as my eyes adjusted to the shadows.

The stables were seldom completely quiet. There were always the sounds of shuffling of hooves over the dirt and hay,

breathing and the occasional huff, the flick of a tail and its brush against the walls of the stall.

Those were all normal noises; they almost faded into the background.

The choked, strangled sound that came from the other side of the stables wasn't normal.

As I crept forward, my eyes adjusted well enough to see a strange, tall shadow in an otherwise empty stall. The floor was loose with hay, but because it wasn't occupied, we'd left tools in there to keep them out of the way. A bucket, ringed with iron and half full of water was nearest to me.

The shadow snarled something that made my hair stand on end. Whoever it was, they weren't alone.

Without thinking, I plucked the bucket up by the handle and swung it in a wide arc, whacking the person on the back of their head. The water splashed out, soaking their head and shoulders. A loud, deep curse whipped out from his lips.

But the other sound I'd heard—it was pained. Frightened. Wrong. And I could see the trembling shoulders of someone else, trapped on the other side of this tall man.

I didn't know who I'd hit until I did it, but I felt doubly justified when the blustering, red face of Kurt Redmond spun toward me.

His hair was sopping wet, hanging around him. The person behind him might've gotten splashed, but Redmond had taken most of the water and all of the bruising.

"Who the fuck are you?" he snarled, pushing his hair back.

There was the zing of a sheath that dragged my eyes down. His breeches were still open, his cock—his cock there, out but flagging.

A wave of disgust rushed through me, turning my stomach to stone and filling my lungs with shards of ice. Wide-eyed, I looked beyond him and saw—

Gods. Garrett was pressed against the wall, his hose torn. I looked swiftly away, flushed and horrified. Finally, I noticed

what I ought to have seen to start.

Redmond had drawn out a dagger, its wicked point tilted my way.

“I should teach you to mind your own business, serf,” Redmond sneered.

He took two threatening steps, and I lifted my bucket, backing up. It was no shield, but it was heavy.

Garrett had more presence of mind than I did, even then.

Against the far wall of the stall were propped all sorts of tools. They’d been out of range before, but Garrett sprang, for once hopping nimbly on the ball of his foot. He spun back toward us, an axe hefted in both hands. He gripped it so tightly I could see the shake of his arm down the shaft.

“Get out,” he growled between his teeth, eyes flashing.

Redmond paused, staring between the two of us.

Alone, I didn’t think either one of us stood much of a chance against him. But we weren’t alone.

I could only thank the gods he wasn’t wearing a proper sword.

When Redmond failed to move promptly, Garrett snarled, “Get the fuck out.”

I’d never heard him curse before. It was enough to make Redmond blink.

“I won’t forget this,” he warned, his dark eyes on me, tucking himself away and jerking his clothes to rights.

He stormed out of the stable, and the second he’d crossed the threshold, the axe fell from Garrett’s slack fingers.

He followed it to the floor, his knees going out from under him.

Time seemed to drag, slowing his descent as I stared at him.

But when the wind went out of Garrett, that—that meant I had to do something. Had to act.

“We can’t stay here,” I whispered, afraid to—to what? Draw attention from the empty stables? Startle Garrett by being too loud, too brash? “He might come back.”

Garrett looked up at me, tears shining in his eyes. There were high spots of color on his cheeks, but otherwise, he looks ghastly pale. He was in shock. Or if he wasn’t, he was a stronger man than I could fathom being.

“Where would we go?” His voice was soft, broken, carrying none of the hardness from when he’d cursed at Redmond.

It broke my heart.

I shrugged my jerkin over my head. It wasn’t much—not enough by far—but I was taller than Garrett and it was plenty long. The world wouldn’t end if I walked around in my shirtsleeves for the day.

With hand outstretched, I helped him to his feet and encouraged him into it. “Not far. Just—not here. We shouldn’t sit in the shadows.”

He looked down at his feet, like that was precisely what he wanted to do—fade into the dark and disappear.

I gripped his hand and squeezed it tight. “The darkest things cannot survive the light of the sun. Come on.”

I led him out the back to my hiding place, and my limbs went heavy with guilt.

If I hadn’t left him.

If I hadn’t run off.

If I’d done my work and not hidden like a coward.

All of those things were true, but I shook myself out of it at once.

Garrett did not need me guilt ridden and sorry. He needed a support. And as much as I could hate myself for not doing things differently, I shouldn’t have had to.

Garrett should have been safe alone in the stable. Safe anywhere.

He wasn't responsible for Redmond's depravity. I supposed that meant I wasn't either.

But I should have beaten that bastard's head in with that bucket when I'd had the chance.

Kurt Redmond had a reputation in the keep. It was common knowledge among servants that we ought not let those most vulnerable among us go wandering alone in his presence. He was . . . arrogant. Entitled. Callously cruel enough to make the king's brother, Leopold, look like a yippy pup instead of a beast with teeth.

Outside, I stopped to look Garrett over. His face was streaked with tears, but he'd squirmed his way into my jerkin. He tugged at the hem, pulling it so far down that the fabric strained over his shoulders.

He was bruised. It wasn't obvious yet, but the red mark against his forehead—it would purple. I was just glad it hadn't split skin.

“Gods, Garrett, I'm so—”

My mouth snapped shut when Garrett shook his head. He blinked too fast. Fresh tears trailed down his cheeks.

All right. No apologies.

“Let's sit down for a moment. Catch our breaths.” I wasn't telling him what to do, exactly. It was more a question, my voice every bit as unsure as I felt.

Garrett swallowed, not once, but twice, before he nodded. We sat there on the grassy slope that looked over the moat, silent and tense.

Did I touch him? I worried that might be too much.

My embarrassment earlier was forgotten, but . . . but I could imagine, in his position, I'd not want another person too close to me.

Still, Garrett's hand pressed into the ground between us, his fingers twisting around the stalks of grass with ruthless fury. Tears continued to streak down his cheeks, and I tried not to stare. If I could be there for him, that was enough.

I thought I had found him in time. It'd only been a handful of minutes. But it did not matter how far Redmond had gotten when the whole matter was abhorrent. My family hadn't seen a single fae during the invasion, after all, and Mathilde had nightmares about them.

Maybe Garrett's hand was there on purpose. Maybe it'd be better to offer some comfort.

Maybe, I should figure out what the hell he actually wanted before deciding for him.

"I'm not sure what to do," I whispered. In the space between us, I let my hand creep toward his. I brushed the very edge of his palm with the tip of my pinky. "Or what to say."

Garrett let out a shuddering breath, but he lifted his hand, pressing it over mine hard. I could barely manage to turn it over, to squeeze him back.

"But whatever you need," I swore, "is yours if I can give it. We can sit here all day. Or—or we can ride out of Trierent and never come back."

Garrett laughed. The sound like a wet hiccup. When he glanced my way, his eyes were full of skepticism.

True enough, things were not that simple, but . . . but if Garrett wanted to run, I would beg my mother and Matilde to follow. Or to understand. Or . . .

Right then, all I could hold inside was the all-encompassing need to give him anything to make this, if not right, then at least a bit less awful.

"I'd never leave Audric."

I blinked. It took me a moment to realize he meant the king.

"Whatever you need," I repeated. That was all that mattered.

For a moment, Garrett stared up at me. I thought he might be considering it, but then—

Oh no.

His expression crumpled, pain drawing his lips into a grimace. He sobbed and pressed his wet face against my arm. His nose dug in, and I wiggled to make a space for him against my side. With my arm wrapped around his shoulders, I pulled him in tight, close.

I wanted to tell him he was going to be all right, that he could cry until he felt like stopping, but all the words caught in my throat. I just sat there, holding him, rocking gently back and forth like my mother had every time I'd scabbed my knee.

In time, he went quiet. His breathing got steadier.

Soon, we were silent and still enough to hear the scuff of approaching feet.

Garrett flinched, but he didn't pull away from me. He didn't look up.

I wasn't sure I'd have had it in me to let him if he'd tried. My arm tightened around him as I looked up.

"Master Derrick," I said as the man approached, as much a greeting as an attempt to let Garrett know who was coming.

Derrick had been working at the royal stables longer than I'd been alive. He'd seen more than I could guess, and he'd always struck me as a shrewd, clever sort of man.

When he approached, he was scowling at the pair of us, but he only addressed me. "I take it Garrett here has you on some chore for the king today?" he asked mildly, reading the situation before I even had the chance to make excuses for lazing about.

"I, um, yes?" So lying didn't come easily to me. That was hardly a character flaw.

Derrick merely grunted, already glancing toward the stable, satisfied to move on without embroiling himself in something that was none of his business.

But I couldn't simply let him go. I needed help—someone to run an errand so that I didn't have to leave Garrett's side. "Sir. Master Derrick, um—"

Derrick directed me; it was not my place to ask him favors. But right then, I needed one. “Garrett and I have need to ride out today. But I’ve planned poorly, and I need riding breeches. For both of us. One for each. If you wouldn’t mind . . . could we, perhaps . . . are there some to borrow?”

