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# COVENANTS

by

**Lorna Freeman**

## TROOPER

A horse soldier, Rabbit is nothing but a grunt in the Royal Army of Iversterre. A lost grunt, seeing as how his unit can't seem to find its way out of the mountains. But help comes from an unexpected source: a Faena—or "magical"—from the Border kingdom.

## NOBLE

The Faena, a mountain cat named Laurel, blows Rabbit's cover. Turns out he's not just some poor Border farm boy turned trooper, but the son of Iversterre nobility. And their chance meeting is nothing of the kind. Laurel needs Rabbit's help to stop a war.

## MAGE

Smugglers from Iversterre have been making runs into the Border, killing its sacred beings. It's enough to make even the calmest Border-born angry. Especially Rabbit. For he's been keeping another secret about himself. And it's about to explode—in a big way....

The Border trounced Iversterre once. It will happen again. Unless Rabbit can keep his cool and learn the rules of a game he's never wanted to play...

To my mom and dad,  
who would always buy me books  
instead of candy.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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the right doors, but shoved me through them; and John Schimmel, Jody Heaston, Sara Robinson, and David Elliott, who were with me for the entire birthing process.

## Chapter One

We were lost. We'd been on a routine patrol, just like hundreds of others, but this time, while making sure the mountains above the small town of Freston were bandit free, we had somehow mislaid the way back. I was scouting ahead of my troop, volunteered by my troop mates on account of me being from the Border—a child of the Earth or some nonsense that was always showing up in children's pantomimes and street dramas. Nonsense or not, after over a week wandering about without any sign of a familiar landmark, my captain was desperate enough to half believe that I could find a way home by smell and how leaves grew on trees. My tracking skills, though, were learned in low-lying forest, not above the timberline where the only thing that grew taller than grass was some feeble-looking scrub. I had no idea where we were and didn't know how to get one.

I headed up a trail that looked like one we had gone up a couple times the previous day, a few more times the day before, and at least once the day before that. My horse climbed it with easy familiarity, he and the path having become so well acquainted, and he needed no urging to stop once we reached the crest. I hunched my shoulders against the biting spring wind, turned my horse to reexplore the lea, and found myself staring at the Faena standing before me as he contemplated me back.

There were all sorts of holy folk and vicars in the Border, each with their own lore and ritual that were just different enough to cause fights whenever they came together. Once, when I was a child, I watched wide-eyed at a Solemn Assembly as the Witch Gless went flying by upside down, held by the ankles by invisible hands with his ceremonial robes down around his ears because he insisted on a pause in the invocation that Rises With The Dawn found blasphemous.

But nobody messed with the Faena.

Faena came from all the Border races. Part priest, part intercessor, part justicer, they were the warp that the wool of the Border was woven into. Faena went out before the Border's army during the last war with Iversterre, chanting and singing praises. They all came back. Most of Iversterre's Royal Army did not. The one who strode the Weald around my family's stead was an ash tree sprite who took on a nest of trappers after a wolf petitioned her on account of the pelts the trappers had who were once kin of his. When she was finally through with them, the trappers were preaching piety, purity and the sanctity of the land. Did I say that no one messed with the Faena?

This one was a mountain cat.

He stood on two legs, a bit taller than me, with different-colored beads and feathers woven into his tawny head fur and attached to pointed ears. His amber eyes caught the sun and glowed as his tail twitched and played in the breeze. Seeing he had my attention, he reached under his coat into a side pouch and produced a napkin that he unwrapped, revealing a couple of honeycakes. I dismounted and smoothed the creases out of my tabard.

"Rabbit," I said, pressing my hands together.

"Laurel," he rumbled, pressing his paws.

"You stride this place?" I asked.

"For now," Laurel replied. He smiled, showing sharp teeth, and offered the honeycakes again. I reached out and took one; he took the other and sat down to eat.

I hunkered down beside him doing the same, keeping a tight hold on my horse's reins in case he took a notion to bolt. But he was unfazed by my eating companion and merely reached down for a mouth of grass. Finished with the honeycake, Laurel twisted to the side, produced a waterskin and drank a long swallow before offering it to me. I took it—the water was cool going down my throat and I sighed when I was done, wiping my mouth. Handing the skin back, I took a breath to speak but then heard hooves against stone and solid earth. This time I twisted around to see my troop coming up the trail.

"There he is. Sir," Lieutenant Groskin said.

While the Border wasn't exactly a bastion of tolerance, most learned to leave alone what left you alone—and if someone was minded to share food and drink, you figured that you'd just been given a chance to strike one of many meal covenants. They could last anywhere from an hour to as long as both your bloodlines should live. Fiat. So it didn't bother me, a human, to be eating and drinking with someone who licked his claws clean with delicate swipes of a cat's tongue—but it did upset the troop. There was a lot of unbuckling, loosening and handling of weapons as they surrounded us.

Captain Suiden leaned forward in his saddle. "What's going on, Rabbit?"

I stood up and shook my pants legs down. Darn uniform never seemed to hang right.

"We're lost," I replied. I heard the snicks of helm visors being lowered and hurried up my explanation.

"And I figured that this person could help us find our way out of here, sir."

The captain stared at me. "How do you know it won't lead us to its cooking pot?"

"Too right," Groskin muttered.

I opened my mouth but before I could say anything, Laurel Faena stood. His beads and feathers clacked, shifted and fluttered as he made a graceful bow to the captain, his tail balancing out behind him. He had acquired a tall, carved staff, also adorned with feathers, beads and knotted cloth, that he held in one paw. He gave a shorter bow to me, one paw touching his mouth, then chest. I knew it, food treaty. I did the same, feeling the weight of everyone's stares. Straightening from my bow, I watched Laurel walk up to and then through the barrier the troopers made with their horses, only to run into our lieutenant.

Lieutenant Groskin had been assigned to the mountain patrol because somewhere in his army past he had been a bully to the wrong people; so he was only being himself when he leaned on his pommel, hand on his sword hilt, a nasty smile on his face.

"And where do you think you're going—" The lieutenant broke off, surprised, as his horse Fiend (it fit) sort of side-hopped out of the way, gave a soft whicker and reached out to gently nip Laurel's ear as the cat passed.

"Well, now, that's famous," Trooper Jeffen whispered next to me.

I kept my face straight as we all turned and followed the Faena as if he pulled us on strings. He stopped at the edge of the same steep trail that I and later my mates had just come up, and pointed. A moan rose up from the troop and I lost all desire to laugh.

We had been up and down that pox-rotted path for several days, each time seeing nothing but mountain

and more mountain, and now all of a sudden there was the trail leading to the road that flowed down the mountainside into the patchwork of farms, groves and estates that surrounded Freston as it nestled in its bowl-like valley. In the town itself we could see the green of gardens, squares and tree-lined avenues against the red roof tiles of homes, the blue of businesses, and the gold of government. We could make out the caravans traveling up the King's Road to the Kingsgate, which opened onto the main marketplace. We could even see the faded purple tiles of the Royal Garrison near the Westgate, and in the middle of the walled town, the silver and crystal spires of the church rose tall, blazing with the reflected light of the sun. All hard to miss. We stared, hearing the hoots and jeers that would greet us when we got back to the base.

Recovered from his encounter with the Faena, Groskin sidled his horse up to the captain's. "An ambush by a magical would go down much better than us saying we've been chasing our arses for the last week. Sir. In plain view of home. Sir."

Captain Suiden turned and looked long and hard at Laurel, who looked back at the captain, his face calm. Our captain then let out a sigh and kned his horse.

"Tell the men to move it out, Lieutenant." He started down the trail, the wind blowing his horse's tail behind them like a streamer.

Groskin barely got the words out before the entire troop was behind the captain, fighting hard not to be in front of the captain. I let out my own breath, and mounted my horse. As I started to follow the troop, I felt a brush against my palm. I looked in my hand and saw a red feather, then turned and looked at Laurel Faena, who was looking straight back at me. He once more touched his mouth, then heart; then he reached up and touched the feathers remaining on his staff. I had just obligated me and any offspring I'd have forever and ever. Oh, hell. Fiat.

"Eyes forward, trooper," Lieutenant Groskin said from behind me.

I turned to the front again and Groskin pulled even.

"You're so sodding heedless, Rabbit," he began. "That thing—"

"Laurel Faena, sir," I said.

"—could have had you six ways from Feast Day without raising a sweat—if it sweated."

"We had pacted a meal covenant, sir."

"Covenant. With a magical." Groskin looked over at me and saw the feather. "Is it serious?"

I nodded. "Yes, sir."

"What have you gotten yourself into, Rabbit?" Lieutenant Groskin frowned. "Will it involve the troop?"

"Don't know, sir. All of us were lost and now all are going home."

"Bloody poxy damnation," Lieutenant Groskin said, running his hand over his face. "We'll have to tell the captain—and the commander when we get back. After everyone stops laughing."

"Yes, sir," I said. I swore I heard the wind snickering.

## Chapter Two

It wasn't as bad as we thought it would be when we got back to the garrison that afternoon. It was worse.

A day or so late and Commander Ebner figured we just got held up by a bit of nature, like a rockslide or sudden storm. Three days late and he worried that we had injuries or somehow lost horses. Eight days late and he knew that there was an all-out war going on in the mountains and he was going to our rescue. He was mounted, having just given the speech to the men about how they rode to avenge our massacre, when we came through the garrison gates into the horse yard. As soon as he saw us, he cried out, his mustache quivering with relief. It stopped vibrating, though, as he saw there were no bandages, bruises or any other sign of our epic struggle to win free so we could warn the town of the massed hordes sweeping down on it. We didn't even have a shaving nick.

"Captain Suiden," Commander Ebner said. His voice echoed in the yard.

"Sir!" our captain replied.

"Over a week late, Captain," the commander stated.

"Yes, sir!"

"Well?"

It was fascinating to see how the laughter started in the far corners of the yard and moved inward, sort of like the reverse of a stone's ripples in a pond. By the time Captain Suiden finished telling how we wandered the mountains, unable to find the trail home, our would-be rescuers were holding their sides as they gasped and wheezed and swayed in their saddles. The laughter stopped, though, as Suiden got to the part of meeting the Faena and I held my breath until I realized that he was going to leave out the meal covenant. Many of the more straight-laced lads already looked sideways at me because of my Border upbringing. I didn't want them to know that I'd made a pact with someone they wouldn't hesitate to call demonic. I curled my fingers around the feather I still held in my hand, praying hard that no one in my troop had overheard me tell Groskin. Or Groskin tell Suiden.

"A magical," Commander Ebner said. He smoothed his mustache. "This close to town."

"Yes, sir," Captain Suiden said.

"Dismiss your men, Captain, and come with me." Commander Ebner wheeled his horse and noticed the troopers still gathered in the horse yard. He waved his hand at them and the other captains gave orders to stand down.

"Lieutenant Groskin," Captain Suiden said. "Please dismiss the men." He then followed the commander to the stables.

We barely waited for Groskin's bellow of "Dismissed!" before scattering like beetles from under an overturned rock.

It was too much to hope for that the groomers hadn't heard what happened, but I managed to get out of the stables somewhat whole. (I was a little bruised when I accidentally bumped into Groomer Hedley while he was in the middle of a funny story about blind horsemen. I apologized and helped him up but darned if I didn't bump into him again. Clumsy me. I got to my barracks and headed for my cot. I needed to hide the feather and I figured the best place for it was in my footlocker. Under the guise of changing out of my uniform, I shoved the feather under a stack of my smalls and for the first time in days I took a

deep breath and let it out.

"Sheesh, don't be such a priss, Rabbit. A little dirt won't hurt you."

I looked up and saw Jeffen at his cot next to mine. He grinned at me. "Who'd think that a farm boy from the Border would be such a coxcomb?"

"Heigh-ho, if you'd take a bath now and again, maybe, just maybe, you'd get lucky." I grinned back as I slipped on my dressing robe and shut my locker. "Then again, maybe not. A bath wouldn't improve your face."

"Pound sand, peacock," Jeff said. "The lovely ladies lust after my luscious, uh, body."

"Yeah, right." I turned away, thinking to go to the baths and hide out in the steam. "They'd have to use a shovel to find it first—"

"Border puke."

Blast. I stopped. Blocking me was Lieutenant Slevoic. Lieutenant Groskin liked to browbeat gentlemen's sons. Slevoic liked to hit. Anyone. Next to him stood Ryson, and behind them Slevoic's nasties and hanger-ons.

"Sir!" I said.

"I heard that you were playing pattyfoot with a magic mutant, puke," Slevoic said.

"Captain Suiden hasn't given me leave to discuss that, sir!" I watched Ryson drop his smirk.

Slevoic laughed and leaned into me. "He's not here—"

"Heed Captain!"

At the shout I was very careful not to let any relief show on my face. I looked to the side, expecting to see Captain Suiden at the door and found myself staring into Suiden's face. Slevoic and friends were so intent on intimidating me that they hadn't noticed the captain's approach, and no one felt the need to inform them. I froze where I was and saw the captain's eyes shift.

"Trooper Ryson."

"Sir!"

"You will report immediately to the stable master for detail duty." This time I was careful not to grin as Ryson hurried out of the barracks. Cleaning tack and shoveling muck while listening to Groomer Hedley's funny stories might curb his appetite for weaseling.

The captain's eyes shifted back to me and his brows rose at my robe. "Trooper Rabbit."

"Sir!"

"I assume there's a reason why you're wearing that."

"I was going to the baths, sir!"

"I see. If you would, then, please wait a moment." He turned to Slevoic. "Is there a reason why you're in my barracks, Lieutenant?"

"We just wanted to visit with our friends, sir," Slevoic said.

"Oh?" Suiden asked. "You expect to find some here?" Slevoic opened his mouth, but the captain cut him off. "Dismissed, Lieutenant. Now." Suiden didn't say anything for a count of ten after Lieutenant Slevoic and company had left; then all he said was that we would wait for Lieutenant Groskin to arrive from the stables, which he soon did. Captain Suiden made sure we were all accounted for, then had Groskin shut the door.

"Listen up, men. You are to remain in the barracks by order of the commander. You will not leave nor will you receive visitors. Evening meal will be delivered." The captain caught sight of my robe again. "So will ample water for those of you who desire to wash. Lieutenant Groskin, remain here to make sure that these orders are obeyed. That is all."

"Captain?" Lieutenant Groskin asked.

"I will talk with you when I return, Lieutenant." Captain Suiden turned to me. "Rabbit, you're with me."

"Permission to change into my uniform, sir," I said.

Captain Suiden actually smiled. "No. Commander Ebner will get over the robe, eventually, but he wants us there a couple of moments ago." At that, he turned and headed for the door as I followed.

When we arrived at the commander's quarters, we were ushered immediately into his presence. We stood at attention, the candlelight highlighting my robe's vivid blues, reds and purples, and I wondered what the commander had heard about me, because his mustache stayed still.

"At ease, men. Sit down," Commander Ebner said, as his aide shut the door. We waited for him to sit; then we seated ourselves in the chairs drawn up to his desk. I made sure that there were no gaps in my robe, as I didn't want to flash my superior officers.

The commander fished out a piece of paper from a neat stack. "Trooper Rabbit, no patronymic. Father, Lord Rafe ibn Chause, third brother of the current Lord Chause; mother, Lady Hilga eso Flavan, daughter of the current Lord Flavan—"

"They've taken the names Two Trees and Lark, sir," I said.

"—who thirty years ago renounced their Houses and moved to the Border to become farmers"—Commander Ebner read a little further—"and weavers." He sighed and set aside the paper.

"Why did you leave the Border, Trooper Rabbit?"

How does one rebel against rebels? My parents had cast off the privileges of position and rank to raise their family in the Border, unfettered by hypocrisy and oppressing conformity, to embrace earth, cottage goods, and the fae that lived wild and free, uncorrupted by the effluence of human governance. Fiat.

So, how did I one-up that? I ran away to the city and became a horse soldier in the Royal Army of King Jusson Golden Eye.

"I wanted to see the world, sir," I replied.

Commander Ebner looked back down on the paper. "Thirty-two degrees to the throne with Chause, and forty degrees with Flavan." He looked up at me again. "You could have joined at Iversly and become an officer, perhaps even a royal guard."

"I'm not an aristo, sir. I'm a farmer's son."

He looked at my robe. "Hmm. Yes." He shifted in his chair. "You met a Faena during this last patrol."

"Yes, sir."

"Do you know the history of Iversterre?" Commander Ebner asked.

"Yes, sir. Or at least a version of it."

"Hmm, I'm sure," the commander said. "We have our own version too. The truth probably falls somewhere in the middle." I silently disagreed, remembering the long-lived elves' tales of harrings, burnings and killings.

"There were magicals here once," Commander Ebner said. "But as the kingdom expanded, the magicals withdrew—until Iversterre reached what is now the Border. Then all hell broke loose."

"The Border War, Rabbit," Captain Suiden said.

"Yes," Commander Ebner said, "with the Border army led by these Faenas." He smoothed his mustache. "We were spanked hard, trooper, and sent to bed without our supper. A most shocking and humiliating defeat. We were very fortunate that they allowed us to sue for peace, and now we ignore the Border, hoping very hard that it ignores us back."

It didn't. The Border was very much aware of its southern neighbor, like a pebble in the shoe or a grain of sand in the eye.

"My grandfather was one of the lucky few to come home," Ebner said. "Grandpapa used to tell us stories of how even the trees—" He broke off. "Well, enough of that."

"Yes, sir," I said.

The commander leaned forward. "Now one of my units comes back a week late from what should've been a routine patrol saying that they were lost a half day's ride from and in plain view of home, that there was a magical—a Faena!—where there've been none since before my greatgrandfather's time, and that a trooper made a pact with it. After which this Faena showed said troop the way home. What do you think the Lord Commander will say to that?"

"Uh," I said.

"Right." Ebner sat back in his chair and I watched his mustache ruminate. Captain Suiden was staring at a candle. The garrison commander sighed again. "Well, there's no help for it. We have to find out what's going on."

"Sir?"

"And since you're the only one who has any knowledge of these Faena outside of old war stories and children's tales, I'm sending you."

"Me, sir?"

"Captain."

"Sir," Captain Suiden replied.

"You and your men will leave tomorrow morning and go back to where you found the magical."



"Yes, sir."

"There you will find out what it wants and report back to me." Commander Ebner stood and we did likewise. "I trust your judgment, Suiden." The commander's mustache flattened against his cheeks. "Just don't start another war. I don't want to have to fight trees."

### Chapter Three

The trumpet awakened us all at sunrise and from three cots down I could smell Ryson, ripe from his tour of duty in the stables. Apparently he had fallen into bed without undressing.

As I rose and stumbled through my morning routine, I kept catching eyes on me. I hadn't been pumped about my meeting with the commander and captain because Groskin took Suiden's ban on visiting to extend to us gossiping, so the air was heavy with speculation, all aimed at me. Finally I took refuge from the covert glances by sitting back down on my cot and working through my morning prayers.

"Heed Captain!"

At the shout, I quickly finished and opening my eyes, stood. I wasn't exactly the last but close enough to get the eye from Lieutenant Groskin, who had followed the troop captain into the room. I checked to see that my trousers were draped properly over my boots, and looked up in time to see the lieutenant suck in a deep breath.

"Lieutenant," Captain Suiden said.

Groskin sputtered as the air escaped again.

"At ease," Captain Suiden said. He waited until we were somewhat relaxed. "Our leave has been canceled." It was the troop's turn to suck air as we stared at our captain. He looked back, his brown eyes calm.

"You are to outfit for an extended tour. The mission's parameters will be explained once we are en route. That is all. Lieutenant Groskin, with me." They both left the building.

I went to my footlocker to start packing, ignoring the now outright stares from my mates.

"What the poxy hell is going on, Rabbit?" Jeffen whispered at me.

"I can't talk about it, Jeff." I bent over to open my locker.

"It's about that damn feather, isn't it?"

I straightened so fast I felt my spine pop and stared at Jeff. "You've been in my locker."

"No. As if I didn't see you with it. Bright red, Rabbit, just like the ones the magical had," Jeff replied.

I looked down at the drab of my uniform and realized that the feather had to have glowed against it. I raised my head again as the aroma of stables engulfed me.

"Border freak," Ryson said, crowding close. "What the hell did you do?" The rest of the troop gathered around, listening hard.

"Back off, Ryson," I said, bringing my arms up to shove him away.

"What's going on here?" Lieutenant Groskin growled from behind us.

My arms dropped and my spine popped again as we jumped to attention.

"Sir! We were just wondering if Trooper Rabbit had anything to do with our canceled leave, sir!" I heaved a mental sigh. Ryson had less sense than a defective sheep.

"Oh, so you think Trooper Rabbit tells the commander what to do?" Groskin asked. My spine stiffened even more at his smile.

"Sir, no, sir! But maybe he had something to do with us getting lost in the first place, sir!" Ryson replied.

Groskin's smile widened and his eyeteeth seemed to lengthen. "How, trooper?"

"Uhm, he's from the Border, sir?"

"And?"

"Maybe he knows some, uh ... I mean, he's always praying, sir!"

"So that got us lost?"

I was praying hard that Groskin's response to Ryson's stupidity wouldn't spill onto me. "He has a feather, sir. From the magical," Jeffen said.

I felt as if I had been slugged in the gut.

"You think that we don't know this?"

It was quiet enough to hear the flags gently flapping in the breeze outside on the commongrounds. Inside, we all stood so straight that we could be used as straightedges, our faces as impassive as stone. I could hear the lieutenant purr as he looked us over and I realized that we had reached his ideal—completely cowed.

"Ryson, you smell like manure." Groskin walked over to a water barrel and thumped the side to see how much water was in it. "You will launder yourself, your bedding, uniform, and anything else you've touched before we leave. Is that clear, trooper?"

"Yes, sir."

"I can't hear you."

"Sir, yes, sir!"

"The rest of you, pack!"

We packed.

After breakfast I went back to my locker for one last check to make sure that I hadn't forgotten anything. I saw the feather, red against the white of my smalls. I picked it up and, after a moment, took a pin from my kit and fastened it to my tabard. I turned and saw I had everyone's attention, so I grinned, showing all my teeth.

"A Border custom."

We assembled in the horse yard prior to departure, the sun just peeking over the garrison's walls. Commander Ebner was there, his mustache stiff against his cheeks. All of our faces were on the haggard side, with the exceptions of Lieutenant Groskin, who was still purring, and Captain Suiden, who was his usual self. His brown eyes rested on my pinned feather for a moment, then moved on, scanning the rest of the troop.

Satisfied, the captain told Lieutenant Groskin to relay the order to move out. He waited until we were all in motion, saluted Commander Ebner, and joined us. The commander didn't say anything as we passed. I supposed it was for drama's sake that he stood there. I could hear future bards sing of our mission:

The sun shone bright that fateful morn,  
As the brave young lads rode out to war,  
O, mustache, waving us on in the gentle breeze—

The melancholy broke and I fought not to laugh, just in case Suiden did have a third eye in the back of his head. I had grown up with Faena and I knew that one Faena does not a war make. Unless war was declared first, and Commander Ebner said we weren't going do that. I hoped not— I didn't want to fight trees either.

## Chapter Four

We reached the mountain lea as the sun hovered a handsbreadth above the horizon. I looked around, feeling as though it was a lifetime since we were last there instead of just yesterday. At the lieutenant's order, I dismounted and walked over to where Laurel and I shared honeycakes and covenants. I wasn't surprised to see no sign of him now.

I caught a faint whiff of the stables and saw Ryson ignore me as he walked by, his tabard still damp. All his uniform changes had been dirty and he had to wear one wet after Groskin's command to clean up. I shivered in sympathy.

"Listen up, men," Groskin called out. "The captain requires your attention." He saw me and waved me over to him. "Rabbit, the captain wants you with him." I followed the lieutenant to Captain Suiden and stood next to him, Groskin on the other side of me. The captain waited until everyone had gathered around and I frowned as I noticed how his brown eyes seemed bright green in his dark face. I then figured that they were probably reflecting the last rays of the sun.

"We have been charged by Commander Ebner to discover the reasons behind our recent adventures," Suiden said, "including the appearance of the magical. To this end, we will search for and make contact with said magical, ascertain why it's here, if it had anything to do with us being lost, and what, if any, threat it may pose." The captain nodded his head at me. "Trooper Rabbit, due to his Border experience, is promoted to lieutenant for the duration of this mission." I forgot the captain's eyes as my own widened. What the bloody hell?

"But he's a just a farm boy from the Border," Ryson blurted out.

"Lieutenant Rabbit's father is ibn Chause and his mother's eso Flavan." The captain waited a beat as the troop stared back, stunned. "Any other questions?" It was a rhetorical question but we all answered "No, sir!"

"You are dismissed."

The breeze played with the pinned feather as I went to help set up camp, but as soon as I touched a bundle it was picked up by a trooper. I stared at him but he didn't make eye contact.

"You're an officer now, Rabbit," Lieutenant Groskin said as he stood beside me.

"A pox on that. Sir." I turned back to grab another bundle but they had all been taken. I walked over to where the tents were being put up and was ignored by the working men. I waited a few moments to see if anyone would acknowledge me, but I was thoroughly snubbed and I felt my face flush. A picture rose up of my da when the Weald council became more impossible than usual, and I drew myself up and looked down my nose.

"Lieutenant Rabbit," Captain Suiden said.

My head snapped around and I stared down my nose at him.

"You need to get your tent up before the light goes," he said. The sun was just sliding beneath the horizon and the wind picked up.

"Sir, as stated in the regulations and procedures, troopers will set up camp, sir!" Ryson said.

Sheep-biting weasel.

"Lieutenant Rabbit will have the same duties and responsibilities he's always had unless and until I say otherwise," Captain Suiden replied. "Have I made myself clear, Trooper Ryson?"

There was silence as we all digested this.

"Have I made myself clear, Trooper Ryson." The captain's voice rose just a little.

"Sir, yes, sir!" Everyone, including myself, Lieutenant Groskin and maybe a few of the horses, shouted.

The captain turned away and we all let out a silent breath. I went to get my tent and found it with Jeff.

"I guess we'll be sharing still as they didn't bring an extra one," he said.

"Yeah." I looked over my shoulder at the captain silhouetted against the last rays of the sun. "Uh, Jeff, did you notice how the captain's eyes—" I broke off at Jeff's blank stare and shrugged. "Never mind." When we finished setting up the tent, we went to the campfire where Trooper Basel led the duty cooks in fixing dinner. There were rabbits roasting over the fire and I felt my gorge rise as the smell washed over me. I went back to my tent where I had dumped my saddlebags and got bread, cheese and fruit. As I walked back to where the men were, Basel waved me over.

"I put aside some tubers for you, Lieutenant."

I sighed. "Basel, you've known me for four years. You don't have to call me lieutenant."

"Yes, sir. Here you go." He gave me a plate filled with steaming hot vegetables.

I sighed again and, finding a spot upwind of the fire, sat down. To my surprise, Jeff joined me and

watched me demolish the food on my plate. "Is it a Border custom that you don't eat meat?"

"No, some are meat eaters." I thought of the wolves, dragons, and others with sharp teeth. Laurel Faena had not looked like he subsisted solely on nuts and berries either. Or honeycakes. "And I eat fish. It's just that the Border turns any notion of what's 'food' on its head." I forked up more food. "There was this farmer in the Weald next to ours who used to raise pigs, until one day he met a forest boar who spent the morning discussing with him the meaning of life and the purpose of the universe. He said afterwards that it sort of put him off pork chops."

"You didn't have any farm animals then?" Jeff asked.

"For food? Just dairy cows and laying chickens. But we also had horses, sheep, a couple of goats, dogs, and cats. Not to mention the snakes, owls and hawks that lived in our outbuildings." Jeff stared and I explained. "They were there for the vermin. As man goes, so go rats and mice."

"So it was a real farm," Jeff said.

"It is a real farm. My family isn't playing gentlefarmers," I said. "They live off what they produce and sell the rest."

"It's just that—I mean, sheesh, Rabbit. You're a fop," Jeff said.

"Too right," someone murmured.

"It's a farm." I saw no one understood and tried again. "There weren't any tailors or fancy cloths. We made our clothes from the wool we got from our sheep, and as I have three older brothers, most of mine were hand-me-downs. By the time I got them, they were brown, lumpy and scratchy—and you don't want to know what my ma's homemade soap did to them." My skin started to itch in memory. "Hell, lads, is wearing handwoven smalls," I said over the laughter, "and I've earned every fine shirt I have." After we finished dinner and the guard rota was set up, I crawled into my tent to sleep. I settled down in my bedding as the flap opened and Jeff came in. He was quiet as he got into his bedroll, and I started to drift off.

"You could have said something," Jeff said.

I blinked sleepily. "Huh?"

"You keep too many damn secrets, Rabbit."

"Said what?"

"About your parents. The magical. The feather."

I was waking up fast. "We all have secrets—" I began.

"Not like these. My secrets aren't anything like yours."

That was probably very true.

"Ibn Chause e Flavan," Jeff said.

"I'm still me," I said. "I haven't changed."

"Yeah, but who are you?"

## Chapter Five

When I awoke the next morning, Jeff was gone and his bedroll was neatly rolled up in the corner with his saddlebags. I took extra care over my prayers, figuring that I needed all the help I could get. I then grabbed my razor, soap and a towel, lifted the tent flap and went out into the sunshine. I came to an abrupt halt, though, as I ran into Captain Suiden. He and Lieutenant Groskin were in front of my tent, both facing Laurel Faena, Suiden with his arms folded, Groskin with his hand on his sword hilt. Behind the Faena stood the troopers, a few making warding signs against evil, but most with their hands also on their swords.

Laurel looked as he had when I'd met him yesterday. He had the same embroidered coat, the same staff, the same feathers and beads woven into his tawny head fur and ears. Both ears now were pressed forward as his eyes met mine. He gave a small bow, as if we were chance-met acquaintances on market day. "Lord Rabbit."

A mutter went through the men at the honorific, and hard looks started coming my way too.

"Assure your men, honored captain," Laurel said, his voice a deep rumble, "that I mean no harm."

"It's kind of hard to believe that when you're found slipping and sneaking into camp," Groskin said, his hand tightening on his sword hilt. A snarl of agreement went through the troop, and Ryson, standing a little apart from the rest, muttered something I couldn't hear. Several nodded and began to pull their swords from their scabbards.

Suiden cast a glance at the men and everyone quieted, those withdrawing their swords freezing midpull. "What do you mean?" the captain asked, looking back at the cat.

"Peace," the Faena said, his whiskers sweeping back in what I'm sure he meant to be a harmless smile. His sharp eyeteeth glistened white in the sunshine.

I could hear the breeze softly whisper over the lea's grass in the sudden silence. Then Laurel laughed, a deep chuffing sound, at Suiden's politely incredulous look. "I speak truth, honored captain. But perhaps we can discuss it in private?" He gestured at my rather goosepimply bare chest. "After Lord Rabbit gets dressed." What the hell? I cast a wild look at the Faena at his intimation that I was to join their counsels, only to catch sight of Suiden's face. The captain's gaze rested on me for an eternity. "You are dismissed, Lieutenant," he said finally.

"Yes, sir!" I said and was by the cookfire before my next heartbeat. Behind me, I could hear Groskin growling at the men to put their bloody swords away and didn't they have duties and if not he could find some for them if they insisted on lollygagging about. There was the sound of hurried feet as the troopers cleared, fast.

I waited a moment for my breathing to even out and then asked the duty cook for hot water.

"Of course, Lieutenant," Basel said, saluting.

"Damn it, Basel, stop that," I said, scowling at him.

"Yes, sir," Basel said. He reached down and produced a bowl. "I found strawberries growing over there"—Basel indicated a sunny spot against a large boulder—"and I saved some for your porridge,

knowing how particular you are in your food, Lieutenant.” Nothing like being toadied before breakfast. Before I could respond, a sour smell washed over me. I checked my feet to see if I had stepped in anything.

"It's Lord Rabbit, Basel," Ryson said, several troopers trailing behind him. Far behind. The smell was coming from him, his wet clothes had mildewed.

"You're rancid, Ryson," I said.

"You've no idea," Ryson's tentmate muttered.

"Why didn't you put your clothes out last night to dry by the fire?" I asked.

"Of course, Lord Rabbit." He batted his eyelashes. "Forgive us, Lord Rabbit. We don't know clothes like you do, Lord Rabbit."

"That's enough, you sheep-biting, fornicating weasel—" Jeff grabbed my arm and pulled me away. No one wanted to touch Ryson, but a couple of the men got in front of him. Their eyes watered as the wind shifted. "Have your wits gone lacking?" Jeff asked, his voice soft. "You want the captain or Groskin to hear you?" Ryson and I stopped trying to get at each other and everyone did a quick search. The tension drained as we located Suiden and Groskin still standing with Laurel Faena.

I shrugged away from Jeff and went back to the fire. The water was gently bubbling. I took a washpot and poured some in it.

"If a Faena wants to call you high emperor of the universe, reign without end, you say fiat," I said, quickly lathering my face. "They see things that no one else does. A different reality."

"So this is your reality, Lord Rabbit?" Jeff said.

"I don't know. Don't call me that."

"Ibn Chause e Flavan. How many degrees are they?"

"Thirty-two and forty," Ryson put in. He smirked at my stare. "It's amazing how Commander Ebner's voice carries. Even in his office."

Eavesdropping, spying weasel—

"So, that's what?" Jeff asked. "Seventy-two ancestors you share with the king?"

I turned away from both Ryson and Jeff and began to shave. "Give it a rest. My parents laid that down before I was born. I can't come dancing in and pick it up again."

"Could've fooled me last night," Jeff said.

I paused in midswipe of my razor, remembering my snit when the men froze me out of setting up the camp. Well, how observant of him—and how nice of him to throw it in my face in front of everyone. I finished shaving and rinsed the soap off. "Yeah, well, you were all being twits—" I broke off as I caught Groskin moving over towards us. Laurel and Suiden were ducking into the captain's tent.

Ryson saw the same thing and blanched. He produced a tiny sliver of soap and began to strip. "Quick, Basel, hot water. Groskin said if I don't clean up, he's going to douse me in the stream back yonder." We all cast a glance at the stream full of snowmelt running across the back of the lea, and a collective shudder went through us at the fear that Groskin might decide that we all needed a bath. Basel hurriedly poured

water into another washpot while I emptied mine out. Jeff grabbed a stick and lifted Ryson's uniform into my pot, and Basel poured hot water over that too.

I sized up Ryson's fragment of soap and the size of his stink. "Here," I said, thrusting my towel and soap at Ryson.

"He'll need more," Jeff said. "I'll go get some." He took off at a trot and, after a moment, I did too, thinking to go finish dressing in my tent and play least in sight for a while.

Suiden didn't send for me until after breakfast. Until then, I joined the rest of the troop in doing small housekeeping chores, like mending my tack. It didn't look like we were moving out soon. Ryson had to launder everything, and he walked around camp with a borrowed blanket wrapped around him. This time he hung his clothes and bedding around the cookfire to dry out. (Groskin threatened to make Ryson wear his wet uniform again, muttering about the indignity of Ryson's bare arse and the camp looking like a wash yard, but Ryson's tentmate was very impassioned about the smells of manure and mildew in small tents, and the lieutenant relented.) I was standing at the edge of the lea staring down at the city, wondering how it got misplaced during our last patrol, when I felt someone touch my arm.

"The captain wants you in his tent, Rabbit," Jeff said.

I nodded and went to Suiden's tent, entering at the captain's command. The first thing I saw after my eyes had become accustomed to the interior gloom was the silver tea service. I blinked. My ma had one like that, one of the few things that she brought with her from her former life. I sat down on the rug between Laurel Faena and Groskin, and was handed tea in a delicate porcelain cup on an equally delicate matching saucer. Groskin offered me a bowl of lemon slices and then, after I took one, a sugar bowl and tongs. When I was finished, Groskin placed the bowls on the matching tea tray. As I selected a silver teaspoon and stirred my tea, I watched Groskin pour a cup for Laurel, struggling with the lieutenant being mother. Glancing down, I touched the rug—it looked like a Perdan. It was strewn with fat needlepoint pillows, and the walls of the tent were hung with tapestries. I grinned, thinking that our captain knew how to travel.

"Something amusing, Lieutenant?" the captain asked.

I stopped grinning. "No, sir. Just enjoying the tea, sir." Captain Suiden lounged back against a pillow, looking very much at ease. "All right, Sro Faena, why are you here?"

Laurel took a dainty sip. "I am on my way to see the king."

The captain, Lieutenant Groskin and I all stopped whatever stirring, drinking or fidgeting we were doing and stared at the Faena. He stared back, bland and benign, and took another sip of tea.

"The king," Suiden repeated.

"Yes," Laurel replied.

"Our king," the captain said, looking for clarification.

"Yes."

"Jusson IV, also called 'Golden Eye,' who, at this present time, resides in the Royal City of Iversly." Captain Suiden wanted to be absolutely sure.

"Yes, that king."



"I see. Any particular reason why?"

Laurel looked at me. "Do you remember, Lord Rabbit, the fur trappers in your Weald some years ago?"

"Yes," I said. "Honor Ash Faena, uh, remedied that."

"So she did. It was an isolated incident, no?" Laurel asked.

"Yes." I stifled a shrug. "As far as I remember, it was the first time something like that happened. And the last."

"It's a true memory you have, Lord Rabbit," Laurel said. "But you've been gone how long?"

"Five years, Laurel Faena."

"Not a great amount of time, yet what would you say if I told you that since you left we've had not only trappers, but fellers, slavers, hunters, and other runners raiding throughout the Border?"

I blinked. "Uh—"

"One hunter even managed to reach Dragoness Moraina's lair." Laurel took another dainty sip. "We buried what we could find of him in one of Cobbler Rosemary's shoe boxes."

We all paused to consider the image that arose.

"What's a feller?" Groskin asked, after a moment.

Laurel waved a paw at me.

"Fellers are tree runners," I said. "Border hardwood is considered premium in southern markets."

"Logging is illegal in the Border?" Groskin asked.

"Yes, sir. Cutting down a tree kills its sprite."

Captain Suiden's and Groskin's eyes shifted around the tent, looking for things made of wood. They both settled on the tent poles.

"Don't worry, you have no spritewood," Laurel said. He touched his staff that lay behind him. "And this was given to me by an oak sprite whose tree is very much alive. Her sister, however, didn't fair so well. Fellers got her."

Captain Suiden set his empty cup down. "It seems that there's a serious problem in the Border."

Laurel nodded. "A very serious problem." He looked at me. "You know the delicate balance there, Lord Rabbit?"

Delicate balance? It was a bull dancing on a thin rope strung between two high poles. With no net. "Yes," I said.

"Everyone with their own idea of how the universe runs and how that should play out on their patch of earth, no?"

"Yes," I said again.

"And how hard it is for anyone to agree on anything, let alone have a consensus?" I nodded. The memory

of my da's frustration with both the Area Weald and High Councils rose up again.

"The High Council did reach an accord, Lord Rabbit," Laurel said. "Unanimous."

My mouth fell open.

"We will declare war if these raids do not stop."

My mouth closed with a snap.

"Honored Moraina was most eloquent about becoming part of some apothecary's potion or lordling's boots." Laurel finished his tea and set his own cup down. "And the moon season will start soon."

Suiden frowned. "Moon season?"

"It's the time from the first full moon of spring to Midsummer's Eve where the haunts of those betrayed and murdered appear, sir," I said, politely ignoring Groskin's start at the mention of ghosts.

"I would think that the dark of the year would be more the time for hauntings," Suiden said.

"The four seasons align with the four aspects, honored captain," Laurel said. "Fire and summer, air and fall, water and winter, and earth and spring. It is earth that governs the dead as it is the substance from which we are made and to which we return." His ears went back against his head. "And each year there are more and more of the slaughtered—" He broke off and took a deep rumbling breath. "However, your father spoke prudence before the High Council, Lord Rabbit. Honored Two Trees was equally eloquent about the, hmm, bloodiness of war, so the High Council has decided to see if the problem could not be resolved by diplomatic means. By reminding Iversterre of its treaty with us. I was chosen."

"But why are you still here?" the captain asked. "Why were you waiting for us instead of going on to me Royal City?"

"The Council realized that even my lone presence in Iversterre could upset its denizens. They felt that an escort from the kingdom would ease things and so I was charged to have Lord Rabbit accompany me."

Feeling the weight of Captain Suiden's stare, I swallowed and cast him a quick look—and blinked, as his eyes seemed to be glowing in the gloom of the tent.

"So why Rabbit?" the captain asked. "There's a large garrison at Veldecke, right on the Border. You could have gone there for an escort."

"Where do you think the runners are coming from?" Laurel asked. "Do you think that the town's elders haven't noticed the trees, slaves, pelts and other contraband showing up in their marketplace? Being ferried down their roads? The garrison is most diligent, as you surely are, in their patrols. Do you think that they haven't seen what is being carried out of the Border?" His ruff bristled. "Perhaps I would've received an escort. Or perhaps I would've ended up stuffed and mounted in some lord's hall."

Not bloody likely, I thought.

"However, Lord Rabbit's family is known and respected throughout the Border," Laurel said, "and here he is kin to two powerful Houses of your kingdom."

Captain Suiden turned his stare on Laurel. His eyes were glowing. He picked up the teapot and poured another cup, adding just lemon. "Why didn't you say something when you fast met us, then? Why this waiting and guessing game?"

"No game, honored captain. After your adventures, you were too upset to hear anything I had to say. If I remember correctly, you accused me of planning to eat you and your men, and Lieutenant Groskin had a novel idea of how to cover up both that you were lost and that his horse liked me.

While Groskin found the bottom of his cup very interesting, Suiden waved his hand at these mere details.

"But if we didn't return? What would you have done then?"

"I would've gone to my second plan," Laurel replied. "Which was my first until I found you wandering up here." He watched Suiden open his mouth and cut him off. "To go into the town and speak with your commander."

"I'm just a farmer's son from the Border, Laurel Faena," I said, setting aside the images of pandemonium and riot that his plans evoked, "no matter how my da stands before the Council. I can't see how my presence would help, but I can easily see how it could hinder. A lot."

"Farmer's son, true," Laurel said. "But you are also the nephew of Lord Chause, thirty-two lines to the throne of the kingdom, no? The grandson of Lord Flavan, forty lines to the throne?"

"Well, yes, but my parents left all that."

"Does that make you any less the nephew or the grandson?"

I'd once met a couple of lordlings who were stranded in Freston during a winter's storm. In their sneering arrogance, they'd reminded me of the underbelly of a toad— soft, white, and poisonous—and they cured any desire I had to claim nobility. I wasn't about to start now. I opened my mouth to say so but Captain Suiden spoke first.

"You have valid points, Sro Laurel, but Rabbit belongs to my troop and with my troop he will stay. Further, I must take this request to my commander before a course of action can be decided."

"Why? Does he not trust your judgment?"

The captain stared at me, his eyes now blazing, but I shook my head. I hadn't told Laurel the commander's words.

"Don't look so surprised, honored captain. You're here without a multitude of soldiers."

"Commander Ebner trusts me to fact-find and report back to him, not to have one of my men go haring off on your say-so," Captain Suiden said, each word deliberate. He set his teacup down.

"So while we dither about, blood is spilled and our rage grows until war is unavoidable." Laurel pointed at the feather pinned to my tunic. "There is an obligation."

"I will not be coerced or manipulated." The captain's anger filled the tent and pressed down on us.

"Don't tell me that you had nothing to do with us being lost."

Laurel growled, showing his eyeteeth, and lifted up on his haunches. "I did not. I am no swindler."

"Ballocks."

"Sir," I said, trying hard to keep my voice from shaking. "If Laurel Faena said he didn't cause us to be lost, he didn't. He wouldn't lie, sir. Any more than you would commit treason." I turned to Laurel and saw that his pupils took up almost all of his irises. I swallowed hard. "And Laurel Faena, Captain Suiden is right. I'm obliged to you, but I also have an obligation to Commander Ebner. I would break faith and

be declared a deserter if I were to leave without his permission." Stalemate. Oh, please God, I prayed, do not make me choose.

"If I may make a suggestion, sir," Lieutenant Groskin said. He waited for Captain Suiden's nod before he continued. "What if we were to send a trooper back to Commander Ebner with a report? The horses had an easy ride yesterday and a good rest last night. Whoever's sent should make base before sunset and we should have an answer tomorrow morning, latest." There was a moment's quiet as Laurel sank down until he was sitting again. Suiden raised his eyebrows at him. "Is this acceptable?"

"It is acceptable."

"Do it," Captain Suiden said to Groskin.

Lieutenant Groskin got up, carefully edged around the cups and tea tray, and left the tent. The captain picked up his cold and probably very bitter tea and took a sip. At the same time Laurel began to preen, running his tongue over his paw. Both stopped with a grimace and Laurel lowered his paw while the captain put his cup down again. They did not look at each other as we sat in silence.

A few moments later, Lieutenant Groskin opened the tent flap and peered in. Captain Suiden made a sharp gesture for him to enter.

"I sent Ryson's tentmate," Groskin said as the flap closed behind him. "I figure that his nose deserved a reprieve." The captain stared at Groskin and the lieutenant's smile faded. He cleared his throat. "He understands, sir, that he is not to linger but as soon as he gets an answer from Commander Ebner to return here. I also took the liberty, sir, to have him ask for additional supplies if the commander approves us escorting the mag—uhm, Laurel Faena." Lieutenant Groskin, problem solver and forward thinker. My brain tried to shut down again.

"Very good, Lieutenant," Captain Suiden said. "You and Lieutenant Rabbit are dismissed."

We both were out of the tent so fast that the flaps swung back and forth for a few moments before settling into place. Groskin and I stared at each other and I wondered if I looked as wild-eyed as he did. We both turned and looked at the tent entrance. Laurel was not exiting. We waited for a moment but Groskin probably decided, as I did, that Laurel Faena could take care of himself. We started walking away, our steps picking up speed.

"Did you see, sir?" I asked. "How the captain's eyes—"

Groskin's feet moved faster. "I've never seen him so angry," he said over me.

"But—"

Groskin reached his tent and dived in. I stood staring after him; then feeling incredibly exposed, I went to hide among the other troopers, figuring there was safety in numbers.

I played least in sight for the rest of the day. But when I fell asleep that night I dreamed of being made into taffy.

## Chapter Six

I was awakened the next morning by the sounds of hooves and men's shouts echoing up the mountain trail. Looking around, I could see that the sun was well risen and Jeff gone, so I jumped up and quickly dressed. Before I left the tent, though, I unpinned the feather from my tabard and stowed it in my saddlebag. I figured I had made my point and now it was time to lie low. Very low. I slunk over to the cookfire to see if there was anything left of breakfast.

"I set aside some eggs for you, Lieutenant," Basel said, beaming. "I'll whip them up right quick. Got some herbs too. From my garden—I picked them fresh just before we left."

"It's not your garden, Basel," I said, exasperated. "It's the garrison's and what's grown there is for the officers only—" I broke off and Basel's beam cranked up a notch.

"Yes, Lieutenant, sir. I'll also have your water when you're ready to shave." After shaving and eating, I slipped in with the rest of the troop as they watched the newcomers arrive, acting like I had been there all along. As soon as I saw who had returned with the messenger, though, I scowled.

"I say, Suiden, splendid view you have here," Captain Javes said. He had dismounted and was looking around through his quiz glass. He wore his parade dress uniform and a sword with fine filigree work on the hilt that would snap the first time he tried to use it. Captain Suiden and Lieutenant Groskin stood before him in their field uniforms, and there was no sign of Laurel.

"Look, Rabbit," a trooper said. "A kindred spirit."

"Rather not," Jeff said before I could, talking through his nose. He peered at Captain Javes' highly polished boots. "Habbs in the country? Devilish bad form." Snorting a laugh, I scanned the complement still arriving and saw Lieutenant Slevoic sneering into the morning sun, and frowned. Slevoic was not Javes' regular lieutenant.

"Oh, my word," Javes continued. "I'll be forgetting my head next." He handed Captain Suiden a dispatch pouch that had so many seals and ribbons on it that it looked like a Festival ornament. Even Slevoic couldn't have opened it without leaving a trace.

Captain Suiden took the pouch and made a brief speech of welcome, inviting Captain Javes to join him later for tea. After he was done, he turned and disappeared back into his tent. Lieutenant Groskin caught sight of me and headed my way. The group around me melted away.

"I guess we're going to escort the magical," the lieutenant said when he reached my side.

That was a safe assumption, as the packhorses kept coming up the trail. When the last one crested the ridge, I turned away and shot a look at Lieutenant Slevoic. He had dismounted and was standing with a couple of other troopers. As I watched, Ryson walked up to them and joined in their conversation.

"Damn," I muttered to myself, then glanced over at Groskin. "Uh, sir."

Groskin grunted in agreement. "Yeah, damn is right." He then faced me and grinned, his eyeteeth sharp. "And don't call me 'sir.' Only the captains are 'sir,' to you." He looked at Slevoic. "While there are some who may seem 'untouchable'—" Untouchable? Slevoic probably didn't have to bathe as nothing seemed to stick. "—you rank everyone here, Rabbit, and don't let anyone say different. No matter how well they're connected."

I now frowned at Groskin. "Sir—I mean, connected how?"

"Politics, Rabbit. Slevoic has relatives who are close to the king. But then, so do you." With that, he turned on his heel and went into Captain Suiden's tent.

I turned on my own heel and headed for my tent, thinking that a nap before lunch would be good. I opened the flap and went in—and nearly bounced out again. Laurel was sitting against Jeff's bedroll. In his hand was the feather.

"I give you good morning, Lord Rabbit," he said.

I entered all the way and let the flap fall.

"Good morning, Laurel Faena," I said. I sat down on my bedding and waited.

"I came in here to be out of the way until the good captain decides to introduce me to the new arrivals," Laurel said. He held up the feather. "I knocked over your pouches by accident and it fell out." I remembered my speech to Captain Suiden yesterday about lies and Faena, and held my tongue. He handed the feather to me and I placed it back in my saddlebag.

"You do not wear it?"

"I'm not repudiating my obligation, Laurel Faena." My voice was sharp and I made an effort to even it. "It's that wearing it could be a provocation just now."

"I see."

I pulled off my boots (standard issue, not Habbs) and placed them by my saddlebags. I had come in to take a nap and nothing was going to stop me. I lay down on my bedding and closed my eyes.

"It is amazing how much the good captain's eyes look like Dragoness Moraina's, especially when she's annoyed," Laurel said.

My own eyes slammed open.

"And when the lieutenant smiles he reminds me of my own sire." I rose up on my elbows and stared at the mountain cat. At last, someone was seeing what I had.

"Where do the People come from, Lord Rabbit?" Laurel asked.

Bards prophesy through song, while to mages knowledge is power. Dragons seek the Pearl of Wisdom, elves hold their histories, lineages and swords sacred. And the Faena practice illumined questioning that leads to enlightenment, which when inflicted on me always made me want to start the cult of Ignorant Bliss.

I sat up, swallowed my bile and replied, "The Border, Laurel Faena."

"And before that?" Laurel asked. I looked at him blank faced and he sighed. "Do you believe that we descended from a comet's tail, or were spewed from a volcano, or sprang up complete from divinity's head as some vicars teach?"

I shook my head.

"So where did we come from?"

We were formed from the dust. "The land."

"Which land?"

"This one," I said, and stopped. Damn, I'd been enlightened.

"Yes." Laurel smiled. "The land Iversterre now rests on, its denizens living and dying in the same place that we did, our ancestors' bones and ashes part of every bite, every drink. In the very dust they breathe." He extended the claws on one paw and examined them. "What do you think that is doing to these denizens?" I thought about Captain Suiden's glowing emerald eyes and his taste for tea in fine porcelain cups, and how lightly we always stepped around him. Lieutenant Groskin's purring and eyeteeth, and how the troop stepped lightly around him too. Damn it again, more enlightenment.

Laurel, content with the points he made, fell silent, and I lay back down on my bed, staring at the tent ceiling.

"Laurel Faena, how did the troop become lost?" I asked after a moment. Turn about, after all, was fair play.

"A good question, Lord Rabbit. Someone interfered. Now the next questions are who did so and why?"

## Chapter Seven

"Smashing carpet, Suiden," Captain Javes said as he looked at the rug down through his quiz glass.

We were gathered in Captain Suiden's tent after lunch, Groskin once more preparing tea. I thought that Suiden might've scrounged up some furniture for this meeting, but we were again seated on the floor of the tent with the same fat pillows to lean back on. Not that I dared lounge.

Javes aimed his quiz glass at me. "Though I am rather surprised that this trooper is privy to our little council, what?" I tried to ignore the effect of his eye hideously magnified by his glass, glad that I had resisted buying one for myself.

"Rabbit has been field promoted to lieutenant," Captain Suiden said. I noticed he didn't say that it was only for the duration of the mission.

Javes dropped his glass and for a brief moment his eyes narrowed in speculation. Then he resumed his silly ass look. "Oh. Then congratulations, Lieutenant Rabbit. Good show."

"Thank you, sir."

There was a stir at the tent flap and I heard, "Trooper Jeffen escorting the magic—uh, Laurel Faena, sir."

"Very good, trooper. Show him in," Suiden said.

Captain Javes leveled his glass at Laurel as he walked into the tent. Laurel bowed, a graceful effort that sent his tail back out the tent flap.

"Good afternoon, honored captains and lieutenants." Laurel gave a shorter bow. "Good afternoon, Lord Rabbit." Captain Javes slued around and stared at me, his glass forgotten, dangling by its ribbon around his neck, while Lieutenant Slevoic choked on a mouthful of tea. Apparently Ryson hadn't passed that tidbit on.

"Ibn Chause e Flavan," Groskin murmured. He was purring again.

Laurel, satisfied, sat down next to Captain Suiden. A soft rumble emanated from him too.

"Chause and Flavan! Why—" Captain Javes broke off. He turned to Suiden. "Of course you had to promote him. I mean, once you found out—"

"I've always known, Javes," Suiden said. "So has Commander Ebner. It was no secret."

"But a common trooper!"

"It was what Rabbit wanted and at the time we could accommodate him. Times, though, have now changed." Suiden reached into the now opened dispatch pouch and retrieved the documents. They also had multiple seals and ribbons. Commander Ebner wanted to make sure there was no question as to whom the orders were coming from. And to prevent any forged ones being slipped in. "Shall we discuss our mission?" It was as Groskin and I had guessed. We were to accompany Laurel Faena to the Royal City. The combined troops were to provide a suitable escort and make sure he arrived safely. Javes was blank-faced at the part where Captain Suiden had been given command.

"Commander Ebner writes that he has sent news of our pending arrival to the Court," Suiden said. "He has also sent ahead to inform the different city governors of our possible presence in their jurisdictions, asking that they assist us as needed."

So much for this being a covert operation.

"Lieutenant Groskin," Suiden said, "please bring me the map kit." Groskin stood and walked to the rear of the tent, returning with a leather tube that he handed to the captain. Suiden opened it up, pulled out the rolled maps and laid them down on the cleared rug. "Lieutenant Rabbit, if you would please open the tent door to let some light in." As I rose I heard the faint scurrying of footsteps on grass. I tied the flaps back, scanning to see who was stupid enough to spy on the captain, but saw nothing out of the ordinary so I ducked back in. The captain waited until I was seated.

"Here we are." Captain Suiden pointed to a very small dot in the upper part of the map. He traced south.

"There's Iversly." He tapped his finger once on the crown representing the city. "The commander suggests that we follow the mountain route to the Gresh Transom, take the Transom down to the King's Road, and follow the Road until we reach Gresh. There we can sail down the Banson to the Royal City." He looked up at Captain Javes and Laurel Faena. "It should take us approximately three weeks. Is that acceptable?"

"Yes," said Captain Javes.

"It is acceptable," Laurel replied.

"Very good." Suiden waved at the maps and Lieutenant Groskin began rolling them up. "We will leave right after first meal tomorrow." The captain nodded dismissal and we left the tent. Laurel headed for the stream to meditate, I supposed, and Captain Javes went to the pickets, I also supposed to check on his horse. I expected Lieutenant Slevaic to follow Javes but to my surprise he stopped next to me.

"So you're an aristo, puke."

On second thought, I wasn't so surprised.

One would think that with his penchant for others' pain, Slevaic would look like a vaudeville villain, but his blue eyes and open face did not show any of the malevolence that lurked below the surface as he stared at me.

"Lay off, Slev," Groskin said from beside me.



It was Slevoic's turn to be surprised. "I thought you didn't like lordlings."

"Just the stupid ones playing soldiers. Rabbit isn't stupid—except about clothes."

At that opportune moment Captain Suiden came out of his tent.

"Ah, Lieutenants. I forgot to mention that I expect a logistics report by evening meal."

"Yes, sir," we all said.

With that, Slevoic saluted and went to his tent. The captain stood with us as we watched him go, then turned and ducked back into his own tent.

It was another beautiful night on the lea, but I'd have been glad to see new scenery that didn't have the threat of disappearing hanging over it. The lieutenants and I had done the logistics report (I mostly listened and wrote as Groskin and Slevoic talked about supplies, packhorses, and rotas) and we gave it to Captain Suiden at the designated time. He had invited the officers and Laurel to dine in his tent where this time a folding table and chairs had been set up, and we had trout and vegetables, wonderfully prepared and presented by Basel. I had no problem with the fish and so escaped comment by Javes and Slevoic. They did eye Laurel sideways but he was as dainty eating as he was sipping tea, and he rumbled in pleasure over his portion. It was an innocuous meal with civilized conversation and when we were done I hurried outside, eager to join my mates. Their bursts of laughter had punctuated dinner and I wanted to hear the jokes.

"Hold up, Rabbit," Groskin said, grabbing my elbow.

Lieutenant Slevoic pushed past us and headed for his tent. I caught the glow as he lit a cheroot and the acrid smell of burning tobacco drifted back to us.

"You're an officer now," Groskin said. "You can't hang out with the lads." I stared at him. He was right, officers did not mingle with regular troopers. I tried anyway. "I can't snub my mates," I said. "As soon as this is over, I'll go back to being just a trooper."

"Do you think that you'll be allowed to?"

Another burst of laughter came from the fire. One trooper produced a squeezebox and another a tin whistle, and they played as everyone sang a ribald song about an admiral's daughter (rotten to the corps, but oh so nice to the navy). I tried again.

"But the captain said I was supposed to be treated like I always have."

"No." Groskin's voice was gentle. "He said that you were to have the same duties and responsibilities, Lieutenant. Until he says different. And he will. In fact, he's already started." For the second time in as many days I felt punched in the gut. The third verse started and I could hear Jeff's warbling tenor soar, then crack. Groskin gave my elbow a sympathetic shake, then dropped it and headed for his tent.

With convenient timing, Captain Javes emerged from Suiden's tent.

"Oh, hallo, Rabbit." He paused to tug on his gloves. "Escort me to my tent?"

No, I thought. Go away.

"Yes, sir," I said, and fell into step with him.

"Some big changes happening, what? With promotions and magicals and missions and all." Javes stopped at his open tent, a lantern casting a square patch of light over us. "I'd invite you in for a drink, but you look fair knackered." He paused, but I said nothing. He then pasted his bugger me grin on his face and said, "Good night, then, Lieutenant." It took all that I had not to stomp back to my tent. I flopped down on my bed after flinging my uniform anyhow at my saddlebags. I still lay there brooding when my tent-mate came in. He settled into his bedroll and there was quiet.

"Good night, Lord Rabbit," Laurel said.

I shot straight up.

"What the poxy hell are you doing here?"

"Ryson's tentmate brought back an extra tent." Laurel chuffed. "Apparently he couldn't take any more of Ryson's aromas. Trooper Jeffen is bunking there."

I lay back down feeling abandoned and forsaken.

"Also, the good captain wanted me with you just in case someone decides to go roaming in the night watches." I was startled out of my self-pity at the thought that my mates needed to be guarded against. Then I remembered they weren't my mates any longer, but were on the other side of the great divide that separated regular troopers from officers. Plus, there was Slevoic with Ryson and whatever other stoolies that were hanging about. I lay back down and stared towards the ceiling for a long time.

## Chapter Nine

The next morning dawned bright and clear. Captain Javes' troop carried pennants and standards that looked grand snapping in the breeze against the blue sky and scudding clouds. (We didn't bring ours as we felt no need to impress mountain goats.) Javes also looked grand in a crisp field uniform, boots (Colbies, suitable for country wear), an embroidered cloak and, to my surprise, a serviceable sword that replaced his filigree one. It was all topped with a cap with troop insignia and feather, set at a jaunty angle atop his pomaded blond curls.

However, the weather showed the fickleness of spring in the mountains. One moment the clouds were fleecy white, the next the entire sky a solid dark gray. It drizzled at first, but soon the rain was coming down in sheets, plastering Javes' cap to his scalp, the feather dribbling into his face. The next days saw us sleeping in dripping tents on soaked ground wrapped in sodden bedding as the rain showed no sign of letting up.

It wasn't the first time my troop had to ride in bad weather. We were at the bottom of the garrison's pecking order and harsh conditions during patrol were normal for us. Javes' unit, however, were King's Road patrollers, a cushy assignment handed out to pets, suck-ups and the well connected. It was no surprise when they began complaining, but I was startled to hear grumbles from my own troop—and several times when they saw me come near, my old mates would fall silent.

I tried once to find out from Jeff what was going on.

"Tell me, Rabbit, why are we here?" Jeff asked.

"We're escorting Laurel Faena."

"It's a little convenient that we get lost and this cat turns up just in time to show us the way home. And then there's your covenants, feathers and all. What have you gotten us into?"

"Me? I haven't done anything. Besides, we're taking an ambassador to Court, Jeff. Not going on a suicide mission."

"An ambassador who's been stirring the pot, getting the stew seasoned just the way he wants it."

"You don't want to go to the Royal City?"

"Not like this. Not will ye, nill ye."

I blinked, thinking that was the whole point of being a solider. "Uh, Jeff—"

"You know what I mean. Manipulated."

"Laurel said he had nothing to do with us getting lost."

"Of course he would. But it was magic, Rabbit."

"Yes, but Faena don't lie."

Jeff stared at me for a moment, then started to turn away. I grabbed his arm.

"Damn it, Jeff—!"

He stiffened and, turning back, snapped off a salute. "Yes, sir!" This time I stared, wanting to point out that I too was wet, cold and miserable. That Captain Suiden would no more allow me or Laurel to run his troop than he'd allow Javes. Or Slevaic. That I didn't want to be a lieutenant, definitely didn't want to be an aristo, and I wasn't any happier with the Border catching up with me than the troop was. But Jeff's eyes were remote and I felt a grayness wash over me. I let go of his arm.

"Forget it," I said, walking away.

Later that evening I overheard someone whisper how I'd ordered Jeff to stand guard over a rock in the rain for hours until Slevaic finally had pity and dismissed him.

## Chapter Ten

It took us four days to reach the King's Road instead of the normal two. By the time we reached the flatlands, the rain had stopped and the afternoon sun was breaking through the clouds—a welcomed sight. Still we were a bedraggled bunch, and all smelled like Ryson. When we reached the Road, Captain Suiden had us halt and he looked us over.

"There is no way we're going into Gresh like this." He turned his horse in the opposite direction from the city. "We will dry out at the way station that's a few miles down the Road." We reached the station as the stars started coming out. Laurel Faena, who loped beside me the entire trip, followed me into the stables and then into the station proper, his eyes bright as he stared about. Someone had started a fire in the hearth, and the warmth was welcomed, even though the odors became more potent as the steam rose off of us.

We set up laundry and Basel took over the cooking detail, and those not on one did the other. Rabbits had been caught again and Basel made stew out of them. The smell drove me to the rear of the station where I rolled up my sleeves and joined those who were scrubbing on washboards. Elbow deep in suds, I'd glanced up from time to time to check on Laurel. He sat on a bench with a sewing kit in front of him, mending his coat. As he finished a thread, he would extend a claw and cut it. No one crowded him.

When the stew was ready, Basel requested four burly troopers to dish out the first hot meal we had in days to prevent a stampede. I got bread out of my bags (I was able to pinch the mold off), cheese (the same) and a couple of withered apples. I then went back to where the laundry had been set up, the soap overriding some of the smell of cooked meat, and Groskin found me there.

"Basel baked some potatoes for you," he said, handing me a couple on a plate.

"Thank you." I put my cheese on the hot potatoes and watched in satisfaction as it melted. Groskin sat down next to me and we ate in happy silence. After a moment Laurel joined us, the two captains came and sat down opposite us and last, Slevoic wandered by and hesitated, then sat down on the other side of Groskin and tucked in.

Captain Javes finished his stew, wiped his mouth with a kerchief (it had lace edges) and looked at me. "I say, Rabbit, why are you back here away from the fire?"

"Lieutenant Rabbit doesn't eat meat, except for fish." Captain Suiden answered for me, his voice carrying to the front of the room and all four corners. "I suspect he was trying to get away from the smell of the stew, not hiding from anybody." He scraped the bottom of his bowl with his spoon. "Though what's this I hear about you ordering someone to guard a rock, Lieutenant?"

I was sure that Captain Suiden knew everything about it moments after it happened, but I answered anyway. "Trooper Jeffen was being a twit so I told him to stand there until he got over it, sir." Up until now there was the rattle of spoons against bowls, but it stopped as Jeff jumped up, knocking his empty bowl on the floor. "Uh—" I grinned as it sank in he couldn't call a superior officer a liar. At least not in front of other superior officers.

"Yes, Trooper Jeffen?" Captain Suiden asked.

"It wasn't quite like that, sir—" So maybe he could call me one, in a roundabout way.

"It wasn't quite like what?"

"I wasn't being a twit, sir."

"Oh? So Lieutenant Rabbit made you guard a rock in pouring rain for no reason at all?"

"No, sir."

"No, what?"

"I didn't guard a rock, sir. He didn't have me guard anything. And I'm not a twit." "Well, Lieutenant, Trooper Jeffen says you didn't have him guard a rock. And he's not a twit," Captain Suiden said to me, his face straight. He turned and signaled one of the duty cooks who brought him another bowl of stew.

"I thought it was Trooper Jeffen, sir. But the way it was raining, I could've been mistaken."

"I see." Suiden laid his spoon down and stood up. "Is there anyone who was ordered to stand guard over rocks or other inanimate objects—things that don't move," he added when frowns showed up on some

faces, "—by Lieutenant Rabbit?"

No one said anything.

"Maybe Lieutenant Slevoic knows, sir," Groskin said. "I heard that he was the one who dismissed the guard." Slevoic gave Lieutenant Groskin a blank stare. "No, I didn't dismiss anyone from guarding a rock." He looked at Captain Suiden and added, "Sir."

"No one?" The captain sat down again and picked up his spoon. "Perhaps in the rain you mistook a horse for a trooper, Lieutenant Rabbit. It's sometimes easy to do."

"I could ask them, honored captain," Laurel offered.

For the first time ever I saw Captain Suiden disconcerted. "You can— The horses can—" He shook his head. "Uh, no, thank you." He scooped some stew, stared at the chunk of rabbit meat sitting in the spoon, and quietly laid it back into the bowl.

## Chapter Eleven

It was raining again the next morning and we stared out at it, glum. Long-suffering faces turned to the captains, as we hoped that they'd let us wait out the storm in the comfort of the station—and it looked like they would, as the captains didn't want to get wet again any more than we did.

I found an iron to press my clothes. I had left all my best pieces in Freston, thinking that we'd be in the mountains, but I didn't want Captain Javes to hog all the glory. I stood there in my smalls, running the iron over the creases and cuffs in my trousers. My own jaunty cap, with the feather pinned to it, lay on the table ready to be donned.

"Peacock," someone muttered as he went past. Not yet, I thought, but soon. I carefully placed my trousers next to my already pressed tabard and laid out my shirt.

"Lieutenant Rabbit, have you seen any of my gear?" Basel asked as he joined me, bringing with him the smell of herbs and green plants.

"Just Rabbit. Please. And no, I haven't." I flipped the shirt over and started on the front. "Why?"

"I'm missing a couple of sacks, sir," Basel said, a worried frown on his face. "I've searched but can't find them." I stood the iron upright and, looking around the room, saw Ryson walk in from the stables, carrying two sacks. "There," I said. "They must've been left behind when we unloaded the horses." I reached for the iron again, but as I did, Ryson shifted the sacks, revealing mud on his trousers. I frowned. It shouldn't have been there, as every muddy garment went into the wash last night—I had the wrinkled hands to prove it—and the only way to get splatter like that was to ride a horse. A galloping horse. The mud glistened weakly in the lamplight. It was fresh.

"I saw him last night with Slevoic, sir," Basel said softly, also staring at Ryson. "They seemed to be having a rather involved discussion."

I slid a glance at Slevoic, who was edging his way around the back of the room towards Ryson. Feeling a chill creep down my spine, I grabbed my trousers and put them on.

"How involved?" I asked Basel as I held my shirt up. It wasn't as crisp as I'd have liked, but most of the wrinkles were gone. I pulled it over my head and did the same with my tabard.

"I couldn't exactly hear, Lieutenant," Basel said, his voice even softer. "But it seemed like Slevoic was giving him directions." Nodding as I snatched up my cap, I looked around again and located Captain Suiden. I hurried over, but just as I reached him, a shout went up outside from one of the poor sods assigned guard duty.

"Riders approaching!"

Captain Suiden looked at me and I inclined my head towards Ryson and Slevoic. The captain's eyes narrowed before he turned to the room. "Everyone get dressed. We have company."

I hurriedly searched for Laurel and found him dicing with some troopers in the stables, out of Suiden's sight. (Not that Suiden was against gambling, but he felt it shouldn't happen while on duty. Or off duty. Or at the garrison. Or out of the garrison. Or awake. Or alive.)

"We've company coming," I said to the men as they jumped up and saluted. The dice disappeared and Laurel grabbed his staff, which was propped in the corner. I pushed him into the station where he joined Captain Suiden and Javes, every bead and feather in place. I put on my cap and joined Groskin and Slevoic, who stood behind the captains. The door was flung open. . "Governor Hoelt of Gresh!"

We stood at attention as the governor and her entourage entered, a start running through them as they saw Laurel Faena. There was frantic rustling behind me as the half-dressed troopers rushed to finish clothing themselves. To Governor Hoelt's credit, her hesitation was barely noticeable before she walked over to us, and it could've been because of the diminishing nakedness of the men as well as Laurel. Her aides stayed by the door.

Suiden bowed, his hand over his heart. "Grace to you, Governor Hoelt. I am Captain Suiden of the Freston Mountain Patrol, Horse. May I present to you Ambassador Laurel Faena"—Laurel bowed—"and Captain Javes, of the Freston King's Road Patrol, Horse." Captain Javes also bowed.

Governor Hoelt bowed back. "Grace, Captain Suiden, Captain Javes. Uh, Ambassador Laurel—"

"Riders approaching!"

"Part of your group?" Captain Suiden asked.

A very frustrated expression flashed across Hoelt's face. "No!" She struggled for control. "I mean, no, they're not."

"I see."

The door flung open again.

"Doyen Allwyn of Gresh!"

Once again, we, including Governor Hoelt and her group, bowed as the churchman walked in with his entourage. They also started when they saw Laurel. The church clerks bunched up at the door with the governor's aides as Doyen Allwyn joined us, he and Governor Hoelt eyeing each other. The candlelight twinkled on silver embroidery in his vestments as the doyen then turned and faced the captains. He tapped his Staff of Office twice on the floor, making the tiny silver bells ring.

Captain Suiden bowed again. "Doyen Allwyn—"

"Riders approaching!"

Captain Suiden sighed. "I assume they aren't with either of you?" Doyen Allwyn shook his head while Governor Hoelt gave a resigned shrug.

Once more we all turned to the doorway and waited. The guard tried to fling it open but it hit one of the governor's aides and bounced closed. After a moment, the door creaked slowly open again and the guard peeked around it, holding his sword.

"It's all right," Captain Suiden said. "Announce whoever it is." Satisfied that we weren't being butchered by our unexpected guests, the guard opened the door all the way.

"Major Verne of the Gresh Command!"

Major Verne and the troopers with him tried to enter but the governor's and church's groups had flowed back into the doorway. All we saw was the crest of the major's helm rising above their heads.

"Move, dolts!"

A couple of clergy suddenly went sideways and Major Verne thrust through. He too stopped short, which may have been because of Laurel but also may have been because of the frown on Doyen Allwyn's face. Major Verne flushed and bowed.

"I beg pardon, Doyen." He straightened, tugged at his tabard, which had gotten twisted in the brief scum at the doorway, and walked over to join us.

Captain Suiden saluted and waited to see if there were any more announcements. When there were none, he waved a hand. "Ambassador Laurel, Captain Suiden, Captain Javes."

"Where's Lord Chause—"

"Blessings, Ambassador Laurel—"

"Commander Freser is waiting for your report, Captain Suiden—"

All three of our guests were shouting over each other, the major ahead by loudness. Doyen Allwyn won, though, by rapping his Staff on the floor. Hard. In the silence, a bell fell off and with a tinkle landed at Laurel's feet. A gasp ran through the church clerks as he bent down and retrieved it, his paw closing over the bell. Laurel looked up at the doyen, who was frowning at the magical who made so free with a holy object. I too frowned at the Faena's thoughtlessness and, hopefully unnoticed, took his tail and gave a gentle tug.

"That is a most interesting staff, Doyen Allwyn," Laurel said, ignoring me. "Oak, no? May I ask how you came by it?" I looked closer at the Staff of Office, then turned on the doyen. "Murderer!" I shouted, as thunder rumbled in the distance.

## Chapter Twelve

"Of course I didn't know it was a Border oak," Doyen Allwyn said as he looked down at his Staff lying on a cloak spread out on a table.

"Are you sure that it is spritewood?" Captain Javes asked.

I said nothing, figuring from Captain Suiden's stabbing stare that I had already said too much. Laurel extended a claw and traced over the wood, careful not to touch it.

"Look, honored captain. What do you think this is?"

The sprite's openmouthed death throes stared back at us.

"It could be just a random pattern," Javes said, leveling his quiz glass at the Staff. "I once had a bed stand where the swirls made a perfect outline of a windrider in full sail. It was complete with rigging and everything." I gave the captain a sidelong look and tried to step away from him, but Groskin caught me by the arm and held me still. The thunder rumbled nearer and the patter of rain turned into the rapid thumps of hailstones.

Laurel responded by placing his staff next to the other. The church staff shuddered again and again as if from blows, the bells' tinkling almost swallowed up in the crack of thunder. The dead sprite's mouth moved in a silent scream and beyond the noise of the storm I could hear the crash of a tree falling.

"Prudence Oak's last moments," Laurel said.

"Abomination," Governor Hoelt said, her voice trembling. "Burn it." Murmurs of agreement went up and the clergy started praying as others made signs to ward off evil.

Laurel picked up his staff, handed it to me, and began gently wrapping the other in the cloak. "No, honored governor, that would not be wise. We don't know what would be released." He pulled a strip off his coat and tied it around the bundled Staff. "Besides, Verity Oak would want her sister's body returned home to her." He removed beads and feathers from his staff, and fixed them to the cloth strip. He then gestured over the Staff, and I blinked at the faint shimmering traces he left in the air.

"The holy bells," a church clerk whispered.

Laurel looked at Doyen Allwyn. "If you desire, honored elder, I will remove the bells for you at a more auspicious time. I suggest that you purify them." He reached for his staff. "I further suggest that you and anyone else who handled Prudence's body also be purified."

"I say, Ambassador Laurel," Captain Javes said, watching him, "why can you have a staff?"

"As I told Captain Suiden and Lieutenant Groskin, the sprite who gave me this is still very much alive," Laurel said. His eyes slit in brief amusement. "There are ceremonies and rituals that Faena go through to be gifted with our staves, eh, Lord Rabbit?" The heaviness that weighed down on me lightened a bit as I grinned back at Laurel. A clerk turned away in disgust. "Orgies," he muttered.

"Affirmations," I shot back. "There is nothing wanton about it." My grin widened. "My honored parents wouldn't be involved in something so indecorous." You could take the scions out of the House but definitely couldn't take the House out of the scions, though my grin got even bigger as I thought about the timing of one ceremony and the subsequent birth of my little sister. I caught Captain Suiden's eye and stopped.

The captain gestured at the wrapped Staff. "It is safe?" Laurel nodded, his beads clacking. "Yes, honored captain. The wards protect us."

The noise of the hail pounding down had increased, with the lightning and thunder almost simultaneous.



"Groskin, please have the guards come in," Captain Suiden said. Groskin opened the door and the guards, huddled in the small protection of the doorway, fell into the room. Beyond them we could see huge hailstones thudding into the ground.

"Messirs, Major," Suiden continued, "I suggest that we settle ourselves to wait out the storm." A flash and crack punctuated his words and everyone nodded in agreement. "Ambassador Laurel, I also suggest that we remove the staff from our living quarters. No disrespect, but it would be easier if the sprite's body were elsewhere."

Laurel's ears lay back against his head. "Such as?"

The stables are nice and dry," Suiden said.

Laurel was quiet for a moment; then his ears slowly came up again. "I can see that its presence would be upsetting. Very well." Laurel once more handed his staff to me and reached for the other.

"Lieutenant Rabbit, please go with Ambassador Laurel," Captain Suiden said. "You have guard duty for the rest of this rota."

We left for Gresh the next morning. I had spent the rest of yesterday and most of last night standing guard over the horses and the death staff. During the day it wasn't so bad, but at night—well, I knew exactly where the staff was as the hairs on my body always pointed to it no matter where I stood. It didn't help that the only light I had was from the storm, which lingered overhead. I didn't know what was worse, standing with my back to it and imagining what was going on behind me, or facing it, wondering what I'd see in each lightning flash. I compromised by standing to the side, close enough to both the station and outside doors to make a wild dash if I needed to. I was finally relieved a few hours before dawn but when I'd fallen asleep, I dreamed of bowling where each time the ball would strike a pin, a tree would scream and die.

It didn't surprise me that I was assigned to ride with the packhorses and spare mounts. Captain Suiden was still annoyed with me for shouting murder at the doyen. But I was very surprised at my roommate in the doghouse. Slevoic rode up, his showy horse prancing, snorting and shying sideways. Glancing down at the horse's flanks, I could see blood from Slevoic's spurs. Behind him, on an even prettier horse, was  
Javes.

Slevoic reined in his horse beside me, upset. "I just sent a message to family I have in Gresh, Captain," he protested. "To let them know I'll be in town. That's all."

Yeah, right, I thought. The arrival of our Gresh guests I was mighty coincidental, following as they did on the heels of Ryson. Slevoic must've read my expression, because he shot me a glare. "Freaking puke—"

"Yes, I'm sure it's just as you say, old boy," Javes interrupted, his voice vague. "But, you know, chain of command and getting permission and all that. Next time ask, all right?" He smiled vacuously at Slevoic.

"You're to take the rear."

For a moment I thought Slevoic would actually refuse to obey Javes' direct order, and I waited hopefully. But he shot another glare at me, then viciously roweling his horse with his spurs, he rode to the end of our train—where he'd have to wade through churned mud and droppings from all the horses. Glad that I wasn't Slevoic's horse, I made sure the grin was off my face before looking back at Captain Javes—who merely gave me the same silly ass smile. "Carry on, Lieutenant," he said before he returned to the front.

We reached Gresh in the late afternoon. During the final descent to the city, I could see it sprawled on both sides of the Banson River. The river gleamed golden from the setting sun, as it flowed through the city, with ships sailing down or tacking up it. Oxen teams pulled heavy-laden barges to the sky blue-roof-tiled warehouses on the docks. Small punts and scows wove through river traffic, mimicking the wide avenues and boulevards of the city, which bustled with the energy of three major trade routes converging. There were the yellow tiles of a theater district instead of the one playhouse Freston had, several market squares, and in the middle rose the silver and crystal church spires set afire by the setting sun.

We entered the city through the Flowergate, and for once a gate's name matched its description. It opened into the perfumers' district and we were bombarded with flower, spice, musk, citrus and herbal scents that arose from the now shutting stalls and closing shops. Last-minute shoppers lingered over trays of fragile petals in the open marketplace and they barely glanced at us coming through before they went back to their bargaining, only to give themselves neck strain when they whipped back around to stare at Laurel.

Whatever messages had flown from the way station to Gresh, no one seemed to have told the townsfolk about the Faena.

We reached the garrison as the last rays of the sun winked out over the city's roofs. I kept expecting Governor Hoelt and Doyen Allwyn to peel off from our column and go to their respective offices, but they stayed and entered the garrison gates with us. We were met by the base commander and in the deepening dusk salutes were exchanged. After a moment, Captain Suiden turned and motioned for me to join them.

"This is Lieutenant Rabbit, Commander Freser," Captain Suiden said as I rode up and dismounted. The commander's eyes lingered on the feather on my cap as I saluted.

"Lieutenant Rabbit," Freser said. "What's this about a murder?" I recognized one of the soldiers who had arrived at the way station with Major Verne standing behind the commander. At least one person had braved the hailstorm. I looked at Captain Suiden, but he remained silent, so I took a deep breath.

"Ambassador Laurel could better answer that, sir!"

"But it was you, wasn't it, who made the accusation?" Commander Freser asked.

The yard was full and I watched as triple the number of men necessary lit the lamps, their heads turned towards me. "I wasn't accusing the doyen, sir. Not really. I just saw a— a body, and it took me by surprise."

"And this corpse was in the possession of Doyen Allwyn?"

"Yes, sir, and Ambassador Laurel is going to talk to King Jusson about that very thing."

"I see," Freser said.

"As there's no complaint lodged," Doyen Allwyn said, "we'll take our leave."

A line formed between the commander's brows but he couldn't stop the doyen as I didn't even hint that he had so much as disturbed the peace. The churchmen gathered themselves and began to turn their horses around to go back out the garrison gates.

"We will look," Doyen Allwyn said to Laurel, "into this very distressing incident, Ambassador, and will let you know the results of our investigation."

Laurel bowed. "Thank you, honored elder. If you will call on me in the morning, I will have removed the bells by then."

Doyen Allwyn's eyes drifted back to where the staff was. "Uhm, yes. Of course." The wind picked up with the falling dusk and a gust blew under cloaks. He shivered. "Until tomorrow. Blessings." Doyen Allwyn wagged his fingers, turned his horse and gave it a solid thump with his heels. In a few moments he and his clerks were out of sight, the echoes of their horses' hooves fading.

"Well, that was a brief benediction," Governor Hoelt said, her own eyes bright in the lamplight. "I too must be going. I'm sure the council will be waiting for my report." She bowed. "But I will also call on you tomorrow."

After the governor's departure, Commander Freser turned to Captain Suiden and indicated a soldier standing by. "I am sure you want to get settled, Captain. My aide will show you to your quarters."

We were taken to an empty barracks that had signs of a hasty evacuation. As we inspected it, the aide turned to the Faena. "The commander has set aside quarters for you, Ambassador Laurel."

"No," Captain Suiden said, overhearing. "By your leave, Ambassador, you should remain with us."

Laurel nodded. "Yes, honored captain."

Suiden looked around and found me, even though I was doing my best to act invisible. "Thank you," he said to the aide, "but Lieutenant Rabbit will see to the ambassador's needs." There was nothing the aide could do but salute and depart, promising that someone would return to show us to the mess and baths. The captain waited until he was out the door, and then began to pat about his pockets. "Devil take it, I seem to have lost my purse. Perhaps I dropped it at the stables. Trooper Jeffen, please see if you can find it for me."

We heard footsteps outside hurrying away.

"Oh, I've found it," Suiden said, and Jeff started to come back. "But," Suiden continued, "be so kind as to remain at the door." Jeff moved to the side of the door and took up position looking out.

Captain Suiden looked at Laurel. "Where's the staff?"

Laurel pointed to a corner where the staff stood propped.

"I'll ask you again, how dangerous is it?"

"It is completely warded, honored captain."

"That's not what I asked." The captain frowned. "You moved pretty fast to get it away from the doyen. You moved just as fast to wrap it up and make signs over it. And you wouldn't let them take the bells." He went over to the corner and stared at it. "So tell me. How dangerous is it?"

"It will not cause someone to burst into flames or give them the pox, if that's what you are asking," Laurel said, joining him. "But it is very dangerous." He shook his head, sending his beads clacking and feathers fluttering. "Prudence Oak was powerful in the talent—" He caught Suiden's look. "You call it magic, honored captain." The Faena gently opened the shrouding cloak and gestured at the openmouthed scream of the sprite. "What do you think she did when she felt the first bite of the axe? Do you think she blessed her fellers? Spoke gently of those who would profit from her murder as she surrounded herself with goodness and light?" The cat shrugged. "If it weren't warded, I wouldn't want it anywhere near me." I stared at the death staff, wondering how she had been killed, if she were so powerful. Captain Suiden

shot a look at me and, turning back to Laurel, opened his mouth.

"But if it's so horrific, why carry it to the Royal City?" Captain Javes asked before Suiden could speak.

"I can't leave it here, honored captain."

"Take it back to the Border," Javes said.

"If I return with honored Prudence's body now, especially the way it is, we will have war." Laurel sighed.

"Well, it'll at least make a good argument before the king."

Captain Suiden gave me another look, then turned around and faced the rest of the troopers. "You all heard Ambassador Laurel. No one will so much as think about touching it unless directed by and under me ambassador's supervision." He looked at Ryson and Slevoic, standing side by side. "If I find you acting outside of my orders, you will curse the day your mother first smiled at your father."

We spent the time waiting for the promised guide tidying away our gear. I was more interested in the baths than food (and sleep before either), but was willing to explore what the mess had to offer, so when the commander's aide returned, I jumped up from the cot ready to journey forth—only to feel a hand on my arm.

"The captain wants to talk to you, Rabbit," Groskin said.

I walked back to where Suiden sat with Javes and Laurel Faena. "You have guard duty, Lieutenant," Suiden said.

I don't know what my face looked like, but Suiden dismissed everyone else, and they went without argument— even Javes.

"Sit." Captain Suiden indicated the cot opposite him.

I sat, keeping my gaze over the captain's shoulder.

"Tell me the difference between knowing and conjecture, Lieutenant."

Surprised, I answered. "Knowing is being certain, conjecture is guessing. Sir."