Derrick chewed his cheek as he glanced us over again. “Of course. A moment.”

It was as simple as that. Derrick shuffled back into the stable house. While he was gone, we sat in silence, Garrett tense like he was a rabbit waiting to be caught.

But Derrick only returned, folded breeches in his arms. He set them beside me, met my eye, and gave me a terse nod before heading into the stable. He shut those back doors behind him, and I heard the wooden latch, leaving us out here alone.

Alone and safe from prying eyes, at least for a little while.

CHAPTER 6

GARRETT

It seemed almost impossible, given the way everyone around Trierent was acting toward me since the Kelpy incident, but Voss . . . hadn't changed.

I'd been afraid he had, assumed he had, but he hadn't. He was still just sweet and nervous and kind and—just thinking about it made me want to cry again. Why was someone like Voss, one of the lowest ranking people at the keep, kind and caring, while people like Kurt Redmond were in positions of power?

Hells, why *were* people like Kurt Redmond at all?

I'd changed into Voss's ill-gotten riding breeches, and Audric hadn't said a word about me showing up to sword practice in them. He'd given me more concerned looks than usual, sure, but it was probably because I was being incompetent with slightly less gusto than usual.

I was sad. I was sure I wasn't the first, nor would I be the last person Kurt had assaulted. I was sure he'd succeeded in the past, even more than with me. It made my chest ache to think that he'd hurt so many people, and no one would ever stop him because he was important.

I was scared because he was Redmond's son. He was powerful and rich, and it would be easy enough for him to find a different time and place, and succeed. And if he didn't, if he decided he was done with that, he'd already threatened that it wasn't over. No doubt he intended to cause problems for me. Or worse, for Voss.

“Garrett,” the king’s soft voice came to me, far closer than I’d expected. I swung around, forgetting that I was still brandishing my wooden practice sword, and it went flying out of my hands as I turned.

Audric was there, right in front of me. For a moment, we both looked to where my sword had landed, then he turned back to me with warm, concerned eyes.

“Where is your head today, Garrett?” His voice was still low—worried, not exasperated or angry.

I couldn’t look him in the eye, so I stared at the ground. “I—I’m sorry, Majesty. I’m just out of sorts this afternoon. Perhaps we should give up for the day.” I sighed, long and deep, looking away entirely. “Maybe we should give up entirely. It isn’t as though I’ll ever be a master swordsman.”

The king’s arm came around me, his bulk turning us both and ushering me toward the doors, into the keep. “It isn’t about you becoming a master swordsman, Garrett. We practice so that someday you’ll be able to defend yourself with the sword if you need to.”

I gave a wet sniffle, then immediately slapped my hands over my face, pretending to rub at my eyes.

His Majesty didn’t need to be exposed to my weakness—to the fact that I would never be able to defend myself, because apparently the people who were going to attack me were too important to defend against—even if I became the finest swordsman in all Aranthé, which simply wasn’t going to happen.

Audric couldn’t understand. Even before he’d been king, he’d been more significant to the kingdom than I would ever be. He was good, and he would never have behaved as Kurt had, but there was nothing he could do to change Redmond’s position. Even the king couldn’t simply remove a powerful lord from his money and land without consequence. Before the war, some lords had chafed against being led by the last king’s bastard, and while those complaints had quieted somewhat, I had no doubt there were still whispers.

And for me? For Voss? Why would anyone risk dissension? We would never be in the position to repay such a favor, where Redmond could offer the realm so much. It was his money, in large part, that funded the city's repairs—his harvest stores that kept the streets calm and satisfied. Sure, Audric wouldn't want to bow to that, but my father had spent years drilling it into me: Money, in the end, made everything move when you needed it to. Money was the universal language that everyone understood, and even with as successful a merchant as my father was, he would never match Lord Redmond's riches.

It would be best for everyone if I simply let it lie and hoped Kurt would ignore his smarting pride and leave us alone. That didn't seem incredibly likely, but I doubted he'd be thrilled to admit he'd been bested by a stable boy with a bucket, so maybe he would.

The king led me into the dining hall, straight up to his table, sitting me on his right, where Lord Penn usually sat for meals, and motioned to a serving maid. "Can we get some tea, please?"

She bobbed a curtsy and rushed off, leaving us mostly alone in the room.

"Would you like to talk about what's wrong?" he prodded again.

I turned to look at him, but my eyes caught in the wide-open doorway. On the figures of Kurt and his father standing in the hallway, facing each other. Lord Redmond's back was to me, but he was leaning toward his son, his stance serious.

Kurt's eyes were on me. As I watched, he pulled an apple out of a pocket, and used his other hand to unsheath the dagger he'd threatened Voss with. Meeting my eye, he sliced into the fruit and ate the slice directly off the blade.

When I glanced back to Audric, his expression was even more concerned. He looked to the Redmonds, then back to me. "I . . . you know I'll always support you in any endeavor, Garrett, but please, whatever it is you do, be careful."

He was afraid of the Redmonds. He was asking me not to make trouble.

“Of course, Your Majesty,” I agreed instantly. “I don’t want to be a bother. I just—we both know I’ll never be able with a sword, so I’m not sure why we bother.”

“Stabbed me well enough,” Lord Syren announced, dropping into the seat on His Majesty’s other side with the speed and precision of a bird of prey diving down to grab a fish, then indolently splaying himself sideways, legs hanging over one chair arm and head on Audric’s shoulder. “I think it’s more a matter of conviction than skill. You think you’ll fail, so you do. When you were determined to succeed, to protect Audric, you did well enough.”

I bit my lip, considering, and tried to stop glancing over at Kurt, who was still glaring at me from the hall. It was true, I supposed. I had successfully stabbed Syren. But he’d had his back to me at the time, and he’d been unarmed, so it had hardly been a fair fight.

But he was right that I had acted differently than I usually did on the field. I hadn’t stopped to consider every action, thinking and second guessing and being disarmed by the time I decided on a course of action. I’d simply known I had to defend my king, so I had.

But how was I supposed to stop overthinking when practicing? When I had time to think, I was going to think. It was what I was good at, not like swordplay.

The maid came out with the tea His Majesty had requested, along with a plate of fruit and cheese, setting it in front of us with another curtsy.

Regardless of what Audric needed me to do, keeping my head down and refraining from angering Redmond, there was one thing I needed to address.

So I turned back to the open door, drawing all my strength and straightening my spine. “I wanted to talk to you about one of the stable hands, Majesty, if you have a moment.”

He gave me an amused smile and handed me a cup of tea. “That is why you’re here, isn’t it? For a moment? Has one of the stable hands acted inappropriately?”

“No! No, he . . . he’s my friend, and I wanted to make sure you knew that he’s a, um, a good man. He’s been helping me, and I had some trouble with—with my work this morning, and he—” Damn it all, how did I explain that he’d saved me from Redmond without mentioning Redmond, or the situation, or raising Audric’s concerns any further?

Fortunately, Syren saved me, as he’d been wont to do since the Kelpy incident. Maybe before that, if I were being honest with myself. “Oh do tell. Is it the delicious dark-skinned boy who’s as tall as me, with the deep brown eyes?”

Audric lifted an amused brow in Syren’s direction. “Do I need to be jealous?”

“Only if you’re bothered by your squire having a crush,” Syren shot back, bumping their shoulders together as he took the cup of tea from in front of the king. Something in Audric relaxed then, but I didn’t miss the last confused glance he’d sent toward the Redmonds.

It was Syren who drew his attention back.

“Excellent taste if I do say so myself,” he said to me. “Always pick the tall ones. We’re the best.”

That, finally, broke the mood and made me chuckle. “Yes, my lord, that’s Voss. He’s always been very kind to me. Helped me when I had problems. So I wanted to make sure you knew, in case—in case it was ever important.”

His Majesty clearly knew I wasn’t telling him everything, but he nodded, taking his cup back when Syren offered it to him, and taking a drink as he met my eye. “I’ll keep it in mind, Garrett. We always have to help those who support us when we’re in need, after all.”

I nodded, and glanced away again. Redmond and Kurt were gone from the hall, and I didn’t know whether to breathe a sigh of relief, or tremble with fear of where and when I’d see them next.

CHAPTER 7

VOSS

There was a stark difference between when Audric, the king's bastard son, had visited Trierent as part of Lord Pen's retinue from afar, and now, when all he had to do was walk from one part of the keep to the other.

The first time, we'd all rushed to see Lord Pen had what he needed. A future king, and we'd all but ignored the enormous man in favor of Lord Pen, Leopold, even Lady Senta.

A couple years later, and all that had changed. King Audric showed up unannounced, and he sent the stables scrambling to provide.

Did he intend to ride out that day?

Should we send someone to the kitchens to prepare food for the road?

Those stable hands who saw him first rushed to serve him, while inside, Derrick frowned out at the yard and sniffed.

He liked the king, I thought. Sometimes it was hard to tell Derrick's preferences. After Garrett had gone off to practice, Derrick had simply scowled at me a moment, asked if there was anything he needed to know, and accepted it when I said there wasn't.

It wasn't my tale to share, and I had no business telling Garrett how to handle the situation.

Still, even if Derrick liked King Audric better than he'd liked the man's father, he wasn't hasty or overeager to make

his way out into the yard, give a small, informal bow, and ask, “How can we assist Your Majesty today?”

The busyness in the yard came to an abrupt halt, and the king combed his fingers through his short brown hair, like he was abashed at the hassle.

“I wondered if I might have a word with Voss?”

I was still standing inside the stable when the bottom of my stomach dropped out. King Audric’s gaze roamed across the gathered stable hands, and I realized he—he didn’t know who I was.

“ ’S fine with me,” Derrick said. He turned to look through the stable doors, and I—

Fuck, I was making the King of Aranthé wait.

I scrambled into the light, bowing deeply before my feet even came to a stop. “Your Majesty, I’m at your service.”

When I straightened, the king was smiling at me kindly. I didn’t realize until I saw his expression that I’d braced for the worst. I’d thought he brought trouble.

Basically, I’d been tense for days, waiting for the fallout of assaulting a lord’s son. Redmond had promised retribution, and I had no reason to doubt he was capable of it.

But King Audric hadn’t brought his guards. His sword wasn’t even visibly on him—a strange thing, as I’d rarely seen him without it before the battle with the fae.

“Let’s walk,” he said smoothly.

His strides were enormous, and too quickly, I was rushing to catch up, feeling like a child stumbling at his father’s side.

I chewed my tongue as we went. It was seldom a good thing, to have the focused attention of your betters. Worse still to interrupt or press for details he was not ready to give, so I kept my mouth shut.

“Garrett says you’re his friend,” the king mused once we were away from the stables, walking the edge of the keep’s inner courtyard.

The late king's palace had been a wonder, I'd heard. He'd built it into the side of the cliff over the oceans on the ruins of an old fae holding—a testament to our victory, our safety. It hadn't lasted long.

Trierent Keep, by comparison, was quite plain. But this place was safe. Practical. It suited our new king better.

“I, well, Majesty, I would like to think we're friends, yes. Or friendly. I wouldn't want to presume—”

The king sent me an amused glance from the corner of his eye, and my mouth snapped shut.

“I must admit,” he said, “I'm relieved. I'd feared for a moment that a Redmond had caught his eye, but Syren seems quite sure—”

I flinched so hard that it brought us both to an abrupt stop. Wide eyed, I stared at him, and he stared back at me, waiting for me to explain my dramatics. Heat rushed up the back of my neck, and I gaped, unsure what to say.

He didn't know. Garrett hadn't told him.

He couldn't have, or the king never would have speculated such an atrocious arrangement. He wouldn't be so blasé about Redmond's depravity.

“What is it?” the king asked.

I couldn't *lie* to him. Not to the king.

But I couldn't tell the truth either.

“I . . . ” My gaze fell straight to the ground. “I cannot claim that I know Garrett well, or that I know what's in his heart, but I am entirely certain that he feels no fondness for Redmond.”

“Is Kurt causing problems?”

There in Audric's eyes, I saw a shrewdness I hadn't recognized before. I'd always thought of the new king as something of a battering ram, not someone cool and measured and attentive.

I swallowed and took a chance on his understanding, because it seemed I did not know my king's true nature very well at all. "Please, do not make me answer that. It's not my place to say."

The king hummed and nodded, then continued walking on, leaving me once again unsure what he was after.

"I didn't come to talk about that anyway, though I would like to know what's bothering Garrett. More . . ." With his hands folded behind him, he stared up at the bright blue sky. "I wanted to give you my blessing."

"For what, Sire?"

"I've met Garrett's father, only a time or two, but he left an impression. He's . . . an ambitious man. I've no doubt he'd prefer Garrett to make a match with someone with resources to benefit his own house."

Someone like Redmond.

Thank all the gods that the king didn't say it like that. I wasn't sure I could take it.

"But I wanted you to know, if you have any hang-ups about your position or Garrett's, you have my blessing."

Finally, it hit me—what the king was trying to say.

My whole head was on fire. "Oh, I—you may be misunderstanding. I don't think—"

The king held up his hands, palms out. "I don't need to know. That's between you and Garrett. I just didn't want one stodgy old man's opinion to get in the way of Garrett's happiness."

King Audric was nothing like I thought. Sure, he'd never spent much time in Trierent, but to throw sand in the face of tradition like this was shocking.

"I could offer you a place in my retinue," he said, unbidden.

I choked. "Sire, I am no one."

He pulled his gaze from the sky and smiled serenely once more. “Not true. You’re Voss, a trusted stable hand at Trierent Keep, and you are held in high regard by a young man whose judgment I fully trust.”

I couldn’t imagine a life like that, in the keep proper, attending the king daily.

I wasn’t prepared for it. Wouldn’t have the slightest idea how to comport myself.

“Sire, I . . . forgive me. I am honored, truly, but I enjoy my time with the horses.” Most particularly, I enjoyed not making a fool of myself in front of them. So long as I had an apple in my pocket, the horses didn’t give a damn how I behaved around them.

“Then I shall suggest Master Derrick take you on as his apprentice, if he’s willing.”

I did not know what to say.

“Thank you, Sire.” My voice came out raspy and tight.

We’d made our way around the keep’s inner yard, back around to the stable again, and I was so lost in my shock and confusion that I did not notice the Redmonds had arrived until we were upon them.

Derrick was glaring, his arms crossed. But the moment we were in range, Lord Redmond whirled, quite happy to ask his favors of someone less ornery.

“Good, you’re already here, Your Majesty. That saves us a trip.” Lord Redmond glanced at King Audric with a tight smile, but his eyes passed across me without registering.

Kurt, however, was fixated. He stared, grinning like a wolf at a bone still hanging with fresh meat for the taking.

“What can I do for you, Lord Redmond?” The king sounded perfectly pleasant, but I couldn’t help noticing that he’d seemed more at his ease as we walked around the yard. He wore proverbial armor now he hadn’t bothered with for me. Strangely, I didn’t think it had much to do with the

difference in Lord Redmond's station and mine, but with the difference in our characters.

I'd never had any reason to question King Audric's right to the throne. I'd never had a station high enough to look down on him, even when he was nothing but the king's bastard son.

"There is a stableboy here who attacked my son. Voss is the beast's name. I want him flogged and thrown out of the keep. We cannot have servants here who do not know their place."

His son started, blinking fast.

"Father," Kurt hissed. "This is Voss."

The pair of them turned their matching gray eyes on me, and I had to master the urge to flinch away. Kurt looked down his nose, affronted that my criminality did not radiate from me so obviously that his father knew at once that I was the dastardly upstart who'd hit him.

"Oh dear." The king almost sighed, tilting toward me briefly. "Voss?"

I swallowed.

I couldn't regret raising that bucket. It had been worth any risk to see Garrett safe. But, well . . . that didn't stop a man's heart from racing when he stood before the peers of the realm, before his king, to bear the consequences.

"It's true, Your Majesty. I hit him with a bucket."

Kurt sputtered. He didn't like the sound of that. Perhaps it'd have been better for his pride if we'd thrown fists like men, or I'd pulled some honorable weapon on him. But by my estimation, he was no man and no one worth fighting honorably.

Derrick stepped forward, clearing his throat, but he stopped when the king held up a hand. His eyes were still on me, measuring me up.

"And were you to be faced with the same situation, would you hit him again?"

All might be lost. I'd confessed, and I'd no intention of denying what I'd done. The nice thing was, there was nothing left to keep me from taking my turn and glaring at Kurt every bit as viciously as he'd glared at me.

"Absolutely."

The king clicked his tongue. "It sounds like a simple matter between two young men, with insult doled out on both sides, not a cause for punishment, Lord Redmond. Unless, of course, Kurt would like to tell me precisely what he's done to offend Voss?"

As Kurt Redmond flinched back, going pale, I decided that the king was, in fact, one of the most terrifying men I'd ever come across, and I was immanently glad not to be on the receiving end of his ire.

"This is highly inappropriate," Lord Redmond spat, but the king simply let the lord's anger sweep over him.

"I've actually been meaning to talk to you for a while, Kurt. Now that the fae threat has passed, the realm has need of an ambassador to Pyrtha in the south. I think you would be perfectly suited to the role."

"What good could come of politicking with those barbarians?" Lord Redmond demanded. Kurt, it seemed, had lost his voice. "I won't have you sending my son down south for no reason."

"There are plenty of reasons, Redmond. Trade. Commerce. Peace. It's an opportunity for your son to prove himself. And I'm sure neither one of you would deny a direct order from your king."