"Very good. Succinct." I heard the captain shift on the cot. "Now, Javes can guess where Slevoic sent Ryson yesterday. He can make another guess as to why, especially when Governor Hoelt was so disappointed when she realized that she wasn't our only caller. But he has no proof and so he is limited in his response."

"But Slevoic lied," I said angrily. "Whatever he sent Ryson for, it wasn't to alert any kin of his arrival. Sir."

"Most likely," Suiden said, his voice dry. "But don't think that Slevoic can't produce scores of people swearing on their fathers' beards that they are his cousins, that he sent them a message that he was coming to Gresh, and that he's the best of fellows."

I frowned at the opposite wall.

"You, though, Rabbit, with your shouts and shrieks in front of all and sundry—" The cot shifted again. "Did you understand what was going on in the horse yard with Commander Freser?"

I forgot my pique enough to drop my eyes to the captain's. "He was trying to get me to say that Doyen

Allwyn was involved in Prudence Oak's murder."

"Very, very good," Suiden said, his face calm. "Politics, Rabbit. The commander was trying to use you to gain an edge over the church here in Gresh. It was clumsily done and you were able to deflect him, but you made yourself vulnerable in the first place by acting without thinking." Captain Suiden paused for a moment. "Gresh is a provincial town with delusions of grandeur, no matter how it bills itself as the gateway to civilization. If you're so easily tripped here, how will you fare when you reach Ivervly?" He stood up. "Think, Lieutenant, before you leap sticklebutt into something you should have seen coming."

"Yes, sir," I said as I also stood. "It just took me by surprise and all."

"I suppose it did, Lieutenant. Remember, though, that no matter what—or who—the staff was in the Border, here it's just a stick, special only because it has bells."

The next morning Captain Suiden completed the arrangements for us to sail down the Banson and by early afternoon we were loading up on the riverboat. I had spent my own morning pressed into duty as Laurel Faena's assistant. Through a complicated dance of the magical and mundane—Laurel with wards and me with pliers—we removed the bells from the death staff and set them aside to await Doyen Allwyn's return, but he didn't come before we had to leave for the ship. After I boarded, I stood at the railing and watched the docks, keeping my face turned away from our guests. It didn't work, though, as I was spotted.

"Ho, Lieutenant Rabbit," Commander Freser called out, beckoning me.

Ho? I thought, as I went to join them. I started to salute.

"None of that, my lord," the commander said, smiling. "So, what do you think of our fair city?"

Ho, I thought. Someone told him who I was. "It looks very nice, sir."

"It's a shame—isn't it, Major Verne—that you won't have time to do a little sightseeing. Though I suppose Gresh pales in comparison with Iversly." Freser paused. "I've never been myself. What's it like?"

"Lieutenant Rabbit has been based in Freston for, what? Five years, my lord?" Captain Javes asked.

I nodded. "Yes, sir."

"I'm sure Iversly has changed a great deal since then," he said.

I gave my own silly ass smile and nodded again at Javes' nonanswer. Commander Freser's own smile frayed a little as Major Verne ran a finger along his mustache.

"Well, city comparisons aside," said Governor Hoelt, "I'm sure your family'll be glad to see you again." My smile broadened into a whole herd of asses. "Yes, ma'am." Frustration tightened the governor's mouth, as Laurel rumbled softly and ran a paw along his whiskers. Sighting fresh prey, Governor Hoelt brightened. "Ah, Ambassador Laurel. Were you able to remove the bells from Doyen Allwyn's staff?"

"Yes, honored governor."

"Good," Commander Freser cut in. "Though I didn't see the doyen this morning. He did get them?"

"No, honored commander. We had to leave before he arrived. In fact, I brought them with me as I didn't

want to leave them in the barracks. It worries me, though, that I am responsible for such potent church icons." Laurel frowned and rubbed his chin in thought. Then he brightened. "Perhaps you can take them to the elder, Commander Freser, or you, Governor Hoelt."

Horror flashed across both their faces.

"Oh, do not worry." Laurel hastened to assure them. "I am almost certain they're safe." For a brief moment Javes looked amused, and I turned my head away to look over the docks to hide my own grin—and did a double take. Doyen Allwyn, his slight form in a plain brown robe, stood by the gangplank alone with baggage at his feet.

"Well, how about that," Laurel rumbled next to me.

The rota guard shouted and Captain Suiden appeared from the direction of the boat's helm, the boat's captain and first mate traveling in his wake.

"Grace to you, Doyen Allwyn." Captain Suiden bowed as the doyen came on board, carrying his baggage. "I received your message."

Curious, I followed Commander Freser and company as they joined Suiden. As I arrived the captain said, "Lieutenant Rabbit, please be so kind as to get the doyen's things stowed."

I nodded, reaching to take the baggage from the doyen. "Yes, sir."

"If you will just show me where," Doyen Allwyn said, "I will carry it." He saw my look of surprise and smiled, hefting his bags as he followed me to the holds. "Penance through an act of humbleness, and so mortifying pride. It begins my purification."

"You're traveling with us then, Doyen?" I asked.

"Yes, my lord," Allwyn replied, showing that he too must've found out who I was. "The Synod was greatly upset by the whole matter, and felt it best to report it to Patriarch Pietr—and for him to perform the actual purification rite." In one move the Gresh church had isolated and removed a potential liability, eliminated any leverage the city council or army might've gained, and positioned someone on the inside to gather information and deliver it fresh to the head of the Holy Church. Freser and Hoelt were probably frothing at the mouth.

"I apologize, sir, for any distress that I might have caused you," I said as we reached the stairs and began to descend.

"It's not your fault, Lord Rabbit," the doyen said, sounding a little winded. He gave a sigh of relief as we reached the bottom and I flung open the hold door. "Though I must admit that it felt as if my humbling began last night when my fellow clergy swept their robes aside to avoid being contaminated." He tottered into the hold and, after catching his breath, began to stack his bags in a corner. "It was amazing to come from so high to so low in so short a time."

"Me, I'd wonder who decided to help out with a little push," I said.

"You mean, who gave me the staff," Doyen Allwyn said. He placed the last bag on top and began to root around in it. "That is also something to put before the patriarch."

That was a firm "Back off," so I didn't fish for the name—I'd wait a while. The doyen straightened, holding a small wooden casket. "I believe it isn't Border wood." Since he was offering, I looked, and he was right. Doyen Allwyn then opened the box and I could see that it was lined with dark green velvet.

"For the bells," he said and closed the lid.

"Laurel Faena can ward it for you after you put them in, sir," I said, walking towards the door. Then stopped. Doyen Allwyn had discovered Prudence's body in the corner. Once more I could see the faint tracery of Laurel's wards like huge DO NOT TOUCH signs—and I deliberately looked away.

"Is it safe where anyone could get to it?" the doyen asked, staring.

"No matter where it's stored it will be unsafe," I said, staying by the hold door.

"Will anyone touch it?"

"Only a fool, sir—and a fool will do so whether it's here or locked in the King's Treasury." I shrugged.

"Where else could we put it? I don't want it in my cabin."

"Such an invisible thing," Doyen Allwyn said. "You look at it and see only what you expect to see."

A stick with bells on it, I thought. "Yes, sir."

"The question arose in the Synod," Doyen Allwyn said, turning to leave, "about how I could carry it and not notice anything untoward." He waited for me to shut the door. "But then, I pointed out that they also did not notice anything unusual and what did that say about them?" He smiled again. "The question was dropped rather quickly."

"I bet it was," I murmured.

"The question also arose," he said, "if I were wise in meeting a magic—uh, Borderer—"

I smiled. "Laurel Faena, the Faena, or honored Laurel, sir."

"Laurel Faena," he repeated, "but again I pointed out that whether or not we'd met, the staff still would have been, uh—"

"Prudence Oak's body," I supplied.

"Yes," Doyen Allwyn said. "They left that alone too." He crooked a smile once more. "I was so excited when I heard about the Faena." He started up the stairs and I followed. "Most think that the stories about the Border are made up, like dramas and children's pantomimes. It was a shock when I saw him face to face."

"I'd noticed, sir," I said.

"Even so, I had many questions and was hoping that honored Laurel would guest a few days with me," Allwyn continued. We reached the deck and stood blinking in the sunlight. "Only to have it all turned on its head."

"My captain wasn't too happy with me either."

Allwyn crooked a smile. "I noticed." He looked around the boat. "Well, I suppose I should pay my respects to the captain of this vessel. No, there's no need," he said as I started to escort him, and his smile widened as his eyes traveled around the narrow deck once more. "I'm sure I should be able to find him on my own." I watched the doyen to make sure he was going the right way, before turning and walking slowly in the opposite direction. Despite what Captain Suiden may have thought, I was brought up on Border politics, which were as contentious and devious as anything in the kingdom. There were always wheels within wheels, and these particular ones had the feel of being on a speeding cart drawn by

runaway horses. I found an empty spot on the river side of the ship and leaned against the railing to think.

"Ho, Lord Rabbit!"

It was too good to last. "Go away, Ryson."

"Aw, does the widdle wabbit want to be awone?"

Before I could reach his throat, Jeff stepped between us. "Stop it, both of you."

"Poor widdle wabbit."

I went around Jeff, but he managed to grab me. "No, Rabbit. You're in enough trouble as it is." He was right. Shooting Ryson an evil glare, I yanked my arm away from Jeff and smoothed down my tabard.

"Widdle wabbit mussed his cwothes," Ryson said. "Too bad." "Lice-ridden, goat-tupping weasel—" I tried to go over Jeff and was tackled.

"Shut up, Ryson, or I'll shove your smalls up your nose," Jeff said as he sat on me.

Swallowing hard against nausea, I stopped struggling. "Get off. Your bony butt hurts." As I rose to my feet, I was flanked by a badger and a weasel in the afternoon light. I then blinked and they were again just Jeffen and Ryson. Startled, I took a step back, but Jeffen caught my arm again.

"You know what he is, so why are you letting him get to you?" he asked. His glare intensified. "And what the pox-rotted hell were you thinking? Calling a doyen a murderer?"

"I didn't call him a murderer—" I began, searching for a way to escape.

"Yes, you did," Jeff said. He grabbed my tabard with his other hand and pulled me around to face him. "What's wrong with you? You're already in the sodding mountain patrol. You can't get any lower, except maybe guarding latrine ditches."

"Maybe it's because the magical hexed him or something," Ryson said.

"Maybe so," Jeff said, scowling at me.

"He did not and he would not." I gave up trying to get away and scowled back at the two of them. "That would be like a doyen practicing the dark arts. Worse. Anyway, Suiden's already made it clear that I acted with extreme stupidity."

"Aw, Suiden's widdle pet wabbit—"

"Oh, shut up!" I said, beating Jeffen. "Accuse me of sucking up as you lick toes. Never mind me, what's with you, Ryson? You always were a weasel, but now you're in line for the crown."

"I've done nothing—"

"And toadying Slevicious, of all people. I'd watch it, playing both ends against the middle. You'll get crushed."

"Are you threatening me?"

"He doesn't have to," Jeff said, once more getting between us. "You think the captain doesn't know exactly what's going on? He's assigned you to the horse detail. Stupid, Ryson."



"Shoveling muck, huh?" I eyed Ryson, glad I was upwind. "Been helping Slevoic deliver more messages?" He didn't say anything and I shrugged. "Your funeral."

"Yeah," Jeff said, "but you're working on your own, Rabbit."

I said nothing for a moment; then, untangling myself from Jeff, I turned back to the railing and leaned against it. "I grew up with folk like Laurel," I said. "To me he's as normal as porridge for breakfast. Tree sprites too. Honor Ash Faena strides the Weald that includes my parents' farm. When I was a kid she'd let me tag along." I stared out over the water. "You think I went off the deep end? Imagine your family and friends dead, mutilated, and adorning our holy sites. Or made into chairs for us to sit on." There was more silence; then Jeffen and Ryson joined me at the railing.

"You know I've fought bandits with you for close to five years, and this is the most that you've ever said about yourself that wasn't just 'I'm just a farm boy' stuff," Jeff remarked.

I blinked at him.

"It's like you're always watching, always holding back," Jeff said. "Even so, I'm thinking we're pretty good mates but then I find out that I don't know the half of it."

"I've talked about my family before—" I began.

"Only when you had to," Jeff said, "and then only as little as you could get away with." He turned his head to me. "Then this magical shows up and all kinds of stuff starts coming out—Lord this and degrees that—"

"It doesn't matter," I tried again.

"Doesn't it?" Jeff asked. "The magical thinks so, Lord Rabbit ibn Chause e Flavan."

I opened my mouth but nothing came out.

"It has made me wonder how good a mate you really are—"

"Jeff—"

"—and what else you think unnecessary to tell me." Jeff's eyes were angry. "Or don't trust me with." I opened my mouth again, and caught sight of Ryson standing silent next to Jeffen, all ears. I sighed. "I suppose if I told you to go away, you'd just find someplace to hide and listen."

Ryson gave me an innocent look.

Jeffen, also watching Ryson, laughed, the anger leaking out of his face. "You are going to weasel one time too many, lad." At Ryson's shrug, he laughed again and relaxed enough to also lean against the railing, his eyes scanning the river. "I grew up in a town a little northwest of here. We used to come to Gresh during Festival."

"See, I didn't know that," I said.

"You never asked," Jeffen said.

That was true, I hadn't.

"This is as far south as I've ever been." Jeffen watched a punt go skimming by. "I've been talking to the lads in the Road patrol. Most are southies and I was trying to get a feel for what it's like down there."

"What did they say?" I asked, interested in spite of myself.

"It's much more civilized than the northern marches."

Jeff smiled at my sound of derision. "I also asked them how the cat would be received." His face became thoughtful.

"They said they didn't know. That in the south everyone thinks that magicals are just make-believe," he said.

"So I've heard," I murmured.

"My family thinks the same, even though we're in the wild north," Jeff said. "To us, trees are supposed to be chopped down and made into stuff, or burned as fuel, and animals are either wild and hunted, or they're domestic and food." He looked at me. "Now you and the cat say different, and maybe it is, but do you think that people are going to change their minds just on your say-so?"

I actually hadn't thought that far ahead.

"Even if they see what you're saying is true, do you think they'll accept it? When it means that you can stand up and call them murderers?"

I sighed. "I don't know, Jeff."

"The captain's right, Rabbit. Sometimes you just don't think."

## Chapter Fifteen

Each day was warmer than the last as we sailed down the Banson, and we were soon packing away our cloaks and underwoolens. As we approached the civilized south, forest gave way to cultivated fields, fortified manors and keeps were replaced by genteel country estates, trade towns appeared along the river's edge, and in the distance we could see the tantalizing colored roof tiles of inns, taverns and other places of interest along the King's Road.

Jeffen and I declared a truce of sorts, as we were under the constant eye of both Suiden and Groskin. We'd seen their remedy for feuding troopers and neither of us wanted to join Ryson in cleaning the boat's horse stalls. I did brood over what Jeff had said, though, just in case we were able to argue in private. I wanted to prove that none of it was my fault.

We were breaking our journey in Dornel, a city on the river midway between Gresh and Iversly.

"We have to stop there, gracious sir," the boat's captain told Suiden, "as it's a checkpoint for river traffic." He smiled, his braided mustaches bracketing his mouth and chin. "It's a nuisance, but it keeps us river rats honest. Somewhat."

Captain Suiden passed this on to the Gresh church elder that evening during dinner. "I'm taking advantage of the scheduled stop to report to the Dornel garrison commander. If you also wish to call on anyone, Doyen Allwyn, we'll have time."

Doyen Allwyn nodded and murmured thanks. It was a strange melding of army officers, a Border ambassador, and doyen, all guests at the boat's captain's table. Everyone spoke with exquisite politeness,

and at times my eyes crossed with the effort of trying not to yawn. I had tried to get out of eating in the impromptu officers' mess, but Suiden let me know that I was to be present and seated before the dinner bell stopped ringing. He wanted to make sure that Doyen Allwyn's lasting impression of me would be of an earnest but dull dinner companion, not the wild-eyed man who shrieked murder at him.

We reached Dornel on our eighth day from Gresh. Captain Suiden stood next to me as the boat approached the city. "I've always enjoyed Dornel," he said. "It isn't as pretentious as Gresh, and it doesn't overwhelm like Iversly."

"Yes, sir." I could see faint markings on his dark face in the light reflected off the water—then, for a brief moment, long, tightly woven braids, brilliant clothes, jewels and gold earrings overlay his staid haircut and drab uniform. And beyond that—I remembered one of Dragoness Moraina's male offspring, an impressive ice dragon whose silver white scales shimmered in the sun with hints of blues, greens, purples. But he was nothing to the obsidian dragon I now saw: green-eyed, dark outspread wings shot with gold, full of red fire and black smoke. In one massive five-taloned hand he held a delicate teacup without breaking it. I shook my head and the captain was himself again. There was a faint metallic taste in my mouth as I felt my heart begin to pound. Oh, bloody hell.

"Are you all right, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir," I said. I reminded myself to breathe. "The sun is a little bright."

"I see." Captain Suiden looked back over the water at the city. "When we leave the boat, Rabbit, you will stay with me at all times."

"Sir?"

"You aren't to wander off by yourself, Lieutenant. I want to always be able to see you. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir."

"You don't understand, do you?"

"No, sir."

Suiden casually turned around and watched the deck around us. "Ambassador Laurel isn't the only missile being catapulted at the Royal Court." He saw my frown and sighed. "You, Rabbit. Remember, ibn Chause e Flavan?"

Oh, yeah. I shoved what I had just seen aside and concentrated on the captain. "Yes, sir."

"While you were stationed at Freston, you were far enough removed not to matter in kingdom politics. Now you're landing in the middle."

"Does it matter that I don't want to be a lord, sir?"

"Don't be naive."

"Yes, sir." I sighed this time. A couple of weeks ago I was worried because we couldn't find our way out of the mountains. It now seemed such a small thing.

"Connected to two powerful Houses, you'd make a tempting target to their enemies, Lieutenant. Or perhaps even their allies."

Enlightenment could happen even without infernal illumined questions. "Laurel didn't share my tent for his protection, he was guarding me."

Suiden gave a faint smile. "Not so naive, after all." His smile faded. "Governor Hoelt asked for you upon her arrival at the station—you were more important than the very large cat standing on his two hind legs before her. Now the governor may have just wanted to curry favor, but since she found out you were there from Ryson, sent out on the sly by Slevoic, I tend to think not." We were coming up to the docks and I could see the sailors readying the mooring lines.

"I'm not minded to have anything happen to you, Lieutenant."

I was silent for a moment. "Why didn't Doyen Allwyn or Major Verne know who I was at first, sir?"

"Because they weren't told."

"But they knew to come to the way station."

"Information was leaked from the governor's office, Lieutenant. Remember how unhappy she was when they arrived?"

"Yes, sir." I nodded, remembering the look of frustration on Governor Hoelt's face.

The ship gently bumped against the pier, and sailors swarmed, making fast.

"Though she must've thought Festival had come early when you started screaming bloody murder at the doyen."

I did not scream, I thought.

"All right, a loud shout."

Startled, I looked Suiden who was faintly smiling again as his green eyes glinted at me. "Uh, yes, sir."

## Chapter Sixteen

Custom officials were waiting to inspect our ship after we had docked, coming on board as soon as the gangplank was in place. They cast superior looks at the provincials from the northern marches, only to double takes so fast that I could hear the snaps as their heads whipped back around. They clumped together on the deck as we left the ship, rubbing their necks and staring at the Faena.

I saw firsthand the unpretentiousness of Dornel. As we left to call on the city's garrison commander, we passed people pushing wheelbarrows up the dock to our ship. Some were ordinary folk while others wore livery and had other signs of service to the rich and mighty.

"Manure, Lieutenant Rabbit," Captain Javes said, riding beside me.

"Pardon, sir?"

Javes waved a hand at the line. "They are here for the horse manure on our ship." Captain Suiden had decided that, as we were horse soldiers, we should ride to the garrison. I looked down at my mount, wondering what was so special about his droppings that people would line up for them.

"They use it for gardens and other shrubbery," Javes said.

"Well, yes. Of course, sir. But surely the city has plenty of its own."

"The people of Dornel firmly believe in waste not, want not."

"Ha, ha, sir."

Javes' mouth tightened against a smile for a moment. "They feel it's better to shovel it on their flowers and vegetables than throw it in the river. After all, the fish have no use for it. A very neat and thrifty people." I cast a glance back at the ship. Ryson was going to be very busy.

"They're self-sufficient too," Groskin said from in back of us, where he rode next to Slevoic. "Enough is grown within the city's walls to feed all the residents." We entered Dornel proper via the Rivergate, the wide-eyed guards thrusting people aside to let us through. "There are even underground cisterns that fill up when the river runs high during the spring melt," Groskin continued. "Sluice gates draw off the surplus to other reservoirs. The city has a plentiful supply of fresh water at all times."

"Why make themselves so siege-proof?" Laurel asked, walking beside Suiden's horse in front. He ignored the gasps and cries of those who pressed away from him.

"There used to be pirates who raided along this stretch of the Banson, sir," Groskin said.

"Didn't you say, Lieutenant, that the raiding had started again?" Suiden asked.

Groskin frowned. "Yes, sir." He saw my questioning look. "My family is from around here, Rabbit, and they've written that pirate sightings and raids have become almost commonplace in the last few years." Laurel looked around. "I see no signs of attacks here, honored lieutenant." Groskin shrugged as he also looked around. "For some reason this time around they haven't tried Dornel itself, but my father says that he has a friend whose cousin's son's wife's brother was in a settlement that the pirates laid siege to not far from here."

"So deep in the kingdom?" Laurel asked.

"Yes, sir," Groskin said. "The garrison troops and river patrols are sent out to search for them, but they disappear like magic—uh, mysteriously, Ambassador."

There was a bubble around us as we rode through the streets of Dornel and the commotion that started at the gate followed us into the city. Folk would look up, casual at first, then more intent as they realized that Laurel was not wearing a costume. And he wasn't our prisoner. And he carried a really big stick. He smiled at something the captain said, his canines gleaming white. The bubble widened to include most of the street, and I wasn't surprised a little later when mounted soldiers appeared ahead of us, bristling with things that had sharp edges.

"I think we should halt here and make no sudden moves," Captain Suiden said, reining in his horse. We did likewise and waited for the men to approach.

"Lieutenant Jaxtir of the Dornel garrison, Dornel Patrol." The lead soldier raised his helm's visor and saluted. The men behind him kept theirs lowered and weapons out.

"Captain Suiden of the Freston garrison." Suiden saluted back. "Is there a problem, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir. What is that?" Lieutenant Jaxtir pointed at Laurel.

"He is Ambassador Laurel. I'm sure your commander has received orders regarding his journey to Iversly."

"They said nothing about it coming in my city."

"You're privy to your commander's dispatches?"

Lieutenant Jaxtir shifted his shield. "He shared them with his staff."

"I see."

I watched the light play off Jaxtir's shield, and folded my lips together tight.

"Are you barring us, Lieutenant?"

Jaxtir shifted again. The shield shimmered in the sun and I bit the inside of my lip, drawing blood.

"No, sir. Not you, Captain—" Jaxtir began.

"As I am sure King Jusson and his Lord Commander would both be very interested in a lieutenant taking upon himself to refuse passage to an ambassador to his court." Jaxtir's shield flashed green and blue. Something tried to come up my throat and I swallowed it back down, hard. I must have made a sound, though, as Captain Javes looked at me, then faced Jaxtir again, lifting his quiz glass. The shield turned purple.

Lieutenant Jaxtir did some inspired thinking. "Perhaps this should go before the commander, Captain Suiden."

"What should go before your commander?" the captain asked. "You gainsaying us?"

Maybe not so inspired. The lieutenant's eyes shifted to Laurel, whose ears were laid back on his skull. "If you would follow me, sir, I'll escort you to the commander."

"Thank you." Captain Suiden nodded. "Ambassador Laurel, if you would, please?"

We started moving again.

"I wonder if you have seen our traveling companion, Doyen Allwyn of Gresh," Suiden said.

We stopped moving.

"A doyen from Gresh is traveling with you," Lieutenant Jaxtir said, his voice flat.

"He's going to Iversly to meet with the patriarch," Captain Suiden said. "I'm sure the letters with his itinerary were on the mail boat that passed us a few days ago." The captain paused. "He has gone to pay his respects to the Dornel doyen."

"Doyen Orso." Jaxtir made a rough gesture to start his men moving again.

"Oh, is he still doyen here?" Captain Suiden indicated that we were to start moving too. "He's a relative of yours, isn't he, Lieutenant Groskin?"

"More of a connection, sir," Groskin replied. "Through some cousins' marriages, though as a child I called him uncle. I asked Doyen Allwyn to tell him that I was here. I'd hoped I could see him later."

"I'm sure that can be arranged, Lieutenant."

Jaxtir rode a little ahead of Suiden, and the way he was positioned kept me from seeing his shield, but I kept darting glances towards it, like probing a bad tooth. Apparently, though, Captain Javes' view was unrestricted.

"I say, Lieutenant Jaxtir, that's an interesting shield you have there. What is it made of?"

Jaxtir glanced over his shoulder at Laurel. "Lizard skin, uh, Captain."

Bloody liar, I thought.

"Oh, I'm terribly sorry." Javes gave his silly ass smile. "I'm Captain Javes, also of the Freston garrison. These are Lieutenants Slevoic, Groskin and Lord Rabbit ibn Chause e Flavan." We stopped again as Lieutenant Jaxtir turned his horse around to stare at me. I smiled, showing my teeth, and watched the lieutenant's shield, now in front of me, flash delicate pink.

"He's going to see the king in Iversly, too, and whatever relatives may be hanging about." Lieutenant Jaxtir's mouth parted in consternation. That last revelation must have put the last nail in the coffin of any plan to have us waylaid in an alley by thieves and cutthroats.

"The garrison, Lieutenant?" Captain Suiden said.

Jaxtir once more gave the signal, and our cavalcade began to move.

"So your shield's made from a lizard," Captain Javes said. "Is it standard issue here?" He peered through his quiz glass at the other Dornel soldiers. Their shields were just like the one I carried, except for the Dornel emblem on them. "Or are they only for officers?"

"No, sir, it's not standard issue," Jaxtir replied, facing straight ahead.

Javes turned his glass back on Jaxtir's shield. "How fascinating. I've never seen lizard skin like that. How did you come by it?"

"Can't recall, sir."

"Really, Lieutenant? Well, that's amazing, what? To not remember how you got something so uncommon."

"Always had a poor memory, sir."

Lieutenant Jaxtir tried to slip away the moment we were inside the garrison gates, to inform the commander of our arrival—he said—but Captain Suiden insisted on going with him and taking us along.

"Oh, and bring your shield too, Lieutenant," Javes said.

We all walked into the commander's office, Jaxtir carrying his accoutrements.

"Commander Ystan, this is Captain Suiden and Captain Javes of the Freston garrison," Jaxtir said. The commander rose from his desk as the army part of our group saluted while Laurel, despite being ignored, began to bow—only to snap upright at my gasp. Instead of mail, Commander Ystan wore a hauberk made of the same material as Jaxtir's shield. Laurel Faena roared.

## Chapter Seventeen

"This is my fault, honored captain," Laurel said.

Captain Suiden didn't argue with him. We were in a room waiting for Commander Ystan, with guards stationed outside.

"I shouldn't have been surprised, especially after seeing the lieutenant's shield." At Laurel's roar, troops burst into Commander Ystan's office as Lieutenant Jaxtir pulled his sword and accused us of trying to attack the commander. Which was kind of hard to prove as we stood with empty hands in plain sight on the other side of the room.

"Commander Ystan," Captain Suiden said, ignoring Jaxtir. "I am here by order of Commander Ebner of the Freston garrison."

"Yes, um— Got the dispatches a few days ago." Commander Ystan blinked at us.

"Then you know that it's a matter of some urgency."

"We also know that there's a large, unpredictable magical that may have just tried to do something—magical," Jaxtir said, his sword pointed at Laurel. He turned his head to look at Ystan, who still stood blinking behind his desk. "I suggest, sir, that we place them under guard until we are able to sort everything out."

Captain Suiden said nothing as we were escorted to another room and guards placed outside our doors. But his look could have filled a library.

"The skin the commander was wearing and Jaxtir's shield came from one of Dragoness Moraina's brood, sir," I now said. "Dragon Gwynn. He was an ice dragon." "Whom you played tiddlywinks with as a small lad," Slevoic said, throwing himself into a chair.

"No," I replied. "Gwynn had a territory in the Upper Reaches by the time I was born. But he would visit his dam." I looked back at Suiden. "He was a poet, sir, and would give recitals every time he came."

Laurel rumbled and a guard looked over his shoulder at us.

"He should have lived for centuries. Longer," I said. "Dragoness Moraina is approaching her millennium. A thousand years of such poetry as to make even a snot-nosed boy yearn and dream. Dragons don't read or write, sir. It's all oral, passed down from master to pupil. Now everything Gwynn knew, everything he was is gone. And they used his skin for undergarments and shields."

Both guards were now looking into the room at us.

"I am sorry for it, Rabbit, Sro Laurel," Captain Suiden said. "I am truly very sorry. But we can't do anything for him or Sra Prudence. We can, however, do something for Sra Moraina's other offspring—if we can get to Iversly."

Laurel rumbled again. "It's not for protection that I am going to see your king." He looked worried. "And I am not sure it's not a fool's errand I'm now on."

"What do you mean?" asked Captain Javes.

"I am here to stop a war, but after today I don't know if I can." He ran a paw over his head, ruffling his beads and feathers. "Do you think that honored Moraina doesn't know what has happened to her son? Or will soon know?" He looked at me. "And what do you think will happen when the elves find out?"



"Elves," Groskin said.

"Elves live longer than dragons," I said. "Forever, barring fatal injury. They remember when they lived in Iversterre—and how they were driven out." It was my turn to look worried. "The northern clans still read their death rolls on their holy days. None of them like the kingdom very much. Or humans."

The Dornel guards were now in the room. Captain Suiden glanced at them, then paced to the window. Moving aside the curtain, he revealed two more guards, who looked back at him.

"I need someone to find your commander and get him here now," Suiden said.

"Who'll go?"

"I'll go, sir," said a voice from the window, and we heard footsteps hurrying off.

"It's not just what's going on back home that concerns me," Laurel said after a moment, "but also what we've found so far on our journey. If this is what's in the provinces, what's going on in the Royal City?"

## Chapter Eighteen

Commander Ystan and Lieutenant Jaxtir showed up a short while later, accompanied by Doyen Allwyn, another doyen, and the governor of Dornel. Apparently the fine art of spying was practiced in Dornel also. There was rustling in the bushes as the guard resumed his post outside the window once more. He wasn't about to give up one of the best seats in the house.

Ystan had removed the dragon skin and now wore regular chain mail under his tabard. He clinked as he walked in, Jaxtir by his side and the others behind him.

"Captain Suiden—"

"Groskin, my boy. How are you?" The second doyen had a rich, rolling baritone and it rolled over Ystan as he swept around the commander and caught Lieutenant Groskin in a bear hug.

"Uh, grace to you, Doyen Orso," Groskin grunted. He managed to get free and tried to smooth out his crushed tabard.

"Faugh! No need of formality between us, eh, nephew?" Orso grinned and slapped Groskin's back, sending him stumbling. "How's your mother?"

"She's well, uncle," Groskin said.

"And your father?"

"He's well also."

"And your brothers? Sisters?"

"They are well, uncle."

"I am Governor Somne," the governor said, breaking into what promised to be a long cataloguing of the Groskin clan. She bowed. "Grace to you and welcome to our fair city, Ambassador Laurel"—she turned

to me—"and Lord Rabbit ibn Chause e Flavan." The spy network was working overtime. Laurel Faena and I bowed back.

Doyen Orso rolled again. "Now, what's this about my nephew being under arrest?"

"And Lord Rabbit and Ambassador Laurel?" Governor Somne added.

"Um—" Commander Ystan started.

"They're not under arrest," Lieutenant Jaxtir said. "There was an incident and now we're conducting an investigation."

Doyen Orso rolled on. "What was this incident?"

"It's an internal matter," Jaxtir said.

"Fine," said Governor Somne. "In the meantime, Ambassador Laurel will remove to the Governor's House."

"I'm afraid we cannot allow that, Governor," Jaxtir said. "The incident involves the—this—it."

"Ambassadors do not and never have come under the army's jurisdiction, Lieutenant," the governor said.

"We have only these people's word that it is an ambassador," the lieutenant returned, his voice smooth.

"Commander Ebner has sent documents to you, Commander Ystan," Captain Suiden said.

"Uh—" the commander started.

"Unfortunately," Jaxtir said, "documents can be forged. With what happened this afternoon, I'm afraid that the commander has decided that everyone should remain in custody until they're verified."

"What did you do, nephew?" Doyen Orso asked Groskin.

"I'm afraid that's confidential—"

"Ambassador Laurel and Lieutenant Rabbit got upset because the commander was wearing a friend's skin," Groskin said, interrupting Jaxtir. He looked at the lieutenant. "You don't impress me, boyo."

"You've disobeyed a direct order—"

"Seems to me that I haven't heard one yet." Groskin folded his arms.

"A friend's—" the commander began.

Doyen Orso and Governor Somne drowned him and each other out.

"Please stop, gracious sirs," Captain Suiden said, and everyone quieted. He turned to Ystan. "I'm sorry, Commander, what were you saying?" The commander, seeing that his moment wasn't going to be usurped, blurted out, "A friend's skin?"

"Your hauberk and Lieutenant Jaxtir's shield are made from the skin of the son of a good friend of Ambassador Laurel and Lieutenant Lord Rabbit," Suiden replied.

Ystan turned to Jaxtir. "Said it was lizard skin."

"Dragon, sir," I said. "He was a great poet."

"It was what I was told, sir," Jaxtir said at the same time.

"A new design. From the Royal Armory. Impervious to arrows and other missiles," Ystan said.

Hell, I thought.

"If I may, honored commander, I would like to know about the pirates," Laurel said.

Everyone quieted once more at the sudden jump from dragon skin to outlaws.

"Such strong rumors of sieges and raids. Do you have any proof that these attacks actually happened?"

Ystan opened his mouth, waited, and when no one else spoke, said, "Jaxtir's cousin's sister's best friend—"

"No, honored commander. Have you seen any evidence of pirates at all? Burning farms, looted warehouses, commandeered ships?"

"No," Ystan said. He looked at Governor Somne, who shook her head.

"Honored elder, have you?"

"Why, no," Doyen Orso said. "Not personally." He frowned. "Nor, if I remember correctly, have any of my parishioners."

"I have—" Jaxtir began.

"Where? On whom?" Laurel asked. He indicated the commander, governor and doyen. "Give names and places that they'd recognize."

"Uh—"

"There are no pirates, are there, Lieutenant?" Laurel asked.

"Uh—"

"And when the word comes in of a pirate sighting, the patrols are sent out to chase will-o'-the-wisps at noon, no?" The Faena noticed the puzzled faces. "Sent on an useless errand so as to be kept out of the way." Laurel turned to the governor and commander. "I am most curious as to the timing of these supposed raids."

"What do you mean?" Governor Somne asked.

"Smugglers use the dark of the moon to move their goods," Captain Suiden said.

It was silent as the commander and governor counted the days of the month. Governor Somne's mouth then opened in an "Oh" of enlightenment. "Yes." Her eyes matched in roundness as she stared at Lieutenant Jaxtir. "The pirate sightings are at the new moon."

Laurel grinned, showing his fangs. "With the patrols looking for phantom pirates, there's no one to see which boats stop at the inspection point. And which boats don't." His smile curled into a snarl. "Or even what is dropped off or loaded from the warehouses on your docks."

"There is too," Commander Ystan said. "Can't leave the checkpoint unmanned. Jaxtir's troop has it."

The Faena's silence was eloquent.

"But there are also the customs administrators ..." The governor's voice faded as her eyes rounded even more. Then they narrowed into slits at the lieutenant. "You bribed my clerks."

"Only one needs to be corrupted, honored governor," Laurel said. "I would check to see who is assigned this duty when Jaxtir's unit has the docks."

The governor's eyes narrowed further. "Oh, I will."

Laurel rumbled in his throat as his tail lashed. "It looks like we've just found the first nest of runners in Iversterre."

## Chapter Nineteen

We were escorted back to the docks by Commander Ystan and our former guards, Governor Somne, Doyen Orso and Doyen Allwyn. Ystan kept apologizing both for Jaxtir, who was put in the stockade on charges of smuggling and conspiracy, and the fact that the rest of his officers were out patrolling the river with their units (looking for pirates) and so couldn't form a proper honor guard for us.

We scoured Lieutenant Jaxtir's quarters, then the rest of the base looking for additional contraband, but nothing else turned up besides the hauberk and shield, which were placed on a horse by themselves.

Laurel Faena held the reins.

We decided to also search the dock warehouses. As Laurel had pointed out, smuggled goods could've been stored in them with no one the wiser. So as the doyens went to the ship, the rest of us went from warehouse to warehouse. Where we could find someone with a key, we had them open it. Where we couldn't find anyone, Commander Ystan had his men break off locks and chains. Again, we didn't find anything.

"Jaxtir had two weeks to move out the contraband," Governor Hoelt said at the last warehouse. "After Commander Ystan received the dispatches." She glanced around at the barrels of flour and sacks of rice. "If there was any here to begin with."

"True, Governor," Javes said, also looking about through his quiz glass. He dropped the glass and frowned. "But then why didn't Jaxtir get rid of the shield and hauberk? He must have known that he ran the risk of Ambassador Laurel recognizing what it was, if not who it was."

"Hubris, Javes," Suiden said, "and a certainty that he would be believed over a magical." He sighed, his gaze resting on Ystan, who was peering into a flour barrel. "And he probably would've been if we didn't have Rabbit backing up Sro Laurel."

I wandered outside as Ystan and Somne assured everyone that, regardless of Jaxtir's motivations, they would uncover the full extent of his iniquity—including his accomplices. But I figured that any evidence not destroyed when Ebner's dispatches arrived was going into the fire right now as the news of Jaxtir's arrest spread through the city. I also figured that it would be a long time, if ever, before the runners would use Dornel again, as their ruse was revealed. Reaching the edge of the dock, I stared down into the water. For the first time in five years I wanted to be home on my parents' farm.

"Lord Rabbit," someone said from the direction of the river.

There were three men on a small boat, one holding a rope with one end formed into a loop. When I looked up, he flung it over my shoulders. And pulled.

I'd always scoffed at dramas where someone, after being explicitly told not to do something, did it anyway with predictable results. Yet here I was, after all Captain Suiden's orders and warnings, about to be snatched. I dropped to the wharf and braced my feet against a pylon. They responded by one of the other men grabbing the rope and pulling also. I strained harder against the column, and started yelling my head off.

From the warehouse I heard the rapid footsteps of several people running, one set much lighter and quicker than the rest. Someone brown and furry came to a stop beside me, his toe claws digging into the dock wood. At once the rope slackened, and I heard the splash of oars and shouts— screams, really—coming from the river. I shucked the rope, rolled behind Laurel and peered out from behind his legs. Two of the men in the boat were rowing as hard as they could; the third one used his hands. Laurel raised his staff.

Footsteps pounded behind me. I pulled my boot knife and spun around on my backside, picking up splinters. Captain Suiden glanced down at me and then looked at the Faena.

"Don't, Sro Laurel."

After Suiden ran Captain Javes, with his sword pulled and looking nothing like a silly ass, Groskin with two knives, Commander Ystan and his troopers waving their own swords, and last, Slevoic, unarmed.

"Don't," the captain repeated. "They don't have Rabbit and using magic would cause a lot of upset." Laurel growled but lowered his staff and Suiden gave a soft sigh and looked down at me again. "Are you all right, Lieutenant Rabbit?"

I wasn't at my dignified best hunkered down beside Laurel Faena with his tail waving over my face, so I tried to stand. However, my arms were bruised and aching from the rope and my legs were shaking from the aftermath of both reaction and strain. Laurel had to carefully take one arm and the captain the other to haul me up.

The boat was growing smaller in the distance and though Ystan sent troopers scurrying to put a patrol boat on its trail, I figured that by the time they started looking, the would-be abductors would be long gone. Laurel hovered as I wobbled back to the warehouse doors, allowing the exclamations, expressions of outrage, and apologies of the governor and commander to wash over me—only to stop as I confronted my horse.

"Sir, if it's all right with you, I'll walk with Laurel to the ship," I said.

There was silence at my stated preference for the Faena.

"You are walking a little wide-legged, Lieutenant," Captain Suiden said. "Splinters?"

"Sir."

Everyone stared at my backside.

"Nasty things, splinters," said Ystan, who was becoming chatty now that Jaxtir wasn't snatching his speaking time. "Got one in my foot once. Still feel it." The commander raised his eyes to my face.

"Remove them before they fester."

"The lieutenant will have it taken care of as soon as he gets on board, Commander," Suiden replied for

me.

The good thing was that both the ship's sailors and the troops had been given a day's leave. The bad thing was that they were coming back. It was decided to remove the splinters on deck where there was plenty of light. Laurel had me drop my trousers, took one look at my pale backside, then had a couple of lounging sailors, ripe for any entertainment that presented itself—including my bare arse—set up an awning so that I wouldn't get sunburned. Doyen Allwyn had volunteered his services, and he and Laurel set up soap, hot water, towels, torture instruments, and evil smelling potions. Laurel then had me lie out on a table and he lifted my tabard.

"Full moon rising," a sailor called out.

Laurel bent to his work, the doyen standing by to give assistance. After a few moments, Suiden walked into my view, holding a cup of tea. "How are you doing, Lieutenant?" he asked.

Right then Laurel had to dig for a particularly stubborn splinter and I flinched. "I am all right, sir."

"Sweet cheeks! Me own true love!" another sailor called out. Laurel had to stop as said cheeks clenched. Suiden took a hasty sip.

"Lord Rabbit, relax," Laurel chuffed. "I will defend your virtue." I gave a pained smile only to have it fade as Jeff and Ryson passed behind Captain Suiden and paused, their eyes wide.

"Rabbit?" Jeff said.

"Lieutenant Rabbit had an unfortunate encounter with the wharf," Captain Suiden said. "However, I have confidence that he will completely recover."

"Yes, sir." Jeff grinned. "May we keep him company in his hour of need?"

Captain Suiden took another quick sip. "Of course, Trooper Jeffen. I'm sure he'll appreciate your, ah, support." I closed my eyes and for the rest of the time ignored the exclamations of returning troops, the catcalls of the sailors, and the more to the point comments of my mates while Laurel diligently plucked out all foreign objects from my backside. But I snapped my eyes open with a hiss when he slathered on something that stung like a swarm of bees.

"Truly virgin territory," Doyen Allwyn remarked.

Laurel finished up with a couple of dabs. "You may get up now, Lord Rabbit." I was off the table and had my tabard down and my trousers up before Laurel laid down his swab. Laurel chuffed again as he and the doyen began cleaning up the work station. He dropped his instruments into the hot water. "Be careful of the splinters that are still in your clothes. I will see you tonight before you sleep to reapply the lotion," he said, washing a wicked-looking hook.

I nodded and turned, wanting to get as far away as possible, only to come face to face with Captain Suiden. "All's well, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir," I said..

"Good." He turned and started walking to the bridge, indicating that I should follow him. Which I was quite happy to do. I looked over my shoulder at the badger and weasel, both of whom looked upset at the loss of their prey. I blinked.

"Pay attention, Rabbit," Suiden said.

I snapped forward again.

"We will talk later about what obeying a command means, but right now Commander Ystan and Governor Somne want to get descriptions and details on your attempted abduction."

"Laurel Faena was there too, sir. They should also ask him." "Yes. However, due to the sensitive nature of what Sro Laurel is, they have decided it's best not to involve him."

I opened my mouth to comment on the rank stupidity of this, but then decided that I couldn't throw stones. I closed it again.

"Exactly," said Suiden.

I gave everything I had to the governor and commander, who once again promised investigations, gave apologies and exclaimed at the boldness of Lieutenant Jaxtir's smuggling gang. I kept any hint that I thought Jaxtir had nothing to do with my attempted abduction to myself—the lieutenant hadn't known who I was until Captain Javes told him during our procession to the garrison only a couple of hours ago.

It was improbable that he, with his life so suddenly full of incident, had time to set anything up. I did wonder, though, how the abductors knew where I'd be, then wondered some more if they'd been lurking about the docks all along, waiting for me to wander off on my own. I felt my shoulders tighten.

I was spared the captain's lecture on obedience as Commander Ystan, Governor Somne and Doyen Orso stayed to dine. For once dinner was lively as any soldier's tavern as Ystan had become loquacious and was full of army stories. He even dared to shout Doyen Orso down during dessert when the church elder tried to interrupt him. At the end Ystan, his face flushed with triumph, stood up at the table and proposed a toast to our glorious king, Jusson Golden Eye. I gratefully stood—my arse hurt—and Laurel politely did the same, drinking with us at the toast's end. He then proposed a salute of his own.

"Here's to understanding and peace, to the return of what has been lost, to the revealing of what is true, and the acceptance of who we all are becoming. Fiat." In a bard's tale, the candles would have burned blue or some such rot after such a cryptic statement, but all that happened was a moment of silence; then my dinner companions slowly lifted their cups and drank. I suppose that Laurel's toast was vague enough that each could read their own meaning into it, and besides, who'd admit to not wanting understanding and peace? I did notice, though, that Slevoic's lips were dry after he lowered his cup.

While the captains were seeing our Dornel guests off the ship, Laurel and I went to the hold to check on the death staff and now dragon skin. I stared at them, once again feeling the hairs rise on my body at our private chamber of horrors.

"When you started your journey, honored Laurel, did you foresee this?"

Laurel shook his head. "Not this, Lord Rabbit. Never this." He raised his paws to renew the wards.

I waited until he was done. "What did you foresee, then?"

Laurel's eyes slid sidelong to me and if I had hackles, they would have risen. The thought suddenly came to me of how the Border took Iversterre by the throat and savaged it hard the last time it had transgressed. Now they couldn't find a ragtag bunch of runners who were murdering its People? I took a step away from the mountain cat.

Laurel rumbled, his ears lying against his skull as his eyes slit. Then he stopped. "The dragon's curse," he said, looking at the skin again. "Dissension, division, distrust." He sighed. "Even through the wards." He picked up his staff and began tracing once more. I watched for a moment, then reached out and stopped

him.

"Also ward between the staff and the skin," I said. Laurel stared at me and I shrugged. "Can't you feel how they feed off each other?"

"I see," Laurel said slowly. He raised the staff again.

"No, not there." I took his arm and pulled him to a different spot. "Here." I stood next to him, keeping my hand on his arm. I grunted in satisfaction as the wards blazed. I allowed my shoulders to relax and my hand to fall away from Laurel's arm. "That's better."

"Yes," said Laurel, staring at me once more.

We also checked on the cask with the holy bells, but its wards didn't need renewing, so we extinguished the lanterns and left.

"So, honored Laurel," I said, climbing the hold steps behind him. "You didn't tell me. What did you foresee?"

Laurel said nothing until we were on the deck. He walked over to the railing and waited for me to join him. It was a beautiful night, the stars brilliant and low, and the waxing moon bathing the water in sharp-edged reflections. I remembered my earlier adventure, though, and didn't stand too close to the rail.

"I saw the fulfillment of the Council's charge," Laurel finally said.

Well, that was nice and vague, just like his dinner toast. "And what was that?"

Laurel's eyes slid to me again, but this time I grinned. "Yes, I dare. I was brought up in the same damn place you were, honored Laurel."

Laurel Faena chuffed; quietly at first; then his laughter overtook his whole body. "So you were, Lord Rabbit. So you were." His laughter dwindled into the occasional snort. "As I said before, I was charged with peace."

"How do you mean to do that?"

"At this point, I don't know."

Faena don't lie, but I felt like Laurel just did a quick two-step with the truth. I sighed, frustrated, and repeated a question which he could only answer two ways. "And you had nothing to do with us getting lost."

"I had nothing to do with you getting lost," Laurel echoed, as he leaned against his staff. "It was a most powerful working, Lord Rabbit. I almost didn't find you."

I contemplated us still in the mountains—and once again wondered if it would've been a bad thing.

"Tell me, Lord Rabbit," Laurel said after a moment, "why did you leave the Border?"

"I wanted to see the world."

"Hmmm. Yes. The truth, if you please."

I watched the play of moonlight against dark.



"Rabbit."

Conjecture and knowing. I guessed Laurel hadn't been quite truthful, but I knew that I hadn't. "I was apprenticed to a mage. Decided it wasn't for me."

"Why?"

"Choice. Mine." Rebellion against an old man with cold eyes looking me over like a horse he was minded to buy. Or a meal he was about to devour. Looking into the future and seeing it full of shadows.

"Besides, I did want to see the world."

"You didn't get very far."

I shrugged. "I'm still young."

While we were talking, I could hear the crew's and troopers' voices as they conversed, joked, and called to each other. Now, out of that noise, I heard my name and I turned around. Lieutenant Groskin was headed our way.

"He even moves like my sire," Laurel said.

I watched Groskin's fluid strides and on the deck there was the shadow of a tail.

"What do you see, Lord Rabbit?"

"Nothing," I lied.

"Come away from the railing, Rabbit," Groskin said as he arrived. He didn't wait for me to comply, but grabbed my arm and pulled me back.

"Forgive us, honored lieutenant," Laurel said with a small bow as he also moved further from the rail.

"We weren't thinking."

"Too right you Weren't thinking." Groskin glared at both of us and I found myself hanging my head like a schoolboy caught out. "Captain Suiden wants to see you both." He waited for us to start moving and fell in beside us. I guessed I was going to get my lecture after all. I hunched my shoulders.

Commander Ystan, Governor Somne and Doyen Orso came to see us off the next morning. I had spent the night in Lieutenant Groskin's cabin, as Captain Suiden decided that he wanted me under his or the lieutenant's eye at all times. That meant that Slevoic was shifted to Captain Javes' cabin and Laurel had the choice of either Captain Suiden's cabin or sleeping on the floor of ours. He chose our floor, muttering about the testiness of dragons in the morning. I slept well, despite the fact that I had to lie on my stomach and that both my bunkmates were prejudiced against fresh air, refusing to open the porthole. Groskin swatted my hand as I reached for it.

"Night air is injurious," Groskin said. "Besides, the whole idea is to keep you secure, Rabbit."

This time I muttered about there only being so much air in the cabin and having to share it with two big oafs, but Laurel only laughed and Groskin ignored me.

I now stood on the deck next to Lieutenant Groskin as Captains Javes and Suiden went through the leave-taking ceremony. I ignored the muted whistles and calls of "sweet cheeks" by the sailors as I watched Ystan hand Suiden a sealed pouch.

"For the Lord Commander," he said, and Captain Suiden saluted and promised to deliver it personally.

"I've sent a letter to my good friend Archdoyen Obruesk," Doyen Orso said to Lieutenant Groskin, "regarding your arrival in Iversly. Hopefully, you'll be able to spend some time with him."

"Yes, uncle," Groskin said.

Finally, with one last bow, a salute, and Groskin surviving a crushing bear hug by Doyen Orso, we were rid of our guests and the ship's captain gave the signal to set sail.

"Next stop, the Royal City," Laurel said.

## Chapter Twenty

The heat was alive, weighing us down as we lay boneless in any shade we could find, every breath full of water. Hot water. It ran off of us in rivulets and made everything limp and bedraggled. We even found mushrooms growing in dark places and Ryson mildewed once more. He washed his clothes and bedding, but nothing dried and so he had to launder them again and again (which was, overall, a good thing). By our last day on the Banson, we were perilously close to being out of soap.

We were in the city's outskirts, the last of the farmland and country estates had fallen away some time ago, and the King's Road, now running parallel to the river, was thick with the sky blue of dock warehouses, the occasional sprinkle of the gold of government and the purple tiles of army posts. Then we rounded the final bend and started the approach to the city proper and I caught a whiff of something that made me sneeze.

"That's the sea," Suiden said, standing next to me in the prow, under one of several awnings the boat's captain had erected for shade on the deck. (I called blessings down on his head each time I prayed.) I knew that I looked like a vaudeville provincial, but I leaned forward trying to see beyond the city to the ocean. Off in the distance there was a broad shimmer of light.

"Heigh-ho," I said softly. The smell washed over me again, a salty scent that evoked tales of elegant windriders that seemed bonded to their captains and alive. I shivered.

"Yes," Captain Suiden said.

"Good view of the city, what?" Captain Javes said, coming up behind us. With him was Laurel, panting, and Lieutenants Groskin and Slevoic.

I realized that I had ignored the Royal City in my quest for the sea, and I pulled my senses back to Iversly. And was bombarded. "Poxy hell!" I danced back from the railing wide-eyed.

"Too much for your lordship?" Slevoic smirked.

"Bloody yes!" I resisted, barely, clapping my hands over my ears and shutting my eyes. I did try to breathe through my mouth as the aromas of flowers and spices, jakes and middens, bakeries and kitchens, drains and gutters obliterated the sea scent, but all that did was cause me to taste it. Combined with the chaotic sights and loud sounds, it was way too much and I wanted to go to my cabin and hide.

"It is rather overwhelming, no?" Laurel said, his eyes wide also. He covered his nose with one paw.

I looked down and confirmed the presence of dead fish lying bloated in the green and oily water. The

prow splashed through a wave and I moved even farther away from the railing, as I didn't want to get any of the river on me.

"Don't worry, Sro Laurel, Lieutenant Rabbit, you'll get used to it—if only in self-defense," Captain Suiden said. He too had moved back from water washing up on the deck. "That's where we're going to dock, if I'm not mistaken," he said, looking to the side. "I reckon we have about an hour before we do so." He turned to Captain Javes. "It's time to get the men together and give them their orders." I followed the captains, as Suiden's lecture on following directives was to the point (and very pointed). I heard boot steps beside me and assumed it was Groskin.

"Well, Lord Puke, you've finally arrived in the big city," Slevoic said.

So it wasn't Groskin. In my defense, I was fighting the odor of decaying fish mixed with turbid water. "Let it be, Slevoic."

Slevoic must have looked around and seen everyone was occupied, for he hooked my ankle with his booted foot to send me flying over the railing into the river. Except that I caught my balance and bumped into him. Accidentally. "Oh dear, how clumsy of me." I reached down to help him up, but he batted my hand away and climbed to his feet.

"Lieutenant Slevoic," Captain Suiden said.

Slevoic looked at him from behind blue eyes.

"You will oversee the unloading of the horses."

For a long moment Slevoic stood motionless; then he saluted and went below deck. Ryson made to follow him.

"Oh, I say, where are you going?" Captain Javes asked.

Ryson paused. "I, uh—I'm assigned to the horses, sir."

"Oh, jolly good dedication to duty and all that, but we've something else planned for you." Javes did his bugger me smile and beckoned Ryson to him. I noticed, though, how the captain was careful to remain upwind.

I was assigned to Laurel—no surprise there—and gathering our luggage and warded cargo, we waited in the shade of one of the awnings, watching the sailors prepare to dock. Doyen Allwyn joined us with his own baggage, including the bell cask.

"We never did get a chance to talk, Ambassador Laurel," the church elder said as he sat down beside the Faena.

Laurel rumbled agreement. "No, we did not."

"I have so many questions." The doyen sighed and looked out over the river and the city. "I'll be honest and tell you that I'm not looking forward to the next few days, especially when I tell His Holiness the Patriarch what has happened." He looked at the cask and then the bundled staff and dragon skin. "Is happening." The boat bumped against the pier and once again I got to see the sailors' skill in docking. Doyen Allwyn stood and waited until we did also. "Hopefully, we will still be able to find time to converse together."

Laurel and I bowed.

"Thank you for not pressing about who gave me the staff," the doyen said. "For allowing me to handle it myself."

"Honored elder," Laurel said as he bowed again.

"Blessings," Doyen Allwyn said, waving his hand over us. "May you truly bring peace and understanding." He turned and walked away.

There was a moment of silence as we sat down again.

"So you weren't able to find out where the staff came from either, eh?" Laurel asked.

I shook my head. "No."

Laurel sighed as he leaned back, his staff propped beside him. "So, something else to discover while we're here."

## Chapter Twenty-one

There were thousands of pigeons in the Royal City and one of them must have carried the news of our arrival, as we were met at the docks by a lieutenant, a government clerk and a gaggle of clergy surrounding another doyen. My stomach clenched as I looked around to see if there was anyone who looked like my ma or da, but no one appeared who resembled my family. Laurel and I had loaded the staff and skin onto a horse, and I went down the boarding plank with the other troopers, holding its reins. When I reached the wharf, I felt as though I had been swallowed by the city and fought the urge to go back on the ship.

Remembering my orders, I walked over to where Captain Suiden stood with Captain Javes, Doyen Allwyn and Laurel Faena, all facing our welcome party. Lieutenant Groskin joined me; there was no sign of Slevoic but I did notice that Ryson was standing guard over a mound of trunks and cases. Behind them, Basel fussed over unloading the food supplies.

Hearing footsteps, I turned and saw Jeff approaching.

"Captain Suiden said that I'm to guard your, uh, backside, Rabbit," Jeff said as he reached me, "to ward off any attacks by demonic splinters."

"You can take your sodding splinters and—" I began.

Captain Suiden moved aside, abruptly claiming my attention. "And this is Lieutenant Lord Rabbit ibn Chause e Flavan."

Startled, I snapped around and started to salute, then bow, and then figuring that I already looked a right ass and so might as well do it proper, did both. I heard snickering and made a rude gesture behind my back.

My salute was merely returned by the lieutenant, but the clerk bowed.

"Grace to you, Lord Rabbit," she said. "Losan eso Dru, from the Lord Treasurer's office."

The Iversly cleric waved his hand, his mouth in a thin smile. "Blessings, Lord Rabbit. I am Archdoyen

Obruesk.”

Blinking at the deep bass coming from the skinny rail of a man with very little hair left on his egg-shaped head, I bowed again. "Your Eminence.”

Archdoyen Obruesk's smile widened. "And blessings, Groskin. Your uncle Doyen Orso sent word via mail boat that you would be arriving."

"Grace to you, Your Eminence," Groskin said, bowing.

"Is Orso well?"

"Yes, Your Eminence. He sends his greetings.”

"I'm glad to hear that. I look forward to dining with you while you're here.” The lieutenant, who had been impatiently waiting while the archdoyen laid claim to Groskin, turned to Suiden and Javes. "There's a saying about those who choose to stand in the hot sun. Shall we remove to someplace cooler, sirs?" The archdoyen shot the lieutenant a look and opened his mouth, but Losan spoke before he could.

"Yes. And I will take you, Ambassador Laurel, to the residence set aside for your embassy."

A faint frown came and went on Suiden's face.

"It's all right, honored captain," Laurel said.

"I've been charged with your safekeeping, Sro Laurel," Suiden said.

"So you have. Until I reach Iversly. Which I have." Laurel smiled, showing gleaming eyeteeth, and while the welcome party didn't step back, they did seem to lean outward a little. The Faena ignored the archdoyen's glare. "I can hardly lodge with you in the barracks."

"That is so, Sro Laurel, but while Lieutenant Rabbit has been assigned as your liaison, he is also under my command. I will not let him go off by himself.” The welcome party now looked at me as they would a village simpleton. I heard more snickering and made a ruder gesture.

"Besides," Suiden said, "Commander Ebner was quite explicit in his directives." He thought a moment, then turned to the welcome lieutenant. "I know that there will be guards at the embassy. Is it possible we could take over those duties?"

"What a splendid idea," Javes said. "Why don't we just toddle along with Ambassador Laurel while you find out, Lieutenant?"

I found myself looking at Captain Javes sidelong. He was doing his silly ass smile (which was a shade different than his silly bugger) but beyond that I saw the wolf in parade dress for the first time.

The welcome lieutenant let out a sigh. "Well, if that's what you want to do, sirs." He sighed again and nodded at the clerk. "We will follow you to the ambassador's residence." He looked back at Suiden.

"Although I doubt, sir, that you will be able to fit your full complement in the residence.”

"I'm sure we'll be able to work something out," Suiden said. He turned and looked at Groskin. "Give the command to move out, Lieutenant.” At Groskin's shout, we swung up on our horses and followed the Royal Garrison lieutenant and the clerk, the church clergy staying with us—apparently to bless away any ill intent from the waterfront's denizens. As we moved through the streets I tried not to gawk, but I was seeing things I had only heard about—and had dismissed as untrue at the time.

"There's something about sailors that draws whores like flies," Groskin said as he rode next to me, his mouth quirking up—after he first glanced ahead to make sure the arch-doyen was out of earshot. "Almost as bad as soldiers." The prostitutes in Freston never looked as raddled as these poor drabs. (I guess there was an advantage to small town living.) One full of pockmarks caught my eye and, after she gave a great hacking cough and spat out what was left of her lungs, smiled, showing blackened teeth. I snapped forward as I heard snickering behind me. I made another rude gesture, then worried that she would see and take it as an invitation. Until we rounded a corner, I sneaked glances back to make sure she wasn't following.

We wound through the Royal City's streets, our surroundings improving until we were riding down broad boulevards and through large squares. The bubble was back, the city's folk doing a double take and then giving wide berth to our party, their eyes wide as they realized that the large cat walking out in front of us was real. The sun beat down and I wondered how Laurel could stand the heat of the paving stones against his bare pads. My toes curled in sympathy. Or at least they tried. I'd sweated so much in my boots that my feet were drowning.

We turned the corner and were in another large square, the center full of trimmed grass, flowers, clipped bushes and trees. We edged along it until we came to a large house and stopped. Losan turned to the Faena.

"Your residence, Ambassador."

"Where are his guards?" Suiden asked, his brows raised.

"Uh, I'm sure they'll be along soon," Losan said, looking at the lieutenant.

"Not my jurisdiction," he replied, shrugging.

"It's just as well, then, that we came here," Suiden said, swinging down from his horse. He walked up to the door and knocked. We waited. He knocked again. We waited again. He tried the door and it swung open, showing a darkened hall with no one in sight. "Where are the embassy servants?"

"Normally ambassadors supply their own," Losan said.

"Yes, but Commander Ebner's missive stated that Sro Laurel had no retinue."

"Uh—"

Suiden sighed and came back to Laurel. "It is, then, just as well that we are here." He looked at Losan. "I am sure that you will see that the ambassador receives all the servants he needs to run his embassy."

"And who will pay their wages?" the clerk asked, recovering. She stared down at the Faena, who stood there wearing only beads and feathers, his mouth open as he panted in the heat.

Laurel gave a slight bow. "Do not worry, honored—hmm—do not worry. The High Council took into account the need to support myself. I have more than enough to take care of any expense."

"The kingdom does not recognize Border coinage," Losan said. "We've heard about fairy gold."

"As I have no fae gold, there's no problem." Laurel turned and looked at the dark—and cool-looking—interior. "But why are we standing out here when we could be in there?" He didn't wait for an answer but started up the walk to the door.

I swung down from my horse, followed by Groskin and Jeff. We got in front of the Faena and entered

first, scanning the foyer. It was like entering a cool cave and Laurel gave a sigh of relief as he reached the hallway tiles. "Much, much better," he murmured. He turned and caused the clerk, who had followed behind us, to step back again.

"Sweet river of life—"

I figured she wasn't talking about the Banson as it flowed through the city. I glanced at Laurel and saw his amber eyes were glowing in the dimness. They winked out as he gave a long, slow blink, then came alive again. I looked back out the door and saw our escorts had clustered around the door and were staring at the Faena too, the arch-doyen's mouth pulling down at the corners. Out beyond them were the troops. I could see Ryson with the luggage carts and behind him, Slevoic leading the spare horses.

"If you would please, Javes, secure the premises," Suiden said, from the street. "I will go with the lieutenant from the garrison to present the dispatches." As Suiden rode off with the welcome lieutenant and the church contingent (Doyen Allwyn looked longingly over his shoulder at us), the troop moved in.

It was a large, graceful house, cool in the afternoon heat with smooth walls, colored tiles and arched hallways. It was built around a courtyard, full of lush plants filtering green light through the windows. Some of the ground floor rooms had glass doors and when we opened them, we could hear the splash and tinkle of the fountain in the courtyard center. There were fruit trees and shaded nooks with benches, paving stones and grass, flowers and lattices. I stood at a door, inhaling the fragrance, when the wind sighed and once more I caught scent of the sea.

It was a large, graceful, empty house. Each room was bare—no furniture, no window coverings, no rugs. The kitchen didn't have a pan, plate or spoon. It did have an indoor pump, and there was one outside by a small vegetable and herb garden that Basel clucked over, but no bucket in either place. We opened a shed and there wasn't a hoe or rake to be found.

"Sheesh," Jeff murmured, looking into the shed's corners. "They've even taken the cobwebs."

"The ambassador is responsible for furnishing the embassy," Losan said, when Captain Javes confronted her on the house's bareness.

"I see," Javes replied. "And if there's a pressing need for a chamber pot before he can buy one, what is he supposed to do?" At his words several men shifted uneasily as they were made aware of their own pressing needs (the tinkling fountain didn't help).

The clerk went to a door set discreetly under a staircase and opened it with a flourish. "The water closet." Her face declared us provincials. "There are others throughout the house."

"Is that what that is?" Jeff whispered behind me. "Ryson thought it was a cistern and filled his waterskin from it."

"Oh, jolly good. Indoor plumbing," Javes said. "Now"—he waved his hand around the room—"what about the rest?"

"The ambassador is responsible—"

"And so it will be taken care of," Laurel said. "If you will give me the name of a banker, please."

"Banker?"

"So I may establish an account, no?" Laurel blinked again, then opened wide his eyes, his pupils dark and large, and the clerk shifted her feet. "I am sure the one who services the king will be fine."

"The kingdom doesn't recognize Border coin—"

"I heard you the first time."

There was silence while Losan worked out that she really couldn't ask the Faena what he was going to use as money. And that she had pushed the limits of her welcome. Laurel's tail lashed one way, then another, and she shifted again.

"Uh, yes, Ambassador. When would you like an escort?"

"Do we have enough food for tonight, honored captain?"

Javes looked at Basel, who nodded. "Yes, sirs. For tonight and a couple of meals tomorrow."

Laurel blinked again. "Come for me tomorrow morning, then."

A quick bow and a quicker pace, and very shortly the front door opened and shut behind her.

I had followed just to make sure she didn't get lost on her way out, and I started to return to the others when the door opened again. I turned around and saw Slevoic, his uniform plastered to his body with sweat, the aroma of horses hanging heavy around him. He stepped inside, crowding me. "Well, it's my Lord Freak Sweet Cheeks."

I crowded back. "What interesting dreams you have, Slevoic."

"Let me tell you my dreams, puke—"

"No, thank you. Not on an empty stomach."

"Oh, Slevoic, you're back." Captain Javes came wandering into the entry hall, followed by Groskin. "Are the horses all settled?"

The lieutenant moved away from me. "Yes, sir."

"Very good. Please help Groskin with the room assignments. And Rabbit"—Javes gave me the same narrow-eyed stare I last saw on Suiden—"you're with me."

As was predicted, it was a tight fit, with some in bedchambers, some in the servant's quarters, and some in sitting rooms, dressing rooms, and rooms that we had no idea what they were intended for. The only ones who had chambers to themselves were Laurel Faena, which we figured was all right as it was his embassy, and the death staff and dragon skin, warded in a closet, which nobody wanted to be around anyway.

Suiden returned as the sun sank towards the horizon, casting long shadows in the courtyard. I had convinced Laurel to sit on one of the benches to catch the afternoon breeze, and the rest of the men had decided that it was a good idea. We filled our waterskins from the fountain after the Faena cupped a paw, drank and declared the water fresh (Groskin made Ryson throw his skin away and wash his mouth out with the remaining soap) and we plucked fruit from the trees. There were all sorts, and Basel rubbed his hands together in glee as he went from tree to tree, making schemes for breakfast. I chortled myself when I found the pomegranates. It was only the second time that I had the tart small-seed fruit, and my lips and chin were stained red from its juice when Suiden entered the courtyard. There was a general stir as the troops tried to find the energy to stand, but the captain had pity and motioned for us to remain as we were. His green eyes caught the sun's last rays as he headed my way and I scooted over to make room for him to sit.



"Well, that was interesting," Suiden said.

Javes had sat on the grass (after spreading his kerchief) next to our bench, and he now lifted his head to look at Suiden out of wolfen eyes. I passed a pomegranate to the captain, who took his dagger and cut it open. Taking a bite, he sighed in pleasure and settled against the bench's back, dirusting his booted feet out. He swallowed and released another sigh. "That's good." He listened to the fountain in the darkening courtyard for a few moments. "We are assigned to Ambassador Laurel until such time as the ambassador provides his own guards."

Javes nodded while Laurel purred. "Excellent, honored captain."

"Commander Loel did think that Lieutenant Rabbit should be reassigned to the Royal Garrison, but I pointed out that Ebner had made Rabbit liaison to Sro Laurel. And that only the Lord Commander or King Jusson could countermand his orders." I had lulled myself into thinking I was going to be ignored but at Suiden's words my shoulders tensed.

"So for now, we all abide here," Suiden finished.

"Very good," Javes said as he leaned back against the bench leg (also draped with a kerchief) and rested his arm on his raised knee. "You know, after pushing Commander Loel so hard, you'll probably remain in Freston for the rest of your natural life." Javes' voice was very soft.

"There are worse commands, Javes, in worse places. Besides, I don't see you campaigning so hard to leave." Suiden's voice was equally soft.

"As you say, my dear captain."

## Chapter Twenty-two

I bunked with Groskin, Jeff and another trooper that night in a second story room, all of us starting in our bedrolls, but soon crawling out of them in self-defense against the heat. Groskin did not argue when I threw open the windows that overlooked the courtyard—the room had ventilation openings on the opposite wall, so we had a cross breeze. While it wasn't unbearable, to those used to mountain climates it came close.

The next morning after a breakfast that featured Basel's fruit creations, Losan eso Dru showed up with two of her sister clerks. I was outside in the courtyard with Jeff, marveling—from a distance—at the big, many-colored spiders and speculating on the odds of them finding their way into our sleeping quarters. (We got a little quiet when we found a rather large lizard caught in one web, and we gave the weavers even more room.) When I felt a touch on my elbow, I nearly shot out of my skin. I snapped around, expecting to see an eight-legged beastie crawling up my arm. Instead, Groskin stood there, and I held my lips tight at his grin.

"Captain Suiden wants to see you two." Groskin's grin widened. "Though I'm sure that you've time to change your uniform, Rabbit, if you need to." I almost but didn't quite make a rude gesture at him (old fears die hard) as we followed the lieutenant into a salon where Suiden's Perdan rug had been rolled out on the floor and his folding table and chairs placed on top. Suiden stood beside Laurel, who sat in one of the chairs, facing Losan and the two other clerks, and Captain Javes was propped against the wall next to the door that led into the interior hallway.

"Ah. A moment please, men," Suiden said when we walked into the room. He turned back to Losan. "The Border will not be responsible for the Royal Army's upkeep and, as this is not a barracks, we have permission to outfit ourselves as befits an ambassador's residence."

"We should take over this duty, Captain." Losan gave a smooth smile. "This will keep both you and the ambassador from any hint of impropriety."

"Oh, I say, one of Gherat's clerks in charge of army procurement?" Captain Javes asked. "What would the Lord Commander say to that?"

Losan's smile slipped a bit.

"I will keep the accounts," Suiden said, "as per regulations."

"Yes, but—"

"You overstep yourself, Losan eso Dru," Laurel rumbled. "Iversterre was informed of my coming and the reasons for my solo state. Yet upon my arrival I am thrust into an intolerable situation, and every protest is met with excuses, justifications, and rationalizations. Now you wish to push yourself into the running of my household." Laurel stood and grabbed his staff, which leaned against the wall, then faced the trio of clerks. "Enough. You have no authority here." He started for the door. "I will be ready in half an hour. Please meet me in the entry way."

"Trooper Jeffen, please escort Losan and her aides to the foyer," Captain Suiden said.

Losan's mouth shut with a snap and after glaring red-faced at the captain, she spun around and walked out after the Faena. Jeff herded the other two clerks behind her.

As soon as they were gone, Suiden told me to shut the courtyard doors, while Javes pushed away from the wall and shut the door to the hallway. Groskin moved the chairs so they faced away from the uncovered windows and glass doors.

"Please sit." Suiden frowned as we all did so. "I had forgotten how, ah, involved the politics were here."

Javes gave a sharp laugh. "Involved? The ambassador of the only country to beat us bloody stupid is given a stripped bare house, is told that his money is no good and that he'd probably nick any loose change lying around, so we'll keep the household books, old fellow. By a jumped-up junior clerk."

"Eso Dru, Javes," Suiden said.

"Fine. A jumped-up noble junior clerk."

"It concerns me, sirs, that she had no compunction in demanding that she take over the procurement of our supplies," Groskin said.

"Yes," Suiden said. "It makes one wonder."

"It also concerns me that we haven't heard from any of the Gresh or Iversly clergy," Groskin continued. "Nor from anyone else."

"You're right, Lieutenant," Javes said. "Where's the receiving committee? In every damn place we've been, the officials fell over themselves to greet the ambassador. Here, they act like he's some junior clerk, come only to make sure the lawn is trimmed and the middens emptied." He turned and looked at me. "And what about Lord Rabbit here? If my papa had a loose heir running about, he'd be all over him like wet on water."

"Uhm, sir, I'm not really the heir—"

"No, not to Flavan, Rabbit," Javes said, "but Lord Chause has only one very young son and the brother next in line is a vice admiral in the Royal Navy out quarreling with the Turalians over sea trade routes—and is not married."

"Widower, no children," Suiden said.

I blinked, not realizing how close to the succession I stood. "But my da is still alive and I have three older brothers."

"Who aren't here," Suiden replied. "You are."

"But I don't want—" The world shifted.

"Then you should have stayed in the Border," the obsidian dragon said. The gray wolf gave a sharp yip, while the black panther's ears laid back in agreement. Green eyes stared down at me through wisps of curling smoke. "Why do you think your parents went there? It's the one place where certain Houses—"

"Or other interests," the wolf growled.

"—couldn't reach them."

"Why did you leave the Border, Rabbit?" the large cat rumbled.

"I wanted to see the world ..." My voice trailed off as three different species looked at me in disbelief.

"So you've said before, but your parents couldn't have been so naive as to not tell you what they had left behind," the dragon said.

They did tell me. But what I ran away from terrified me more than anything that might have arisen from the once upon a time of my parents' past. From the clean, bright walls shadows gathered and I was suddenly surrounded by darkness through which several pairs of transparent eyes peered. I heard the wind shaking the trees, and something stretched, men snapped with a thunderclap.

"Rabbit, are you all right?" Groskin asked, his hand on my arm.

I looked up and saw Suiden and Javes watching me with concern. The sun shone into the room, the trees outside still, the only shadows cast by window and door mullions. A shudder shook me. "I—"

The door opened and Laurel came in. "What has happened?" He shut the door behind him and hurried over to where we were, his toe claws clicking against the floor tiles. "Are you all right, Rabbit?"

Suiden rose and went to my side. "Lieutenant Rabbit was overcome by the heat for a moment."

"I see." Laurel looked at me. "You might want to breathe." I realized that I wasn't taking in air and began to gasp, willing my heart to slow down. A metallic taste filled my mouth, followed by bile, and I swallowed. After opening the glass doors to the courtyard, Groskin came back and tried to thrust my head between my knees. Laurel swatted his hand away and reached into his pouch, pulling out a couple of leaves. "Here, chew these."

I swallowed again, recognizing them. "No," I said in denial.

Javes frowned. "What are they?"

"Thunder without a cloud in the sky, Rabbit," Laurel said, ignoring the captain. "Tell me, what did you see?"

"It's not uncommon to have thunder without clouds when it's hot," Suiden said. "And you're not dosing my men without my permission."

I tried to stand, but my legs wouldn't work and I fell back into my chair. Groskin clamped a hand to my shoulder to keep me seated.

"It's just the heat, sir," I said. "I'm all right."

"No, you're not all right," Laurel said. He looked at Suiden. "Do you know what's ailing him?" Shut up, I thought, and both Laurel and Suiden looked at me as if I shouted.

"All right," Javes said. "What is going on?"

Laurel held up the leaves and in the breeze from the open doors I caught the faint scent of mint.

"Mentha," he said.

Suiden stared at Laurel, then jerked his head around at me, his face filled with dawning understanding.

"So?" Javes asked as Groskin frowned down at me.

"It's given to mages," Laurel said, "when they start to come into their full power." There was silence as Laurel's words sank in; then Groskin snatched his hand back from my shoulder as if it were hot. Javes, though, peered at me through his quiz glass. "Oh, I say," he murmured, fascinated. Then his voice changed. "You're shaking like you have the ague, Rabbit."

I felt like it. Despite the heat, I was shivering with cold and my teeth had started to chatter. I pushed myself to my feet anyway, this time staying there. "I'll be all right, sir," I repeated, not looking at Laurel or his damned leaves. "It's the heat. A little rest and I should be fine."

"So you're not a mage?" Javes asked, still looking at me through his quiz glass.

I shook my head and nearly fell. I steadied myself by grabbing onto the chair's back. "No, sir," I denied.

"I'm just a farm boy." And I was. It took many years for an apprentice to become a mage.

"Rabbit—" Laurel began, taking hold of my arm. I didn't have the strength to pull away.

"Let him go, Sro Cat," Suiden said, removing my arm from Laurel's grasp for me.

"Captain—" Laurel began this time, rumbling.

"We don't have time to argue," Suiden said. "There are three officious clerks of Lord Gherat's waiting to take us to the bank, so to the bank we must go. Unless you want them or, worse, Gherat to start asking questions." Moving between Laurel and me, he looked at Groskin standing several paces away. "Get someone to escort Rabbit upstairs, Lieutenant." Groskin went to the door and shouted, and a trooper almost immediately appeared. Laurel rumbled deep, his tail lashing, but he remained quiet as the trooper and I left for my room. We did detour first by the kitchen where I drank a cup of water and downed two oranges Basel produced. But after climbing the stairs on wobbly legs, I finally made it to my bedroll. There I collapsed, feeling as though I'd been rolled out and pounded flat. I shot upright again, though, as the smell of mint hit my nose. Reaching into my trousers pocket, I found two mentha leaves that Laurel had managed to tuck in. I stared at the leaves for a moment, then dropped them on the floor before collapsing once more. The room spun around once as I sank into oblivion.

## Chapter Twenty-three

I woke up to a sun-filled room, and I groaned. Every joint hurt and my mouth tasted like I had done a tavern crawl, licking the floors clean. I sat up, and lay back down quick to keep my head from falling off. Then my stomach let me know it was feeling neglected and threatened to erupt. I was holding still, hoping that everything would calm down, when the door opened and Jeff walked in carrying the captain's tea service.

"How're you feeling?" Jeff asked.

I croaked.

"That good?" Setting the tray down, Jeff shoved something under my head and shoulders, raising me up.

"I brought you some tea. Hold on a moment." He left the room but returned quickly with screens of different sizes.

I croaked again.

"These? One of the lads found them in a small closet tucked away under a staircase. Must have been missed by whoever cleaned this place out." Coming back to my bedroll, Jeff lifted the teapot and poured a cup. Dropping in several lumps of sugar, he stirred it before handing me the cup. I gulped it down as Jeff took the large screens and fit them over the windows. He then took the smaller screens and placed them over the ventilation openings. "They'll keep out any garden visitors that might come calling," Jeff said as he returned. He took the cup. "More?"

"Yes, please," I whispered.

Jeff poured another cup and added sugar to it. "So, what happened? The captain just said you were taken sick." He watched me gulp down the tea again, and poured another cup.

"The heat," I whispered.

"Oh," Jeff said, his face telling me how weak he thought that was. But he decided not to hold it against me and added, "It has been pretty hot, I guess. I thought I was going to melt when I went outside yesterday." He saw my look of inquiry. "Suiden took me with them to the bank since you couldn't go." He grinned as he dropped sugar in the cup. "Never saw so much marble."

"Groskin didn't go?" I whispered, taking the cup. I drained it once more.

"Yeah, he went," Jeff said. He gave a faint frown. "Thought he'd come back up here to check on you, but I saw him taking off with Slevoic." Jeff shrugged, dismissing the doings of lieutenants, and grinned again. "You should've been there, Rabbit. The banker was full of how he couldn't accept Border coin and how he couldn't give the ambassador credit. Something about reciprocal—" "Reciprocal agreements. The Border and Iversterre have no banking treaties with each other," I said, my voice stronger.

"Yeah." Jeff took my cup and filled it the fourth time. "The ambassador let him talk until he ran out of words, then he pulled out a sack from his carry pouch and dumped jewels in front of the banker." He handed me the cup. "Captain Suiden said later that they were all of the first water, whatever that means."

"Top-notch," I said, my voice almost normal. I emptied the cup again.

"Well, with all the pretties glittering on his desk, old windy-bags sure changed his tune fast." Jeff poured again.

"Probably from Dragoness Moraina's hoard," I said, speculating.

Jeff's eyes widened. "A dragon's jewels?"

"Probably," I said again. "They're the only ones with enough gemstones that they can give out sacks and not miss any." I held out my cup. "So, the banker was dazzled?"

Jeff emptied the pot into it. "He almost had palpitations. He did have palpitations, though, when the ambassador pulled out a letter of credit." Jeff watched me drink the last of the how very strong tea. "It was from the Qarant."

I nodded and managed to lean over to set my cup down on the tray. "Trading partners."

"Come again?"

"My ma's weaving would make a grown man weep, especially if he had to wear it. But my sisters, Harmony, Sage, and River Rain—"

"Sheesh, Rabbit," Jeff said.

"—sell their work to trade factors who then either resell it in the cities or to the Qarant."

"Cities," Jeff said. "Here?"

"No. Border cities—the elfin ones, mainly." I saw Jeff's face. "We're not all in the woods. The elves build incredible cities." Including, according to them, Iversly.

The tea had eased the ache in my head and settled my stomach, and I sat up. "So we're using the Royal Bankers?"

"Oh, yeah," Jeff said. "Windy-bags did a song and dance about how he'd been misled and that everything seemed proper and that he could handle all our needs. Especially when Suiden presented his letter of credit from the Lord Commander."

"Misled," I said.

"Yeah, the captains caught that too. Javes said something about Lord Gherat trying to put a spoke through the ambassador's wheels—and ours. That the Treasurer does not like the Lord Commander, especially because the army doesn't have to account to him for its funds." Jeff started to tidy the tray. "We spent the rest of the day getting supplies and victuals. Basel must've hit five different markets, and took notes about others. Captain Javes is going shopping for furnishings today." He gave a sneer. "I mean, old fellow, who better, what?"

"Careful, Jeff," I said vaguely. "Javes is not the ass he seems to be." Jeff shrugged, also dismissing captains who acted like twits.

"You know, maybe I should go with Javes," I said, calculating my purse's contents against next quarter day. "He probably could do with some help." Jeff smirked as he stood and picked up the tray. "Captain Suiden said you'd try to go the moment you heard there was going to be shopping." Jeff didn't wait for my response. "Well, the captain did say that if you could get downstairs and eat breakfast and keep it down, that maybe you can go with Javes."

By holding onto the banister, I managed to get downstairs without falling. Jeff waited while I ate breakfast; then, after a meal of dry toast and coddled eggs, he freed me from Basel (who tried to spoon-feed me) and took me to the same room I fled from yesterday. I hesitated at the door, peering at Captains Suiden and Javes, who were seated at the same table. My desire to get out of the house was stronger than any reluctance to enter, though, so I crossed the threshold, relaxing when nothing happened.

"Before he got out of bed, sirs," Jeff said, entering behind me.

A faint smile passed over Javes' face.

"How are you, Lieutenant?" Suiden asked.

"I'm fine, sir."

"Good." Suiden stood up. "Thank you, trooper." He waited until Jeff left the room, shutting the door behind him. "Actually, you look like hell, Lieutenant."

"Sir, I'm sure I'm up for a small trip—"

Captain Javes picked up something from the table and handed it to Suiden, who held it up—the mentha leaves I had dropped on my bedroom floor yesterday. I stopped in midsentence, my gaze traveling between the two captains.

"Groskin found them by your bed," Suiden said.

"Was the ambassador right, Rabbit?" Captain Javes asked. "Are you a mage?" I looked out the windows to the courtyard and watched a yellow and black bird with an orange-feathered throat flit through the trees. A slight breeze was stirring and I could hear the rustling of leaves.

"You were asked a question, Lieutenant," Suiden said.

"No, sir." The bird settled on a branch and trilled a challenge.

"No, what?" Javes asked.

The bird trilled again, then, satisfied it had driven off all competition, began to preen. Behind it, a large spider crept down the tree trunk.

"Lieutenant," Suiden said.

"No, I'm not a mage. Yet." The spider reached the branch and eased closer to the bird. The bird raised one wing and worked on its feathers.

"I see. And those leaves?" Javes asked.

The spider moved a little closer, one slender leg by the bird's foot. The bird started working on its tail feathers. "As Laurel Faena said, sir, they're given to those who are starting to come into their full mage powers. It can be—traumatic, and mentha alleviates the symptoms."

"Like the symptoms you're having?" Suiden asked. "Are you coming into your powers, Lieutenant?" The bird raised its head to clean another part of its body, saw the spider and, squawking, tried to take off.

"I—" The spider shot up and grabbed the bird by the throat. After a brief tussle, the spider carried the bird, still feebly flapping, back up the tree trunk.

"Lieutenant."

A few yellow feathers floated to the ground.

"I ran away," I said. "Broke my indentures."

The captains were silent while they worked at my statement. "You were apprenticed to a mage, Rabbit?" Suiden asked after a moment.

"Yes," I said.

"Why did you run away?" Javes asked.

"I was afraid."

"Of what, Lieutenant?" Suiden said.

"That I'd get eaten alive." I pulled my mind away from the feast in the tree and realized that I had moved to the courtyard doors. I turned to face the captains and felt my lips twist as I remembered a street drama I had seen. "Oh, he's not a dark mage or a dread lord. He isn't out to conquer the world by opening the nether gates and flooding us with his demon minions." I paused. "But he's not out to bring heaven on earth either."