His Majesty clapped his enormous square hand on Kurt's shoulder so hard the man's knees bent. "Though, I should remind you, Kurt, the Pyrthians are rather stringent in the application of their laws. Aranthe cannot afford to go to war if you get yourself beheaded with an overreach. Do not offend them. Do not insult them. Do not injure them. Watch your every step. I'd suggest you brush up on their customs before

you leave. On the morrow, I think. We've hardly time to waste before we reach out to our neighbors."

His smile was bright as the sun when he turned away from the lord and his son. "Derrick, if you have a moment, I'd like to talk to you about Voss's future."

Derrick was staring, and—

Gods, I'd never seen the man shocked. He'd seen all that Trierent Keep had to offer in the decades he'd served here.

But he'd never seen anything that prepared him for a king like Audric Marana.

CHAPTER 8

GARRETT

His Majesty knew.

He had to know, right? He'd practically tossed Kurt out of the keep on his ear, sending him off to liaise with the violent, tribal Pyrthians. There were rumors about them that said they painted each other's naked bodies blue under the full moon, that they lived outdoors without roofs over their heads or pillows beneath them, and even that they had witches who ate human flesh.

There could be no doubt that being sent to them was a punishment, even when being made a diplomat on behalf of Aranthé was a promotion. Not to mention the fact that someone as hateful and awful as Kurt would no doubt offend the tribesmen and end up on a spit over some witch's cookfire.

On the other hand, people had said worse things of fae, and while it was true of some of them, Syren definitely wasn't a wild human-flesh-eating thing. So perhaps it was another case of the rumors being stranger than reality.

None of that mattered, since I wasn't the one being sent to Pyrtha. No, Kurt was, because Audric *knew*.

Why else take a chance on angering Lord Redmond so deeply? Rumor at the keep said the elder Redmond was in a snit, and the younger was wandering the halls in a daze, looking like the ghost of a hanged man.

It was hard for me to feel too terrible for him, since he was a wretched person, and I'd celebrate to hear he'd ended up in a witch's belly.

But I hadn't wanted the king to know about Kurt. About what he'd done—what I'd allowed to happen. The best he could think me in the circumstances was weak, and I couldn't say he'd be wrong.

I had been weak. I'd allowed—

I marched into the stables to find old Derrick giving Voss a talk, and my mind screeched to a halt. Was he going to be let go? They were all the way at the other end of the stable, speaking softly, so I couldn't hear them, but—but surely Voss wasn't in trouble, was he? He'd done the right thing, and if he'd told His Majesty about it, Audric would never in anyone's lifetime have punished him for saving silly, useless Garrett from the big bad threat.

The conversation looked serious, Derrick meeting his eye and speaking more than I'd ever seen the old stable master speak in the entire time I'd known of him.

When Voss turned, he had a hand curled into his middle protectively. Like he felt sick, maybe? I looked up to his face, and it was . . . overwhelmed was probably the right term.

Not angry, or even unhappy, but his eyes were wide and his jaw set with determination. He nodded to Derrick, and the old man returned the gesture and turned to head out the opposite door. He caught my eye as he turned, and while the stable master wasn't exactly an emotive man, there was an expression on his face. Amusement? Happiness? It was hard to tell, underneath his usual gruff demeanor.

Something he said on his way out must have caught Voss's attention, because his eyes went even wider and he spun to face me. His hand was still pressed to his belly, and he seemed to be breathing fast.

Oh no.

Was he in serious trouble? Because of me and godsbedamned Kurt Redmond? If Redmond had somehow hurt Voss's livelihood because he'd dared stop him from hurting me, I would stab him myself before he left for Pyrtha in the morning. I'd do it in his sleep if I had to, since it was the

only way I was ever likely to best anyone who had an idea how to use a blade.

Voss hurried toward me, his free hand coming up as though to rest on my shoulder as he neared, but he dropped it without touching me. Did he not want to? Practically everyone in the keep tried to lay a hand on me nowadays, whether they realized it or not. I was like the smooth surface of a still pond. Strange and confusing, so they wanted to give it a splash, make sure it was really what it seemed to be and not an illusion.

Make sure I didn't feel like a monster under my fae magic, perhaps.

But no. Not Voss. He'd never been like that.

"How are you today?" he asked, his voice just as soft and kind as always. Not ingratiating or seductive, just concerned.

I bit my lip for a moment, taking him in. His wide dark eyes, his short wiry black hair, and his kind expression. Frankly, it amazed me he'd even mustered the violence to hit Kurt with a bucket. He was as nonviolent as I was, at heart. And he'd done it for me. To protect me.

But the king.

"Did you tell His Majesty what happened?" I asked, and it came out a little harder and more accusatory than I'd intended. He flinched back, immediately shaking his head.

"No, no of course not." He glanced around, like maybe one of the horses was listening in. Terrible gossips, horses. "I think—I thought that you would. But it's not my place to spill your secrets. And Lord Redmond and his son are so far above me, they could spit on me and I'd have to pretend it was rain."

It was my turn to flinch back. That wasn't true. Was it? It could never be acceptable for lords to act that way simply because they were lords. Audric would not only never do such a thing—he wouldn't approve of it in his people.

But Voss hadn't grown up with King Audric. He'd grown up under lords like Audric's father, who had ignored the finest man I knew simply because he was his twelfth child and not

his first. Lords like Konrad the Betrayer, who had decided that humanity could be mostly destroyed, so long as he was allowed to rule over the remains.

In fact, I knew Audric better than almost anyone else in the world.

I was the one who knew how he would react to the Redmonds. Who knew that he would ignore the threat the lord and his ass of a son posed to his rule, and do what was right no matter what—because that was what Audric always did.

I shook my head so fast my hair spun away from my head in a blond halo. It must have looked ridiculous, but Voss wasn't laughing. He was giving me this terribly sad look, like he thought I was being naive.

More than ever, I began to understand what it felt like to be Audric.

“No, you don't understand. You're wrong. Maybe things did work that way under Audric's father, but he's not like that. He would never allow you to be mistreated by the Redmonds just because they're powerful.”

A stone dropped in my belly and my breath caught in my throat.

Audric would never have let the Redmonds mistreat anyone just because of their power.

Not Voss.

And not me.

I'd come to the stables to be annoyed with Voss for telling the king about Redmond. And not only had I been wrong about him doing that at all, but I'd been wrong about everything. I shouldn't have been angry with Voss over telling Audric.

I should have done it myself.

“Isn't this awkward?” a familiar, silky voice asked from the darkness of a familiar stall—Eldwin's. “I came to lecture you on how inappropriate your behavior has been, and it seems that you've already figured it out for yourself.”

Syren came slinking out of the shadows, opening the door and leaning in the gap as Eldwin sauntered over to stand behind him, nosing at his neck.

“I—I didn’t mean—it wasn’t important enough to—”

Syren continued to stare at me as I fumbled for words. Not because he was waiting for me to make sense or make my point. Because we both knew I was wrong and wouldn’t find the right words.

“I didn’t want to cause problems for him. He has enough to deal with,” I finally managed to choke out. “The Redmonds are important.”

“Redmond is a spoiled child, and his son is even worse,” Syren countered. “And yes, they both want to go back to the old ways, but do you truly think that Aranthé would turn on a king who just defeated the fae single-handedly?”

I frowned at him. “It wasn’t single-handed. His Majesty would never say that.”

Syren waved me off, as though I was making a semantic argument, then reached back to rub a spot on his chest, eyes distant, as though he was reliving the battle. “Yes, yes, others helped. But the day might have been won without any of them. Any but him. And if the fae returned tomorrow, he could defeat them again. Redmond would piss his pants if he were confronted by the creatures Audric faced down. His opinion is the dirt beneath my feet.”

Voss blinked and stared at him, his mouth falling open at the tirade. When Syren glanced at him, he snapped it shut. Then, bizarrely, he bit his lip, and seemed to struggle to hold back a smile.

My mind went to the notion of Redmond pissing himself, and well . . . how many people in Voss’s position had ever taken part in a conversation that essentially called a powerful lord a coward? There was no chance of him getting in trouble for it, either. Syren was the king’s consort, and no one with half a lick of sense would so much as speak against him after

he'd faced the fae prince in battle himself. Only he and the king had managed the feat and walked away from it.

Compared, Redmond *was* a coward. I didn't even know if he'd fought in the final battle with the fae, and I knew that Kurt had not.

After a long silence, I sighed. "I was ashamed."

"You were ashamed because Kurt Redmond did something shameful like the spineless little weasel-boy he is, and Voss threw a bucket of water at him, like he was an overamorous dog trying to hump the king's leg?"

Voss choked on air, covering his mouth with both hands and bending over in the effort to keep from laughing aloud.

I had to admit, it was a little funny. Even if just thinking of Kurt reminded me of the swooping feeling of utter helplessness in the pit of my stomach. Picturing him trying to hump the king's leg was . . . well, that was different.

Syren was beside me suddenly, though I'd barely seen him move. He was so good at that. I wondered if I'd ever be so quick.

He reached up and cupped my cheek in one hand. "I don't know exactly what happened or why, Garret, but if Redmond or anyone like him ever comes for you again, I expect you to at the very least maim him. Castrate him. It isn't as though the world needs more little Redmond brats. Trust in Audric. And if not him, trust in my pettiness. I will never allow you to be punished for defending yourself from some pissant lord who demands the undemandable."

He turned toward the door, but shot me a grin over his shoulder. "Really, it's for the best Audric sent him off to doom himself. There are only so many lordlings I can mutilate before people start wondering if I'm plotting against the entire noble class."

He winked, and suddenly I wondered if maybe Syren was plotting against the whole of the nobility. It wouldn't have surprised me. I supposed we would never know, until it was far too late. For my own part, I was hard pressed to care.

CHAPTER 9

VOSS

“That fae is one of the most terrifying creatures in this keep,” I muttered, watching as Lord Syren led Eldwin away.

By and large, I’d avoided him, but he—he had fought beside the king. He’d protected Aranthé. He’d just offered his full support to Garrett against *anyone*. These weren’t things I could fault him for.

It was possible that my unease around Lord Syren had come from allowing old stories to influence me unduly. People I knew to be of sound mind—Master Derrick, Garrett, Lady Pepin—had all accepted him. So I would try to stop bracing for the worst of the fae to come out through him, and simply be glad that it wasn’t my balls he had reason to threaten.

Garrett caught my eye, grinning. “Only one of them?”

I shuddered, flexing my arm around my middle and bringing the other to fold across it. “You didn’t see King Audric with the Redmonds. He delivered Kurt to his doom with a smile. At least with Lord Syren, it’s on the surface. He wants everyone to know he’s dangerous. His Majesty keeps it well hidden.”

Garrett hummed in agreement, and his shoulders lifted briefly. “But you don’t have anything to fear from either of them.”

I blinked, shocked. Didn’t I? A fae and the king of the whole realm?

Garrett's smile returned, and I realized then that it was the first natural one I'd seen in weeks, since before he'd left for the coast. It softened his features, but . . .

Gods, he was as beautiful as golden dawn.

My chest seized up as I stared at him. I forgot to breathe.

Unaware that I was drowning in my adoration for him, Garrett continued, "They're only a danger to bad men, and you are very, very good."

My gasp sounded like a man dying. Garrett's eyes rounded in shock. Heat boiled up from my middle like a steaming cauldron, darkening my brown skin and making me regret the full-length sleeves I wore that trapped the sweltering damp in.

I rocked back on my heel and looked away. Could a man die of being complimented? It hadn't even been poetic, but that made it sweeter still. Garrett said only what he meant, and he thought I was—I was *good*. Though I wasn't precisely sure the whole measure of what he meant, it didn't matter. My soul had left my body and slammed back inside all at once, leaving me unable to catch my breath.

With a concerned furrow on his brow, he stepped into my space. Slowly, he reached up and touched my cheek. It was the lightest brush of his fingertips, but when I turned into his hand, he didn't drop it. Instead, he flattened his palm, a cool, steadying presence against my skin.

"Voss, are you ill?"

The only sound I could make was a tight hum, but I shook my head.

"Is it what you and Derrick were talking about?"

A laugh bubbled out of me. What Derrick and I had been talking about?

I blinked, and even as my senses returned, I could only see Garrett standing there, staring up at me. It was everything I'd imagined, all those times I hoped he would notice me and see something worth paying attention to. His attention was acutely focused on me, his eyes bright and curious.

And his lips were just there, pursed in a worried little moue.

My eyes fluttered shut, I leaned down, and there he was. His lips were soft—soft like I imagined silk would feel. With both hands raised, I tucked his golden hair behind both his ears.

The kiss was quick. I didn't press, but neither did he. All that passed between us was warmth and sweetness. It was all I was ready for, and all I really wanted right then.

When I leaned back, it was as if I'd been spun around the maypole and only just found my footing again, but Garrett was there to center me.

"I'm to be his apprentice. Apprentice to the stable master. Maybe master one day myself, if I don't muck around too much," I admitted.

Garrett grinned. "That's fantastic! I worried—the two of you seemed so serious."

I shook my head, still a little numb with shock from the enormity of everything that had happened in the last day. "Nothing the matter at all."

"That's wonderful." Garrett reached out and squeezed my hand. It was the first time he'd touched me voluntarily—or, well, the first time he'd done so in a moment of joy.

I squeezed back firmly. "Garrett?"

"Hmm?"

My throat constricted around a lump, but this needed saying outright. I had to find a way to manage it.

"I also think that you are, um, very, *very* good."

When he kissed me again, I felt the shape of his smile against mine.

FOR DAYS, I'd been thinking about the sweet kisses that Garrett and I had passed back and forth that evening in the stable. In time, Derrick had interrupted us with a loud clearing of his throat, and Garrett had ducked his head and gone to supper.

There were butterflies in my belly all the time now. Matilde teased me for smiling so much. Mother kept giving me knowing looks.

I wished I could say it were my change in station, or even the impending celebration on my behalf, but my smiles were all for Garrett. My hopes bloomed up around him like an overgrown garden.

Still, it was nice when, after work one evening, the hands cleared the stable yard and set up a bonfire. There was a whole pig on the spit, and I had a sneaking suspicion that the king himself had agreed to give it to us.

My friends, Derrick, the other hands—they all said the celebration was for me. Some elbowed Derrick and said it was for him as well, for finally choosing a successor when he was already dragging his tail toward retirement. He begrudgingly sniffed at them and took another drink.

In truth, I thought it was a celebration for something else entirely.

Kurt Redmond had been gone for nearly a week, and in that time, word about what had happened spread through the keep's servants like wildfire. There weren't many details on why we'd fought, but practically every servant and quite a few of the realm's peers knew that Kurt and I had quarreled, culminating in my hitting him round the head with a bucket.

A scuffle like that wasn't cause for a celebration on its own, but it was the first proof—real, tangible, irrefutable proof—that the world we'd all become accustomed to didn't exist anymore.

Lord Syren had been right; after his bravery facing the fae, King Audric was well loved by the people of Aranthé. He was all but untouchable, politically, and perhaps literally

untouchable, if anyone meant him harm. He was a seasoned warrior on his own, but there was no denying Lord Syren would make good on his threats if any dared to cross the king.

He had turned the world on its head when he'd sided with me over Kurt Redmond. Lord Redmond had abandoned his council seat and ridden to his country estate the day after Kurt had left.

Aranthe was no longer a kingdom where the mighty were born with privilege never questioned, where they could do as they liked and the rest of us should learn to grin and bear it.

King Audric weighed people on merit. To most of us, even the idea of it was novel.

And if that weren't reason enough to make merry, well, there was always the lure of spreading gossip.

"I heard the bucket was full of piss," Gretl's high voice announced. I turned my back on the crowd gathered before I had to corroborate any more untruths, and made my way into the stable.

The doors were flung wide, but it was quieter in here anyway. I carried the plate of pork and roasted apples to a ladder, balancing it unsteadily as I made my way up to the loft.

Garrett and I had split up—me to retrieve food, him to find drinks—and we'd agreed to meet back here. The ruckus was fun, well-intentioned, but the circumstances surrounding the moment were difficult enough that we'd drifted naturally toward each other, met each other's eyes, and simultaneously offered to find somewhere quieter.

By some miracle, I made it into the loft without upending the whole plate, the muscles in my abdomen aching from the strain of climbing the ladder one handed.

I was still catching my breath when, from far below, I heard a curse.

I peeked over the edge, and found Garrett there, two mugs gripped in his left hand as he tried to climb.

"You all right?" I called down.

He looked up at me with a grimace. “I lost one.”

Now I saw the one mug that’d been tilted, the dark spot on the dirt beneath him. Fae blood raced in his veins, and he was still the very same Garrett.

I grinned. “I don’t mind sharing if you don’t.”

He scrambled up the ladder without another word. I think he was just relieved that I hadn’t asked him to go back and make another attempt at climbing a ladder—a risk for him in the first place.

Between us, we shared our plate of pork and apples, and our one (mostly) full mug of ale, eating with our fingers and licking grease and sweetness from them between bites.

The whole affair had me stealing glances at his lips.

“I want to kiss you again.”

Garrett choked, sputtering around the drink he’d brought to his mouth. His teeth pressed into his lip, and that only made me want to taste it more.

Before he spoke, he set the mug on his thigh to keep it balanced, and he met my eye as he said, “You—you can. If you want.”

My heart pulsed fondly. *As if I hadn’t just said I do.*

Garrett looked down into the mug, and spots of red colored his cheeks.

“I’m glad,” I said. “But that’s—I wanted to talk to you about something first. Um, not to be presumptuous. Just . . . so that we understand each other, and you’re not surprised if, I, well . . .”

This hadn’t seemed such an embarrassing thing when I’d promised Matilde, but then, I hadn’t thought it’d be a bother. My heart had been set on Garrett already, and I’d assumed he was entirely beyond my reach.