"What is he out for?" Javes asked.

"Himself."

It was quiet again; then Captain Suiden pulled a chair out from the table. "Sit, Rabbit. You look like you're going to keel over." He sat down himself, laying the leaves on the table.

Javes picked them up. "So you're a runaway apprentice mage who is coming into his power, whatever that means." He paused. "What does it mean?"

I looked at my hands. "There are those who are born with the talent—"

"You mean magic?" Javes asked.

"No, sir," I said. "The entire Border is what you'd call 'magic'" Despite myself I gave a faint smile. "Look at honored Laurel—he's a talking mountain cat who walks on two legs. And carries a big stick." My smile faded. "But there are those who can shape a ... a force—"

"Wizardry," Suiden said, his eyes intent. "You're able to summon and command the elements."

I nodded. "Yes, sir. Eventually. It takes years of study to get there."

"Yet all this is happening to you now," Javes said. "Why?"

I looked out the window again, but couldn't see anything in the tree. "Twice in a mage's life the talent kind of takes over. Once during late childhood when it first manifests, and then just at the beginning of adulthood, when the mage's aspects become apparent." I remembered my family's startlement when, after recovering from a sudden fever, I'd walk into a room and stuff would fly off shelves and fires lit by themselves. Then Magus Karesté showed up, promising to teach me how to control my burgeoning adolescent talent. Which he did. But he also taught me how to fear.

"Aspects," Javes repeated, his brows knitting.



"Air, water, fire and earth," Suiden said. "Is that what happened yesterday, Rabbit? Your aspect became apparent?" I remembered the roaring sound of wind, while the trees remained motionless. "Partly," I admitted.

"Partly?"

I shifted in my chair. "I think my master found me."

"And?"

"I think I forced him away again."

"The thunderclap," Suiden said.

I nodded again, staring at the floor.

The captains were quiet again.

"You do look like hell, Lieutenant Rabbit," Suiden said, "but we think that it would be good for you to get out. So you will go on this shopping trip."

I lifted my head.

"You will stay with me at all times," Javes said. "No wandering off, no matter how pretty the clothes in the window, what?" I nodded again and Captain Javes laid the leaves back on the table.

"You say that the Faena has nothing to do with the strangeness that's been happening," Suiden said. "Perhaps that's true, but it's very coincidental that it started just when he showed up, including all that is going on with you." He paused. "And lord or not, newbie mage or not, runaway apprentice, pacts and feathers, smuggling and threats of war, you are still under my command. Is that clear?"

"Yes, sir."

## **Chapter Twenty-four**

Suiden declared that Jeff would also go with Javes, and sent both of us back up to our bedroom where we discovered new hot-weather uniforms waiting for us. Instead of the usual helm or cap, there was a hat with a broad brim in the front to shade the face, and a flap in the back to protect the neck from the sun. The uniform itself was made of a material that was very light, allowing any stray breeze to wrap around the body before going on its way. We both sighed with relief when we donned the new uniforms, as the ones from Freston felt, in the humid heat, like a wet blanket.

"It's cotton, Lieutenant," a southie trooper said when he overheard me wonder what it was.

It was still early, the sun just clearing the roofs as Jeff and I followed Captain Javes out of the embassy to our waiting horses. Javes was wearing the same broad-brimmed hat and cotton uniform we wore, but he had augmented it with his Habbs boots, his gold filigreed sword, and a light cape. And of course, his quiz glass, hung by its ribbon around his neck.

We mounted our horses and Javes turned his to face us.

For once, there wasn't anything silly in his expression as his eyes rested on Jeff and me, and we straightened in our saddles as we gave him our full attention. A breeze stirred the captain's cape for a moment, then was still.

"We are about to go into places fraught with pitfalls and snares, lads, which have destroyed better men than us." We nodded, wide-eyed.

"Our enemy is swift and crafty, and you will meet with cunning beyond comprehension."

Our eyes grew wider.

"It's therefore imperative that, one, you stay in the middle of each shop we enter and not—I repeat—not touch anything. Two, you will keep silent until I give you permission to speak. Three, no matter what the shopkeeper may claim to have in his back room, you will not go in there. And, four, you will not accept any offers of sisters, daughters, cousins, nieces, or any other female relative, no matter what the inducement offered." Jeff and I looked at each other, desperate to know what was in the back rooms and what did the female relatives look like.

Javes smiled. "Unless, of course, you want to get married."

Scratch the sisters.

The captain led us through broad boulevards and avenues, our horses' hooves clapping on the cobbled streets. There were others about and the closer we got to the market streets, the busier it became, as people conducted their business in the cool of the morning. Soon our horses were on a street full of just opened shops. I craned my neck, trying to find a tailor.

"Patience, Lieutenant," Javes said, riding beside me. "First things first."

"Yes, sir." I ignored the rude noises behind me.

We rounded a corner and in the shop windows were elaborately carved chairs, tables, and cabinets. Javes read the discreet signs that hung over the doors, stopping at one that said GUAREZ AND SONS and beneath that in smaller letters BY ROYAL APPOINTMENT. We dismounted and entered, a bell ringing over the door as we opened it. Instead of the instant appearance of the shopkeeper, though, we were left alone to appreciate the fragrance of beeswax and lemon, the feel of a soft, deep-pile carpet, and the ambiance of quiet elegance. Jeff and I huddled in the middle of the room while Javes strolled about, looking over the pieces.

After a little while, a rear doorway curtain parted and a smiling, silver-haired man entered. "What can I do for you, gracious sirs—" His smile faltered as he took in Jeff's common soldier uniform, but it collapsed completely when he looked at me. "My lord?"

"Hallo," Javes said from a corner, with his bugger me silly smile. "Guarez?"

The man nodded, still staring at me.

"I am Captain Javes and this is my aide, Lieutenant Lord Rabbit Chause e Flavan—"

My face froze.

"—and we are here to purchase furnishings for the new Border embassy." Javes patted around his body.

"Hang on, I've got a letter from the bank somewhere." He found it and handed it to the furnisher, who accepted it with a limp hand. Javes allowed him to scan it, then filched the letter back. "But first, do you

use Border wood?"

"Uh, no."

"Oh, splendid." Javes beamed. "Cause the ambassador is a little touchy about it on account of when you cut down a Border tree, you kill its sprite." He looked around the shop. "I'd hate to bring back one of your excellent pieces and have him say it's the body of an old friend, what?"

The furnisher now stared at Javes. "We use no material from the Border."

Javes cranked his smile up another notch. "Then you won't mind if Lord Rabbit takes a gander, eh?"

I took my cue and began to walk around the shop, examining the furniture. "He's from the Border too, you know," Javes continued, his voice confidential. "Fourth son of Lord Rafe ibn Chause and Lady Hilga eso Flavan, right, Lord Rabbit?"

I paused in my circuit. "I am their seventh child, sir." Damn if I'd let him dismiss my sisters.

"Oh, yes," Javes said. "There are eight altogether." He looked as if he had just remembered the secret of life. "Looks awfully like his papa, doesn't he?"

"His grandfather," Guarez said. I felt his eyes sweep over me, taking in how my uniform hung on my lean frame. "He even wears his clothes the same."

I finished and shook my head. "There's no Border wood here, sir." I looked at the curtained door that probably led to the workshop and Javes waved a hand.

"No, no need. If it's not out here, I'm sure it's not in there either." Javes' smile changed, becoming narrower, yet showing more teeth. "And I'm also sure that the good furnisher won't offend either Ambassador Laurel or Lord Rabbit ibn Chause by selling us smuggled spritewood, what?"

"No, gracious sirs—"

"Splendid." Javes beamed again.

Javes sat down with Guarez and was soon immersed in genteel dickering for the complete furnishing of the embassy. I went back to the middle of the room to Jeff. I wanted to think on why I had been displayed, and what plans I had thwarted when I couldn't accompany Captain Suiden to the bank yesterday. Also creeping around the edges was the remark about me looking like my grandda, and I found myself checking that my uniform was straight. I was so involved that it took me a while to realize that Jeff was quiet and not trying to make my present interesting with sounds, snickers and low-voiced comments, no matter that the captain had ordered us not to talk. I gave him a look and met a cold stare.

I sighed, then shrugged. I hadn't known that Javes was going to thrust my parents' nobility down the merchant's throat.

Javes stood up. "Excellent, Guarez. We will await you at the embassy this evening." He waited until the furnisher bowed. "And thank you for the recommendations." He turned and signaled us. "All right, men. To our next destination." He checked a list that was on store stationery. "Which should be right around the corner." Guarez escorted us to the door and gave another bow to Javes and then one to me.

"Captain, my lord." He shut the door so close behind us that I felt my trouser cuffs shift in the breeze.

The performance was repeated at the carpet, window coverings (something called blinds, made of thin, polished wood slats, bleached almost white), porcelain, silversmith, linen, and other shops. Captain Javes asked if they had any Border contraband, introduced me as a lord, had me check around, and then

bargained hard for the supplying of me embassy in whatever the shop sold. He flashed around the letter of credit, careful not to let the shopkeepers drool on it, then had them agree to come to the embassy that evening to "see the scope of the job, what?" He never mentioned, though, that the ambassador was a mountain cat who walked on his back legs. I figured that there was going to be a whole lot of screaming in the old place that night.

We walked out of the last shop, the sun high overhead hitting us hard, and I was glad of the wide-brim hat. I glanced at Jeff, but he stared straight ahead, still in a snit over "Lieutenant Lord Rabbit." We mounted our horses and he fell in behind Javes and me when we started moving.

"I think first we should water our horses and then find something for us. I'm feeling a little peckish," Javes said.

I looked sideways at the captain. He caught it and raised an eyebrow. "Spit it out or let it go. But do not sulk, Lieutenant."

My ma would accuse me of the sullens, usually when she pushed into where I didn't want her to be. I didn't care to hear the same from the captain. "What can I say, sir?"

"You can ask what the blazes is going on instead of playing the sacrificial victim."

"It would have been nice to be informed before what is going on went on, sir."

"So you would've been, if you hadn't been taken sick yesterday morning."

"Before I was to go to the bank, sir?"

Javes looked at me sideways. "Suiden was right. You're not as naive as you sometimes act, Lieutenant." That did not answer my question and I stayed silent. We turned down a street and saw a square where a fountain bubbled into a trough. We rode up and the citizenry moved back, giving us clear access to the water. I frowned—in Freston the army had to wait its turn just like everyone else. "Does the army here always get to go to the front of the line?" I asked Javes.

"Oh, no, Lieutenant Lord Rabbit," Javes said, dismounting. He tried to lead his horse to the water, but the animal needed no help. He shouldered the captain out of the way and bent down into the trough, drinking noisily. Jeff and I had to quickly dismount too or we would have been dumped into the water as our horses hastened to follow the captain's. Javes looked around. "No," he repeated, "they don't do this because of us." He gave a slight smile. "It's because of you." I blinked and stared around, meeting the eyes of one man who was holding his horse back while ours drank their fill. He flinched, then gave a low bow.

"Between our clergy traveling companions, Gherat's clerks, any letters that came from Gresh, Dornel, and Freston, plus our just finished shopping trip, I am sure that the city knows that a grandson of Lord Flavan and a nephew of the current Lord Chause is a lieutenant in the Royal Army. And you heard Guarez this morning, you're the spitting image of the old lord." He lifted his quiz glass and peered at my trousers. "Even down to the creases. Tell me, old boy, how do you get them so sharp?"

"You know, sir, Slevoic asked me that very question."

The silly ass went away and the wolf stared back at me. "Careful, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir."

Our horses, having done their best to suck the trough dry, were finished and we mounted. Javes once

more led us down a street, and now that I wasn't concentrating on finding tailor shops or wondering what the captain was up to, I noticed that I was garnering my fair share of attention, some even pointing me out to companions. It was as if a target had taken up space on my back, and I had to fight not to hunch my shoulders.

"Was this expedition so that everyone would know that the rumors were true, sir?"

"Partly," Javes said. "We did need to furnish the embassy."

"Would it have hurt to just let them be rumors?" Blast, I was sulking. I pressed my lips together, hoping that they hadn't been in a pout.

"Rumors can be denied and dismissed, Rabbit." The gray wolf's yellow eyes were almost colorless in the bright sunlight. "If you had disappeared prior to anyone really seeing you, your existence could've been denied and dismissed too."

Now I felt I also had targets on my chest and forehead. "Sh—uh, shoot, sir. The abduction attempt?"

"Perhaps." Javes guided us around another square, this one lined—judging by the aromas—with eateries. "A clerk or even the odd officer can be suborned. It is very difficult, though, to do an entire city." Wolf eyes met mine. "I'm not saying it can't be done, but it takes a very high level of, say, application."

I chewed on that as we continued around the square, until Javes stopped in front of a restaurant that had tables sheltering from the sun under a blue and white striped awning. I waited until we all dismounted.

"But it has happened, sir." I saw Javes' questioning look.

"Iversterre has dismissed an entire people." A couple of riders on horseback slowed down, saw me looking back at them and sped up again, their horses' hooves clattering against the stone street. "Here, Border folk don't exist except as fantastic stories. Never mind that the kingdom lost a vicious and bloody war to them. And especially never mind that the People once lived here until they were driven out. With a very high level of application." I watched a server from the restaurant approach.

Captain Javes turned and frowned at the server, causing her to freeze. His face then smoothed and he smiled, gesturing for her to continue forward. "Um, may I help you, gracious sirs?" Her gaze fell on me and her eyes widened as she bowed. "My lord?"

"An outside table," Javes said, "if you please." He indicated one in a corner, a fair distance away from the other patrons. "That one looks nice."

It was amazing how we all sat at a round table and still managed to have our backs to the wall. My display continued with passersby doing double takes, while the server told us the specialty dishes, took our orders, and disappeared back into the restaurant. A carriage slowed down so its occupants could get a good look at me as the server returned with a basket of bread, a dish of oil Javes said came from olives, and tall glasses of lemonade and tea. Javes spoke to her and she went inside again and came back with two pitchers that had water beading on the outside. I reached up and touched one—it was cold.

"They bring ice from the mountains down the Banson in special boats," Javes said as the server placed the pitchers on the table, "and store it in an icehouse here. I remembered them as having the coldest drinks in the square." He took a sip of lemonade. "I was right."

The server bowed. "Thank you, gracious sir." She whisked the tray away and went back into the restaurant.

The captain waited until she had moved out of earshot, then pinned Jeffen with a glare. "They say that the only way for more than one person to keep a secret is for the others to be dead. If what I'm about to say leaks out, trooper, you'll wish you were, understood?" Jeff nodded, his mouth open. I figured there weren't going to be any more "oh, I say" jokes in the barracks.

"And I am sure, Rabbit, that you'll not talk about this either, as you keep secrets so well." There's nothing like a jab with one's tea.

I nodded too. "Yes, sir."

Javes picked up his glass of lemonade, drained half in one long swallow, then looked at me. "All right. Let's say that perhaps Iversterre has been a little forgetful. That events have slipped from its memory, like certain wars. With this memory lapse—maybe even because of it—is an increase in incidents that if allowed to continue would cause the kingdom's future to become very interesting. How would you remedy that, Lieutenant?" The gray wolf looked at me, his eyes intent.

"I'd do my best to remind it, sir."

Javes nodded and sipped his lemonade, looking back over the street. "And so we shall, starting tonight when the royal merchants stop by to greet the new ambassador."

"Oh." I sat still for a moment, then smiled and raised my own glass to the couple walking down the street who had paused to stare.

## Chapter Twenty-five

We returned to the embassy once we finished our meal. After two pitchers of tea at the restaurant, I was in agony and vaulted off my horse as soon as we arrived, dashing into the house. I tried one water closet on the first floor, found it occupied, and then sprinted up the stairs to the one near my room, trying to ignore the fountain splashes. A blessed short time later, I came out and ran into Laurel.

"So, Lord Rabbit, did you find your tailor?"

I had forgotten about my quest for new clothes. "No, Laurel Faena. Not this time."

"I see. And how do you feel?"

"I'm fine."

"Really? I don't remember your eyes having such dark circles." He looked down. "Nor your hands trembling like that." He flicked an ear back. "Did you chew the leaves?"

"No, honored Faena."

The other ear went back. "Denying what happened is not going to make it go away. Though it does seem to be a kingdom pastime, no?" It was the second time that Laurel had alluded to a conversation I had with my superior officers when he wasn't present, and my eyes narrowed.

"No, Lord Rabbit, do not suspect me. Never suspect me." His ears came up and he glanced down the stairwell, then looked back at me and lowered his voice. "You're not alone in this, Rabbit." He smiled and his whiskers swept back. "Mages aren't the only ones who use the mentha. But we will talk later."

I stopped Laurel as he made to go around me. "Wait a damned minute. You will not lob boulders like that, then walk away. What do you mean—"

"Well, well. It's the Border freak and his mutant cat." I had heard footsteps coming up the stairs, but blocked them out as I was intent on my conversation with Laurel, and now I was paying the price. I turned and saw Lieutenant Slevoic with Ryson behind him.

"Is Milord Puke feeling less delicate?" Slevoic puffed on a cheroot and blew smoke in my face.

"Get stuffed," I said, a headache building between my eyes. My fingers began to tingle.

"And how's that going to happen? You?"

"I told you before, leave me out of your dreams."

Slevoic took a couple of quick steps until he was standing nose to nose with me. My head was pounding and I heard wind blowing, a rushing, angry sound. Which was strange as the hallway was still.

Slevoic looked around. "What do you know. No one here." He blew more smoke. "Just you and me, puke." Plus Ryson and Laurel, but they apparently didn't matter in Slevoic's universe. I backed away from him to give myself room, feeling as though I wasn't touching the floor. Slevoic smiled, licking his lips as he gripped his cheroot, ready to thrust it where it'd burn. I raised my hand and felt it fill with—something—as my own lips pulled away from my teeth.

"No, Rabbit, stop!" Laurel grabbed me, pulling my arm down, and I felt his paw close over my hand, holding it shut.

"What is going on here?"

Ryson snapped to attention and Slevoic followed more slowly. I couldn't move, as Laurel held me immobile. Groskin and Suiden reached the top of the stairs. I looked around, as far as Laurel allowed me, and I could see faces appear in doorways, down in the courtyard and in the stairwell. Jeff was on the steps, his eyes just clearing the second floor. Captain Javes moved up through the crowd in the stairwell until he stood next to Groskin. His yellow eyes gleamed at me.

I tried to pull my hand from Laurel's grip, but he resisted, his claws pressing lightly into my skin.

"Well?" Groskin glared at us, his frown deepening as he realized the only one who had to obey him was Ryson.

"You will answer Lieutenant Groskin's question," Suiden said, looking at each of us. When his eyes lit on Laurel holding my fist closed, his brows raised.

How to explain to a captain that two of his lieutenants were about to try to kill—or at least seriously maim—each other as he watched and did nothing? Ryson's mouth hung open as he searched for words that would keep his own hide whole, but nothing came out. Suiden's eyes returned to my face.

"Lieutenant Rabbit?"

"Lieutenant Slevoic is a twit, sir, and I was going to help him get over it."

"There are no rocks to guard here, Lieutenant."

"No, sir."

"I see." The captain's eyes moved to the burning cheroot in Slevoic's hand. "Lieutenant Slevoic?"

"Permission to speak freely, sir."

"Don't you always?" Javes murmured.

"I find Rabbit to be a disturbing influence, sir," Slevoic said.

"That's true," I said. "He's always trying to tell me his dreams, sir."

"You puking freak—"

"Remain quiet, Lieutenant Rabbit, or I will have Groskin remove you." I shut up as Groskin gave the captain a very unhappy look. Sweat trickled down my back from being in close contact with Laurel.

"Please continue, Lieutenant Slevoic."

"Yes, sir." Slevoic turned his blue eyes on me. "I question Rabbit's loyalties. He's Border born and raised, no matter that his parents are from Iversterre, and he's tight with the magical—"

"Ambassador Laurel, Lieutenant," Suiden said, "and you should put out your cheroot before you're burned." I gave a small sigh of disappointment as Slevoic handed the cheroot to Ryson, who ended up having to dump it in the convenience. When the noise from the flush subsided, Suiden waved his hand at Slevoic.

"Continue." "He's close to the ma—uh, Ambassador Laurel, making pacts with it, exchanging feathers and who knows what else." Slevoic's brows rose. "Do you realize, sir, that we have just his and the ma—the ambassador's word that me staff, shield and hauberk are what they say they are? People have been accused—imprisoned even—on their say-so only." He gave a faint smile that Suiden couldn't see.

"And there they are, holding each other like they're lovers."

"You find that amusing, Lieutenant?" Then again, the captain had been known to see around corners.

Slevoic stopped smiling, but he continued to stare at me and I thought about leaning back into the Faena, allowing him to take my weight.

"You will remain as you are, Rabbit." Suiden looked at Laurel. "Is there a reason why you're holding the lieutenant, Sro Laurel?"

"He has not recovered from his illness, honored captain, and he's shaking hard. I'm afraid he will collapse." Now that Laurel pointed it out, tremors were racking my body. My headache had increased and small lights now flashed before my eyes.

"Sir," Slevoic said, "we don't even know that Rabbit's illness is real. No one else has gotten sick."

"Is that the reason why you were ready to brawl with him, Lieutenant? With lit cheroot in hand?"

"Sir—"

"Or every time I look up you're in his face, calling him puke, freak or both?"

"No, I—"

"Listen well, Slevoic, for I will only say this once. What you say may be true—"

The roaring wind got louder, threatening to tear me apart. Laurel tightened his arms as I swayed.



"—or not. It's conjecture. There is no proof whatsoever that Rabbit has betrayed his oath of allegiance."

"But sir—"

"None at all, Lieutenant. I do know, though, that you have done your level best to spread discontent.

Because of you, the men grumble, whisper in corners, form factions, and are even encouraged to insubordination and subterfuge." Suiden's eyes rested on Ryson. "Whatever he may be, Rabbit has never undermined either troop morale or my command."

Slevoic's face was blank. "Sir—"

"The Lord Commander is well aware of who Rabbit is and his relationship with the Border." Suiden looked back, at Slevoic. "It was he who approved his joining the Royal Army, he who stationed him at Freston, and the Lord Commander himself confirmed his appointment as the ambassador's liaison. Are you calling the Lord Commander a fool, Lieutenant?"

"No, sir."

"Very wise, Lieutenant. Very, very wise." Suiden paused to make sure he had Slevoic's full attention. "You are hereby confined to your quarters until you are brought before a review board on charges of attacking a fellow officer, with intent to cause great bodily harm—"

"Sir!" Slevoic's eyes were wide in disbelief that he was being held accountable.

"The lit cheroot, Lieutenant," Suiden said.

"I forgot I had it, sir!"

"And you an experienced soldier," Javes said.

"It's hard to make a fist and not know it's there, Lieutenant," Suiden said. "I have also sent a full report to the Lord Commander regarding your conduct—"

The tremors, head pounding and flashes of light increased and my legs gave way. I slid through Laurel's grasp, causing him to scramble to catch me before my head hit the floor. I heard exclamations and directions, echoing like they were coming from the bottom of a deep well. The room shifted and then I felt my bedroll under me. When I opened my eyes and tried to focus, Laurel was bent over me with Suiden looking over his shoulder, but they both faded in and out. There was a brush on my lips and a mint scent hit my nose (the only part of me that seemed to be working). I turned my head and got slammed by nausea.

"Do not be stupid," Laurel said. He placed the mentha leaves against my lips once more.

I tried to push them away, but Laurel still had hold of my hand.

"Stubborn idiot! Denying it won't make it stop. Take them!" I opened my mouth to say no and he thrust them in, using his paw to push my mouth closed. I tried to spit them out again anyway as my vision dimmed more.

"Rabbit, your eyes are red, like the blood vessels are bursting," I heard Suiden say. "You may be going blind or you may be dying. Do you wish to do either?" Well, no, I didn't, not really. I hesitated, then gave in, crunching down on the leaves, and the mint exploded in my mouth. I swallowed once, twice and waited.

"Here." I allowed Laurel to place more in my mouth and chewed those. The pounding started to subside and my stomach settled. "Stubborn, stubborn idiot. If you had done this yesterday, you'd not be flirting with death now." I tried to answer him, but with the pain withdrawing I was sliding towards oblivion. My eyelids drooped.

"Why are you holding his hand, Sro Laurel?"

"How long has the lieutenant harassed Lord Rabbit, honored captain?" Laurel countered with another question.

I opened my eyes a bit, somewhat interested.

"Since Slevoic was assigned to Freston, about three years ago." I felt Laurel make a couple of passes over my hand, and then gently pry it open.

"What the sodding poxy hell is that?"

My eyes opened all the way. Suiden never cursed. Well, maybe a little, but not like that. I tried to see but my vision was still blurred.

"The accumulation of three years of abuse." Laurel made a couple more passes. "If Lord Rabbit had connected with this, we would've had to scrape the lieutenant off the wall, floor, and anywhere else he may have splashed." Whatever was in my hand began to dissipate and I wiggled my fingers. "Do not move, Lord Rabbit." I stopped.

"Runaway untrained apprentice mage." I could hear the concern in the captain's voice. "Is he a danger? Is he in danger?"

"No, honored captain, to both." Another pass and it ebbed some more. "The mentha will help restore Rabbit's balance and he'll regain his usual self-control." Laurel brushed his paw over my palm and the tingling started to fade. "He's had a lot thrust upon him all at once. The lieutenant's taunts and threats were the final drops that burst the dam." He drew on my skin with a claw, leaving a line of fire in my palm. "If we leave him be for a while, he should recover. He's too dragon-headed to do otherwise." I heard him dip something in water and wring it out, and I sighed as he placed a wet cloth on my forehead. My eyes closed and, as everything faded away, I heard someone snore and wondered who it was.

## Chapter Twenty-six

A badger was leaning over me. I could see the white patch on his forehead as his paw shook my shoulder. I thought of the family that had moved into the forest near our farm, and how Honor Ash Faena had to eventually negotiate a truce between them, the wolf pack and the big cats. I smiled sleepily at him.

"I give you good day, honored badger."

His brows came together; then he picked up some leaves. "Here, Rabbit. Suiden said you were to take these the instant you wake up." Willing to obey a direct order, even one given through a furry animal, I reached for the leaves, pleased that my hand did not shake—though I couldn't think why it should. I bit down on them, enjoying their sharp flavor. The badger watched me as I chewed and I wondered why Jeff looked so anxious. I struggled to rise, Jeff helping by grabbing one arm. "This is getting monotonous," I said as I staggered to my feet. Again, I was surprised to find that I was mostly steady, though I now began to remember why I mightn't be. I took a tentative step and kept my balance.

"So, do you know who I am?" Jeff asked, still looking worried.

"Don't be stupid, Jeff."

Jeff looked relieved, then glared at me. "What was I supposed to think? You called me 'honored badger' a minute ago."

"Oh." I thought fast. "I was dreaming about my parents' farm and the badgers that lived near it." I shrugged. "Must've got you mixed up with it." I rubbed my hand, which started to burn a bit.

"Well, never mind all that," Jeff said. "A servant from Court has come to fetch Ambassador Laurel." He pulled me towards the door. "The captain said that you have a quarter hour to get ready so that you can accompany him."

"But—" I began, startled that I'd be tipped out of my sickbed just to play liaison.

"Rabbit, the servant asked for you too."

Hell and its ugly mother. I hit the hallway at a trot and reached the water closet at a full run, sliding a little past the door when I stopped. A quarter hour later, washed, shaved and dressed, I was bounding down the stairs, trying to straighten my hastily donned belt.

"Here he is now," Captain Suiden said as I reached the bottom. The man in royal livery next to him bowed low.

"Lord Rabbit," the servant said, "I am here to escort both you and Ambassador Laurel."

"To the king?" I asked, finally getting everything straight.

"To one of his majesty's ministers, my lord. The Chancellor of Foreign Affairs." The servant gave a faint smile. "If I might take the liberty to say, Chancellor Berle was a little vexed when she discovered that you and the ambassador had arrived and she hadn't been told, and she sent me straightway to offer her apologies and to bring you to Court."

There had been a low amount of noise from tradespeople busy with the outfitting of the embassy, but now it shot up, a couple of muffled shrieks adding to the sounds of panic. I looked down the hall and saw Laurel Faena approaching, carrying his staff.

The servant, though, ignored the commotion with well-trained deafness, and once more bowed low.

"Ambassador Laurel." Over his shoulder I could see Groskin approaching as he walked towards us, carrying the captain's dress belt, sword and gloves. He handed them to Suiden and the captain put the sword on and tucked the yellow gloves into the belt.

"Lieutenant," Groskin said, holding out another sword and set of gloves. I frowned at both the "lieutenant" and how he was careful to keep his hands from touching mine, but then I looked at what he had handed me and all other thoughts fled.

All horse soldiers received a plain blade and dark blue dress gloves; holding the tasseled officer's sword in my hand hit home as nothing else did the change in my status. Jeff had followed Groskin, and I stared at him as I took the old ones off and buckled on the new belt, adjusted the sword and carefully folded the bright yellow gloves over the strap.

"I am ready when you are, honored folk," Laurel said.

Both tradespeople and troopers watched as Laurel led our little procession to the front door. Javes came out of the captains' office and Groskin joined him. Both of their faces were somber. Groskin, though, did not meet my eyes.

"You have command, Captain Javes," Suiden said.

"Yes, Captain Suiden."

As the door closed behind us, I looked out on the street and saw the death staff and dragon skin loaded on one of several horses. Jeff slipped past us to go join the captain and servant, but Laurel Faena paused next to me. "And so it begins," he said softly. He then looked at me. "Are you all right, Lord Rabbit?"

I nodded. "Yes, honored Faena. The mentha worked wonders."

It was Laurel's turn to nod. "That is good. I have more if you need it." He touched my arm. "We will talk when we return." Captain Suiden and the servant, realizing that they had lost us, looked back.

Laurel gave a brief chuff. "I suppose that we should go on, lest our keepers come back and get us." He smoothed his feathers and checked his beads, took a deep breath, then walked towards the horses.

After making sure my sword hung straight, I followed.

I had thought that I'd already seen a fair chunk of Iversly, but I discovered that I'd traveled only a small part. We rode through squares, across marketplaces, down shop-lined streets, around triumphal arches and monuments, past theaters, over bridges that spanned the tributaries that fed the Banson and formed the delta that the Royal City was built on.

"Iversly is a triangle with the Royal Residence at the farthest end," Suiden said as we crossed yet another square, "unlike most cities that are built around a central point." A standard elf design where the stronghold faces the threat. The wind shifted, bringing with it a salty tang, and I wondered what had threatened them from the sea.

"We did," Suiden said.

I turned around to stare at the captain.

"Eyes forward, Lieutenant."

I faced front again.

The Faena walked next to Suiden, carrying his staff in one paw and leading the packhorse with the other. But instead of the bubble we normally got when the big cat was out and about, the city folk lined the street—in some places several deep. Most watched Laurel, but I also fell under scrutiny.

"It seems that Captain Javes' campaign was successful, sir," I said to Suiden. A man lifted a child to his shoulder and pointed at me, and I was tempted to wave.

"Yes, and don't even think about it."

We crossed one more square, another bridge, passed through a triumphal arch, rounded a corner, and stopped. The end of our journey was before us—the Royal Residence of King Jusson Golden Eye. And behind it was me sea.

## Chapter Twenty-seven

The royal compound was a huge, sprawling complex several stories high with wings, annexes, and outbuildings. The palace itself was gold-roofed, but there was the purple of the army and the different blues of commerce. The servant, being a considerate guide, allowed us a few moments to gawk before riding on.

As we neared, I could make out over the surrounding walls the soaring arches and graceful colonnades that were part of the original elfin building, and see where human architects tried to match their delicate beauty. They came close, but it was still obvious where one ended and the other began. Something gleamed to my left and I turned. Across from the royal buildings was the patriarch's See, the crystal and silver church spires bright in the sun. I blinked at how the palace and the See were opposite each other, and the tension that seemed to shimmer between them.

"Politics, Rabbit," Suiden murmured, "and a balance of power. One counterweighing the other so the scales remain even, never tipping into either the tyranny of an unchecked throne or the fanatical orthodoxy of church governance."

"What about the army, sir?" I asked. "Where does it fit?"

"Right now in the Lord Commander's hand," Suiden replied.

I opened my mouth to ask what about the king, but shut it again at seeing the servant's interested gaze.

The entire compound was on a promontory that thrust out into the ocean and I could hear the breakers crashing below it. We reached the only bridge that spanned the palace moat; I looked down, saw sharpened stakes in the water along with strange fish with many teeth, and moved my horse as close to the middle as I could get without running over the captain. On the other side of the bridge was the guard gate. We stopped and I leaned forward, curious how this would play out.

"Guests to see Foreign Chancellor Berle."

The lieutenant in charge merely nodded at the servant and waved him through, he and his men taking care to salute the captain as we passed. I did, however, sneak a peek behind me and saw them clumped together staring after us.

We were led up a Broadway, lined with trees punctuated with vistas of fountains, ornamental lakes, arbors and shaded walks. The road crunched under the horses' hooves—it was made of crushed seashells and gleamed white in the morning sun. The ground had been gently sloping up for some time, but as it leveled off, we veered to the right, following a smaller road that curved around a stand of flowering trees. Clearing them, we could see that we had come to a palace wing. As we dismounted, liveried groomers appeared to collect our horses, and after a brief but heated discussion about who was to carry the death staff and dragon skin, we climbed the flight of steps into the building—I last, because my arms were full.

We were ushered into an ornate reception chamber that had columns with twining vines carved onto them, cages full of bright-feathered birds that chirped and twittered, a painted ceiling full of cavorting nymphs (I heard a gasp behind me as Jeff realized there were bared bosoms and legs up there), and a mosaic floor showing cavorting mermaids (there was another gasp as he realized what we were walking on). Tall, north-facing windows filled the room with a soft light, and I could see someone standing by a table at the far end. She bowed as soon as Laurel Faena got into range and as she straightened I looked into the face of a vixen.

"The Chancellor of Foreign Affairs, Berle," the servant intoned. He then effaced himself, leaving the room.

"Grace to you, Ambassador Laurel," the chancellor said. Her russet eyes flicked over me, rested on the captain for a moment, then snapped back to the Faena.

"Honored chancellor," Laurel said, rising from his own bow. He turned and gestured for me to join him. "May I?" At the chancellor's nod, Laurel directed me to lay my burdens down on the table. As soon as I did, I moved back to where Jeff was trying to find an inoffensive place to put his feet, and Suiden joined us.

Chancellor Berle looked down at the staff, shield and hauberk. "My goodness, Ambassador. What are these?"

"The reason why I've come to speak with your king, Chancellor," Laurel said. "They are what's left of two Border citizens."

"I see." Chancellor Berle stared with dismayed fascination; then she gave a wry smile. "Well, I was going to invite you to be seated, but I don't think that would be appropriate now." At the captain's high sign, Jeff and I grabbed chairs and moved them away from the table. The chancellor gave another wry smile.

"Thank goodness for ingenuity. Shall we?"

Despite Suiden's prejudice against gambling, I'd been in a few high stakes games where it was as much bluff and reading the other players as it was skill and luck of the draw. Chancellor Berle and Laurel Faena sat facing each other as if one had bet the family estate and the other was determined to win it. The chancellor made the opening bid.

"I wish to apologize, Ambassador Laurel. You've come a long way to receive such a poor welcome."

"Thank you, honored chancellor." Laurel saw the chancellor's bet and raised it. "I admit it was a little disconcerting."

Chancellor Berle nodded. "Unfortunately, I was away from the city and did not get word that you had arrived until I returned last night." She made a discard. "And contrary to appearances, the treasury clerks do not set foreign policy."

So much for Losan eso Dru.

"However, I trust that you've managed to get everything arranged to your satisfaction?"

"Yes, honored chancellor. Through the efforts of Captains Suiden and Javes, the embassy should soon be completely furnished."

"Good." Chancellor Berle shifted in her seat. Time to show cards. "So, Ambassador, as I said, you've come a long way. Why?"

Laurel Faena stood and walked over to the table. He looked at me and held out his staff. At the captain's nod, I walked over and took it from him, starting a little at the warmth that spread over my hand and up my arm. Laurel bent over and removed the shroud from Prudence Oak's body. The chancellor rose and stood next to the Faena.

"Are you familiar with spritewood, honored chancellor?"

"Yes, Ambassador." Surprised, I looked up from the table and met Chancellor Berle's eyes as she

watched me over Laurel's shoulder.

"Then I don't need to explain what this is." Laurel traced over the dead sprite. "Her name was Prudence Oak, Chancellor. I knew her and grieved hard with her sister over her murder. So imagine my shock when I discovered a church elder using her body as his Staff of Office." Laurel pointed at the hauberk. "Or my horror when I saw a commander in the Royal Army wearing the skin of Dragon Gwynn, a son of a dear friend." Laurel looked up. "The commander said that he was told it came from the Royal Armory." Laurel moved back to his chair, sitting down. "For the past five years we have suffered predations from runners—"

"Runners?" Chancellor Berle asked, also seating herself once more.

"Smugglers and raiders, honored chancellor. They run wood, pelts, ivory and such into Iversterre and the lucrative markets here." Laurel held out his paw and I handed his staff back to him. "Where no one asks any questions about the origin of an exotic fur, or whether the apothecary's potion contains real dragonheart."

"This is very distressing, Ambassador."

"We're not too happy about it ourselves." Laurel leaned forward. "There is talk of war."

There was silence. "I see," Chancellor Berle finally said. "Are you sure that these smugglers are from here?"

"A fair question. Some runners have been caught"—Laurel's lips drew back, showing his eyeteeth—"and questioned diligently. They were all from Iversterre."

"Are there Border folk involved too?"

Laurel shrugged. "It's possible, but so far we've found no evidence."

"I see," the chancellor said again. She folded her hands in her lap. "Tell me, how does Lieutenant Rabbit fit into this?" I'd been distracted by a particularly nubile mermaid, but my head snapped up at my name.

Laurel's whiskers swept back again, this time his smile showing fewer teeth. "Honored Two Trees—Lord Rafe ibn Chause—was instrumental in getting the High Council to try diplomacy. He recommended his son as a go-between, due to both Lord Rabbit's Border ties and his kin in the human kingdom." Laurel chuffed. "It was either that or send a retinue of Border folk, and we didn't think Iversterre was ready for that."

Chancellor Berle nodded. "And Captain Suiden?"

Laurel's brows drew together as he stared at the unexpected card he had just been dealt. "Captain Suiden?"

"He is the son of the sister of the Amir of Tural."

I couldn't help it. I stared—along with Jeff and Laurel—at my captain. And Prince Suiden smiled faintly as he bowed to the fox.

## Chapter Twenty-eight

I made a mental note to never gamble with Laurel Faena. Instead of disclaiming any knowledge of Captain Suiden's royalsness, or denying that he was plotting with the Amir of Tural, the cat shrugged.

"I am sure your army commanders knew who he was when they appointed him head of my escort." Laurel looked at Chancellor Berle, his face calm. "The good captain's antecedents do not interest me. The illegal running does. The moon season will begin at the full moon, and the blood of the slaughtered will then sing out for vengeance. A most dangerous time, Chancellor Berle, when all will be reminded of friends and family who have been murdered."

The chancellor's face was impassive. Another gambler to avoid. "What is it that you wish us to do, Ambassador Laurel?"

"Stop the smuggling. To this end, I wish to meet with the king and the rest of his advisors."

Chancellor Berle allowed a judicious frown to come over her face. "I can present you at Court—"

"No, honored chancellor," Laurel interrupted. "Forgive my rudeness, but there's no time for courtly airs and graces. It must be addressed immediately." He waved a paw towards the table behind them. "If this doesn't stop, war will happen."

Sometimes, no matter how good a player you are, it's wise to fold your hand and quit the game. The chancellor rang a bell for tea and refreshments, and settled down to an even politer version of Captain Javes' genteel haggling with the shop owners. Finally, they agreed on Laurel meeting with King Jussion in two days.

"I will send a servant tomorrow with the time, Ambassador Laurel," Chancellor Berle said, finishing her tea. She smiled. "I will try to have it as early in the day as possible, to avoid any competition from the heat."

"I am very appreciative, honored chancellor," Laurel said.

Because I was there as the Faena's liaison, protocol allowed me to share in the food. But I wasn't about to eat while my captain and mate had to stand and watch, no matter that I last ate the previous day while they had a full breakfast that morning. However, I was hungry, and I stared at Laurel, willing him to get a move on. And got not only his return stare but one from Suiden too.

"Have patience, Lord Rabbit," Laurel said, setting his cup down and rising. "As soon as I prepare the staff and dragon skin, we will leave."

"Uh—"

Laurel smiled. "I'd forgotten that you hadn't eaten today." He turned to Chancellor Berle. "Lord Rabbit has been a little under the weather."

"I'm sorry to hear that, my lord," the chancellor said, frowning as she realized she'd missed something. "Is it the heat?"

"Yes, Chancellor," I said. I rubbed my palm against my leg as it started to burn.

After Laurel redrew the wards, I picked up the death staff and dragon skin and joined the rest of the group and waited while Chancellor Berle, who had walked with Laurel Faena to the door, finished the ceremonial small talk. The chancellor then looked at the captain. "It was nice to see you again, Your Highness. Do you have a message for the Turalian ambassador?"



Suiden shook his head. "No, thank you, Chancellor. I am sure I will see my cousin shortly."

It was still morning when we left the palace wing, the sun having yet to reach its zenith. The servant awaited us with our horses.

"That's all right," Suiden said. "We won't need your escort."

The servant looked at the captain.

"We're going to stop by the garrison and I'll have one of the soldiers take us back."

There's nothing to do when a prince tells you—however politely—to bugger off, except to bugger off, and the servant bowed, handing his reins back to a groomer. As we rounded the trees back to the Broadway, though, I looked back and saw him talking with someone on the steps. Startled, I first thought it was Slevoic. Then the man turned to go back in the palace, revealing a thicker frame, and the sun glinted on the silver in his light brown hair. Not the Vicious.

Laurel waited until we were hidden by the trees before stopping. "Honored captain—or should I say Your Highness?"

"Captain will do."

"I do not think it would be wise to take me to the royal barracks." Suiden's emerald green eyes glowed down at the Faena and in the bright sun I could once more see the clan markings on his face.

"We aren't going to the barracks, Sro Laurel." Suiden urged his horse forward. "Lieutenant Rabbit is going to the mess to eat, I am going to the garrison commander's office to see if there are any dispatches or instructions, and Trooper Jeffen will attend you while you meditate by one of the many ornamental lakes on the royal grounds." He looked back down at Laurel. "It should only take a short while."

Laurel rumbled with annoyance, but my stomach growled even louder and he gave in with a short laugh.

"All right. But as soon as Lord Rabbit is finished eating, we return to the embassy."

The captain nodded. "As you wish, Ambassador."

Laurel laughed again. "Right."

We followed the Broadway back down towards the gate, until we came to an avenue that branched off. Suiden turned onto it and I could see the purple tiles of the garrison. As we approached, the sound of the breakers grew louder and I wondered what it would be like to always have it in one's ears.

"I grew up in a city on the sea's edge," Captain Suiden said. "My family's wealth and power comes from it."

"The trade routes, sir?"

Suiden actually laughed. "Not so naive, Rabbit." We could see the blue water beyond the promontory edge. The captain looked out over it, his eyes unfocused. "There's nothing like being at sea. The tide race and that first shuddering jolt as the sails fill and the ship lets you know she's glad to be back where she's queen. As she dances before the wind, singing and laughing under your bare feet, riding the waves with the dolphins leaping before her prow. Even the mighty storms where you and she together wrest fate from the ocean's grip, and then fling it back, defiant and alive."

"Fiat," I said, my voice soft.

"Fiat," Suiden repeated, tasting the word. "Oh, yes. Fiat."

Laurel had cocked his ears back to listen, while Jeff had pressed forward. Pulling even with me, Jeff took a breath, then asked, "Do you miss it, sir?" I shut my eyes, thinking that Ryson's stupidity had spread through the entire troop.

"Do I miss it?" Suiden sounded almost amused and I cracked one eye open. "I guess you can say that. Tell me, Rabbit. Do you miss the Border?"

Both eyes sprang open. "Sir?"

"Trooper Jeffen has asked if I miss the place where I was born and raised. Do you?"

The image of my parents smiling as pale old men led me away rose up and I began to say that I couldn't care less, but then other memories pushed it aside. The forest in its wild spring greenness. Summer swimming holes and crisp fall mornings. Winter nights, mulled cider, and traveling bards' tales of swords and sorceries. Playing chess with Dragoness Moraina while she spoke of beginnings and endings, and how the latter were foreshadowed in the former. Honor Ash Faena's biting humor as she let me tag along on her strides of the Weald. I had to blink to clear my suddenly blurred vision. "A little, sir."

"Both of you so very far from home," Jeff said as we rounded a bend and the garrison came into full view. "And so very different from what you once thought you'd be." He then snapped upright in the saddle as he remembered whom he was talking to. "Uhm, sir."

"Well, as Lieutenant Rabbit is always saying, I wanted to see the world," Suiden said.

Yeah, right, I thought hard, and then waited. But Suiden just smiled.

"I am who I have always been, honored Jeff," Laurel said, "and where I'm supposed to be. At this time, in this place, with my present company." We reached the garrison just then, saving any of us from having to respond. While there wasn't a guard gate, sentries stood on each side of the garrison entrance—their eyes wide as they took in the Faena. I heard pounding feet and two groomers ran up, while Laurel bowed to the captain. "I will await you by that lake." He pointed at one down a shaded lane that had a gazebo and vine trellis with ripening grapes hanging from it. "Until then, Your Highness." Without waiting for the captain's reply, he walked off, leading the packhorse. After saluting, Jeff followed him.

"It appears that Sro Laurel isn't too happy with me because I won't allow him time alone with you," Suiden said, dismounting.

"Yes, sir," I said. I dismounted also, wondering if he'd heard Laurel's and my conversation earlier as we left the Border embassy or if he'd made a lucky guess.

"I don't guess," Suiden said and, handing the reins to the groomer, walked away.

I stared after him for a moment. Then, realizing that I was standing in the hot sun, I thrust the reins into the other groomer's hands and hurried down the path, catching up with the captain just as he entered the garrison door.

The last time I had been in a garrison was in Dornel, two weeks before, and that didn't really count as we had spent most of the time under guard. I was surprised at how much the Royal Garrison felt like home.

The captain led me past the sentries into the main building (I glanced up but there were no paintings on the ceiling, just a honeycomb pattern), and down a series of halls and passages on the main floor until we approached a door with more guards. At that point my stomach growled so loud that I looked down at it, half expecting to see it snarling back up at me.

"I was going to introduce you to the commander before you ate," Suiden said. "But by the sounds you're giving off, he may think you have a wild animal with you." He beckoned a passing trooper and told him to show me where the officers' mess was. "I will come for you when I'm finished, Lieutenant. Don't wander off."

The officers' mess was empty, the morning rush being over and the midday one not yet starting. I was able to snag porridge with honey, two soft-boiled eggs, toasted bread, butter and blackberry jam, a pomegranate, something called yoghurt, and a large pot of tea. I sat down by one of the open windows (facing away from the stables) and applied myself to making it all disappear.

"You're Lieutenant Lord Rabbit, aren't you?"

I looked up to find a major looking down at me, teacup in hand. I finished chewing and swallowed before I answered.

"Yes, sir."

The major sat down facing me, setting his teacup on my table. "Have you been transferred here?"

"No, sir. I'm with my captain."

The major lifted his cup and took a sip, looking around. "Who adds invisibility to his no doubt many talents."

"He's in a meeting, sir."

"I see. You're with that magical, aren't you?"

I put my spoon down to answer. "We are assigned to the Border embassy, sir."

"I see." The major kicked the chair next to me out from under the table and propped his feet up on it, and waited until the spoon was almost in my mouth. "It's kind of strange, isn't it, all that?"

I put my spoon down again. "I wouldn't know, sir." My stomach rumbled, wondering why the gravy train had stopped.

The major took another sip of tea. A fly buzzed in one window and out another, while a wave crashed loud against the promontory's cliff. Just to make sure, I reached for one of the toast slices, buttered it, slathered it with jam, and raised it to my mouth.

"You're from the Border too, aren't you?"

I put the toast back down and folded my hands on the table. "Yes, sir." The major went back to his tea, and I sat there while my food got cold and soggy. My palm began to itch and I scratched it.

"I'm sorry, sir, but we have to close the mess now to get ready for lunch." I looked away from the major to see a trooper there with apron and towel.

"Oh, too bad, Lieutenant. If you were a captain or higher, you could stay and finish but since you're not, you have to leave." The major took a long sip of his tea, his eyes gleaming over the rim of the teacup at me. "And they don't allow food outside the mess."

The itch spread over my entire hand. "I see." I stared back at the major. "As my captain is meeting with the commander, I'll just go to his office and tell them both why I had to leave the mess before I'd finished eating. Sir." I flexed my hand a couple of times and tilted my head so that I could see the server too.

The major lowered his cup onto the table. "Do not be insubordinate, Lieutenant."

"No, sir." I flexed my hand again.

The major said nothing for a few moments; then he smiled and stood up. "You know, I'm sure there can be an exception made for you, Lieutenant Rabbit. Stay and finish your meal." He nodded and, moving fast, headed out the door. The server made to follow, and I grabbed him by the arm, smearing butter on his uniform.

"A moment please, trooper."

"Uh, I really have to help get ready for lunch, Lieutenant—" I shoved the rest of the cold toast in my mouth and started to work on my solidified porridge. "There is no rule that lieutenants have to vacate the mess, is there?"

"Uh—"

"My captain is really with the commander and I will ask them both."

"No, sir. It was just a joke, sir."

I'd been hazed before and shrugged it off as a part of life in the barracks. And this was mild compared to jokes played on me in the past. Yet I wasn't tasting anything I was shoveling in my mouth and my stomach felt leaden from anger. The trooper watched me, nervous.

I nodded. "Dismissed."

He rose and went through the mess to the kitchen doors, moving so fast that he created a breeze. I finished the rest of my meal and then stared out the window, watching soldiers cross in front of it going about their business. No one came to clear the table and I moved the dishes off to the side. Soon I heard steps behind me and turned, as Captain Suiden approached. His eyes narrowed as he saw my face.

"What happened, Lieutenant?"

"Nothing, sir."

Suiden sat down across from me. "Nothing?"

I scratched at my still itching palm. "Just a practical joke, sir." Suiden was quiet, watching my fingers dig into my hand. I stopped and flexed it again, stretching it wide. The kitchen door opened and the same trooper came out, saw me, then dove back in before the door closed. I heard a muffled curse and a slight smile touched my lips.

"Lieutenant."

"A major interrupted my meal, kept me from finishing, and then told me that I had to clear the mess as lieutenants weren't allowed in here past a certain hour." I nodded at the door. "One of the duty cooks backed him up."

Suiden, still looking at my hand, raised a brow. "That's an old joke, Lieutenant, and relatively harmless."

"Yes, sir."

Suiden's eyes shifted to my face once more and he raised the other brow.

"He was a lordling, sir."

"High ranking officers stationed here usually are, Lieutenant."

I looked out the window again and nodded. "Yes, sir."

I heard the captain sigh. "It is like pulling teeth, Rabbit. Tell me, and that's an order."

I rubbed my hand against the other. "That's what everyone keeps foisting on me. From Jeff to Laurel to you, sir. 'Lord Rabbit' in a place where a lord's idea of a good time is bullying people who daren't fight back. And damn-all who I say I am."

The captain pushed back his chair and rose. "Sometimes you just don't have a choice, Lieutenant. Or else you've already made it and now you have to live with the consequences." He waited until I stood. "You're being foolish, Rabbit, like a man who escapes a burning ship by jumping into the ocean—and then complains because it's salty and wet." He started for the door, then stopped, catching me in midscratch. "Though I promise you, Lieutenant, if I ever catch you being small-minded and petty, I will help you get over it fast. Whether or not there are any rocks around to guard."

## Chapter Twenty-nine

It was just before noon when we made it back to the embassy, and it was a relief to enter the house and get out of the heat. As the door shut behind us, I started towards the kitchen, thinking to get a cool drink and maybe a snack to tide me over until the midday meal.

"Lieutenant, if I may see you and Ambassador Laurel for a moment," Suiden said, stopping me in midstride. He turned to Jeff. "Please find Captain Javes and Groskin and tell them I need to see them immediately." We entered the captains' office, and I blinked. Gone were the folding table and chairs. In their place were two desks placed eater-cornered from each other, with large chairs behind them and smaller guest chairs in front. There were bookcases, a couple of cabinets, a low table with Suiden's tea service on it, and potted plants echoing the greenery of the courtyard. A breeze through the open courtyard doors sent the newly hung blinds clacking.

The hallway door opened and Javes and Groskin came in, followed by Jeff, and Suiden immediately sent him out again to stand guard in the hallway. As soon as the door closed, Suiden beckoned me to him. When I reached him, he grabbed my hand and held it up to the light coming from the glass doors. "Tell me, Sro Laurel, what is this?"

I looked down into my open palm and my mouth fell open. I pulled away from Suiden, staggered over to a chair and sat down, still staring at my hand. Or rather what was on it. Lieutenant Groskin peered over my shoulder, then backed away fast, making signs to ward against evil. He stumbled over Javes who was coming closer to have a look himself. Groskin grabbed Javes' sleeve and dragged him away. "No, sir, don't!"

Groskin gave Laurel a wild look. "What the bloody hell did you do to him?"

"This is something between Lord Rabbit and me—" Laurel began.

"No, it is not," Suiden interrupted him. "I've told you again and again, Rabbit is mine." His eyes were afire. "You did this under my nose, while I was watching, without saying a damn thing."

Under my nose too. I touched the silvery marking.

"Will someone tell me what is going on?" Javes yanked his arm away from Groskin, walked over to where I was and took hold of my hand, looking down into it. His face changed. "Oh, I say—"

"It isn't a matter of who Rabbit belongs to," Laurel said, "but of what he is." He came up beside me and removed my hand from Javes' grip. "This was very necessary."

"You've turned him into a freak!" Groskin pulled out two knives. "What are you going to do now, magic him into killing us all?" He bellowed the last part and lunged, only to stop and fling up his hands, still clutching his knives as the Faena held up a paw spread wide with his claws unsheathed. I screamed as fire spread across my palm at the same time the rune on the mountain cat's middle pad flared.

"Stop!" Suiden roared and everyone froze. The captain took a deep breath and then another, while I cradled my hand in my lap and bent over it, trying to keep from sobbing aloud.

"All right," Suiden said. He breathed deeply again, moved over to a desk and sat down behind it. He stared at Laurel Faena, his eyes molten green, as he folded his hands together on the desk. "Groskin, put away your knives." Groskin hesitated. "Do it, Lieutenant." The knives disappeared. "Everyone sit." Javes and Groskin found chairs and sat, Groskin as far away from me as possible. Laurel stayed standing and stared back at the captain. Suiden took another deep breath. "Fine. Tell me why it was necessary to mark my lieutenant."

Laurel blinked, a slow squeezing of his eyes; then he sat next to me, propping his staff against his chair. "Do you know where the People come from, Captain Suiden?" Great, illumined questioning. My head dropped down further in disgust.

"You heard him, honored captain? Even though he said nothing?"

My head snapped up and I stared at the Faena, allowing everyone to see the tears tracking down my face. Suiden remained quiet.

"And you've been hearing him for quite some time, no?" Suiden still remained quiet. Groskin and Javes looked at each other in bewilderment.

"I hear him too, mostly when he's upset or feels strongly. It's called thought-scrying and I can tell you that even among the People it is a most unusual ability. Yet here you can—as can I, but then, I'm 'magical.'" My eyes narrowed at the allusion to my conversation with Suiden and Javes yesterday.

Ignoring me, Laurel gave a slight smile, a baring of his teeth. "And if I who am magical do this, what does that make you?"

"What are you saying, cat?" Groskin asked.

"Answer my first question, Lieutenant. Where did the People come from?"

"What people?" Javes asked.

"Us. Border folk. The fae and the fantastic. The 'magicals.'" There was silence; then Laurel sighed. "The People come from the land, this land." He leaned forward in his chair. "As I told Rabbit, the same land that you now occupy." Laurel sat back, his point made.

There was more silence. "And?" Javes asked, while Groskin looked puzzled.

Laurel stared for a moment, then dropped his head into his paws and started massaging his forehead. "Oh, such obtuseness. You don't see?"

"Rabbit," Suiden said, "tell us what Sro Laurel told you."

I had lowered my head again and now didn't bother to look up. "Once the People lived throughout Iversterre. They lived, died, and were buried here, their bones and ashes part of everything." I kneaded my hand as the burning pain began to ease. "Now you live here, in the same place that the People did, growing your crops, raising your livestock, birthing your children."

"Are you saying that we are changing into magicals?" Javes asked.

"No. You already have." The pain was almost gone and I stared at the rune on my hand. The same rune that was on Laurel Faena's paw. The same rune that won a war.

"How so?"

"You are translated," Laurel said for me. "Your bodies, your very substance has been changed from human to fae, in all its variants." Laurel gave a swift smile. "It will be most interesting to see what form your children take."

"Heresy," Groskin began, but Suiden held up his hand, stopping him.

"And Rabbit is also changed?" the captain asked.

"No. Rabbit is still human, but he is talent-born and can shape the force you call 'magic' "

"Yeah, but he's from the freaking Border," Groskin said.

"So?" Laurel shrugged. "His parents aren't. They were born here in Iversterre. Yet a son of theirs has enough talent that coming into his full power, he shook the world." He briefly smiled again. "Or at least the city. But unless Rabbit can control his talent, it will control him. Most of a mage's apprenticeship is learning mastery." Laurel reached over, pulling my hand from my lap. I didn't resist. "Because of Rabbit's inexperience, he almost killed Lieutenant Slevoic. A small loss, perhaps, but one I am sure that your superiors would have frowned on." He ran a claw gently over my palm. "This rune will help him gain control, until he can be properly trained." A shudder ran through me at the thought of being forced to return to Magus Karesta, and I felt the weight of both Suiden's and Laurel's gazes on me.

Laurel's paw tightened on my hand. "Rabbit—"

"What does the rune say?" Javes asked, interrupting Laurel.

The Faena turned to Javes. "Truth."

Javes got out of his chair and stood next to mine. "Look at me, Lieutenant."

I raised my head.

"The Faena cat says that through eating, drinking and breathing, I ingested enough fairy dust to become one."

I nodded. "Yes, sir."

Javes spread his arms out, looking down. "Yet I seem to be the same person my mother birthed all those years ago." He looked up again and I watched his brown eyes bleed into the yellow of the wolf. "There's nothing magical about either me, Suiden or Groskin that I can see."

"Tell him what you see, Rabbit," Laurel said.

"Hey, stop right there—" Groskin began.

"A dragon prince, a wolf and a panther," I said.

"—I'm human and nothing but human—" Groskin stopped. "Uh, who's the panther?"

"You are."

"Well, we know who's the dragon prince so that leaves me the wolf." The yellow eyes gleamed at me as Javes' muzzle dropped open in a tongue-lolling grin. "But, for all we know, these visions could be from those leaves you pushed down Rabbit's throat, Ambassador. I've heard there are mushrooms that do the same thing." I looked at Suiden. "His hair is in many braids almost to his waist, beaded. He has three gold rings in one ear and an emerald stud in the other. His clan markings on his face are inked with blue, there is a tattoo of dolphins on his left arm, above the gold, sapphire, and emerald bracelet on his wrist. He is wearing a green and blue silk tunic with sleeves that stop at the upper arm, and black pants that end just below his knees. He has two swords, a straight one on his back and a curving one on his hip. Two daggers in his sash." I looked down. "And he is barefoot." This time the silence was absolute. Suiden ran his hand over his short hair, before touching an earringless ear, then lowered it to run it over the sleeve of his plain shirt. "And the dragon?" he asked after a moment.

"Obsidian. Huge. Bigger than any I've ever seen." My mouth twisted. "Drinking tea from the daintiest cup I've ever seen."

Laurel's brows drew together. "Teacup? No fire or smoke?"

"Yeah, that too." I watched for a moment more. "A lot of that."

For the first time, Laurel looked a little nervous. Then he waved it away with a paw. "Rabbit has the ability to discern. To see beyond the facade, the obvious, to what's really there. It's not a lotus dream." Javes stared at Suiden, fascinated. "Then why can't we see it?" Laurel shrugged again. "Perhaps the final catalyst to effect the complete translation hasn't happened yet. Or perhaps it's because of the very human trait of refusing to acknowledge anything outside your own mundane world-view. But trust me, you are translated."

Javes opened his mouth, but Suiden spoke before he could. "Perhaps. And perhaps not. But whatever is going on with Iversterre and its people, it still doesn't give you the right to bespell one of my men."

"Not a spell." Laurel released my hand to lean forward in his chair "It is not making Rabbit something he's not, but giving him control over his talents as he grows into who he is."

"It seemed to me that a few moments ago, you were controlling him." Suiden leaned forward also. "That thing on your paw burned and he screamed in pain."

"Rabbit reacted to my anger. Training will stop that."

"So says you," Javes said.

"Faena don't lie, sir," I said. "They can't, not even to themselves." I held my hand up, showing the rune, and ignored Groskin's flinch. "Truth. Not a truth, not my truth or yours, sir. The Truth."

"No one can stand knowing the truth, Rabbit," Suiden said. "At least not for long."

"Yes, sir. It's how the Border won the last war." I lowered my hand again. "The Faena lift the rune of truth and suddenly you see yourself, your commanders, your mates exactly for what everyone is. Not



only the weak, the venal, the vicious, but the motives behind every loving word, every kind deed, every blessing. All of it, sir." I went back to tracing the marking in my palm. "You're right. No one can stand it and the Royal Army went mad."

"But I thought the trees—" Groskin began.

"They came after the Faena," I said.

Suiden leaned back in his chair, making it creak. His eyes narrowed at Laurel. "Why are you here?"

"To prevent another war."

"And your journey has nothing to do with Rabbit?"

"His father recommended him as a liaison."

Suiden frowned at the neat evasion. I watched the dragon set his cup down, smoke curling up around his face, and I forgot about my hand. "Uh, Laurel—"

"Do not jerk me about, cat."

Laurel's ears laid back and his pupils dilated dark. "The rune was necessary as he was a threat to himself and others. Accept it." The beads on his staff rattled as he pulled it to him.

"Uh, Captain Suiden—"

"You told me that he was neither in danger nor a danger. You lied then or you lie now." The smoke increased and flames licked out on both sides of the dragon's mouth. "Perhaps both."

"Once the rune was drawn, he wasn't." Laurel's neck fur rose. "And. I. Do. Not. Lie." He stood, holding the staff in front of him.

"On my lieutenant, without my permission." The dragon rose up on his hind legs, his gold-shot black wings outspread.

"Do you own him? No. You don't." A rumble started in Laurel's chest as he unsheathed his claws again while the dragon opened his mouth, drew in a deep breath and lifted a taloned hand.

Once a dragon from outside our Weald tried to move in on Moraina's territory. My family had to hide in the root cellar, along with every other creature that could find its way there (it got very crowded), while the battle took place over our farm. We prayed at first that they wouldn't harm our house and fields. Partway through the prayers changed to not too badly damaged. Then to just be able to put it all back together again, somewhat. Then that we live. Then that our bodies be recognizable. Then that they'd be found. Rune or not, I was not hanging about while Laurel Faena and Captain Dragon Prince Suiden battled it out. I jumped out of my seat, grabbed Groskin, saluted, then grabbed Javes and hustled them in front of me to the hallway door. I flung it open and shoved them out as fast as I could.

"Where are you going, Rabbit?"

Blast, almost made it. I spun around, standing at attention. "Someplace safe, sir!" The dragon and the Faena blinked the same look at the same time. Their eyes then shifted behind me. Jeff had managed to keep the area around the door free and clear of anyone who had itchy ears. But beyond the circle of his guard post were as many troops as could crowd into the hallway, their eyes as round as saucers. And right in the middle of them all was the same royal servant of that morning.

It was the second time that I had seen Captain Suiden disconcerted. He fussed with his tabard, jerking it straight. Laurel was worse. He stared for a moment and then, turning his head, ran his tongue over his shoulder a couple of times. Both of them pretended very hard that they weren't about to try to rip each other's guts out the moment before.

"Have Captain Javes and Lieutenant Groskin come back in, Lieutenant Rabbit," Suiden said, "and bring Trooper Jeffen."

"Sir—" I indicated the royal servant.

"I see him, Lieutenant." Suiden nodded at the man. "I will be with you in a moment." I shut the door before the servant could respond, meeting Jeff's eyes for a brief panicked moment before we moved to the back of the room, as far away from the captain and Laurel as possible. Suiden allowed it for one moment.

"Both of you come here."

There was nothing for it but to join Javes and Groskin in front of Suiden's desk. Laurel stood off to the side, having propped his staff against the wall. He started preening the other shoulder and Suiden pulled at his shirt cuffs. The captain then looked at Jeff. "I take it that you've heard most of what was said here."

Jeff gave the tiniest of nods. "I also understand that Captain Javes has told you his theory of keeping secrets." Jeff's nod was bigger. "Good. Then I don't have to explain what will happen if any of this gets out, do I?" This time Jeff shook his head frantically. "Very good—"

There was a tap at the door. Suiden gestured and I opened it, and was not surprised to find the royal servant on the other side. I caught movement and saw Ryson trying to sidle closer. I backed up to allow the servant in and, leaving the door open, folded my arms and leaned against the door frame so I could see both out the door and into the room.

Reaching the desk, the royal servant bowed and then reached inside his thin coat, pulling out a gilt-edged card. "Please forgive my insistence, Your Highness—" There was a stir out in the hallway as the man's words reached the lingering troopers. Ryson, who was bending over pretending to have something in his boot, straightened so fast that he gave himself muscle strain. I smiled as he grabbed his lower back.

"—but the king is holding a reception tonight in honor

of the arrival of the first Border ambassador to Iversterre—" The stir became mild pandemonium while inside the room Laurel looked up in mid-tongue swipe and Captain Suiden stopped fidgeting with his tabard.

"—and you, Captain Prince Suiden, Captain Javes, and Lieutenant Lord Rabbit ibn Chause e Flavan are commanded to escort the ambassador and are given leave to enjoy the king's pleasure."

### Chapter Thirty

It was a balmy evening, the sunset an afterglow on the horizon. Captains Suiden and Javes, Laurel, and I were in an open carriage on our way to the Royal Palace, with Jeff and another trooper as our outriders.

We weren't the only ones—the streets were full with city folk out to enjoy the night's respite from the heat. From my seat behind the driver, I could see their reaction as they realized who had just gone by, their faces turned towards us in the flickering light of the streetlamps.

Laurel decided that a royal reception was not the place to bring a corpse or detached body parts, so the spritewood and skin were left at home. The Faena carried only his staff and wore just his beads and feathers. When the palace servant opened the door to our carriage, he saw a large, very male mountain cat standing on his back legs holding a big stick. He needed no prompting to bow low as the Faena stepped down. The rest of us followed and we joined the line of guests going up the red-carpeted marble stairs to the brightly lit double wide doorway. While they didn't point and stare, there was a lot of whispering, and wide gaps opened up between us and those in front and behind.

When we reached the top, Suiden presented our invitations to the short and rather dried-up-looking majordomo standing at the doorway, who read them closely. Satisfied we weren't gate-crashers, he turned and bellowed, "Ambassador Laurel, Captain Prince Suiden, Captain Javes, and Lieutenant Lord Rabbit ibn Chause e Flavan."

As I waited for the ringing in my ears to go away, I watched how everyone—guests, musicians, servers, royal guards, and servants—stopped and stared as we descended into the reception hall.

Another one of the king's servants had waded his way through the crowded room and now waited for us at the bottom step. As soon as we reached him, he bowed. "Grace to you, Your Highness, Ambassador Laurel, Captain, my lord. If you'll follow me, I'll take you to the receiving line." He eyed the Faena's staff.

"Uh—"

"I promise I won't hit anyone with it," Laurel murmured.

We were led to a large room off the main hall where there was another line. I was sunk in the numbness that had surrounded me all afternoon and paid little heed to those around me as we waited to be presented. However, as we neared the king, I felt someone staring a little harder than the rest and I turned my head to meet the gaze of a uniformed man standing a little before the throne. At the same time both Javes and Suiden stood a little straighten

"Lord Thadro," Javes murmured to me. "The Lord Commander of the Royal Army and of the Royal Guard." At that moment, someone who looked just like the ma-jordomo announced our names, and I rose from my bow to look in King Jusson IV's face as he smiled.

"Welcome, Ambassador Laurel, Prince Suiden, and Captain Javes." He paused and his smile widened as he looked at me. "And welcome, cousin. Welcome home."

I was a small child when the news reached my parents' farm that King Jusson had succeeded his queen mother, and he had been grown then. But instead of someone of middle years, a decade and a half into his rule, I stared at a man who looked my age. He also looked like a dark elf from the Border city-states—tall and slender with a mass of black hair, winged brows, and tilted eyes with gold etched around black irises. Instead of sitting on an ornate throne, he was seated in a plain chair, on a dais raised only enough so that, seated, he would be face level with those who stood before him. And instead of the elaborate jeweled crowns I had seen in engravings of Iversterre's previous rulers, he wore a simple circlet of gold. As did the elf kings of old.

The king laughed. "Look, we have dumbfounded him."

As Lord Commander Thadro looked questioningly at me, I felt a thump on my side and I bowed again. "Forgive me, Your Majesty. It's just that I am not used to thinking of myself as kin to the king."

King Jusson's smile changed. "Oh? Your parents haven't spoken of our family ties?"

The numbness was disappearing fast as I contemplated the hole I'd dug for myself. "They have, Your

Majesty. It's just that—" I stopped as the king's brow rose.

"Yes?"

I bowed once more and gave a wry smile. "It's just that I'm an idiot, Your Majesty. Thank you for your kind words."

The king seemed willing to overlook my gaffes. "You are welcome, cousin. You're not an idiot, though. It seemed that you were someplace else and we took you by surprise."

Maybe he wasn't so willing. I was conscious of the silence in the room as everyone strained to hear our conversation. "I am having difficulties adjusting to the heat, Your Majesty, and was thinking how much cooler it is in Freston." My palm started to burn and I curled it behind my back.

"I'd rather the heat and Iversly, Your Majesty, no matter how cool Freston may be," a man standing on the other side of the throne said. His blue eyes rested on me, derisive in an otherwise open, pleasant face. "Such a small, mountainous town."

Looking more fully at him, I realized he was the same person I'd seen on the palace steps that morning. Up close he appeared much as he had from a distance, of middling height and build. The candlelight picked out the silver in his hair and the splendor of his raiment. Jewels sparkled on his fingers and on the lapel of his coat, all in blazing contrast to the austere king. Then he turned his head to King Jussion, and I blinked, once more startled at his resemblance to Slevoic.

I hesitated for a heartbeat; then the thought came to me that as Jussion claimed me as cousin, I either equalled or outranked everyone else in the room, no matter how comfortable they felt about horning in on the king's conversation (the words sounded an awful lot like Suiden). I shrugged at the man. "You forget, gracious sir, that I come from an even more provincial place—a Border farm. To me, Freston is a big city, full of riotous living." I smiled. "And I like the mountains."

The king laughed again. "No, not an idiot at all." His black eyes gleamed at me. "We will talk again, cousin." He nodded at Laurel. "As we will also, Ambassador. We have spoken with Chancellor Berle about our meeting and are looking forward to it."

Laurel bowed. "Thank you, Your Majesty."

"You're very welcome. But for tonight, please enjoy our hospitality." King Jussion nodded again and his attention shifted to the party behind us. Dismissed, we made our way back into the main reception hall.

"Well, we survived," Javes remarked. "Though for a moment it was close." He snagged a glass from a passing server's tray and took a sip. "Nice recovery, Rabbit."

The server offered us glasses also and I took one, looking at the pale amber liquid with tiny bubbles floating up. "Ale?"

"No, sparkling wine," Suiden said. He gave me a cool look, and I knew that I'd hear later about woolgathering while in the presence of royalty.

Laurel took a cautious sip and delicately sneezed. "My goodness." He gave a discreet lick of his whiskers and took another, bigger sip.

"Careful, Ambassador," Javes said. "The bubbles make it light on the tongue but potent in the blood." I took a sip myself and was startled at the effervescence. I allowed it to linger before swallowing and taking another mouthful. Javes smiled. "We'd better get some food in you both before you both become

fall-down drunk, what?" He led us over to where long tables were set up against one wall, next to where the musicians were playing.

"Sirs, who was that man next to the king?" I asked, taking another sip.

Suiden waited until we reached the food tables. "Lord Gherat of Dru." His voice was barely audible over the music.

I lowered my glass. "Losan eso Dru's father?"

Javes picked up a plate, turning away from the crowded hall. "No. She's a distant cousin." He shrugged as he began to fill his plate. "Nepotism is alive and well, Rabbit. Gherat is Lord Treasurer and Chancellor of Financial Affairs and Revenue. All taxation, all domestic trade policies, all government accounting—except for the Royal Army—issue from, cross, or end up in his hands. He is a very powerful man." He was also a man sure enough of himself to intrude into a king's conversation without invitation. And even more sure enough to denigrate someone whom the king welcomed with favor.

"Lieutenant Slevoic is Gherat's close kinsman," Suiden said, "as is Commander Loel of the Royal Garrison. They're all of the House of Dru." I blinked at my captain, surprised. Then, remembering Gherat's startling likeness to Slevoic, I wasn't so surprised. They even had the same look of derision in the same blue eyes. Thinking on Slevoic's easy access to the throne, the gray apathy began to weigh down on me again, and I drank the rest of my wine, feeling it bubble down my throat.

"You've had a series of shocks, Lieutenant," Javes said in my ear, "but you better get over them fast." I turned and stared at the captain. There wasn't anything silly about his expression.

"One blunder will be overlooked, no matter that it happened before the king. Especially since you made such a swift recovery. But if you want to stay reasonably whole, I suggest that you pay attention." His eyes shifted off to the side and snapped back to my face. "Your uncle, Lord Chause, has deigned to recognize you and is coming this way."

"It appears that your Flavan cousins have also decided to welcome you into the fold," Suiden said, facing another direction. He barely wetted his lips with his wine.

"And please forgive my presumption, Your Highness," Laurel said, "but is that your cousin the ambassador?"

"Nothing like a king's favor to work wonders for one's social life," Javes said. He thrust his full plate into my hand. "Here, try to soak up some of that wine you just guzzled." I looked down. Stuffed eggs, stuffed mushrooms, stuffed grape leaves. Different cheeses. And fish eggs on crackers. With a wedge of lemon. I popped a mushroom into my mouth and chewed, swallowing just as the Turalian ambassador reached us.

"Good evening, gracious sirs." The man bowed, an elaborate affair with arms and hands waving, his top-knotted braid's beads clicking together. "Your Highness."

Suiden took another, bigger sip of his wine, and sighed. "Stow it, Kenalt."

The grayness receded fast again, as there was nothing like a family row to enliven a gathering. Then I remembered what had happened earlier when Suiden was inclined to squabble, and eased a couple of steps away. But the Turalian ambassador came out of his bow grinning.

"Ah, cousin, it gladdens my heart to see that Freston hasn't dulled your wit." His brown eyes danced. "Aren't you going to introduce me to your companions?"

"Ambassador Laurel, Captain Javes, and Lieutenant Lord Rabbit ibn Chause e Flavan." Suiden waved a hand at his cousin. "The Amir of Tural's eldest son, Ambassador Sro Kenalt." I bowed with the others, puzzled that the ambassador wasn't a prince.

"The royal line in Tural flows through the women, Lieutenant, mainly the amir's sisters' sons." Suiden took another gulp of wine.

It was Kenalt's turn to look briefly puzzled; then he shrugged. "Yes, as the wise man said, 'At least you know who the mother is.'" He grinned again, his clan markings crinkling in his dark face.

Though accused time and again of being a peacock, looking at Sro Kenalt I realized that I was an amateur. I took in his red and green silk runic echoing the crystal beads in his hair, his thin overcoat of black silk matching his black pants that stopped midcalf, the gold ankle chain above sandaled feet, and opened my mouth to ask who his tailor was.

"Grace to you, messirs." We turned at the voice coming over my shoulder.

I had expected my da's people to look like him, as my ma's family would look like her. And while there was a strong resemblance between Lord Maceal of Chause and his youngest brother, he must've looked exactly like his own father, my grandda, because, as I turned, I saw my mirror image, aged a few decades. His dark hair was streaked with gray, deep lines bracketed his aristocratic nose on his thin face and creased his high forehead, his brown eyes were as world-weary as (so everyone said) my own oozed naivete, his frame just a little thicker than mine. "Good evening, Rabbit." He looked over the rest of my group and bowed. "Your Highness, Ambassador Sro Kenalt—and, Captain Javes, is it?" A server walked by with a tray of sparkling wine and Lord Chause paused to take a glass, then a sip.

"Ambassador Laurel," he finally said with a nod.

I stopped midbow at the insult, but Laurel merely raised a brow, then beckoned the server over to him. After taking a glass for himself, and then a sip, he nodded back. "Lord Chause." He smiled, showing his excellent teeth, and the people nearest us who had been leaning in to hear over the music, suddenly leaned back out again (a few musicians scooted their chairs away without missing a beat). Into the suddenly cleared space around us popped a couple, the man blond and the woman dark, and both as plump as Festival geese.

"I give you good evening, gracious sirs! Hello, Rabbit! I'm your cousin Teram and this is my lady wife, Isalde!" Suiden and I both had been reaching for a glass off the server's tray, but stopped and bowed to my Flavan cousins.

The server started to edge away and Suiden, still in his bow, moved to block him.

"Quite a little gathering here, eh?" Lord Teram continued. He grabbed two glasses of wine also, handing one to his wife who held it with a limp hand. "Too bad our grandpapa isn't here to meet you, cousin, but he's in the country on a repairing lease—gout, you know. He refuses to give up his port!" Teram beamed at his grandda's excesses and took a large gulp of wine. "I must say that it's good to see you again, Javes. I had heard that you were reassigned to Freston, of all places! I didn't quite believe it until tonight when I saw your uniform. It must be nice to get back to civilization!"

Javes did his silly ass smile. "Yes, what?" He indicated the Turalian ambassador and Suiden. "I'm sure you know Ambassador Sro Kenalt, but have you met Captain Prince Suiden?"

"Yes, but I was a little nipperkin and I daresay he doesn't remember me." Teram turned his beam on Suiden as he bowed. "Are you glad to be back in the City, Your Highness?"

Suiden murmured to the server to leave the rest of the wine on the food table. He then nodded at Lord Teram. "Yes, my lord. Coming to Iversly is always an adventure." He picked up a glass and drained about half.

"Though it's a little thin of company right now," Lord Teram said, casting his eyes over the packed hall. "Hardly anybody's in town, isn't that right, Maceal?"

"Yes," Lord Chause said, curling an aristocratic lip at the crowds.

"Is your wife in residence?" Lord Teram asked.

"Our son is a little under the weather and she decided to stay home with him tonight," Lord Chause replied.

"I hope that he's all right!"

"Oh, yes. More female crotchets than anything else."

"Good, good! I will have Lady Isalde call on her then!" For the first time I understood clearly why my parents ran away. I caught Captain Suiden's eye and he shook his head very slightly, so I started thinking about asking Sro Kenalt to introduce me to his tailors.

"If you will excuse me, honored folk, I wish to speak with Chancellor Berle," Laurel rumbled. He gave a general bow, pressing his paws together, holding his staff in the crook of his arm.

"I will accompany you, Ambassador," Captain Javes said, while I placed my still full glass down on the table.

"You don't have to run off, do you, Rabbit?" Lord Teram asked.

Maybe I could get something to wear to the theater in Freston. "I'm sorry, uh, Teram. I am assigned as Ambassador Laurel Faena's liaison."

"Oh! Well, perhaps you can come by tomorrow, eh? See the rest of the family!" Boots too, I thought, or some of the light footwear I'd seen around the city.

"Indeed, Rabbit, I was thinking to invite you to dine with us," Lord Maceal said. "As soon as my wife is persuaded to leave the nursing to the nursemaids." On the other hand, both canvas shoes and sandals would be entirely impractical in Freston.

"Yes, my lords, though it's up to my captain when I'll be off duty."

Laurel nodded his head once more and started walking away, Javes with him, and I bowed and hastened to join them. Captain Suiden made to follow but Sro Kenalt grabbed his arm. "Oh, no, cousin. We've a lot of catching up to do." The ambassador's grin was evil. "Besides, I've got all kinds of messages for you from Her Highness, your mother."

I turned away from the look of panic, then resignation, on my captain's face. Laurel chuffed quietly as we walked along the path that magically appeared in the crowd. "I didn't think I'd ever see the honored captain so easily and thoroughly routed." Javes gave an exaggerated shudder. "Mothers. I'm still terrified of mine."

I thought of how my own mother, with one eye slit and one brow raised, tore with frightening efficiency into the heart of any misbehavior. "Uhm, yes."

Laurel chuffed again, though I noticed that his tail was tucked. He saw me looking at him. "To keep it out of the way, Lord Rabbit."

"Uh-huh."

It was a kaleidoscope of people who, while not as colorful as Sro Kenalt, were dressed extravagantly with flowing dresses and elaborate coifs on the women, and formal coats and trousers or embroidered robes worn by the men. And everyone wore flowers, interwoven in hair, pinned on bodices, collars, lapels, and in chains looped around necks and wrists. The air was sweet with their perfume—and from the beeswax candles lighting the rooms. I caught the reflection of candle flames in mirrors and windows, off the polished marble floor, in the bright jewels worn by the guests as they moved in a dance of conversation and laughter—and I thought of the faeries' castles that floated over enchanted lakes.

We caught up with Foreign Chancellor Berle, who wore white roses against the russet of her hair and pinned to the gold of her gown, and she smiled as she bowed. "Grace to you, Ambassador Laurel, Lord Rabbit, and"—she knit her brows—"Captain Javes, right? Welcome to Ivers Palace." She did her wry smile. "I have promised the king that, however tempted I might be, I would not talk business tonight, but allow you to enjoy the reception."

We plunged into the swirling colors, and were handed off to lord to advisor back to the chancellor, then to ladies (widows, Javes murmured, who didn't have husbands to tell them what ideas to have) and back to the chancellor again—who started us on a new round. Once, during our third circuit of the room, I saw Lord Gherat holding a mini-court, which included my newly introduced Cousin Teram and Uncle Maceal, and a man in uniform who Javes said was the Royal Garrison commander, Loel ibn Dru. Gherat looked up and met my eyes, then deliberately turned away. A moment later they all burst into laughter and I started to think about his mother, but Laurel whacked my shin with his staff.

Most of the people we were introduced to were fascinated by the mountain cat, some (once they were sure he wasn't going to bite) even running a hand over his fur. After the first couple of times, Laurel politely smiled and offered an arm or shoulder, and lords and ladies both would stroke fingers over it, their own smiles full of childlike wonder. Even those who eschewed petting him were transfixed by the picture he made: a large cat with beads, feathers, and staff in one hand, and a glass of sparkling wine in the other that he sipped from time to time.

Some of the guests also spoke to me about my parents. "Your mama was so beautiful at her presentation," one woman said, her hand forgotten as it lay on Laurel's arm, "and all the rest of us poor debutantes were jealous." She smiled at her memories. "But I always attached myself to dear Hilga at balls, as her dance card filled up fast and I would have a chance at the ones who weren't quick enough." She sighed. "We weren't surprised at all when she caught Beau Rafe's eye."

" ' Beau Rafe,' hah!" Her husband grinned at me. "Ask your papa next time you see him about an ale keg and the night watch." I blinked, as my da was the soberest of men. The lord's grin widened. "Old Mops led them on a merry chase." And despite the king's injunction on business, the advisors and other politicians asked questions about the Border.

"I understand that you have a banking agreement with the Qarant, Ambassador," one said after we'd been introduced. He peered at Laurel over the edge of his glass as he took a swallow, and I saw a tortoise peeking out of his shell.

"No, honored sir," Laurel replied. "Not a banking agreement. We're trading partners."

"I see," the tortoise said. His head extended further. "What do you trade?"



"All kinds of goods. Smithery and other crafts. Some grain, fruit. But mainly textiles." Laurel pointed to the woven strips decorating his staff. "Cloth, rugs, and the like. There are some who say our carpets rival Perdans."

"Indeed." The tortoise's head was fully extended and he had risen up on all four legs. "I would like to speak with you further on this, Ambassador—"

"Talking business at the king's reception, my lord?" Lord Gherat said from behind us, his smile not reaching his eyes.

I expected the tortoise to snap back into his shell, but instead his head lowered and his mouth gaped open, showing powerful jaws as the lord smiled back. "Why, Gherat, I'm amazed at how you always manage to find us out. Are you going to tattle?"

"Perhaps." Gherat turned to me, putting his back to Laurel and Javes. "However, I'm here to bring Lord Rabbit to his cousin the king before he faints from the heat." He smiled again, his blue eyes crinkling at the corners. "We don't want, ah, Sweet Cheeks here falling down and getting any more splinters."

"Yes, my lord." I waited a moment, then raised my brows at him. "The king, my lord?" I smiled back.

"When you're ready."

Javes gave a deep laugh and Laurel chuffed as Gherat's smile and crinkles disappeared. Without saying anything more, the Lord Treasurer turned and moved into the throng and, with a brief bow to my companions, I followed.

### **Chapter Thirty-one**

Lord Gherat took me to another side room, going past two guards to rap at the door, which was opened by another guard. "Let him in!" a voice called and the guard moved back. Stepping to the threshold, I saw Jusson sitting on a divan surrounded by lordlings. Standing behind him was Lord Commander Thadro. He turned an impassive face towards me. Apparently I'd not impressed him when he saw me in the receiving line.