Now, I had the king’s blessing and, more importantly, Garrett’s soft smile every time he bumped against me. He no longer seemed unattainable.

But Mother had been lecturing Matilde after one of her young friends found a man and got with child. She'd been terrified Matilde, who'd started her monthly bleeds already, though she still struck me very much as a child, would find herself in a similar situation, and we'd not be able to afford the extra mouth.

Matilde had, quite understandably, been annoyed that she was getting lectured, but that I was not.

In truth, I didn't know if Mother assumed I wasn't interested in or capable of pursuing a woman, or if she simply assumed that, because I was a man, the responsibility I'd bear was smaller. I hoped it was the former.

Even still, Matilde had turned her brown-eyed glare on me and said it wasn't fair that she should be subjected to a lecture and I wasn't, and I had agreed.

So I'd made her a promise, and I meant to see it through. After all, I was a terrible liar, and Matilde would catch me out in a second.

And really, what could it hurt? I didn't mind waiting to find love, to be sure of my feelings. I wanted Matilde to have a chance at romance like that—the kind our parents had, the kind you could build a life around.

Still, looking Garrett in the eyes and saying he could not have everything that I desperately wanted to give to him? That felt, if not offensive, then difficult and presumptive and definitely uncomfortable.

“Voss?” Garrett's eyes were beginning to swim with worry.

I drew in a sharp breath and set my shoulders back. “I'm saving myself till marriage.”

Garrett blinked at me, and I wished the wood beneath me would open up a hole to another realm, and I could sink inside it.

Despite my best efforts to stay composed, I stammered on. “Not that I think you want—especially right now . . . Only, I, um, I didn't want us to get caught in the heat of the moment and it to come out then. I didn't want to risk a

misunderstanding, or to hurt your feelings. I'm sorry. Obviously, it's something we can discuss if it's imp—"

Garrett was biting his lip, and he pressed his first finger against my own to shut me up. It took me a moment to realize he was trying not to smile.

"First," he said, "there's absolutely nothing for you to be sorry for. I'm—I'm glad we can talk things through upfront, know where we both stand and where our boundaries are so that we can respect them." I closed my mouth, and he dropped his hand only to budge closer to me. His knee pressed against the outside of my thigh. "Second, I'm not ready for that anyway. I'm still figuring out—" He shrugged, but I was already nodding. I knew what he meant, and it was everything: his new nature, what had happened with Kurt, how much he could trust anyone who swooned in his direction now.

Garrett's quick tongue darted across his lips. When he looked at me again, it was through the fan of his golden lashes.

I swallowed hard.

"Third"—he leaned toward me, his gaze on my mouth—"I happen to think you're worth waiting for."

If it had ever been a question, then and there, I decided it wasn't. As Garrett's lips closed over mine, I swore to myself and every single god above the earth and below it, I'd wait forever for him and be happy to do it.

CHAPTER 10

GARRETT

Syren's glowing eyes taunted me as he sat across from me, barely bothering to hold back a smirk as he brushed my hair back from my eyes. "Something you want to talk about?" he asked, his melodic voice managing to somehow be teasing and sweet at once.

"No," I denied. "No, there is not."

His smirk broke through, and he looked away, gaze still calculated as he continued, voice light and airy. "A tall young man, your Voss. Sturdy, too. Not as big as Audric, but close enough to make a man nervous."

"'M not nervous," I mumbled, and turned away, only to find his eyes in the mirror, and glare there.

His amusement . . . well, strangely enough, it didn't rankle. I wasn't even annoyed, not really. He was trying to get a rise out of me, and succeeding. It wasn't done for a sinister motive, or because he liked to hurt anyone, just because he was—well, he was Syren.

Instead of pushing any further, he leaned forward and started moving locks of my hair around, his expert fingers sliding through the strands almost faster than the eye could follow. "It's nothing to be frightened of," he finally said. "If he's especially clumsy, you can make judicious use of your powers to ease the way. Really, though, it's best to teach him from the beginning." He reached into a pocket and pulled out a bottle of oil, holding it in front of me, and oh gods above and below, I wanted to hide under the bed and never think about

Syren giving me . . . advice . . . ever again. “I mean it,” he reiterated, shaking the bottle to punctuate the point. “Teach him well from the start and you’ll both find the whole experience more satisfying for the rest of your time together.”

My eyes lifted to catch his at that, and he pursed his lips before looking away. We didn’t know how long I was going to live, after all, part-fae mess that I was. He said that a fae’s will could extend a human’s life, though, so I simply had to trust that I either wasn’t fae enough to live a long time, or I was fae enough to keep Voss with me.

I was marrying him, after all.

I snatched the bottle of oil out of his hands and shoved it into a pocket, shooting him another glare as I moved. “Fine, yes, I will . . . try to do that. Can we please be finished with this now?”

Syren’s sly smile and wink was as good as agreement, and he practically flowed out of his seat like water instead of standing up like any normal human. When I went to follow him, the sole of my shoe caught on the edge of a floorboard, and I almost tumbled to the ground on my face. Fortunately, Syren’s perfect dexterity extended to me, not in sudden preternatural understanding inside of me, but in that he reached out and wrapped an arm around my chest.

“Can’t have you cracking your head open right before you get married,” he teased, again with none of the malice other people attributed to his actions. Or, well, maybe with other people, there was malice. For me, there were soft glances and shoulder pats to go with the snark and sass.

It was . . . nice. My father was still unimpressed with the match I’d made myself, saying that if I were going to marry a man and forego children, the least I could do was “marry up.” For once in my life, I hadn’t needed Audric’s steel spine to stand in front of my father and tell him, under no questionable circumstances, that I did, in fact, consider marrying Voss to be “marrying up.” Money and station were irrelevant, and all that mattered was that Voss was one of the finest men in the kingdom.

When His Majesty had said practically the same thing about Voss at the feast that night, all the indignation had gone out of my father. He still didn't like it, but really, I'd already achieved far more than he had expected. Whatever Voss did or didn't do, I was a knight, and I was the only one alive who'd been the king's squire. I had a title and land of my own.

I tried not to think about it much, but technically, I was a member of the nobility. I suspected Voss was terrified of the fact that after we married, he would be as well. Hard to blame him. His sister was taking it well, and had started to flirt with the knights training at the keep, which I suspected also terrified Voss.

"Come on," Syren said, prodding me in the direction of the door. "You've a ceremony to get to. Only I'm allowed to be late to my own wedding."

Because of course, he had been. As had an abashed King Audric, both of them ruffled in their gold-embroidered silken finery, and everyone in the crowd had been well aware of why they'd been late, given the king's swollen red lips and Syren's cat-that-got-the-cream grin.

No, I couldn't do that. Part fae or not, no one but Syren could manage such an affront to the gathered court with quite so much grace.

"YOU TOOK DANCING LESSONS," I accused, yanking Voss into our—*our!*—bedroom and closing the door behind us, then pushing him up against the solid oak of it. "You dance like a courtier."

His smile was as blinding as the sun, and my breath caught in my throat at the sight of it. "You think so? I mean, I did. I asked Syren to teach me. I didn't want to embarrass you at our wedding feast, and I guess he agreed because he taught me, and didn't even make fun of me for being a clumsy oaf like usual."

It was an impressive thing, since Syren made fun of everyone for being a clumsy oaf, including the king. Sometimes I wondered if it was how he expressed love. On the other hand, I doubted Voss could have taken it in this case, and Syren had gained a good feel for how much prodding a human could endure to their ego before cracking. Usually, he learned it in the process of deliberately breaking them.

Instead of saying any of that, I smiled up at Voss. My husband. “You went to Syren for dancing lessons, for me.”

“Maybe.” His voice went low and soft, that timbre that made it vibrate through my bones and made me want to shiver all over. It also never failed to make my cock take note, which had often been embarrassing or inconvenient.

But not tonight.

No, we were married now. We’d waited years for this night, with sweet kisses and longing looks and Syren’s amusement at the mere concept of celibacy. And now Voss was mine and I was his and I was absolutely going to need him naked right away.

I started tearing at his clothes with all my usual grace, and he chuckled, letting me for a moment before leaning in and putting a finger under my chin, tipping it up so that he could kiss me, long and slow, his tongue sliding between my lips in a way he’d rarely done before, because it—well, it got us both worked up, and he didn’t want to break his promise to his sister, and neither did I. It was maybe the sweetest thing I’d ever heard about, and besides, I’d never try to get Voss to break his word.

I fell into the kiss, my hands going slack at my sides as he devoured me, ignoring the layers of clothes between us and simply wrapping an arm around me and pulling me tight against him. His warmth was perfect in the cool fall air, even hotter than the fire stoked across from the bed.

When I went entirely lax and pliant against him, he picked me up and carried me to the bed, like I weighed nothing. All those muscles I’d spent years perfecting with sword practice were irrelevant, compared to his solid, broad self, and when he

stripped his shirt off, laying it carefully to one side, my breath caught at just the sight of him.

I reached toward him like a toddler demanding sweets, but he just smiled at me and reached for his hose. He carefully stripped us both, laying out each piece of clothing across the chair in the corner. Perfectly Voss, really. They were the finest clothes either of us was likely to ever own, and he would be slow and calm and meticulous to preserve them. He was always slow and calm and meticulous.

The man was perfect.

I realized as he was folding my belt that I'd forgotten Syren's bottle of oil, but before I even had a chance to open my mouth, he produced his own from his folded tunic.

When I cocked my head, his cheeks flushed dark and he glanced away. "I, uh, asked His Majesty for some advice. He gave me this."

"You—you asked the king for sex advice? About me?" I almost wanted to die of mortification on Voss's behalf.

Still, he approached the bed and lay there beside me, cupping my cheek in one palm again, and smiled down at me like I was the dearest thing he'd ever seen. "He's the only man I know married to another man, and who's bigger than me. Seemed like he might know how to deal with that."

It was true. Voss had grown up and out even more as time had passed, tall and broad and muscled like few other men were, other than the king. He was gorgeous flat planes of muscle and work-roughened hands, and I wanted every single bit of it for myself.

Correction: I *had* every bit of it for myself.

I leaned in to press another kiss to his lips, not pulling away till both of us were breathless. "Then maybe you should show me what he taught you, since you went to all that trouble."

His smile this time was almost shy, a touch hesitant, as though he were nervous. Which of course he was, because so was I. We'd waited a long time, and this was the one way we

still didn't know each other. Syren's advice came back to me, and I decided I would do my best to guide him if he needed that.

He nudged my thighs apart, sliding between them, and the sight alone was enough to make my heart start pounding. How was he so beautiful?

Also, how was his cock that big?

I'd always assumed we would try sex in all the ways, though having him inside me had been my favored fantasy, but lying there on our marriage bed, looking at his cock, I suddenly wondered if that had been a terrible idea.

Voss reached out and ran a finger down my chin. "You want to start the other way? That's fine, I just thought since you, ah—" He broke off with another flush, obviously remembering our discussions on the matter. The nights I'd told him about my fantasies for our wedding night.

And damn it all, this *was* my wedding night, and I was going to get what I'd been wanting. So instead of saying anything, I slid closer to him, spreading my legs farther and resting them on his muscled thighs. I bit my lip and hoped it looked sexy instead of terrified.

It seemed to work, since Voss took in a sharp breath, then nodded to himself. He opened the oil, slicking his fingers and reaching for me, hesitant at first, then with more confidence when I didn't shrink away.

The first finger was . . . well, it was strange. I let my eyes drift shut, trying to feel instead of focus. "You tell me if it's too much," he demanded in his low, rumbly voice that—oh gods, did he know how sexy that was? I pressed back against his hand, biting my lip and nodding in acquiescence.

When he added a second finger, a whimper slipped out of me, unbidden, but it was becoming less strange and more—hells, I didn't know what to call it. My guts were squirming oddly, my balls tight and cock as hard as it had ever been, lying against my stomach, completely ignored.

Part of me wanted to ask him to touch it, touch me, but I was pretty sure if he did, I was going to go off like an untried lad seeing a flash of ankle, and that wasn't the impression I wanted to remember from my wedding night.

The third finger, added quicker than the second, startled a moan out of me, and a second later, all three pressed up and I could barely breathe as stars shot across my vision. I gasped and bucked up, eyes flying open to stare at my husband.

He was looking down at me, slightly uncertain, but clearly pleased with himself. "I did it right?"

I let out another whimper and let my head fall back to the bed, offering up a tiny nod and another whimper, barely managing to whine out a little, "Right."

Apparently, that was enough of that, because he pulled his hands away from me and turned to oiling up his cock. His glistening brown skin, his fist sliding over the thick shaft of his cock, was an image I knew I'd take through every single day with me, for the rest of my life, and it made me want to whimper some more. Instead, I arched up, pushing my ass toward him.

I'd definitely been right. This was what I wanted. The opposite too, sure, but this was what I'd jerked off a thousand times thinking about over the last few years.

When he was finished, he palmed one of my ass cheeks, pulling me closer, and steadied his cock with the other hand, guiding it straight to my hole. It slid in with the barest friction, but even with the oil, it was so damn much. More than the fingers, and so—

The light brush of his fingertips along my shaft was almost enough to set me off, despite the overwhelming sensation of his cock. "Voss," I hissed, not sure if I wanted him to stop, or just keep going until I came.

His slow smile told me he knew exactly what I was thinking. Part of me wanted to ask just how detailed Audric had gotten when Voss had asked for advice, and the rest of me

never, ever wanted to think of my king and sex in the same moment.

That was wiped from my mind a moment later when Voss's groin was flush against me, and he started to pull back out. How was that even more overwhelming than it had been going in?

He took the first few strokes excruciatingly slow, and all I could do was whimper and scrabble my hands uselessly against the firm muscle of his chest, trying and failing to say anything more coherent than his name.

Then, he pulled out and shoved back in in one smooth, quick motion, and my eyes rolled back in my head. Fuck me, no wonder people acted like complete jackasses over sex. It was amazing. I wrapped my legs around behind him, arching up into him as he slid into me again and again, until all I could do was gasp and pant and *feel* as the pressure built inside me.

When he wrapped his hand around my cock once more, it was too much, and a few strokes sent me flying over the edge, warmth flooding my whole body as Voss—as my husband—fucked me into our marriage bed, his cock the only thing that felt real in the whole world.

I lay there, spent and panting as he continued, his own pace going ragged as his breath before he stilled above me, groaning and tightening his hands on my thighs. Somehow, he was even more beautiful that way than every other.

Perhaps because this was just for me. This sheer joy had been found in my body, as mine had been in his. Spent though I was, I couldn't wait to try again.

After a moment, he slid out and lay beside me on the bed, still panting and looking me over. "Right?" he asked again.

"Perfect," I corrected.

He grinned back, slipping his fingers through mine between us on the bed. "Can't wait to try it the other way. You sounded like that was fun."

I giggled and leaned against him, then finally met his eye for a long, quiet moment. "Me too. And then again for the rest

of our lives.”

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THE BLACK KING BLURB



Prince Revelin was slaughtered beside his family. Now, his cousin King Verlyn holds the throne, and peace reigns in Nenyth.

That is the story peasants tell, huddling before their hearths while the kingdom falls into ruin, afraid to speak the truth even in whispers. There is no peace, only the brutality of the beasts and bandits that roam the countryside while the usurper king sits his throne, blind to our suffering.

I've felt it every second of my life, held back by illness that's gripped me since childhood. But a wish and a promise brings me the health and strength I need to set things right—find the rightful king and restore Nenyth.

If I fail, my promise will be broken, my life lost alongside it, but word of a rogue knight reaches our hamlet—a warrior skilled enough to teach me the ways of the blade. In my father's footsteps, I'll become a knight and restore justice.

My name is Quentin, and if it takes all that I have and all I've ever hoped for, I will save my kingdom, my people, and my prince.

The Black King is an MM epic fantasy serial novel. For all of 2022, join Quentin and our knight errant as they fight back the dark. Full of violence, hope, and more than a little swordplay.

EXCERPT FROM THE BLACK
KING

GREER

TW: blood, violence, broken things, murder, a sobbing child, the kind of stuff that's going to send the prince of Nenyth straight to therapy. Greer too. Stay safe, foxy friends.

Revelin, Prince of Nenyth and heir to the throne, was trembling.

He had pressed himself back between his feather pillows, curled up tight, and hugged his legs to his chest. He looked small, but then, he was small. He'd not yet seen his fifth summer, and had the strangest look—like a spotted cow, with his pale skin and black hair. His eyes, also dark, were so large that, most of the time, he looked both baleful and sweet. Now, he was staring, the whites visible all around his obsidian irises.

He had thrown back the curtains around his bed. Typically, he slept with them closed, but something was happening in the castle. There was a threat stalking the corridors, and he wanted to see it coming.

Truth was, if danger was coming for him, there was little that he could do to stop it. That was my duty.

I'd been asleep in the quarters I shared with my husband. Kent and I both served as royal guards, and though we'd discovered over the many years we had been together, that each other's proximity was more help than hindrance in the execution of duty, we had agreed that every so often, it was pure luxury to have the bed entirely to oneself.

So I had been alone, spread comfortably across the full width of the bed, when Kent had burst into the room. I'd

woken for the sound at once, but before I had stood, he'd been pulling on my arm, hastening me to my feet.

“There's been a murder,” he announced, his voice hard as steel, his jaw set. Already, I was dressing, shoving my long shirt into breeches and going for the belt that had my scabbard.

As I hastily pulled myself together, Kent had gone quiet. His gray brows furrowed. Once I had myself in order, I paused.

“It was William,” he said, voice low and heavy.