On the other hand, Jusson was smiling. "Come on in, Rabbit." Squashing the thought that I'd rather be reliving my first week of training with my old sergeant, I entered. Hearing the door close, I looked behind me but I had entered alone—Gherat had stayed on the outside.

"Come in, cousin, and sit down," Jusson said.

I found an empty chair in front of the divan and sat. Jusson waved at someone (who looked like one of the major-domos) who poured wine, this time dark red, into a glass goblet. I watched as the outside of the glass beaded with water.

"Have you ever had bloodwine, Rabbit?" Jusson asked as the servant handed me the glass.

"No, Your Majesty." There was silence, and then I realized that was my cue. I took a sip and the cold flavors of red wine, oranges, lemons, limes and honey exploded in my mouth. "It's very good, Your Majesty." I took another sip and set the glass down on a side table. Jusson raised a brow and I recognized another cue. "I'm sorry, Your Majesty, it's just that—" The other brow went up and I

laughed. "It's just that I've already had several glasses of wine and nothing much to eat this evening."

Jusson waved again and a plate appeared before me.

"No meat, am I correct?"

"Yes, Your Majesty." I wondered who the royal spies were.

"You have permission to address me by my name in this room, cousin."

"Thank you, Jusson."

Jusson smiled and settled back into the divan, watching me eat. This time it was my turn to feel like the fattened Festival goose. Jusson chuckled and I looked up in mid-chew. He grinned at me. "Tell me, Rabbit—such an interesting name! You look nothing like one. How did you come by it? Is it a nickname?"

I swallowed. "No, sire—"

His brow rose again.

"—Jusson. My ma—" Someone snickered.

"Lady Hilga," he said.

"Yes, sire—Jusson. She said it was because I was so quick and could hide in plain sight, though how she could tell that on my Nameday two weeks after my birth I don't know." I took a sip of my wine. "I figure it was because after six children, she and my da—"

"Lord Rafe." There were more snickers.

"They now go by Lark and Two Trees." I took another sip of wine. "Anyway, I think by the time they got to me, they ran out of names."

Jusson leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. "Six brothers and sisters? Such a large family."

"There are eight of us total, cousin. I've a little sister."

"My word. What's she named? Squirrel?" one of the lordlings asked, and the others laughed.

I said nothing, thinking of how the lovely Freston ladies might respond to an ankle chain like Sro Kenalt's. The Lord Commander glanced at the lordling, then returned his impassive stare to me.

"So, what's your sister's name, cousin?"

I gave the king a slow blink. "Sparrow, sire."

"Does she sing?"

That caught me by surprise. The image of my sister at her first Solemn Assembly singing the invocation arose— and how even crabby old Rises With The Dawn joined in at the fiat. "Yes, sire."

"Then perhaps your, ah, ma was right in naming you so," the king said. The lordlings snickered again.

"Yes, sire."

"Jusson, Rabbit. Or cousin."

"Yes, cousin."

The king smiled again, his black eyes intent. "So, anyway, Rabbit, tell me. Why does my cousin have on his hand the same marking the Faena cat does—a marking that he didn't have a couple of days ago?"

My mouth parted as I stared at him.

"Answer my question, Rabbit."

"Your Majesty—"

"You weary me, cousin, with your insistence on my titles."

"Yes, Jussion. Tell me, how old are you?"

Jussion blinked and sat back. "What does my age have to do with anything?"

"I'd imagine that it has a lot to do with everything, cousin." Jussion frowned and I watched the gold in his black eyes flare. Stubborn idiot, Laurel rumbled. Go ahead and tell the man what he wants to know.

Not man, I thought. Dark elf.

Laurel's rumble turned into a growl. Man, elf—he is king here. Tell him before he cuts your idiot head off. He roared the last words and I winced. Dropping my eyes down, I saw I still held the plate. I set it aside and stared at my palm.

"I nearly killed a man," I said, "so Laurel Faena placed the rune there to keep me from losing control again."

"How did you almost kill him?"

"I lost my temper and summoned something I didn't know I could."

"Witch," one of the lordlings muttered, and started to make a sign against evil.

Jussion gave the lordling a narrowed look and he stopped midgesture. "The doyen who traveled with him has attested to Lord Rabbit's orthodoxy. Do you dispute it?"

"Uh, no sire," the lordling said as I blinked at the realization that the king had spoken with Doyen Allwyn.

Jussion turned his attention back to me. "However, it's no wonder people are unsettled, cousin. The entire city shook with thunderclaps a couple of days ago when you first took—sick. Even now I can 'feel' whatever it is hanging dense about you. Then yesterday I received a message from"—he picked up a sheet of paper that was next to him on the divan—"Magus Kareste, who writes that a runaway apprentice"—Jussion scanned down the page—"has been traced to the Royal City. He says that it would behoove both Iversterre and the young man if we found him and returned him to his master." Jussion lowered the paper and looked at me. "For this apprentice is untrained and, as he comes into his powers, can cause unwitting harm to himself and those around him." I suddenly remembered that it was rather important to breathe.

"Well, cousin, what do you say to that?" Jussion laid the paper beside him on the divan.

I took another breath and tried a smile. "Kareste tends to exaggerate."

"Who is this Magus?"

"A mage, sire."

"A mage." The king stared at me. "And you were apprenticed to him?"

My smile disappeared. "Yes, I was."

"But you've broken your indentures?"

"Yes, I did."

"And now you're coming into your 'power'?"

"Yes, according to Laurel Faena, I am."

"And therefore you've become dangerous?"

"No, I'm not."

"Oh? You lost your temper and tried to kill someone. You don't call that dangerous?"

I suppressed a shrug, looking away from Jusson. "I'd been provoked, sire."

"We are aware of Lieutenant Slevoic, Rabbit."

I blinked at the royal "we."

"Look at me!"

My head snapped around.

"Such stubborn arrogance, even to your king." A different kind of frown passed over his face. Then I realized he was smiling again. "You put me in mind of your grandfather, Rabbit. I remember him standing before my mother the queen with the same look, like the world would shape itself according to his will."

The king shook his head. "And it very often did." I wondered why Jusson had reached back to my grandda as, from what I saw, my uncle and I looked as father and son.

"Your uncle Maceal has his papa's physical looks and a measure of conceit. But he missed out on something." Jusson looked hard at me. "And I know now where it all went." There was muted laughter and my eyes shifted to the lordlings again. The laughter died.

"They bother you?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Their wit does not agree with me, cousin."

King Jusson settled back against the divan and sighed, folding his hands over his stomach. Part of me noted that the glitter had disappeared from his eyes, and let out a relieved breath. The other part shoved my relief far down.

Jusson gave a short laugh. "Determined not to give an ell, are you?" He sighed again. "The 'squirrel' was a joke, Rabbit. Just like the major in the officers' mess." I gave a start at the king's mention of the practical

joke of that morning.

"Perhaps a little careless, a little tasteless. But no real ill intent. Even the 'witch' was more fear than anything else. I would think that after three years of Slevoic, you'd know what malice looked like." Now part of me was feeling rather small as I shifted in my chair. I did know what malice looked like and Jusson was right, it hadn't happened here.

"As king, Rabbit, you very quickly learn which battles you fight and which aren't worth the effort. It seems that somehow you didn't. Though one would think that you would've had to with six older brothers and sisters, just in self-defense."

"And five years under Lieutenant Groskin, sire," Jusson's Lord Commander said, unexpectedly. Startled, I looked up and met his gray blue gaze, and to my astonishment, he winked.

This time the king laughed. "Yes, indeed, Thadro." His laughter faded as he stared at me. "Well?"

I dropped my eyes to the king's briefly, then looked down again, hunching over my hand. "You're right, sire— Jusson. It's just that—"

"I am going to command that you remove those words from your speech, Rabbit."

"Yes, cousin."

Jusson sighed. "Well, tell me. It's just what?"

"I don't know what's safe anymore." I marveled that I'd admitted that as I ran a finger over the rune.

"I see," Jusson said.

It was quiet as I sat tracing the rune in my palm. I remembered something from my apprentice days before I had bolted: once for memory, twice for witness, three times to establish. I finished my third tracing and felt the rune flare warm across my palm.

"Show me, cousin."

I held out my hand and Jusson grasped it, pulling it to him. He bent over and traced the rune with his own finger and it grew warmer. He watched it shimmer for a moment, then, releasing me, sat back and picked up the letter. "If I were a cruel man, I would tell you that I needed to think on this and decide in a day or two. Or a week. But I am not cruel—at least, not unnecessarily so. I am also not inclined to force a kinsman back to someone he has fled, indentured or not, untrained mage or not, and so I will deny this request." A look of revulsion crossed his face as he set the paper aside again. "Besides, the Magus had bespelled the bird he used to send the message so that it wouldn't rest nor stop to eat until it reached me. It died in my hand." His brows met as he stared at me, the gold bright around the black of his eyes. "You will remain with your troop, cousin, continuing in all the offices that you hold, honoring all the oaths you have made. So sworn?"

The rune flared once more as someone gasped and gasped again. Realizing it was me, I bit my lip hard and drew blood. "Yes." It came out as a sob so I swallowed and tried again. "So sworn, Your Majesty." Another sob leaked out. "Fiat."

## Chapter Thirty-two

I staggered to the carriage that one of the royal majordomo twins had waiting at a side entrance so I could avoid the reception crowds and, on the king's command, go home and rest. The majordomo had also gathered Laurel and Captain Javes, and was off to find Captain Suiden. With one look at my face, the two of them remained quiet in the presence of the coachman. The majordomo returned quickly, guiding Suiden, who had his arm flung around his cousin Kenalt's shoulder both in familial affection and for balance' sake. Both of them were singing sea ditties sotto voce so that, as Suiden told us, they didn't wake the djinn that slept in the rocks and crevices along the coastline. "If they're awakened, they bring storms, Sroene."

Sro Kenalt nodded several times. "Yes. Destroy ships." He lifted a finger to his lips. "Shhh."

The majordomo had taken off once more and now returned with Jeff and our other outrider. The three of them helped Suiden climb into the carriage, while Kenalt supervised. Despite that, we were soon all aboard and ahorse, the coachman snapped the reins and we took off. I'd expected Suiden to fall asleep but he stayed awake, demonstrating with his sword belt all the different sailors' knots.

When we arrived at the embassy, I slipped off to my own room—where I discovered that the furnishers had been there too, moving in bunk beds for four. However, I also discovered that Groskin had moved out, taking not only his gear, but Jeff's and the other trooper's too. The trooper gave me a side glance before leaving; Jeff, however, stood in the middle of the room for a few moments. He then stripped down to his smalls and, choosing a top bunk, curled up on its bare mattress. I was too weary to feel much of anything, except to think that Groskin'd have an interesting time explaining to Suiden what he'd done, especially with the head the captain was going to have tomorrow.

For the first time in days I was able to get up the following morning without someone hanging over me, and I savored it. Jeff was already gone and so, after dressing, I went down by myself into the officers' mess and stopped. It was also the first time I'd been in the officers' mess since it had been furnished. I stared about, seeing the same quiet elegance that was in the captains' office. There were round tables, dark brown against the white walls and polished to a mirror finish, with high-backed, intricately carved chairs. On each table was a vase with fresh-picked flowers from the courtyard, with place settings of silverware, linen napkins, crystal glasses, porcelain teacups with matching saucers. The courtyard doors were open and I could see tables and chairs out on the trellised patio, though these seemed to be made out of wrought iron painted white. I sat at a table and Basel immediately emerged from the kitchen.

"Good morning, Lieutenant," he said, beaming. He filled my glass with orange juice, poured tea into my cup, and then, after hustling back into the kitchen, reappeared with plates piled high with food that he set before me. "When you're finished, the captains want to see you, sir."

So much for lingering over a pot of tea. I sighed and thanked him, starting in on my eggs. After a moment, I realized that he hadn't left and looked up. Basel gave me one of the goofiest smiles I'd ever seen, even on him, and did a little bow. "I made sure the eggs were fresh, sir. Went to the market first thing this morning to get them."

"Uh, thank you, Basel. And it's just 'Rabbit.' Please." Basel's smile got goofier. "The fruit is also fresh-picked this morning." He took the cloth he held and wiped a smudge off the table. "Just let me know, sir, if you need anything else." He bowed again and, backing away, nearly fell over the table behind him. He teetered on one foot, caught his balance and bowed once more, still grinning as he went backwards into the kitchen door.

The relayed command loomed larger than trying to figure out why Basel was fawning worse than usual,

so I finished my meal quickly and hurried to the captains' office—only to run a gauntlet of smartly snapped salutes, elaborate bows and greetings of "I give you good morning," and "Grace to you, Lord Rabbit." With everyone wearing Basel's same goofy smile. It should have been a short walk down the hall, but it seemed to take forever to reach the captains' office, my back and arm twinging from all the return bowing and saluting. I knocked on the door and heard Javes bid me enter. "Shut the door behind you, Lieutenant," Javes said. I saw Suiden sitting behind his desk, and did so very softly.

"Sit." Javes waited until I seated myself at a chair placed midway between his and Suiden's desks. "We have a problem, Lieutenant. It seems that word of your—marking has leaked out and now the Lord Commander is being pressured to take away your commission and discharge you from the army."

One guess as to who leaked it.

"Groskin." I sighed. "I'm not surprised, sir. He moved his and everybody else's gear out of our room last night." Feeling my own headache starting, I rubbed a knuckle between my brows. "The king also knew about it."

All of a sudden I had the absolute attention of both captains. "The king knows?" Suiden asked.

I dropped my hand. "Yes, sir. He questioned me about it last night."

"When Gherat took you to him?" Javes asked.

"Yes, sir," I said again, then added, "His Court was there."

"His Court!" Javes said. "All of them?"

I barely caught back a shrug. "I don't know, sir. The room was full. The Lord Commander was there too."

"Questioned in front of witnesses," Suiden breathed. Then he glared at me, his eyes rather red. "You should've told us immediately—" He broke off, remembering his condition the previous night.

Javes gave a brief grin, then leaned forward. "What did the king say?"

"He rebound me to my oaths."

Suiden joined Javes in leaning forward, both their faces intent. "Tell us exactly everything that happened," Suiden said.

"Everything," Javes echoed. "Do not leave a single thing out." They listened as I recounted what had happened the night before after I had left Captain Javes and Laurel.

"Gherat was left outside while you were invited into the king's chamber?" Javes asked at one point.

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, jolly good."

"The king kept calling you cousin?" Suiden asked at another. "And insisted that you do the same?"

"Yes, sir."

They listened to the rest, frowning but saying nothing about the letter from the Magus, then sat back. The dragon and wolf looked at each other, then at me, dropping their muzzles into the same tongue-lolling,

teeth-baring grins. The dragon picked up a teacup in his hand and took a sip. The wolf watched me for a moment, then gave a knowing look. "You're seeing our, uh, other selves, aren't you, Lieutenant?"

"Yes, sir."

"Your hand is glowing a bit."

I glanced down into my palm.

"Never mind all that." Suiden placed his teacup down. "Tell me, Rabbit, are you aware of what the garrison at Freston is?"

"It's where the army dumps all its—screw-ups, sir."

"Not just any screw-up, Lieutenant," Javes said. "But officers who, because of their connections, are allowed to retain their commission. Like Groskin who calls a doyen uncle. Or Slevoic, who's related to both the Commander of the Royal Garrison and Lord Gherat." Javes' mouth pulled down. "Which is why he's been able to get away with so much. It was considered a miracle that he was even sent to Freston."

"Politics," I said. "Uhm, sir."

"Very much so," Suiden said, "as Freston is also where the army isolates anyone that they're not sure of but want to keep an eye on, like me, the nephew of the Amir of Tural."

"Or me, the son of a very wealthy merchant who has strong ties to the Qarant," Javes said.

Remembering the looks of recognition Javes received last night, I wondered just how wealthy his da was and how strong his ties were to the Qarant.

"Or you, Rabbit." Suiden looked at me. "Directly related to two of the most powerful Houses in Iversterre. But brought up in the Border."

"It didn't matter what was said about you when we were in Freston, as we were so far away from anything vital that no one cared." Javes said. "However, now we're in the Royal City, and between Groskin's hysterics and Slevoic's machinations—" The captain broke off as he shrugged.

"But with Slevoic being on report, what he says shouldn't matter," I said.

Suiden placed his teacup down and rubbed his face with his hands. "Commander Loel has determined that the lieutenant acted in self-defense."

"What?" I stared at the captains, my stomach suddenly tight. "A review board wasn't held. Sirs."

"A commander has the power of summary judgment over all who report to him," Javes said. "We were put under Loel's command when we arrived in Iversly."

"He has it even over his kin?" I asked, the tightness creeping around to my spine.

"Yes," Javes said. "Welcome to the army, Rabbit."

"I've sent a protest to the Lord Commander," Suiden said, taking his hands from his face. "But until he renders a decision, Slevoic is returned to the unit."

I sat still, stunned.



"And now those who questioned having someone from the Border in the army all along are not only demanding your discharge, but also wondering out loud whether you should be banished from Iversterre," Suiden continued. "It hasn't helped that neither Chause nor Flavan claimed you until last night"—his look turned back into a glare—"nor that you slammed that major in the Royal Garrison's mess, however annoying he may have been." "Just so," Javes said. "But with the king rebinding you to your oaths and offices, those mouths are stopped and their teeth drawn." He smiled as he got up. "I'd give just about anything to be a fly on the wall right now in Lunkhead's office—" He broke off as he realized what he had called the garrison commander in front of me, and cast a look at Suiden.

Suiden's voice was mild. "So would I. Why don't you get Trooper Jeffen?" He looked at me. "Until this is all settled, Jeffen is permanently assigned to you, to prevent any untoward incidents."

Javes went to the door and opened it, shouting for Jeff.

A faint wince crossed Suiden's face as he poured more tea.

"Nothing's going to happen to Groskin either for blabbing, is it, sir?" I asked.

Suiden set his teapot down. "No. At least, not now." He glanced at Javes as he came back into the room. "Rabbit just asked if Groskin would be disciplined."

Javes sighed as he sat behind his desk. "Factions, Rabbit. Groskin is protected by strong church interests. Arch-doyen Obruesk has already written letters to everyone and their mother stating how he is 'very uneasy about soldiers being subjected to magical influences.'"

Suiden nodded. "And Commander Loel has informed me that, as far as he was concerned, Groskin did not disobey a direct order but instead brought a dangerous situation to the attention of the appropriate people." The captain's eyes gleamed hard. "That too I've taken to the Lord Commander."

I studied the rune on my palm. "Why, sirs?"

"Why is Groskin acting this way?" Suiden asked.

I nodded.

"The lieutenant was assigned to Veldecke before he came to Freston, and had some things happen there that he still hasn't reconciled himself to," Suiden replied.

I frowned, feeling like a pawn in a game where I didn't know the rules. It gave me no comfort that Slevoic's faction was strong enough to challenge the king.

"No, not challenge, Rabbit," Suiden said. "At least, not this group. It's a jockeying for position. A fight for the king's ear, his favor, to stand at his right hand."

The power behind the throne drama.

"Exactly," Suiden replied.

"I wish you'd both stop that," Javes said, looking at Suiden, then me. "I feel like a stepchild."

"Rabbit thought that Lord Gherat Dru was a rival for the throne," Suiden said.

"Good grief, no." Javes' eyes turned wolf yellow. "That would reave the kingdom apart and Gherat knows it. Besides, he doesn't have near enough lines to the House of Iver." He sighed again. "No, he's a childhood friend run amok—Jusson and he were fostered together, and Gherat milks that for all it's

worth." I blinked, thinking of the middle-aged Lord Treasurer and the king who looked only as old as me being childhood friends, and how no one seemed to notice how the king hadn't aged. Or at least said anything about it.

"They attribute it to clean living and good blood," Suiden said.

Javes thumped his desk. "Stop that. What are you saying now?" I opened my mouth to answer him but just then the door opened, and Jeff entered the room carrying a large silver tray piled high with white envelopes.

Suiden put down his cup, frowning. "What's that?"

"Lieutenant Lord Rabbit's mail, sir. It's been arriving all morning." Jeff placed the tray in front of the captain and then stood at attention. Javes joined him, staring down at the small mountain, as I rose from my chair and also approached Suiden's desk.

Javes had been right. A king's favor did do wonders for one's social life. I picked up an envelope and pulled out a gilt-edged invitation to a dinner to be held that night. I laid it down and picked up another; it was an invitation to a luncheon— "What's 'alfresco' ?"

"Outdoors," Javes said, reading over my shoulder.

"Oh, a picnic, then." I laid that one down and next read invitations to a ball, two soirees, three routs, another ball, a couple of boating expeditions, several afternoon teas, musicales, masques, more dinners— I gasped and dropped the invitation I'd just opened. Javes picked it up.

"Lord Kaspero and Lady Mael of Surask beg the pleasure of your presence at the presentation of their daughter, Nestae eso Surask.' Oh, I say, Rabbit. Your very first coming out ball. How exciting." A feeling of being hunted stole between my shoulder blades.

Suiden, still frowning, also stared at the mail. "How in the world are we going to sort through this? I've been away too long and have no idea who we should embrace and who we should avoid like the pox." Javes waved the debutante invitation. "And all those matchmaking mamas circling like sharks smelling blood in the water." He did his silly ass smile. "Can you dance, my lord?"

The hair on the back of my neck rose as I thought of trying to maneuver through some complicated step while making small talk with a powdered, jeweled and coifed debutante with her mother looking on, planning the demise of my bachelorhood. "No, sir!" My palm burned and I added, "Except for the Festival dances, sir!"

"Stop scaring him," Suiden said, "and help me think of a way to sort through this mess."

"What about the king, sir?" Jeff asked.

We turned and looked at him, and his face flushed.

"The king, trooper?" Suiden asked.

"Couldn't you ask for his advice? I mean, as the king calls Rabbit cousin and all—" We continued to stare as he trailed off.

"What have you heard, Jeff?" Javes asked, his voice soft.

"It's in the mess, sir. How the king welcomed Rabbit home and then spent over an hour with him, and

how he knows all about the mark on Rabbit's hand, sir." Jeff rightly interpreted the look on both captains' faces. "I didn't tell them, sirs. In fact, I didn't even know that the king knew." He did his own frown.

"Rabbit never tells me anything."

The two captains were silent. "You know," Suiden finally said, "if the army collected intelligence this well all the time, we'd never lose a battle."

"Well, I'll be f—a fool," I said. "The troopers were toadying me."

"And I bet you just sucked it up, milord," Jeff muttered.

"Oh, sod you and your horse—"

"That is enough," Suiden said as Javes looked intently out the window, his mouth twitching. "I'm not in the mood for nursery quarrels. Keep it up and I'll assign both of you to Groomer Hedley when we return to Freston. Indefinitely." Suiden stood up and another faint wince crossed his face. "However, you did make an excellent suggestion, Jeffen. We will ask King Jusson for help and hopefully he'll send someone who can guide us through all this—"

A soldier tapped on the open door. In his hands was a silver tray piled high with white envelopes. "I'm sorry, sirs, but this was just delivered."

### Chapter Thirty-three

With Suiden's threat hanging over our heads, Jeff and I once more declared a truce and sat out in the courtyard (after checking for spiders) on my favorite bench under the pomegranate tree. Springtime was a soft lover in Freston, stealing over the mountains with a gentle touch. In Iversly it was a riot with mobs and looting, and the courtyard droned as the birds fought the bees over the flower petals. I watched the skirmishes as Jeff told me how Groskin stood like an old-fashioned revivalist in the troopers' mess, preaching doom and gloom—and with Slevoic behind the lieutenant the whole time, nodding, his blue eyes gleaming.

"Groskin said that the cat had bespelled you and now both of you were turning everyone into beasts, and that the Border will soon swoop down and enslave everyone until we all forget that we were once human," Jeff said.

"That's stupid, Jeff. The Border has already proved that it doesn't need to turn us into anything in order to wipe us out." Several bright butterflies fluttered by our bench to join the flower melee, and one landed on my knee. Its wings slowly folded and unfolded.

"Well, most of the southies thought it stupid too—talking cat or no, it's all still a bunch of children's stories," Jeff replied, looking out over the courtyard. "And most everybody had a hard time seeing you, the peacock o' the mountain, as evil incarnate." He propped a knee up and rested his arm on it, leaning against the back of the bench. "Besides,

I've been around both you and the ambassador the most, and nothing's happened to me." He shrugged.

"Then the news hit this morning and everyone thought who cares— the king calls you cousin."

"Everyone? Or most everyone?" I asked, remembering the grumbles and sidelong glances at me during our soggy trek out of the mountains into Gresh.

"Anyone that matters," Jeff said. He saw my look and shrugged. "Royal favor covers a heap of sins, Rabbit." I didn't reply, placing my hand gently against the butterfly's front legs, and it stepped onto my palm. It slowly flapped its wings as it moved across the rune and climbed to a finger.

"But it's true, isn't it?" Jeff asked after a moment. "As you told the captains, we are—what you called it—translated. Changed from human into the magical."

"Yes." I turned my hand so that the butterfly moved to the back of my finger and I held it up to eye level. "It's true, and you know it." I gave him a sideways glance. "Why didn't you back Groskin?"

The butterfly beat its wings, fanning my face.

Jeff shrugged, his eyes angry. "Because I have no desire to put myself in Slevoic's tender care no matter what is swooping down on me." He saw my look and his mouth twisted. "The Vicious did that cheroot thing in another fight. Put it right in the trooper's eye, blinded him. Then he told the poor sod that if Ebner ever found out, his sisters would be next—and he described them both, saying their names." I blinked, realizing which trooper Jeff was talking about. I'd been told he'd gotten drunk and fell into the fire. He had been discharged from the army as unfit for duty and now worked in the stables of an inn as a groomer, knee-deep in horse muck.

"You're a little odd sometimes," Jeff said, "and you keep too many damn secrets from your mates."

"I'm not odd—" I began as a second butterfly landed on my wrist.

Jeff spoke over me. "But you don't smile while you're describing the injuries your men sustained while out on patrol with you." His mouth twisted again. "He drools at the thought of getting you alone, Rabbit."

I knew.

It was silent as we watched a company of bumblebees hold a flowering bush against all comers. "So, I'm a badger?" Jeff asked after a little bit.

"Yes."

Jeff sighed. "All the animals in the world and I get small and furry."

"I don't know, Jeff," I said. "The ones around my parents' farm were pretty impressive. Even the wolves left them alone." Both butterflies beat their wings together and my hair blew back from my face in the draft.

"What about Ryson?" Jeff asked, and paused.

"Weasel," we said at the same time.

"Though polecat would've come in a close second," Jeff said. "Slevoic has been assigned back to the stables," he added. "Javes is having him clean and mend all the tack." He gave an evil smile. "And Ryson and Groskin have kitchen rota together until Suiden says otherwise. Basel got so mad when he found out that he forgot to call Suiden 'sir' and burnt the toast."

My eyes got wide as my breakfast turned to lead in my stomach. "Heigh-ho, merry-go. Groskin and Ryson? Does anyone dare eat?"

As Jeff claimed that he waited for the other troopers to take the first bite, both butterflies flew off and the wind of their flight rushed past me, blowing through the tree, swaying branches and rustling leaves. I

leaned back against the bench and crossed my ankles. And uncrossed them in a hurry as a spider was shaken out of the pomegranate tree, landing near my feet. He was pale and elongated as opposed to his more brightly hued, muscular brethren, and we watched as he scurried off, making sure that he didn't turn back towards us.

Losing the spider in the shadow of the fountain, I eased back on the bench, again thrusting my feet out in front of me. After seriously contemplating my boots, I sighed. "All right, maybe you're right."

Jeff looked at me and waited.

"Maybe I do keep too many secrets. It's just that—" I tried to smile. It didn't work. "I left the Border running from something that scared me spitless, Jeff."

"What? You being a mage?"

"Not a mage. Not yet. Not even close. An apprentice." I watched the fountain spray sparkle in the sunlight. "My master—I could feel his lust—" I broke off as Jeff shifted on the bench and I scowled at him. "No, not that."

"Oh," muttered Jeff. "Sorry."

"It was as if he was starving and I was supper. It scared me," I repeated. "Hell, it scared me." I took another breath and shrugged. "So I ran away and came here, hoping no one would find me."

"But they did," Jeff pointed out.

"Yeah," I said. "They did."

"How did we get lost, Rabbit?" Jeff asked after a moment.

"I don't know," I said. I saw his side glance. "I've asked Laurel again and again, and he denies having anything to do with it." I shrugged. "I believe him." At least about that.

"Your hand is glowing," Jeff said.

I looked down and saw the rune bright in the tree's shade. I held my palm up and Jeff took and angled my hand so that the sun fell directly on it. "What does it say?" he asked. He moved my hand back into the shade so the rune stood out more and bent over it. Another butterfly flew by, the draft of its passing as strong as the wake from Dragoness Moraina's wings. It circled back and landed on my shoulder and I felt the weight of it anchor me to the earth even as the wind whispered to me the secret of flight.

"Truth," I said, as Jeff reached out a finger to the bright lines.

"What the bloody hell are you doing? Get away from him!" Jeff jumped up as Groskin came storming out of the officers' mess. The butterfly beat its wings once, twice, and I felt them brushing against my cheek. It then took off, a speck of color against the blue sky.

"Groskin!" Suiden emerged from the captains' office. Groskin snapped to attention. "Trooper Jeffen is exactly where he's supposed to be. You are not. Return to your post." Groskin, without meeting my eyes, spun around and marched back into the house.

Suiden stood a moment, grimacing in the bright sunlight. He men gave it up as a bad job and turned to go back into his office. "Come inside." We followed Suiden inside and in the relative dark of the room, I made out someone standing next to the captain.

"This is Lord Esclaur ibn Dhawn e Jas, Lieutenant. The king has sent him to help with your mail." Figuring that I must be the only lieutenant in the Royal Army with a social secretary, I bowed. As I came back up for air, my eyes adjusted to the dimness and I recognized him as the lordling who made the crack about squirrels. Remembering Lord Gherat escorting me, I realized that my royal cousin had a twisted sense of humor.

"Grace to you, Lieutenant Lord Rabbit ibn Chause e Fla-van," Lord Esclaur said as he bowed back. He was Captain Javes' spiritual brother, down to his quiz glass and brown pomaded curls. "I understand that you have an embarrassment of invitational riches."

I looked over to Captain Suiden's desk and saw the mountain of mail had grown to a mountain range. "Yes, my lord, I suppose you can say that." Lord Esclaur followed my gaze and his mouth hung open for a second. He shut it with a snap and minced over to the white envelopes, lifting his quiz glass. "My word. All this for you? You are popular, aren't you?"

"As you can see, Lord Esclaur, Lieutenant Rabbit is being swamped. We rely upon you to help us navigate this." Suiden had started to go to his chair when there was a tap at the door. He sighed and waved at his desk. "Just put it there." I watched as the mountaintops grew in height and Suiden moved to one of the guest chairs to sit. He put his head in his hand, massaging his brow.

Lord Esclaur responded by taking off his lightweight cotton coat, rolling up the sleeves of his lawn shirt, and diving in. The folding table was set up for him, tea and sandwiches were requested, and Jeff and I were pressed into service, ferrying the unread invitations to, removing the rejects from, and maintaining the "keeper" piles in front of the lordling. All the while, Esclaur kept up a running patter of commentary.

"What, doing that in this heat? I don't think so. No. Yes. Yes. Oh, no, you will not go there. My goodness gracious, is she ready to come out?" He picked up an invitation engraved with the Flavan crest and gave a genteel sneer. "I suppose you'll have to. Family."

At the end of two hours, we had sorted through all the invitations, had written acceptance replies to all the engagements that Lord Esclaur had deemed that I must attend, and had entered them into datebooks he produced, one for him and one for me. He indicated a few somewhat smaller piles. "These, Lord Rabbit, are invitations for Ambassador Laurel and I've separated them into 'wise to go,' 'doesn't matter one way or another,' and 'run for the hills.'" He then pointed at other piles. "And these, Prince Suiden, are your and Captain Javes' invitations. Again, I've taken the liberty to sort them." He started rolling down his sleeves. "I am at your disposal, gracious sirs, to accompany you to any and all of these functions." He slipped on his coat, adjusting his cuffs. "Fortunately, I've also been invited to most of these, and I'm sure a word in the proper ears will take of the rest."

I followed Esclaur to the door, where he turned and, catching sight of my face, grinned at me—and superimposed briefly on the fop I saw a blue-eyed white wolf of the Upper Reaches. "Oh, do not fret, Lord Rabbit. Remember, life always entails change. Yes, indeed. And the alternative is just not acceptable." The lordling bowed, turned back to the door and ran into Laurel Faena, followed by Lord Gherat.

"Well, it's one of the Court's little lapdogs," Gherat said, smiling. "Who let you off your leash, Esclaur?"

"Oh, I'm allowed out on my own every once in a while, Gherat," Esclaur replied. "Especially when there's a full moon out. You know, to howl and chase shadows." Laurel and I looked at each other and then back at the two of them.

Gherat shrugged. "Be careful. Sometimes shadows hide things that are real. You wouldn't want to crack your noggin by running headlong into one." Just what we needed, I thought, more cryptic rot. Gherat shot

a look at me, his eyes widening a little.

Laurel rumbled. "We should not joke about the moon, honored lords. It marks a time of unpleasant remembrance for the Border." He nodded at Lord Gherat. "But I do have hope to report good things to the High Council. Thank you for bringing me the time of the meeting with the king." Apparently Lord Esclaur wasn't the only one who was the victim of Jusson's humor this morning.

Gherat nodded back at the Faena, a faintly derisive look on his face. "You're welcome—Ambassador."

"Well, I'd better be going," Esclaur said. "But I'll be back this evening, Lord Rabbit, to accompany you to the rout. Grace to you, messirs." He did a general bow that yet somehow managed to exclude Gherat, and left.

Which meant we received the full measure of Lord Gherat's attention. He put on an solicitous expression.

"You look a little peaked, Suiden. Too much reception last night?" He smiled. "Though perhaps you should overimbibe more often. I understand you have a rather pleasing baritone, especially when singing the, er, 'yo hos.'"

Suiden sighed. "To what do we owe the honor of your prolonged presence, Gherat?"

"Oh, I have many reasons." Still smiling, Gherat walked over to the invitations. He picked up the Flavan one on top, read it, and flicked it back on the table. "One of which is to see my cousin, Slevoic. I was told, though, that he's not here." He picked up another invitation.

"No, he's not," Suiden said. He stood up and went to the teapot on his desk. I could hear the gurgle as he poured the last of the tea into his cup. "Slevoic has been assigned to the Royal Garrison stables."

Gherat froze, then turned to Suiden. "You sent one of my House to work in the stables?"

"Yes," Suiden said, sipping his tea.

"How dare you." Gherat's blue eyes glittered with rage, and both Jeff and I took a step towards him. Laurel caught our arms.

"I dare because he's under my command and therefore mine to do with as I will." Suiden raised a brow.

"Wasn't that what Slevoic said when those soldiers were killed?"

While stationed at the Iversly Royal Garrison, Slevoic had forced his unit to ford one of the Banson's tributaries during a storm, and three troopers had drowned when they were swept from their horses. Even his noble connections couldn't overcome his causing the needless deaths of his men, and Slevoic was packed off to Freston for his sins. However, looking at Gherat's face, the shame of being sent to Freston paled in comparison to working in the Royal Garrison stables in full view of all the Vicious' former mates. Thinking on the blinded trooper Jeff told me about, I smiled.

Gherat struggled for control. "And Lieutenant Groskin?" he asked after a moment. "I also wish to pay my respects to Archdoyen Obruesk's young friend. Where's he?"

"Kitchens," Suiden said briefly, taking another sip of tea.

This time Gherat kept his face rigidly blank, though I could see a muscle jumping by his eye. "I see. Then I will see them another time." He turned, and met both Laurel's and my gazes. After another struggle, he gave a short bow, his mouth a thin line. "Sirs." Straightening, he stalked out of the room, his back stiff.

Jeff slipped out after him to make sure he actually went to the front door.

There was silence until we heard the muffled thud of the front door closing; then Laurel softly chuffed.

"That was wondrously sweet, honored captain."

Suiden smiled, briefly. "Yes." He then winced and, after rubbing his forehead, tried to pour more tea. However, the teapot was empty. Setting pot and cup down, he went behind his desk and sat in his chair, faint lines between his brows.

"I have a remedy for your ailment," Laurel offered.

"No, thank you." Suiden gave Laurel a narrow look, but the Faena had moved to the window and the captain had to shut his eyes against the glare. Jeff came back into the room and as Suiden opened his eyes to look at him, he saw the stacks of his own invitations. He sighed. "Can you read and write, trooper?"

"Yes, Captain," Jeff said.

"Good. You are in charge of my social calendar. Your first duties will be to enter these into my datebook." Suiden nodded at the invitations and winced, swallowing hard. "No, belay that. Your first duty is to get me a pot of tea. Strong."

"What about Rabbit, sir?"

"He can damn well wait here until you're done." Suiden closed his eyes again. "Javes should be back any minute. He went to get some additions to your wardrobe, Lieutenant, so that you'll be presentable when you go out on the town." Jeff gave a faint snicker as he went out the door again, but I didn't care. I was staring at the captain in horror, seeing myself with a giant quiz glass hung around my neck, the weight bending me over to the ground.

"Don't worry, Rabbit," Suiden said, his eyes still closed. "Javes knows your style." One eye cracked open. "Though I would've thought that his sartorial boldness would appeal to you."

There was a very fine line between bold and ridiculous.

Suiden's eye closed again. "I see."

### **Chapter Thirty-four**

The invitation from my Flavan cousins said "rout" and it was decided that my dress uniform would be acceptable. Javes returned from his shopping trip with new yellow gloves, yellow silk handkerchiefs, Habbs, and a lightweight cape, dark blue with a blue silk lining and fastened by black braided frogs across the chest—and not a quiz glass in sight. The captain also brought a barber back with him, as my neglected hair reached below my collar. Now, shaved, trimmed, and fully dressed, I checked my image in the full-length mirror. I spun around, watching in satisfaction as the cape flared out, to view the back. As I stopped, the barber took advantage of me standing still and whisk-brushed my shoulders clean of clippings and imaginary lint.

"Just like my sisters," Jeff said, watching me.

I ignored him as I turned to the side.

"And a cousin of mine. He's also a priss and his wife has to fight him for the mirror."



"Jealousy," I said, "is an ugly thing."

Lord Esclaur called for me in his open carriage and we rode to my cousin's house with Jeff once again as an outrider. The night was sharp edged from the light of the full moon and, as we entered the square, I could see that the Flavan house took up one side. Marveling at such a large place for one family, I asked Lord Esclaur how big Flavan's principal seat was.

"Oh, very large. Very large, indeed. The main estate includes not only plantations, but three substantial towns too." The lordling settled into lecture mode. "Now your uncle's wealth is more concentrated in the City. Chause owns several commercial properties and is silent partner to many a merchant." We joined the queue of carriages snaking towards where the guests were alighting. Up ahead I could see huge torches at the house's entrance and frowned. Even in provincial Freston we had oil-wick lamps, so it was very strange to see torches in cosmopolitan Iversly.

"No, torches aren't common at all," Lord Esclaur said to my query, also frowning.

When we reached the front entrance of the Flavan house, I stood, waiting for the servant to open the carriage door— only to sit down again as I got a good look at his outfit. I had thought that his livery looked strange, but put it down to the flickering torchlight. But it wasn't livery—the servant was costumed to look like an ogre from a popular children's pantomime, complete with fur loincloth and spiked club. And bare feet. He winced as he trod on something as he stepped up to the carriage, flinging open the door and hefting his club. "Who dares enter my master's house?"

The same lines from the same pantomime.

"I don't—"

"My lord, we are holding up the line," Lord Esclaur said as he rose. "Indeed, we shall beard the wicked sorcerer in his lair."

The bloody hell I would. I settled back into the seat squabs. "I'm not—"

Lord Esclaur kicked my ankle and I yelped. "Oh my, leg cramps again, Lord Rabbit? Well, once you get out, you'll be able to stretch." He grabbed my arm and hauled me up, much stronger than he affected to be. "You are the king's cousin," he hissed in my ear. "Act like it."

The house was done up just like the sorcerer's lair, with fake rats, ravens, and spiders on huge webs dangling from the ceiling. Esclaur and I joined the line of guests waiting to be greeted, and up ahead I could see the gallant Locival, with the broadsword Lion's Heart resting on his hip. By Locival's side was the fair princess Beatel (plumper than usual) whom he rescued from the Sorcerer Slifter's foul plots and nefarious schemes. Her long golden tresses were braided and beribboned, reaching nearly to the ground, and suspended from a gold chain on her forehead was the Pearl of Chastity. Behind the couple hung a tapestry sunrise, representing the new dawn, for by their kiss and troth of true love, they broke the evil spell that held the kingdom of Heusterand enthralled in perpetual night.

"Ho, cousin! Esclaur!" Locival raised his helm visor, revealing Lord Teram underneath. "Isn't this splendid?" He held out his hand in welcome.

I sensed Esclaur drawing back his foot and so I reached out to clasp Teram's hand. "Grace to you and good evening, Teram. Yes, it's something. Though I am surprised. I didn't realize that this was a masque."

"My lady thought it up after we had sent your invitation," Teram said.

I looked at Lady Isalde underneath her blond wig, but she said nothing.

"And I said, 'Why not?'" Teram continued. "It'll be fun!" He waved over a servant, this one made up as a hunchback, who had a basket of black silk dominos. "Choose one!" He waited until both Esclaur and I had slipped a mask on, and then slapped my back. "Enter in, my lords, but ware the sorcerer's traps!"

We bowed and went past him into the party proper. The interior was as darkly decorated as the entrance, and servants dressed as the sorcerer's minions mingled with the costumed guests. Food tables were set along a wall and were adorned with fake (I hoped) human and animal skulls sporting fat candles. Any desire to eat faded fast.

"It is a flexing of muscle, Rabbit," Esclaur said, catching my bemused look. "Jusson is able in one day to set up and host a massive reception in honor of an ambassador that most aren't too sure about. Teram wants to show that he has the same pull."

Great, another faction. Then I remembered Gherat and Teram standing together at the reception, and wondered. "But Jusson is the king," I said. "Of course they will come when he calls. If they don't, either they're in trouble or the kingdom is."

Lord Esclaur shrugged. "True, my lord."

A servant (this one with fangs) walked up to us, and Esclaur took two glasses from the tray that was decorated with toadstools and spiders, handing me one. "But Flavan has forty direct lines back to the first king, Iver. No other House outside of the king's can boast that. Chause comes close with thirty-two, and his son, because of his wife, has thirty-six. Still, should Jusson's House fail in the near future, Flavan will be ahead in the throne sweepstakes. Even now Teram tends to think he's so close to royalty as to make no difference." He took a sip, made a face and looked for a place to put the glass down. "It must've turned in the heat," he said, his frown deepening.

I sniffed at my wine and, with another glance at the lighted skulls on the food table, decided to ditch my glass also. "Cousin or not, I'm leaving if I see any black candles." We were the only ones not in some sort of costume from the pantomime: There were villagers, doyens, Beatel's sisters, Locival's quest companions, and the blind storyteller who always showed up when Locival became hopelessly muddled.

However, as the story took place in the north where more clothing was not only fashionable but necessary, sweat glistened as it ran down faces and necks, and more than one woman paused by open windows and doors with covertly loosened bodices and discreetly lifted skirts, courting breezes. I began laying bets with myself as to who'd be the first to faint.

"Well met, my lords," someone said over my shoulder.

Refusing to utter the greeting used (and overused) in the pantomime, I turned—and froze at seeing a masked Slevoic standing in front of me. Then he moved and what little light there was gleamed on the silver strands in his hair. Not Slevoic then.

"As I live and breathe, it's Gherat," Esclaur drawled. He lifted his quiz glass and scanned the Lord of Dru's outfit. Esclaur's brow rose. "Not in costume?"

"No," Gherat said pleasantly, "I leave the dress-up to others." All signs of his earlier rage were gone—and my hackles rose. His blue eyes were colorless in the dimness as he looked at me from behind his domino and smiled. "Oh, don't worry, Lord Rabbit. I don't hold you responsible for your captain's actions. Besides, I've better manners than to start a brawl in Flavan's house with one of his guests."

"Yes, my lord," I murmured, thinking of how he had no compunction in picking a fight when I was the

guest in Jusson's house.

"But you don't drink." Gherat signaled and another servant presented a tray, this one with a fake asp twined around the glasses. He waited until we took a glass, then turned to the crowd, scanning it. "Let me introduce you about. You may know everyone here, Esclaur, but there are several that Rabbit should meet."

It was like a fever dream of the king's reception as Esclaur and I were passed from guest to guest. But instead of open stares full of curiosity, here everyone was black-masked and hidden. With the decorations, the nightmarish servers, and the dirges the musicians were playing (evil sorcerer music, I supposed), the weight of it pressed down like a soft, suffocating pillow, and I wondered that Teram would consider this fun.

"So, ah... Dabbit, are you long in town?" a lord in doyen robes asked.

"It's Rabbit, and I don't know—"

"You must get over to the Boar's Head, Nabbit. They've such excellent sport there." The man launched into a detailed description of all the cockfights he had attended— blood drop by drop—and I went back to staring about the room, prepared to dodge Lord Esclaur's foot. Nothing threatened, though, and I glanced over, noting that Esclaur looked a little glassy-eyed.

"I shall be fighting my Gray tomorrow night," the lord concluded. With a glance at our still full glasses, he raised his own glass and drank deeply. Esclaur and I did the same, though I pretended, as I didn't want to chance getting a mouthful of vinegar. Finished, the lord set his glass down and looked through me.

"Oh, I see someone I must speak with. Grace, Fabbit." He bowed and walked off.

"Well, that was just wonderful—" I broke off as I got a good look at Lord Esclaur. "Are you all right?" Taking his wine glass, I put both it and mine on a table. I then guided him to an open window.

"I could do with a bit of a breather," Esclaur admitted. "I think the heat's getting to me." He pulled off his mask and moved closer in a vain hope for a breeze. In the meager light I could see sweat beading on his forehead and I frowned, pulling off my own domino. Looking around, I spotted Lord Dru heading our way.

"Here comes Gherat. I'll ask him if he can get you something cold to drink." As Gherat reached us, I opened my mouth, only to have Esclaur recover enough to kick the same ankle. I gasped as his toe connected.

"Are you all right, Lord Rabbit?" Gherat moved closer, looking us over.

I gave him a pained smile, staggering a little. "Just a cramp."

"Oh, too bad." He moved even closer, his colorless eyes seeming to glitter behind his mask. "Neither of you look very well. How about going outside for a bit to get away from all this heat?"

I moved out of range of Esclaur's foot. "That's a good idea."

Gherat gestured and a servant dressed as one of the sorcerer's apprentices emerged from the crowd.

"Messirs are overcome by the heat. Is there somewhere they could cool off?"

"Yes, milord," the servant apprentice said. "This way, please." After bowing, Esclaur and I followed the servant from the room.

"What the hell was that all about?" I whispered, limping again.

"I didn't see you eating or drinking. What makes you think I want anything?" Lord Esclaur whispered back. "Especially after that bloody awful wine." He pulled out a clean handkerchief and wiped his face.

"You didn't drink that last glass, did you?"

"Heavens, no. I faked it, just as you did."

"Does my cousin usually set such a dismal board?" I asked as we turned a corner, the party fading to a faint murmur.

"No, Teram prides himself on his dinner parties. His kitchen and cellar have always been excellent." Esclaur blotted his face again. "Until now." We turned another corner and the party sounds disappeared altogether. We continued down a long hall, until we came to a pair of glass doors. Beyond them I could see the outline of foliage. The servant lit a lamp that was sitting on a small table by the doors.

"What's that for?" I asked.

The servant looked up and I realized that his face was shadowed by his costume's cowl. "It's so that milords won't have to sit in the dark." And have every night flier and crawler making its way to us? "No, thank you. We'll be fine." As he set the lamp down on the table, I opened the door and stepped outside, waiting for my eyes to adjust. "There's a bench over there." I moved in that direction, sighing in relief at the cooler air, only to turn around as I heard Lord Esclaur stumble behind me. He stood swaying, took another step, and his knees buckled. I hurried back and caught him before he collapsed, helping him to the bench.

"Sorry about that," Esclaur said, his voice slurring. "I do feel awfully peculiar." He swallowed hard. "Pr'aps I should've gotten that drink." The servant had left the lamp burning by the glass doors and in its feeble light I could see that Esclaur was drenched in sweat. I stood, straining to hear if there was a fountain. Nothing. I thought about going back into the house but discarded that idea, not wanting to leave the lordling alone. "Maybe there's a water pump somewhere out here," I said as I stood up, trying to see into me darkness. I then heard a footstep against a paving stone. I waited for another but there was silence. Not even a cricket chirped. Esclaur mumbled something and I crouched down beside him.

"Quiet."

If I were by myself, I would've turned the tables and become the hunter. If Esclaur weren't so sick, I would've tried to slip us past whoever was out there. If Jeff were near, I would've called for help. If, if, if.

I felt for my boot knife and the one I wore in the small of my back since the last abduction attempt, ignoring my officer's sword as it was new and I didn't know the balance of it. I quietly took off my cape and, laying it on the bench, waited in the stillness of the courtyard. Then two things happened at once.

Lord Esclaur passed out, slumping to the ground, and several men burst out of the bushes.

If this were truly a pantomime, at this point I would've either laughed or walked out in disgust. However, it was real life, and even though my attackers wore Sorcerer Slifter costumes and black masks, I was more concerned with staying reasonably whole than with how silly they looked. After the first rush, they all skidded to a stop, surprised to see me up and aware enough to handle two knives without cutting myself.

The five sorcerers and I stared at each other in the dim light from the house; then a couple faded back into the bushes, while the remaining three produced cudgels. By the rustles, I could track the other two working their way around to my back. I shifted around so that I stood at the top of the bench, the three in front of me following. I waited for them to call out to their mates that I had moved, but they stayed

quiet, so I figured they had been told not to make any noise.

I grinned and bellowed, "Help! Murderers! Assassins!"

The other two once more burst out of the bush with their cudgels upraised, only to fall over me darkened cape-draped bench. Their heads collided with a satisfying thunk and my grin widened as they sank down, stunned.

The three sorcerers that were left standing began to circle closer. I made a feint with a knife at one and while he leaned back, I lunged at another, moving out of the way of the third who swung at my head. I felt the passing of the cudgel and a chill went down my spine. It would've been a killing blow if he had connected. I lunged again and caught one of the sorcerers. His mouth opened in a silent scream before he collapsed and I nearly screamed myself as I could make out that he had no tongue.

"Holy God, preserve me!" I whispered hard.

I heard stumbling behind me and tried to move so that I could also see the other two, when the same sorcerer swung out again. I ducked but he managed to hit one knife out of my hand and it went flying, sticking point down in the grass. I yanked my sword out of its scabbard, reckoning new weapon or not, it was time to learn fast. "Come on, whoresons."

I backed up to give myself room to use the longer blade. One of the sorcerers that had collided managed to get up again and move around the bench. He swung with his cudgel but he was still groggy and overreached. I shifted and lifted a foot, pushing him into a tree. Once more his head met an unyielding object and he sprawled on the ground. I was left facing two attackers who had spread out. I fainted towards one, watching for the other and as he stayed put, I spun and slashed at him. I sensed movement and pivoted once more, bringing my sword around and catching the first under the ear.

My old sword would have sliced through the muscle, bone and sinew of the attacker's neck. Even if he had worn mail, my old sword still would've struck him a blow serious enough to hinder him from fighting. But that was my old sword. My new sword shattered on impact and all I held was the tasseled hilt. The sorcerer I'd hit made a sound and I realized that he was laughing without a tongue. The other joined in, both gobbling in their throats. I flung the hilt aside and lifted my remaining knife, only to hear the third one on the other side of the bench. I glanced over and saw he had risen to his feet, and was moving to join his fellows.

Three against one armed only with a knife that was small enough to fit into a boot sheath were never good odds and at that moment I should've been focused on my immediate future. And I was. But at my feet were the remnants of my sword blade twinkling in the weak light, to my side was Lord Esclair drugged or poisoned, and before me were three tongueless pantomime villains, laughing. All in my cousin's house. I slowly straightened from my fighter's crouch and raised my hand. "Truth," I said, shutting my eyes.

I noted in a detached way that, as the tongueless sorcerers could laugh, they could also scream if given enough incentive. And while usually there's a point where the senses are overwhelmed and the screamer passes out, they didn't. Their screams went on and on. It finally occurred to me that I might've had something to do with that, and lowered my hand. The screams dwindled into sobbing and I cautiously opened my eyes to see them curled up on the ground, their arms over their heads, still clutching their cudgels. After a moment, I moved from sorcerer to sorcerer, removing clubs and masks. The one who had run into the tree was still unconscious. The one I had stabbed was dead. I checked Lord Esclair and he was alive, but his breathing was shallow, his pulse rapid and faint. I retrieved my other knife, using one of the sorcerer's robes to clean it, but only sheathed the one in my boot. I loaded the cudgels, masks,

blade pieces and hilt into my cape and made a bundle. I then slung Esclaur over my shoulder, picked up the bundle and knife, and went to find help.

### Chapter Thirty-five

"Five attackers," Suiden said, resting his haunches on his heels as he examined the broken sword, cudgels and masks spread out on my cape. Captain Javes stood behind him, also staring down at the cape, his hands in his trouser pockets.

"Yes, sir," I replied.

Laurel was tending Lord Esclaur who was lying in Groskin's old bunk in Jeff's and my bedroom—the only place where there was an empty bed. The Faena questioned me about the symptoms and then, after sniffing closely at the lordling's breath, concocted a noxious smelling brew that he managed to get down Esclaur's throat by using a kitchen funnel.

"Do not worry, Rabbit," Laurel said. "It is a strong poison, but Lord Esclaur got only a small amount and this dose should render it impotent." Should is not would, I thought, but I nodded and, at the captains' command, began to tell them what happened. When I got to the part where my sword shattered, it was quiet enough to hear a pin drop.

"He wasn't wearing a hauberk?" Javes asked. He hunkered down beside Suiden and picked up the sword hilt.

"No, sir. I checked."

"The sword was weakened, Javes, and the edge blunted," Suiden said, easily breaking a piece off the blade. "More brittle than nut candy." He then stood and sighed. "It could've been done any time between last night and when he got dressed this evening." He shrugged, his face tired. "It could even be another sword. It's new to Rabbit and he wouldn't have known the difference."

Laurel's ears lay back and he rumbled as he wiped Lord Esclaur's face with a cloth dipped in something that smelled clean. I wandered over and put my fingers into the bowl, bringing them up to my nose and inhaling.

"Please continue," Suiden said.

It was quiet enough to hear a feather drop two streets away when I got to the next part. I dipped my fingers again in the bowl, allowing the infused water to pool in my cupped hand. In the distance I could hear hooves against cobblestones and wondered if Jeff was returning from informing the king.

Toe claws clicked on the floor and Laurel grabbed my hand, ignoring the water that dripped onto his fur. He extended a claw to trace over the rune and once again I felt it grow warmer. "You shut your eyes," Laurel repeated, and I nodded. "And when you opened them the false sorcerers were on the ground." I nodded again. The sound of hooves came closer and I wondered if Jeff was bringing company. Laurel batted my cheek with his other paw until I looked at him, his amber eyes staring into mine. He shook his head, his beads clicking and swaying. "It is no surprise then that the Magus wants you so badly."

"What do you mean, Sro Cat?" Suiden asked.

"Rabbit has had no training at all, honored captain." The Faena shot Suiden a glance. "As it seems that he's been so busy these past few days that he has had no time for me to even teach him just the basics."

Suiden waved away mere trivialities. "Fine. He has no training. So?"

The hooves were now close enough for me to tell it was more than two horses. A lot more.

"So he has no idea of how to shield himself. He should've been on the ground with the assassins." Laurel's paw tapped my cheek again, reclaiming my attention. "Do not worry, Rabbit, this is my embassy." He dropped my hand and returned to Esclaur.

"What did Lord Teram do?" Javes asked.

"After he finished being outraged, he went out with servants to check the courtyard. I didn't go with him as I dared not leave Esclaur. He came back claiming that they found no one, and then wondered why Esclaur and I were out there in the first place, as 'it wasn't open to the public' I told him that Gherat sent us out there, but Gherat denied it, said he only told the servant to take us where it was cooler." I shrugged, sighing. "Which was true. The servant, though, wasn't anywhere around." I nodded at the spread cloak.

"They both wanted me to leave that with them, but I told them that I was taking it to you." A faint smile came over my face as I remembered my cousin's affronted glare at being denied by his provincial cousin whom he'd graciously admitted into his august ranks.

The hooves were now striking stone in the square, slowing to a stop in front of the embassy. Shouts sounded, the front door crashed open and footsteps pounded into the hallway.

"You know, there are disadvantages to having the Royal Army as guards," Laurel remarked.

The bedroom door was flung hard against the wall behind it, cracking the plaster. The king stood there surrounded by several of his Own, and accompanied by the Lord Commander (spines snapped as Suiden, Javes and I jumped to attention), a woman carrying a satchel, and the other lords of the king's Court. Bringing up the rear was Jeff. He sidled around the mob in the doorway and took up a position behind me. Which could've meant anything.

King Jusson's eyes were blazing as he strode over to where Laurel stood bathing Lord Esclaur's face, the captain and the rest of the guard scrambling to keep up. "What has happened?"

At that most opportune moment, Lord Esclaur's eyes opened and, seeing the king, he smiled. "Sire, it's good to see you." With that, he rolled over on his side and went to sleep, and I began to think that maybe, just maybe, I would live to see the dawn.

Tension went out of Jusson. "He will be all right, then."

"It appears so, honored king." Laurel dipped the cloth in the bowl, wrung it out, and wiped Esclaur's neck. "As I told Lord Rabbit and the captains, he was given a very strong poison, but he only received a trace and, with the antidote, he should recover." The king relaxed further and he looked around for a chair. Seeing none, he sat on the edge of the bunk and, propping his arm on his knee, rested his forehead on his hand.

"Your Majesty?" the woman with the satchel asked.

Jusson looked up. "Oh. The royal physician." He beckoned her over. "We're sure, Ambassador Laurel, that you won't mind if she examines Lord Esclaur."

Recognizing a demand, no matter how politely couched, Laurel moved aside and allowed the woman access to Esclaur. To her questions, the Faena showed her the leaves and powders he used to make up the antidote and, as she competently poked, pried and pressed, they talked about different herbs and compounds, comparing their methods of healing. Hampered only by Lord Esclaur waking up and weakly demanding that she quit her assault on his person, she soon finished. The physician bowed to the cat and moved to where the king could see her without turning his head. "I agree with Ambassador Laurel, Your Majesty. Given time, my lord should recover. As his pulse is still a little fast and weak, I suggest that he not be moved tonight."

A soft snore came from the lordling who had fallen back asleep. "And as he is sleeping naturally, I shan't bleed him."

I was standing behind the healer and so King Jusson could see me look of horror that passed over my face. He gave a faint smile. "Thank you, we trust your judgment."

The physician bowed again, gratified, and Laurel offered to show her the officers' mess, "where, honored healer, you can get a decent cup of tea."

The king waited until Laurel's rumble and the physician's treble faded down the stairs before looking at the captain of his guard. "Shut the door, Thadro," he commanded.

After directing two of the Own to stand guard outside the door, Lord Commander Thadro shut it and walked back over to stand next to King Jusson. Jusson then settled down on the bunk, just as at ease as he had been in his chamber.

"Now, cousin," he said, pinning me with a look. "Tell us everything." Once more I recited my evening, starting with Lord Esclaur picking me up at the embassy and working through the events at the House of Flavan. And once more it became very quiet when I told of how my sword had shattered. Lord Commander Thadro went over to where the pieces were still on my cape, next to the cudgels and masks, and picked one up.

"Lord Gherat sent you out to the courtyard?" King Jusson asked.

"Well, he suggested it, sire," I said as Thadro broke the blade piece in two, the sound of the snap seeming to echo in the room.

"I see," the king finally said, his glittering gaze showing why he was called "Golden Eye." "This must be investigated fully, Thadro, and the culprit punished. No matter who he is."

The Lord Commander dropped the pieces back onto the cape and bowed. "Yes, Your Majesty. I will take care of it."

Suiden had moved over to where Jeff and I stood, and now Javes joined us as we stood bunched together. The king looked back at me. "Please continue, cousin." If I thought the silence thick when I told Laurel and the captains the rest of my tale, it was absolute while I told the king and his Court. When I finished, Jusson held out his hand.

"Show us, Rabbit."

I walked to where he sat but a couple of the guards moved in front of him, their hands on their swords.

The king sighed. "We have given someone a command, yet you prevent him from obeying. Tell us, what is that called?"



The King's Own were chosen for their family trees, not their mental capacities, but these guards caught on quick and moved aside. I took one step closer and extended my hand. The king sighed again and, grabbing my hand, yanked me to him. "We haven't bitten anyone. Yet." He traced the rune just as Laurel did, and just as it did for the Faena, it flared warm. He looked up at me, his eyes now completely gold.

"What did Ambassador Laurel say when he heard this?"

"He was very upset that I hadn't allowed Rabbit to be trained," Suiden said.

"Very good, Captain Prince," Jusson said. "But we asked our cousin."

"He said that it was no wonder that Magus Kareste greatly desired my return, as I should have been reduced to a quivering mass like the assassins," I said.

"Indeed." The king's eyes narrowed into slits. Still holding onto my hand, he stood and spread open my palm. "Come look, everyone." No one moved. The narrow-eyed gold glare swept the room and suddenly I was mobbed. "Do you see anything evil?"

A ragged chorus of "No, Your Majesty" sounded. "Though he did kill a man, sire," a lordling added.

Captain Suiden opened his mouth.

"Do not presume to answer for us, Captain Prince," Jusson said. "While your zeal to protect your charge is commendable, please remember that you are not in Tural." The king turned to Thadro. "Tell me, Lord Commander, how did Lieutenant Rabbit say he killed his attacker?"

"With a knife, Your Majesty."

"So he did"—Jusson tapped my palm with his finger—"and not with this. Show us the knife, cousin." I tried to tug my hand from the king's grasp, but he wouldn't let go. So I pulled the knife with my other hand and started to hand it to him. The guards as one drew their swords.

"No, cousin, not to us." The king indicated Lord Commander Thadro. "To him, if you please." I switched directions and handed the Lord Commander my knife, noticing that I hadn't gotten all the blood off.

Commander Thadro took the knife and examined it.

"Well?" said the king.

"It's just a knife, Your Majesty." Thadro hefted it in his hand. "Well balanced and cared for, but still a plain knife. Though you should clean it properly, Lieutenant, before you resheath it." He handed it to a guard.

"An assassin is killed after he and his fellows attack Lord Rabbit," the king said. "Is that evil?" Another ragged chorus denied that it was. Jusson nodded and let go of my hand. "No, of course it isn't. We will tell you what is evil. When guests are invited to fellowship and one is poisoned and the other has to fight for his life."

The silence was back.

"And when a soldier's weapon is made to fail at the time it is most needed."

The silence deepened and I shivered.

King Jusson turned to Suiden. "We will leave the royal physician plus two of our Own for Lord Esclaur here while he is recovering. Please tell Ambassador Laurel that this is only to relieve our anxiety and not

to cast any doubt on him." He waited for our bows and, gathering his Court, left the room in the same whirlwind that he entered in.

As footsteps pounded down the stairs, I realized that, in guarding Esclaur, the two Own would also be standing outside my bedroom—and I wondered which way that sword was supposed to cut. I also realized that Lord Commander Thadro had taken my knife.

## Chapter Thirty-six

I was awakened from a sound sleep by a pillow hitting me in my face. I immediately rolled out of bed holding the boot knife that I had under my own pillow, staring about in the gray predawn light as I strained to see who had attacked me.

"Oh, good. You're awake." Lord Esclaur, leaning on one elbow, smiled.

The bunk above me creaked as Jeff looked bleary-eyed over the edge of his bed. Lord Esclaur's smile widened to include him too. I sighed and sat down on my bunk, and began to run my hand through my hair, nearly stabbing myself in the eye. I found my boot sheath and put the knife back.

"Is this the embassy?" Esclaur asked, looking around the room. While the rest of the house was furnished in elegance and grace, the room looked exactly what it was, a soldier's barracks. There were two sets of bunk beds with two foot-lockers, and that was it.

I nodded, yawning.

"How exciting. I can now tell my friends that I spent the night in the cat's den." He threw back the blanket, glanced down, then snatched it up again. "Uhm, I seem to have lost my clothes."

I mumbled at him that they all had been sweat-soaked.

"My goodness, I really must've been sick." He sat up again, making sure the essential parts remained covered. "You don't happen to have a spare robe, do you, Rabbit?"

I rubbed the back of my neck, muttering that I had left all my robes at Freston.

"Well, maybe the trooper has something I can wear." Jeff grunted "No" and then wondered aloud what sin he had committed to be afflicted with chatter so early in the morning, "my lord."

"Surely someone in this place must have something I can put on." Esclaur smiled again, ignoring Jeff. "Will you see to it, Rabbit? I can't wander about naked."

I mumbled that I would see what I could do, then stood up, yawning and stretching.

"Rabbit," Jeff said. "What's that by your foot?"

I glanced down and was suddenly wide awake. I carefully moved my foot away from the spider about to climb on it.

"There too," Jeff said, leaning down and pointing.

I looked and saw another one glowing against the dark blanket on my bed. That was not good. "Uh,

maybe you should check your bunks.”

There were squeaks and thumps as Jeff and Lord Esclaur (the lordling managing to keep decently covered) searched around.

"There's one here also," Jeff whispered. He eased out of his bunk, climbing down to stand next to me. At that, Esclaur decided to join us, just on general principle, wrapping his blanket (after shaking it out) around him.

"There's another," I said, pointing at the floor. "Four of them."

"Five," Esclaur said, looking in a corner.

We huddled closer.

All the spiders were the same—long, pale and nasty looking, like the one we'd seen in the garden. The first one moved towards my foot again, apparently fascinated with my big toe, and I reached for one of my boots next to my footlocker.

"Steady," Esclaur murmured. He grabbed the other boot.

"Don't miss," Jeff said softly, somehow managing to contort and get one of his own boots without moving his feet. "We don't want angry spiders running about our exposed parts." There was a silent count and then we raised our boots and brought them down, again and again. Jeff swarmed up to his bunk, knocking his bed guest to the floor where it was pounded flat. I did the same with the one riding on my blanket. Then we turned berserker, snapping off blankets, flipping mattresses, moving the footlockers, shifting the bunks themselves as we discovered three more spiders. Another spider crawled out from the boot Jeff held and he yelled, shaking it off his hand onto the floor, where Esclaur and I pounced on it, our boot heels coming down in rapid succession.

The door was flung open but we ignored the royal guards standing there with their swords drawn and their mouths open. "Were you bit, Jeff? Did it bite you?" I asked. Breathing hard, Esclaur and I clustered around Jeff, staring at his hand. I grabbed it and moved it closer to the window, straining to see in the light. "It doesn't look like it, but maybe I should get Laurel—" I turned to go and came face to face with Groskin and Slevoic standing just outside the bedroom door. I raised my hand to push my hair out of my face and Groskin slammed down to the floor while Slevoic, after a moment's hesitation, took a step back. I scowled at Groskin. "Oh, get up. My hair was in my eyes."

"You threatened him," Slevoic said as Groskin slowly rose and straightened his tabard, keeping his eyes on the floor. "You saw," Slevoic said to the two guards. "Rabbit threatened Groskin."

"Go away, Slevoic." I said as I made to go past him, but he pulled a knife and stepped in front of me. I sighed. "Yeah, right."

"Heavens, is that you, Slewty?" Lord Esclaur said, coming to stand beside me, his blanket still wrapped around him, and carrying his quiz glass. "What on earth are you doing lurking outside Lord Rabbit's door?" He raised his glass, peering at the lieutenant's knife. "Comparing weapons with your friends?"

I watched Slevoic, who was staring in blue-eyed amazement at Lord Esclaur. "A little Border healing," I said.

Slevoic recovered fast. "It was probably a little Border poisoning to begin with, puke."

"I was poisoned?" Esclaur's voice rose to a squeak, his quiz glass forgotten.

"Yeah. See what happens when you hang out with freaks?"

"But your mother wasn't there, Slevoic," I said.

The two royal guards blocked the lieutenant, one catching his arm and pushing his knife hand down.

"Why are you up, my lord?" The royal physician had come up on us from the stairs and, to her credit, only blinked at my smalls. And in that blink I was behind the door. I felt a presence next to me and looked. Lord Esclaur had beaten me inside the room and was also peering around the door, his head just below mine. There was a snicker and Esclaur and I opened the door so that Jeff was in the healer's line of sight. There was a thud as he dove for a bunk, forgetting about spiders at the double threat of a woman physician.

The healer didn't miss a beat. "Why do you have a knife out, Lieutenant?" She listened to Slevoic for a few sentences. "Stuff and nonsense. Lord Rabbit had nothing to do with Lord Esclaur's poisoning and I'm sure he has better things to do than to threaten you. Put it away before you hurt yourself and make more work for me." She swept up to the door, which I had closed again to a narrow slit, and addressed my eyeball. "Open the door, my lord, so I may attend to my charge." There was a breeze and then another thud as Lord Esclaur ran and jumped into his bed. Furious whispers were exchanged as he made Jeff find another hiding place.

I made a diving leap for my own bunk, snatching up the blanket to fling around me (after snapping it very hard—I hadn't forgotten the pale beasties). "Come in—" I stopped and tried for a few octaves lower. "Come in."

Lord Esclaur slid down in his bed until only his eyes showed over his blanket as the physician approached him, and another bout of whispers started as she tried to get Lord Esclaur to release the cover.

"It isn't enough that we've had excitement and alarms all through the night. You have to create more, before the sun rises," Suiden said from the hallway, wearing a beautifully brocaded robe, its gold threads winking in the weak dawn light. Groskin and Slevoic, taken unawares, spun around while the royal guards snapped to attention. The captain's green-eyed gaze, though, was aimed in the room, and Groskin tried to sneak down the stairs. "Where are you going, Lieutenant?" Suiden said, without turning around.

"To the mess, sir!"

"I see. As you and Lieutenant Slevoic are both so full of energy, you will put on your dress uniforms and guard my office door. Now. And Slevoic"—the captain held out his hand as the lieutenants turned to go—"give me your knife."

Slevoic paused, then finished resheathing his knife. "No, sir."

Silence fell hard in the hallway.

"What did you say, Lieutenant?" Suiden's voice took on a basso rumble.

"I said, no, sir." Slevoic looked over the captain's shoulder. At me. All along the hallway, doors opened and heads popped out, and he raised his voice. "I refuse to go unarmed while Rabbit is not under restraints. Lord Esclaur was poisoned last night while in his company and he has just now tried to attack Groskin."

For the first time in two days, Groskin met my eyes, ashamed. "That's not true, sir. I overreacted—"

The captain rumbled over Groskin, flames leaping in his eyes. "You refuse a direct order, Lieutenant?"

Slevoic smiled, his face filled with taunting derision. "Yes, sir—hellfire and brimstone!" he shrieked as the very real dragon bore down on him. He scrambled backwards until he hit the wall, his gaze riveted on the flames licking out of Suiden's muzzle. I pulled my blanket over my head, hoping that the captain wouldn't find me in the dark.

"Do you really want to chomp the lieutenant, Suiden? I mean, he's been hanging about with Ryson. No telling what he's picked up." I allowed a small opening in the blanket and watched as Javes the wolf appeared, placing himself between Suiden and Slevoic. He leaned against the dragon's front legs and Suiden allowed himself to be stopped.

"You twist whatever you touch, Slevoic," the dragon prince rumbled, and the windows shook. "And what you can't, you break. But not my men. Never my men." Barely fitting in the hall, Suiden's wings scraped either side and the ceiling. He folded them tight against his body as his flames burned yellow-white. "Give me the knife." Slevoic weighed surrendering his weapon versus having his arm and any other body parts ripped off. Or fried. He gingerly laid the knife in Suiden's outstretched taloned claw and turned to escape downstairs.

"You haven't been dismissed, Lieutenant," Suiden said, and Slevoic froze, then pressed back against the wall. Suiden put his head to the door and looked into the room. "Come out from under there, Rabbit." I emerged from under the blanket. "Where's Jeffen?" Jeff came out from behind a footlocker, padding on black paws to the middle of the floor, avoiding the spider remains on the floor. Over at the other bunk, the healer stared down at the blue-eyed white wolf staring back at her. The royal griffins at the door shifted lion's feet and ruffled their eagle's feathers, while Groskin lay crouched down before Suiden in the hallway, the black panther's ears flat to his skull. All through upstairs and downstairs I could hear the echo of animal sounds.

"Apparently Sro Cat's final catalyst has happened," Suiden said. "Can you change us back, Rabbit? Or are we stuck like this forever?" "I don't know, sir." I swallowed, the now familiar metallic taste in my mouth, and my hands started to shake at the implication.

"Who cares? This is outstanding." Javes squeezed past the royal griffins and ducked under Suiden's head to come into the room. His yellow eyes were gleaming. "Is this how you've been seeing us, Rabbit?" He glanced down at his body. "What happened to our clothes?"

"Don't know, sir," I replied, my eyes on Suiden as the dragon turned his head to watch Slevoic.

"You don't know? Perhaps we should ask the ambassador, eh?" The gray wolf sat on his haunches and looked about the room, his ears pricking forward as he saw Lord Esclaur. "I say, you too?"

As the two wolves eyed each other, I could hear the animal calls change into words as the world shifted once more. Laurel Faena entered the room carrying his staff, walking by Suiden in his brocade robe. Jeff was sitting on the floor, once more in his smalls. I looked down into my lap where my hands rested, and noted how they were still shaking. Breathe, I reminded myself.

"What has happened?" Laurel asked, as Jeff rose and, in a nonchalant way, moved to his bunk and snatched a blanket off, wrapping it around him. Javes had the presence of mind to also rise and now stood in his own splendidly bright silk robe, his quiz glass around his neck. Out in the hallway other faces filled the doorway behind Suiden, their eyes wide. Many were grinning—a few, though, were not.

"In good time, Sro Laurel," Suiden said. He chose a burly trooper. "You will escort Lieutenant Slevoic to his quarters"—Slevoic jerked up and stared at the captain, his chest still heaving in his fright—"where he

is to remain under guard until he is brought up on charges of insubordination. For a start." Slevoic opened his mouth but, as Suiden gave a deep, rumbling growl, he shut it again, quick. The trooper slipped into his room, returning with sword and knife, and stunned looks followed them down as the men watched Slevoic being herded down the stairs. One, though, scowled.

"So," Laurel said, looking at me. "What happened?"

"We were invaded by weavers—" I began, pointing to the flattened and fragmented spiders.

"We were hexed!" Ryson shouted out, causing everyone to start. (He must've not liked being a real sheep-biting, goat-tupping weasel.) The troopers shook off the shock of Slevoic being held accountable, and mutters of agreement swept through them.

"No one was 'hexed,'" Laurel said, his voice mild, as he frowned at me. He then looked at the floor.

"These weavers?" He brought the end of his staff down with a thump. "How many were there?"

"That was ten, sir," Jeff said.

"A pox on the spiders—" Ryson said, and the muttering grew.

"What spiders?" the royal physician said. She left Lord Esclaur and moved over to where the spider pieces lay on the floor, and abruptly backed away again. "Everybody out of here. Now!" She grabbed Esclaur and hauled him up out of the bed. "Leave the blanket, my lord."

"I'm bloody naked—"

"Do you want to be bloody dead?" The healer started pushing him towards the door, trying to pull the blanket off. "You know better, my lord. Why on earth did you stay in here?"

"But we got them all—" Esclaur began, turning his head to her.

The healer yanked him to the side. "You're barefoot! Watch where you walk!"

Suiden stepped into the room and squatted down by one spider carcass, then immediately stood up again. "Ten Pale Deaths?" He moved quickly out into the hall, the royal guards also backing up. "Get your arses out of there. Now." He looked at Laurel Faena. "You too, ambassador. Dying of their bite is very—unpleasant."

I threw my blanket off and hurried to the door, Jeff and Laurel on my heels, making sure to avoid the weavers' remains. "One crawled on Jeff's hand," I said.

"If you haven't started convulsing by now, you weren't bitten," the healer said, as she examined Jeff's hand. She then peered at me. "You didn't step on any, did you, my lord?" Her gaze switched to Laurel. "Ambassador? Their venom goes right through the skin."

Laurel and I checked our paws and feet, and heaved a sigh of relief when we saw they were clean. Javes looked smug, as he was wearing slippers that matched his robe.

"Rabbit probably called them—" Ryson tried again.

"Look," Javes said, pointing.

I turned my head and stared. In the strengthening morning light I could see three more in the corners of the ceiling.

"Eleven, twelve, thirteen," Jeff counted.

"Fourteen and fifteen," Laurel rumbled, also pointing up over the bunk beds.

"It makes one think, doesn't it, fifteen Pale Deaths descending upon this room, after everything else that has happened to Rabbit," Javes said.

It didn't make me think, it made me angry and scared. I shivered, watching one spider crawl leisurely down the wall.

"We don't give a sodding damn about all that!" Ryson shouted, still trying to work the mob. "We were just turned into animals—" His voice trailed off as Suiden turned. The sun had just begun to weakly shine through the hall windows, and the troopers gasped and shifted, opening a path directly from the captain to him.

"They're green, Rabbit," Jeff whispered, staring at Suiden's eyes, "and they're glowing." I didn't respond to Jeff's seeing what I had seen all along, as Ryson succeeded once more in turning everyone's attention back to the translations, and a space cleared around me also.

"No spell either," Laurel said. He turned to the physician who was still trying to get Esclaur to relinquish his blanket. "What should be done, honored healer, about this infestation?"

"Fumigation. Close everything up and use braziers to burn—"

"The hell it isn't a spell," Ryson said, finding a new target.

"No," Laurel said. "No spell, no hex, no curse. Nothing anyone has done has caused you to change. You just became what you've always been."

"Yeah," I said. "A flea-bitten weasel who's Slevoic's stooge. Tell me, did you and the Vicious go spider hunting yesterday?"

Ryson jumped. He then put on a frown. "No, of course not!"

"Not to interrupt, sirs," a royal guard said, "but the spiders are moving this way." One weaver was hanging by a silk thread over the door opening. Laurel knocked it to the floor, once more bringing his staff end down on it, growling.

"I would point out, honored folk, that although the experience this morning may have been upsetting, you are still alive and well." Laurel gestured at the dead spider. "But I make this the fourth try to kill Lord Rabbit, and you can't recover from dead. At least not in a form most people would want to assume." Laurel shut the door and disappeared into the neighboring room. He returned with a blanket that he stuffed under the door. "And whoever is behind this has no thought as to who else might be killed. Who knows how many of these weavers escaped in the night and are now throughout the embassy. Maybe even in your own sleeping chambers."

"He's right," Javes said, frowning. "I think we should all get dressed and evacuate—"

"I don't care," Groskin blurted out, cutting the captain off. He had been standing silent, but now he gave me a tortured look, his face pale. "I don't care about spiders, assassins, poison, and broken swords. I'm a man, not a beast, and I won't stay where I'm being magicked." He took a deep breath and faced the troopers. "I will take anyone who wants to go to the Royal Garrison. I'm sure Commander Loel will understand."

"I just bet he will," muttered Lord Esclaur.

"As I said, Rabbit," Captain Javes said before the lieutenant could respond. "Anyone can be suborned. Even an officer in the Royal Army." Groskin jerked around at the captain. "I have not been suborned! Witchcraft—"

"No witchcraft," Laurel said. "Do you understand? No incantations, rituals, or potions." He gestured with his staff and the troopers ducked. "This is my embassy. A little bit of the fae right here. You were for a moment as you would be in the Border. What you already have become, living here in Iversterre where the Border once was." He rumbled in annoyance. "'Magic' cannot change what is into something it's not." He waved his staff again. We ducked again. "As well try to turn a stone into a horse or a wagon into a fish. It. Can. Not. Be. Done." He brought his staff down and each word was punctuated by a thump on the floor.

Groskin stared at the Faena for a moment, men looked away. "I don't care," he repeated as he turned to go down the stairs, but Captain Suiden had moved and was blocking his way.

"What do you know of broken swords and assassins, Lieutenant?" the captain asked. "You weren't there when Lieutenant Rabbit told of his adventures." Suiden's eyes were lit again, flames leaping in the emerald green. "How did you find out?" Groskin backed up a step, everyone behind him moving away to give him room. They also saw Suiden's eyes. "Lieutenant Slevoic—"

"Lieutenant Slevoic had nothing to do with the attack on Rabbit last night...." Ryson started out shouting, but his voice trailed off as wolf, dragon and panther focused hard on him.

"Oh?" Javes asked. "And how do you know what happened to Rabbit last night?"

"Lieutenant Groskin told me—"

The lieutenant's mouth closed with a click of his teeth and the old Groskin emerged. "The bloody hell I did." He turned to Captain Suiden. "Slevoic told me this morning that Rabbit claimed there was an attempt against him at his cousin's house." Claimed. I glared at Groskin as I opened my mouth, but Suiden waved me to silence as he considered Ryson.

"The lieutenant says it wasn't him and I tend to believe him. At least over you." The captain's eyes narrowed. "Did you have anything to do with sabotaging Lieutenant Rabbit's sword?"

A murmur—well, more of a growl—swept through the other soldiers at the mention of sabotage and weapons in the same sentence. They pressed closer to Ryson, and it wasn't a show of support. Then they got a strong whiff and moved away again.

"No, sir, I didn't—"

"But you know who did, don't you?"

"Lieutenant Groskin—"

Groskin made a rumble in his throat just like Laurel's and his own eyes shone gold in the dim hallway.

Captain Suiden ignored him, still focused on Ryson. "No, not Lieutenant Groskin." He stepped closer, not caring about Ryson's aromas. "What do you know and who told you?" The problem with weasels is that, well, they're weasels. Leave one twisting in the wind and it would deliver up its own mother for the hint of a chance at a safe landing.



"Lieutenant Slevoic told me last night sir after evening meal that Rabbit claimed five attacked him and that his sword shattered because someone weakened it and that it was a lie as how could anyone fight off that many without a cut or bruise and assassins dressed as pantomime villains is plain stupid and the tongueless part was too much in his cousin's house no less it is a noble house and the puke dishonors it and the Border freak must've made up the attack to cover up him poisoning Lord Esclaur because instead of taking Esclaur to a real physician Rabbit is bringing him here to the witch cat to make sure Lord Esclaur is dead or possessed by demons so that the mutants in the Border can overrun the kingdom," Ryson said.

No one said anything for a moment as they parsed the sentence.

"My goodness," Javes finally said. "All that right after supper? Before Lieutenant Rabbit returned?"

"Siryessir!" Ryson saluted. "He said that someone brought him word, sir!"

"Why did you lie and say Groskin told you?" Javes asked.

"Slevoic told me to, sir, if I were ever asked, sir! He said that Groskin was Suiden's bootlicking spy, sir! He wouldn't set up Rabbit, sir!" Ryson's eyes started out of his head as he realized what else he'd just let slip. "Uh, I mean, sir, he wouldn't gather evidence—"

"I know what you mean, trooper," Suiden said.

Groskin rumbled again, his eyes narrowing.

"Not so nice to be falsely accused, is it?" I said. Groskin glanced at me and then looked away. I turned to Captain Suiden. "Slevoic was also shocked out of his gourd when he saw Lord Esclaur alive and well this morning, Captain."

There was a pause as everyone stopped to consider that.

"Perhaps I sent the lieutenant away too soon," Suiden said. He motioned to a trooper who had on more clothes than the rest. "Bring Slevoic back up here." He turned again to Groskin as the soldier pounded down the stairs. "As Sro Laurel has pointed out, Rabbit has had several attempts on his life and all you can natter about is hexes and what's unnatural. Murder is unnatural." His green glare swept the hallway and everyone in it. "You shriek at a hair in your soup while you dine sitting on a muckheap."

"But sir—" Groskin tried.

The flames leapt up again in Suiden's eyes. "You disobey a direct order and leak restricted information. You incite the men against Rabbit and are neck-deep, unwitting or not, in a plot to murder him. You encourage insubordination." He took a steadying breath but roared anyway, the windows rattling. "And because of your gross stupidity and willful blindness you are made the House of Dru's dupe!"

"Sir," Groskin tried again.

"Don't bloody 'sir' me. I took you on, Lieutenant, when no one else would—"

Groskin's head went down.

"—but I'll be damned if I'll wink at subversion by my lieutenant." A faint cry came from the first floor and heads turned. Suiden stopped in midtirade and frowned, moving over to the banister. We caught the sound of running feet, growing louder until the trooper skidded into the bottom step. "Sirs, come quick! It's— Come quick!"

Thoughts of hexes and subversion (along with blankets, clothes and women healers) were forgotten as we all rushed downstairs. Slevoic's guard lay on the floor of the room, a lump swelling on the side of his head, his knife and sword gone. The royal physician pushed past the crowd at the door and knelt down beside him.

Suiden turned and shoved us all out of the room. "Quick, search the embassy. I want Slevoic found—not you, Rabbit." I skidded to a stop as the rest of the men scattered in different directions, Jeff barely missing crashing into me. "I'm not chancing you and Slevoic being alone, even for a few moments. With me."

He started down the hallway towards the front door, Jeff and I behind him. But we didn't get very far before another shout went up from the courtyard. We spun around and ran out an open side door, sprinting past the fountain to the gathering crowd in the vegetable garden—and came to a slamming halt. A moment later Javes arrived, pushing to the front, his eyes wild as he stared down.

"Who—" Javes began. He turned to me. "Who is it, Rabbit?" I shook my head as I felt my hands start to tremble again. "I don't know, sir." Javes looked over at the troopers who had come out after us. "Who's missing?" They also shook their heads, their eyes wide in horror, and Javes snarled, "Well, bloody do a count!"

There was a quick count as more men poured into the garden, and then someone called out, "Basel, sir. Basel's missing." He must have been gathering his herbs for breakfast when he translated.