I froze. “William is dead?”

Kent shook himself and met my eyes—and in my whole life, I'd never forget that look of abject betrayal.

“No. William killed the queen.”

I'd never seen him look so stone-faced and angry, but there hadn't been time to process his words—what it meant for William, the head of the royal guard—to betray us all, before Kent was rushing me out the door, pressing me to swear to him to protect the prince, to trust no one else with his life.

To play nursemaid to a child while my husband and partner fought rebels and the queen lay dead.

It ached, like my heart was tied to my husband out there, a rope tugging me in his direction. But before me was a small child who needed protection and care and—well, perhaps I wasn't the most maternal of guardians, but I would not leave the hope and future of my kingdom without defenses.

“What is happening?” the prince asked in a high warble, a little like a songbird.

“I do not know.”

His shoulders flinched, and I knew I had been too stern, too sharp. With a sigh, I shut my eyes and tried to relax my forehead, my shoulders. I tried to summon a serene smile to my face before I looked his way again. With slow, quiet steps, I came to the edge of his bed and sank down, settling my hand on his bare foot.

“There is danger. An attack on the the palace. But I am here, and you are safe.” I could not tell him not to be afraid. At the very least, his mother was dead. His father and sister could be next.

Those were matters to discuss with him when the danger had passed, when Kent came and told us it was safe to come back. Better still, they were matters for the boy’s father to discuss with him while he held him on his lap. That was a kind of comfort I could not give him.

A knock sounded on the door—the same quick rap, followed by two slow beats, that the guard had used for ages.

The door was locked, but I was desperate for news. I stood. “I’ll see who that is.”

Prince Revelin nodded, pulling his blanket up over his knees. He looked mere seconds from diving under his coverlet as I approached the door.

“Hello?”

“Greer?” a feminine voice called from the other side. “It’s Rebekah. Open up.”

Rebekah had served in the guard longer than I had. Longer than Kent. If there were anyone left in the castle to trust, she’d be in that number.

Still, I braced my foot behind the door as a stopper before cracking it open.

Her face was flushed red and sweaty, her chest heaving.

“I’d thought you would be with Kent,” she said, out of breath. Her palm pressed the door, but caught on my foot, it didn’t budge. A quick frown twisted her features. “What’s the matter?”

“Nothing at all. I am here with the prince, I—”

“Kent sent me,” Rebekah rasped, leaning forward. “You must go. We’ll take the prince and flee. When things are safe, we’ll return. But now, Greer, we *must go*.”

There was something harried and frantic in her that—that did not seem normal. I frowned. “I’ll wait for Kent to—”

“Kent is dead,” she hissed.

The words hit me like an avalanche, unbelievable and overwhelming. It was then that I took in the blood on her sword, the sharpness of her smile. That blood could be anyone’s, those emotions caused by fear or strain or bitterness. Only ... I knew. I knew that blood was Kent’s, and I knew she meant me harm.

“I’ll wait for my husband.”

I pushed the door, but before it shut all the way, before I could turn the lock, Rebekah shoved her full weight against the door. It crashed open, banging into my nose with a hard crack. My vision blurred. I tasted iron in my throat.

Then her sword was coming my way, the tip shining red. I barely had time to jump back, was already grabbing my hilt.

The clang of steel on steel filled the room as she stalked toward me. Off my game. Losing. Each blow sent me farther and farther back.

Kent was dead. Rebekah, a long-time friend, meant to kill me too.

“Step aside,” she growled between her clenched teeth. “Leave. I will not follow you.”

“Fuck you.”

There was an opening, her arm too high. I lunged for her leg. I cut it, seeing red and hungry for blood. And Rebekah cried out.

I’d never know if it was a battle cry, or one of pain. The next second, she had a knife in her free hand, had stabbed toward my chest.

I gasped. Stumbled.

That saved me.

The point of her knife pierced flesh and sank into bone. It was a grating, full body pain that made my vision sway like a

flickering candle.

I fell to the floor, looking up from beneath the blond hair that'd fallen over my eyes to see her rictus grin.

“Enough. Die quietly, like your poor, dear husband.”

She didn't know her blow had missed its mark. It hadn't slid between my ribs, but hit higher and stuck, and while every breath, every beat of my heart, throbbed with pain, I would not die so easily.

She turned her back on me, searching for the prince, still tucked between his pillows.

“Hello, sweet piglet. Come out and play.” Rebekah stalked toward the end of the bed. I forced myself onto my hands and knees, my vision swimming, pain sparking down my arm, and the searing heat of pain tempered by the cold slick of fresh blood.

“We'll have a roast,” Rebekah sneered. Prince Revelin screeched and scrambled away from her.

“Come now,” she said. “One quick skewer and it's all done.”

One skewer. That was enough.

Her attention was off me. On the prince.

I summoned all that was left of my strength and shoved myself to my feet. I lost no momentum as I staggered forward in large steps, lifted my blade, and slid it forward.

It pierced the back of her neck, severing her spine just beneath the base of her skull. Steel filled her throat. It sliced her flesh and pierced her neck, and I heard her gurgling gasp, even over the prince's screaming.

Gasping, I let go and braced myself on the bed's wooden post.

Rebekah fell forward. The point of my sword stuck through the hollow at the base of her throat, and when she hit the floor, the force pushed it through her flesh. The weight of

it tilted and fell, clattering against the stone floor as her blood began to flow, staining the slate a rich reddish brown.

I panted, hair hanging over my forehead. Blood leaked, sticky and thick, from my nose. From the wound on my shoulder, it was ruby red and thinner, soaking through my shirt until it clung to my breast.

I was dazed, but a sob and a whimper pulled me out of it. Prince Revelin sat against his pillows, shoved into the farthest corner of his bed, his face shining with tears and snot. His dark hair clung to his wet cheeks, and the tears kept flowing even when he noticed me looking at him and squeezed his eyes shut tight.

With the back of my sleeve, I rubbed the blood off my nose. There was nothing much to do with my other wounds, but I tore the collar of my nightshirt open and pressed one of Prince Revelin's handkerchiefs to the wound. A scarf wrapped tightly held it in place, and I shrugged into a dressing gown.

Once my appearance was less nightmarish, I found my way around the bed. His breath jumped when I lifted my hand, before I even touched him, an animal instinct telling him to be afraid. But when I brushed my knuckle across his jaw, he gasped and the tension went out of him a second later.

"Shh, little lion." I cupped his quivering chin. His tears smeared under the pad of my thumb when I stroked his cheek. "I need you to do something for me. Will you try?"

His head bobbed against her hand as he nodded, eager to be given direction and purpose so he could do more than simply sit and be afraid.

"Put on your trousers and boots. Grab your coat. We're leaving."

Prince Revelin swung his feet over the side of the bed. His toes did not touch the rug beneath, and it took a bounce or two to get him standing, but once he was, he took off, shoving his legs into trousers and lacing them up himself. Usually, there were servants to help him dress, so his fingers were clumsy as he tried to mimic his valet's quick efficiency.

Nevertheless, he had that in hand, and I could do more than stand and gape at the boy. I owed him—and Kent—better.

I picked up my blade from the floor and wiped the blade on Rebekah's jerkin before sliding it back into its scabbard at my hip.

The prince's room was fine and large. The ceilings were high. Fine tapestries were hung on every wall. But so much was too heavy or cumbersome to take with them. I needed something light, something that would allow me to keep my hands free, something Prince Revelin could carry himself.

My gaze landed on a small chest, pushed to the edge of the prince's low dressing table. It held buttons, cufflinks and gloves, broaches, rings, and all the trappings of a young royal.

It was valuable; it was enough.

If we had to escape, the contents of that chest could keep us fed and safe for weeks. And if I returned with a living, healthy young prince, but missing a handful of jewels, I doubted the king and queen would miss them overmuch.

I snatched it up and turned to the young prince, who had tucked his shirttails into his trousers and was buttoning his thick woolen cloak about his neck.

“Are you ready?”

He nodded, his coal-black eyes filled with bottomless sorrow.

“Then we'll go.” I pushed the trunk into his soft pink hands. “Hold onto this. Stay near me. And if anything happens, if I fall, run. Run, and do not stop until Kent finds you. Do you understand?”

Another silent nod, milk teeth puckering his bottom lip.

“Good. Stay close. Be brave. You'll make it through this.”

If it cost me everything, I'd see to that.

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And a great big thank you to you, readers! We couldn't do this amazing job and write all the kissing books under the rainbow without your faith, energy, and support.

You're the best. <3

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ABOUT SAM BURNS

Sam is an author of LGBTQIA+ fiction, mostly light-hearted fantasy romances. Most of her books include a little violence, a fair amount of swearing, and maybe a sex scene or two. Oh, and let's not forget a fox. He'd be offended at being forgotten.

She is a full-time writer who lives in the Midwest with her husband and cat. Someday, she plans to be a full-time writer who lives near the ocean with her husband and cat.

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