"Sixteen points," Jeff said, goosebumps all over his skin although the new day was already hot. "Back home I would've hunted him and mounted his head on my wall for all to see."

The white stag's antler spread was impressive.

"To us his kind are sacred," Laurel said from behind me, "and we would have revered him." The Faena walked over and crouched down beside the deer but it was obvious that there was nothing he could do, as Basel's eyes were already filming over. Flies buzzed both at the gaping slit in his throat and the blood-soaked ground. "Bringers of Spring," the cat said, his voice soft. "They leap down from the heights, Lady Gaia riding on their horns."

"Lady Gaia?" Javes asked.

"The fertile earth," Laurel replied.

I noted footprints leading out the garden gate that led to a throughway between the embassy and its next-door neighbor. I then looked back at Basel's body crumpled in the small space, and measured distance. "But why kill him? He couldn't have given any sort of fight at all. There wasn't room."

"Oh so innocent Rabbit," Javes said. "Why did Slevoic do his best to torture you for three years? Because it gave him pleasure." The captain also looked at the tracks going out of the garden gate, his face tired. "I suppose he escaped through there." He sighed and started herding us back into the embassy, but stopped as he caught sight of Suiden. Behind the captain was Groskin, his eyes fixed on Basel, and next to them was Esclaur (still blanket draped) flanked by the two royal guards and the healer. She came up to Basel's body and stared down at it, then shook her head, her eyes sad.

"It's not your fault," Javes said to Suiden. "No one would have guessed this."

"Something to tell Basel's family," Suiden said.

The gate opened and we all turned, but it was only a couple of the lads supporting the throughway's duty

guard between them. "Found him in there, sirs," one said. "Slevoic hit him from behind good and proper."  
They pulled up short when they saw the dead stag.

As the captains and physician moved to check on the guard, I knelt down beside Laurel. The Faena softly sang a lament and I closed my eyes to pray, only to have them fly open as a gasp ran through the troops. Basel, in man form, stood next to his deer corpse, the early morning sun shining through him, the full moon a pale shadow in the sky. The wind blew softly and I smelled sweet grass and rich loam, as if I were once more behind a plow. Pushing my hair out of my face, I looked down and watched as green shoots pushed through the dirt where the stag's blood had run into the ground.

"Lady Gaia mourns as the moon season is come," Laurel murmured.

## Chapter Thirty-seven

It finally dawned on Ryson that hitching his wagon to the lieutenant's star hadn't been very bright and for once he didn't make a bad situation worse by his chronic stupidity. He was helped by Captain Suiden placing him under guard—this time with four soldiers, armed to the teeth.

"I don't want to see you, hear you, or smell you. Is that clear, trooper?" the captain asked Ryson, who nodded frantically.

"Yes, sir. Basel saw us, sir," he said, anxious to redeem himself, and maybe distance himself from the cook's murder.

"Saw what?"

"He was in the garden last night when Lieutenant Slevoic and I got the spiders. The ones that were in Rabbit's room. Basel asked us about it later." He flinched away from the captain's face. "Slevoic told me it was a joke, sir. To remind Rabbit that he was nothing but a puking—uh, a farm boy from the Border, no matter what the king called him. I didn't know they were so poisonous."

"Venomous, soldier," the healer said, watching Ryson with a fascinated eye. "Poisonous is what you bite, venomous is what bites you—and you would've found out quickly how venomous they were if one had."

"Was Groskin there, trooper?" Suiden asked.

Ryson shook his head hard. "No, sir. Though Lieutenant Slevoic said to say he was." He slid a look at Groskin. "He said to say that Groskin was involved from the beginning ..." Ryson's voice faded again as his brain once more informed his mouth that maybe he should shut up.

"They've both got porridge for brains," I said. "Groskin for trusting Slevoic, and Slevoic for thinking Ryson could keep a secret." My mind skittered over the possibility that Basel had been killed because of Slevoic's animus towards me.

"Oh, I don't know, Rabbit. Ryson did all right until today," Javes said. He eyed the weasel. "What do you mean, 'from the beginning'? What beginning?"

"Later, Javes," Suiden said. "We have to get the ambassador to his audience with the king." But he also gave Ryson the eye. "Afterwards, though, we will chat."

It being so hot, putrefaction had already started on Basel's body, so Suiden had us move it into the cold storage room. Laurel Faena placed wards around it to help slow decay, but, as the cat told the two captains, "Nature will have her way, honored sirs."

"Just as long as we can delay her for a few hours, Sro Cat," Suiden said. "I wish to present Basel before the king, along with your spritewood and dragon skin." Instead of putting Lieutenant Groskin under guard with Ryson, the captain assigned him vigil over Basel's body while the rest of us prepared to escort Laurel to the royal compound. The lieutenant stood at the cold storage room door, wearing his parade uniform. Suiden made the lieutenant give up his knives (all six of them) and his scabbard hung empty as he stared at the wall opposite him, his eyes haunted.

Basel's shade made the men very edgy at first, but as it was Basel, and he did none of the traditional ghostly things like bleeding rivers of blood through his slit throat or giving quick demonstrations of decomposition, they calmed down somewhat. What really helped, however, was that instead of roaming the embassy wailing and clanking chains, Basel attached himself to me.

Having mounted an expedition into our quarters to liberate our clothes and accoutrements from the spiders, Jeff, Esclaur and I retired to the captains' office to prepare for Laurel's audience with the king. As we dressed, Jeff looked sideways at the haunt who stood next to me. "Why is Basel following you about?"

My hair flopped down into my eyes and I pushed it back. "The moon season started with last night's full moon. In the Border this is the time when the betrayed and murdered"— I too looked sideways at Basel, transparent in the light coming from the courtyard doors—"and I guess he's both, seek justice."

"But we're not in the Border, Rabbit," Jeff pointed out.

"Tell him that," I said.

"Besides, you had nothing to do with Basel's death." Jeff paused. "Did you?"

"Don't be stupid." I carefully inspected my tabard for lurking spiders before jerking it over my head. "How would they get justice if they haunt their killers? They attach themselves to whoever they feel can avenge them." Or should. I once more pushed away the thought that Basel died because of me, and picked up my empty scabbard. I stared at it.

"You could've been a haunt too," Jeff said, also staring at the scabbard.

Empty or no, I buckled it on anyway. "Don't think about it."

"We all could've been," Lord Esclaur said. He had won a short but furious battle with the royal physician and was now dressing in civvies provided by Javes. He adjusted his quiz glass, making sure the ribbon wasn't twisted, his hair once again carefully pomaded and curled.

I stared at the captain's spiritual brother in every aspect, even down to translations, bringing to mind the rest of the king's men in waiting. "Tell me, wolf, how long has Javes been part of the pack?"

To Esclaur's credit, he didn't insult me with false protestations of not knowing what I was talking about. He was quiet for a moment as Jeff and even Basel turned and looked at him. He then smiled the same tongue-lolling grin I'd seen on the captain. "He's been part of the Court quite a while, my lord." He cocked his head. "Not so naive, are. you?"

"They will engrave that on my tombstone," I said, picking up my gloves and a couple of handkerchiefs, giving them a good shake. The feather fell out from one of the yellow squares onto the floor, but no one

noticed.

Jeff's brow creased. "But Javes doesn't have a patronymic. Besides, I heard his father's a merchant."

Army intelligence again.

"That's what he said, but does anyone know who his mother is?" I tucked my gloves into my sword belt, put my handkerchiefs in my other pocket and glanced down, making sure that my trousers draped properly over my newly buffed Habbs (they had gotten smudged between the fight last night and the spider bashing this morning).

"No, Rabbit isn't naive at all," Javes said from the door. I quickly turned around. "Just willfully thick at times about things he doesn't want to be true."

"Sheesh, you're like twins," Jeff said, looking between Javes and Esclaur. "Uhm, sir."

"You've always known who I am," I stated. "When you joined us in the beginning, you damn well knew that I was ibn Chause and eso Flavan. Sir."

Javes met my eyes, the yellow of the wolf changing back into the brown of the man. "My act of ignorance wasn't because of you, Rabbit."

Somehow that failed to relieve my mind. But then Captain Javes began to frown and he raised his quiz glass. "I say, didn't you get a haircut last night?"

My hand shot up to my hair, and down my hair. I turned my head and could see the ends brushing my shoulder. I tugged it just to make sure it was mine and not some wig someone plopped on my head when I was distracted, and winced. It was mine. "Sodding hell," I whispered, feeling my spine tighten.

"Just what we need, more weirdness." Javes walked over to his desk and rummaged around in a drawer, finding a length of string. "Here." He watched me fumble with it, then took it back. "Turn around, I'll do it." He combed and plaited my hair into a queue, finding another string to secure the end of the braid.

"Let's not give Jussion's nobles something else to ponder on. If anyone asks, lie."

My palm itched and I rubbed it against my leg.

"Oh, pox on it," Javes said. "Don't say anything, then." The itching faded.

The captain turned to Jeff. "You have Rabbit's back."

Jeff nodded.

"Only Suiden and I can dismiss you. No one else, not even Rabbit, understood?"

Jeff nodded again. "Yes, sir—"

Toe claws sounded out in the hallway. Laurel was coming towards us, running, and I turned again to face me door, welcoming a crisis, any crisis, to take my mind off what was happening to me. The Faena hurried into the room, his eyes wide with his iris a thin ring around his dark pupils.

"Rabbit, did you take the spritewood staff and the dragon skin?" On the other hand, there are some things that should never ever happen. My spine tightened even more as I asked a question I already knew the answer to. "No, why?"

"They're gone."

Bloody, sodding, pox-rotted, blast damn it all to hell.

### Chapter Thirty-eight

"How could they be stolen?" Javes asked as we stood in front of the closet where they had been warded. Jeff and Esclaur looked over my shoulder as I peered in, all of us searching the cubby as if Laurel had missed them as they lay in a dark corner. He hadn't. Javes moved me aside and ran his hands over the shelf where they had lain, but the closet remained empty.

"Why would anybody take body parts?" Esclaur asked.

"To some it's just wood and lizard skin, honored lord," I said. I gestured at my boots. "Sort of like our leathers."

Javes sighed and stepped back, admitting defeat. "I suppose we ought to tell Suiden that they're gone."

We found Suiden standing by one of the courtyard doors in the hallway, looking out at the shrubbery. The captain's eyes narrowed into green slits as Laurel told him of the theft.

"I'd rather face the plague, honored captain," Laurel said, "as it's less toxic than the staff and skin in the hands of someone of ill intent."

"You said they were warded, Sro Cat," Suiden said.

"Warded against any ill effects," Laurel replied. "Not against theft." He ran his paw over his head, sending his beads rattling and clacking together. "If I'd thought someone would be stupid enough to take them—"

"Only a fool," I said, my voice soft.

"—I would have asked honored Suiden for a guard."

"And we all know who the 'fool' is," Javes said.

Just then Groskin emerged from the officers' mess, carefully avoiding Basel standing behind me. After him came more troopers who weren't as adventuresome, and they stopped.

"Please move aside, Basel," I said. The haunt obligingly shifted, but still no one moved. That may've been because of how Suiden's eyes had flames flickering in the center.

"What is this?" Suiden asked. The troopers were all in their dress uniforms, accoutrements gleaming.

"They've heard that you're taking Trooper Basel's body with you and they wish to form an honor guard, sir," Groskin said. "Please." More soldiers appeared, coming from both upstairs and the ground floor quarters.

"Well, here's insurrection," Esclaur said, his brows raised.

But Suiden shook his head. "Except for those on guard rota, all may come if they wish." He sighed. "It'll be something else to tell his family." The captain's eyes then blazed at Groskin. "I will gut you myself if you even so much as hint that you are fomenting unrest, Lieutenant."

Groskin winced, then nodded. "Yes, sir."

Javes lifted his glass at Suiden's flaming glare. "That's something that'll make all the children go screaming to their mothers."

"Your eyes are yellow, sir," I said helpfully.

"Thank you so much for telling me, Rabbit," Javes drawled. "I hadn't noticed."

"It is the physical manifestation of your translations," Laurel said. "The outward appearance of what has happened internally, even though your bodies have returned to their human form." He shrugged, his beads rattling. "It's what Rabbit's been seeing all along."

"You mean they're going to stay like that?" Esclaur asked, his own winter blue eyes wide as he stared at Suiden.

"Yes."

"Then the children and their mothers are going to have to deal with it," Suiden said, "as we must get to the palace, especially with Slevoic loose in the city."

Someone had dug up the banners and pennants Javes' troop had brought to a mountain lea so long ago and, as our procession wound through the city streets, the wind unfurled the flags until they were snapping in the breeze. For the first time since we arrived, the streets were empty of spectators as the big cat went by, though I did notice troubled faces peeking out from doorways and from behind window blinds. I suppose the sight of a flag-draped bier borne by ten large soldiers going by in a funeral procession was a little nervous-making. And the ghost probably didn't help.

I caught a flicker to my side and turned. Basel, now in his stag persona, paced beside me, his hooves making no sound on the cobbled streets. Though, as I thought of it, none of us were making any noise. I looked down and saw mountain grass and meadow flowers springing up from the stones. Lady Gaia was indeed mourning.

We were halfway to the royal compound when hooves came thundering down the street and a detachment of the King's Own, led by Lord Commander Thadro, rode up to us, their horses' hooves abruptly muffled as they reached the front riders. Our spines snapped straight as Lord Esclaur's brows rose until they almost met his hairline. "His Majesty must really want to make sure we arrive."

"Captain Prince Suiden," the Lord Commander said, his grayish blue eyes twinkling. "Not that I don't think that you can get across the City without help, Your Highness, but the king has asked that I join your escort."

"Yes, sir," Suiden began, but broke off at more thundering hooves growing louder in the distance. This time a detachment from the Royal Garrison appeared. They reined in when they saw us, and I blinked as I recognized the major from the Royal Garrison's mess—it was truly a small world. The major pulled to a stop, startled to find himself face to face with the Lord Commander. "Sir! I've been sent by Commander Loel to bring Lieutenant Rabbit to the Royal Garrison." A couple of muscular soldiers separated from his troop and headed my way.

"Now, that's interesting," Lord Commander Thadro said, turning his horse. "As I was ordered by King Jusson himself to escort the entire party to him. Including his cousin, Lord Rabbit." He leaned forward. "Are you countermanding His Majesty's order, Major?"

The major stared at Lord Commander Thadro with a deepening frown on his face, then shot me a

frustrated glare. "No, sir," he said.

"Return to the garrison, Major," Thadro said. "Now. That's my order." The major spun his horse around, plunging back to the garrison troops, and they immediately thundered off again.

King Jusson must've made it very clear that come hell or high water, Thadro and his men were to deliver us to the palace, as they hesitated for just a moment when they saw Basel, only a couple making warding signs against evil as they fell in with us.

"He's harmless, sir," Captain Javes said. His mouth quirked even as he sighed. "At least he was when he was alive. A smashing cook, though."

"Oh?" Thadro asked, the lurking humor in his face fading. He glanced over his shoulder at the shrouded bier, then back at Javes. "What happened—?" He broke off as his gaze sharpened. "What the hell?" He looked closely at Suiden and his mouth fell open. "What the bloody hell?" He stared down at Laurel pacing beside him. "Did you do this?"

"No," Laurel said. "Not I."

Remembering the metallic taste in my mouth, I sat very quiet on my horse, hoping no one would ask me.

"Then this just happened?" Thadro asked. He cast another glance at Suiden and Javes, but this time noticed Esclaur's blue gaze. "What did happen?"

"Slevoic ibn Dru challenged Prince Suiden," Laurel said. "The prince won."

"What?"

"It is a Border embassy, no? An actual part of the Border in the middle of the Royal City, which itself rests on what was once Borderlands. And so it behaved like the Border, and the soldiers were translated."

"Translated?" Thadro looked back at Suiden and Javes, then caught sight of Esclaur. "You mean, turned into magicals?"

"I was a wolf, sir," Javes said, giving way to a tongue-lolling grin. "So was Esclaur."

"Indeed, yes," Esclaur said, also grinning.

"Slevoic's faction tried to use this to drive a wedge between Suiden and his men, and between Lord Rabbit and his fellows," Laurel said, reclaiming Thadro's attention. "No matter that Rabbit has had repeated attempts against his life, including fifteen venomous spiders placed in his bedroom."

"Pale Deaths," Javes murmured.

"The bloody hell" Thadro said softly as he and several guardsmen blessed themselves.

"While no one was harmed by the weavers," Laurel said, "honored Basel was made a casualty of the factional infighting."

"He was murdered, sir," I said. "Slevoic slit his throat."

"That's for the review board to decide, Lieutenant," Suiden said.

"Yes, sir."



"As we don't want anyone accusing us of jumping to conclusions, however correct."

I smiled. "Yes, sir."

A couple of butterflies flew by, circled around and landed on each of my shoulders, their weight running through my arms and legs. As their wings opened and closed slowly, I could feel the brush of them against each cheek, like a kiss.

"Rabbit, your hair," Jeff said from behind me.

I reached up, and then down, and then down some more. My hair now reached the middle of my back, though the queue Javes made was still in place.

At Jeff's words, Javes looked at me. And sighed. "Suiden."

Suiden turned his head, taking in the butterflies and my lengthened braid. "Pox take it, Rabbit. We have an audience with His Majesty and we've enough weirdness as it is."

Just then, the wind managed to get my hair ties undone and my queue unraveled, spilling down my back.

"I hope that the guards do let us in to see His Majesty," Thadro muttered, eyeing me, "and don't instead pour hot pitch on the demon hoards attacking the king's palace."

"Honored folk," Laurel said, and Thadro, Suiden and Javes looked at him. The Faena nodded at the major and several troopers from the garrison waiting for us at the gate beyond the moat bridge to the royal compound. Frowning, Lord Commander Thadro took his guardsmen and moved to the front.

"Now here's insurrection," Javes murmured. From the arm waving and pointing, it seemed that the major was actually arguing with the Lord Commander about taking us to the garrison. The lieutenant on gate duty stepped up to the knot of men and, by the way he was standing, it seemed he was agreeing with the major.

"This smells as bad as Ryson's smalls, sir," I said.

"Yes," Suiden said. "Wait here." Suiden tapped his heels and his horse began to work its way through the crowd on the bridge towards the arguing soldiers, its hooves sounding hollow on the wooden bridge.

A glint off a scale distracted me and I glanced down to look at the toothy fish swimming through the stakes in the moat water, only to feel the wind tug at my hair again. Obedient, I turned my head, just in time to see a Royal Garrison trooper pull away from his fellows, and first I tracked him idly, wondering what was so interesting about him. Then, as I watched, the trooper stopped by a post by the guardhouse, reaching out his hand—and terror slammed through me. I stood up in my stirrups and shouted, "NO!"

Suiden and Javes both slued around at my shout, and their own eyes grew wide as the guard grasped the lever mounted on the post, Suiden bellowing "Treachery and treason!" while Javes cried out, "Betrayal!"

The rest of our party, seeing what was happening, started yelling too and drawing their swords while Laurel roared and raised his staff.

All too late.

The soldier, startled into it, looked at us for one moment, then smiled faintly before he pulled the lever; there was a rumble of machinery, and the moat bridge cracked in the middle as it began to drop. At the same time, the remainder of the major's detachment exploded out of a side street to form a barrier behind us, while the major's men did the same in front. We were neatly trapped on the collapsing bridge, the

horses and men stumbling as they lost their footing and started to slide towards the widening gap. My own horse staggered, wrenching the reins from my hands. I looked down again and saw the sharpened stakes and toothy fish waiting to meet me, and I closed my eyes— when once more the wind whispered to me.

Fly.

All right, I whispered back, but not just me.

Of course, the wind said.

The bridge fell away, water splashing onto my new Habbs, and I sighed, thinking that with ankle kicks, assassins, spiders, and now fishy water, I was not meant to have a decent pair of boots. The wind chuckled and I opened my eyes.

We weren't truly flying. We weren't moving through the air or hovering high above the ground. But then, we weren't down in the moat with the fishes either.

We stood above the water, those on horses and on foot describing the arch that the bridge had formed over the moat before it collapsed. While the rest of the men (and horses) tried to assimilate that we were standing on seeming thin air, Jeff dismounted and probed with his sword whatever was holding us up. Fortunately for the troop's peace of mind, it did not yield.

"Trooper Jeffen, stop that and remount," Suiden said.

If we were stunned, the garrison troops and gate guards were flabbergasted. A few managed to escape, running off shrieking "Sorcery," but the rest stood gape-mouthed and unresisting as the King's Own relieved them of their swords and shields—though Laurel aiming his staff at them might have had something to do with it. The troops behind us had a little fight left, but Laurel, still holding his staff on the ones in front, lifted his paw against the ones in the back, the rune shining bright. (We parted down the middle as if someone ran a comb through us, even Basel making sure he stood to the side.) The garrison soldiers were convinced that it was better to be quiet and reflect on their sins— before the Faena shoved them down their throats.

Laurel rumbled. "No care given at all to whom else they may kill." He looked at me. "You have garnered some very callous enemies."

"Yes," Esclair murmured. His blue eyes were almost black in anger. "Forty degrees on one side and thirty-two on the other is making some people rather nervous. All those lines to Iver and the throne."

I frowned. "But I don't want the throne—"

"Those who covet cannot believe that others don't lust after the same thing," Laurel said. "Stay here, honored folk." He followed Captain Javes to the rear and a low moan rose up from the garrison troops, which turned into terrified cries as vines shot up from the water (a few of our own also squeaked), twisting into planks and pylons until it became a living bridge beneath us. After a moment it burst into flower and was almost immediately mobbed by birds and bees. Spring in Iversly.

I looked at Basel. "Left that a bit late, didn't you?" The phantom stag shrugged.

With the garrison troops turned prisoner, we crossed the green bridge, leaving royal guards behind to replace the now-in-custody gate guards. We followed the rest of the King's Own through the winding broadways and avenues of the compound until we reached the palace proper. Contrary to Lord Commander Thadro's fears, we weren't prevented at the palace proper, and all of us—ambassador,

lord, physician, ghost, the ghost's body, officers, butterflies, troopers, prisoners—spilled into the formal throne room. It was vast, with columns pacing down the length of it and soaring up to the high vaulted ceiling, and made bright by tall windows that the sound of the sea poured through. I looked down the long room towards the dais, worried about whom I'd see sitting on there, but even from that distance I could tell it was King Jusson, wearing his simple crown of gold, but sitting on a much more imposing throne than he had the night of the reception.

And on the floor before the throne looked to be a circle. At first I took it for decoration, but as soon as I got close enough to make out the details I stopped, allowing everyone else to flow around me. I caught sight of brown fur and looked to the side of me. Laurel had also stopped and was examining the floor insets. His eyes then shifted and, doing the same, I stared at the steps that led up the dais to the throne.

Heigh-ho.

I saw why the king had no problem with what was etched on my palm, as his throne looked down upon a large weighing scale, with both pans balanced, circumscribed by the repeated runes of truth and justice. On each dais step were the ones for wisdom, knowledge and discernment. I looked around but didn't see advocate mercy or forgiving charity anywhere, and I locked my knees to keep from backing away. It was a very hard place and I didn't want to be near it, much less stand upon it, as I had no desire to bare my words, motives, or soul for judgment. As I wondered if Jusson knew what he had on his throne room floor, Laurel shifted as if he too would rather be somewhere else. "It is an elfin palace, no?" he murmured, moving back a pace.

The king's Court stood at the bottom of the dais, consisting of the men in waiting, Foreign Chancellor Berle, and other faces I recognized from the reception the night before last, and, of course, more royal guards. But no Lord Gherat. As I worked on that, one of the majordomo twins stepped forward and began announcing us, but the king waved a hand, cutting him off.

"We know everyone that we should, and if there are any that we don't, we are sure that they will be made known to us in due time." The king's voice was as dry as the major-domo's face. Jusson then looked us over, his gaze sharpening as he took in the picture we made. He slowly stood. "What has happened?" His brows met. "What are Royal Garrison soldiers doing here and why are they taken prisoner?"

"A garrison trooper collapsed the moat bridge while we were crossing it, Your Majesty," Suiden said. "While his fellows blockaded us."

"What?" The king hadn't raised his voice, but it echoed through the chamber.

Lord Commander Thadro came to the foot of the dais and bowed. "It's true, sire. If it weren't for the magical, we would've been fish food." The wind murmured at the stealing of its moment of glory and I looked at Laurel to see if he heard it. Apparently he hadn't as he still watched the king, his ears pressed forward.

"I've just been informed that a couple of guards were sent to Commander Loel when my second saw the garrison troops go out." Thadro said. "They haven't returned."

"Are we cut off from the city?" King Jusson asked, starting down the stairs.

"No, sire. Our men hold the gate, and we don't have to raise the bridge—another one sort of grew there. It seems sturdy enough."

"Bring our armor. We will meet whatever is coming to greet us." The king's eyes blazed gold. He then caught sight of the ghost and stopped on the dais steps. "Who is that and why is he here in our throne

room?" The Court froze, their heads turned towards us.

"He was Trooper Basel, Your Majesty, of the Freston garrison, the Mountain Patrol," Suiden said. He pointed over to the bier. "He was killed today."

"Let us see," Jusson said, continuing down the steps. A royal guard walked over to the bier and pulled back the flag shroud.

"Well, we may be mistaken," the king said, "but that looks more like a stag than a soldier. Though we've known men who ..." Jusson's voice trailed off along with the nervous laughter that had started at his remarks as Basel's shade shifted back into his stag persona. At that the wind swept through the entire throne room, once more smelling of sweet grass and plowed earth.

"He was murdered by Lieutenant Slevoic, Your Majesty," Suiden said.

"Was he?" Jusson asked as he reached the bottom step. Then he got close enough to see Suiden's eyes and his own widened. "Captain Prince?" His gaze shifted, taking in Javes and Esclaur, before lighting on me. "Cousin?" The wind laughed and swirled around me, lifting my hair while the butterflies danced.

"He is come into his full power, honored king," Laurel said. "Each mage is marked in some way, and Lord Rabbit's hair appears to be his, hmmm, badge." Running footsteps sounded and several servants came into the throne room, carrying the king's battle dress. A couple of them tried to remove Jusson's coat and shirt, but he impatiently pulled away. "We've been told. But what has happened to Prince Suiden and the rest?" He took his sword from a servant and allowed the scabbard to slide to the floor, baring the blade. "Is this your doing, Faena?"

"No," Laurel said. "It's not." He lifted his paw, his truth rune alight, and I could hear the runes in the Witness Circle on the floor start to softly hum. I moved a little away.

Jusson's eyes snapped to me. "Do you know why this has happened, Rabbit?" He glanced at Basel. "And why is the murdered trooper's ghost hanging about you?" The Court's attention returned to me and I heard mutters of "Sorcery" and "Witchcraft" with a couple of "Necromancies" thrown in.

"Your Majesty—" Suiden began.

"Silence!" Jusson said. "We asked our cousin!"

"It's a long story, Your Majesty," I said. "But I am your man." I went to grab my own sword but my hand closed over empty air, and I remembered that I didn't have one any longer. I looked around, wondering if flourishing Jeff's sword would have the same effect, and my eyes collided with the rune circle once more. I looked up. Most of the Court wouldn't meet my eyes—and those who did made warding signs against evil. I felt the force of their rejection and suddenly I had enough. For years they'd turned a blind eye to Slevoic and the merry house of Dru, yet here I was being treated like the chief demon from hell. I was ready to walk away and leave them to their insurrections, their corruption, their looming war with the Border. They weren't my problems.

I started to turn and came face to face with Basel, watching me. Dead because of Slevoic's malice towards me, and now wanting me to make it right. I looked beyond him and saw Jeff and the rest of the troopers, their eyes on me also. Dragged into this solely because I was part of their troop. None of them were warding, none were turning away. I met Suiden's green gaze, his face calm as he watched to see what I would do, while Javes, quiz glass forgotten, did the same.

"Are you, Rabbit ibn Chause e Flavan?" Jusson asked. "Are you mine?"

I looked back to the king. I hesitated, then swallowed and stepped onto the mosaic scale, a foot on each weighing pan. And the hum burst into a full chord.

A gasp went through the room and King Jusson's mouth parted in shock as I stood in the middle of glowing runes. "Once for memory, twice for witness, three times to establish, Your Majesty." I raised my hand and the rune on it shone bright, as bright as the ones on the floor, as bright as the sun, written in light. "I swear to uphold all oaths that I have made to you, in all my offices. Fiat."

"Rabbit," Laurel rumbled—and stopped, becoming thoughtful.

I stood in my own personal windstorm while Jusson stared at the rune circle. "Only in the tales of Locival has it ever done that." He raised his eyes and considered me for a moment, then turned his head, looking at his Court. "Well?" he asked.

### Chapter Thirty-nine

Diligent questioning of the prisoners had elicited the information that the plan was to take me captive, to be produced at a later time as proof of both the Border's and Jusson's degeneracy. But if they couldn't take me, then I was to be killed to keep me from corrupting the army and throne further. And while the regular troopers bought into the story that the Royal Army was both purging itself and protecting the kingdom, the major muttered a name: "Lord Teram." Esclaur had been right. My lines to the throne had made someone very nervous—my Flavan cousin.

The wind was quiet as I listened, the butterflies on one shoulder, rooting me to the earth. I looked away from the soldiers kneeling on the floor with their hands bound behind their backs, and my eyes met Groskin's. He blinked and then lowered his head.

After the prisoners were herded down into the palace dungeons, I picked over their swords, choosing one that felt balanced in my hand. I also found something to tie my hair with again, though it seemed to have stopped growing. It was a thick braid that reached my waist, playing havoc with my hauberk. I had to leave the hood down and my helm off as they wouldn't fit, and I prayed very hard that no one would take a swing at my neck or head. Laurel watched my preparations from where he stood next to Foreign Chancellor Berle. "You will return from this, honored Rabbit," he rumbled.

My brow quirked. "Farseeing or wishful thinking, Laurel Faena?"

"Perhaps a little of each."

I shrugged at him as I buckled on the new sword belt. "Maybe so, maybe no. What will happen, will happen."

Laurel's whiskers swept back. "And fatalism does not become you at all."

I laughed and left him to join my troop.

"You will stay here," Suiden said to Groskin as I walked up.

"Sir," Groskin said, "Let me—"

"No. Be glad that you're not down in the dungeon with the rest. I would've put you there, but the king

asked that I hold off until everything is settled.” Groskin stared for a moment, then once more lowered his head and nodded.

Before we started out, Jusson sent another, bigger and better armed detachment to the Royal Garrison. "No heroics," the king said to the detachment leader. "If you are challenged and cannot get through, return to us."

It was a hodgepodge of soldiery that rode behind King Jusson. Riding on one side of Jusson were his lordlings, including Lord Esclaur who had won another battle with the royal physician. Gone was the mincing, affected lord. His tabard matched those of his fellows—a snarling wolf which was repeated on one of the banners. On the other side was Lord Commander Thadro, carrying the king's shield, and the Royal Guard, their device a griffin, also repeated on a banner. And, of course, the lead bearers carried the king's standard: a plain sword crowned. To lead, rule and defend.

We fast cantered towards the entry gate, the King's Own we had left behind as guards coming out of the guardhouse and shaking their heads at Jusson's query if anyone had passed. Just then we heard hooves thudding and the exploratory detachment rounded the bend of the road that led to the Royal Garrison at a gallop, augmented by the remaining garrison troops, mostly plain horse soldiers with a sprinkling of officers, plus the two missing royal guards.

Seeing us, they came to a stop, the detachment leader riding up to the king and saluting.

"Commander Loel and the rest of the officers are not there, Your Majesty," the detachment leader said. "It appears they all left the compound by the sea escape." The guard indicated the troopers. "These were locked in the stockade." Loel had earlier imprisoned those who would oppose him, and when the few troopers who had escaped from the bridge alerted those who remained in the garrison that their attempt failed, they did a bunk out the back door. Suiden shifted on his horse next to me, frowning as he stared out over the blue waters, and I stared too, seeing the white dots of ships' sails.

King Jusson detailed some of his Own and troopers to man the garrison, sending them back. Next, he turned his horse around and contemplated the green bridge. He raised his head and looked over at Trooper Basel who stood next to me in his stag persona. (He had been impervious to all hints that he stay behind with Laurel Faena.) They watched each other for a moment; then Jusson urged his horse onto the bridge, Thadro riding right behind holding the king's shield. It held and everyone relaxed. His standard-bearers hurried in front of him, and we crossed the moat, ducking the odd bumblebee.

Once we were across, Jusson sent a couple of guardsmen down to the naval yard to warn them of the escaping deserters. Then we picked up speed, only to skid to a halt at a trooper's cries behind us. We all slued around in our saddles and saw brambles spring up thick and green, then darken as they hardened, blocking the entrance to the bridge. Basel, looking pleased with himself, delicately picked his way back to my side.

"You do know," I said as the haunt reached me, "that we have to go back that way, don't you?" Basel ignored me as we started down the street. "Have it your way then, but the king won't be too happy if he has to hack through it in order to get home." I thought I heard a faint raspberry.

As wild rides go, it wasn't much of one, Jusson keeping us to a canter at all times. When we reached one particular square, he briefly stopped and sent detachments off, some to secure the city gates and one with a wolf pack lordling to "bring whomever you find at the House of Dru to the palace." We took off again, and I remained where I was, planted amid my mates, neither pushing forward nor falling behind, wedged between Suiden and Javes with Jeff having my back.

The streets were deserted as we clattered through them, even the commercial squares and avenues quiet

and void of people. I kept scanning ahead, expecting to meet up with some sort of opposition, and was rather unnerved by the oppressive silence broken only by us—the city seemed to be holding its breath. I thought of the fighting dragons over our farm, and wondered if the citizenry here were cowering in their own cellars.

We rounded a corner and poured into a square, and I sat up straighter in my saddle as I recognized it. My eyes picked out the soot stains on walls from torches and I felt my lips pull back from my teeth. Cousin Teram's house. As we drew nearer, I heard the sounds of hooves against cobbles, and mounted men carrying a standard rode out from one of the side streets that bracketed Flavan House. The bannermen shifted, revealing their standard—and I blinked. It was a lion rampant, crowned.

"Oh, spare me!" We moved closer and I could see their tabard devices. "Right out of the same damn pantomime!"

"It's all about symbols, Rabbit," Suiden said. "Goodness and light against twisted and dark—and with this Teram's casting himself as light's champion and the kingdom's deliverer."

Even in battle, Captain Javes wore his quiz glass and he lifted it now, peering through it. "And here comes Locival now with his broadsword Lion's Heart, ready to smite the evil sorcerer." Teram, wearing the same outfit from the masque, rode behind the bannermen. Javes did his bugger me silly smile. "That's you, I suspect, Rabbit."

The glare I gave Javes was evil, though it probably lost something with the butterflies fluttering around me. (Fortunately, the wind seemed content to leave my hair alone.) "I am not—" I began.

"Bones and bloody ashes!" Jeff said over me as a shocked murmur went through our men. I snapped forward again and saw the missing Royal Garrison troops mixed in with Teram's own men pouring out from the side street to form ranks behind Lord Teram. Both mercenaries and renegades were led by the Royal Garrison commander, Loel.

"Oh, I say," murmured Javes. "Lunkhead himself." His brows rose. "I wonder who bunked out the sea escape?"

"So do I," Suiden said.

I paid scant attention to the two captains—my gaze was riveted on who rode with Commander Loel. "Sirs—" Javes and Suiden looked where my finger was pointing, and they grew very still as Slevoic took up a position behind the commander.

"Well, it seems as though we've found the missing staff and skin," Javes said.

The sun flashed off the shield Slevoic carried, turning it green, then purple. I allowed my eyes to shift to the hauberk, now turning for a brief moment pink, then back to white. Slevoic held in his other hand Prudence Oak's body with a flag attached to it, and Javes leaned forward, trying to get a better look.

"The House of Dru's device: an oak tree," he said. He gave a short laugh. "How ironic."

Ironic. I blinked to clear the red mist that rose up at Slevoic's mocking defilement. "Murdering spawn of hell," I said as my hand grew warm.

"Yes," Suiden said, a deep rumble in his chest. "I want this pastan auc." Rabid dog? I frowned at Suiden's Turalian as it occurred to me that Slevoic hadn't translated this morning at the embassy.

King Jusson signaled and it fell silent in the square, the snapping of the pennants and standards the only sound. Then Lord Teram stood in his stirrups. "Citizens of Iversterre—"

"No pretty speeches, Teram ibn Flavan e Dru." Jussion's mild voice carried over the entire square. "You are in rebellion against your king."

"He's of Dru?" I stared at Teram in horror, my skin crawling at the thought of being connected to Slevoic and Gherat's House.

"His mother," Suiden said. "No blood relation to you."

"What do the aristocracy do? Go around marrying each other?" I asked.

"Yes," Suiden replied. "Your parents did."

"Rebellion?" Teram shouted back at the king. "You're harboring an evil sorcerer—"

"Told you," murmured Javes.

"—taking him into your House, to the very throne! We are not rebels!" Teram waved his hand around at his men. "We are the last bastion against the corruption you have let loose on Iversterre!"

"And the fact that Lord Rabbit has sixty-four degrees and you only forty has nothing to do with any of it," Jussion said, his mild voice turning dry.

"Sixty-four?" I asked, startled. "It's not seventy-two?"

"No," Javes said. "There's some duplication. All that intermarrying."

"I have proof of his sorceries!" Teram yelled. "Done right here in the Royal City!" He beckoned and an assorted group of people emerged from behind his troops to stand in front of him. Recognizing most of them, I sighed.

Javes sighed with me. "As I said, anyone could be suborned." The server from the restaurant with cold drinks, silver-haired Guarez from the royal furniture shop, the duty cook from the Royal Garrison, a servant in Flavan livery, even the man who flinched away from me when we watered our horses in the park. I glared at the ground, thinking it was too bloody hot for this rotting nonsense.

"He also has seven brothers and sisters, each one twenty-four lines closer to the throne than you'll ever be," Jussion said, his voice even drier as he ignored the witnesses.

"All abominations, like he is!" Teram shrieked, the king finally goading him into abandoning his rehearsed speech.

"Why? Because you say so?" The king shifted in his saddle. "This has nothing to do with sorceries and everything to do with you coveting what you never will have. Not now, not ever, Flavan of only forty lines to the throne. We still hold the Royal compound, including the garrison and bridge. Our men have secured the city gates and our Own are now at the House of Dru. Your confederates have failed and are either fled or in our dungeons." He waved a hand in my direction. "And Lord Rabbit ibn Chause e Flavan has once again escaped from your clutches." The men in front of me parted and I smiled, nodding at my cousin.

"Not all have fled or are imprisoned, Jussion ibn Iver!" Teram screamed, flinging a hand up, and I heard a muted thwack, then a buzz, sort of like a bumblebee's hum. I recognized the sound and my heart jumped, then sped up as everything else slowed down. I barely raised my shield before feeling a thump against it.

"Archers!" someone cried.



Another thwack and the buzzing sounded again.

Trust, the wind said.

The humming abruptly stopped, the square becoming absolutely quiet. After a moment I lowered my shield, an arrow quivering in it, my thumping heart the only sound I heard. Jusson was once more staring wide-eyed, but instead of at me, he was focused on an arrow that was frozen in midair a span away from his face. Beside him, Thadro was also wide-eyed as he tried to cover the king with His Majesty's shield. I looked around and saw other arrows in shields and shattered on the ground, but more hung in the air, stopped midflight.

Jusson reached out a finger to touch the arrow in front of him. He watched it fall to the ground, as did all the others that hung in the air. He then turned gold eyes on Lord Teram.

Teram did not hesitate. "Witchcraft! See how the arrows stopped—"

"Take them," Jusson said.

There wasn't time for the trumpets to sound the advance. Nor was there room in the square for any clever battle plans, any elegant maneuvering for position. The two sides simply fell on each other with a clash that made my ears ring: swords against swords, against shields, against armor, enraged horses screaming, men shouting. Suiden swirled away, his sword rising and falling. I heard a man cry out and Suiden's sword shone red. Javes pressed forward, his own sword flashing out and striking sparks as his lips pulled back in a snarl. I followed him, my horse shouldering king's men, mercenaries, and rebel troopers out of the way in my haste. "Slevoic!" I bellowed.

I reached the front of the king's line and out of the corner of my eye I saw Esclaur and another lordling both ride to the witnesses who huddled together in terror of wayward swords, battle-axes and flailing hooves. Jusson separated a man's head from his body, then charged forward to engage Teram, but the Flavan lord instead rode towards me while Commander Loel bore down on the king. At that moment the melee parted and I caught a glimpse of purple. "Slevoic!" I tried to ride past Teram, shoving at him with my shield. But he dodged it and brought his broadsword up in a show of competence, the blade whistling past my head. I bent low, using my knees to turn my horse around to face him and raising my shield just in time to block a second hacking blow. I was startled at the power behind it, the hit jarring my arm.

"You should've stayed in the Border, cousin," Teram said as he swung again, grunting with the effort. "But now I shall mount your head above my throne. And I shall warm my feet on a mountain cat rug." What I'd thought was fat contained a fair amount of muscle—once again blocking his sword jarred my shield arm. He closed in, trying to unseat me, but my horse pushed his off, hooves flashing out, teeth biting at his horse's neck.

Eso Dru, Slevoic's cousin. I wondered how I could have missed the malice behind Teram's "well met" front. I opened my mouth to speculate on his mating habits and probable parentage of his children but I found myself yelling, "Reaver!" as the rune's warmth filled my hand again, traveling up my arm.

"Oh, really! Is that the best you can do?" Teram's eyes slit in a smirk. "No 'Murderers' or 'Assassins'?" He shook his head. "What a bumpkin!" He brought his sword around and I dodged out of the way. I then raised my own sword and this time he parried with his shield. He feinted, then swung once more at my uncovered head. I ducked, and at the same time brought my sword up to his open side. His hauberk deflected it, but I hit him hard enough to cause him to gasp for air, his eyes indignant that the Border provincial had dared to connect a blow.

"Reaver!" I yelled again, as the warmth from my hand spread across my body. I thrust at his sword arm

and when he shifted his shield to block, I brought my sword around at his knee. He quickly lowered his shield to stop me, and I hit his exposed face with the edge of my own shield, his nose exploding like a ripe tomato despite the nose guard on his helm. Teram grunted, this time in pain, and tried to bring his shield up once more, but it had caught on the bottom of mine. I dropped my shield inside of his and pulled, yanking him out of his saddle, and Teram fell to the ground with a surprised shout and clatter of armor. He still held onto his sword, though, and tried to gut my horse by thrusting it up through his belly. But my horse reared up and danced on his hind legs, ready to bring steel-shod hooves down on Teram  
ibn Flavan e Dru.

"Hold, Rabbit!" A hoof from another horse came down, and Teram's mouth opened in a gasping scream as his sword hand was crushed. I allowed my horse to land, his hooves alighting on either side of Teram's head, and I found myself staring at King Jusson, Lord Commander Thadro behind him. Jusson gave me a very nasty smile, a cut dripping blood down his cheek. "This one's mine, cousin, and I want him alive. For now." More than willing, I moved out of the way as Jusson was joined by his wolf pack and guards, and I scanned the square. To my surprise, the battle was already ending; many of the turncoats were kneeling in surrender while Commander Loel lay unmoving on the ground. Several of the King's Own had joined Esclaur in guarding the witnesses, while a mixed group of troopers, guards and lordlings rode past me to Flavan House to pound on the gate. More went down the sides of the mansion, where they also hammered on doors. Esclaur saw me looking and, with a word to a guardsman, wheeled his horse and headed my way at a fast trot.

I was trying to find Suiden or Javes when something flickered off to the side, and I turned to see Slevoic ride into a side street on the other side of the square. I urged my horse to follow and, hearing more horses behind me, I spared a brief look over my shoulder and saw Jeff and Esclaur. Pacing with them was Basel's stag haunt. I faced forward and cantered down the side street and, seeing a flash go around a corner, I swung my horse wide and stopped at the street's mouth to peer in, making sure there wasn't an ambush. There was. Slevoic and about twenty renegade troopers were waiting. All facing me.

Slevoic smiled as he held Prudence Oak's body in one hand, his blue eyes gleaming in the street shadows. "Oh so easily led Border puke." He made a show of looking us over. "No Groskin?" His smile widened. "I'd be careful who I'd let get behind me. No telling who else doesn't like freaks." His men laughed at his wit.

I was getting really tired of facing smirks. "Captain Suiden is behind me, Vicious. Should be here any minute." (My hand didn't burn, so it must've been true.) I watched the smile falter on his face at the thought of coming face to face with the dragon prince. I looked at the renegades. "You should've seen him this morning. I thought he was going to have an accident."

"Shut up, freak!" Slevoic was not amused.

"Me a freak? Tell me, do your playmates know what you're wearing, Vicious? What your banner staff is made of?"

"I said shut up!"

Suppressing the urge to say "Make me," I sighed. "Commander Loel is dead and Teram is captured. The rebellion is put down, Slevoic. It's over."

"Perhaps it is, Lord Sweet Cheeks Puke, or perhaps the best is yet to come, but right now it's just you and me." Slevoic said, reaching for his sword.

I once more marveled at Slevoic's universe that excluded the other twenty plus people with us. But again, I was more than willing, and I hefted my own sword while my horse took a step forward, his hoof loud

against the cobbles.

"What the hell is that?" one of Slevoic's men yelled. I stopped and looked at him but he was staring beyond me, his eyes wide.

I frowned for a moment, then smiled as something pale ghosted up to my side. "Why, this is Trooper Basel." I looked back at Slevoic. "Remember our cook, Vicious? You know him—you two served together until he was transferred to the mountain patrol." I leaned forward. "He was murdered today, his throat slit while he was out in the kitchen garden."

"The mutant cat probably did it," Slevoic said, also staring at the shade.

"Border folk hold white stags sacred," I said as Basel moved to where I could more easily see him. "Laurel Faena would no more have killed him than the patriarch would desecrate church altars. No, one of his troop mates murdered him." Basel lowered his antlers and silently struck the street with a hoof, and I shifted my gaze once more to the soldiers behind Slevoic. "He also sabotages weapons. Are you sure you want to go off with him?"

The turncoats muttered, a couple even starting to ease away, but froze as Slevoic turned to glare at them. He whipped his head back around at me, and I bit off an exclamation at how his eyes were now glowing. "Nobody's going anywhere unless I say so."

"Bones and bloody ashes," Jeff said from behind me. "What's happening to the Vicious?"

Not only were his eyes glowing, but also his hauberk, shield and banner staff. Slevoic hadn't translated in the embassy. But neither had I or the royal healer. I knew why I hadn't and I could guess why the healer hadn't—both of us were mage-born. That meant that Slevoic—

"Sorcerer," I said.

Just then I heard horses approaching from the square, moving fast. "Rabbit!" Suiden called, his voice echoing.

"Here, Captain!" I called back.

"No!"

I stared at Slevoic, tasting his sudden terror bitter across the back of my tongue as he stared over my shoulder. My horse danced, pulling against the reins as he too felt the intense fright of the man. Surprised, I moved so that I could see what was coming down the street while keeping an eye on the Vicious, but it was only my captain leading troopers. I shot a quick glance at Basel, but he hadn't moved and now stood with raised head, looking as puzzled as a ghost stag could.

I looked back at the lieutenant again. Even with the scare Suiden gave him that morning at the embassy, Slevoic's reaction was extreme, sweat pouring down his colorless face, his hands shaking. Then memory burst upon me of how I was when I started to come into my power. "Oh, hell—"

"No! Keep away!" Slevoic howled, raising Pru Oak's body just as Suiden drew even with me, and I could see Pru's eyes—black pits in her screaming face.

Get down! the wind said.

Get down, Rabbit! I heard Laurel bellow.

"Duck!" I shouted as I slammed down along my horse's neck. My pommel caught me in the stomach, hard, knocking my breath out of me, and it grew dark as I tried to suck in air. I swallowed, this time a metallic taste filling my mouth. A roaring filled the street and I vaguely heard screams and horses galloping off.

Whatever had just happened, I thought, it was not good.

## Chapter Forty

I lay wheezing in my saddle as I was led out of the side street back into the square, my eyesight still dim with sudden flashes of light, the metallic taste strong in my mouth. Once we reached the square, Jusson took one look at my face and told me to go inside Flavan House. I did not argue, even when I was made to lie on a couch in a room off an enclosed atrium filled with bright, twittering birds. I closed my eyes, the butterflies settling on my head.

After a while my breathing became easier and when I heard a commotion outside the room, I sat up. The door flung open and the king entered, followed by Captain Thadro, his Own, Lord Esclaur, and Captains Javes and Suiden. Jeffen, who was sitting guard, and Basel, who hovered in the corner in his man form, jumped to attention.

"So you're saying that you don't know what happened?" Jusson asked. He had cleaned the blood off his face, the thin cut along his cheekbone already scabbed over.

"No, Your Majesty," Suiden replied. "I had followed Lieutenant Rabbit and found him and Trooper Jeffen facing off against Slevoic and a small detachment of rebels. The moment I arrived, though, Rabbit yelled 'Duck.'" A wry smile crossed his face. "I've learned, Your Majesty, that in battle it's not wise to ask questions when someone shouts an imperative. I ducked."

There was muted laughter, and a smile flitted across the king's face.

"When I came up again," Suiden said, "parts of the street were scorched and Slevoic and the rest were gone."

"I see," Jusson said. He walked over to the couch and looked down at me. "And you, cousin? Are you well? Your color is better."

"Yes, sire," I said. "I'm well." I stood, a little loath to be sitting while the king was standing. Except for some wobbliness in my legs, everything seemed to be working fine.

"Good." He grabbed Jeff's chair and sat down, waving me back to my seat on the couch. "Then perhaps you can tell us what happened."

"Slevoic is starting to come into his power, Your Majesty," I said.

A bird chirped and then fell silent.

"Define 'power,'" Jusson said.

"He's mage-born, same as me, sire, and he's going through what I just did." I looked at Suiden and Javes. "Only three people didn't translate in the embassy, sirs. Me, the healer, and Slevoic." I cast a wary

glance at Jusson. "I'm not calling the honored healer a mage, but she probably has some talent." I indicated the butterflies and braid. "You know what I am. So what does that make Slevoic?"

"Sorcerer," Jeff said, staring at me. "You called him a sorcerer."

"He wears dragon skin and carries a death staff, Jeff. With his, uhm, bent, it's not a wholesome combination." I felt the resistance, the refusal to believe that a member of a Great House could be something so foul. "What would you call him if his hauberk was human skin and his standard attached to human bones?"

"That's different—" Thadro began.

"No, it's not. Sir. They were people." I looked back at Jusson. "Even before this"—I waved at my hair again—"happened, I didn't want to be anywhere near the staff or hauberk, warded or not. Neither did anyone else—Trooper Ryson even avoided them. Slevoic is wearing one, has attached his House's device to another—and it probably gives him great pleasure."

"Pain always did," Javes said. "But doesn't he have to chew those mentha leaves the Faena cat gave you?"

"He could survive without them, sir." I shrugged. "But mentha leaves are easy to get—I've seen them growing wild. He should have no problem finding them."

"But he doesn't know—" Javes began.

"Groskin, sir. I'm sure that Slevoic knows all about it."

"All right," Javes conceded. "But he still has to figure out what's happening to him."

"He knows, sir," I said, sighing. "I called him a sorcerer to his face."

Jusson sat still for a moment; then his eyes focused on my face. "A sorcerer, loose in my kingdom." He saw my look and his mouth twisted. "I've sent out searchers into the City, and have men at the gates, but not only did Slevoic grow up here, he was stationed here too. I'm sure he knows who is open to a little judicious bribing."

Or to a little judicious terror, I thought.

The king's mouth quirked further. "The evil they have accused you of being, Rabbit, they themselves have become. I'm sure His Holiness the Patriarch could do a sermon or two about that." He sighed and stood.

"I suppose we should take the rabble outside back to the royal compound. But, before I leave"—the king's smile became real—"I want to see where this infamous party took place. Teram was always over the top." Esclaur and I did the honors, but the interior of Flavan House looked normal in the daylight, with no trace of skulls, toadstools or poisoned wine. I led the way to the courtyard, as Esclaur's recollection at that point was very hazy, and I showed Jusson where the lordling had collapsed. As I reenacted the fight between me and the five assassins, Suiden squatted down on his heels as he studied the ground. "Here," he said as he pointed out shoe and boot prints in the soft dirt and crushed grass.

"Do not worry, Captain Prince," Jusson said. "I believed Rabbit the first time he told me." The king turned and walked back towards the house, his entourage trailing behind him. "And a body was found early this morning in the river—unfortunately not an uncommon event. It was weighted, but the river patrollers had orders to search the usual favored spots. It was also tongueless and had a stab wound that matched Rabbit's knife."

Everyone in the house had been herded out into the street to stand in the middle of the square. The king remounted his horse and sat facing Teram, who had a rough bandage around his hand. Behind him were the witnesses, mercenaries, turncoat troopers and archers, and a crowd of servants. A guard (who looked an awful lot like the majordomo twins) read from a list of charges that had been penned at Teram's own desk, his loud voice echoing in the square. Teram said nothing as the guard intoned about attempted abduction, poison, cudgels, broken swords and, of course, treason, but his head flew up when the guard got to the spiders.

"Fifteen Pale Deaths?" His eyes were wide in horror. "I did not!"

Rebellion, regicide and kinslaying he had no problem with, but apparently the weavers were a bit much.

"Slevoic," Javes said.

"Yes, he's mine," Suiden said, flames leaping in his eyes.

"No, ours, Captain Prince," Jusson said as the charges were nailed to Flavan House's front gate. "We are king and so we have first dibs." He reached out his hand to receive a copy of the charges, and passed it to a lordling. "See that this is posted throughout the City and all of Iversterre." He looked back at Teram, holding his gaze. "Also see that the tale is told of how our cousin, Lieutenant Lord Rabbit ibn Chause e Flavan, stood in the Witness Circle and it burned bright as the sun as he swore to uphold this king and this kingdom. As it was in the days of old, when the real Locival and his companions rode, bringing justice to the realm." Jusson's smile was not pleasant. "Now that the Circle has come alive again, we are so looking forward to seeing how you fare there, Teram ibn Flavan e Dru."

We posted guards at the house entrances, then loaded the wounded, the very young, and the infirm into some carts, and the dead into others, and moved out of the square. I looked out over the mass of people walking, noting that Teram's wife Isalde was absent, and wondered if that was deliberate or just a lucky break.

We soon reached the bridge over the moat, and the brambles were just as thick and thorny as when we had left. Basel pranced up to the bridge and immediately the tangle parted, leaving a wide gap for us to go through. "Show-off," I said as I went past. He ignored me as he struck a pose, antlers held high, only to have the prisoners pitch a fit as they took in the ghost—apparently for the first time.

"See?" screamed Teram. "See? I told you he was an evil sorcerer! Look! Necromancy!" A trooper reached over and slapped him on the head, and he stopped midshriek, his mouth hanging open at a common horse soldier daring to assault his exalted person. I watched as the realization sank in that there was nothing he could do about it. The trooper prodded Lord Teram with his foot and he stumbled forward, all protestations gone.

It was a rowdy bunch that swept up the stairs into the palace. There were catcalls, rude jokes and noises as we laughed at finding ourselves alive at the end of a battle. Lord Commander Thadro immediately separated our prisoners, sending Teram down to the dungeons, instructing the mercenaries and turncoat troopers to be moved to the garrison stockade "to make room," and directing the rest to gentler but just as secure quarters.

"Put all the children in the palace nursery with their mothers," King Jusson said, pulling his hauberk hood down and sighing in relief at the breeze. "But post guards."

It was a pared down, but just as noisy group that followed the king into the throne room—only to fall silent as we came face to face with (guessing from his big hat and vestments) Patriarch Pietr standing near the rune circle. Next to him were Archdoyen Obruesk and Doyen Allwyn. The doyen had his head

shaved and was wearing white penitent sacking. But I barely noticed that because my attention was riveted on what the patriarch and doyen carried in their arms.

"No." My legs gave way and I sank to my knees.

"No." Laurel, standing behind them, yowled with me in pain and grief as my eyes closed out the sight.

## Chapter Forty-one

"Open your eyes, Lieutenant, or I swear I'll pin them open for you!"

They flew open to meet Captain Suiden's molten green ones glaring down at me. "This is not the time for moaning and swooning, do you hear me?" He grabbed my arm and hauled me to my feet.

The patriarch walked forward a couple of paces, a little awkwardly. "Forgive me, Your Majesty, but we"—he inclined his head to include Allwyn—"came for the meeting with Ambassador Laurel, only to hear of the insurrection you had to put down." He shifted the burden in his arms, bells tinkling. "Is all well?" King Jusson threw me a sideways glance, then looked over at Laurel who was lamenting softly. "It was until now."

"Then the audience is going forward?"

The king cast us another look. "We think we'd better, Your Holiness." The patriarch nodded and he and Doyen Allwyn laid their burdens on the rune circle, making sure they all were straight. Archdoyen Obruesk watched them from under his brows.

I walked over and squatted down beside the circle. Laurel, still lamenting, followed.

"When Doyen Allwyn arrived, I had him enter into three days of purification and sanctification," the patriarch said. "When his time was accomplished, it occurred to us that perhaps we should search the See." He sighed and removed his hat, showing that his head was also shaved. He began to undo his vestments, revealing white underneath. "We found these staves." He laid his hat and vestments aside, standing there in penitent sacking. "I take it that they're what we thought they were." He looked at Laurel. "Doyen Allwyn was reluctant to name who'd given him his staff, Ambassador, because it came from me." Though the most common was oak, a church staff could be made from any hardwood, the idea being that it wasn't the wood that made the staves holy, but rather what they represented: the guidance, comfort, and protection of God. The thought floated across the back of my mind that these were more likely to cause nightmares, as I reached out and almost touched a staff made of ash. "Honor Ash Faena."

"You knew—her?" Jusson asked.

"She strode the area around my parents' farm." I held my head in my hands. "How could you've not known, Laurel Faena?"

"I've been gone a long time, Lord Rabbit," the Faena replied. "It took me months just to find you."

"We weren't lost that long, cat," I said.

"Did you ever tell anyone where you were?"

He was right. I had kept where I was to myself, hiding. I lifted my head and looked around at Basel's

body and the spritewood before us, weariness pressing down.

"I'd come to see if I could stop a war, honored king," Laurel said, standing up. "But I don't think I can."  
The Faena rumbled deep in his chest. "How it grieves me that I can't.

"Never say never, Ambassador Faena," Jusson said, his voice soft. "There has to be a way out that doesn't involve more bloodshed."

I made myself stand also. "You foresaw the fulfilling of the Council's charge of peace, Laurel Faena," I said.

Laurel looked at me. "That can just as easily come after war—"

"Don't split hairs," I said. "Either you saw peace or you didn't."

"They killed Honor Ash Faena," Laurel replied.

"Yes." A hard knot formed in my chest. "They killed her."

"What do you think the other Faena will say?"

Along with the elves, tree sprites and Dragoness Moraina. My face became drawn with the certainty of another war with the Border. I knew which side I'd be on, thrice sworn to the king. I wondered if I would end up fighting against my da and brothers.

"We have grievously wounded you," Jusson said to Laurel. "But you're an ambassador. Show us what to do to make amends, how to make restitution."

Laurel let out a sigh and ran his paw over his head, staring at the staves. "Yes, honored king. Let me think on it."

I also stared down on the bodies neatly arranged in the rune circle and something nudged my brain. "You say Honor Ash was fine when you left, Laurel Faena?"

"True, honored Rabbit," Laurel replied. "She saw me off, wishing me good hunting." "Yet here her body is, arriving in the city before you, already seasoned and fashioned with holy bells." I looked at Captain Javes. "What did the restaurant server say about her ice boats?"

Javes stared back at me. "That's it."

"We suppose that eventually someone will tell us what is going on," King Jusson said.

Javes bowed. "Forgive us, Your Majesty, but Lord Rabbit has just come up with the answer to the problem you sent me to Freston to solve."

The king's eyes abruptly turned gold again.

"You knew, sire?" I asked. "You knew there was smuggling going on?"

"My tutors were very insistent that I learn to count and do sums," Jusson said. "I could see that the docks were busy and the harbor was full of ships, but when I checked the revenue books, they did not match."

He shrugged, his mouth hard. "You aren't the only one to indulge in naivete, cousin. I accepted the explanations given me by my Lord Treasurer. Then I heard the rumors of slave running, and sent Javes to investigate."



"We got the staves from Lord Gherat, Your Majesty," the patriarch interjected. His face was calm, his eyes angry. "He gifted them to the Church. Said that they came from a northern estate."

Chancellor Berle had come up to stand with Lord Esclaur, and she now prompted me. "The ice boats?"

"False reports of pirates that sent everyone chasing their own tails in Dornel," I said.

"Yes, we received Commander Ystan's report," Jusson said.

"And while they're scouring the Banson for the raiders, they ignore the boat carrying ice to the favorite restaurant of the rich and noble in the Royal City." I looked at Javes. "You had me thinking, sir, that it was my likeness to my Chause grandda that had everyone jumping."

"You do look an awful lot like him, cousin," Jusson said.

"As you say, Your Majesty," I replied. "But I'm guessing that wasn't the reason for their reaction when I showed up—as if they'd opened the door and found a thieftaker looking for them. And there they were today, all ready to give false witness. Why else would a royal shopkeeper and a restaurant server entangle themselves in my cousin's treason?"

"There's bribery and blackmail," Lord Esclaur said. "A little money and threats against one's family go a long way."

"That sword cuts both ways, Esclaur," I said, "because they're also threatened with exposure if they're involved in the smuggling, so they joined my cousin in an effort to discredit Laurel and me." I looked back at the staves lying in the rune circle. "It must've alarmed them when they found out that we could tell spritewood from ordinary, dragon skin from lizard." My mouth twisted. "That we could even tell who they'd killed."

Laurel softly yowled. "That they were friends."

"Friends," Jusson echoed. He sighed and looked around the throne room. "Our palace has been turned into an abattoir."

That was nothing new, I thought. The whole kingdom was one.

"That will cease, Lieutenant Lord Rabbit ibn Chause e Flavan," Jusson said, turning glittering eyes on me.

I said nothing at the confirmation that the king could hear me. Most of the Court looked from Jusson to me, puzzled. A few, though, frowned.

"Your Majesty—" began Suiden.

"No, Captain Prince. Again, while your zeal for your charges is commendable, we are talking to our cousin." Jusson kept his gold-shot gaze on me. "We have had enough people pulling at the stability of our kingdom. We do not need you to add to it, Lord Rabbit."

The puzzled looks intensified.

I supposed the smart thing would've been to fall to my knees and beg for forgiveness. I supposed. "One of my earliest memories, sire, is Honor Ash Faena guiding my steps as she led me around the farm, teaching me how to track." The knot in my chest tightened and I tried to catch my breath. "Look what they did to her." I took another deep breath. "Look what they did to all of them."

In the quiet that followed, boot steps sounded out in the hall, and we all turned as the lordling whom

Jusson had sent to the House of Dru came through the throne room doors, hurried to the king, and bowed. "Your Majesty, Lord Gherat had already fled, but I've brought you who—and what—we found." Troopers and guards entered, some carrying boxes and crates. And right in the middle of them was our own very officious clerk, Losan eso Dru.

"Oh, I say," murmured Javes.

## Chapter Forty-two

At Jusson's request that all bodies be removed, Laurel bowed and, with Patriarch Pietr and Doyen Allwyn, took charge of the disposition of the staves, moving them back to the patriarch's See. As they were leaving, the patriarch told the Faena that he was recalling all Staves of Office, "for it grieves me, Laurel Faena, that we could be profaning not only our churches, but dishonoring the poor, uh, people who were murdered." Walking behind them, Archdoyen Obruesk scowled at Laurel from under his brows.

"At present, I am more concerned with the church elders using the staves, honored patriarch," Laurel said, "as they are not healthy to be around." His toe claws clicked against the marble floor as he left with the church clergy. "Please make sure that once I ward the room, no one enters it." His voice faded down the hall. "And I would give serious thought to going through purification again."

Captain Suiden had the troopers move Basel's body out to the churchyard, where they were going to build a pyre to burn it at sunset, as Laurel also told Suiden that neither would it be healthy for the stag's body parts to float around loose in the city. Or anywhere else.

"To have his head mounted on someone's wall, or an apothecary to use his antlers in a potion for someone to drink would not be good, as it would become a focal point for all sorts of wickedness. We should destroy it completely, honored captain, with appropriate rites and ceremonies. That way we can counter any, hmm, adverse reactions arising from the trooper's murder."

"Curses, you mean?" Suiden asked. He looked around. "Groskin, you are in charge of Trooper Basel's funeral arrangements. Vigil with full honors, everyone required to attend except those on duty rota."

"Yes, sir." Groskin's voice was subdued.

"Ask the garrison troopers and Royal Guard if they would also attend." The captain's eyes shifted to behind me. "Take Trooper Jeffen with you to help."

"Yes, sir." The lieutenant and Jeff left the room, Basel following after them.

"How convenient to be able to oversee one's own funeral," Jusson remarked, watching.

Even with the bodies gone, Jusson apparently decided he had enough of his throne room, and he led us down the hall to double doors guarded by the King's Own. They flung them open, revealing a large chamber with decoration as rococo as the one in which Laurel and Chancellor Berle had first met half a lifetime ago (no nymphs or mermaids, though). As the crowd poured in, the king walked to a raised chair also guarded by the Royal Guard, and sat. Lord Esclair and the other lordlings went to stand on one side of the king, while Suiden, Javes, and I remained in the back. The king, looking around, saw us lingering, and pointed to the other side of his chair, where Chancellor Berle and other advisors had taken up space. Chancellor Berle gave me a tight-lipped smile, her face lit with satisfaction.

King Jusson looked over the people. "Is everyone here that ought to be?"

"Yes, Your Majesty," Captain Thadro said.

"Good. Bring her here."

Royal guards escorted Losan eso Dru and her lordling captor before the king.

"This is not a trial, Losan eso Dru," the king said. "When we are done here, you will be turned over to the Lord Magistrate to face charges of treason."

Losan started to weep. "I'm innocent, Your Majesty. Please—"

"We found her burning papers, Your Majesty," the lordling said. "We stopped her, but when we looked at them, they were about her dealings, not Lord Gherat's." Guardsmen and troopers approached with the boxes and crates. "Here they are, sire."

"Take them over to Chancellor Berle, please," the king said. He waited until the crates were stacked against the wall by the chancellor. "Well, Losan eso Dru, all day we've been dealing with conspiracies and rebellions—and each time we look up, we hear the House of Dru's name. But when we send for our Lord Treasurer, we find that he is missing. We are sure you can see why we'd find this upsetting."

If Lord Esclaur was a spiritual brother of Javes, then Losan of Dru was a blood sister of Ryson. She started talking immediately, going back to her days as a very junior clerk and how Gherat would have her falsify accounts, working up through larger acts of fraud and malfeasance, to how this morning she knew it had all come undone when she discovered that Lord Gherat was gone and his strongbox emptied.

"Names, Losan eso Dru," King Jusson said. "Give us names."

But Losan didn't know who else was involved, as Lord Gherat had been very careful about keeping his cohorts separate and hidden. She only knew what she did because she had a nasty habit of eavesdropping, going so far as to drill holes and create hidden nooks so she could listen in to conversations held in Lord Gherat's private chambers. As she said that, several in the room shifted uneasily.

It was the same with the rest of the witnesses—they had bits and pieces of the puzzle, but not the whole. In fact, the only information that all of them shared was that Javes was the king's agent.

"How?" Jusson asked. "Not even my Lord Commander knew."

"I bet Gherat did," Berle said, her voice soft.

"We received a letter over two years ago, Your Majesty," the furniture dealer Guarez said. "And when the captain and Lord Rabbit came to my shop, I sent word." The old man stood with his hands shaking from fear and the palsy. "I received instructions back that if either ever returned, I was to delay them and send a message quick, and they would be taken care of."

I glanced at King Jusson, then averted my eyes from his face. There was nothing like betrayal by a close and trusted friend. Someone so close that he was allowed to stand beside the throne and join any of the king's conversations. Someone so trusted that he was given the keys to the kingdom's strongbox—which he then used to overthrow the king.

"Perhaps Teram knows more, Your Majesty," Lord Esclaur said from the other side of the dais as the guards escorted the furniture dealer out of the room.

"Perhaps," Jusson said, nodding. "We were going to wait and question the rebels separately, but as Flavan's and Dru's affairs do seem to crisscross, we should examine the pretender Locival." He looked at the Lord Commander. "Please bring Teram to me."

It didn't surprise me to see that the Flavan lord had regained a measure of his arrogance as he came into the chamber, his gait strong despite his broken nose and bandaged hand. However, it did surprise me to see who had arrived with him; Archdoyen Obruesk walked in behind Lord Teram, his cavernous eyes sweeping the room until they lit on me. If his glare had been a sword, I would've been skewered to the wall.

"We only recall asking for Teram ibn Flavan, Your Reverence," Jusson said, a brow rising.

"We were praying together in his cell, Your Majesty." Obruesk's deep voice boomed out in the chamber.

"He asked that I accompany him." Teram stood next to the archdoyen, his face pious.

"Does the Church support this rebel in his effort to seize the throne?" Jusson asked, raising the other brow.

"I am only providing spiritual comfort and guidance, Your Majesty," Obruesk replied. "As I would to any poor soul in need."

"There's a multitude of 'poor souls' in our dungeons at this moment. Why this particular one?"

Obruesk's face went stern. "He has been threatened with sorcery, Your Majesty. The so-called Witness Circle?" he added at the king's blank look.

King Jusson's brows snapped together. "Lord Teram's life is forfeit to us, to do with as we please."

"My only concern, Your Majesty, is the purity of your rule—"

"You should be more concerned with the purity of our anger."

The archdoyen opened his mouth but the king cut him off. "You have made your apprehensions known, Archdoyen Obruesk. Now please leave."

"See how the Holy Church is barred from the palace, yet the king's sorcerer cousin stands next to the throne!" Teram said, his face gone beyond pious to saintly.

"You are close to having your head barred from your body, Flavan e Dru," Jusson said, his eyes glinting down on Lord Teram. Lord Commander Thadro drew his sword and, standing behind Teram, forced him to his knees, placing the sword edge against his neck. Teram glared back up at the king, unrepentant.

"Your Majesty, forbearance, please—" Obruesk began.

"Thank you, Your Reverence," Jusson said. "Please rest assured that we will inform Patriarch Pietr of your assistance." Obruesk hesitated, then bowed and, after another glare at me, walked from the room, his robes flaring out behind him.

"Very clever, Lord Teram, to involve the Church." The king shifted in his chair and placed his elbow on the chair arm, propping his chin against his fist. "But we suppose that His Reverence hasn't told you: The patriarch has found sprite bodies throughout his See, each one donated by Lord Gherat of Dru. His Holiness wasn't too thrilled by that."

Teram did a credible job of sneering, even with the sword at his neck. "There's only the freak cat and

Border bumpkin's word what they are."

"Such a brave man!" Jusson marveled. "Or a very stupid one. Tell us, Flavan, whether or not it's spritewood, did it come from Iversterre?"

"How should I know—"

"Be aware that we've just finished questioning not only your, ah, witnesses but Losan eso Dru too."

"Losan eso Dru—" Teram broke off, his sneer faltering.

"Kings tend to frown on smuggling as it both diminishes their revenues and promotes lawlessness. But it disturbs us even more that our Great Houses are involved in something so tawdry as poaching."

"Poaching, hah!" Teram managed to get out, now trying for scorn.

"We suspect that's what the Border would call it, as they didn't give permission for anyone to have what was taken." Jusson brought his brows together again. "Didn't you catch a poacher on one of your estates a few months ago, Flavan? If we remember correctly, you had your game wardens hang the man there and then, after chopping off a few body parts. As a deterrent, you said."

"Uh—"

"We raided the House of Dru and have confiscated all records." The king gestured at the crates and boxes lining the wall behind Chancellor Berle. "But it would be easier for you to tell us who else is involved, Flavan—with your oh so close ties to Dru—rather than shift through all of them, even with the clerk's help."

Teram's eyes skittered over me and settled on the boxes. Color drained out of his face, leaving even his lips bloodless.

I frowned. The archdoyen's support or no, the man was already under a death sentence for his failed rebellion. Yet he seemed more afraid of whatever he thought might be in the boxes.

Jusson slowly straightened in his chair as he also took in Teram's terror, his own frown becoming real. "You know, Flavan, we were surprised that we did not see your gracious wife and lovely children earlier today when your household was—moved. Where are they?"

"I—" Teram swayed, cutting himself on Thadro's sword. Blood seeped down his neck.

"Where are they, Flavan?" Jusson leaned forward.

"Gherat—" Teram stopped, his chest heaving in his fright.

"Lord Gherat has them? Why?"

Teram shook his head wildly, cutting himself again on Thadro's sword. Jusson gave an impatient gesture and the Lord Commander moved his sword off Teram's neck.

"Are they hostages? Against what?"

"Your Majesty, please. He will kill them."

Murdering must run in the family.

"He may think I've talked anyway," Teram said. He glanced again at the boxes. "Or told you where to find those." Sweat rolled down his face. "Why didn't you let Obruesk stay? He could have vouched for me—" Teram's eyes widened and he folded his lips together, refusing to say any more.

"The archdoyen is involved in this?" Jusson asked, his voice soft. "Perhaps we were too hasty in dismissing him."

"Archdoyen Obruesk isn't related to Dru, is he, sir?" I whispered to Javes.

"My word, no," Javes whispered back. "The House of Dru has never been interested in the Church." He frowned. "At least until now."

"I don't think we can question clergy, Your Majesty," Lord Esclaur said at the same time.

"Pox take it, no, we can't," Jusson said, his voice still soft. "But if His Reverence insists on thrusting himself into our affairs—" He sighed and settled back into his chair. "We will talk with the patriarch." He glanced back down at the trembling lord in front of him. "You have raised so many new questions, Flavan. Please rest assured that we will find answers to all of them." Jusson nodded at Captain Thadro. "Take him away."

I watched cousin Teram be escorted out, back to the palace dungeons and the king's interrogators, who wouldn't be near as gentle as Jusson had been.

"Think they'll get anything from him?" Javes asked Suiden.

A couple of days ago I would've said yes," Suiden replied. "Now, I don't know."

"I didn't realize he loved his family that much, sir," I said.

"It's not love, Rabbit," Suiden replied. "It's the fear of the demise of his House and all its lines to the throne. That there will be no one to carry on his greatness. Lord Gherat knew what to lay hold of to ensure Teram's silence."

"But silence for what?" I asked. "The rebellion is failed, the smuggling ring is exposed, and Lord Gherat is fled. What's left?"

Chancellor Berle, listening in, sighed. "Well, for one thing, if Lord Teram won't talk, then not only don't we know who else is involved, but we don't even have proof against Gherat. It's all supposition."

"There's Losan's witness," Javes said.

"Peepholes and secret cubbies." Berle gave a scornful laugh. "But not one scrap of real evidence. Who'd believe just her?"

A thought emerged and I looked up at the king. "What about asking Losan who owns the Iversly warehouse the smugglers used, Your Majesty?"

"Front men and sham companies," Chancellor Berle said, but she looked thoughtful.

"Maybe," I said. "But someone has the title—"

"Or the building was leased," Javes said.

"Then there's a record of who leased it and who it was leased from, sir. And I bet she knows."

"You're damn shrewd when you want to be, cousin," the king said. He motioned to a guard. "Bring the clerk."

As Losan was escorted back, Jusson once more rested his chin on one fist, while the fingers of the other hand drummed on the chair arm. He frowned at her, radiating annoyance. "We find that you have not been forthcoming with us, Losan eso Dru."

"Your Majesty—" she began.

"You will tell us about the warehouse."

Her mouth parted in shock. "How did you know? How did you find out?"

"Never mind how!" The king slapped his hand on the chair arm, hard. "Tell us!"

Losan jumped straight up, and as her feet touched the ground, she was talking, giving us so much more than we expected. "I overheard Lord Gherat talking about a shipment of goods and I was concerned because there was nothing in the official records regarding it. So I discovered which warehouse the shipment was delivered to and went there to investigate. I realized that all of it was smuggled and so I confiscated and moved them to another warehouse."

"A warehouse full," I whispered.

"Of course, I was going to inform you, sire, as soon as I had gathered all the facts."

King Jusson ignored her lie. "When was this?"

"A little over a week ago."

It was probably the last run Lieutenant Jaxtir sent from Dornel. I looked at the clerk, wondering if she knew how close she'd come to being killed. There was no way Lord Gherat didn't know she had absconded with his contraband and she probably was saved only by the turmoil caused by Laurel's arrival in Iversly and Teram's own machinations. My mind shied away from what might actually be in her warehouse.

"Whom did you lease the building from?" Jusson asked.

"It was one that the dockmaster listed as being vacant, sire. I leased it through him." She tried an ingratiating smile. "The goods are still there." The king ignored that red herring too. "Then who owned the warehouse that the contraband was originally in?"

"Lord Chause, Your Majesty."

### **Chapter Forty-three**

"I own many warehouses, Your Majesty," Lord Maceal ibn Chause said. "I may have leased one to Lord Gherat in the past year. I'd have to have my agent check my records."

By King Jusson's orders, Lord Commander Thadro and Captain Suiden went with a mixture of guards and troops to Losan's warehouse, as Laurel Faena advised that the contraband be left there until he had a chance to go. The king also sent his Own to invite Lord Chause to the palace for a friendly chat, and

my uncle had strolled in, the epitome of an aristocrat as he looked me with slight disdain, as though I was just too boring for him to feel anything more.

The sun was casting long shadows outside the windows of the receiving chamber, and soon it would be time to go to Trooper Basel's funeral. Lord Chause lounged in his chair, casting a world-weary gaze over Lord Esclaur and Captain Javes. He then looked back at King Jusson. "May I ask, Your Majesty, the nature of the charges against Gherat?"

"No."

"Oh. Well, what about Teram?" My uncle looked at me. "Tell me, Rabbit, did your cousin really try to lead a revolt wearing a Locival costume?"

I frowned at his pointing out my relationship with Flavan but Jusson spoke before I could. "Nor have I asked you here to discuss Teram ibn Flavan."

Lord Chause smiled faintly. "I beg pardon, sire."

King Jusson watched my uncle for a moment. "Do you know how close we stand to war, Maceal?"

"I thought you took care of that, Your Majesty."

"No, not with the House of Flavan. With the Borderlands."

"I've heard the nonsense about the spritewood and dragon skin, sire." My uncle's lip curled even more.

"It's not nonsense, Maceal," Jusson said.

"I again beg pardon, Your Majesty," Lord Chause said. "But I haven't been impressed with the, ah, Borderers they have sent to us." He sneered at me. "A clodhopping farm boy and a performing animal."

"The Border War was also unimpressive?" Lord Esclaur asked.

"A children's tale, Esclaur," Lord Chause said. "Fighting trees and chanting fairies? More nonsense."

"So full of nonsense, Maceal," Jusson said, "that we sued for peace and considered ourselves very fortunate that we received it."

Lord Chause opened his mouth.

"I have read the firsthand accounts of the battle," Jusson said, cutting my uncle off. He leaned forward in his chair. "Just one battle, Maceal. No others, not even an exchange of insults. Iversterre received the drubbing of its kingdom life." The king's eyes glittered. "It's not just a children's pantomime." A line appeared between my uncle's gray-shot brows, spoiling his sneer.

"I've also read the letters between my great-grandfather the king and the 'fairies.' And the resulting treaties." King Jusson's eyes glittered more. "Do you know why we have such a strong garrison at Veldecke?"

"I assumed to keep out the mad and the malcontents from the Border," Lord Chause said, still trying to sneer over a frown forming on his face.

"Oh, come now, Maceal," Esclaur said. "Think. Why would we need such a large force there if the Border was composed only of rabble?"



"Bandits—"

"No, my lord," Captain Javes said. "No outlaws come down at us from the Border. All our banditry is internal. Or from the sea."

"The garrison at Veldecke isn't to keep the Border people out," Jusson said. "It's to keep us in." He leaned forward again. "Even your brother and his wife didn't go through the garrison to the Border. They sailed on a Qarant trading ship to one of the Border portal city-states."

My ma always talked about that trip with a shudder, turning green at the memory of being seasick, though my da's face glowed at the thought of being at sea.

"Have you wondered why the army sends its problems to Freston and not the garrison at the utmost edge of the kingdom?" Javes asked.

"No, Captain, I can't say it ever crossed my mind—"

"Because we'd be bloody damned if we'd allow some gape-seed idiot in a uniform to violate the treaty because he couldn't think beyond his arse."

"My lord," Javes answered.

"Or any other body part," Esclaur muttered. "Like Groskin."

"Only the best go to Veldecke," Jusson said. "Yet in spite of all our precautions, my agent"—the king waved a hand at Javes—"has traced the flow of contraband from Veldecke to Iversly's port. What do you think this means in terms of the treaty?"

Lord Chause said nothing.

"It means that we're in deep trouble." King Jusson leaned back in his chair. "Our army was decimated in the Border War, Maceal. We were really fortunate that Tural didn't find out until much later, as we would all be speaking Turalian and sporting clan markings." He rested his chin on his propped-up hand. "Now, because of some who'd looked to fund a little civil disobedience and others seeking to line their coffers, we are facing war again with— how did you put it, Javes? The only country to beat us bloody stupid." I looked at the captain, thinking that at least one of King Jusson's spies had been exposed.

"Even now Ambassador Laurel is with Foreign Chancellor Berle, trying hard to find a diplomatic solution, but they're not hopeful." King Jusson sighed. "Our great lords and senior officials involved in smuggling and slave running. Our warehouses full of body parts. Our churchmen carrying those thrice-damned corpses as Staves of Offices. Our soldiers with hauberks and shields made out of the skin of one of the treaty signer's sons." He saw my start. "Oh, yes, cousin. Judging by the letters she sent to my greatgrandfather, Dragoness Moraina was very much involved in the drafting of the treaty." I frowned at that—honored Moraina did not read or write.

"I never questioned Gherat," Lord Chause said. "Why should I have? As he is your Lord Treasurer, I just assumed anything he did had your approval." I shifted in my chair. This was not the time to shove all the blame on the king.

Jusson considered Lord Chause. "You're right," he said after a moment. "Gherat is my responsibility." He stood up. "Therefore I am declaring all profits gained from agreements with the Lord Treasurer to be forfeit due to his treason." He smiled at Lord Chause. "Of course, if you can prove that your business with Gherat was legitimate, then you'll retain the assets." His smile widened. "But that means that you'll have to open your books to our auditors."

Lord Chause also stood, his eyes starting from his head. "Your Majesty—"

"We will, however, make concessions to those who cooperate with us."

"Your Majesty, I assure you, all I did was lease my warehouse to Lord Gherat. Or rather my agent did. As far as I'm concerned, my dock properties are just one of the many business ventures I have."

That collided with something Esclaur had said. "Do we know, Your Majesty," I asked, "who owns the restaurant with the ice boats? Or at least the property the restaurant is built on?"

"Ah," Jussion said, drawing it out as my uncle's face paled. The king smiled while his eyes remained cold. "Your nephew's not quite the bumpkin you named him, is he?"

At that point there was a knock on the door. The royal guard opened it and Lord Commander Thadro and Captain Suiden, returned from the warehouse, entered and bowed. "Forgive our intrusion, Your Majesty," Thadro said, "but Trooper Basel's funeral is about to begin."

"We will be there." King Jussion turned to Lord Chause. "We have to attend a funeral for a gallant—"

Basel? I thought. Gallant?

Jussion gave me a sidelong look. "A gallant trooper who was murdered as part of this whole fiasco involving Dru, Flavan, and now your House." He nodded to two guards who moved to flank Lord Chause. "Please stay and enjoy our hospitality, Maceal. If you have need of anything, these guards will see to it. I shall return to take up our conversation after the funeral." He pointedly waited for my uncle's shaky bow before he left, pulling the rest of us in his wake.

The sun was just above the sea when we arrived at the churchyard. A pyre had been built of wood and Trooper Basel's stag body placed on top of it. Both regular troopers and royal guards stood around the pyre facing outward, holding their swords in front of them with the points resting on the ground. Pennants were placed at intervals around the pyre also, and they flapped in the evening breeze—or because my personal windstorm kicked up again.

As we arrived, Lieutenant Groskin stepped up and saluted. Behind him came Jeff and Basel, still in stag form, who made their way to me. The royal guard who had accompanied us from the palace gave the

haunt lots of room.

"Good job, Lieutenant," Javes said, looking around.

"Yes, it is," King Jussion said. Torches were lit, waiting for the firing of the pyre, and they painted the king's face gold with flickering light. "Have you gotten over your squeamishness of the 'magical,' Lieutenant Groskin?"

Groskin cast a glance at Suiden's glowing green eyes. "Yes, sire."

"And you no longer believe that our cousin Rabbit and the Faena cat are hell personified?"

"Yes—I mean, no, sire." Groskin now glanced at me, then away. "I didn't really believe that to begin with, Your Majesty. It's just that—"

"You know, we have taken a great dislike to that phrase."

"Uh—"

"Go ahead! It's just what?"

Groskin stared at the ground. "I was afraid, Your Majesty."

"So you acted with—what was it you said, Captain Prince? Ah, yes. 'Willful blindness and gross stupidity,' and became something worse than just a frightened man—a dupe." Suiden cast a sidelong glance at Javes, who found the pennant nearest him fascinating.

"And so betraying the trust of your captain and fellow lieutenant, and perhaps helping thrust us to the brink of war," Jusson said.

Groskin didn't respond.

"As this affects the well-being of our realm, we will discuss your disposition with Captain Suiden. Until then, you will obey your captain, understood?"

"Yes, sire."

We continued up to where the clergy stood, Groskin falling in behind us. Patriarch Pietr was still in penitent sacking and without staff or any other badge of his office. He was flanked by Doyen Allwyn and Archdoyen Obruesk. "Your Majesty," the patriarch said as King Jusson stopped in front of him. "As we are doing penance, I cannot conduct the funeral so the archdoyen will officiate." He sighed. "He's the only one who didn't have a spritewood staff." The archdoyen nodded, managing to look both smug and stern at the same time.

"I see." The king's face was blank, though his eyes narrowed.

"He understands, don't you, Archdoyen"—the patriarch gave Obruesk a look that reminded me of Suiden—"that this is not the time for riding favorite hobby horses."

"I am fully aware of the situation here, Your Holiness," Archdoyen Obruesk said. His eyes rested on me for a moment, taking in the butterflies, then shifted to Basel next to me. "No matter how irregular it is to conduct a funeral for a deer, and regardless of the church's doctrine on ghosts, the rites will be done correctly."

"I'm sure that they will," Jusson said. "Is Ambassador Laurel here?"

"Here he comes, sire," one of the lordlings said.

The Faena arrived with Chancellor Berle. Behind them were other lords and officials—I suppose Trooper Basel's funeral was the event of the hour. Not bad for a mere soldier, no matter how good a cook he was.

"Good," Jusson said. "Shall we get started?"

Despite the archdoyen's misgivings, the ceremony went well. I joined my troop and stood at attention while Obruesk recited the last rites over Trooper Basel. His deep voice merged with the ocean's roar, and it seemed as if the sea itself was speaking.

"As we came into this world, so we go out." Archdoyen Obruesk glanced at the dead stag, but to his credit he did not falter. "Shorn of what during life had defined us, we stand naked before God, where His light removes all obscuring shadows. So Trooper Basel also stands where"—the archdoyen ignored the haunt standing behind me—"his worth is not judged by riches or position, but by the only thing he can bring with him: his soul. And as we entrust Basel's soul into the Maker's hands, we give his body to the earth." The pyre was now being ignored. "To the last embrace, to return to that from which we were formed." He picked up a handful of dirt and, after looking about for a moment, threw it on the kindling.

"To the last embrace," the rest of us intoned.

"Until the day we are summoned forth," the archdoyen said.

"Until the new morn when we shall arise anew," we said.

"All corruption left behind in the cleansing earth," the archdoyen said.

"All shining with joy, reflecting God's glory," we said.

"The earth keep you, Trooper Basel," the archdoyen said.

"The earth enfold and keep you safe," we said.

"Peace, Trooper Basel," the archdoyen said.

"Peace and rest be yours," we said.

Captain Suiden picked up a torch and Captain Javes picked up another. The sun slid down behind the water, turning it orange, then red as they both lit the pyre. As dusk fell, the flames grew, and soon engulfed it, consuming the stag laid on top. I'd expected the stench of burning meat, and there was that, but underlying the char smell was again sweet grass and loam.

"Well, how was that?" I asked the haunt, turning away from the fire. "Feel like a little peaceful rest?" I looked closely at Basel, but he was just as he was before the funeral. Not even a little fading. I sighed.

"You're having the time of your life—death, aren't you?" Basel tossed his antlers.

"Do any shades hang about after they're avenged?" Jeff asked.

"Do not give him any ideas," I said.

## **Chapter Forty-four**

We think we got all the ashes, but we will check again in the morning when it's light, honored folk,"  
Laurel faena said.

We were back in the palace after Basel's funeral. My uncle, with the threat of auditors tearing his books apart, spilled his guts. Chancellor Berle's eyes sparkled with suppressed glee as she listened to names, dates and descriptions in which Lord Gherat figured prominently. It probably was too much, on top of everything else that had happened that day, for Jusson to hear in great detail how his trusted advisor and friend betrayed him, so afterwards he and his Own joined the Freston and the Royal Garrison troopers for a rowdy and boisterous dinner. The king himself toasted Basel again and again, each toast becoming more outrageous than the last as the wine flowed. The haunt had moved to the head table where Jusson sat with his lordling wolf pack and senior officers, standing regal with antlers held high, eating it up.

After dinner, the king decreed that the Freston troops would stay at the Royal Garrison, and Laurel would be a palace guest, as "the embassy, Ambassador, is not a healthy place to be, with who knows how many Pale Death spiders infesting it." He had earlier sent his Own to get Ryson and the then Suiden had left to guard him, and as soon as Ryson arrived, he was sent to the garrison stockade to join the other prisoners.

Laurel had not joined us for dinner, but had overseen Groskin and Doyen Allwyn in shoveling the pyre ashes into wheelbarrows and dumping them over the cliff into the sea, so that not even a bone fragment remained.

"The bridge is also fixed, honored king, so that the briars will open for travelers unless they are a threat to the throne." Laurel looked tired as he ran a paw over his head, causing his beads to clack and feathers to flutter. He stood at the door of the room that Jusson, Javes, Suiden, Thadro, Basel the ghost and I, with butterflies, had retired to. Everyone else had been dismissed, including Lord Esclaur and the rest of the wolf pack.

"Come and sit down a moment, Ambassador," Jusson said. "We've all had a hard day and are due a little respite." At his signal, I poured a glass of bloodwine from one of several pitchers, and offered it to the Faena.

Laurel hesitated, then entered the room, the guards outside shutting the door behind him. "For a moment, honored king." He sat down on the couch next to me, placing his staff beside him. I handed him the glass and he sighed deeply as he drank, licking the wine off his whiskers. "That's very good." He smiled and finished the glass, handing it back to me to refill.

"So, tell me, Ambassador Laurel, are you making progress with Chancellor Berle?" Jusson asked.

"It seems so, honored king," Laurel began, reaching for his glass. As I handed it to him, though, I brushed against the staff and, with a flurry of wings, the butterflies leapt up from my shoulder and flew to the sill of an open window. I blinked. What the hell?

Watching the butterflies, Laurel placed his glass on the table before us and rose from the couch, picking up his staff. As he raised it, the butterflies flew out the window.

"All right, what's going on?" Javes asked.

"I believe that's my question," Jusson said.

Laurel lowered his staff, his amber eyes reflecting the candlelight. "Lord Rabbit is coming into his full power, honored king."

"You've already said that," Jusson pointed out.

"There are affinities that come with the power. Mine is earth and it appears that Lord Rabbit's is air." A breeze, for drama's sake, gently blew around me for a moment.

"There are also signs, badges if you will." Laurel indicated himself. "I walk as a man would; normal cats do not." His whiskers swept back. "Even the ones who deign to associate with noncats." Noncats? I wrenched my gaze from the window and stared at the Faena, now wondering at how his universe was divided.

"Lord Rabbit's badge is his hair, perhaps because of some relationship between that and his strength." Laurel eyed the length and thickness of my braid. "It's something for him to explore."

"You've said that too. Get to the point, Ambassador." Jusson said.

"Yes, honored king," Laurel said. "I thought the butterflies were also part of the same affinity-and-badge marking as they are creatures that ride the wind. It appears that I was mistaken."

"Then what are they?" Jusson asked.

"We had physical translations at the embassy this morning where the troopers became what they would be—if they chose—in the Border."

"I was a wolf," Javes murmured, still watching me.

"Yes, the Captain Prince was a dragon and my guards were griffins. I've heard all about it," Jusson said as Suiden looked sidelong at Javes. "The point, Ambassador." "I didn't think that a physical translation could be sustained outside of the embassy, but again I was mistaken."

"Didn't you say, Sro Cat, that we were changed anyway?" Suiden asked.

"Not that changed yet, honored captain, else there would be fae and fantastic beasts roaming Iversterre." Laurel did not look at Jusson. "Or should I say, more of them."

"The point, Ambassador," Jusson said. "Please."

"I've made it, honored king." Laurel waved a paw around. "The People once lived on this land and either changed it or were changed by it. Perhaps both. Now you live here and the land is changing you."

"What does that have to do with the damn butterflies?"

"They were translated also, honored king, and didn't want to change back." Laurel frowned at me. "We should talk, Rabbit, about allowing strangers to latch on to you."

"Strangers!" Jusson turned to the captains and the Lord Commander. "They're not any of ours?"

"No, sire," Thadro said as Javes and Suiden shook their heads. "Everyone's accounted for."

"There are the rebels—" I began.

"No," Suiden said. "You had them fluttering around you yesterday in the embassy courtyard."

That was true.

"Then perhaps they're your fellow countrymen, Ambassador Laurel," Jusson said.

"No," Laurel said. "I am alone." He then stared down at his paw, frowning. He rubbed it against his side. "At least, I thought I was."

"You can't tell?" Jusson stared at Laurel. "Do you mean to tell me that the Border is filled with, uh—"

"Folk," I supplied.

"—folk who shift shapes, so that you don't know if it's really a butterfly or something else?"

"And who'd want to be a butterfly?" Thadro muttered.

"Yes, honored king," Laurel said, ignoring the Lord Commander. "You get used to it."

"That's confusion and madness," Jusson said. "How can the Border function?" "There are customs, structures and governances," Laurel said. His whiskers swept back in a smile. "There are also the Faena. Between us all, we manage to keep it reasonably sane."

"Define sane," I muttered.

Laurel chuffed. "It does get a little lively now and again, no?" He bowed. "Permission to withdraw,

honored king. I wish to check the wards at the church and then meditate, as tomorrow promises to be another eventful day." He looked at me. "Perhaps Lord Rabbit—"

"Permission given, Ambassador, and Lord Rabbit will stay with us," Jusson said.

Laurel sighed and, wishing us good night, left the room. As he walked out, though, he cast a frowning glance at the window the butterflies flew through.

"You are changing, honored king, and your kingdom is sliding towards chaos.' Then a good night, and he's gone," Jusson said. He picked up his glass, drained it, then held it out for Javes to refill. "Butterflies, ghosts, talking cats, mages, glowing circles, sorcerers, wind and thunder!" He eyed me over his glass rim. "Until you arrived, cousin, the only things I had to worry about were the Turalian navy and overambitious lords."

"It doesn't seem to be bothering you much, Your Majesty," Suiden remarked as I finished my glass of wine. I reached for the pitcher in front of me to pour another.

Jusson shrugged. "I've spent time at Veldecke, Captain Prince, and I've read my great-grandfather's letters, diaries and accounts of the last war. I know that the Border is more than tales of make-believe." He took a sip of his wine. "Just as I know that the Amir of Tural has court wizards. Wizards that follow the amir—or at least the amir's generals and admirals—into battle." The room grew quiet and I paused midpour, staring at His Majesty.

"And now you've a wizard of your own, Your Majesty?" Suiden asked carefully.

"No," Jusson said. "I also know the difference between a master and an apprentice, Captain Prince, and that Rabbit won't become a mage for many years." He took another sip. "What I do have, however, is Ambassador Laurel and through him the chance for something beneficial for both the Border and us." He sighed. "If he and Berle can come up with a solution to the mess we've found ourselves in."

"I'm sure they will, sire," Javes said.

"Oh, yes," Jusson said. "We will not have another war." He drained his glass and allowed Javes to pour another. "That, though, is for the morrow. Right now, we must see to the disposition of Lieutenant Groskin."

Suiden looked up, his face sharp. "'Disposition,' Your Majesty? He's not going before a review board?"

"No," Jusson said. "Groskin will remain in his present office with his present duties."

Suiden snapped his glass down. "Why the hell do I have to take him back?"

Jusson eyed Captain Suiden. "Is it something that you breathed in Freston's air or were you born contrary and willing to gainsay a direct order from your king? If I say 'Wear motley and ride an ass to war,' you say, 'Yes, sire.' "

"But the donkey wouldn't have been involved in a conspiracy, Your Majesty," Javes said.

Jusson took his glass of bloodwine, rose, and walked to the window, looking out into the night. "We are aware of Lieutenant Groskin's failings."

"Failings," Suiden said. "The man twice helps bring us to the edge of war with another kingdom—perhaps succeeding this time—and you liken it to a character flaw."

"I will not tolerate insolence, Suiden," Jusson said, still looking out the window.

Suiden's green eyes grew hotter, a flame flickering in them. "Why keep him with me? There are plenty of assignments that do not come in contact with the magical—and where his shortcomings won't matter."

"The king has spoken, Captain. Groskin will remain your lieutenant and that's an order." Lord Commander Thadro's voice was as mild as Jusson's.

I finished my glass and suppressed a yawn—it had been a long night and an even longer day—and I stared heavy-eyed at the king. "Factions, sire?"

Jusson stared at me over his shoulder.

"Factions," Suiden echoed.

I nodded. "You know, Captain, like you said—the arch-doyen. You've told me he's already been writing letters. Can you imagine what he and Doyen Orso would say if Groskin was disciplined because he objected to being physically translated? What their supporters would say? What the patriarch would be forced to say?" I glanced again at Jusson and then back at the captain. "You saw, sir, that His Reverence felt his position strong enough that he could barge in on the king's questioning of Teram."

Suiden frowned at me, then at his wine before finishing it. "Pox take it."

A yawn escaped me. "Sometimes, sir, you have to risk the part to preserve the whole." I drank more wine.

"Oh, really? You want Groskin as part of your unit?" Suiden asked. Javes reached over with the pitcher and poured him another glass, and Suiden gave his fellow captain a narrow look.

"Hell no—I mean, as I'm a lieutenant now, wouldn't I be assigned elsewhere, sir?"

"I was thinking of asking Ebner to assign you to me," Suiden said.

"What makes you think Rabbit is going back to Freston?" Jusson said before I could respond. He turned around to face the room.

"But you've just said you didn't want Rabbit at Court, sire," Javes said.

"No. I said that I don't plan to have Rabbit as my tame mage." Jusson waved a hand. "But that's something for later. Right now we're discussing Groskin, and my decision is final, Captain Prince. He will remain with his unit."

"Factions," Suiden said, frowning at the wall in front of him.

"Factions," I echoed this time. "The Border is rife with 'em. It's why the Border didn't sweep down during the War and just take back Iversterre."

"Oh?" Jusson asked, his brow raised.

"Yes, sire. Once we defeated the Royal Army, no one could agree on anything else. Who to lead, where to go, how to get there, what to do when we arrived." I waved my glass, encompassing the whole room.

"The miracle wasn't that we won the war. It was that we had joined together to fight it." I drank more wine. "We lost Iversterre in the first place 'cause of factions. Cities against cities. Clans against clans. The cities and clans against each other. Elves against the other fae. The fae double-crossing everyone. Bit by bit, here a city, there a province, it was all taken away as we squabbled amongst ourselves." I gently



burped. "Pardon, honored sirs." Jussion and Thadro both smiled.

"So the elves don't get along?" Thadro asked.

"No, sir. The northern warrior clans think the city elves soft. The city elves think the clans are backwoods." I looked at Jussion. "Sort of like the northern and southern part of Iversterre, sire." Both Jussion and Thadro's smiles faded into thoughtfulness as I happily finished my wine. "Laurel Faena calls it 'lively.' I say it's insane. Vicars starting stupid fights over where one breathes in the Earth Songs. The fantastic slamming the human. The dragons thinkin' of everyone else as toys or food. Or both. And the mages—" I yawned long and loud. "The Weald council meetings drove my da crazy 'cause they couldn't even agree where to dig a privy."

It was Javes' turn to look amused. "That bad, old fellow?"

Suiden nudged the pitcher away, but I found it anyway. I poured another glass.

"Sod, yes. Sir." I guzzled my wine and, setting my glass down, leaned back on the couch. "It was the Faena who pulled us together during the War and made us fight as one. Now they keep everyone in check and remind us what happened when we were all divided." I felt something wet slide down my cheek. "Damn." I brushed the tear away but there was another. Honor Ash. The wind, which had been quiet, murmured softly and I strained to hear what it was saying.

"Rabbit!"

My eyes flew open. Everyone was staring at me and I sat up. "What?" "You started to go—I don't know, someplace," Javes said, his brows together.

"What?"

"It was like your edges blurred," Jussion said.

"There are stories in Tural," Suiden said, "of wizards becoming the very thing they summoned—water, fire. Or air."

We had those stories too. I sat up straighter—or at least tried to. "I summoned nothing." I blinked at the captain, trying to focus. "It's probably the wine. Y'all are a little blurry too. Sirs."

"Perhaps we should have Sro Laurel check on you," Suiden said, standing. "What with the translations and all the other weirdness."

"I'm not weird an' I feel fine, sir," I said. I tried to stand also and didn't quite make it.

Suiden caught my arm. "Well, for sure there's been too much wine. Bed for you, Lieutenant, then I find Sro Cat."

"Yes, sir," I said. I pulled away from the captain and took a step, then waited for the floor to stop moving. "I'm goin' to be awfully sick tomorrow," I remarked.

Jussion's frown disappeared and he laughed, putting down his glass. "Come on, cousin." He slung one of my arms around his shoulder, and the rune flared warm. He froze. "What the hell is that?"

"Truth. Once, twice, three times I've sworn to you, Your Majesty." I smiled fuzzily at him. "Even in the elfin rune circle before an elfin king."

"The Witness Circle is elfin?" Javes asked.

I gave the wolf a reproachful look. "You weren't listenin'." I pulled my arm away from the dragon and waved it around. "All Iversterre was once the People's, an' most of its great cities were elfin." I swung my arm the other way. "An' this was the seat of the elfin king before Iver took it away." My arm dropped and I yawned, my jaw cracking. "They remember that. They remember all of it, 'cause elves live forever." My voice slurred more. "But you know that. The king is old as my da but he only looks as old as me."

"Live forever!" Thadro gave Jusson a speculative look. "But why him and not others, even of his own House?"

"Hell if I know, sir." I yawned once more and my eyelids drooped. "Maybe somethin' to do with inheritance and landlaw."

Jusson stared at me with wide eyes. "Take it off me."

I looked at him blearily. "Sire?"

"Take it off, now!" Jusson was trembling.

Suiden reached over and pulled my hand off the king's shoulder, and Jusson quickly moved away, breathing hard.

"I could see—" Jusson stopped, then tried again. "I was—" He broke off once more and stared at my hand, now hanging by my side. "I should order you to cover it up."

"Cover up the truth, sire?" Javes asked. "That's not a good thing." He moved to take Jusson's place, reaching for my arm. "Though it's not a good thing to scare your king either, Rabbit."

Jusson gave a barking laugh. "No, it's not." He waved Javes away. "But damned if I will be." The king stepped back to my side. "Hold it away from me, though!"

I rested my hand palm side up on his shoulder. Suiden took my other arm over his shoulder and as we went out of the room, the royal guards fell in behind so that I had my very own procession to my bedchamber, held up on either side by the king of Iversterre and a prince of Tural.

## Chapter Forty-five

I knew before I opened my eyes the next morning that it would be wise to stay very still. I lay in bed swallowing hard against the nausea pushing up from my stomach, and thinking that just maybe I had control over it, when something knocked against my bed, causing me to jump. The next thing I knew, I was face down in the chamber pot trying to hurl up my toes. When I was done, I collapsed on the floor right where I had been kneeling and curled into a ball.

"I beg pardon, Rabbit," Laurel said.

I moaned.

"Oh. I doubly beg pardon," Laurel said, his voice much softer. His claws clicked on the floor, and he squatted down and laid his paw lightly on my head. "I have a remedy—"

"Yes," I whispered. "Please."

I heard him walk away and then the clink of porcelain. "You're going to have to sit up to drink this." I slowly rolled into a sitting position, and waited for my stomach to stop heaving, my arms resting on my knees, my head hanging down. "Hell."

Laurel handed me a teacup and I downed what was in it, my stomach roiling. I waited, holding my breath.

"I've more, Rabbit," Laurel said.

Without raising my head, I held the cup up and he refilled it.

It seemed that the first dose was staying put, so I drank the second.

"Do you think you can stand up?"

I nodded, then wished I hadn't. After everything calmed down, I got to my feet, with a lot of Laurel's help, and carefully walked back to my bed. Or a bed. I peered around at the opulent room as I sat down. "Where am I? And where's Basel?"

"The king had you put to bed here in the palace," Laurel said. He walked to the window blinds and closed them, and I sighed in relief. "And I asked the moon soldier to give us privacy. What happened after I left?"

I tried to remember. "Nothing—"

"Something must have, because for the first time since we arrived in Iversly I have been allowed to be alone with you." He came over to the bed and sat down, careful not to cause it to move. "Captain Suiden actually sought me out last night to asked that I, hmm, check you over." Laurel's ears shifted. "Something about the air?"

A memory abruptly surfaced. "Oh, yeah."

Laurel waited a moment, then sighed. "Tell me, Rabbit."

"It was probably the wine." My palm began to burn and I looked down into it. "Traitor."

"Tell me!"

I winced. "Betrayed and tortured." I caught sight of Laurel's ears lying flat and I relented. "They said that I started to fade into the air."

Laurel frowned. "What was going on when this happened?" he asked.

"We were drinking," I said. "A lot." At least I was.

"Nothing else?"

More of the memory popped up. "Honor Ash. I was thinking of her." I frowned. "Then the wind said something but I couldn't hear."

"Has the wind spoken to you before, Rabbit?" Laurel asked.

I eyed the Faena, thinking of what to tell him, and my palm began burning again. I held it up to him. "You did this on purpose, didn't you?"

"Yes. Answer my question."

I sighed and lowered my hand. "Yes, the wind has spoken to me before."

"Since when?"

I started to tell the cat about yesterday, when another memory arose—the wind laughing at me on a mountain lea. I glanced sideways at Laurel. "Since when you first showed up."

"As I said last night, air is not my aspect," Laurel said. "Earth is. It's how I tracked you." He considered me. "You were hearing the wind that long ago?" I started to nod again, but stopped myself in time. "Yes. The captain said something about mages being consumed by what they summon—and I remember stories like that too."

"That has been known to happen," Laurel said. He stood and went over to where his staff was propped against the wall. "And sometimes they're seduced. The water mage becoming a waterspout and so forth." He came back to where I sat. "The idea is to strike a balance, where you are not overwhelmed, nor are you suppressing. Neither is good."

I eyed his staff. "What are you going to do?"

"How do you feel?"

"Why?"

"Because I am going to show you how to meditate," Laurel said, "and it's difficult to do if your stomach is trying to come out your nose. Trust me on this." He was right, it was difficult to meditate while hung over.

I grasped almost immediately what Laurel was explaining, as it was very close to the way I prayed (something I hadn't done a lot of lately). But it was hard to clear my head when every bit of me was clamoring for attention. My hair hurt and each strand let me know it. Finally Laurel called a halt, saying I had done enough for now. "You understand the basics, and it'll come easier with practice."

I sighed and got up, rubbing my forehead.

"Do you also understand how to keep your thoughts from being scryed?" Laurel asked, also standing.

I forgot and nodded, and then winced. That was a little more difficult, sort of like rubbing my head and patting my stomach at the same time.

"Good," Laurel said. "Once you have learned to center yourself, we will move to the actual training." He rumbled in his throat as he stretched. "Which was been delayed enough—you could've been seriously hurt when you confronted Slevoic yesterday."

"I can't wait." I discovered tepid water in a ewer on the dresser and poured some into the bowl next to it. There was a shaving kit laid out, and I picked up the soap and brush and began to make lather. "To become something that I'd swear I'd never be."

"Stop whining," Laurel said. He walked to the windows and reopened the blinds. "I've told you that mages weren't the only ones who chew the mentha leaves." I stopped squinting against the sudden glare and stared as he met my eyes in the mirror. "You?"

"All of us who work talent. Why do you think Honor Ash took such time with you?"

"Apparently not because of my winning personality." I applied the lather, feeling sharp disappointment at

the sprite's ulterior motives. I picked up the razor and began to shave.

"She loved you, Rabbit," Laurel said, sitting back down on the bed. "Child and growing lad, she loved you, and she couldn't wait until you were of age so she could ask you to join the Faena. She would boast of you at each of the Faena councils—your quickness, your talent, your intelligence—until everyone else was sick of it." Laurel sighed. "I cannot believe I shall never see her again." He looked back at my reflection. "She was furious that Magus Kareste convinced your parents to apprentice you to him." His whiskers swept back in a wry smile. "She named him thief and laughed in his face when he came looking to see if you'd taken refuge with us. Honor Ash told him if you had, indentures or no, he'd not get you back. She also told him about his parents, his upbringing, and the status of his maleness. Or lack thereof." I said nothing, concentrating on finishing shaving. But all the while the thought lurked in the back of my mind of how I'd convinced myself when I ran away that no one cared—and how wrong I was.

"She was very glad, Rabbit, that I was going to find you," Laurel Faena said.

I finished dressing in silence; a new uniform was provided along with the shaving kit, crisply pressed, creases sharp. I started to walk to where I could see myself in the mirror to make sure everything was straight, and then realized that I didn't give a damn. I turned away and went to where the uniform I wore yesterday was folded in a chair. I picked up my sword and scabbard and buckled it on. I then ransacked the trouser pockets for handkerchiefs, and discovered the feather.

Laurel rumbled, his eyes on it.

After a moment, I went back to the dresser where a brush and comb were also provided. After watching me fumble with my hair (even though I had a mirror this time) the Faena rumbled again. "Let me do it." He took the brush from my hand and in a few moments I had my heavy braid back, the feather fixed to one of the ties.

"We need to talk about the covenant, and also what happened with Slevoic," Laurel began, putting the brush down.

"Rabbit!" Jeff called outside my door.

"But apparently not now." Laurel sighed. "I've come to believe there's a conspiracy deep and wide dedicated to keeping us from needful discussions."

I didn't respond but turned away from my reflection in the mirror and walked to the door, opening it—and blinked. Blocking the doorway was Basel, in his man form, wearing full ghostly armor and holding a really big sword. "Stop exaggerating," I said. The shade turned his head and gave me glowing red eyes. "And stop that too."

Jeff and several King's Own stood in front of the haunt, all looking annoyed. "He wouldn't let anyone come get you, Rabbit," Jeff said, "even though we told him the king sent us."

"My fault, honored sirs," Laurel said from behind me. "I needed to speak with Lord Rabbit in private and asked the moon soldier to ensure that we wouldn't be disturbed." He came out of the room, crowding both Basel and me into the hallway. "Time got away from us." He bowed. "Shall we go?"

Asked Basel to stand guard? I stared at the ghost and he shrugged.

"The dead are governed by the earth aspect, Rabbit," Laurel reminded me as we started down the hall after the captain of the guards, "which is my affinity." He cast me a look. "It was an asking, mind, which the haunt could've refused. Anything else would've been necromancy." The King's Own brought us to the

same chamber where we had first met Foreign Chancellor Berle. The nymphs and mermaids were all there, and Jeff quickly sought out his favorites.

"What happened to you, cousin?" Jusson asked as I bowed. The original table had been exchanged for a much larger one, and he sat in the middle of one side. His eyes focused on the feather, bright red against the dark of my hair. "I asked for you some time ago." We all turned and glared at Basel, who tried to duck behind me.

Jusson sighed. "Never mind, I don't want to know." Lord Commander Thadro and Captain Javes were on one side and Captain Suiden on the other side of the king. Jusson gestured at an empty seat next to Suiden. "Please be seated, Rabbit." He looked at Laurel Faena. "If you won't mind waiting outside, Ambassador. We have some brief army business and then we will have our delayed meeting." He waited until Laurel exited, then nodded at Thadro. "Bring him in."

Thadro signaled a guard who went out of the room and returned with Lieutenant Groskin—and Archdoyen Obruesk, carrying his staff.

"You again!" Jusson said, frowning.

"I didn't ask him, Your Majesty," Groskin said.

"Why shouldn't I be with my good friend's nephew," Obruesk said at the same time, "to give comfort at his time of travail?"

"He's not giving birth," muttered Javes.

"Consider him comforted," Thadro said. "Now please leave." But the archdoyen had caught sight of me, and lowered his head, glaring out from under his brows. "Once again you'd bar me but you allow an accused sorcerer to stay."

He really must have been sure of himself.

"Leaving alone the pesky detail of proof, without which accusations are mere slander. Your Reverence, once again you press uninvited into where you have no place." The king leaned forward, resting his clasped hands on the table. "But since you insist, you may stay while we conduct a military inquiry. You may also stay during our meeting with another country's ambassador. However, we shall inform the patriarch that we also get equal access to all his church council meetings." He smiled, showing his teeth, and waited.

Politics, indeed.

The archdoyen raised his head, still glaring, but he knew he had been routed. He spun around and stalked to the door, the bells on his staff tinkling as it struck the floor with each step. A guard closed it behind him with a gentle snick.

"Well?" The Lord Commander glared at Lieutenant Groskin.

"Sir, he insisted on accompanying me—" Groskin began.

"Leave it, Thadro," Jusson said. "We're sure the archdoyen thought this up on his own." Lord Commander Thadro settled down in his chair. "Under normal circumstances, Lieutenant, you would be up on a host of charges ranging from insubordination to inciting rebellion, with undermining morale, disobeying a direct order, endangering a fellow officer, and precipitating a war along the way. Not to mention sheer stupidity in aligning yourself with someone whom you knew to be perfidious—"

The king cleared his throat.

"—however, because the circumstances are not normal we have decided to give you another chance."

Groskin's head, which had been down, snapped up at that. "Sir?"

"You will remain with your unit and your captain in the same office you held before."

"Uh," Groskin said, looking at Suiden, whose eyes were hot green in his dark face.

"Twice you've come in contact with the magical," Thadro said, "and twice you've failed abominably. Do not fail a third time."

"No, sir."

"This is not a sinecure, Lieutenant," Jusson said. "As we said before, you have betrayed the trust of your fellow lieutenant, your captain, your entire troop, and the Royal Army. You have betrayed your king. You have a lot of proving to do."

"Yes, sire," Groskin said, still staring at Suiden. Sweat was beading on his forehead.

"You will go back to the barracks," Thadro said, "and sit in your quarters—alone. I want you to think on your good fortune in having a third chance, when most wouldn't have had the second. Dismissed."

Everyone was silent until the door shut after Groskin.

"Ten to one Obruesk is lurking about the hallway waiting to pounce on his 'good friend's nephew,'" Javes said.

"No takers," Thadro said.

"We will talk to the patriarch, and soon," Jusson said, his eyes hard. He then turned to Thadro. "Please bring in the others." Once more Thadro signaled and a guard went back to the door. The king looked at Suiden, his face easing—a little. "Cheer up, Captain Prince," he said. "It won't be nearly as bad as you think."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Suiden said as the guard returned, escorting Laurel Faena, Foreign Chancellor Berle, Lord Esclaur, several advisors, and, judging by his uniform, the Lord Admiral. Behind Chancellor Berle followed another guard carrying a large wooden box.

"Always 'Your Majesty' and never 'sire.'" Jusson propped his chin on his fist as Chancellor Berle and Laurel Faena sat at opposing ends and the others filled in the rest of the empty chairs around the table.

"Why is that, Prince?"

"I once called a man not my father 'sire,' Your Majesty. It didn't turn out well."

"Your uncle, the Amir of Tural?" Jusson asked.

The thought went across my mind that the difference between a king and a farm boy turned lieutenant is that when I pushed, I got smacked upside the head. Laurel chuffed once, which he turned into an unconvincing cough while Jusson frowned at me. "That's enough, Lord Rabbit ibn Chause e Flavan."

As I said.

"Rabbit—" Suiden began.

"All right, what's going on?" Berle demanded. The king raised a brow at her and she blushed. "I beg your pardon, Your Majesty—sire—" She stopped and took a deep breath. "It's like Lord Rabbit is holding a conversation with everyone else that I can't hear."

"Not just you, Berle," Javes said. "Esclaur and I can't hear either."

"But the ambassador, Captain Prince, and I can." Jusson looked around the room. "Does anyone else hear Lieutenant Lord Rabbit?" Lord Commander Thadro raised his hand. "Interesting." The king faced Laurel. "Why us and not them, Ambassador?"

"It is an ability, honored king, like having perfect pitch," Laurel replied. "Rare, but not unknown." He hesitated and then added, "It is also tied to having the talent, in some measure."

"Talent," Berle said, her voice hushed. "Magic?"

I cautiously looked around the table and took in the stunned looks aimed at Jusson and his Lord Commander.

"You call it that, honored chancellor," Laurel said.

"The Border must be a very interesting place," Jusson remarked, "if one can eavesdrop on another's thoughts at will."

"It's a little more complicated than that, honored king," Laurel said. "It usually takes a lot of training to become adept at thought-screwing. The reason why you're able to hear Lord Rabbit so clearly is that he is very strong—and he hasn't had much training on how to guard his thoughts."

A muttering went through the advisors, as the possibility having their thoughts being available for public consumption apparently didn't sit well, and they cast me uneasy looks. Seeing it, the king rapped on the table. "This is all very fascinating and bears further exploration. Later," Jusson said, disregarding that he had started it. He looked around the table. "Yesterday we had an attempted rebellion by the House of Flavan. However, it failed and those involved were either captured or killed—except for Lord Gherat of Dru and his kinsman, Slevoic ibn Dru. We have posted men at all city gates and docks, but it seems that they've slipped our grasp as several ships were seen sailing from the sea escape." An advisor looked at the Lord Admiral. "You haven't been able to apprehend them, Admiral Noal?"

Admiral Noal shook his head. "No. But we have patrols out looking and I'm confident that it will be only a matter of time before we do."

"And when you do, Noal, what then?" Berle asked, her face challenging. Admiral Noal looked at her, frowning.

"When he does, Berle, he brings him back to us," Jusson said. "Because of his role in the rebellion and other serious crimes, we have declared Lord Gherat outlaw, his House dissolved, all titles rescinded, and the reversion of all its properties and holdings to the throne." A faint gasp sounded around the table while Chancellor Berle sat back in her chair, smiling.

"Outlawed, Your Majesty?" another advisor asked. "Without a trial?"

"One of Gherat's crimes is against the people of the Border," Jusson said. "Murder and slave running. Chancellor Berle, if you would tell us what you found."

Chancellor Berle signaled and the guard placed the box in front of her. "Agents went out this morning, Your Majesty. This is what they returned with." Standing, she removed the box's lid, reached in and



pulled out a nobleman's walking cane with a silver handle. Apparently someone had noticed the dead sprite and had placed two rubies where her eyes were. There were bone-handle knives, belts and boots made of skin that shone with a luminescence, a wolf's pelt with head attached, and large apothecary jars. I stared at the piglet floating in one, and turned away, while Laurel rumbled deep, his ears pressed against his skull.

"This is just a sample, Your Majesty," Berle said, sitting down. "We've several rooms full. And, of course, you know what the patriarch found in his See."

"So there is no question that we have violated the Border treaty," the king said.

"None whatsoever," Chancellor Berle said, sighing. "What really concerns me, sire, is that not all the—the contraband stayed in Iversly. According to Lord Chause, a great deal, including captured Border citizens, were sold to outside interests, mainly Turalian merchants."

"We have sent a request for Ambassador Sro Kenalt to help us in our inquiries," Jusson said. "But we were dismayed to find that the ambassador is no longer in our city." Captain Suiden stiffened and turned in his seat to stare at the king—only to find Jusson watching him back. "I take it, Captain Prince, that you know nothing of either the flow of slaves to Tural or of your cousin's whereabouts."

"No, Your Majesty," Suiden said. "I haven't seen Kenalt since your reception—"

"Where you did disappear with him."

"—nor am I in collusion with Gherat or Teram." Suiden caught up with the king. "We were—drinking, Your Majesty." A faint flush shone under his dark skin. "And we were in sight of many."

"So you were," Jusson said, his eyes gleaming at Suiden. "And we've been told you have a very pleasing baritone and know the most amazing songs." He raised a brow. "But during your bacchanal your cousin did not spill any secrets about Tural's involvement?" The gleam increased. "Or would you tell me if he had?"

"I've been sworn to your service, Your Majesty, for the last twenty years," Suiden replied. "Yes, I would tell you."

"Would you?" Jusson repeated. "Always 'Your Majesty,' never 'sire.' Perhaps we should have you stand in the Witness Circle and give your oath once more. Would you?"

"Yes, Your Majesty. I have sworn to your service," the captain repeated.

"Would you?" the king pushed. "You had once sworn to the Amir of Tural."

"I didn't break faith, Your Majesty. The amir decided he no longer wanted my fealty."

"The amir cast you, his eldest sister's son, out? Why was that, Captain Prince?"

"He didn't like that I withstood him, Your Majesty."

"Oh? And this is a desirable trait we want in our own sworn men?"

"I have learned tact, Your Majesty. My 'no's are more diplomatic."

Jusson laughed in spite of himself. "You will not call us a fool to our face, Captain Prince?"

A faint smile crossed Suiden's face. "Yes, Your Majesty. Besides, I don't believe that you'll ever

dispossess an entire village just because you wish to build a pleasure garden for your favorite concubine. Complete with fountains, for which you will divert water, causing several other villages' crops to wither, their orchards to fail, their cattle to die of thirst—”

"We see, Captain Prince." Jusson considered Suiden. "So altruistic! Willing to face down your amir for the sake of peasants and cows."

"My ship's first mate came from there, Your Majesty—"

"Ah.”

"—and I also thought the concubine and her family were getting a little too fat while others went begging—"

"Politics too.”

"—and I was sure that my uncle would listen because I was right." Suiden shrugged. "What I was, was young and naive.”

"A volatile combination," Jusson agreed. His gaze then swept the table. "After twenty years of service, Prince Suiden has proven his fealty to our throne, so let there be no more questioning of his intent. Even by us.”

A few shifted at the king's declaration, casting uneasy, looks at Suiden's glowing green eyes.

"Also," Jusson said, "let there not be any questioning of whether or not we have violated the treaty with the Border. Though it appears that the majority of the smuggling revenue was used for Teram-turned-Locival's pantomime rebellion, there were others involved who just wanted fat purses. We need to discover what we can do to avert war.”

"Just because we lost the first war doesn't mean we will lose the next, sire," an advisor said. "Besides, we shouldn't be held responsible for the actions of brigands, no matter how highly placed and whatever their motivations.”

"Well said, indeed," Lord Esclair said. "Though, of course, if the situation was reversed and brigands based in the Border were raiding our kingdom, it would be intolerable.”

I watched color creep up the advisor's face. He glanced over at Laurel. "Do we want to air our differences before the ambassador?"

Laurel immediately pushed his chair back and stood. "You're right, honored sir. I will withdraw. But think on this. The Qarant are trading partners with the Border, and if they didn't know about the smuggling before, they will very shortly. Do you want them to also know that you refuse to take responsibility for what happens within your realm? How comfortable do you think they would be trading with you?" The Faena bowed, never taking his eyes off the assorted stunned and outraged faces, then turned and walked out the door.

"How dare he threaten us—" the advisor began.

"He's right," King Jusson said. "If we become known as a kingdom of cutthroats and thieves, the Qarant and others would be very leery about dealing with us.”

The advisor cast another look at Suiden, stopping at Captain Javes on the way. "Not if we win against the Border.”

"Win against magic?" Jusson asked. "We didn't last time, and we were a whole kingdom then, with all our Houses united." The king leaned forward. "And then there's the Turalians with their involvement in our offense against the Border, just when Teram decides to start his rebellion. Do you think that's just happenstance? We are sure they are watching very closely. What do you think they'll do if we go to war?"

"His Glory the Amir would wait until you're at your weakest and most distracted, then strike," Suiden said.

"Yes," Jusson said. "Using all his Court wizards."

"But wizards and djinns and afreets are just a child's tale—" The advisor broke off, staring at Suiden again.

Suiden shook his head, his green eyes afire. "No, they're not."

"Once we could pretend that Iversterre was the center of the universe and that the sun, moon and stars revolved around us," Jusson said. "That time has passed." He looked at Lord Commander Thadro. "Please have Ambassador Laurel join us again." It was quiet enough to hear the tap of Laurel's staff as he approached the table and his chair scraped loud as he pulled it out from the table to sit down. The king glanced around at everyone. "Evil has been done in our kingdom and we will address it. Understood?"

Everyone nodded.

"Good." King Jusson settled back in his chair. "Chancellor Berle?"

"I've spoken with the ambassador to see how we can rectify this, Your Majesty," Chancellor Berle said. "I have given you our recommendations."

"We have received them," Jusson said. He took a breath before turning to Laurel. "A heinous crime has been committed against your people, Ambassador. We beg your pardon here, and will send a letter of apology to your Council. Rest assured that we will bring to judgment any and all who are involved in this ring, no matter their station."

"Thank you, honored king," Laurel said.

"We have also reviewed your recommendation to send an emissary to the Border both as a gesture of goodwill and to establish an ambassadorship with our neighbor—an action long overdue. But we are concerned. With what has happened, can you guarantee the safety of whomever we send?"

"Yes," Laurel said.

Jusson's face lightened as a smile flashed across it. "Well, you're confident."

"I was given full discretion, honored king," Laurel replied. "Your representative will be safe. My oath on it."

The rune on my palm grew warm at the truth of his words, and the king looked my way. He then turned back to the Faena.

"All right. We name Foreign Chancellor Berle as our emissary." The chancellor did not look surprised but bowed her head in acknowledgement.

"We wish to see the list of those you choose for your retinue, Chancellor," the king said.

"Yes, sire."

"We have also reviewed your recommendation that all the remains that are found be returned to the Border, Ambassador." Jusson's gaze dropped down to Berle's grisly finds still on the table. "This also concerns us as we wonder if sending so many back would not precipitate the very thing we wish to avoid."

"I have considered this carefully, honored king, and believe that not doing so would be worse. This will at least allow their families and friends to mourn and perform the proper rites." Laurel sighed. "It will also help stifle any rumors of you keeping our dead for use as tables or coats. I'll accompany the bodies back and hopefully be able to ease the anguish their arrival will cause."

"We see." Jusson was silent once more. "All right. It shall be done." He turned to the Lord Admiral. "As by sea would be the fastest, Admiral Noal, please arrange for a ship to carry Chancellor Berle, Ambassador Laurel, and his—cargo back to the Border."

"Yes, sire," Admiral Noal said. He looked at Laurel. "Where, Ambassador?"

"Elanwryfindyll, honored admiral. A city-state on the

"Also arrange for a convoy, Noal." Jusson's mouth twisted. "What now to us is a ship of horrors will be considered a rich prize to pirates and other sea powers."

"I recommend that Captains Suiden and Javes and their troops escort Ambassador Laurel and Chancellor Berle, Your Majesty," Lord Commander Thadro said.

I stared at the Lord Commander, stunned, as I'd been certain that our assignment would end as soon as I heard that Laurel was returning home. But, like the church at Gresh, the Lord Commander was removing the embarrassment of two obviously talent-touched troop units, one apprentice mage, and a ghost, from the instability caused by Teram's failed rebellion. No matter Jusson's avowed embracing of the magical. Then, as the meeting turned to the logistics of the trip, I saw Javes and Thadro speaking together, and realized that, also like the Gresh church, Thadro had just placed someone he trusted inside Chancellor Berle's entourage. Wondering how that was all going to play out when they reached the Border, I glanced at Laurel Faena—and blinked at how he looked like the proverbial cat in the creamery as he worked out the details of our journey.

## Chapter Forty-six

With the threat of war hanging over it, the military juggernaut moved swiftly and the troop was at the harbor docks that afternoon, milling about as we waited to board our ship. Laurel had disappeared earlier with Chancellor Berle and a man introduced as the dockmaster to inspect what was in Losan eso Dru's warehouse. King Jusson had decreed that, as it was corrupt dock workers who had helped store the contraband, it would be dock workers who removed it and loaded it on the ship—after Laurel explained to them exactly what each piece was, and who it had once been a part of.

I was staring out at a trio of graceful windriders anchored in the harbor, my mind on how to get out of going to the Border. Besides not wanting to be on a death ship for the three weeks' journey, I was a runaway apprentice and the High Council wouldn't care that I was a trooper in the Royal Army, thrice sworn to King Jusson IV. They'd give me over to Magus Kareste as soon as I stepped ashore—if he

wasn't there waiting for me himself.

A commotion sounded behind me and I turned around. Admiral Noal was coming up the docks, accompanied by Lord Commander Thadro, Captains Suiden and Javes, Lieutenant Groskin, and—I closed my eyes and actually rubbed them before opening them wide—Ryson.

"What the poxy hell?" I turned to Jeff standing next to me. "Did you know?"

Jeff shook his head, his eyes also wide. "When the troop left the garrison he was still in the stockade." The party saw me and veered my way as Jeff and I joined the rest of the troopers in standing at attention.

"At ease," Thadro said. He turned to the admiral next to him. "Admiral Noal, this is Lieutenant Lord Rabbit. You saw each other at the meeting but weren't introduced."

Admiral Noal nodded at me, his eyes wandering over Basel. "Hello, Lieutenant. I know your uncle, Vice Admiral Havram ibn Chause, a fine officer." What I murmured must have satisfied the admiral because he nodded again, then turned to the Lord Commander. "A few more details to settle, Thadro, and then we'll be ready to start loading up."

"Go on ahead, Noal," Thadro said. "I'll be with you in a moment."

Admiral Noal looked at Groskin and Ryson, then back at me. "Sure, take your time." He nodded once more and walked away toward the dock offices.

"Captain Suiden, gather all the men together, please," Thadro said and waited until we fell into formation in front of him. "Well?" he said to Groskin and Ryson, still standing by him.

First Groskin, then Ryson, apologized to me and to the rest of the troops, just as if we all had a nursery squabble and were now being made to kiss and make up. I kept my head down the entire time and concentrated on how the water lapped against the hulls of the ships at dock, the cries of the gulls, and the smell of salt in the air.

"Risking the part to save the whole, Lieutenant," Suiden said after everyone had been dismissed. His fury was a physical force.

I was having a hard time controlling my own anger. "I sodding didn't mean this, sir. The only thing Ryson can call uncle is a mangy weasel. Why was he released?"

"Because if we slap Groskin on the wrist, we have to do the same for Ryson," Javes said, coming up to us, "as he's guilty of the same thing—allowing his fear of magicals to make him act unwisely. Or so says Archdoyen Obruesk."

He growled the last part, his eyes yellow and hard. "The Lord Commander wants to see us, Suiden."

I did not watch the captains move off. Neither did I watch Groskin and Ryson standing over to the side. I walked over to where my new trunk lay in the shade of a building and sat down on it. (My old one was left behind just in case any Pale Deaths had taken up residence in it.)

"Don't they care?" Jeff asked as he followed. He made me scoot over and sat also. "I can see Groskin as he sort of lost it, but Ryson was Slevaic's suck-up ever since the lieutenant came to Freston."

I made a sound of assent.

"And they're going to send him to the Border?"

"Politics, Jeff," I said. "The archdoyen is bucking against the king, maybe because of me or because of Dru, maybe both. Or maybe just because he thinks he can." I remembered Obruesk's glares at Laurel and me. "He doesn't like Border folk much."

"They haven't found Slevoic, have they?" Jeff asked after a moment.

"No, not that I've heard."

"Think he met up with Gherat?"

I sighed. "I don't know."

Conversation petered out and we sat in silence, watching the shadows grow longer as the afternoon waned. After a while I heard another commotion and I stood. I could see Laurel Faena, accompanied by Chancellor Berle, coming towards us. Behind them was a long line of men pushing carts loaded high. I sat back down facing the water, as I did not want to see.

"Lord Rabbit," Chancellor Berle said from behind me.

In politeness I stood again and turned, keeping my eyes on her face. "Yes, honored chancellor?"

"Have you seen the Lord Commander?"

"He went over there, Chancellor"—I pointed toward the dock offices—"along with Admiral Noal and Captains Suiden and Javes."

"Thank you." The chancellor bowed and hurried off to the offices.

"Are you all right, Rabbit?" Laurel asked, joining us.

"No." I nodded over to Ryson. "I'm not."

"Yes, Chancellor Berle told me," the Faena said, also looking at the trooper. "But I am sure that between the captains, honored Jeffen, and me, the Fragrant One will not be able to harm you."

I shrugged. "I'm not afraid of him. I'm just damn mad that he's free." I focused back on Laurel. "And it doesn't matter if he's on the ship, as I'm not going. Magus Kareste would grab me as soon as I step ashore."

Laurel turned around and stared at me. So did Jeff and Basel. "You must go, Rabbit," Laurel said. "I need you with me." He waved a paw at the line of carts going past us. "I cannot handle this by myself. Besides, there's your training."

"But the Magus—"

"Do not worry about the Magus," Laurel interrupted. "I will take care of him."

"Define 'take care of,'" I said.

"So young yet so suspicious." Laurel chuffed. "Kareste will not 'grab' you. My oath on it." He pointed at the red feather in my hair. "The covenant goes both ways, Rabbit. You are obligated to me, but I'm just as obligated to you."

I sighed, staring at my boots. If I'd known how much trouble the damn pact would turn out to be, I never would have eaten with the Faena. At this moment the back mountains above Freston had strong appeal.

"You're asking me to honor the covenant?"

"Yes, and I will protect you."

I had opened my mouth to ask him how he was going to manage that, when—for the third time—I heard a commotion coming towards us. I turned and this time I saw King Jusson with an entourage heading our way. Someone must have been on the lookout because at that moment Lord Commander Thadro, Admiral Noal, Captains Suiden and Javes, and Chancellor Berle emerged from the dock offices. They all changed direction to meet where Laurel and I stood.

Jusson stopped and immediately disappeared from view.

"Lord Commander." The king's voice came from behind a wall of King's Own.

"Sire, please," Thadro said. "We just put down a rebellion. If you must come down here, let the guard protect you."

"I refuse to cower either in my palace or behind my guards," Jusson said. "Move." The guards reluctantly parted in front and the king came into view again. "Good, everyone is here," Jusson said. He was smiling, but his eyes were gold as he looked around until he found Ryson. "We see that you've had another trooper restored to you, Captain Suiden."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Suiden said, his own eyes just as bright and hot.

"I have informed Trooper Ryson, Your Majesty, what his fate would be if he were to backslide into old habits," Thadro said. "At length and in great detail."

"Excellent." The king looked at me. "You should know that Archdoyen Obruesk told the Lord Magistrate that Lord Teram's rebellion grew out of the same fear that infected both Lieutenant Groskin and Trooper Ryson. He was so convincing that he had the Magistrate arguing with me to set Flavan free."

"The attempts on my life don't matter, sire?" I asked.

"No proof that he was involved, cousin. At this point all that can be proved is that Esclaur was poisoned in Flavan's house during a party. Anyone could've done that. Or so says Obruesk." The king shrugged. "And even if he did try to kill you, who could blame him with the threat of turning into an animal hanging over him? Again, says Obruesk."

"There was no threat—" I began.

"Quite a little temper tantrum the archdoyen has dirown, Your Majesty," Javes said over me, stepping on my foot.

"Yes. I've sent a message to the patriarch, explaining that I'll be attending the next church council meeting, and why. I believe that they will be appointing offices and I've sent His Holiness some suggestions." Jusson's look encompassed both Laurel and me. "There's something about the two of you that makes normally sane people's wits go fleeing."

"It's a skill, honored king," Laurel said.

Jusson gave a short laugh. "Skill, indeed."

"So is the Lord Magistrate going to release Teram, Your Majesty?" I asked, moving my foot out from

under Javes' boot.

"Oh, no. I explained to him that I didn't care if the fires of hell were coming upon his lordship. Shooting arrows and waving swords at one's king is totally unacceptable—and Teram's hide, animal or human, is mine." He then turned to Chancellor Berle while motioning, and Lord Esclaur stepped forward from the mob that stood behind him. "We have approved your embassy retinue, Chancellor Berle, and have only one addition. We have appointed Lord Esclaur ibn Dhawn e Jas as your aide."

Esclaur smiled faintly at the chancellor.

"Also, we have turned down your request for embassy guards. Captains Suiden and Javes and their men will act in that capacity until a permanent ambassador is chosen."

"Yes, Your Majesty." Chancellor Berle was wearing her high stakes game face. "And servants?"

"Supplied from the royal household," Jusson said. He waited for her bow and murmured thanks before turning to Suiden. "Captain Suiden, the success of this mission rests on you and your men, as much as it does on Chancellor Berle. So it is very important that you put your troop back together so that it functions as a unit again."

"Yes, Your Majesty," Suiden replied, his own face blank.

Jusson sighed. "Did I ever tell you, Captain, that as prince I served in the navy?"

"No, Your Majesty."

"I found it to be a very enlightening experience. The well-being of the ship depended on all crew members being able to work together as a whole."

"My men aren't sailors, Your Majesty," Suiden said.

"No, but you are, Captain Prince."

Suiden became still.

"You see that ship in the middle?" Jusson pointed to the largest of the three windriders in the harbor.

"Yes, Your Majesty," Suiden whispered, staring out over the water.

"It's yours."

"Mine."

"For this trip to the Border, you are her captain. Lord Admiral Noal has outfitted her with an experienced crew, but they all answer to you." Jusson paused, and although Suiden said nothing, the king smiled.

"You have approximately three weeks until you reach the Border. Use your time on her wisely."

I too stared over the water at the middle ship. As both a bribe and a palliative to ease the pain of taking back Groskin and Ryson, she was magnificent, her graceful lines evident even to my ignorant gaze. I glanced at Captain Suiden, who did not take his eyes off the windrider. Sometimes making a virtue out of necessity was a very easy thing.

"Sire," Lord Commander Thadro said softly, looking behind the king.

Jusson quickly turned around. "Oh, blast and rot it! What now?" The troopers and dock workers parted,



bowing low in reverence as they hadn't for King Jusson, making way for Patriarch Pietr, his penitent sacking and shaven head covered by his robe and hat of office. Following him were Doyen Allwyn, and bringing up the rear, Archdoyen Obruesk, minus his staff.

The patriarch stopped in front of King Jusson. "Please forgive my intrusion, Your Majesty, but I've been looking for you and was told you were here. I've come to make a request."

"Yes, Your Holiness?" Jusson asked.

The patriarch gestured for the clergy to come forward. "As the Holy Church has been involved, however unwittingly, in the horrors perpetrated against the Border, I would like to send Doyen Allwyn with the emissary so he can speak to the Border High Council about the Church making restitution."

"Of course, Your Holiness," Jusson said, "But isn't he going through purification?"

"He can fast and pray on the ship just as well as anywhere else," Patriarch Pietr replied. He gestured again, this time harder, and Archdoyen Obruesk, who had hung back, dragged himself forward. "I also ask to include the archdoyen—"

It became very quiet.

"—as he has shown much interest in recent events. This way he can witness them firsthand and gain greater understanding of the consequences of the sin of pride and what happens when one thrusts oneself where he has no authority." Obruesk's position apparently wasn't as strong as he mought. Or the patriarch's was stronger.

"Of course, Your Holiness," Jusson said again, showing that he had his own game face.

"Thank you, Your Majesty. You are most generous." The patriarch turned to Thadro. "It has come to my attention, Lord Commander, that you do not have a chaplain going with you."

"No, Your Holiness. There hasn't been time to look for one."

The patriarch nodded. "I understand. Things have been moving very quickly." He smiled, a baring of his teeth. "May I recommend the archdoyen?"

The patriarch's was a much, much stronger position.

"Uh—" Thadro said as I struggled not to let my mouth fall open. "I'm sure that if he chooses to conduct services—"

"No, Lord Commander," the patriarch said. "This will be another way for him to gain understanding of what it means to—how do you call it? Follow the chain of command. Let him fill the office of chaplain with all its attendant duties."

"Yes, of course," Thadro said, his voice a little faint.

"Thank you." The patriarch raised his brows. "What rank will he have?"

"Has he been in the army at all, Your Holiness?"

"No, Lord Commander."

"Captain, then. But it's a noncommand commission."

"You mean that no one has to obey him?" More teeth showed in the patriarch's smile.

"No—I mean, yes, that's right."

"But he has to obey the others?"

"In military matters, yes."

"Which are?"

"What the other officers say they are," Thadro replied.

The patriarch's smile was so wide that his eyes were narrow slits. He turned to the archdoyen. "What a wonderful learning experience this will be for you."

## Chapter Forty-seven

I tried once more to convince Laurel to release me from the covenant and let me stay in Iversterre, but he again swore to me—in front of Jusson—that he would not allow Magus Karesto to take me, and Jusson stated that he couldn't have an unschooled mage running wild in the Royal City.

"I cannot chance it, cousin," the king said. "Every day it seems that something else pops up." His gaze rested a moment on my braid and feather, then dropped to the rune on my palm. "And I cannot like what happens when one comes in contact with that."

I opened my mouth to explain that I didn't go around touching people on purpose, but Laurel spoke before I did. "It is like getting ambushed, no? But with training, Lord Rabbit will be able to control its, hmm, side effects. Which I hope to be able to do during this trip."

Jusson grinned at my expression. "Well, I am your king as well as your cousin and I command you to go with the Faena cat." His grin became sharper at my continued expression. "We took Ambassador Laurel's word that he could keep our emissary to the Border safe, and now he's swearing the same for you. Are you saying that his word is no good?"

All of a sudden I was responsible for the peace process.

Captain Suiden walked up at that moment. "What's the matter, Lieutenant?"

"Captain Prince." The king sighed. "Threaten one of your men and you become all teeth and claws." I smiled at the memory of Slevoic's terror when he defied the captain and found himself facing the dragon. Then an older memory rose of Dragoness Moraina arguing with a mage, who decided to make his point by hurling a powerful spell right between honored Moraina's eyes. I also remembered his subsequent extreme discomfort when Moraina easily swatted it away. I gave the captain a speculative look.

"All right, Your Majesty. I'll go."

Laurel gave a short chuff. "I swear on everything I hold sacred that I will keep you safe, and you look at me sideways. The captain's shadow floats by and you're ready to follow it to the moon."

"It's called loyalty, Sro Cat, and is something you earn," Suiden said.

I quickly stepped between them as the Faena rumbled in his throat. "I trust you, honored Laurel. It's just that—"

"Hah! He said it to someone else," Jusson said.

"—I spent five years hiding from these folk and you're asking me to return with only your say-so as backup. What if the High Council commands you to give me to the Magus?"

"The High Council can take a long walk on a short pier," Suiden said, "along with this wizard. Right now I need you to attend to your duties. Your Majesty." With a bow to the king, he walked off.

"Make a man captain of his own ship and he thinks he rules the world," Jusson remarked. "Captain Prince!" he called out, and Suiden stopped and turned around. "You have our permission to leave our presence."

It was the third time I'd seen the captain disconcerted. He hesitated, then bowed. "Forgive me, Your Majesty." He gave another bow for good measure, then left.

The king caught sight of my face. "Do not be dismayed, cousin." He shrugged. "I could surround myself with sycophants who'd fawn and swoon over my every utterance. But that would mean they'd fawn and swoon over the next person too." The king gave a wry smile. "Ask Teram where all his supporters are."

"Sucking up to you, sire?" I guessed.

"Pox take them, yes. It's better to have strong men who do the right thing because it's the right thing to do, not because I say do it. And if they argue back or forget the occasional observance"—Jusson's black eyes gleamed—"I am sure I can remind them who's king."

"But what about those who are strong yet don't care about what's right," I asked.

"Those you avoid like the plague." Jusson sighed. "Anybody can be fooled once, Rabbit. The trick is not to let it happen twice."

"Yes, sire," I said, as I shot a glance at Groskin.

"That wasn't being fooled," the king said, following my look. "That was being betrayed by someone you had every right to trust. Now, if you had believed Teram's expressions of goodwill—"

"Not bloody likely, sire."

Jusson gave a short laugh. "You definitely aren't an idiot, cousin." He looked at Laurel standing silent next to us. "I would like to speak with Rabbit in private, Ambassador."

"Yes, honored king." Laurel bowed and walked off towards the group with the patriarch. I watched Patriarch Pietr's eyes light up as he made room for the Faena to join them. Archdoyen Obruesk, however, glowered.

"Trooper Basel, if you please," Jusson said to the shade, who also bowed and moved away.

Yeah, right, I thought. If I'd asked for privacy—

"You never did ask me what I saw when you put your hand on my shoulder last night, cousin."

I stared at the king, not quite sure I wanted to hear. "Sire?"

All amusement had left Jusson's face, leaving it strained. "There are certain beliefs that a king holds about his rule, especially one whose House has been ruling as long as mine." He turned his head, tracking a boat laden with lumber going out to the ships. "An unbroken line, all the way back to King Iver. I've never questioned it. Why should I? I must rule by divine right or my House wouldn't have lasted so long and be the measuring stick by which every other House determines their ennoblement."

"Yes, sire," I said, thinking of all the problems my degrees to his House had caused.

"Then you touched me with your rune and I was there, in the last hours of the battle for the City." The lines of strain deepened on Jusson's face. "Servants dead, women, children, their blood slick on the throne room floor. Those still alive fighting, desperate to save a remnant, while the founder of my House and his men swept over them like the sea at high tide." He took a deep breath. "I could see one lying dead by the throne steps. She had my mother's face, Rabbit, and her eyes were gold."

A gull cried as it flew low over the water.

"I always knew I had elf blood. How could I not when I see its evidence every time I look in a mirror?" Jusson gave a wry, pained smile. "But I never questioned it, just as I never questioned how Iver came to rule an elf city. I figured that the one didn't matter because the other was ordained by God." I stared down into the small waves lapping against the dock.

"Now what I've always accepted as true—" Jusson turned to look at me. "Would God ordain a rule that was begun on the deaths of children? And I, who sit on Iver's throne with my unbroken line and my elfin blood, what does that make me?" The lines of strain deepened on his face. "I looked into the mirror this morning, cousin, and saw a dead woman's eyes looking back."

"Yes, sire," I said, my voice soft.

The wind whipped Jusson's hair, exposing an elfin ear. "Then I managed to have a private conversation with the Faena cat. Not only do I contend with rebellions and revelations, but also a land in transition." He looked to where Javes and Esclaur stood talking together. "Turning into wolves, dragons, and sorcerers. Rumors have already begun to seep into the City, cousin." He turned the other way and caught a dock worker staring at him. Seeing he had the king's attention, he immediately picked up his wheelbarrow and moved to the waiting boat, but not without first sliding a look at me.

"I see, sire," I said.

"And what do my advisors say? Muster a force and bring it to Veldecke, just in case Chancellor Berle fails. Never mind that increasing troops there might provoke the Border to attack. I know it would provoke me."

"The Marcher lords, sire?" I asked, remembering who pushed for the last war.

"Everyone who's finally realizing that the Border is more than a once upon a time in the land of make-believe." Jusson sighed. "It feels like I'm riding a runaway horse with no saddle, no reins, no bit. Those I once trusted have proven false, and even those that, haven't—" The king's eyes now went to where Admiral Noal and Chancellor Berle were talking. "Well, there are ways of controlling wild horses, just as there are others who have proven true." His black eyes began to gleam again as he looked back at me. "You are my man, thrice sworn, the last time in that runic circle, damn near lighting up the sky. So I also name you my emissary, Rabbit. Bring me peace!"

"Me? Uh, sire?" I stared back at him, startled.

Jusson turned and beckoned Thadro, who stood a distance away. The king held out his hand as the Lord Commander approached and Thadro gave him a knife. My knife. "We had taken this so that if any had accused you of witchcraft in the defense of yourself, we would be able to produce it as proof of your innocence." He held the knife out and I took it, holding it with a limp hand. "It has been cleaned."

"Sire," I tried again. "I'm just a farm boy. I know nothing of diplomacy."

"Correction, cousin. You were a farm boy. Now you're my sworn liegeman, truth written on your right hand." He clapped me on the shoulder, once more grinning at my expression.

"Your Majesty," I tried a third time, "I wouldn't know where to start, how to start—"

"Do you think Berle has an inkling?" Jusson asked. "You know these Border people. She doesn't. A word, a gesture, an expression, and she could precipitate the very thing she'd come to prevent."

"So could I! I'd be a minnow swimming with sharks, sire—"

"Oh, I'd trust you to hold your own, cousin," Jusson returned. "You did here."

"But nothing depended on me here," I said, desperate.

"Lord Esclaur would argue with you, Rabbit," Jusson replied. "So would your troop, so would the haunt following you about. *I* argue with you, liegeman. You never give an inch, no matter who pushes at you. No matter what is pushed at you." His smile softened. "Don't worry, cousin. I'm not asking you to replace Berle. But I am asking you to make sure that no one forgets why they were sent. All of the reasons why."

I wanted to tell the king that being a plain horse soldier in a backwater mountain trade town suited me fine. The power and the glory I'd gladly leave to others more skilled—and ambitious—than I. I had opened my mouth when a dock worker trundled by with a cart piled with more pelts, the fur rippling in the harbor breeze. I caught a glimmer hovering over the boat and my heart stopped for a moment, afraid. Then I realized that I was seeing Laurel Faena's wards—and not, as I first thought, ghosts.

I dragged in a breath through my still opened mouth, and let it out through my nose. "Yes, Your Majesty," I said, giving in. "I will do my best to bring you peace."

"Swear to me, Rabbit," the king said. "To me."

I raised my hand, and I felt the warmth flow down my arm, across my body. "I so swear, Jusson. Fiat."

"Good," King Jusson said, satisfied. "Very good." He looked beyond me. "And just in time, as I think His Holiness wants us to join him."

The patriarch did want us, along with all the other troopers, to come together so that he could hold an impromptu service on the dock. After he finished, he had us line up and he laid hands on each one as he prayed. When he reached me, he hesitated. "Will you permit me to pray for you?"

I was standing with my head bowed in anticipation of the patriarch's blessing and raised my head in surprise. "Yes, of course, Your Holiness."

"I wasn't sure that you followed the teachings of the Church."

"Yes, of course I do," I said again.

"No 'of course' about it," Archdoyen Obruesk muttered. "He looks a pagan." He stood behind Patriarch

Pietr eyeing the feather and long hair with contempt.

I didn't see the look the patriarch gave the archdoyen over his shoulder, but Obruesk shut up. However, he held his mouth closed like a steel trap while his cavernous eyes burned. It was an easy guess whom he blamed for his fall from grace.

The patriarch turned back to me. "Who was your catechist?"

"Brother Paedrig, Your Holiness."

"Short, round man with red hair?" the patriarch asked, a smile lighting his face.

"It was red when I was little, Your Holiness, but by the time I left it had turned mostly white."

The patriarch laughed. "So that's where the good brother went." He looked over his shoulder again. "Even you can't question Brother Paedrig's orthodoxy, Archdoyen Obruesk." He faced me once more. "He taught both me and the archdoyen." He raised his hands, preparing to lay them on my head. "I wish, young lord, that we had time to talk both about my old teacher and what it was like growing up in the Border. Perhaps we can when you return."

I set aside the question of whether or not I would return, and closed my eyes as the patriarch prayed, asking God to bless and keep me safe, and give me strength, wisdom and guidance. Standard fare. He started to take his hands away, then stopped. "I also ask that what is torn be mended, what has been done in secret be brought out in the light, what needs to be loosed, be loosed, and what needs to be bound, be bound." My eyes flew open. Great, now the patriarch was spouting cryptic rot.

Patriarch Pietr frowned, his eyes catching mine in a glare, as one hand came down from atop my head and gave me a sharp tap against my cheek. "And finally, I beseech that Lord Rabbit learn respect for his elders." He then smiled even as his brows stayed knitted in a frown. "I wouldn't be surprised if some of Brother Paedrig's white hair was your doing." He tapped me again, this time more gently. "Blessings, young lord," and he moved on to the next trooper.

That night I stood at the railing of the largest ship, the Dauntless, having braved the boat trip out into the harbor. The two other, smaller ships, the Valiant and the Adamantine, were part of our escort, the king and the Lord Admiral deciding that it was better to be safe than sorry, and that three ships were a much harder morsel for pirates to swallow than just one. I was alone—Basel's haunt was inspecting the galley and Jeffen was stowing his gear in the soldiers' berth.

As I stared out towards the black expanse of the open sea, I heard the click of claws against wood and turned around.

"And so it continues, no?" Laurel stopped beside me and leaned against his staff.

"Yes, honored Faena."

"Have you meditated this evening?"

"Not yet."

"But you will?"

"Yes, honored Faena."

"It is important, Rabbit. It was only through blind chance that you were able to deflect what Slevoic

threw at you. Right now you are like a child with a sharp sword, more likely to behead yourself than anyone else."

"Yes, honored Faena."

We were silent, listening to the sounds of the sailors preparing for tomorrow's sailing, their shadows passing in front of bright lanterns and backlit windows.

"I felt the power of your oath when you stood with the king," Laurel remarked.

"He wished my efforts for peace, honored Faena."

"I see."

There was a burst of laughter somewhere behind us, voices raised in the excitement of a joke. Then they faded into the night.

"I will protect you, honored Rabbit, when we arrive in the Border," Laurel finally said. "You have nothing to be afraid of."

I nodded. "Yes, Laurel Faena."

Laurel caught my arm and gently pulled me around so we faced each other. "What did the Magus do to instill such fear in you?"

I shrugged, as a memory I had long pushed down surfaced. Sitting at my apprentice's desk in the Magus' study, I'd quickly solved a problem he had given me as he stood over my shoulder. I remembered looking up into his face, expecting the same kind of warm praise my da would give for a job well done, only to freeze at the glitter in the Magus' eyes as he stared down at me. "He'd look at me like I was an egg full of meat and he a starving man," I said after a moment.

Laurel sighed, his paw still resting on my arm. "As I've said before, you're very powerful, and some collect power as barrels collect rain. Here a drop, there a sprinkle, until they're full and wet even when everything else is dry and there are no clouds in sight." He let his paw drop but continued to watch me. "Tell me, Rabbit, did you go through a ceremony when you first came to the Magus?" Another memory arose. "Yes." I thought a moment. "The Magus cut a lock of my hair off, then gave me water in a silver cup. He threw the hair in a fire he had burning in a bowl." The flame had no fuel that I could see sustaining it and he held the bowl in one hand, mindless of any heat, and fed the hair with the other. I remembered my wary astonishment as the fire burned blue.

"The fire and water were to bind you to the Magus." Laurel laughed at my look of indignant horror. "Oh, not forever, Rabbit. Apprentices cannot be kept bound once they've demonstrated a mastery of their craft." Laurel stopped laughing, but his whiskers remained swept back in amusement. "Which happens in fifteen to thirty years. The Magus was with his master twenty before he was declared a mage." He eyed me with interest. "You should've been bound so tight that you couldn't have even thought of leaving. He must have been very surprised when he discovered you were gone, and I do not wonder that he believed Honor Ash had something to do with it."

I said nothing, trying to deal with what Laurel had said.

Laurel rumbled—it was almost a purr. "And the Magus must've been very, very surprised when, after he had finally found you, he was swatted away again like a pest of a fly." He saw my look. "Captain Suiden told me about it after your first encounter with Slevoic ibn Dru. He was worried that your sickness might make you vulnerable to the Magus' influence." He shrugged, his beads clacking. "And perhaps you

would've been, but with the rune—"

"There were more than one," I said, interrupting Laurel.

"What?"

"I saw their eyes, there were more than one that found me.

"More than one mage." Laurel's voice was flat.

It was quiet, the sailors apparently having finished, and now all I heard was the murmur of men speaking in the distance and the creaking of the ship as it gently rocked in the harbor currents.

"Still think you can protect me?"

"What?" Laurel said again as he returned from wherever he had gone. "Oh, of course. That is not a problem, Rabbit." His eyes glowed in the lantern light as he stared at me. "How many more were there?"

I counted the shadows that I had seen. "Five, I think."

"Five mages and you knocked them away, then shut them out so that they were reduced to sending messenger birds."

Suiden wasn't the only one who had been talking, though to be fair, Laurel could've learned about the bird from almost anyone, not just the king.

Laurel shook his head, sending his beads rattling once more. "No, Magus Karesta shall not get you back, indentures or no." He raised his paw and the rune shone against the darkness and my palm echoed its warmth. "So I swear to you, Rabbit. Fiat."

## Chapter Forty-eight

It seemed that Admiral Lord Noal felt that even three ships were scant protection with the Turalian menace lurking out in the open sea, as we were rendezvousing with Vice Admiral Chause for additional protection. In the afternoon of our second day at sea, sails were sighted and I watched Captain Suiden come out of his cabin, followed by the ship's first officer, and peer through a spyglass. He then collapsed it and handed it to Lieutenant Falkin, and they both went back into his cabin.

I had suggested to Captain Suiden when we had first set sail that I didn't need to be guarded anymore as all those who wished me harm were either in custody, fled, or back on shore. Suiden had suggested back that maybe I had too much time on my hands as I was coming up with stupid suggestions, and if I had any more like that, he would find something to occupy my time, like cleaning out the bilges. So Jeff and I stood in a spot out of the way of the scurrying sailors, watching the sails of the other ships grow larger on our horizon. Worry tightened my spine at the thought of meeting another family member, as the ones I'd met so far, with the exception of the king, had not been pleasant.

On the other hand, for the first time in three years I didn't have the threat of Slevoic hanging over me, I wasn't seasick (like Ryson—there was a God), and the sun felt good across the back of my shoulders, the wind brisk in my face. My lips pulled into a reluctant smile. Life, at least at this moment, was tolerable. . .



"Misbegotten spawn of a pig-swiving cur! Haunt my galley, will you?" Jeff and I turned around just in time to see something flash by. It made a turn and headed back towards us—Basel's shade. He overshot his mark and almost ended out in the sea, then quickly moved behind me. We stared at him, then shifted as we heard pounding steps coming our way. The ship's cook ran into view, wearing a stained apron and carrying a huge meat cleaver. I took a step back and nearly went over the rail myself as I realized the cook's apron and cleaver were full of drying blood.

It'd become clear within a short while of us setting sail that the Dauntless' crew was unhappy with us replacing their marines, with an army captain being foisted on them, with the magical, with women on board, with the cargo, with our destination. And they were extremely unhappy with Basel. A Freston lady once told me that soldiers were wholly given over to talismans, mascots, and rituals. (So I always put my armor on in a certain order; I'm still alive.) But we were piddlers compared to seamen, who had superstitions about everything—as one trooper discovered when he started to whistle. Ghosts, especially those of murdered men, topped the unlucky list. They must have been told that Basel was part of our complement because there were no shrieks, screams or other displays of alarm when he arrived on board with us. There was, however, a lot of spitting and other signs to ward off evil. At first it was sort of upsetting, but then I figured that if they wanted to hawk all over the deck, it was fine by me—I didn't have to clean it up.

I faced the ship's cook as he hefted his cleaver and glared through me at Basel. "You keep that whoreson out of my galley, or I'll send him to hell where he belongs!"

There was an army rule that the cook was never to be upset (especially around mealtimes), but I'd be pox rotted if I'd allow the salt dog to threaten me. Besides, as I eyed his gory cleaver and apron, I was pretty sure I wasn't going to eat anything he was preparing. "Are you waving that cleaver at me, sailor?" I asked.

There was a sudden stillness as both sailors and soldiers stopped to watch, and First Lieutenant Falkin emerged from the crowd to stand next to the cook.

If King Jusson looked like a dark elf from the coastal city-states, Falkin was from the northern elfin clans. Tall and slender, with dark gray eyes set above high cheekbones, his fair skin showed none of the weathering of one who'd been since childhood at sea. He wore his pale blond hair long enough to completely cover his ears, and I wondered if the sailors considered pointed ones unlucky.

"Is there a problem, Das?" Falkin asked.

"The haunt was in my galley again, sir, and I told the lieutenant here to keep the damn thing away from me."

"That's a reasonable request," Falkin said, facing me.

I smiled. "I have no problem with reasonable requests, sir. I do, however, have a big problem with people brandishing weapons at me." I looked at the cleaver. "Especially bloody ones."

"That is also reasonable, Das," the first officer said.

The cook lowered the cleaver. "Aye aye, sir."

Falkin returned my smile. "I tell you what, Lieutenant. You keep the ghost out of the galley, and I keep Das from, uh, brandishing his weapon at you."

I ignored the snickers that went through the sailors. "I'll try, sir. But as Trooper Basel is now a shade, he

doesn't quite have the imperative to obey an order that he once did."

"I see," First Lieutenant Falkin said. "Would you like me to try?"

"I say, Falkin, Rabbit," Captain Javes said as he walked up. "Is there a problem?"

"No, sir!" we both said at the same time as we snapped attention.

"'Cause it would bother Captain Suiden awfully that his first officer and his lieutenant were having difficulties, what?"

"Sir, yes, sir!" I said.

"Aye aye, sir!" Falkin said at the same time.

"And we really don't want to do that, do we?" Javes asked, peering at us through his quiz glass.

"No, sir!" Lieutenant Falkin said.

"Sir, no, sir!" I said.

"Jolly good." Javes aimed his glass at the sailors and troopers, and they all realized that they had urgent duties elsewhere. The captain waited for the deck to clear, then did his bugger me silly smile. "Oh, my word. I almost forgot— Captain Suiden would like to have you both gather the crew and troops so he can address them. Now."

I watched the first lieutenant's face as Javes strolled away. "Uh, sir?" Falkin turned to me with one brow raised.

"Captain Javes is of the king's Court."

"He is?" Falkin's other brow flew up at my nod. "And you? Are you also someone special?"

"Hell, no, sir. I'm just a farm boy."

"That's not what I've heard, Lieutenant Lord Rabbit ibn Chause e Flavan, sixty-four degrees to the tiirone."

"Oh, that. I didn't grow up with it, sir." I grinned, shrugging. "I've kicked my share of manure while behind a plow." I saluted. "I'll go get the troops."

But apparently that wasn't necessary. At Falkin's gesture, I followed him up to the bridge where he had the bosun pipe assembly.

"Thank you, sir," I said, as I stood at attention next to him.

"Don't mention it." Falkin watched the men gather below us. "But please keep the ghost out of the galley. In the navy we try not to upset our cook, especially around mealtimes."

Below us the crew and passengers gathered, the sailors on one side and the troopers on the other just as if a line had been drawn down the middle. And separate from everyone else stood Chancellor Berle, Chaplain Obruesk, Laurel Faena and Lord Esclaur. As the last man appeared, Captain Suiden came out of his quarters, followed by Javes, Groskin, and the ship's second and third lieutenants.

"We have been charged by King Jusson IV to escort the first ambassador from Iversterre to the

Borderlands," Suiden said as he stood braced against the moving ship, his hands behind him as he gazed down on the crew and troopers. "To this end, Vice Admiral Chause's fleet will form a convoy to accompany us—"

Just then the ship swerved and while the crew and ship's officers shifted easily with the change in direction, all of the troopers went reeling with shouts, curses and cries, some just catching themselves before they went over the railing. Groskin stumbled, desperately trying to keep his footing, as Javes and I latched onto the banister in front of us to keep from falling down to the deck below, with Jeff crashing into us. Captain Suiden, though, rode the change in direction as effortlessly as the seamen, casually shooting out a hand to catch Groskin before he fell. At the same time, Suiden turned his head to the helmsman and the muffled laughter that had started below on the main deck died out.

"Was that yaw necessary, Seaman Mattus?" Suiden released Groskin and walked over to the sailor at the wheel.

I could see Mattus' throat work as he swallowed. "Uh, aye—yes—sir. A course correction."

"I see." The captain reached over and took the wheel, moving Mattus aside. "You are then relieved of your duties until you can properly set a course." He glanced over at First Lieutenant Falkin. "You will supervise Mattus' training, Lieutenant. I want daily reports."

"Aye aye, Captain."

Captain Suiden watched the sea for a moment, his hands resting lightly on the wheel's spokes. He then sighed. "Sro Falkin, assign another helmsman, please."

At a gesture from the first lieutenant, another sailor came up from the deck to take the helm over from Suiden, who stood at his shoulder for a couple of moments. "Very good." Suiden turned, rejoined his officers, and looked down at the crew and troops. "I received two commands from our king. The first was to see to the success of the mission—not only the safe delivery of Chancellor Berle to her embassy, but to do everything in my power to help ensure the success of her mission. The second was to weld this ship's different complements into one." There was nothing but the sounds of sails and ship as the windrider cut through the water.

"His Majesty was very insistent that the second was necessary for the first to happen." Suiden placed his hands on the railing and leaned over it, his eyes sweeping both sailors and troopers. "I agree and will do everything possible to achieve it. Do you understand?"

"Sir, yes, sir!" the troopers shouted.

"Aye aye, sir!" the sailors shouted at the same time.

"Very, very good," Captain Suiden said as he smiled, his teeth gleaming white in his dark face. It reminded me of Dragoness Moraina at her worst (or best) and I edged a step away while a ripple went through the men below. Suiden looked over at First Lieutenant Falkin and I could see his body stiffen as he fought not to bolt. "Dismiss the men, Lieutenant." The captain then went into his cabin, Javes bravely following him.

At Falkin's dismissal, the crew and troopers scattered, clearing the deck fast. The first lieutenant then looked at me, his eyes wild. "A shark. The captain's a bloody shark."

"No, sir, a dragon. One that can hear through walls and see around corners." I followed the first lieutenant down from the bridge, anxious to put distance between me and Suiden.

"And you serve under him?" Falkin stopped, but I urged him to keep going. He took in Jeff and Basel in a panic behind me, Basel's eyes popping out of his ghostly head. He started walking again, picking up the pace.

"He's a fair captain, a good captain, and he takes good care of his men," I said, stepping right behind him. "Just don't make him mad with stupid stuff." Jeff made a strangled sound of assent. "I'd keep Mattus out of sight for a while."

"It was only a joke—" Falkin began.

"No, it was done deliberately to make the captain look incompetent in front of the vice admiral." Falkin said nothing. We had run out of room to, well, run, having reached the prow.

"The crew knew it was going to happen, didn't they? Some signal was given so they could brace themselves."

"Uh—"

"You know, sir, I'd have everyone play least in sight until this blows over."

"Too right," Groskin muttered behind us. We spun around and stared at him, and he shrugged at us. "Did you think I was going to stay up there? I figured the lieutenant here knew where the good hiding places were." He looked at Falkin. "Let me give you some advice: Never, ever encourage dissension." My stare turned incredulous and he shrugged again, then grunted, his mouth twisting. "Let me be a lesson to you." He turned to me. "Not to hurry you, Rabbit, but you might want to start getting dressed. You sometimes take a bloody long time and I don't want the captain coming down on me because you're not ready to go."

"Go where?" I asked.

Groskin stared at me, then turned to First Lieutenant Falkin. "You didn't tell him?" Groskin shook his head, not waiting for Falkin's response. "Not a good idea for orders to go astray, Lieutenant. Definitely not a good idea."

"Tell me what?" My voice rose.

Groskin folded his arms and nodded at Falkin. "You were given the order, you tell him."

Color bloomed along the first lieutenant's cheekbones. "You're accompanying the captain when he goes over to the vice admiral's ship."

"Blasted poxy hell!" I pushed past Falkin and ran for the ladder to down below.

I'd just finished putting on my Habbs in the army lieutenant's berth, which (irony of ironies) I shared with Lieutenant Groskin, when the shout came that we had reached the vice admiral's fleet. After shoving clean handkerchiefs in my pocket and making sure my braid and uniform hung straight, I climbed up the ladder. In short order I found myself being rowed to my uncle's ship, the Pearl Fisher, along with Captain Suiden, Laurel Faena, Chancellor Berle, and, of course, Trooper Basel. I looked back at the Dauntless and saw the thin figure of Obruesk watching us. Even from that distance I could feel his rage at not being included, which he would've been if he had been acting as the arch-doyen. I wondered if allowing the patriarch to foist him on us was wise.

"Keep it down, Lieutenant," Suiden said.

I turned around in my seat. "Yes, sir." Facing forward, my gaze collided with the frown on Chancellor Berle's face.

The captains from the Valiant, the Adamantine and the fleet captains also converged on the Pearl Fisher, and we were hoisted up to the main deck by the bosun's chair one by one, to be greeted by drummers, pipes, and an honor guard. But instead of waiting for us with pomp and dignity at the end of the facing rows of marines presenting arms, Vice Admiral Havram ibn Chause stood at the gangway, greeting each of us as we came on board. When I came on last (very junior in both age and rank), my uncle grabbed my hand and shook it, preventing my salute, and clapped his other hand to my shoulder to prevent my bow.

"I don't need an introduction to know who you are!" His eyes twinkled at me. "Nay, lad, no need for the observances." He clapped my shoulder once more and allowed his hand to drop. "I tell you what, salute twice when you leave the ship, eh?" I found myself grinning back. He was as tall as I was, and whereas everyone else in the family had brown eyes, his were blue as the sky. He had the same lean build, had more gray in his dark brown hair than his eldest brother, and his skin was weathered by the exposure to sun and sea. His face, though, fell readily into laughter—or at least a smile. He was smiling now as he looked at me, lines fanning out from his eyes.

"Thirty years since I've seen your papa. Are he and your mama well?"

"Yes, sir. At least, last I saw them five years ago they were."

He shook his head, his smile dimming. "I told Maceal not to let them be forced to leave, but he had just come into the title and was still trying to find his way. That idiot Flavan and his son, Nersil, God rest his soul—"

I was distracted from the thought that my parents had been forced out of Iversterre by the unfamiliar name.

"Nersil was your mother's brother," Havram said, seeing my confusion. "Teram's papa. Have you met your cousin Teram?"

I nodded and left it at that.

"A bigger clutch of nodcocks I've never seen, for all their degrees to the throne," Havram said. "I don't know how your mama turned out so well—" He broke off, recollecting that we were surrounded by interested listeners, even over the pipes and drums. "Well, that's for another time." He smiled again, and started herding everyone towards the Pearl Fisher's great cabin. "We must dine together before our journey's end so that you can listen to me reminisce."

"With pleasure, sir."

"And tell you how much you look like your grandpapa."

"So I've heard, sir."

A marine standing by the cabin door flung it open and the vice admiral entered first, followed by the rest of the party. I came in last so I was able to hear the marine's gasp over the still playing pipes and drums as Basel's shade crossed the threshold.

Vice Admiral Havram turned around. "Oh, aye. The ghost." He shot Captain Suiden a look out of suddenly un-twinkling eyes as the other captains decided that they wanted to be on the other side of the cabin. "There was a lot of signaling going on earlier regarding it."

"Yes, sir," Suiden said.

"Who was he?"

"Trooper Basel, sir. He was murdered by Lieutenant Slevoic ibn Dru."

Uncle Havram ignored the shocker of Basel's murder and went to the heart of the matter. "Why is he following my nephew about, then, instead of Slevoic?"

"As near as I can tell, it's something to do with what the Borderlands call the 'moon season,' when those murdered attach themselves to those who can avenge them. Trooper Basel seems to have chosen Lieutenant Rabbit." Suiden gestured at Laurel. "The ambassador can explain it better than I, sir."

"Hmmpf." The vice admiral ignored the Faena also. "I know that the church has very strong views on phantoms. What does the patriarch say about this?"

"He was present at Trooper Basel's funeral, sir," Suiden replied.

"So?"

"Trooper Basel was also present at his funeral."

There was silence as Havram digested that. "I see." The vice admiral became aware of the large carry pouch I held. "Just put the dispatches on the table, lad, and"—he looked around—"everyone have a seat." He pulled out a chair at the head of the table.

"Sir, you have one from the Lord Admiral, the Lord Commander, and from King Jusson," Suiden said as I put the pouch down on the table and sat next to him.

"Pass it here, please." Havram placed the pouch down in front of him, then looked at Suiden. "Now, Your Highness, you will tell me how a Turalian prince became captain of one of His Majesty's windriders, and why this same prince is bringing me orders to leave a patrol of Iversterre waters that the Turalians have decided to claim for their own." More than the news of Trooper Basel was signaled. I then caught Suiden's eye, and concentrated on the sounds of a ship at anchored rest in the sea.

## **Chapter Forty-nine**

Uncle Havram took the news of Teram's failed attempt to seize the throne and subsequent death sentence with equanimity, only muttering "Nodcock" a couple of times during the narrative. He was much less sanguine about Lord Gherat. "You mean to tell me that Dru was smuggling Border goods to fund this rebellion?"

"Yes, sir," Suiden said. "The network involved the heads of Great Houses, tradespeople, dock workers, the Royal Army, and river customs. But Lord Gherat was the master planner."

"Where was the stuff going?" a captain of one of the fleet ships asked.

"Some to the markets of the Royal City," Suiden replied. "But much was smuggled to the Turalians."

"I see," the vice admiral said over the mutters of the rest of the captains. "But the ring has been smashed, the rebellion put down."

"Yes, sir," Suiden said.

"Commander Loel is dead, Teram is awaiting execution, and Slevoic is an outlaw on the run."

"Yes, sir."

"The House of Dru is dissolved by order of the king."

"Yes, sir."

"But nobody knows where Gherat is."

"No, sir." Suiden frowned. "We saw ships leaving from the sea escape of the palace compound the day of the rebellion." His frown deepened. "We thought it was the rebels from the Royal Garrison, but when we did a reckoning of the traitors and those loyal, just about everyone was accounted for. The ships could've been Lord Gherat fleeing." The captain sighed. "Or not."

"Gherat a-sea!" Havram frowned back at Suiden. "How's His Majesty taking this?"

"He is still king, sir."

Havram's smile broke out. "Aye, and so he is." He glanced over at Laurel. "How will the Border respond, Ambassador Laurel, when the fleet sails into one of its harbors with a ship brimming with the cadavers of its citizens?"

"It will extend a gracious welcome, honored admiral."

"Hmmp." Havram touched the pouch, staring down at it. Then he looked up again. "Well, I suppose I should read the dispatches." There was a knock at the door and it opened, showing the cook standing there with several loaded carts. "But in the meantime, we will sup together."

The meals I'd had so far on the Dauntless were lessons in hellish eating. Salt pork and a sea biscuit didn't go very far, especially since I wasn't about to eat the pork. Having to knock weevils out of the biscuits didn't help either. There were provisions set aside for me: wheels of cheese, pickled fish, dried peas, corn and rice, oats for porridge, nuts and dried fruit. But it was all locked in the galley pantry and at each meal Das the cook would wonder in a very loud voice why I couldn't eat normal food like a God-fearing man. (I told him back that if he fixed normal food like a Godfearing cook, I'd happily eat whatever he'd serve me.) I was looking forward to a meal without contention and bugs.

While the table was being set up, Havram retreated to a corner and split open the dispatches. The rest made laborious conversation, the seamen not too sure about Trooper Basel, Laurel Faena, Captain Suiden, and me, in that order. I figured my best bet was to lie low, so I remained quiet as plates, napkins, silverware, glasses, bottles of wine, and finally covered platters, serving bowls and tureens were tenderly placed on the table. Aromas started to waft through the cabin and there were appreciative sniffs, some going even so far as to smile. But I thought, oh, hell. Dinner was going to be like being thirsty in the middle of the ocean and not having a drop to drink.

The cook lifted the cover off the biggest platter, revealing a large roast, and Uncle Havram came back to the table rubbing his hands together. "Splendid!" He beamed at his guests. "It's fresh. We slaughtered a cow today."

He sat down and the cook, with ceremony, handed him the carving knife and fork, then stood back, his hands folded before him. Havram jabbed the fork into the roast and juices ran down the side. "Ah, our cook has done me proud, gracious sirs." He took the knife and began cutting, the slice peeling away from

the rest of the roast easily, revealing a slightly pink interior running with more juices, and the smell of roast beef filled the cabin. "Perfect," Havram said. "Excellent job, man!" The cook bowed, but, as the guests broke out in applause, I thrust my chair back, bolting from the cabin. I made the railing just in time to discover that sea biscuits didn't taste any better coming up than they did going down.

I had finished heaving when I heard someone coming up behind me. At first I wasn't going to look; then I figured I had damn well better, with everything that had happened. But it was Uncle Havram. I dragged myself to attention and waited.

"Are you all right, lad?"

I nodded. "Yes, sir. It's just that"—I gave a faint smile—"I don't eat meat."

His eyes twinkled at me. "The carving was a little much for you, eh?"

I swallowed hard, tasting bile. "Uh, yes, sir."

"Well, your captain is having the cook put together a plate for you," Havram said as he went to lean on the rail. He glanced down and moved over some, avoiding where I'd been sick. He was silent as a sailor came up and sluiced the area with water, saluted and left. As he stared out over the sea with clasped hands, all of a sudden he looked like my da, and a lump caught in my throat. "I've scanned the dispatches," he said, abrupt. "They say that Maceal was involved in this smuggling."

It wasn't a question but I answered it anyway. "Yes, sir. Among others of the king's Court."

The vice admiral grunted and muttered something that sounded suspiciously like "Nodcock."

"Though it appears that he wasn't a part of the attempted overthrow of King Jusson," I said, offering him a sop.

Havram nodded, accepting it. "You were there—tell me what happened, lad."

"It's just as Captain Suiden said, sir. Lord Gherat was the head of the smuggling ring. Lord Chause—" Havram shot me a hard stare at my use of his brother's formal title.

My mouth quirked. "He wasn't too impressed with me, sir." I shrugged off Lord Chause's disdain. "Anyway, he supplied boats to bring the contraband down the Banson, and then stored it in his warehouses until they sold it."

"His'? You mean he used the family warehouses?" Havram asked, stunned.

"Yes, sir. He received a cut of the profits."

"Nodcock is a disease and my brother's caught it! What did the king do?" He frowned, worried. "Is Maceal imprisoned? Are our properties seized?"

"As far as I know, sir, no. King Jusson offered Lord Chause clemency for cooperation. Though I'm sure he will be heavily fined and all profits from the smuggling will be forfeit."

Tension ran out of the vice admiral's shoulders. "I see." He sighed. "Though I'd be surprised if the king finds anything." This time his mouth quirked. "My brother is very handy with a set of books."

"The king threatened him with royal auditors."

Havram snapped around to look at me, surprised laughter on his face. "That must have scared the hell



out of Maceal. He loves his silver.”

I remembered Lord Chause's look of horror. "He wasn't too happy, sir.”

"I bet." Havram, smiling, looked back over the water, the wind ruffling his hair. After a moment he shook his head. "Dru is dissolved," he said in a wondering tone. He shot me a glance. "Is His Majesty going to dissolve Flavan also?"

"I don't know, sir. Though it may not matter whether or not he does, as Lord Gherat apparently has Lord Teram's wife and children as hostages.”

"He does?" Havram stood upright, his blue eyes staring at me in astonishment. "By the Briny's beard, why—”

The door to the cabin opened and the cook stepped out carrying a covered plate and a wine glass, but stopped as he met the vice admiral's frown. "Uh, I brought the lieutenant his food, sir.”

Havram sighed and nodded. He then turned back to me. "We will talk later about this, Rabbit. In the meantime, stay out here and enjoy your dinner. I will be sure to have someone fetch you for the dessert.”

"Yes, sir." I barely waited for the vice admiral to turn his back before I had the napkin off the plate, checking over the mashed potatoes, carrots, baked apple, and soft roll.

"There's no meat in any of these, Lieutenant," the cook said as he produced another napkin and shook it out before he laid it across my lap. He waited as I ate a forkful of potatoes.

"Very good," I said, my voice thick. I tried a forkful of carrots, and the honey burst in my mouth. "Very, very good." I took a sip of wine and sighed. "Excellent.” The cook smiled and bowed, his honor restored, and returned to the great cabin. I was left on deck watching the sunset and didn't mind the solitude—I was glad to be out from the strained atmosphere of the dining guests. I munched on the soft roll, staring out over the water, and didn't think much about anything.

I was retrieved for the dessert, a rich cake made of what Vice Admiral Havram said was chocolate, served with a pungent drink he called coffee. The cook once again stood over me as I took my first bite, and smiled at the look of bliss that must have crossed my face.

"I used to have a cup of hot chocolate every morning," Captain Suiden said, his face also sublime as he ate his cake. "It is one of the very few things I miss about Tural.”

He took a sip of coffee. "This is the second." He settled back in his chair, as mellow as I'd ever seen him.

I was pondering daily chocolate drinks and it took a minute to realize that the conversation had stopped and everyone was looking at Suiden with varying degrees of wariness and hostility. Everyone except the vice admiral.

"The two best things that have ever come out of Tural," Havram agreed as he forked up a bite. "Though that's putting the cat among the pigeons with a vengeance, Your Highness.”

Laurel chuffed briefly, his eyes slitting.

"Yes, sir." Suiden took another sip of coffee. "But as I haven't been in Tural for twenty years and have been in the Royal Army for almost as long, I think it's obvious that my ties with the land of my birth have been severed. Nor have I hidden that I once had them.”

Port wine and a platter of cheese had also been provided and Laurel Faena had opted for both. He speared a couple of pieces of cheese and transferred them to his plate. "I believe that would be rather hard to do, honored captain." He rumbled, a cross between a purr and a laugh. "I thought the ship's crew was going to have kittens this afternoon when you reminded them that you were once a Turalian sea captain. Clan marks, earrings, tattoos, and all."

I became very interested in my cake.

"How do you mean, Ambassador?" one of the senior captains of the fleet asked.

"Come, now," the vice admiral said, sipping his own coffee. "Didn't you see His Highness' ship yaw?" He glanced over at Suiden. "What happened?"

"A course correction, sir," Suiden replied.

"Oh, aye." The vice admiral set his cup down. "A very drastic one, if I'm any judge."

"Yes. I've relieved the helmsman of his duties until he learns how to steer properly." Suiden shifted in his chair. "May I ask, sir, what's the situation out here?"

"I must admit, Vice Admiral, that I too would like to know," Chancellor Berle said as she sipped her wine.

"It's tense. Very tense." Havram finished the last of his cake and put his fork down. "It hasn't come to an actual fight, but there has been a lot of posturing and sword rattling. Our merchants have been chased and threatened with boarding. Twice in the past month we've come upon Turalian warships where they shouldn't have been, and have had to shoo them back. Fortunately, they allowed themselves to be shooed."

A thought emerged and Suiden looked over at me. "You wish to say something, Lieutenant?"

Chancellor Berle frowned, but I ignored her. "Yes, Captain. Remember Dornel?"

"Isn't that a checkpoint on the Banson, Rabbit?" Havram asked.

"Yes, sir," I replied. "They were having problems too, with rumors of pirate attacks. Come to find out it was all a diversion so that the smugglers could get their goods through easier. It could be that the Turalians are doing the same."

"A pretty elaborate diversion for what? Some lumber?" one of the captains remarked.

"Choice hardwood, pelts, skins, ivory, and slaves," Havram replied before I could. "Even a dragon hoard." He looked back at me. "So you think that the Turalians may be doing a 'look over here,' as they slip smuggled goods through somewhere else?"

"Maybe, sir. It worked in Dornel."

"Damn them for bilge scum," Havram said, "and I bet that Gherat gave them every plan for deployment that we ever had, him and Admiral Noal being such great drinking buddies."

The silence was politically fraught.

The vice admiral laughed. "Oh, many of the officers drank with Gherat. He was a very convivial companion and knew where all the good taverns were."

Startled at the thought of the Lord Admiral and Gherat in a dockside tavern, I spoke before I thought.  
"Really, sir? Admiral Noal too?"

A captain choked, spraying coffee across the table.

The vice admiral's face stayed affable. "You know, lad, your papa had the same problem with his foot and his mouth."

"Yes, sir."

"Well," Uncle Havram said, taking pity on me and changing the subject, "talking won't get us to the Border any sooner." Pushing away from the table, he stood, and everyone scrambled to do the same.  
"Everyone prepare to sail tomorrow at first light."

Once again Havram played the good host, escorting us to the gangway and standing there as the captains descended to their boats. And once again, I was last. I stood alone with him as I waited for the bosun's chair's return.

"You know, Rabbit, I would've had you reassigned to my ship for a number of reasons," Havram remarked, "including the very selfish one that you're my brother's son. But the king's directive was clear: You are to stay with the cat and the Turalian sea dragon—" He grinned as he saw my start. "Oh, aye, the man is something else, no mistake about it. He would have my captains for breakfast, ships and all." He paused. "Have you ever seen him truly angry?"

"A couple of times, sir, and I was glad it wasn't directed at me"

"I bet, lad."

"But he's a good captain," I hastened to add. "I've been under his command since I joined—"

"Freston Mountain Patrol, the insult of it!"

"I don't mind, sir." The bosun's chair arrived and I went to sit on it, but the vice admiral stopped me.

"I have a berth for you if you ever wish to join me here, Rabbit. The king's instructions can go begging."

"Thank you, sir, but I'm fine." I kept to myself that if I were to join my uncle, Suiden and Laurel would come and retrieve me bodily.

Uncle Havram's blue eyes searched my face. "All right," he said. "But remember that. I'll not have another kinsman forced into something at someone else's whim." He then smiled and clapped me on my shoulder.

"Down with you, lad, lest yon dragon starts breathing fire and smoke at the fear of losing part of his hoard."

## Chapter Fifty

To Foreign Chancellor Berle's extreme annoyance, instead of escorting us directly to the Border, the Pearl Fisher led us to another group of ships.

"We are trying to prevent a war, Captain Suiden," she told him as they stood together on the bridge. "We do not have time to ferry messages about bully boys playing posturing games."

"More than 'posturing games,' Sra Berle," Suiden replied. He paused a moment to read the signal flags from the vice admiral's ship. "Goods and slaves have already been slipped past our navy—"

"But the smuggling ring has been smashed," Berle objected.

"—and we have no idea what else has been passed through," Suiden finished.

"What do you mean, Your Highness?" Lord Esclaur asked.

"Lord Gherat and his hostages are still missing," Suiden replied.

"You don't know that they are," Berle said. "You don't even know if they went a-sea. As you said yourself, it's just a guess."

"Someone went out the sea escape," Javes said. "Who do you think it was, Chancellor?"

"I'm not here to think—" Chancellor Berle cut off at Javes' silly ass smile. "You know what I mean." She turned back to Suiden. "Prince Suiden, you must impress upon Vice Admiral Havram the seriousness of this mission and how we can't afford to take little side trips as the whim takes him. Besides, Admiral Noal has ships out looking for whoever is left." She indicated the windriders coming up fast. "I wouldn't be surprised if one has been here and left already."

"But if one hasn't?" Suiden asked, handing his spyglass to First Lieutenant Falkin. "People and run goods aren't the only things that can be smuggled, Sra Berle. Information also can sieve through, such as there's an important delegation being sent to the Border that includes a chancellor, a Border ambassador, and the king's nearest heir—"

"Not to mention His Royal Highness, nephew to the Amir of Tural," Javes murmured as he swung his quiz glass by its ribbon. "Tell me, Suiden, how close are you to the Turalian succession?"

Suiden shot Javes a glance and then looked back at Chancellor Berle. "We'd be a tasty morsel to snap up, so the vice admiral is making sure our back is covered." The captain turned to First Lieutenant Falkin, who had stood quiet throughout the exchange. "Have the boat put to, Sro Falkin, and be prepared to accompany me to the vice admiral's ship."

"Aye aye, sir."

Suiden turned back to Chancellor Berle. "The vice admiral's compliments, Sra Berle, and he asks that you and Lord Esclaur please join him for dinner upon the Pearl Fisher."

The chancellor's wry smile swept across her face. "Please thank the vice admiral for his kind invitation and tell—signal him that I will most certainly attend; the pleasures of his last dinner party were beyond compare." With that, she bowed and left the bridge, Esclaur trailing behind her. I went to follow, but Captain Suiden stopped me.

"A moment, Lieutenant Rabbit." Suiden looked at Falkin. "Inform Ambassador Laurel of the vice admiral's invitation, if you please, Sro Falkin."

"Aye aye, sir."

Captain Suiden waited for his first officer to leave. He then looked back at me. "You're not going but will stay here and attend to your duties."

As my duties consisted mainly of adventures in meditation and rudimentary talent lessons with Laurel

Faena, I gaped at my captain. "Sir?"

"First, though, you will report to Lieutenant Groskin."

"Sir?" My eyes went wider.

"That is all, Lieutenant. Dismissed."

Dazed, I left the quarterdeck, vaguely aware that Captain Javes had accompanied me.

"I understand that Captain Suiden waited an awfully long time while you palavered with your Uncle Havram," Javes remarked as we reached the main deck of the ship.

Jerking my head around, I met his quiz glass aimed at me. I scowled but then thought better of it.

"Just so," Javes said, his yellow wolf's eye gleaming at me through his glass.

I tried politeness. "Whatever do you mean, sir?"

Javes had mercy and let his glass fall. "Your uncle fell on your neck like you were a long lost nephew—"

"I am, sir."

"So you are. But you don't know him any more than you knew your Uncle Maceal or your cousin Teram." Javes gave me a serious look. "Kind words don't necessarily mean a kind man, Rabbit. Do not jump at them like a goose at a currant, or else you may find your neck stretched across the chopping block."

"But it may be just as he says, sir, that he misses my da and wants to get to know me."

"That is also true." Javes smiled, all affectation gone. "I know that it has been very hard for you these past weeks, with all the attachments you thought you had turned upside down or severed altogether. The lure of a place to hang words like 'mine' and 'kin' can be almost overwhelming."

We started walking towards the railing. I caught a flash out of the side of my eye and I turned to look, but it was only Ryson rushing to the railing too. Javes and I stopped at the sound of retching, and changed course, heading towards the foredeck.

"It doesn't help, sir, that everyone either wants to kill me, dismisses me as a provincial, or seems to have a hidden agenda," I said. "Sometimes all three."

"I suppose not." Javes reverted to his silly bugger smile. "But that's life when you're royally connected, what?"

I judged it best not to answer that.

Javes' smile faded as he watched the sea. "You've called Suiden a dragon—"

"Called, sir?"

"All right, he is a dragon, with fire and talons and everything. Like all dragons, he hoards things, but instead of obsessing over gold and jewels and whatnot, he has his troops." Javes looked over the water, his face pensive. "I think that was what angered him the most about Groskin— and even Ryson. That Slevoic would dare to poach someone who was his." He looked back at me. "You are also Suiden's, Lieutenant, and he will not lose you. Not to some salt dog crying 'Nephew.'"

"He doesn't trust me to make the right decision, sir? To see the true from the false, no matter who claims me kin?"

"Of course he doesn't. You are newly made a lieutenant, just out of your boyhood for all that you shave every morning. Not so long off the farm and fresh out of a little town in the northern marches where the fastest thing is the spring snowmelt running down the mountains." Javes considered me. "To tell the truth, Rabbit, I'm surprised that you haven't had your head turned by the heights you've ascended to recently."

"Maybe, sir, it's because my parents didn't raise a fool." I was distracted from the frown forming on Captain Javes' face by the glower Chaplain Obruesk threw at me as he stalked by. "Though it may be also because there are those who do their best to make sure I know my place and to keep me there."

Javes also tracked the chaplain, men turned back to me, his eyes glinting. "Your place? You'd push at God in the face of hell. Tell me, are all in the Border like you?"

I thought a moment. "Pretty much, sir."

"I see." Javes let out a long breath. "Then it should get very interesting when we arrive there." With that, he nodded and strolled away, leaving me to seek out Groskin.

I found the lieutenant in, no surprise, the lieutenants' berth. He had appropriated several lanterns, placing them around his open trunk, and had spread his gear out around him. He saw me and beckoned. "I haven't had a chance to look over my stuff since we left the embassy, and I figured that I'd better make sure that there weren't any of those damn spiders in my locker."

I had started towards him, but at the mention of the possibility of Pale Deaths, I was back on the ladder at the fourth rung with no memory of rungs one through three.

Groskin gave a slight smile. "Don't like spiders much, do you?"

"No," I said as I sat down. "I understand their purpose in the grand scheme of things, but I don't appreciate them up close and personal."

"Well, not to worry. There aren't any here." Groskin started packing his gear away in the locker. "Where are your shadows?"

"Jeff's indisposed."

"In the head, huh?"

I nodded as I looked around, searching for my ghost companion. "What the navy considers breakfast gives him the gripes something fierce." Something flickered in the corner. "And there's Basel."

Groskin looked over at the haunt, hesitated, then nodded. "Didn't see you there, Basel." He went back to packing. "I tell you, trooper, I miss your cooking."

"Fiat," I murmured.

In the silence that fell between us we could hear the dinner party leave for the vice admiral's ship. "Are you sorry you're going to be missing that?" Groskin asked.

"Not really," I replied.

"What? The food was no good there too?"

"The opposite. But they served a roast and the vice admiral carved it right in front of me." A shudder ran through me at me memory.

"Roast beef?" Groskin asked, his eyes fastened on mine. "What else?" I described the dinner and dessert, and his eyes glazed over.

"A roast beef dinner with all the trimmings and the captain takes a damned roots and berries eater, and a ghost," Groskin said when I was finished, shaking his head.

It became quiet once more. The lieutenant packed the last of his gear and shut the lid. He then looked up at me and sighed. "If I say I'm sorry again, it wouldn't help much, would it?"

I shrugged, finding the shadows cast by the lanterns fascinating.

Groskin sat down on his locker and a quick glance showed me that he too was very interested in the overlapping shapes of light and dark. "You know, I didn't believe in the magical growing up—like everyone else I thought it was just stuff in children's stories or tricksters doing sleight of hand, and even that was frowned upon by the Church elders. Then I got assigned to Veldecke." He shifted, the locker creaking a bit. "It's a plum posting and I thought I was on my way: a captaincy, get my majority, garrison commander, and then who knew? Lord Commander Groskin of the Royal Army, and shield bearer for the king."

"What happened?" I asked, interested in spite of myself.

"Discovered that the magical was more than pantomimes that I wasn't allowed to see as a lad." Groskin raised his head and met my gaze. "Did anyone tell you why I was sent to Freston?"

"Only that something happened to you at Veldecke."

Groskin lowered his head and shook it. "No, not to me, it didn't." He took a deep breath.

"There was a rape—" I made a sound between a gasp and a growl, every muscle stiffening.

Groskin, his head still down, held up his hand. "I didn't." His hand fell to his lap. "I did not, but I watched it happen and did nothing."

"Why?"

"Because she wasn't human."

I felt the wind at my back, whispering words I couldn't make out. Basel ghosted out of his corner, his haunt's eyes wide on me as he shook his head. His lips moved and I could make out "Rabbit." I grabbed hold of the ladder, feeling the wood under my hand, the rune tingling, then turning warm.

"Damn it, Rabbit!"

I looked up and met Groskin's stare.

"You started to—I don't know, blur."

"It's happened before." My voice was hoarse. "Who was she?"

Groskin's face changed and he looked aside. "Some fairy." He sat silent for a moment. "A bunch of the lads and I had sneaked over the wall to the woods on the Border side. We'd liberated some wine from a supply shipment that had just arrived and we figured that was the best place to enjoy it in private. She

happened upon us, wearing the filmy things they always do." He ran his hand over his face, his mouth pulling down. "She was found the next morning in the forest. She had killed herself." I dug my fingernails into the rung, feeling the wood splinter.

"The Weald Faena came for us. He was a fire salamander. I remember the flames as he spoke in the garrison commander's office, white hot."

"Yet here you are," I said, my brows coming together. "Free."

Groskin shrugged. "The commander pointed out that I hadn't actually participated."

I ignored the hairsplitting as my frown tightened. "And the others?"

Groskin shrugged again, this time looking up, his mouth hard. "They said they couldn't remember who did what, each one claiming to have been too drunk to do much of anything and all of a sudden it was my word against theirs. One went so far as to say that maybe I had raped the creature—" Groskin stopped at my expression, then sighed, lowering his eyes. "That I had done it, as it seemed that I was the only one sober enough."

"But the Faena," I began, then stopped.

"Oh, the commander told the Faena that they would be punished," Groskin continued, "but they were lords' and officers' sons. They got a slap on the wrist for taking the wine, and were sent to other posts, as there was no proof beyond a tipsy lieutenant." He raised his eyes again to look at me. "Only I was sent to Freston—for drunkenness and failure to control my men." The wind started whispering again, but I shook my head and it fell silent.

Groskin leaned back against the cabin wall and folded his arms, staring at the floor before him. "I've always told myself that she wasn't like my sisters, but instead a soulless, poxy nymph who probably serviced more than a hundred whores combined. Besides, it was all political—the lord's sons were let go while I was judged expendable. So I've said."

"So you've said," I repeated, frowning.

Groskin's mouth twisted. "Then you and the cat come along and say that we have all been translated. That we've become as magical as those in the Border. That I was the same as the fairy." He looked up and met my eyes. "If that's so, then what did that make me?"

"Someone who stood by and did nothing while a person was gang raped by a bunch of drunken soldiers," I said, focusing back on the lieutenant.

Groskin closed his eyes. "Yes."

"Then left her there in pain and distress so great that she killed herself."

"Yes."

I held up my hand, the rune glowing in the berth's dimness. "No wonder this caused you to go berserk."

Groskin's eyes snapped open, a wary expression coining over his face.

"Tell me, did the fire Faena touch you with it?"

Groskin nodded, shuddering, his face still wary.



"But not the others?"

Groskin shook his head. "They—the commander and the Faena—said that as I was the senior officer—"

"What the bloody hell does that have to do with holding an inquiry?" I interrupted.

Groskin shook his head again. "It's what they said." His eyes stayed fixed on my palm.

"Don't worry, I'm not going to touch you." I dropped my hand and Groskin let out a relieved breath. I stared a moment over the lieutenant's shoulder at the cabin wall, and then looked back at Groskin. "So the Faena showed you the truth, but you called it a lie and thrust it away from you."

"Yes," Groskin said.

"Then you do the same thing with me and Slevoic. Stand back and let him have at me to his heart's pleasure. And because of that, the Vicious felt bold enough to murder Basel."

"I know." Groskin surprised me by agreeing. "When I saw Basel dead, it was like a fog had lifted and I could see clearly what I had done—"

"I bet you could, all sixteen points of it lying there with his throat slit."

"—and I thought that was it. My days in the Royal Army were over."

"Your 'days in the Royal Army'? Slevoic killed Basel and you worried about your army career?"

Groskin nodded again, glancing at me and Basel, then away. "The Faena cat came to see me after Basel's funeral."

I paused at the conversation shift. "So?" I asked, my voice cautious.

He studied his fingernails. "You wear that blasted braid and your prissy clothes and don't eat meat, and bedamn to anyone who doesn't like it. But I do care what others think." I discovered my mouth was open, and closed it with a snap.

"Well, not so much think, as what they see."

"Appearances," I managed.

"Yeah, something like that." Groskin's mouth turned wry. "I was connected to the Doyen of Dornel, and through him to all kinds of big hats, including Obruesk. God forbid that anything I do reflect badly upon the Church."

My mouth now formed the 'Oh' of comprehension.

"It's kind of hard, though, being perfect."

"Uhm—"

Groskin gave a rusty laugh. "Yeah, the cat said as I was nowhere near perfect, I should have no worries about disappointing anyone by giving it up." I felt a twinge of concern at the thought of seeing Groskin's true self.

Groskin's wry smile was back. "And he offered to work with me on that, one cat to another, so that—he

said—I could stop making the same damn mistakes over and over in my fear of being seen a failure.” The twinge became a full-blown spasm and Basel leaned against the ladder, staring at the lieutenant.

"I reckoned that at this point it couldn't hurt, might even help." Groskin's smile turned into a fair approximation of Captain Javes' silly ass grin. "Should be interesting, what?"

## Chapter Fifty-one

It was a quiet evening. The moon was risen with the stars covering the sky, all the way down to the water. The Dauntless moved in a soft rocking motion as the swells gently lifted her up and put her down again. I had heard the return of the vice admiral's guests and was waiting for Laurel Faena at the gangway. However, the first person I saw was Captain Suiden.

"Is there a problem, Lieutenant?" he asked, as he got off the bosun's chair.

"No, sir. I'm just waiting for Laurel."

"I see." His eyes shifted to where Jeff, looking a little wan in the just lit lanterns, stood behind me. "You spoke with Groskin?"

I blinked at that. "Yes, sir."

Suiden nodded and started to walk away. "With me, Lieutenant."

"Sir?" I said, obeying.

"Please have the ambassador see me in my cabin when he comes on deck," Suiden said to Jeff. "Then go fetch Javes and Groskin."

"Yes, sir."

Basel and I followed Suiden into his cabin. "Sir?" I asked again.

"This is the first time since Sro Cat joined us that I've seen you actively seek out his company," Suiden said, sitting down at his table. "What has happened?" At his gesture, I joined him. "Nothing, sir. I mean, at least not now—"

"So this does have something to do with what Lieutenant Groskin told you."

"Uhm—"

There was a tap on the door and, at the captain's command, it opened to reveal Laurel. "Honored captain?" the Faena asked as he entered the cabin.

"Please have a seat, Ambassador," Suiden said, "as we wait for Javes and Groskin." Laurel gave me a look as he sat down and I gave him a furtive shrug.

"The vice admiral sends his regards, Rabbit, and was very sorry that the press of your duties kept you from attending dinner," Laurel said into the silence. "The cook also was very sorry you weren't there, but he made up a basket. Lord Esclaur has it—" Laurel broke off as we heard steps, and a moment later Groskin and Javes were ushered in. Suiden had Jeff stand guard outside the cabin door.

"With Slevoic gone and Ryson fighting seasickness, I doubt we'd have anyone foolhardy enough to try to eavesdrop," Captain Javes remarked as he sat down.

"There's always a new fool ready to take the old one's place," Suiden said. He shifted in his seat to look at me. "Well?"

Laurel gave the captain his slow blink; then, as his brows crooked and his ears pressed forward, he turned his head to look at me.

"I was just going to ask Laurel Faena some questions, sir," I began.

"About what Lieutenant Groskin had told you?"

I shot a glance at Groskin, then looked back at the captain. "Yes, sir."

"Why?"

"It was a brutal crime, Suiden," Javes said, when I remained quiet. "Perhaps he was just looking for someone to talk to about it."

"Rabbit has just experienced brutal things himself, and he hasn't had the need or desire to 'talk' to anyone about them" Suiden replied, still looking at me. He began to frown, the light in his eyes starting to flicker.

"Not answering isn't an option, Lieutenant."

This time I glanced at Laurel and met his amber gaze. I then sighed and looked at the table. "I was going to ask Laurel, sir, why no one was taken by the Faena that strode Veldecke."

Suiden opened his mouth but Laurel beat him to it. "What do you mean, they weren't taken?" I raised my head. "Groskin didn't tell you?"

I frowned, trying to remember if the lieutenant had said that he had. I looked at Groskin but he shook his head.

"He said that there had been a rape of a fae, yes," Laurel said at the same time. "He didn't say, though, that no one was brought to justice for it."

"They claimed that they were too drunk to do anything—and too drunk to remember who had," I replied. "Groskin said that they were all let go."

"They all?" Javes asked, frowning. "Only Groskin was involved in the assault—there wasn't anybody else." He turned to Groskin. "What did you tell Rabbit, Lieutenant?"

"The truth, sir," Groskin said.

"Groskin wasn't sent to Freston for rape, Javes," Suiden said, still watching me. "Unofficially, he was sent there because he dared to name Commander Eanst's and Lord Gault's sons, among others, as—participants. Officially, it was for drunkenness while on duty and failure to control men under his command."

"But the Faena touched Groskin, sir," I said and regained both captains' attention. "He knew who had done what. If he needed further proof, he could have touched the others and they would've talked right quick." I looked back at Laurel. "Yet he didn't and they were let go."

"I didn't know that, Rabbit," Laurel rumbled. "Truth, I didn't know."

I felt the rune on my palm warm.

"I told the ambassador just what had happened to me," Groskin said, his voice hushed.

"What the bloody hell is going on, Laurel?" I asked. "A rape and murder—"

Groskin shifted in his chair and I snarled at him. "It was murder, no matter that she did it herself. And those who raped, then murdered her are allowed to go free." I looked back at Laurel. "Then there's the poxy smuggling. I once asked you how was it that no one could find a ragtag bunch of runners." I leaned forward at the cat. "It doesn't make sense, Laurel. It also doesn't make sense that you would waste months and weeks looking for me while our people are being slaughtered. Why didn't the High Council send you to Veldecke to stop it?"

"I told you why—"

"Because you would've been killed?" I asked, cutting Laurel off. "Then you could've come in force, bringing friends. Veldecke is one Iversterre town that does know 'magicals,' honored Faena. A fire salamander called on the commander there." I felt my mouth twist. "Can you imagine one of those in the Royal City? Yet, from what Groskin said, the commander took it in stride."

"I was told not to go to Veldecke," Laurel said, looking worried, "because my safety would be at risk."

"With the damn treaty? If the garrison commander had allowed you to be harmed, it would've led to war."

"I was also told that King Jusson was being urged to repudiate the treaty by certain of his nobles," the cat said.

"But that's not true," Javes said. "Jusson has never had any intention of repudiating the treaty or starting a war with the Border. He knows we barely survived the last one."

Laurel's ears pressed for a moment against his skull. "Yes. I realized that."

"Did you also realize that Dragoness Moraina was one of the treaty's signers?" I asked.

"What?"

"You heard me. The king mentioned it during his—discussion with Uncle Maceal." I looked at Captain Javes. "You were there, sir."

"But you said that dragons don't read or write," Suiden said as Javes frowned.

"They don't, honored captain," Laurel said, still staring at me. "Perhaps you heard wrong, Rabbit. You were drinking hard that night, no?"

"That was later," I said. "This happened before Basel's funeral."

"The king did say that Dragoness Moraina signed the treaty," Javes said. "He also said she sent letters to his great-grandfather."

"Not honored Moraina," Laurel said. "Impossible."

"Maybe she used a scribe," Groskin said, his voice tentative.

"No, she wouldn't," I said. "Dragons think it's a sin to read or write. For Moraina to use a scribe would

be just as immoral as if she had penned the letter herself." I saw the question on Javes' face. "They feel it interferes with the gathering of wisdom."

"Yes," Laurel said, his mind obviously elsewhere. "Wisdom is to be remembered, not shut away in books, scrolls, and tablets."

"What are we sailing into?" Suiden said. His emerald eyes blazed at the Faena. "You guaranteed our safety, Sro Cat."

Laurel waved a paw. "You will be safe. The Fyrst of Elanwryfindyll would no more violate Hospitality than"—he gave a short chuff—"than Moraina would write a book." He ran his paw over his head, rattling his beads. "Truth, Rabbit, I didn't know these things."

My palm grew warmer. "Even so—" I began.

"Wait! You can't go in there!"

The door thrust open and Chancellor Berle stood in the doorway, Jeff clutching her arm. Behind them was Chaplain Obruesk. In the light spill from the cabin I could make out the holy smirk on his face and apparently Captain Suiden could see it too. He rose and went to the door, saying "That is all, Obruesk."

The sanctimonious smile on the chaplain's face disappeared as if it had been wiped off, and he reverted to his usual glower. Captain Suiden waited until he turned around to go down the stairs. "On second thought, Obruesk, go fetch Lord Esclaur. Now."

Suiden ignored the chaplain's look of outrage and turned to Chancellor Berle. "Chancellor?"

"Is there a reason why I was excluded from this meeting?" she asked.

"Perhaps because I didn't think what we were discussing was your concern, Sra Berle—" Suiden began.

"Oh?" the chancellor interrupted. "You and your senior officers are closeted together with Ambassador Laurel and you don't think it has anything to do with me?"

"If you wish to have this argument in public, Chancellor, I am more than willing."

Chancellor Berle shut her mouth, eyeing the captain with acute dislike. But Suiden ignored her, looking over her shoulder, and I heard boot steps climbing the stairs to the cabin. A moment later, Lord Esclaur appeared behind Jeff, who was still holding the chancellor's arm.

"My word," Esclaur said, raising his quiz glass. In his hand he carried a basket.

"However, it would be best for us to continue inside," Suiden finished. At his gesture, Jeff released Chancellor Berle, and the captain allowed her to sweep past him. "Lord Esclaur, if you please—"

A shout went up and Captain Suiden stopped, his body stiffening as he stared out the door. Another shout and then the ship's crew broke into what sounded like controlled pandemonium.

"What is it?" Chancellor Berle said, hovering over the chair she was about to sit in. "What's happening?"

A pair of running feet pounded up the stairs to the captain's cabin. "Captain Suiden!"

Suiden pushed past the clot of people in his doorway to meet First Lieutenant Falkin. "What is it?" He repeated Chancellor Berle's question.

"We don't know, sir—"

Laurel stood up, growling, and we all snapped around to look at him. His cat eye pupils were dilated black. I opened my mouth to ask what the bloody hell was going on when I felt my skin begin to crawl as if thousands of ants were marching across my body.

"Sweet merciful heavens," I gasped, also standing. "What's that?"

Suiden looked back at me, and then took off running, Falkin close behind him. Laurel bellowed out a roar and went over the table, his claws digging into the wood. He hit the door without touching the floor, and was gone.

I shoved aside my chair and also Chancellor Berle who had latched onto my arm, and followed the Faena out of the cabin—only to stop at the bridge stairs as I realized how quiet it had become under the noise of the frantically working seamen. The ship itself was silent, the water motionless, the wind still. I looked over at the masts and saw that the crew was busy taking down the reefed sails. I then looked at the other ships, but I could barely see them and a frown came over my face, for the night was too dark. I searched for the moon but found instead a blotch against the sky where it should've been. As I watched, the blotch grew, devouring stars as it expanded towards us, fast.

"Rabbit!" Laurel roared from the quarterdeck.

I ran around to where the Faena stood staring out over the water. I heard footsteps behind me and a brief look told me that not only was Jeff following, but also Basel, Captain Javes, Lieutenant Groskin, Chancellor Berle, Lord Esclaur—and Chaplain Obruesk.

"What's going on?" I asked as I reached Laurel. "And what's that? A storm?" As I said that, the crawling sensation intensified. I glanced down, expecting to see the rune on my hand glow, but it was as dark as the growing darkness in the sky.

"Remember the night of the reception when Captain Suiden spoke of the djinn?" Laurel asked, still staring over the water, his ears pressed flat against his skull.

"Yes ..." My voice trailed off, horror creeping over me.

"As I wasn't there," Chancellor Berle said, "what did His Highness say?"

"That the djinn bring storms, Chancellor," I said.

"Is that what that is?"

"Yes," Laurel said, "and someone has aroused it and pointed it in our direction."

"If we had gone directly to the Border as we were supposed to," Chancellor Berle said, "we wouldn't be sitting here like ducks."

"No, honored Berle," Laurel said. "It's coming from where we would've been if we hadn't made this detour." His eyes glowed in the dark and Chaplain Obruesk started to make signs against evil. "Rather than trying to exorcise me," the Faena said, nodding towards the storm, the jagged edges now being outlined in flashes of light, "I would suggest that you pray to ward that off."

"Would it work, Ambassador?" Esclaur asked as distant thunder rumbled.

"Not that I've ever heard," Laurel replied. "But it would be better than standing around blaming each

other, no?"

"An ill-fated mission," Obruesk shot back, "led by sorcerers—"

A flicker caught my eye and I turned to it, expecting to see Basel. The hair stood up on my nape and I moved back until I felt Laurel's fur behind me. "Honor Ash," I whispered.

Obruesk stopped midrant and spun around, everyone else a beat behind him. Laurel's paw came down on my shoulder, pulling me closer to him—which was a good thing as the rest tried to occupy the same space at the same time. The haunt stopped where she was and I could make out the ash leaves woven in her hair.

"Who is it?" Berle asked, her voice hushed.

"Demons," Obruesk said, his whisper harsh.

"No demon, churchman," Laurel replied. "She is the murdered tree sprite Faena. The one who had been made into a church staff." Lightning flashed, and we could hear the distant rumble of thunder.

"How did she get through the wards?" I asked.

"They were probably weakened by the storm," Laurel said, another flash punctuating his words.

"We're going to die, aren't we," Jeff said, his voice barely heard over the thunder.

I glanced over my shoulder at the djinn storm and opened my mouth to agree. "Not if I can help it," I found myself saying.

"No," Javes said, "and certainly not here like trapped rats." He pressed forward and lifted his quiz glass at the ghost. "Is there a way to get us around—her?" he asked.

Lightning flashed again, and this time the rumble of thunder was closer. Honor Ash Faena began to move once more, silently floating over the deck towards us. A swell hit the ship, causing it to creak and moan as it rocked from side to side.

I followed the captain, pulling away from Laurel Faena to stand facing Honor Ash's shade, but she just went around me and the others. Another swell hit the windrider, this one bigger, lifting it up and then dropping it hard while thunder sounded with a sharp crack. I turned, tracking her until she stopped once more at the quarterdeck railing and pointed a finger at the djinn storm bearing down on us. As she did so, the stillness of the air was broken by a slight breeze that swirled around me.

As soon as Honor Ash floated by him, Captain Javes started towards the quarterdeck stairs, everyone else on his heels. But he stopped again as he saw that Laurel and I hadn't moved. "Rabbit, Ambassador Laurel—" The breeze grew stronger, pulling at my tabard and braid. I resisted and it pressed against my back, pushing me towards the rail and the Faena's haunt.

"Like calling to like," Obruesk yelled over the noise of the approaching storm. "Leave them!"

I tried to step back and the breeze stiffened, pressing harder. Captain Suiden's words about mages being consumed popped into my mind and I shook my head. "No!"

"Go down yourself then!" Captain Javes shouted back at Obruesk. Out of the corner of my eye I could see his hand reach for me.

"No, honored Javes!" Laurel said. "Don't!"

The breeze turned into an eddy of wind, with me in the center, and Javes was thrown back by the force of it as lightning crackled and forked across the sky, followed by a boom, then another crackling flash, another boom. The wind-rider surged in sudden heavy seas and the others went reeling as the deck heaved beneath them, Jeff falling and sliding towards the railing until Groskin latched hold of him, and Esclaur grabbing onto the lieutenant. But I stayed upright, held by the wind, and was pushed closer to the railing.

"No!" I yelled and once more tried to move back, hunching my shoulders. The djinn storm was now almost upon the first windrider in our convoy and it was as if clawed fingers reached out for the ship.

"Rabbit," Laurel said, his voice pitched under the rising fury. "Center yourself. And breathe!" Meditating while sitting in the warmth of the morning sun with no distractions is one thing. Trying to do so while caught in a windstorm, facing a murdered sprite's ghost as certain doom bears down on one is another. But I closed my eyes and reached for the center as Laurel taught me, concentrating on my breathing, and to my surprise I felt the tension run out my fingertips and feet, calm filling the empty places. And I heard— Come, the wind belled, a deep ringing that resonated in my bones.

Why?

Live. Come.

Live? But in what form? Fear lanced through me that if I went, I'd not return. That the very thing why I fled from Magus Kareste would happen to me here, and I'd be devoured.

Trust, the wind belled, and images arose of the bridge of air, the arrows stopped midflight, the scorched side street with Slevoic. Live, it belled again, my entire body resounding.

Live, I echoed back. I opened my eyes just in time to see the storm boil over the first windrider, the faint cries from the ship swallowed whole. Greedy hands reached once more and I was vaguely aware of our ship's violent pitching. Live as opposed to dying. Put like that, the choice was a little easier. I hesitated, then lowered my head, and let go.

"Rabbit!" I heard Javes shout—then he was gone.

## Chapter Fifty-two

We moved over the water, flowing between the wind-riders. Before us was a dark mass and we met it as it reared over a ship, flinging ourselves against it.

No. Ours.

Glowing yellow eyes glared out from behind the dark clouds and lips pulled back showing sharp, jagged teeth, while lightning forked and crackled about it.

Impressive. But still ours.

A taloned, many-fingered hand swung, clawing at us. In the other it held breathing ones that it flung into the water. We shifted aside, plucked them out again, cradling them safe.

Ours too.



The dark one thundered and tried to roll over us, to press us down, to crush us.

Not wise.

We called, a deep singing peal, and as the air rushed to us, the dark clouds shrank, growing smaller and smaller. It howled its rage and we smiled.

Also ours.

The dark one now tried to flee and we caught it, holding it fast as the last of the clouds shredded into streamers, stars' twinkling between them. It struck out at us again, but its blows were feeble. The sky cleared and the moon appeared, bright on the water, and we watched the yellow eyes dim, then fade away.

### Chapter Fifty-three

I was walking in the cool darkness of the forest with Dragoness Moraina. Honor Ash strode ahead of us, bright as if the sun shone down on her as she paced through the trees, marking our path, Laurel an indistinct shadow beside her.

"Endings are foretold in beginnings, young human," Moraina said, "and the seeds of destruction are sown at creation." The dragoness smiled, a toothy sight. "But if you're fortunate, you're able to come around again to start anew."

"Is it always the same, honored Moraina?" I asked, my child's voice not yet broken by adolescence. I hopped from dragon print to dragon print, pressed deep in the leaf mold. "The same ending and beginning?"

"For some," the dragoness admitted. "But for others, it is the spiraling song of the lark ascending." I awoke with a start, staring at the dim lamp gently swaying overhead in the lieutenants' berth. I then sighed. Great, now even my dreams were cryptic. I rolled over in my hammock and came face to face with a midshipman. The boy backed up a step, then took off. As he ran up the ladder I could hear him yelling, "He's awake! Captain, sir, he's awake!" I tracked him after the fact, turning my head to where his footsteps faded above decks, and met the gaze of Doyen Allwyn. "Welcome back, Lord Rabbit," the clergyman said.

"What happened?" I asked, somewhat interested.

"You don't remember?" Allwyn asked, moving towards me.

arts," I said, looking back at him and trying to rise. I stopped as my muscles protested.

Doyen Allwyn gently laid his hand on my shoulder, and pressed me back. "The Faena left strict instructions, the first one being that you are to remain in bed—in the hammock until he's able to look you over more thoroughly," he said as he reached for a bowl.

"Where is he?" I asked, still mildly interested.

"He and the ship's physician are with the wounded from last night." The doyen dipped a cloth into the bowl and, wringing it out, placed it over my forehead.

I sighed at the astringent coolness against my brow. The doyen moved to a lit brazier, a teakettle resting upon a wire mesh above glowing coals. "Is Chaplain Obruesk there too?" I asked.

A crease appeared between the doyen's brows. "No," he said as he added leaves to the kettle. "He is not."

I was more interested in a cup of tea and let the whereabouts of Obruesk go. I felt anticipation build as I watched Doyen Allwyn drop a large dollop of honey in a cup while he waited for the tea to steep.

"Were there many hurt?" I asked, to pass the time. I could just make out the steam rising from the kettle spout.

"Some, when the ship was wrecked." The doyen laid a fine mesh over the cup. "A few on board here too." I felt something sharp cut underneath my lethargy and I glanced once more around the berth.

"Where's Jeff? Is he all right?"

Doyen Allwyn nodded his head as he poured the tea into the cup, the mesh straining out the tea leaves. "He was knocked about somewhat." He saw my look. "Just a little bed rest, Rabbit, and he should be back to his usual self." He picked up the cup and started towards me with it, but he stopped as footsteps sounded coming down the ladder. He turned to face whoever was descending.

"Uhm—"

Without looking, the doyen handed the cup to me, and I put more effort into rising so I could drink it, but the cloth slipped over my eyes. I snatched it off just in time to see Captain Suiden climb down into the berth—and to also see Doyen Allwyn's shoulders slump as he relaxed. I lay there with damp cloth in one hand and tea in the other, but the captain solved my dilemma.

"As you were, Lieutenant."

The doyen solved my other dilemma by taking the cloth and dropping it back into the bowl. He then raised me by stuffing folded blankets behind me. I sighed and took my first sip—and nearly gagged.

"What the hell—"

Captain Suiden looked at me and I stopped midcourse. "What is this?"

Doyen Allwyn grinned. "As I said, Lord Rabbit, Ambassador Laurel left strict instructions." He went back to the bowl and wrung out the cloth again, laying it on my forehead. "You are to drink the entire pot."

Captain Suiden walked over to the table and pulled out a chair, sitting in it. "How do you feel, Rabbit?"

"Like s— Uhm, not so well, sir." I took another sip. While this time I could taste the mentha leaves, they didn't help. The second mouthful was as evil as the first. "What happened?"

"You saved us," Suiden replied.

I found my cup of vileness very interesting.

Doyen Allwyn chuckled. "Not used to being a hero, are you?" He reached over and pushed up the bottom of my cup. "You might want to drink this faster, as the ambassador did say that it tastes even worse cold."

I drained my cup and, shuddering, handed it back to the doyen, all the while wondering what I wasn't

being told. Captain Suiden gave a faint smile but said nothing as Doyen Allwyn poured another cup, this time adding two heaping spoonfuls of honey. They didn't help much.

After giving me the tea, the doyen went to another chair and sat down. "I came on deck when the ship started pitching and heaving, figuring that it was better to be above than below." He tucked his hands into his robe sleeves and for the first time I noticed that he wasn't wearing his penitent sacking. "I came up just in time to see your, uh, battle with the djinn. Or at least what I assumed was the battle."

"All that we could see, Rabbit, was that the storm was blocked, then dissipated," Suiden said, "and the crew of the wrecked windrider was taken out of the sea and placed on the deck of the Pearl Fisher." I stared at the doyen and captain, all of a sudden intensely interested. "Yes, sir, and what is everyone saying?"

"Most are very, very glad that you're with us, Lieutenant," Suiden replied.

I had opened my mouth to ask who wasn't when footsteps sounded once more, coming down the ladder.

The captain's head snapped around and both he and Doyen Allwyn stood, the doyen moving to my hammock while Suiden went to stand at the entrance into the berth. Then the captain saluted as the vice admiral entered.

Vice Admiral Havram nodded, his eyes searching the room until he found me. He walked over to my hammock and stopped, staring down at me as Doyen Allwyn also stepped out of the way. "Well, nephew, I've seen you looking better."

"Yes, sir," I said, my voice faint. I looked at my uncle, my captain, and the Gresh doyen. "Please, what's going on?"

They all looked at each other, then back at me.

"The wards have failed," Suiden said and gave another faint smile. "The Dauntless has become a ghost ship." I heard a gasp from Doyen Allwyn and, turning my head in the direction of his stare, I saw Honor Ash Faena's haunt float down the ladder. "Heigh-ho," I breathed.

Vice Admiral Havram, Captain Suiden and Doyen Allwyn stayed still as the sprite's ghost approached, and she stopped before them, gazing into their faces, one after another. I began to get up, no matter that my body was protesting, but Honor turned and placed her hand on the hammock—and I decided that lying down was good too.

"After the storm, you were found lying in the mizzen top, Rabbit," Suiden said. He nodded towards the sprite. "The only reason why you were discovered so soon was because she chased a crew member up there."

"Who is she, lad?" Uncle Havram asked, his eyes on the haunt.

"Honor Ash, sir," I replied, also watching the sprite's ghost. "She was the Faena who strode the area around our farm." Honor moved to stand against the berth wall, her face turned to the ladder.

The vice admiral pulled out a chair, and with a small bow to the ash sprite, sat down. "All right. Now explain to me what exactly is a 'faena,' and why another ghost has attached herself to you." I blinked at my uncle, surprised that he didn't want to know what had happened with the storm.

"We will get to you and the djinn in a moment, Lieutenant," Suiden said. "Answer the vice admiral."

"Thank you for your help, Your Highness," Havram said, his voice dry.

I took a quick gulp of my tea, but was reminded why I hadn't been drinking it. I finished it, grimacing at the bitterness, and allowed Doyen Allwyn to take my cup. I sighed, though, as he filled it again and handed it back to me.

"I'd known Honor Ash since I was little, sir," I said. I looked at the shade but she kept her face to the ladder.

"So she decided to haunt you based on a long-standing relationship?" the vice admiral asked.

"No, sir. The moon season—" I began.

"I've already been told about the moon season. Why is she"—Havram jabbed a thumb at Honor—"haunting you? "

"Because she has chosen me to avenge her, sir."

"Why you?"

"I don't know, sir." I cast another glance at Honor. "Poxy hell!" I shot straight up as I found that instead of against the wall, the haunt stood by my hammock, staring down into my face. I then nearly fell out of my hammock as it unbalanced, the cloth on my forehead going flying and my un-drunk tea splashing everywhere.

"Damn it all, when did she move?" Uncle Havram shouted as he jumped up, knocking his chair into the table. Suiden and Doyen Allwyn made smothered exclamations.

My heart slammed against my ribs as I wrestled with my hammock until I finally managed to convince it not to dump me on the floor. I then looked at the sprite's haunt, who had remained where she was during my struggle. When she saw that she had my complete attention, she pointed at my hand. I looked down and then up again, not understanding, and she pointed again. I turned my hand over to check the rune, thinking that maybe something was wrong, and she grabbed at it, not quite touching me. After my heart calmed down again, I spread my hand out and watched as she traced the rune, her finger again just above my palm. I blinked as the rune grew warm and the lines began to glow in the dimness of the berth.

"The truth rune," the vice admiral said. He had cautiously approached my hammock and now stood at arm's length from Honor, also looking down into my hand. "His Majesty had written about that." He shot me a look. "Do you know, lad, that this symbol is part of our family's device?"

"No, sir," I said, still staring at the haunt, worried where she'd end up next if I took my eyes off her.

"Aye, it is. You must have seen it at our house in Iversly—"

I gave my uncle a quick glance, and he broke off. He sighed, muttering "brother" and "nodcock," moving back to the table, and I heard the chair scrape as he repositioned it, sitting down. "So," he resumed, "for some reason this ghost has attached itself to you—"

"She has—had the same symbol on her right hand, sir," I said, watching Honor. "So does Laurel. All Faena do. A marking to bind them to truth." I vaguely wondered what would happen if she were to raise her rune. Then I more urgently thought that I didn't want to know. Honor ghosted back to the wall, once more facing the ladder.

My uncle was quiet. "I see," he said after a moment. "And what are these faenas?"

"They are the Border's justicers—"

"Thieftakers then," the vice admiral said.

"No, sir. More like thieftcatchers. They don't just go after those that they know have broken the law, they also discover who has."

"Discover how?" he asked.

"Well, say there's a murder and no one knows who did it; they find out, and then go get the murderer."  
My voice trailed off and my eyes widened as the haunt turned her head to look at me.

"I see," Uncle Havram said again.

I reluctantly looked back at my uncle. "But they do more. Are more."

"Such as?" Havram asked.

"Warrior priests—they led us in the war with Iversterre."

Uncle Havram nodded, while the doyen slid a glance at Honor Ash. "What else?" the vice admiral asked.

I hesitated, wondering how to explain the effect the Faena had on a land full of excitable, disparate folk, all pulling in different directions. After the battle between Dragoness Moraina and the intruder dragon over our farm, Honor Ash had gone, unasked, to visit both as they recuperated from their wounds. Not only did my parents get reparation for their destroyed crops and damaged buildings, but Moraina's son Gwyn had come to our Weald while the other dragon had hosted a bard, and between the two we had nights of poetry, songs and stories that healed us as the land was healing.

"They balance us, sir," I finally said, "and hold us together."

"They are very important, then," Vice Admiral Havram said.

"Yes, sir."

"And the murder of one is very serious," he continued. "Perhaps even catastrophic."

My throat closed for a moment and I had to swallow, hard. "It would be like the murder of a doyen, sir. Worse."

"So she's come to you to be her, uh, thieftcatcher," the vice admiral finished. "As has the trooper who has been murdered by one of his own. You who have the symbol of truth on your right hand, drawn as it is in both Ivers Palace and in the House of Chause."

"But what about the magic?" Doyen Allwyn asked.

"Last I heard, being able to work magic wasn't cause for excommunication," Captain Suiden said.

Doyen Allwyn waved his hand. "I know Church law, Your Highness," he said, his voice dry once more.

"Unfortunately, so does Obruesk—better than either of us, I fear." He saw me looking at him and he sighed. "The archdoyen-turned-chaplain is calling you apostate, young lord, and is saying that you should be expelled from the Church." He once more tucked his hands into his robe sleeves. "Never mind that without you he—along with the rest of us— would be at the bottom of the sea."

"Hmmp," Uncle Havram said. "His reverence is saying the reason why the Dauntless is full of phantoms is because you have called them to us." "And that you were able to fight off the djinn storm because you conjured it in the first place," Captain Suiden added.

"But he can't excommunicate me," I said, skipping over the archdoyen's charges. "He couldn't when he was an archdoyen, and he certainly can't now as an army chaplain. Only the patriarch can expel someone from the Church."

"That's true, Lord Rabbit," Doyen Allwyn said.

"However, if he could convince someone that you imperil the physical and spiritual well-being of the crew and passengers—" Captain Suiden began.

I made a sound, deep in my chest, and the doyen stepped back while Uncle Havram's gaze sharpened. "Just like your grandpapa," he said, his voice soft.

"—and offer the Church's sanction and covering—" the captain continued.

The sound increased.

"—who knows who might do what?" Suiden finished.

"Do not worry, lad," Uncle Havram said. "You have guards." He cast a glance at Honor's haunt. "Most of them alive. Just in case someone's piety overcomes their good sense."

I looked down and was rather surprised that my hands weren't shaking. "This man is second only to Patriarch Pietr?" I asked, my voice almost normal.

"Rabbit—" Uncle Havram began as he and the doyen frowned at me.

I met stare for stare. "Why did His Holiness palm him off on us, sirs? He knew what kind of man Obruesk is. And if he's like this here and now, what'll he be like when he reaches the Border?"

"He was sent for the same reason that Commander Ebner allowed Slevoic to write his own orders to join us," Suiden said. "It got him out of the commander's backyard, making Freston a much nicer place. So it is with Obruesk and the patriarch."

Vice Admiral Havram turned his frown on the captain. He then sighed. "That's true. It is sometimes easier in the short haul to push the problem onto someone else. Unfortunately, the only place we can push the good chaplain is overboard." The vice admiral gave a sudden grin. "Though the captain here threatened to hang him from the yardarm and do all kinds of interesting things to him if the chaplain didn't stop inciting his men."

There was an answering smile on Doyen Allwyn's face, which he tried to hide by picking up my dropped cup, setting it on the table. "I have moved in with you and Lieutenant Groskin," he said. He looked up and met my eyes. "It shows that you have the support of the Church—and are not considered a heretic."

"But—" I began, thinking that a knife in the dark didn't care who was bunking with whom.

"But, in the meantime," Suiden said over me, "you will adhere to your guards, Lieutenant. I have asked Sro Laurel to hold your lessons under the mainmast—"

Uncle Havram quickly turned his head to the captain. "Oh, aye?" His brow rose. "The 'What cannot be hidden is to be thrust down everyone's throat' approach?"

"More the 'What is frightening in the dark becomes ordinary in daylight, and so can't be used as a bogey' approach, sir," Suiden replied.

"That will irritate His Reverence," the vice admiral remarked.

"Yes, sir," the captain said. "However, adversity, I've been told, is good for the soul."

Doyen Allwyn smiled again, this time not bothering to hide it. "Rabbit should do his devotions there too, gracious sirs, so that everyone can see that he's still a faithful son of the Church." His smile faded rather fast as he took in my expression. "You have been diligent in your prayers, Lord Rabbit?"

My uncle gave me a quizzical look as I muttered something about not really having time lately.

"If I recall correctly," the doyen said, frowning, "you made time for them during our trip from Gresh to Iversly."

I muttered again as to how it was different then.

"I see." Doyen Allwyn turned to Captain Suiden and Vice Admiral Havram. "The ambassador gets him only after I do." He looked back at me, his face full of reprimand for the backslider. "Daily devotions, overseen by me."

Uncle Havram gave me a faint wink. "Aye, sure." He grinned. "That'll also do wonders for the chaplain's soul." His grin deepened. "Do not worry, Rabbit. Leave His bloody-minded Reverence to us, and trust that we will make certain of your safety."

I said nothing as echoes of three years of leaving Slevoic to "them" washed over me.

"Of course, if you are threatened, you are commanded to defend yourself, using any and every means at your disposal, no matter who comes at you. Understood?"

I liked that better. A little. "Yes, sir."

"Good." The vice admiral cast a wary glance at Honor Ash and, seeing she hadn't moved, settled back in his chair, gesturing for Captain Suiden and the doyen to join him. "Now, nephew, tell me everything that happened last night. Start from the beginning and don't leave anything out."

## **Chapter Fifty-four**

"Are there any oranges left?" I asked as I finished my fourth pickled egg.

Doyen Allwyn pushed the fruit bowl towards me and I plucked out an orange, peeling it as fast as possible. He watched in awe as the orange disappeared in two bites. I selected another.

Laurel plunked a cup of tea on the table before me. "Here, Rabbit. Drink this first." I sighed and swigged the honey-laced tea down, having discovered that was the best way to drink it—the less time on the tongue, the better. I then shoved as much as I could of the second orange in my mouth to cut through the bittersweet taste.

I'd fallen back asleep after I had spoken with Uncle Havram, Captain Suiden, and Doyen Allwyn, despite every intention to keep an eye on Honor Ash's haunt as she kept an eye on me. I awoke the next morning to find Honor gone. Also gone were my aches and pains, except in my stomach, which growled at me as though I were at the tail end of a five-day purification fast.

Though the ghost Faena was gone when I awakened, Laurel was there. He hovered over me all morning like a broody hen, looking puzzled when he thought I wasn't looking. He now caught my glance and gave

a brief chuff. "You have flown before you've even figured out how to crawl, Rabbit." He placed the kettle back on the brazier (he was right, the tea tasted much worse cold). "Yet you sit there as if you've done nothing more strenuous than go out on patrol. My first work of the talent left me as weak as a newborn cub."

"But from what I've heard, it wasn't his first, uh, work, was it, Ambassador?" Doyen Allwyn asked, as I went to work on some weevily biscuits. With my other hand, I picked up a wedge of cheese.

"No, honored elder," Laurel said. "It wasn't." He shook his head, his beads rattling. "And no real training for any of it."

I was more interested in filling the hollow space where my stomach used to be than why I had bounced back so fast. Swallowing the last of the cheese and biscuits, I took an apple from the fruit bowl and in a few quick bites reduced it to seeds and core fragments.

"Right," Allwyn said, blinking. "Well, Captain Suiden has said that if you're up to it, you're to go topside, Lord Rabbit." I grunted but did not move, as I had discovered some rather raisiny grapes and set to making them disappear. Doyen Allwyn reached over and bravely removed the fruit bowl from my grasp. "You'll have it returned to you, my lord," he said, his voice firm, "once we're on deck." He picked up a pile of blankets and headed for the ladder.

Lured by the fruit bowl, I climbed the ladder, sandwiched between the doyen and Laurel. When I emerged blinking into the sun, though, I looked around and tried to dive down the hatch again.

"It is a little disconcerting," Doyen Allwyn said as he stopped my escape attempt and moved me out the way so that Laurel could emerge, sealing off my exit. "But they seem benign."

"Uh," I said as I stared at a sprite remembering her tree, a unicorn and leopard lying in her phantom shade. The thought went through the back of my mind that they wouldn't have done so (at least not at the same time) when they'd been alive. Death had a way of changing one's perspective, I supposed. Looking about, I watched as crew and troopers (some with their eyes starting out and hair standing on end) moved among shades of more sprites, wolves, small furry animals, big cats, antlered deer, bears, lizards, feathered snakes, wildly plumed birds, and great horned and tusked beasts, that walked, paced, slithered, padded, stalked, trod, pattered, shambled, plodded and fluttered about. And it seemed that all—the quick and the dead—turned their heads to fix their eyes on me.

"Uh," I said again, trying once more to go back down the hatch. But Laurel and Allwyn latched on to an arm each, and they "helped" me to a sheltered nook.

"Captain Suiden and Vice Admiral Havram were both very emphatic about you being seen up, about, and reasonably whole," Allwyn said, "without extra eyes, cloven hooves, or other marks of the devil upon you."

"They can come see me in my berth, sir," I said, trying to slip out of their grasp.

"Out during the day in the sun, Lord Rabbit," Laurel said. "Without bursting into flames." In a few short moments I was seated and wrapped up against any stray chill that might happen along. Laurel rumbled at my indignant stare at being swaddled like some toothless decrepit, and moved aside as Basel pranced up in his stag persona. The haunt laid claim to me by striking a pose with antlers high, looking regally out over the other shades.

"Suck-up," I muttered, and Basel flicked his tail.



Laurel rumbled again and I started to throw the blankets off. "No, Rabbit, don't," he said, his eyes slit in laughter. "Humor me."

"It seems I already have," I said, subsiding. To tell the truth, the blankets felt good as it was a little brisk. I hitched them up around my neck.

Laurel's whiskers swept back in a grin, which faded as he looked around at the haunts' unwavering attention. "I'm the one with the earth affinity, yet they act as if I'm a talentless dog. However, they fix on you as if you're Lady Gaia's consort himself come to bless us."

"Consort, Ambassador Laurel?" Allwyn asked.

"The moon, honored elder." Laurel cocked his head to one side. "When were you born, Rabbit?"

"The second day of Harvest. Why?"

"Well, that matches your aspect." Laurel saw Allwyn's puzzled look. "Four aspects match the four seasons, honored elder, and those who have the aspect are usually born during that season. I was born in spring, the time of awakenings and new beginnings, of oaths, consecrations, and promises made, of joinings, pairings and consummation, of the cycle of life—birth, healing, dying, and death. We of the earth are healers, hunters, farmers, seers and shamans."

Doyen Allwyn gave Laurel, then me, a fascinated eye. "And Lord Rabbit?"

"He was born in the fall, the time of fruition and fulfillment, of fealty, faith and promises kept, of change and turning, of songs of harvest and rejoicing, and lullabies." Laurel's whiskers swept back again. "If he weren't a mage, he could've been a bard." So Sparrow wasn't the only one in my family who could sing. I ignored the speculation on the doyen's face.

"Or a warrior." Laurel's smile broadened at my startled look. "The winds of war, Rabbit."

"But that's just a saying," I said.

"All sayings start somewhere," Laurel said. "It's no mistake that you are a soldier." He once more looked over the haunts, becoming still as his eyes sharpened. "I am going to exercise some of my talent and check on the injured, honored folk. If you have need, send for me there." He bowed and was gone.

I didn't say anything as I saw what he had seen, and I uneasily eyed the sailors and troopers who had congregated, standing a little ways off as they watched me watching them. I could see First Lieutenant Falkin's blond hair shimmering in the sunlight as he joined them. He took a step towards me, then stopped, as if uncertain about coming closer. Though that may have been because the unicorn had risen to her feet and was heading my way. Keeping an eye on her and them, I selected another orange and peeled it.

Jeff pushed through the crowd and called out, "Well, there! I thought so with that braid and feather. He's really a winsome she, lads! Virtuous too!"

"Hah!" I said, grinning, shoving orange into my mouth. "You wouldn't know winsome if it bit you on the arse, Jeff." I spoke to the rest of the lads, my voice thick. "Saw him at the theater with someone who looked just like Groskin's horse, Fiend. Then I realized it was Fiend." I smirked at him over the laughter.

"He was only there because Jeff promised him sugar lumps."

Jeff strolled closer, with Falkin a step behind, both avoiding several otters' shades gamboling by. The crew and troopers followed them, with more joining the crowd. Doyen Allwyn shifted aside so that he

could watch.

"Hell, Rabbiteena, that wasn't Fiend," Jeff threw back. "That was your mother, following me about because of my carrots." I leaned forward, paying no mind as Basel stepped aside to let the unicorn lie down next to me. "If that had been my ma, Jeff, she would've eaten your carrots, crunched your lumps, and left you nothing but a stump." I looked thoughtful. "Though, I don't know. From what I've seen, maybe it was her—"

I broke off as I remembered Doyen Allwyn. I shot him a look but he was staring hard at the folded chessboard. A muscle quivered in his cheek and then was still.

Jeff also gave a quick glance at the doyen, a faint flush adding to the colors already on his face. He hesitated, then hunkered down, wincing a little. The others in the front of the crowd did the same, while the rest pressed in until I was surrounded by a solid wall of humanity.

"Uh, yeah," Jeff said. "So, how are you doing, Rabbit?"

"I'm all right." My stomach rumbled and Doyen Allwyn offered the fruit bowl. I selected another orange and, as I peeled it, I noted the black eye, the lump on Jeff's forehead, the splints on a couple of his fingers, and the other assorted bruises I could see. I frowned. "Why aren't you in the infirmary?"

"Both the captain and Laurel said I could return to duty, nurse," Jeff said. He waited a moment, then gave a wry grin. "Well, tell us. What happened?"

I hesitated.

"Rabbit." Jeff sighed and started ticking off on his fingers. "Lost in the mountains. Magicals. Feathers. Translations. Haunts. A bridge of air and then of green vines. Runes lighting up. Butterflies. Stopping arrows in mid-flight. A magic storm. And now"—he waved a hand around, having run out of digits, and in the gaps between the men I could see the shades also pressing closer to where I sat—"a whole shipful of haunts."

"Don't forget Slevaic," a trooper said.

"Oh, yeah," Jeff said, "Slev-o-icious and his one-man horror show gone." Grins bloomed on many of the soldiers' faces, though Ryson, standing on the outskirts, just looked green.

"Slevaic ibn Dru?" Falkin asked, his gray eyes bright. "I knew him from when he was stationed at the Royal Garrison. Both he and Lord Gherat would hang about in the dockside taverns." His mouth twisted in distaste. "The whores would hide as soon as they saw them coming. It didn't surprise me when I'd heard Slevaic had turned into a sorcerer." The twist straightened into a grin. "And after last night, it didn't surprise me to hear that you handed him his hat."

I stared Falkin for a moment, then looked at Jeff, who shrugged back at me.

"Captain Suiden ordered me to tell everyone about Slevaic," Jeff said. "Anyway, you did go up against him. Three times—twice at the embassy and then when we were in the alley."

"But—"

"It's a legend at the garrison, sir," another trooper said to Falkin. "How for three years Rabbit evaded Slevaic." He also grinned. "I once saw Rabbit standing right in front of him, but the Vicious didn't see him until one of the captains called Rabbit to run an errand—and then it was too late for the Vicious to do anything about it. He just about howled."

"My ma always said I could hide in plain sight," I murmured, remembering some of the close calls I'd had with the lieutenant. I felt a hunger pang and shoved the orange into my mouth. I then reached for an apple.

"He sounds a rare treat," a sailor said. "Lord's son?"

"He's a cousin of a friend of the king," Jeff said. "But now he's gone, outlawed and on the run, thanks to Rabbit."

"I didn't—" I began over a mouthful of apple.

"Yes, you did," Jeff said. He shifted on his heels. "I don't think anything you'd say at this point would get anyone worked up, Rabbit."

"Hell, no," Falkin said, squatting down beside Jeff. "We were dead men, Rabbit. Then suddenly, we weren't." He smiled again, his eyes rather round with wonder. "What did you do?"

I swallowed and sighed, feeling as though I was going to strip myself bare in front of everyone. I tried to look out at the sea, but my view was hemmed by sailors and troopers, so I looked back at Jeff, my own mouth quirking. "The storm was going to kill us so I stopped it."

"I was kissing the deck, remember?" Jeff sat down and leaned forward, his face expectant. "How did you stop it?"

I shifted as I chewed, trying to remember the words I used yesterday when I told Suiden, Havram and Doyen Allwyn.

"He turned into the wind," Doyen Allwyn said, his voice quiet, "and the storm just stopped, like it hit a wall. Then it went away."

"Better than the dramas," a trooper said, his eyes wide.

"Yes," Jeff whispered. "What was it like, Rabbit?" I took a deep breath. "Ever have dreams where you were flying?"

A murmur went around the group of men.

"It was like that, except I wasn't flying. I was flight." I pulled the blankets around me tighter. "Like the lift beneath a bird's wing. Or the soaring of a kite."

"Aye," an old sailor said, looking up at the masts. "The filling of her sails until she fair dances and sings." I nodded and, hearing the wind give a faint chuckle, shivered, understanding clearly how mages were seduced.

"When I've had dreams like that, I never wanted them to end," Falkin said softly. Sailor and soldier alike nodded their heads in agreement. "And yours was real. How could you stand to come back?"

A breeze swirled around me, fluttering my feather, and then was gone. "Because, sir, I'm not the wind—"

"You are an apostate," Chaplain Obruesk said, his deep voice rolling above the sound of the windrider cutting through the waves. "A necromancer who has made an unholy covenant with hell."

"Mother loving—"

Everyone scrambled to their feet, staring at the chaplain who had taken advantage of our preoccupation to worm his way into the circle. I frowned up at him but suddenly found my view blocked as Doyen Allwyn stood up, Jeff and Falkin joining him. It didn't deter Obruesk, though, bent on my denunciation. Behind him, I could see Ryson slipping off from the crowd with a couple of other troopers.

Obruesk's cavernous eyes burned as he watched the unicorn rise and stand next to Allwyn, while Basel came around the other side. "A vile seducer of innocents! See how he has corrupted this man of God so that he sits down with wickedness, instead of coming against them in the name of the Holy Church!"

"That is enough." Doyen Allwyn's voice cracked like a whip. He signaled and more soldiers and sailors joined us, all facing the chaplain. "The only wickedness I see is one who uses his office to solicit murder."

"It is not murder!" Obruesk's burning eyes were now fixed on the doyen. "God demands that we remove what's unclean."

"From our own hearts first, Obruesk," Doyen Allwyn said. "Otherwise we become more of an abomination than that which we denounce."

The chaplain glared back at the doyen. "Abominations? You talk about abominations?" He turned to the half circle of crew and soldiers, his robe flaring out about his thin body, and he waved a hand at the haunts. "We are surrounded by unhallowed spirits conjured by this man. Ware!Ware, I tell you, lest you find the abominations devour your soul!"

Chaplain Obruesk broke off as my knife, still in its sheath, landed at his feet with a thunk. He stared down at it, then raised his eyes to me. I had cast off the blankets and risen.

"If it's my murder you want, Chaplain, I will show you how to do it." I pulled my tabard over my head and dropped it on the deck. I started to remove my shirt. "No reason for anyone else to be damned for the taking of a life." The shirt joined the tabard and I went to work on my singlet.

"Would it damn one to remove evil from the earth? No! Heaven shall sing his praises who puts his hand to work God's will!" The chaplain's voice rang out, his head lifted to the sky.

"God does not work through murdering mobs—" Doyen Allwyn began.

I dropped my singlet and laid a hand on the doyen's shoulder and he fell silent. "Then there's no reason why you can't do it, is there?" I asked. I pulled out my boot knife and pointed it under my ribs. "Angle the knife up so, and I'll be quite dead." I grinned, baring my teeth. "I don't know about evil, but maybe that'll remove your shame at being kicked out of Iversly."

Obruesk brought his head down and glared at me, making a warding sign. "Get thee gone, demon, and take your workings with you! Tempting a man of God to bloodshed—"

"My da always said you should never ask someone to do what you're not willing to do yourself." I pressed the knife point and a bead of blood welled up, dark red against my skin. "Right here, Chaplain."

Obruesk drew back his foot to kick, my knife away. "A devil's tool—"

"One more word and I will throw you overboard, Obruesk."

The chaplain whipped around so fast that I heard his spine crack. The troopers who'd left had returned with Captain Suiden, Captain Javes, Lieutenant Groskin, and Lord Esclaur—none of whom were wearing happy faces. I quickly tucked my knife behind my back.

"I told you to stay away from Lieutenant Rabbit, yet here you are." Captain Suiden walked up to the chaplain, his clan markings vivid in the sun. "What part of 'clapped in irons' and 'thrown in the brig' don't you understand?"

There was another stir as Ryson returned with Laurel.

"What the—" Jeff said softly as we both stared at Laurel and Ryson working their way into the circle. "Ryson didn't just go get the cat, did he?" Jeff whispered as the Faena joined the captains and Groskin, Ryson prudently (prudently!) hanging back.

The captain ignored Laurel's arrival as he was still fixed on legitimate prey. "As you seem to have problems obeying orders, Obruesk, I am placing you under guard until we reach the Border—"

The chaplain cut Suiden off and I almost admired his courage. Almost. "So you too have given yourself over to hell's thrall!" He once more turned to the surrounding crew and troopers. "See how your captain stands with the sorcerer's familiar!" Suiden motioned with his hand and two soldiers and several sailors detached from the crowd, converging on the chaplain. "Instead of standing with you?" he asked. "Why should we? Rabbit saved us and you did not."

Obruesk opened his mouth but the captain spoke over him. "Alive by magic beats to flinders death by drowning, no matter how unholy you call it."

The chaplain jerked an arm away from a soldier. "Saved us? The sorcerer called the demon in the first place! I've seen his familiar speaking with his succubus," he said. He looked beyond Laurel, his eyes wide in outrage. "There she is now, as bold as brass!" I followed Obruesk's glare and saw Honor Ash standing behind Laurel. The crowd shifted, staring between me and the Faena and the haunt, and for the first time a thread of uneasiness wound through the men.

"When?" Suiden asked. "When did you see them talking?"

"What does it matter? They are in collusion, working towards their nefarious—"

"Oh, stifle it!" Captain Suiden said, suddenly irritated.

Javes shot a look at Suiden, then looked away, meeting Esclaur's eyes for a brief moment. Both their mouths quivered.

"It was after the storm, wasn't it?" Suiden demanded. The chaplain didn't say anything, and the captain's green eyes glinted at him. "They were friends, Obruesk. He probably does speak to her ghost, just as Basel's troop mates still speak to his."

"Yes, sir," someone said just loud enough to be heard. "We're trying to get him to come back and do the cooking again." A smattering of laughter went through the soldiers and the tension once more relaxed.

Obruesk's mouth opened, but Suiden held up his hand again. "You are a pest. Enough." He gestured at the first two soldiers. "Take him below. Gendy," he added as the men took hold of the chaplain's arms. "He's still clergy. Respect the office, if not the man."

The chaplain cast me a look as he was led away and the thought flitted through my mind that he wasn't going to bless me anytime soon—but I already knew that. I was more concerned about getting my knife back without Suiden seeing. He had turned to Doyen Allwyn and I took a cautious step towards where it lay on the deck.

"Leave it, Lieutenant," Suiden said, without looking at me.

I stopped.

"If you would take over the office of chaplain for the duration of our trip, Doyen Allwyn," Suiden asked, sort of.

"Yes, of course" the doyen replied. He glared after Obruesk. "When I return to Iversterre I will speak to the patriarch about whom he allowed to be his second."

Everyone became still.

"Your Reverence—" began Lord Esclaur.

"I know what I said and where I said it, my lord," the doyen replied. He worked his shoulders and dragged in a sigh. "I desperately need to pray. Blessings." He waved his hands in our direction and stalked off.

Captain Suiden also sighed and looked around at the crew and troopers. "You are all dismissed." No one moved and the captain's brows came together. "Is there a problem?"

"Please, sir," Jeff said, "Rabbit was telling us about what happened with the storm and all when the chaplain interrupted him."

"He was?" Groskin said, pressing forward. "What did he say?" He caught Suiden's eye. "Uh—"

"That it was like when you dream you're flying, only better, sir," Jeff said.

"Oh, I say," Javes said, also stepping up. "I would like to hear."

"But I've already told you—" Suiden began.

"Indeed, yes. I would too," Esclaur said as he followed Javes.

First Lieutenant Falkin said nothing but turned a pleading look on Suiden, who sighed again and gave in. "All right. Lieutenant Rabbit can finish his telling." His eyes narrowed at me. "But afterwards you come see me, understood?"

"Yes, sir," I replied, still holding my boot knife behind my back.

Suiden gave a faint smile. "In the meantime, put your clothes back on and both knives away." He turned, almost bumping into Laurel, and his brow raised. "Sro Cat?"

"A moment, Captain," Laurel said. He produced a vial and a clean cloth from his pouch. "To prevent the wound from corrupting," he said as he dabbed the stinging lotion on the small stab wound under my ribs. He wiped the drying blood off from where it had run down my side, then stood back, and putting the cloth and vial away, sat down on the deck, his staff resting against his shoulder. "I should like to hear also."

It was like I was back in my catechism class when Brother Paedrig would walk in and give the signal for us to sit, but this time I was the one left standing as crew, soldiers, officers, lords, and haunts followed the Faena and, in one motion, seated themselves on the deck, waiting patiently as I re-dressed myself and put away my knives. Suiden propped himself against the mast, his arms folded, and I shot him a look. He once again gave me a faint smile. "I could stand to hear it again, Lieutenant."

"Uhm, yes, sir—" Tabard in place, I turned back to look over the upturned faces as the wind gently circled around me, making my feather flutter once more against my cheek. I gave them a bewildered

look.

Suiden's smile widened. "Just start at the very beginning, Rabbit."

"The very beginning?" I echoed.

"The absolute beginning," the captain said. He opened his mouth, hesitated, then added, "Please." So I stood before them all and recounted from the beginning as I understood it, starting with hearing laughter while lost on a mountain ridge and ending with the djinn storm. As I finished, the watch changed and I told it again. And again, and again, to a mixture of new and old faces, on into the night, the stars hanging dense and low over me, maybe to listen themselves as I spoke to all who would hear what it was like to be the wind and to soar.

I didn't see the captain until the next day.

## Chapter Fifty-five

Having just finished prayer and meditation with I Doyen Allwyn, I was getting ready to begin meditation and talent work with Laurel, but we both rose at the shout. Trailing Jeff, Basel and the unicorn haunt, we hurried to the railing, my eyes straining for my first glimpse of the Border in five years. Home. Or almost home, as I'd never been to any of the coastal city-states.

We all reached the railing at the same time as Captain Javes, Chancellor Berle, and Lord Esclaur, both Javes and Esclaur with raised quiz glasses already aimed at the approaching shore. In the just risen sun it was nothing more than a thickened line on the horizon, but all gazed upon it with eager faces.

"Elanwryfindyll," Chancellor Berle said, leaning out over the rail on tiptoes and shading her eyes. "Well, I guess we'd have to be closer to see anything." She stood flat again and looked at me, ignoring the ghosts. "Glad to be going home, Lord Rabbit?"

I started to say yes, surprised at the sudden homesickness. But then Magus Kareste's image arose, and I shrugged. "I don't know, Chancellor."

"Nothing like being certain, what?" Javes said, also ignoring the haunts behind me—until the unicorn pressed close to the railing next to him. There was a faint suggestion of a snicker, which quickly cut off when the captain glared about him, his quiz glass forgotten.

"She just wants to see also," I said, addressing the air, my voice mild. "She is not making a statement on anyone's love life."

"Including yours, eh, Lord Rabbit?" Lord Esclaur asked, his eyes gleaming at me.

It was my turn to glare. "As I said, my lord—"

"It's simplicity and purity she represents, honored folk," Laurel said from over my shoulder, "not the lack of carnal knowledge. I've seen grandmothers walk with unicorns while those who were, hmm, physically untouched were shunned as if they were the plague."

No one said anything, casting sidelong glances at the unicorn's haunt and then at each other, the air suddenly thick with suspicions of hidden motives and unspoken agendas. I heard a faint purr.

"You are enjoying this too much," I murmured to Laurel. The Faena gave me a bland look back, his whiskers twitching as Lieutenant Groskin joined us, followed by the leopard's shade. The haunt threw himself down at Groskin's feet as the lieutenant stopped at the rail, the cat's sides heaving in a remembered pant as he too stared at the growing shore. Groskin watched the haunt for a moment, then raised his head, his eyes shifting between their normal brown and the gold of the panther, scanning the horizon.

"Elanwryfindyll," he murmured, echoing Chancellor Berle. "Captain Suiden said we're going before the Fyrst, Laurel Faena?"

"His Grace, Loran," Laurel said. "The ruler of the city and its environs, but also head of the Confederation of City-States, and the Oldest One of the Gaderian of Deorc Oelfs—"

"The what?" Esclaur whispered to me. Javes and Berle leaned in to listen.

"Council of Dark Elves," I whispered back.

"He's a very old, very powerful elf," Laurel finished. His tail lashed, though his face remained bland. "Very, very powerful."

"More powerful than the High Council?" Berle asked.

"No," Laurel said. "No one is."

"Why are we going there, then, honored Laurel?" Groskin asked. "Why not go to where the High Council meets?"

"We are," Laurel said, his face blander, though his tail lashed once more. "His Grace is also the High Council's Dark Elf representative and it's his turn to host the next session."

"He sounds a right welcoming fellow, what?" Javes said, his eyes still on the horizon. He then cast me a look. "What's it like there for people like us, Rabbit?"

"Who, sir? Humans?" At Javes' nod, I almost shrugged again. "I really don't know. I've never been to any of the coastal cities." My mouth quirked. "In fact, they'll probably consider me just as provincial as everyone in Iversly did."

"Never?" Javes asked, turning fully to look at me. "How, then, did you get to Iversterre?"

"Through Veldecke, sir."

Everyone else turned to stare at me. "But no one can go through there," Berle said, frowning.

"Well, some can," Groskin said, also frowning, "but only certain ones for very specific reasons. And never longer than a day or, at the most, two."

"I remember the king saying that," I said, this time yielding to a shrug. "I was let through, though, no problem."

"Did you join the army there?" Javes asked.

"No, at Cosdale, sir," I said, naming a town on the King's Road a little to the south of Freston.

"Why not at Veldecke?" Esclaur asked.



"Because it was too close to the Border." My mouth quirked again. "I was running away, my lord. I didn't want to be in reach of anyone or anything that might come across." I rested my hands on the railing. "I attached myself to a supply caravan going to Cosdale and was out of Veldecke almost as soon as I came into it."

"I'm surprised the caravan leader allowed it," Esclaur said, his brows creased.

I shrugged once more. "She was the one who said I could. Worked me hard too." My smile widened. "I figured the army would be very easy after that. It was."

"I know the caravan leader who makes the Cosdale run and I'm surprised that once she had you she let you go," Groskin said.

"Oh? Likes them young, does she?" Berle asked.

I stiffened, giving the chancellor a hard look, and Groskin caught my elbow. "No," he said. "Just as close to free labor as she can get. She has latched on to other lads in the past and they had a devil of a time getting loose." He made sure I was staying still, then let go.

"She did say that I owed her for meals and my space by the campfire," I said. "I told her to get stuffed—I mean, I told her I didn't and left."

"She didn't sic her lump of a head guard on you?" Groskin asked.

I frowned as I thought back, vaguely remembering someone shouting, and running footsteps as I walked away. "If she did, he didn't catch me."

"Is she someone we should be watching, Lieutenant?" Javes asked Groskin.

"I don't know, sir. She never really broke any law that I knew of." There was a movement at Groskin's feet and I looked down to see the leopard looking up at us, his fangs bared.

"And again, maybe she did," Groskin said, his voice soft as he also looked down. He looked up at me, his eyes now bright gold. "You never saw in the carts, Rabbit?"

I shook my head. "No. I was assigned to the caravan's draymaster."

"The smuggling didn't really start until after you'd left, Rabbit," Laurel said. "The caravan may not have been carrying any contraband—then."

"Another one, contracted by the army to supply the garrison itself," Javes said, rubbing his forehead.

"I thought you already traced the run goods to Veldecke, sir," I said.

"To the town, not to the garrison proper," Javes replied. He sighed. "I do not envy you this assignment, Berle."

"Neither do I," Chancellor Berle said, gazing out over the water.

I cast a glance at the Foreign Chancellor, wondering if she ever found out what we'd been discussing in Captain Suiden's great cabin when we were interrupted by the djinn storm. If she had, it didn't come from me—though that may have been because I was never alone. Laurel, Doyen Allwyn, Jeff, or the haunts were always with me, sometimes all at once.

At the thought of haunts, I looked around. The railing was thick with ghosts, the masts, spars, rigging also

full, some holding their shapes, others streaming in the wind, making the sails look tattered. Where I could make out faces, each one was turned to the shore with a fixed intensity and I wondered what our landfall would be like.

"Do you think that if they knew what we carried, they'd allow us in the harbor?" Lord Esclaur asked, also looking around. "I know that if this were Iversly, the Royal Navy would be out in force doing its damndest to head us off."

"I don't know that they can bar us," I said. "Can they, Laurel?"

The Faena shook his head, his ears flicking back. "No, the right of homecoming is given to all—the quick and the dead." Everyone turned to stare at Laurel.

"The right, alive or dead," Lord Esclaur repeated. He groped for his quiz glass and raised it at the cat.

"Except in special cases," Laurel said, ignoring Esclaur. "Like a practitioner of the dark arts." The ship rose and fell in a swell; he rode it easily, his tail, now quiet, balancing him. "But as we have none such aboard—Elder Obruesk's claims aside—we will not be prevented."

"And this 'Magus' who is so anxious to get his hands on Lord Rabbit," Chancellor Berle said. "Shall he be prevented?"

I gave the chancellor a sidelong glance at the abrupt change in subject.

"Interesting question, Berle," Javes said. "But it's out of your bailiwick, what?"

"Indeed, yes," Esclaur murmured.

"I am concerned as the king's representative—" the chancellor began.

"Your orders do not include Lieutenant Rabbit," Javes interrupted. "Let it be, Berle."

"And if it's made part of my 'orders'?" Berle asked. "If a magic—a Border—someone demands Lord Rabbit's return to the Magus as part of the peace negotiations, then what?"

"Then you refer them to me, honored chancellor," Laurel said. "I have sworn both to Rabbit and to King Jusson that he will not be returned to Magus Kareste."

"And if they say that your oath is worthless and demand anyway?" the chancellor pushed.

"No one would say that anything I've sworn is worthless, honored chancellor," Laurel rumbled, showing his eyeteem. "Any more than your fellow ministers would call you dishonorable and untrustworthy. It is an insult, no?"

"I beg pardon, Ambassador. I didn't mean it as such," Berle said, a faint flush on her face. "It's just that—"

"Oh, I say, you too, Berle?" Javes asked, doing his silly ass smile.

The chancellor shot a glare at Javes before turning back to Laurel. "Sometimes, with the best intentions in the world, one is not able to deliver on a promise made."

"Then that one should not have made the promise in the first place," Laurel said, his fangs still gleaming in the sunlight. "I would suggest, honored chancellor, that when you arrive, you do not suggest to anyone that their word is not sufficient. Especially a Faena."

"Tell me, Chancellor Berle," I asked in the awkward silence, "would you hand me over to the Magus?"

"You heard Captain Javes and Ambassador Laurel, Lord Rabbit," Berle replied, her wry smile sweeping her face. "You are not my concern."

"I see," I said, and turned back to watch the sea, resolving never to be alone with the chancellor.

## Chapter Fifty-six

Elanwryfindyll's harbor was very much like the one we had left behind in Iversly. There were ships sailing in, ships sailing out, and ships at anchor. There were docks, there were warehouses, there were gulls, and there were officials, all waiting for us as the Dauntless, Valiant, and Adamantine sailed into Elanwryfindyll. The rest of the convoy, including the vice admiral's Pearl Fisher, was outside the harbor's mouth. Only the ships carrying the cargo entered the harbor as, Laurel pointed out, any more would be a provocation. Vice Admiral Havram had, however, come aboard the Dauntless to be part of the diplomatic landing party and to take over the command of the ship from Captain Suiden.

The harbor reminded me of Iversly, but Elanwryfindyll did not. The city rose from the half circle of sparkling blue water, flowing up, tier upon tier, spreading out farther and farther until it spilled over the top of the sloping cliffs, in soaring colonnades, graceful arches, rounded domes, all bright in the early afternoon sun against the dark of the earth, the greens of leaves and grasses, and a riot of flowers. At the crest, silhouetted against the sky, was the Fyrst of Elanwryfindyll's castle, with pennants flying from the turrets, and battlements.

After we dropped anchor, Uncle Havram ordered my presence in the great cabin to lay down a law that I had no intention of disobeying.

"You are to stay with me, Captain Suiden or Captain Javes at all times, is that clear?" Havram said.

"Yes, sir!"

"You are not to go off with anyone: family, friends, cats, or even other members of our delegation, is that understood?"

"Sir, yes, sir!"

"You are not to sightsee—"

"Yes, sir!"

"You are not to lollygag—"

"Yes, sir!"

"If you use the head, you do not go by yourself. Do you understand?"

"Sir, yes, sir!"

"Repeat it back to me, lad."

"I am not to go off without you, Captain Suiden, or Captain Javes, sir! Ever!"

"Splendid." He shifted to look at Jeffen standing behind me. "Do you understand what I've just said?"

"Sir, yes, sir!"

"What did I say?"

"Rabbit is to stay with you, Captain Suiden, and Captain Javes always, sir!"

The vice admiral smiled, satisfied. "Excellent."

We followed the vice admiral to the bridge, where we stood with First Lieutenant Falkin watching a boat full of officials set out from the docks and head our way. We were soon joined by Captain Javes in his dress uniform, cape and Habbs, Lieutenant Groskin also in dress uniform, and Laurel Faena wearing, for the first time since Dornel, his coat. The wind was fresh even though summer was almost upon us. It swirled around me, gently plucking at my hair ties, and I shivered in my own cape.

"Ah, the welcoming party," Javes said, looking through his quiz glass at the approaching boat.

"Aye," Uncle Havram said as he, Suiden, and Falkin looked through their spyglasses. "I suppose we ought to meet them at the gangway." He and Suiden collapsed their glasses and handed them to the first lieutenant.

"Do we need pipes and drums, Ambassador?" Havram asked as we all clattered down to the main deck.

"Have the troops present arms?"

"No, honored vice admiral," Laurel said, following him. "They look to be just harbor officials. We should be enough. According to protocol, the first one on board will be the harbormaster." Uncle Havram nodded. Reaching the main deck, he looked at Javes. "Where is the embassy party?"

"Down in their cabins, probably wondering what the hell they've gotten themselves into, sir," Javes said.

Laurel gave a short chuff, an ear twitching back. "Too late for that, honored folk." He tugged at his coat while I gave a shake to my cape. I glanced down to make sure that my Habbs hadn't acquired any scuffs and my trousers were draped properly.

"Peacock," Jeff murmured.

"Yes, he is, honored Jeff," Laurel said as we arrived at the gangway. "But here, first impressions count. A lot." Laurel turned me to him for one last inspection, straightening my braid, checking the ties, and adjusting the covenant feather. He then fussed with his own beads and head feathers, tugged once more on his coat, while holding his staff in the crook of his arm. I stared at it, watching its strips of cloth and feathers flutter in the harbor breeze.

"Tell me, Laurel, what happened to the staff that Honor used?"

Laurel's head shot up and he stared back at me with narrowed eyes, his ears lying back against his head.

He let out a rumbling breath. "That is a question, no?"

"Worry about it later, Sro Cat," Suiden said. "They are here."

Laurel looked down at his claws, already gleaming in the sun, and buffed them against his fur. He looked up again and sighed. "And so it begins, honored sirs." I caught a flicker, turned and looked. Basel stood next to Jeff in his stag persona with Honor Ash next to him. I glanced around further. The deck was crowded with haunts, massed so thickly that they were opaque.

"It's a little different than marines presenting arms," Falkin said softly, following my gaze.

I was distracted from replying by the arrival of me bosun's chair, and it was suddenly slammed home how different it was. Then I smiled at the diminutive faerie standing on the deck, pressing my palms together as I bowed.

"Grace to you, Harbormaster," Uncle Havram said, also bowing, but in the style of the kingdom, his hand over his heart. "Welcome aboard the Dauntless."

"My goodness," the faerie said as she stared about her, her hair and wings ruffling in the breeze. She brought her gaze to Laurel. "Honored Faena, what has happened here?"

"It is a homecoming, honored harbormaster," Laurel said.

"A homecoming," the faerie repeated as she stared about once more, pausing for a moment at Lieutenant Falkin's northern elf blondness. Her gaze then lit on Basel and Honor Ash, and her feathery brows climbed nearly into her hair. "A white stag and a sprite Faena?"

"Among others," Laurel said as the unicorn pulled away from the rest of the haunts and made her way to us. Others began to follow her, pressing close.

"By the blessed Lady," the harbormaster said, her piping voice rising to a squeak as she took a step back. "Is it a proper sending off for them, then? Or are you chosen to bring justice, honored Faena?"

"Both," Laurel replied. "But it's not me that they've chosen." He bowed, pressing his paws together. "I am Laurel Faena, of the Black Hills clan. May I present to you Vice Admiral Lord Havram ibn Chause, Captain Prince Suiden, Captain Javes, First Lieutenant Falkin, Lieutenant Groskin, and Lieutenant Lord Rabbit, honored son of Lark and Two Trees. They have come on a mission of peace."

The unicorn reached my side, the leopard right behind her. Honor Ash drifted over to my other side, followed by Basel. In a moment I was surrounded by haunts, all facing the harbormaster. She took another step back, the breeze blowing past me to catch her wings, and she hovered while she stared at me. As she took in the feather, bright red against the dark of my hair, her violet eyes narrowed.

"I see," she said as she alit once more on the deck. She hesitated a moment, then bowed. "Welcome to Elanwryfindyll, Laurel Faena, Prince Suiden, honored folk. I am Harbormaster Lin."

## Chapter Fifty-seven

It was a relatively small party that went ashore: Foreign Chancellor Berle, Lord Esclaur, Vice Admiral Havram, Captains Suiden and Javes, Lieutenant Falkin, Doyen Allwyn, Laurel, Jeffen, and me—and the haunts Basel and Honor Ash (the rest seeming content to wait until their various body parts were off-loaded). Harbormaster Lin was understandably reluctant to let the soldiers and embassy staff off the ships until the powers that be gave the go-ahead, so Groskin was left on board to take charge of the rest of the troops and to oversee the transfer of the cargo to a warehouse allotted to us by the dockmaster. He was also charged to keep Chaplain Obruesk under control.

"I do not want the chaplain raining down anathemas on the city's citizens, Lieutenant," Suiden said. "Even from out here."

"Yes, sir," Groskin replied. He took a deep breath. "You can count on me."

Our landing party was met on the quay by a small detachment of foot soldiers led by a mounted elf wearing burnished silver armor, a cape of deep blue hanging from his shoulders, and a feathered blue cap. With his narrow face, pointed ears, winged brows and black eyes, he could've been a distant cousin of King Jusson. But then there were those who claimed that all dark elves looked alike.

"Laurel Faena?" the elf asked, his voice light and lilting as he looked down on us from horseback.

Laurel bowed.

"I am Eorl Pellan, Lord Commander for His Grace, Loran, the Fyrst of Elanwryfindyll." He looked us over once more, this time settling on me, his face going still as he focused on the feather, and then his eyes widened as he took in Basel and Honor. He shot a glance at Laurel, who looked blandly back at him.

"Grace to you, Lord Pellan," Chancellor Berle began as she pushed forward, only to falter as both Laurel and Commander Pellan turned to look at her, the elf's stare coming down his nose.

"Honored Berle is an emissary of King Jusson of Iversterre, and is sent as a gesture of goodwill and a hope of peace," Laurel said, turning away from the chancellor with a flick of his ear, and her face burned dull red.

"Well, I'm to bring you to His Grace, honored Faena," Commander Pellan said, also turning away. He gestured and the detachment parted to allow two carriages through, pulled by muscular horses. "It'll be a tight fit, but I think we can get everyone in."

"If I may, honored commander, I will walk with you," Laurel said, with another bow.

Under the confusion of loading the carriages, I moved over to Chancellor Berle. "You do not speak unless addressed first, Chancellor," I said, my voice soft. "Didn't Laurel Faena talk with you about protocol?"

"Yes, but—" Chancellor Berle broke off, her face remaining flushed as she glared at me.

"It's going to happen again, Chancellor," I said. "You will be spoken around as if you aren't there. Elves do not like humans for very good reasons. I wouldn't be surprised if both Commander Pellan and the Fyrst fought in the War. In fact, they may very well have once lived in Iversterre—and had kin killed in our efforts to drive them out. Remember that and step as lightly as you can." I looked at First Lieutenant Falkin. "You should be careful too, sir. The dark elves aren't all that fond of the northern elfin clans."

"Lad," Havram said, and I pulled away from Falkin's stare to join the vice admiral, Suiden and Javes in our carriage.

We made a curious procession to the castle, a sort of reverse of the parade not so long ago where a mountain cat walked through a city whose acceptance of the magical stopped at street drama or children's tales. Laurel now strode alongside Commander Pellan's horse, a lone elf walking before them carrying the Fyrst's device: three stars opposite a crescent moon on a midnight blue field. Behind the elf and the Faena came the first carriage with Chancellor Berle, Lord Esclaur, Doyen Allwyn, Lieutenant Falkin, and Jeff. Second was my carriage with Captains Javes and Suiden, and Vice Admiral Havram, Basel pacing on one side, Honor striding on the other, and the elf detachment bringing up the rear.

We wound up the streets to the castle, going higher and higher, the powerful horses making light work of the steep inclines. The city was just as bright up close as it was from the ship. Colorful mosaics of the sea

and its denizens were inserted into white walls and pavements. Flowers were coaxed to grow on just about every available surface, from narrow window ledges to full gardens. Trees lined the streets and towered over walls, and more than one of them watched us go by.

"Now, lad," Uncle Havram said, starting back from the carriage window after he made eye contact with a spruce. "They're not going to attack us, are they?"

I swallowed a laugh and shook my head. "No, sir. They won't."

I turned my head again to the scene outside the carriage and went back to staring at the shops and markets—at both the goods and the people buying them. I picked out sprites, faeries, shamans, brownies, pixies, dwarves, someone in mages' robes (my heart contracted for a moment, then I realized he was dark-haired and young), a sprinkle of humans, and, of course, elves. And they picked us out, at first curiously glancing at the eorl and the Faena, then starting to turn away until they caught sight of Honor and Basel. But instead of the eye-popping, mouth-falling, full-screech terror that would have happened in Iversterre, they bowed their heads, pulling hats off as we went by.

Shops, markets, more shops and markets, steeper streets with more exclusive shops and markets terraced into the cliff's side, and we turned the corner onto a new street with (I sighed) shops and markets.

"I take it that the main thrust of this city is commerce," Javes murmured, also looking out the window.

"No, just the streets we're being allowed to see," Suiden said. "I traced the most direct route while on the Dauntless, and this isn't it."

"What do they think we'll do? Draw maps for the invasion?" Javes asked. He raised his quiz glass at a sprite wearing the traditional minimal clothing, but an elf saw him and moved to block Javes' view, lifting his hand in an apparently universal rude gesture.

"Remember what Rabbit has said, Javes," Suiden said as Javes dropped his quiz glass, red blooming across his cheekbones. "The elves already do not like us." Suiden did Javes' silly ass smile. "So try not to give them any more reasons, there's a good fellow." Javes lowered his brows, keeping his attention out the window, while I did not look at the vice admiral, who started to softly hum a sea ditty. Especially when I remembered the words to the song, about a sailor who'd been at sea for a long, long time. Javes' face turned redder.

The procession turned one more corner and the horses set their back legs to tackle the incline. I noted that the exclusive shops had finally given way to exclusive homes, their windows sparkling in the early afternoon sun.

"Well, now," Uncle Havram said, "it seems that we're getting close to the seat of power. Or at least of the powerful." We turned a couple of more times through streets just as imposing, and then the houses fell away and the sharp sound of the horses' hooves on cobblestone became muffled. I glanced down. Sand. Hard packed, but still sand. The bright early afternoon suddenly darkened to twilight, Basel and Honor glowing in the dimness, and I stared at the huge pines forming a canopy over us, pine needles a thick carpeting on the ground. The wind moved through their boughs, a sighing, rustling sound that reminded me of the forest around my home, and I smiled.

"More trees," Uncle Havram said, twitching a little on the carriage seat squabs.

"As long as you don't carry an axe about your person, sir, I should imagine we'll be all right," Suiden said, his voice just short of dry. "We're in the castle's park and the final approach to the castle itself."

The vice admiral gave him a cold stare. "Thank you, Captain Suiden. You have so greatly relieved my mind."

I immediately wiped the smile off my face—only to see it appear on Captain Javes' (briefly) as he miraculously recovered his good humor. He turned from the window, ready to associate once more with his brother officers and, as he looked back into the carriage interior, his eyes collided with mine. I quickly looked aside, but apparently not fast enough.

"I say, Lieutenant." I held in a sigh and looked back at Javes to see him slightly frowning at me.

"Yes, sir?"

"It just occurred to me. We're in the Border. Why haven't we translated?"

"Translated?" Uncle Havram asked, a frown now on his face.

"That wasn't in the dispatches, sir?" Javes asked. "About what happened at the Border embassy?"

"Oh, aye." The frown disappeared. "Aye, it was. The king himself wrote how you all turned into beasts."

"I was a wolf," Javes said. He waved his hand at Suiden. "He was a dragon."

"Was he!" The vice admiral's mouth twitched as he looked at me. "No wonder you jumped, lad, when I called His Highness a sea dragon."

"Yes, sir," I said again, my voice faint. I gave my uncle a betrayed look as I wondered why he wanted to drag me into the fray. He winked back at me.

"So why haven't we translated, Rabbit?" Javes asked again, reclaiming my attention.

I looked at the captain, and, swallowing, glanced over at Suiden—but they were both as they had been in Freston, with the exception of Suiden's green dragon and Javes' yellow wolf eyes. Those were gleaming in the dusk. "I don't know, sir." My hand started to burn and I looked down at the rune.

"Apparently, you do know," Suiden said, his voice rumbling. I looked up and saw flames licking in the middle of each eye. Not only was he annoyed at the sea dragon crack, he did not like being lied to.

But I wasn't lying. I didn't know why no one had translated.

"Do you think that perhaps it was because the Faena was with us when we came ashore?" Havram asked, the frown back on his face. "The king did write that the cat seemed to be able to control it."

That was plausible. "Maybe, sir," I said, but the rune didn't stop burning. I held it up to the window, trying to catch some light—and met Honor Ash's gaze as she stared at me.

"Bloody damn it all to hell!" I yelled, almost throwing myself across Javes' lap as I jerked away. "I wish she wouldn't do that!"

"Yes," Suiden said, his skin stretched tight across the bones of his face. He took a deep breath. "But if I recall correctly, the last time she did that was to answer a question that no one had an answer to. Or at least you didn't." Faena didn't answer questions. They inflicted them through illumined questioning that drove folk to find the answers in desperate self-defense. But then, death did change one's perspective. I slid cautiously closer to the window, hesitated, then opened it.

"Lad—" Havram broke off as Honor reached a ghostly hand in the carriage and almost touched my



queue. Then she was gone, and glancing out the window, I saw her once more striding beside the carriage, easily keeping up with the horses.

"You did it," Javes said, quiz glass forgotten. "You caused us to translate."

"How did you get that, Javes?" my uncle asked, Suiden joining him in a frown.

Javes looked at Suiden. "When did Rabbit's hair start to grow?"

"According to Sro Cat, when he came into his power—" Suiden also broke off, turning his frown on me.

I opened my mouth to deny it and the burning in my hand increased. Then the memory popped up of the metallic taste whenever the talent was worked, and how it filled my mouth that morning in the embassy. But I had also tasted it when Slevoic came into his powers, so I could've been responding to someone else's working. Except Laurel swore by his rune that he hadn't done it, and Slevoic sure as hell didn't. Which left only me. "I don't know what I did," I admitted out loud, and gasped at the abrupt easing of the burning pain. I sat there with my chest heaving as I dragged air into my lungs. "Or why it happened just then," I added, massaging my hand.

Uncle Havram's brows knit. "According to the king's dispatch, it was just when Slevoic thought it safe to challenge you, Captain Suiden, wasn't it?"

"Yes," Suiden said, looking thoughtful. "It was."

"So it probably stopped him from taking control of your troopers and bringing everything down around Rabbit's ears," Havram said.

"Ha, ha, sir," I muttered. My uncle gave me an innocent look.

"Yes, that's true," Javes said, a thoughtful expression on his face too. "It also flushed the traitors out. Teram, Commander Lunkhead—"

The vice admiral snorted a laugh.

"—and Gherat were all forced to act, most likely before they were ready."

"Yes," Suiden said again, "which led to the defeat of the rebellion along with the complete exposure of the smuggling ring."

"But," I said, massaging my hand, "if it weren't for the translations, Basel would still be alive."

"No, that's not true, Lieutenant," Suiden said. "You heard Ryson. I suspect Basel was marked once he came upon Slevoic and Ryson gathering the Pale Deaths—"

"What?" The vice admiral sat up on the seat squabs. "Pale Deaths?"

"Slevoic decided to let loose fifteen of them in Rabbit's room, sir," Suiden said. "After abduction, poisoning, assassins, and a sabotaged sword didn't work."

Vice Admiral Havram's eyes seemed to start from his head. "That wasn't in the dispatches!" He looked at me, angry. "What did your Uncle Maceal do when he found out, lad?"

No one said anything.

"I see," Havram said, slowly. He turned his head to look out the window.

"Right now, though, I am more concerned about Sro Faena saying that the translations happened because we were in the Border embassy," Suiden said, looking away from the vice admiral.

"Perhaps whatever Rabbit did could only have happened in the embassy," Javes said, picking up Suiden's cue.

"Perhaps," Suiden agreed. "But if so, that still was only part of the truth—and while the cat may not lie, he does seem able to pick and choose which part he will present."

"Or perhaps he truly believed that it was because of where we were, not what was done." Javes frowned, trying to remember. "He did say, rather emphatically, that no spells were cast to translate us and was quite clear that we only did so because it was what we were already."

"Yes," Suiden agreed once again. He looked back at me. "I'm also concerned about how hard the rune rides you, Lieutenant."

I was a little worried about that too. I continued to work my hand, now just a little tender. "Yes, sir."

"You may find yourself in a place where the truth would get you—or us—killed." He frowned again, staring out the window on his side of the carriage for a few moments. He then sighed. "I shall have to talk to the cat about it."

I suddenly was a lot worried. "Uhm, yes, sir."

"In the meantime, Lieutenant," Javes said, "please try not to turn us all into a zoo, eh?"

We eventually broke out of the dimness of the park into the sunlight, the horses setting themselves for the final ascent to the castle. Facing backward I could not see the actual castle as we approached, but saw its outline on the ground as we passed through its shadow. The ground finally leveled somewhat, and I could hear the change in the sounds of hooves and carriage wheels of those ahead of us. A few moments later, we too rolled over a different surface and, glancing down, I saw the water-filled moat beneath us as we crossed the drawbridge. With a rattle and thump we entered the gate and looking up I noted the portcullis above us, and then we were through and into the bailey of the castle.

As we passed through the gate Uncle Havram returned from wherever he'd gone. "We've arrived," he said. His mouth quirked at my blink, and he once more looked like my da. "Aye, I know. A statement of the obvious. But we're strangers here—even you, Rabbit—in a place that is, if not exactly hostile, then not overly friendly. I think the advice you gave the chancellor is excellent: Speak only when spoken to and step lightly. I would only add that we all keep our heads down and our eyes open."

"Yes, sir," we all said.

The carriages reached the gate in the interior wall and we passed through it into the courtyard. The cavalcade stopped with a shout; there were approaching footsteps and me door swung open, held by an elfin soldier at attention. Vice Admiral Havram climbed out first, followed by Captains Suiden and Javes. They all glanced at the soldier, but he just stared through them.

"Here goes nothing," I muttered to myself and exited the carriage. Jeff joined me and we stood looking about the large courtyard, taking in the mosaics and patterns in the paving stones while waiting for direction, which came almost immediately.

"If you would please follow me, honored Faena?" the Eorl Commander said to Laurel. The rest of us reckoned that included us also, so we fell in behind the cat and followed the eorl up the steps leading into the keep, past guards, and through the thick, beautifully carved doors.

"Wood, lad," Havram said just ahead of me, his voice soft.

"It was Gifted, sir," I murmured back. "Given by several trees—and precious for the rarity of it."

We went up marble stairs, bright against the grim stone of the keep's walls, the way lit by slit windows just high enough for an archer to comfortably use. Eorl Pellan turned at the top of the staircase and headed for another pair of carved wooden doors (a flaunting of wealth), open this time, with another set of guards staring through us, and then we were in the audience hall filled with elfin lords and ladies in attendance, and a rune circle on the floor that was the double of the one in Ivers Palace. Beyond them Loran, the Fyrst of Elanwryfindyll, sat on a throne upon a dais, his family's great sword large and gleaming on the wall behind him, the banners of his line and others sworn to him hanging from the high, vaulted ceiling.

Eorl Pellan led us past the Fyrst's court, stopping short of the circle, and bowed. "Your Grace, I have brought you Laurel Faena."

The Fyrst nodded and shifted his gaze to Laurel, who also bowed. "Welcome, honored Faena. I trust that your journey went well?" Looking us over, his eyes lit on me, started to move on, then snapped back, snagged on the covenant feather. A slight crease appeared between his brows, which deepened as he took in Honor Ash and Basel, still in stag.

"Yes, Your Grace," Laurel said. "It was in some respects most satisfactory."

"Good. Well, I suppose that we should take care of first business first." His Grace signaled and a guard opened a door. And out walked Magus Kareste with nine other mages. "Here he is, Magus Kareste," the Fyrst said, his light voice as cool as if he were returning a lost dog. "Your runaway apprentice, brought back by Laurel Faena. As he promised."

## Chapter Fifty-eight

For most of my soldiering career I had managed to avoid serious injury—my hurts being mainly bruises and skinned knuckles. But once, while righting mountain bandits, I was badly cut by one of the outlaws who believed in keeping his sword very sharp, opening my leg up to the bone. I felt like that now: an icy numbness, but no pain. That would come later, when I would finally grasp that the blood splashing all about was mine. I held myself very still as I stared up at the Fyrst, vaguely aware that Suiden and the others had surrounded me.

His Grace the Fyrst looked back down at me, his face calm and remote. "I suggest you take him away, Magus, before he or his fellows are tempted to do something foolish." There was a flash and the metallic taste told me that the talent had been worked. I tried to move my head and found it restrained. Without conscious thought I brushed the binding aside and turned to face the Magus.

The years had not been kind to Magus Kareste. They hadn't been unkind either. He looked the same as he did when I left, his close-cropped silver hair and beard bracketing a thin, pale face that looked as though it had never seen the sun. Light gray eyes stared out at me from under silver brows in a way that reminded me of Obruesk—except instead of burning, they were ice shards. They glittered now at my shrugging off the binding he and his fellow mages had just tried to put on me. Then the Magus' gaze moved to the feather. His brows drew together and he snapped his head to look at the Fyrst, his lips thinner than usual as he held in his protests.

"What have you done, Laurel Faena?" the Fyrst asked, his voice remaining calm. "When you set out, you were expressly forbidden to interfere with the apprentice's indentures."

"I haven't done anything, Your Grace, that would keep the Magus from claiming his own," Laurel said. He lifted his paw, the truth rune glowing.

Magus Kareste's lips were now gone in his effort to hold in all the words that must have been clamoring to get out. His Grace ignored him. "Yet he wears your feather and is surrounded by ghosts."

"The feather is just a meal covenant, honored Fyrst," Laurel said, "and I had nothing to do with the moon folk."

"And the rune on the apprentice's hand, Faena?"

The Fyrst made a gesture and Eorl Pellan came over. Reaching between Suiden and Javes, he caught my hand and held it up, palm turned towards the Fyrst.

"I feel its power even from where I sit," His Grace stated. "What do you say about that?"

Kareste's lips gave out. "Your Grace, this is intolerable!" The Magus' voice reminded me of cold places in the Upper Reaches as it blew through the hall. "The Faena has broken his word—"

Mutters and hisses broke out, though it wasn't clear whether they were aimed at the Magus or at Laurel.

The eorl allowed my hand to drop as the Fyrst tapped a finger on the arm of his throne and the room immediately became quiet. His Grace looked back at Laurel. "Well, Faena? How do you answer these charges?"

"Rabbit came into his full power after I found him, honored Fyrst," Laurel replied, "and the rune was necessary to keep him from harming himself and others. But neither feather nor rune should keep Magus Kareste from claiming him."

"Do you know what is preventing it?" the Fyrst asked, his brow raised.

"Three times Rabbit has sworn to another," Laurel said.

"Once when he joined the Royal Army, once in reaffirmation of his offices, and once in the elfin rune circle in the palace of Morendyll, now called Iversly. All three times to the king of Iversterre—an elfin king, Your Grace, as dark as you with gold in his eyes. So Rabbit swore and the rune circle lit up, as bright as the noon sun." Laurel showed his eyeteeth at the Magus. "Without my prodding, without my explaining, without my saying anything, Your Grace. By his own free will he so swore. Fiat!"

"Faena," the Fyrst said, and Laurel turned away from the Magus with a rumble. "So we have an apprentice who has broken his indentures but refuses to be claimed by his lawful master. What shall I do? Allow him to go free? What then about all other disaffected apprentices who manage to slip their bonds? Shall I allow them to roam free also?"

"That would be chaos, Your Grace," Eorl Pellan put in.

"Yes, it would," the Fyrst said.

"Rabbit has not cast off his master—" Laurel began.

"No?" the Fyrst asked. "It looks remarkably like he has, Faena."

"He has just changed one for another, Your Grace."

"Setting aside whether this new master could accomplish the apprentice's necessary training, Faena, should I then declare the very legal contract his parents signed null and void? Again, just because he is disaffected?"

"By your leave, Your Grace," Laurel said and, at the Fyrst's nod, reached into his side pouch, pulling out a small sack. He walked over and handed it to Eorl Pellan, who peered inside. And blinked.

"From Dragoness Moraina's hoard, Your Grace," Laurel said as the eorl climbed the dais steps and handed the sack to the Fyrst. His Grace upended the sack, a spill of gems flowing into his hand.

"Each one chosen by her," Laurel said. "There should be more than enough to purchase Rabbit's indentures."

"So there should," the Fyrst said, putting the jewels back in their sack and setting it down on the chair arm. "Assuming the Magus desires to sell them." He held up his hand as Laurel opened his mouth. "I cannot force him to do so, any more than I can force someone to sell me a horse whose action I like." A cool smile came and went. "It is against the law, Faena."

"Even if the horse is abused, Your Grace?" Laurel asked.

"Abused?" The Fyrst turned his head to Kareste. "Was there abuse, Magus?"

"No, Your Grace." Magus Kareste's wintry voice once more blew through the hall. "My apprentice was not harmed by me in any way, form, or fashion."

"Is this true, apprentice?" The Fyrst looked at me.

"There was a bird, Your Grace," I said, distantly marveling at my voice's steadiness.

"A bird," the Fyrst repeated, his brows slightly crooking at my nonanswer.

"Yes, Your Grace. The Magus sent it to King Jusson of Iversterre with a message asking for my return. The bird died in the king's hand."

The hall went still and the Fyrst leaned forward in his throne. "Why did it die?"

"Because the bird was bespelled to neither eat nor sleep until it reached the king, Your Grace."

The Fyrst's dark eyes narrowed. "Is this true, Magus?"

"Your Grace, I but laid an enhancement on the bird that shouldn't have harmed it." The Magus raised his brows. "Did my apprentice actually see the bird die?"

"Well, apprentice, did you see the bird die?" the Fyrst asked when I said nothing.

I slowly shook my head, wondering if I looked down, would I see blood on the marble floor.

"As you see, Your Grace, mere hearsay," the Magus said. "As the honored Faena assures us that he did nothing to interfere with my apprentice's bindings, I also assure Your Grace that I did nothing to cause the bird's death."

"Please tell His Grace, Ambassador Laurel, that I saw what happened," Lord Esclaur said across the cat's low growl.

"Oh?" the Fyrst asked, not waiting for Laurel's intervention. "And what did you see, human?"

Esclaur bowed his head. "I was present when the bird arrived, Your Grace. It was nothing but feathers and bones, its heart giving out just as His Majesty pulled the message off its leg. King Jusson has a feel for—for magic, and sensed it on the bird." Head still bowed, he gave me a sideways glance. "Just as he felt it when Lord Rabbit came into his power. There were thunderclaps on a clear day, Your Grace, all over me city."

"Why should we believe this person—" Kareste began.

"As Rabbit stood in the Witness Circle in the king's palace to swear the truth of his allegiance to King Jusson—" Esclaur paused, took a deep breath and continued. "So I will do here, to swear to the truth of my words, if Your Grace so wishes it."

The Fyrst folded his hands together, his forefingers against his lips as he stared down at Esclaur. "Your king senses the talent," he said, ignoring me lordling's offer, "in a land that says the talent does not exist. Or, if it does, it is evil. And your king acknowledges that he can."

"Yes, Your Grace," Esclaur said. "He's been to Veldecke and has felt it there, so he knew what it was when he touched the bird."

"He can also thought-scry, honored Fyrst," Laurel murmured, "and has admitted that too in front of witnesses. An elfin king, Your Grace, as dark and gold as Lieutenant Falkin here is fair and northern."

The Fyrst turned his head to stare at the first lieutenant.

"And kin to Rabbit—whom he openly called cousin, even as Rabbit evidenced his power," Laurel said.

"The bird was just enhanced, Your Grace," the Magus said in the silence. "I did not work its death—"

The Fyrst made a gesture and the Magus shut up. He then picked up the sack of jewels, hefting it a couple of times before handing it back to the eorl. "Give this to Magus Kareste, Commander Pellan. Compensation for the indentures of his apprentice, the human male named Rabbit, son of Lark and Two Trees. Let it be noted in the Acta that all bindings therein are declared dissolved by my order. Fiat."

The Magus' face was like an ice storm, all sharp angles and frozen needles. "Your Grace—"

"Silence, mage!" For the first time the Fyrst showed emotion. "You tread perilously close to being banished for sorcery, for in your arrogance you killed using your talent."

"Your Grace, if the bird did die, it was unintentional—"

"I don't know if that isn't worse! That you didn't care as long as it got you what you wanted." The Fyrst settled back into his throne, glaring at the Magus. "For the bird's death, you will lose what you turned the world upside down to gain."

The Magus' face congealed even more. "I then appeal this decision, Your Grace, to the High Council." Gasps and whispers shot around the hall. "As is my right."

"As is your right, mage," the Fyrst acknowledged. He tapped once more on the throne arm and the whispering died down. "Until then, I think it'll be best if you retire until you are over your understandable disappointment of my ruling going against you." Magus Kareste opened his mouth, but the Fyrst spoke over him. "Rabbit, son of Lark and Two Trees, will remain with me until the Council's decision. Let that be written into the Acta. Fiat."

There was nothing Magus Kareste could do, except bow and agree—especially since the Fyrst's guards

were standing at his elbows ready to escort him and his companions out of the hall. The Fyrst waited until the door shut behind them before gazing at me, his face once more emotionless. "It seems that you've acquired some powerful friends, young human."

"Yes, Your Grace," I murmured.

"You'll need them, as you've also acquired a powerful enemy."

"Yes, Your Grace."

"But thunderclaps in the sky, is it?" The Fyrst propped his chin on his fist, ignoring Berle's smothered exclamation at his sudden likeness to King Jusson. "Perhaps you're strong enough on your own not to need hedges to hide behind."

I said nothing.

"He stopped a djinn storm, honored Fyrst," Laurel said, stepping into the breach, "that came upon us with no warning."

"A djinn storm?" the Fyrst repeated, his dark eyes not moving from mine. "Then it's no wonder the Magus is so anxious to get his apprentice back." He gave a little sigh as he settled back into his chair. "I suppose I'll have to see to his disposition, as I cannot have him wandering about, blundering into things with his talent."

"As I have begun his training, Your Grace, I ask that he be given to me."

The Fyrst's brow rose. "To you?" A sardonic look passed over the elf's face and was gone. "I do not think you're his favorite person right now, Laurel Faena. What if he takes it into his mind to leave you too?"

"There is a covenant, Your Grace," Laurel said. "He will honor it."

"So there is." The Fyrst shrugged. "Well, if you want him— Let it be written into the Acta that the human Rabbit, son of Lark and Two Trees, is given into the charge of Laurel Faena of the Black Hills Weald until the High Council's decision. Fiat." He dismissed me and looked back at Laurel. "Now, honored Faena, tell me about this djinn storm—"

"The Lady preserve us!"

Other cries and sounds of alarm rang out and I turned around to see what was happening.

"Groskin must have gotten the first load off the ship," Javes said, groping for his quiz glass. He then shot the Fyrst a look and stopped.

The unicorn and leopard were pacing through the court, leading a stream of haunts—all headed for me.

"This goes back to the main reason I was sent to Iversterre, Your Grace," Laurel said to the Fyrst, who had risen from his throne and now stood staring at the ghosts filling his hall. "We found their bodies in Iversly and have brought them home, but the moon season is here and every single one of them has chosen the human Rabbit."

## Chapter Fifty-nine

The Fyrst sat quiet during Laurel's recital about his discoveries in Iversterre and their resolutions, not even blinking as the Faena told of the far-flung smuggling ring. He then received both the written and the verbal apologies of King Jusson delivered through Chancellor Berle, listening to her measured speech on the desire for peace and understanding between the Border and Iversterre, his eyes wandering between Berle and the haunts surrounding me. But when Berle segued into establishing an embassy, the Fyrst stopped her. "This too should go before the High Council." He looked down at the chancellor, his face cold and still. "As it touches the entire Border, not just Elanwryfindyll."

Chancellor Berle bowed. "Yes, Your Grace."

"Fortunately, it is our turn to host the Council and they will meet here in two weeks. Until then"—the Fyrst looked at all of us—"I extend to you the Hospitality of my keep and city. Be welcomed." He raised his hand and a fellow who looked an awful lot like one of the majordomo twins, but with elfin ears, started to step forward.

"What about my men who are still on the ship, Your Grace?" Captain Suiden asked from beside me. "May they be brought ashore?"

The Fyrst's brows came together again as he stared down at the captain. But Suiden met him stare for stare, his green eyes glinting back up at the Fyrst, and His Grace's face shifted, changing from distant affront to puzzlement. "I know you—" He looked over at Laurel.

"He is the Amir of Tural's eldest sister's first son, Your Grace," Laurel said. "Prince Suiden."

"I met the prince before he left Tural," the Fyrst said, still frowning, "but I don't remember his eyes being green."

"Many things have changed since I left Tural, Your Grace," Suiden said with a slight bow. "But right now I am more concerned about my men who've been at sea for weeks. May I bring them ashore?" He indicated Chancellor Berle. "They're a part of the proposed embassy staff."

"I see." The Fyrst was quiet for a few moments. "Yes," he finally said. "We extend our Hospitality to them, the staff, and"—he looked at the vice admiral—"to your sailors also."

"Thank you, Your Grace," Vice Admiral Havram said as he also bowed, looking as though he wanted to keep his officers and crews as far away as possible from the elf city.

A small smile flitted across the Fyrst's face. "Do not fear, Vice Admiral." He signaled and Eorl Pellan moved back to the dais. "My commander will make sure that your sailors understand the do's and don'ts of shore leave." He looked at the eorl. "Bring the ships' officers here, Pellan." He cast a glance at Suiden. "And His Highness' soldiers." The commander bowed and strode out of the hall, gathering certain of his guard.

"Sir?" Lieutenant Falkin murmured, and Uncle Havram hesitated, obviously torn between staying with me and going with Pellan. He then sighed and shook his head. "Nay, Lieutenant. The ship captains will take care of what's necessary." He caught the Fyrst's gaze on him and waved a hand in my direction. "My brother's child, Your Grace."

"You are connected," the Fyrst remarked, looking back at me. He then raised his hand once again, and the major-domos' elfin twin stepped forward. "My chamberlain will see you all to your rooms." He looked at the ghosts ranged behind me, then back at the chamberlain. "The west side of the fourth level."



As the chamberlain bowed, I wondered if the quarters were as far away from the Fyrst's rooms as one could get in the keep—and His Grace's brows flew up.

"I see." He shot a look at Laurel. "I will send for you once you're settled, honored Faena. There's much I would discuss with you."

No one said anything as the chamberlain led us through the double doors out of the audience hall, back to the main stairs, and up to the fourth floor, collecting servants as he went. I kept my eyes on Javes in front of me, only catching out of the corner of my eyes the mosaics, bas-reliefs, and tapestries on the walls, an impression of shapes, colors and textures. The chamberlain reached a set of double doors ("More Gifted wood?" my uncle murmured) and opened them with a flair, revealing a large common room—a miniature hall really—with a fireplace at the end and several doorways covered by heavy curtains on each side.

"We'll have to double up some," Chancellor Berle said, counting doorways. The haunts followed us in as the chamberlain oversaw the lighting of the fire.

"Peat moss," the Faena said, seeing Uncle Havram's interest in the fireplace.

"Oh, aye." The vice admiral's mouth quirked. "Well, if wood's so precious and all, I suppose they wouldn't burn it." He didn't wait for the Faena's reply but looked back at the chancellor. "Do not worry about Falkin and me, Berle. We and the other officers will sleep on our ships."

There were two windows at either side of the fireplace, the sun low enough to blaze through them, but even so the servants went through the common room, lighting candles. Soon the scent of beeswax, lightly perfumed with myrtle, filled the air. Several more servants entered with fresh towels, bed linens, pomanders containing a medley of dried petals, spices and oils, and fresh flowers that they arranged in vases around the common area and in the sleeping chambers. Water was also brought in, poured into a large kettle and placed on the fireplace hob to heat. The chamberlain upended a small bag into the kettle and, as the water warmed, the smell of roses was added to the room.

"Nice rugs," Esclaur said, looking down at the colorful carpets covering a floor of gray slate. "Perdans?"

"No, our own," the Faena replied. "As I've said before, Border textiles rival in quality what both Iversterre and Tural produce."

A couple of servants appeared with trays containing pitchers and chalices, and when they walked by I could smell mulled wine. Noses twitched and we turned our heads to watch them place the trays on a table near the fireplace. More servants followed behind them with a tray containing cheeses, different kinds of fruit and fresh bread, still steaming from the oven.

"A little something to tide us over until dinner," Doyen Allwyn said. "Looks good."

There were sounds of assent.

The servants finished and the chamberlain once again swept through the rooms to make sure that they were up to the keep's standards. Satisfied, he herded the servants out before him and, after promising to come get us in time for dinner, he bowed and shut the doors after him with a gentle snick.

As one, everyone turned and looked at Laurel Faena, who looked back at us, his face calm, his tail lashing back and forth.

Uncle Havram held up his hand as several people inhaled, silencing them before they spoke. He then lowered his brows at Laurel. "What game are you playing, Ambassador?" he asked, his voice very soft.

"No game, honored vice admiral— Oof!"

I dimly heard shouts and the scraping back of chairs and tables as I knocked Laurel down and we rolled around on the floor—me trying to get a fist, a knee, a foot, a fingernail into a tender spot. Laurel, though, was taller, with a longer reach and almost half again my weight, and in a few moments he was staring down at me, his paws pinning my arms to the rug as he sat on my legs.

I arched my back, trying to dislodge him. "Let me bloody up, you double-dealing, pox-rotted, mangy son of a flea-bitten bitch."

Laurel rumbled, his ears flattening against his skull.

"Let him up, Sro Cat," Suiden said, coming into view over Laurel's shoulders.

Laurel slowly got off of me, his ears still flat. I also stood, not bothering to straighten either hair or clothes, and Suiden clamped a hand on my shoulder to keep me from going after the Faena again.

"It's no game," Laurel repeated as he spared a brief glance around and located his staff behind Lieutenant Falkin, lying against the wall. He started to move towards it, but Falkin didn't budge. They eyed each other.

"What the hell do you call it, then?" Havram asked. He gestured for Falkin to step aside. "You swear up and down that you'll keep Rabbit away from this Maggot—"

"Magus," Laurel corrected, picking up his staff.

"Whatever," my uncle said, waving the distinction away. I shifted so I could see the Faena. "But when we get here, it comes out that he's the one who sent you in the first place."

"No, he didn't," Laurel said. "I was sent by the High Council."

"Do not shave words and dice meanings with me, cat," Havram said, his voice still soft. "You know exactly what I mean."

"Yes, honored vice admiral." Laurel shot a glance at me, and then away. "I know."

My uncle's voice grew softer. "It doesn't bother you?"

"Yes, it bothers me—"

"You lied," I said, "and have been lying from the beginning."

Laurel sighed and began to untangle his beads. "No, I didn't lie. I just didn't tell all."

"Do you think that's better?" I asked. "That it makes it all right?"

"No. I'm not justifying. Never to justify." Laurel looked at me and this time didn't look away. "But perhaps to explain."

"What's there to explain?" I shoved my hair out of my face. "How funny you found it to dupe the human?"

"Dupe you?" Laurel rumbled back. "Are you with the Magus?"

Well, no, I wasn't. "But—"

"I have done what I've sworn I'd do. Your indentures are dissolved, by order of the Fyrst."

"At least until the High Council meets," Javes murmured, his yellow wolf eyes fixed on the mountain cat.

"Perhaps it would be best if we were to all sit down and discuss this," Doyen Allwyn said as both Laurel and I opened our mouths.

"Yes," Chancellor Berle said, walking over to where the food and drink sat on the table. She picked up a chalice and poured wine into it. "I want to hear why we should still believe the ambassador's professions of goodwill and safety." She pulled a chair up to the table and, sitting down, began to fill a plate with cheese, bread and grapes.

I hung back as the rest moved to join her, but Uncle Havram took one arm, Captain Suiden grabbed the other, and from behind Jeff herded me over to a chair and I was pushed down into it.

Laurel sat down on the opposite side of the table between Chancellor Berle and Vice Admiral Havram, leaning his staff against his chair as he kept his eyes on mine. Falkin moved to stand behind the vice admiral, his gray gaze fixed on the cat.

"Well, Ambassador?" Havram asked.

"As I said, this is no game."

"Then what is it?" Suiden asked, standing behind me, Javes and Esclaur on either side of him.

"There are two main factions in the Border, honored folk—those who want war," Laurel said without looking away from me, "and we who want peace." Honor Ash's haunt floated to his side and stood also watching me.

"War because of the smuggling?" Chancellor Berle asked, sipping her wine.

"Among other things, yes," Laurel replied.

"What other things?" Esclaur asked.

"The fact that Iversterre was once ours, being one," Laurel said. "Many feel it only right that it should be ours once again." He ran his paw over his head, still looking at me. "They've seized upon the running as a rallying cry and are ready with detailed battle plans so that this time there'd be no premature fracturing of the Alliance as there was in the last war."

"Fracturing?" the chancellor asked, picking up a slice of cheese and laying it on a piece of bread.

"The Alliance fell apart after Iversterre sued for peace because no one could agree on what to do next," Laurel replied, glancing at the chancellor. He then looked back at me. "However, your honored father did speak before the High Council, Rabbit. He was most eloquent in his pleas for diplomacy, and enough members were swayed to agree that I should be sent to Iversterre to perhaps find a peaceful solution."

"Which was to comb the mountains over Freston until you found me?" I asked.

Laurel sighed. "The Magus has many friends on the Council, and when he saw which way the vote would go, he got them to make your return a condition for considering peace."

I shook my head, for the first time feeling something other than numbing anger. "But why? I'm just a farm boy from the backwoods and surely not the first apprentice to slip his master's bonds. Why all this trouble just to get me back?"

"How many mages were there, Rabbit?" Laurel asked.

"What?"

"How many mages did Kareste have with him in the Fyrst's hall?"

"Nine," I said, after a moment's count.

"Ten altogether, with the Magus. All full master mages, no? None were apprentices or even senior journeymen."

I nodded, my brows coming together.

"Yet you shrugged their combined working off as if it were a mere annoyance," Laurel pointed out. "Just as you did the first time when they came seeking you."

I frowned deeper at him.

"At the embassy in Iversly," Laurel reminded me. "You are very powerful, Rabbit. Very, very powerful."

"All right, I'm powerful. But as I said back on the ship, the Council wasting time by sending you after me doesn't make sense, Faena." I waved a hand at the haunts around us. "Not if they wanted to stop the slaughter."

"Yes, I know," Laurel said.

"You know," I echoed, and then gave a short laugh. "Maybe I'm not the only dupe here."

Laurel rumbled. "I have admitted that there were things kept from me—"

"No! Really? How that must rankle, honored Faena."

"So, Ambassador," Uncle Havram said, breaking into Laurel's increasing growl. "You were sent by the High Council, as a favor to this Maggot—"

"Magus," Laurel said.

"—to find Rabbit." My uncle's brow rose. "But if he was so hidden from everyone, how did you know where he was?"

"Mages aren't the only ones with the talent, honored vice admiral. As I told Rabbit, I tracked him." Laurel rooted around in his side pouch, pulling out a small wooden horse with faint chew marks where a teething child had gnawed on it. I grew still as Honor Ash's haunt ran a ghostly finger over it.

"Your father gave it to me—" Laurel began.

"My da?" I asked, the numb feeling stealing over me again.

"His father helped you to find his son for a master that his son fled from in abhorrence?" Chancellor Berle asked, refilling her chalice. "What a family—" She broke off as she caught the vice admiral's stare.

"No," Laurel said, "not for the Magus." The cat's face softened. "And it wasn't just your father, Rabbit, but your entire family, plus Brother Paedrig, Dragoness Moraina, and Honor Ash." Laurel waved a paw back at the sprite's haunt. "It was she who remembered your toy."

"Gifted?" Havram asked looking at the wooden horse, and the haunt smiled.

"Moraina did choose each jewel used to buy your indentures, Rabbit, from her hoard—and she hummed as she did so," Laurel said, his brows crooking as his head tilted to the side. "Honor did wish me good hunting." The haunt's smile widened. "Brother Paedrig insisted on praying over me, even though I'm not of your church. And your family—" Laurel shook his head, his beads rattling. "Bring him home, they said. Bring him home, safe."

The room blurred and I looked away. "You could've told me.

"Yes," Laurel said, with another sigh. "I could have."

"All along you've said 'Trust me' and 'My oath to you,'" I said. "How can I?" I took a deep breath, still feeling the pain of being laid open to the bone. "Why should I?"

"I was afraid, Rabbit," Laurel said, "that if I told you, you wouldn't come, and that amid accusations of interference with your indentures, we would lose the chance for peace."

"But you've been accused," Lord Esclaur said, "and the Maggot—"

"Magus," Laurel said.

"—does not have Rabbit, so will there be war?"

"Why?" Laurel opened his eyes wide at the lordling. "I kept my word in bringing Lord Rabbit back to the Border and, regardless what Karesta has said, I did not meddle with his apprentice's bindings. It was the Fyrst's decision to remove him from the Magus' care." Laurel shook his head. "Killing birds. Shameful!"

"And you had nothing to do with it," Javes murmured.

"Oh, no. The Magus managed to do that all on his own," Laurel said, showing his eyeteeth. He then looked at me and his grin faded. "Rabbit—"

"Why don't you want Iversterre back, Ambassador?" Chancellor Berle asked.

Laurel sighed once more and, looking away from me to the chancellor, shrugged. "We don't need it." He saw the incredulous stares aimed at him. "We don't. We feed ourselves and export our surplus, we have thriving industries, we have a brisk trade with the Qarant, among others. We prosper, honored folk. War tends to change that."

"Even if you win?" Javes asked, his voice dry.

"We won the last time and it nearly pulled us apart, squabbling over who gets what." Laurel shook his head again, beads clacking and feathers fluttering. "No, no, and three times no. We do not need you or your land. We have more than enough here." His ears flicked back. "Besides, all we have to do is wait because, as you turn fae, you will surely need us."

I stood up while everyone was busy working on that statement. "It's been a long day, sirs. I'm going to retire." I saluted and headed for a doorway, chosen at random.

"Lieutenant—" Suiden began.

"Lad—" Uncle Havram started.

"Rabbit," Laurel said. He glanced at the others and then back at me as I looked over my shoulder. "We have two weeks to prepare for your appearing before the High Council."

I turned back all the way around to stare at the Faena. "What do you mean?"

Laurel rose from his chair as he indicated Javes. "The honored captain was correct that this is only a reprieve until Kareste appeals the Fyrst's decision before the Council. We have to show them that you do not need a master."

"Won't they care about the dead bird?" Suiden asked.

"The Magus has many friends on the Council," Laurel replied. "Who knows how they will react?"

"Especially since they charged you, Ambassador, to bring his apprentice back to him," Chancellor Berle said, her wry smile sweeping her face. "I know that it would irk me tremendously to have my directives so mangled." She finished her fruit and, picking up a linen napkin from the table, wiped her hands. "What a fine line you've trod, promising something to everybody. Tell me, Ambassador, did King Jusson know about all this?"

"No," Laurel said, his eyes narrowed on the chancellor.

"So succinct!" Chancellor Berle marveled. "It is amazing what you can find out with a simple question, and yet here's another secret unknown by our illustrious king."

"But you didn't know either, honored chancellor," Laurel said. She opened her mouth but Laurel spoke over her. "A ruler can only be as good as his advisors, and while your king may have been unwise in those he surrounded himself with in the past, I think that he has become aware of his, hmm, lack."

The Faena bowed and in a couple of strides caught up with me, grabbing me by my arm.

"I have sworn a solemn vow to your honored sire and dam, Lord Rabbit, to see you home, safe." He propelled me towards a doorway. "We have more than enough time before dinner for a lesson."

"I'm not in the mood to bloody meditate," I said, trying to free my arm. I dug my heels into the carpet and Laurel, letting go, turned an annoyed face to me.

"Do you want to be given back to the Magus?" he demanded.

"No—" I started.

"Go and attend to your lessons, Lieutenant," Suiden said from behind me. "That's an order."

"Politics, sir?" I asked.

"Survival, Lieutenant," Suiden replied. "Both yours and the kingdom's."

"But—" I began.

"Obey your captain, lad," Uncle Havram said from where he sat. "Unless you have a better suggestion. Do you?"

I stared at my uncle, frantically trying to think of something, anything, but after a moment, I lowered my head and shook it. "No, sir."

Laurel reached over and took my arm once more, and led me to one of the far end rooms next to the fireplace.

"Jeffen, go with them," Captain Suiden said.

## Chapter Sixty

We passed through a small antechamber to another curtained doorway into the main sleeping room. It was just like the rest of the keep, austere and elegant, with a massive four-poster bed big enough to sleep a village, draped with curtains to shut out the chill night air. There were more colorful rugs, a fireplace complete with its own peat fire and set of chairs in front of it, a table with a vase of flowers, a washstand, a freestanding full-length mirror, and a huge clothespress, which, when I opened it, revealed a pomander, many drawers, and a clothes rack. I turned back to the room and the thought went through the back of my mind as I stared at all the fine wood that the Fyrst of Elanwryfindyll was an extremely wealthy elf.

We sat at the table and stared at each other for a moment.

"So," Laurel finally rumbled, removing the vase to the floor. "You did right in the Fyrst's hall." He reached into his pouch and pulled out a sack of small river stones. "Now let's examine what you did, and how you did it." It was the most grueling workout I ever had, even as a new recruit in His Majesty's Royal Army. By the time we were finished, I was physically aching all over. During my lesson, haunts wandered in and out of the chamber, but Honor Ash, Basel, and the unicorn all stayed for the entire time as the Faena and I faced each other over the table. The room had darkened and was lit only by the fire when Javes came in to call a halt.

"The chamberlain is come to tell us that the dinner hour is approaching, so give it a rest," the captain said.

At Laurel's nod, I had the candles relight and the circling stones drop into Laurel's paw one by one. I then pushed away from the table, my legs wobbling like I had run up a mountainside carrying all my gear and my horse on my back. I stretched, working the kinks out, while becoming aware of the muted commotion out in the common area. Judging from the sounds and voices, Groskin and the rest of the ships' officers had arrived, along with the embassy staff and our luggage. The curtain parted again and one of the keep's servants entered carrying a large ewer of hot rose-water from the kettle out in the main room, followed by others carrying Groskin's, Jeff's and my footlockers.

Javes lifted his quiz glass at the steaming water. "The chamberlain was kind enough to give us a hint that we wash well, as the elves do not much appreciate the, ah, aroma associated with ripe humans."

The first servant put the ewer down on the washstand and went out, followed by the others who then all returned with more ewers, basins and soap. One went over to the clothespress and, opening a drawer, pulled out towels.

"Yes, sir," I said, stripping off my tabard and shirt. After I was dressed, Laurel gestured for me to stand before him. I stared at him, then down at the blue and white ribbons he held in one paw—the colors of the House of Iver. "King Jusson sent them."

"Did he know that the Magus sent you?" I asked, still staring at the ribbons.

"No," Laurel said. "He did not." He gestured once more and I slowly moved to stand before him. He gathered up my hair and began to deftly braid it, weaving the ribbons into the plait. "He sent these to make sure that everyone here understood that you were his, sworn to his House, Lord Rabbit ibn Chause e Flavan."

I didn't respond and when he finished braiding my hair, he produced from his pouch sapphire cuff links.

"From honored Moraina," he murmured as he inserted them into my shirt cuffs. He reached back in and brought out a sapphire and diamond cluster that he pinned to my tabard, adjusting my braid to make sure the sparkle of the jewels was visible. "She also wanted to make sure that everyone knew that you had her favor, Rabbit Two Trees'son."

"Smashing pin and links, Lieutenant," Javes said as we joined everyone in the common room, the haunts tagging behind us. Captain Suiden said nothing, but raised his brows at me while Uncle Havram silently whistled and Lord Esclaur lifted his quiz glass.

"A dragon's favor," Laurel said.

"Will it matter, Ambassador?" Chancellor Berle asked, also appraising the jewels. Her brows came together when she saw the ribbons in my hair.

"Yes, it matters a lot, Chancellor," Laurel said. "It shows who Rabbit is—and who is his." He looked over at Honor, Basel and the rest of the haunts. "If you would please stay here, honored ones. Having the reminder of your murders follow us in to dinner could be—detrimental."

I blinked as a ripple of nods went through the ghosts, and everyone else stared wide-eyed at the Faena—even Suiden. Lieutenant Falkin's hand twitched as he started to bless himself.

Laurel gave a faint smile. "I've the earth aspect and so I can ask—as long as it's only asking." He cast a glance over us and then, satisfied with our appearance, bowed, indicating the chamberlain waiting patiently at the door. "If we are ready?"

Jeff was led away to the barracks to have dinner with the other soldiers and the rest of us trooped after me chamberlain as he escorted us back to His Grace's great hall, now filled with tables. All eyes snapped to us as we entered, the muted roar of conversation dropping to near silence while the chamberlain neatly separated out the embassy staff and sent them to the lower tables with the scaff and raff of petty officialdom and high ranking clerks. The ships' officers and Lieutenants Groskin and Falkin were sent to the middle tables with the minor elfin nobles. All eyes at his table snapped to Falkin's northern fairness as the first officer approached, and I saw frowns form on several faces. I started to follow, worried about hostilities over soup, but the chamberlain stopped me and I was herded with the rest towards the front of the hall. I then tried to sit with Captain Javes, Lord Esclaur, and Doyen Allwyn at the table right below the Fyrst's, but once more was stopped and firmly guided, along with Laurel, Vice Admiral Havram, Captain Suiden, and Chancellor Berle, to the raised platform where the Fyrst's high table was placed. Rather stunned, I sat down next to Captain Suiden, wondering who had been dispossessed to make way for us.

"Do not worry, Rabbit Two Trees'son," the Fyrst said across Suiden, who was seated on His Grace's left. "None will challenge you for taking their place." His brows rose as he took in my ribbons and jewelry.

"Yes, Your Grace," I murmured as I shook my napkin out and laid it across my lap. Leaning out a little, I could see Laurel, Uncle Havram, and Chancellor Berle seated interspersed with the Fyrst's great eorls on the other side of His Grace. While Laurel was quietly conversing with the eorl next to him, Havram and Berle were staring at the female elf seated at Loran's immediate right. Concerned about their impoliteness, I tried to catch either the chancellor's or my uncle's attention. Then the female elf turned and I found myself staring also. Heigh-ho.

"Let me present you to my wife," the Fyrst said. "Her Grace, Molyu."

Her face just a little fuller than her husband's, Molyu had the normal black hair, winged brows and high



cheekbones. What she didn't have were the typical black eyes— hers were gold, and I felt my spine tighten. I also felt a thump on my side. I gave a very respectful nod.

"Your Grace."

Molyu nodded back. "Prince Suiden, Rabbit Two Trees'son," she murmured in a startling rich contralto.

There were sounds of scraping as the chairs to my left were filled.

"So this is the human who has Magus Kareste all in a lather," a light voice said and I looked away from Her Grace to see an elf with a mane of his black hair sitting down on my right. He turned a young face towards me and I wondered just how old he was.

"My Enchanter, Wynl," the Fyrst said.

Suiden and I murmured a greeting, while I fought not to edge my chair away.

"I understand that you don't eat meat, Two Trees'son," His Grace said, reclaiming my attention.

"No, Your Grace," I said. A servant came by with hot cloths soaked in lemon water. I took one, wiped my hands, and dropped it in the basket carried by another servant following behind.

"I have informed Cook and she has prepared special dishes." The Fyrst dropped his used cloth in the basket. "I hope that you'll like them."

"Thank you, Your Grace. I'm sure I will." I folded my hands in my lap and concentrated on breathing.

"So, the king of Iversterre calls you cousin?" Wynl asked, a winged brow rising. Several servants appeared with plates of hot bread, setting them down before us.

"Yes, honored Enchanter." I waited as the Fyrst helped himself, then Wynl and Suiden, before breaking off a piece of bread for myself. I dropped it onto my bread plate, my fingers stinging from the heat.  
"Sixty-four lines to the throne."

"An elfin king, so the Faena said, Wynl," His Grace mused. I said nothing and he looked at me, once more taking in the ribbons. "Is this not true, Rabbit Two Trees'son?"

"Yes, Your Grace. He looks a little like your Eorl Commander." I looked out over the hall, and saw Eorl Pellan sitting at the table right beneath us. He must have felt my eyes on him because he raised his head, staring back at me.

"Yet you, his close cousin, aren't elfin at all," Wynl pointed out, also looking at the House of Iver's colors. More servants appeared in the hall with tureens and I sniffed. Fish soup. "This is very interesting as I have diligently searched my lineage, Two Trees'son, but have been unable to find a human lurking anywhere in it."

"Yes, honored Enchanter, it is odd, but I don't know why that's so." I shifted out of the way so that the servant could fill my bowl, hoping my stomach wouldn't embarrass me with subterranean grumbles.

"You did speculate, Lieutenant, that His Majesty being elfin may have something to do with inheritance and land-law," Captain Suiden said. He caught my panicked glance at him and gave a faint smile. "This was after Trooper Basel's funeral."

"Oh." I vaguely remembered. "Yes, sir."

"Indeed?" The Fyrst took a spoonful of soup and nodded. A sigh went through the dining hall and everyone started to eat, the cheerful din of talk and spoons against porcelain filling the room. "But why should the king of Iversterre be an elf at all?"

My mouth full of soup and bread, I glanced again at Captain Suiden, who gave another faint smile. "Answer His Grace, Lieutenant."

I swallowed, my throat suddenly tight. "Yes, sir." I looked past my captain to the Fyrst. "The people of Iversterre are becoming fae, Your Grace."

The Fyrst's spoon slowly went down into his bowl. "What?"

Molyu, who'd been talking with the eorl on her right, broke off her conversation and turned her head, her gold eyes wide, while Wyn made a slight choking noise as if he swallowed wrong, then started to cough.

"Sro Laurel thinks it's because Iversterre was once part of the Border and the land is remaking them in its own image."

Suiden's smile came back. "Whatever the cause, my entire troop translated, Your Grace. As Captain Javes is so fond of pointing out, he turned into a wolf while I was a dragon." He tilted his head, reminding me of Dragoness Moraina when she was about to set a poser. "Haven't you wondered at Rabbit being a wizard—and a very powerful one at that—with him only being one generation removed from Iversterre? A land of no magic?"

The Fyrst's face was still. He then seemed to remember his food and raised the spoon to his mouth. "No, I can't say that I did, Your Highness." He finished his bread, then gave a faint smile himself. "The entire human kingdom turning fae?" The smile widened. "How ironic." He broke off another piece of bread. "How absolutely, wonderfully ironic." He shot a glance at the captain. "And you, Your Highness? You've become a dragon?"

"Apparently so, Your Grace."

"How? You weren't born in Iversterre nor in the Border."

Suiden shrugged. "I don't know, Sro Fyrst. Perhaps living for twenty years in Iversterre was enough." He finished his soup. "But most assuredly I was—"

"Still is," I muttered very softly to my bowl.

"—a dragon." Suiden turned to me. "What kind did you say, Lieutenant?"

I raised my eyes to meet the captain's eyes now glinting at me. He heard. "Obsidian, sir."

The Fyrst's face went blanker than normal, while his eyes turned watchful. "Obsidian." Wyn made another noise and reached for his wine goblet, clearing his throat, while Molyu's wide gaze shifted to Suiden.

"You saw this, Two Trees'son?" Her Grace asked, leaning a little out beyond the Fyrst to look at me. "You saw the translations?"

I nodded. "Yes, Your Grace."

"Even before we physically changed, he saw," Suiden said, once more smiling. He returned to his soup, finishing it. "Sro Laurel said that Lieutenant Rabbit has the gift of seeing true."

"Yes?" The Fyrst's black eyes fixed on mine. "Beyond the obvious?"

"It does makes one wonder, Your Grace," Suiden said, leaning to the side to allow the servant to remove his empty bowl, "about Rabbit's intense abhorrence of his old master."

"Yes, it does," Wynl said, having washed away all obstructions in his throat. He took another sip of wine. "So, tell me, Two Trees'son, you stopped a djinn storm? How?"

"I became the wind, honored Enchanter."

This time Wynl's goblet slowly descended to the table. "The wind."

"It talks to you, doesn't it, Lieutenant?" Suiden asked.

"Yes, sir."

"It does? What does it say?" Wynl asked.

I looked up from my plate to answer and found myself looking at twin reflections in the Enchanter's black eyes. As I watched, my doubles shifted, changing into flame, and I leaned closer, fascinated. Then a quick breeze blew between us and I blinked, drawing back, my heart pounding hard in my throat.

"Try that again and I'll sodding take you apart," I said, my voice very soft.

The Enchanter took another sip of wine. "Oh, you will?" He gave me a gentle smile, amused. "All by yourself?"

I smiled back, reaching to the knife in the small of my back. "Sometimes yourself is all you need."

"Leave it, Lieutenant," Suiden rumbled. I allowed my hand to drop as I looked at my captain—to meet the Fyrst's and Molyu's gazes once more, while Suiden stared past me at the Enchanter. "Is this how Hospitality is shown? By provoking one of my men?"

"I apologize, honored prince," Wynl said, allowing a servant to serve him crab sauteed with butter and vegetables, while shaking his head both at the steamed shellfish in sauce and the baked fish artfully surrounded by mounds of greens shaped as waves. "My only excuse is that I was curious." He waited as a servant poured more wine into his goblet. When the servant moved on, Wynl looked past Suiden and me to the Fyrst. "You have given him into Laurel Faena's care, Your Grace?"

The Fyrst forked up a bite of fish, nodded, and once more the rest of the hall plunged into their own plates. He then looked back at the Enchanter. "Yes. He asked for him."

Wynl's eyes narrowed in thought. "Perhaps, Your Grace, it would be best if you allow me to oversee Two Trees'son's stay with us, for Laurel—competent as I'm sure he is—is after all, a cat."

The Fyrst speared some crab, giving a slight shrug. "You may be right, Wynl, but it's in the Acta that Rabbit Two Trees'son is given into Laurel Faena's care. Unless there's a compelling reason, like the talent-murder of birds, I cannot change it."

"True, my husband," Molyu said. "But Wynl speaks wisely. Laurel Faena is a cat and so has a cat's knowledge of the talent." She looked at me, her own face thoughtful. "Perhaps there's another way that doesn't violate the law."

"Well, I can ask Wynl to stand as Cyhn to Two Trees'son as he is cousin to someone who may be related to me." The Fyrst gave another slight shrug as he once more looked at Iver's colors woven in my

hair. "At least I can argue so."

Related? I stared at Molyu's gold eyes. "Uhm—"

" 'Kin,' Your Grace?" Captain Suiden asked over me, his eyes narrowed in speculation.

"Close, Prince Suiden," the Fyrst replied. "Specifically, Cyhn is mentoring—showing a newcomer in a household how to get on. You call it fosterage."

"Rabbit has plenty of people telling him how to get on, Your Grace," Suiden said. "In fact, he may have too many, each with their own idea of who he should be."

"Including yourself, Your Highness?" Wyln asked.

"When he was an insignificant farm boy from the Border that no one thought two coppers about, he was given into my care. I haven't failed him yet, Sro Wyln."

The Fyrst laid down his fork on his empty plate and a servant appeared to whisk it away. "He will still be in your care, Prince Suiden, in most matters. We're talking about his talent, with which you haven't the faintest idea how to go on. Laurel Faena does—however, as my wife has pointed out, he is a cat, with a cat's knowledge of the working."

"So, Sro Wyln knows better?" Captain Suiden also put his fork down on an empty plate, and the servant appeared again to remove it. "Can—and, more importantly—will an elf show a human how to go on? I've heard, Sro Fyrst, of the games Enchanters play on humans."

So had I. Head bowed over my plate as I ate, I cast a sideways glance at the Enchanter and he gave me his gentle smile.

"I promise, Prince Suiden, not to play with Two Trees'-son," Wyln said, still amused. "He won't have to turn his coat inside out to confound me." He rubbed a finger under his chin. "It's amazing to me, Your Highness, how you fight against my coming near your lieutenant, yet you don't argue against Laurel Faena even though he, ah, bent the truth a bit to get Magus Kareste's runaway apprentice here."

"That's because—" I began.

"Rabbit met Laurel's actions with words and fists," Suiden spoke over me again, "and afterwards he didn't fret about being left alone with him. You, on the other hand, sit down next to him and he moves away, and he damn near pulls his knife on you." He took a sip of wine. "I've learned to heed his reactions, Sro Wyln. For the most part."

"Seeing beyond the obvious, Two Trees'son?" Molyu asked around her husband. "Or is it just fear of the elfin Enchanter?"

Wyln's smile widened as he watched me struggle to find an answer that didn't insult him specifically or all Enchanters generally. "I don't need to be fostered, Your Grace," I finally said.

"I disagree, young human," Her Grace said, "as you see fit to attack a guest under our roof and draw knives while at our table. The teaching of manners is a strong necessity at the very least."

"But—" I broke off with a smothered yelp as Captain Suiden kicked my ankle. Hard.

"Dragoness Moraina has also laid claim to Rabbit," Captain Suiden said, ignoring my grimace of pain. He indicated my cuff links and sapphire and diamond pin. "Her favors."

"You are incredibly connected, Two Trees'son," the Fyrst remarked. He turned his black gaze on Suiden. "I don't see that Cyhn and any other claims on Two Trees'son are mutually exclusive, Your Highness. Besides, Cyhn will preclude harm as by that I have claimed Rabbit as part of my household, with all the protections it entails."

"Then I remove my objections, Sro Fyrst," Suiden said, now stepping on my foot as I opened my mouth to protest. He shot me a side glare, then looked back at the Fyrst. "As long as it's understood that it's just for the training of Rabbit's talent."

"So understood," the Fyrst agreed. He gestured and a clerk arose from one of the lower tables. Heads craned to watch as he hurried forward, silence falling over the hall as he reached our table. The Fyrst rose, motioning for everyone else to remain seated, looking down at the clerk. "Note in the Acta that Wynl, the Enchanter of Elanwryfindyll, will stand as Cyhn to the human male, Rabbit—"

What little noise there was ceased.

"—son of Lark and Two Trees, and close cousin to Jusson Iver'son, King of Iversterre." Wynl stood up, holding his goblet of wine. "I so agree." He looked down at me, one brow raised. I could've just sat there and damned the Fyrst, Her Grace Molyu, and the Enchanter for their forcibly adopting me. Unfortunately, that would also damn me and everyone with me to whatever hell His Grace chose to cast us into, along with any chances for peace. I slowly stood holding my own goblet, telling myself to just stay lost next time, no matter if there were a hundred Faena trying to show me the way home.

"I so agree," I echoed.

"Fiat," Wynl and I said and lifted our goblets, draining them.

"Fiat!" thundered the hall, as the Fyrst's household, along with His Grace, raised their own cups and drank. I looked away from Eorl Pellán's stare as he lowered his goblet to the other side of the Fyrst, only to meet the wide-eyed gazes of my uncle and Chancellor Berle, while Laurel looked inscrutable. The Faena shifted his eyes from the Fyrst to me, and nodded, raising his goblet again. I looked back to Captain Suiden and was startled to see his faint smile had returned, reminding me once more of honored Moraina—when she had dined particularly well.

"Good," the Fyrst said. His Grace started to sit down, but hesitated, shooting a look at me. He then turned his head back to the clerk. "Also note that Rabbit, son of Lark and Two Trees, is agreed to not threaten his Cyhn with knives or other sharp objects. Fiat."

## Chapter Sixty-one

"What the hell did you do?" Uncle Havram barked as soon as our chamber doors closed behind the chamberlain, his blue eyes blazing at Captain Suiden.

"It's another layer of protection, sir," Suiden replied. He gave the same damn faint smile, his clan markings vivid in the candlelight. "Apparently His Grace was already set to give Lieutenant Rabbit over to Sro Wynl's care. I just negotiated a bit."

"Negotiated!" Uncle Havram barked again. "And when you're ready to leave and they say that Rabbit is theirs and has to stay?"

"The Fyrst has said that the lieutenant is ours in all but his talent. Sro Wynln is to only see to his training."

"There's sometimes a vast difference between what's said and what's done, Your Highness," Lord Esclaur said, looking worried. "Lord Rabbit's the king's close cousin and thrice sworn liegeman. If they hold him hostage—"

"It's fosterage, Lord Esclaur," Suiden said, "with specific terms and limitations, the foremost being that it ends when—"

"When the one being fostered comes of age," Laurel finished, a bird-eating grin on his face, "or otherwise shows that he does not need a master. Which we'll do when the High Council meets. This is very good, honored captain. Very, very good."

"I'm glad someone's ecstatic about it," I muttered. I moved to a window and stared out at the night.

"Sirs, did you see the lady who sat on the Fyrst's right?" Groskin asked.

"His wife, Her Grace Molyu," Laurel said, one ear cocked towards the closed door, and I idly wondered who was standing outside listening in.

"Yes, Ambassador. But Her Grace's eyes were gold."

"While it's not as prevalent as black eyes," Laurel said, "it's not an uncommon color among the dark elves."

"Oh," Groskin said. Then his face changed as he realized what that said about King Jusson. He then slid a glance at Falkin. In the reflection in the window, the first lieutenant looked even more like a northern elf, missing only the warrior braids on either side of his face.

"We have all changed," I said, shifting my gaze to the waxing moon against the dark of the sky. "And nothing is as it seems." I desperately wanted to be preparing to bunk down in my old cot in the barracks at Freston, away from all the austere splendor of the Fyrst's keep.

"The Fyrst will not allow you to be harmed, Rabbit," Laurel said, his image joining mine in the glass. "Nor will the Enchanter. It's a matter of honor—especially since you were removed from the Magus' care because of his, hmm, carelessness with the messenger bird. They would not want to have to admit to the greater offense of abusing their fosterling."

I shrugged, more out of resignation than any desire to be contrary. By and large, the Faena was right. As the Enchanter was part of his household, the Fyrst, in essence, declared me kindred, with all the protections that a family member was entitled to. Of course, that also meant that I was subject to the rules of his household, and I had a certain morbid curiosity as to how that would play out.

The next few days passed quickly, with the Iversterre embassy staff setting up temporary quarters in our minihall. While none of the elfin eorls came visiting, there were plenty of high ranking clerks and officials dropping by, some on legitimate business and others because they wanted to make sure we hadn't scratched our names into the keep's walls. Chancellor Berle—minus Lord Esclaur—was summoned to a private session with the Fyrst two mornings later. She was gone a couple of hours and came back wearing her game face, murmuring that it was a typical first meeting when asked by Captain Javes. But I noticed her staring into space a time or two, a crease etched between her brows. However, the Fyrst must've summoned Chancellor Berle back as she disappeared again a couple of days later, this time escorted by Eorl Pellán. I watched her go, hoping that the chancellor wouldn't say or do anything that would challenge the commander's honor or his sense of protocol, both very touchy subjects for elves.

But I hadn't much time to ponder the chancellor's concerns as my days passed in a whirlwind that was occasionally broken by islands of calm: a time alone with Uncle Havram as he spoke of growing up with my da, morning prayers with Doyen Allwyn, escaping with Groskin and Jeffen down to the barracks to hang out with my mates, and mealtimes. For, having been put on display the first night, we all were relegated to our common room for our meals— all except Captain Suiden. Or Prince Suiden, who apparently had once stood very close in the succession to the Amir of Tural. Or, again, I thought, watching him follow the chamberlain to another dinner with the Fyrst, maybe still did. Despite her own private meetings, Chancellor Berle frowned as she also watched the captain leave, miffed at His Grace's preference for a lowly Freston mountain patroller—no matter his antecedents—over an emissary of the king of Iversterre. But another thought crossed my mind as I caught the green of Suiden's eyes as he left our chambers—it just might be that the Fyrst's favor had nothing to do with anything so human.

But if the captain-dragon-prince was absent from our dinners, the Enchanter Wynl was not. He showed up with our breakfast the first morning and didn't leave until after my night meditations. During that and the subsequent days, he and Laurel worked together as they drilled me in lesson after lesson in working the talent.

"And again, Rabbit," Laurel said, catching my wandering attention. Wynl, murmuring about being indoors on such a fine morning, suggested that we hold the lesson in one of the castle's terrace gardens. It was indeed fine outside, being Midsummer's Eve, and we sat on stone seats around a stone table, the sun warm against my back. All around was a riot of flowers against a pattern of flagstone paths in the grass, stone edging along the borders, and towering trees. Jeff was relieved for the time being, as Captain Javes was at another stone table playing chess with Doyen Allwyn. Honor Ash, Basel, and the unicorn sat under a large oak, disinterested for the moment in my doings. The wind blew around, fluttering the feather that Laurel insisted that I continue wearing, then was still.

At the Faena's command, I cupped my hands and concentrated on letting them fill with the same bell-tolling resonance I had felt when I'd fought the djinn storm.

"Control it, Two Trees'son," Wynl said.

I worked on dampening all reverberation except in my hands.

"Good. Pour in as much as you can," Wynl said.

My hands began to sing, tone layered over tone, as their edges blurred.

"Now, let go," Wynl said.

I took my hands away and a small swirling sphere hung in front of me, ringing a deep chord that echoed within me. I smiled as the wind once more brushed across my shoulders, and the sphere dipped, then rose again to face level.

"Excellent," Laurel purred.

"Yes," Wynl said. He cupped his hands and in a moment a sphere of flame crackled as it hung next to mine of air. Laurel laughed, but instead of cupping his paws, he inscribed a circle before him with an extended claw. I watched as it rounded out with browns and greens, pulsing with life as measured in suns, moons and seasons. Basel's haunt rose from under the tree and came over on delicate stag's legs. He pushed his transparent nose against the sphere, and I smelled rich loam and sweet grass.

Wynl watched the stag. "It's odd that the haunts prefer Two Trees'son to you, Laurel."

"Yes," Laurel said, "it has me puzzled." He also looked at Basel playing with the earth sphere. "At first I thought it was because the moon soldier was a friend who was killed by the same one who tormented Rabbit."

"But he's a White Stag, the Lady's harbinger," Wynl said. "He should be even more attracted to your aspect than the normal haunt." He watched Basel a moment further. "He is strongly attracted, yet he has joined himself to Two Trees'son."

"Despite my aspect and despite me being Faena," Laurel said. He shifted so that he could see Honor Ash and the unicorn. "All of them, even the cats, even Honor, have chosen Rabbit."

"You were born in the fall, Two Trees'son?" Wynl asked, now looking at the air sphere.

"Yes, honored Cyhn."

"Well, that matches." Wynl gave a slight frown. "One would think, though, that you'd have come into your full power also in the fall."

"It isn't unknown to mature out of season," Laurel said.

"True," Wynl said, though he was still frowning. "Rare, but not unknown."

"You were born in the summer, honored Cyhn?" I asked, watching his summoning.

Wynl extended his finger to allow the fireball to rest on it. "Yes, and in the summer I came into my power. The time of the sun's ascendancy over the earth. Of growth, ripening and the promise of plenty. Of wild revelry, hunts, and courage. The forge of ordeals, refining and purification."

"Balanced, he's the crucible, the heart beating strong, the joy and strength of a people," Laurel said. "Unbalanced, he's as willfully fickle, greedy, and malicious as a overindulged cub."

Wynl actually grinned. "Yes, well, we won't talk about what you are unbalanced, Faena."

"Necromancer," Laurel said. He glanced at Basel and sighed. "It's just as well that the moon folk prefer Rabbit, no? Having so many all at once would be a sore temptation to cross into areas I shouldn't."

I shivered, remembering tales of earth mages turning into necromancers and how even the dead weren't safe. Then I remembered other stories—and how Karest's ice shard eyes had glittered at me in the Fyrst's hall. "I've heard water mages are even more dangerous when they turn."

"Not more dangerous, Rabbit," Laurel said. "But they do bear keeping an eye on."

"Oh, yes," Wynl said. "Born in the dark of winter. The time of storms and reclusion. Of austerity and the spirit ascendant over flesh. The keeper of time and measurements, lord of illusions, the mirror image, of dreams. Balanced, a water mage is the judge, the master builder, the merry trickster, the storm bringer. Unbalanced—" Wynl frowned again. "The worst of the dark practitioners have always seemed to be water mages, as they're so flaming good at the details." The frown smoothed out as he looked at me. "Now you, Two Trees'son—"

"Laurel has already told me, honored Cyhn" I said quick, hoping to forestall being named a bard and maybe a request for a song.

Laurel chuffed. "So I have."

Wynl ignored both of us. "Balanced, a warrior in song and battle, sword upraised defending the hearth,



the lord of harvest and plenty, of wine, rejoicing and dance, of remembrance, of farseeing. Unbalanced, a dread lord."

I blinked.

"Don't worry, Two Trees'son, you're very balanced," Wynl said, "and we will keep you that way—"

The Enchanter stopped and turned his head, as did both Captain Javes and Laurel, the cat's ears pressing forward. I turned my head also and, after a moment, I could hear the distant sound of trumpets.

"The High Council members have begun to arrive," Laurel said.

"Now?" I asked, startled. "We still have more than a week, don't we?"

"For the formal Council meeting, yes," Laurel said as he held out his paw. The earth sphere came to rest on it, gently dissipating. "But there's a lot of politicking that goes on both before and after. Besides, they may be here for Midsummer's Eve revelry." His ears flicked back and he sighed. "We'll stop for now so we can prepare ourselves for the summons that's sure to come."

"Nervous, Faena?" Wynl asked, doing the same to his fire sphere. He reached over to show me how.

"Yes," Laurel said.

"I suppose I would be a little uneasy too if I had to explain to the Council why what they had ordered wasn't done," Wynl said, standing up, a gentle smile curving his mouth.

"No, you wouldn't." Laurel also rose. "Nor am I, at least about that." He motioned for me to rise too.

"Now, if I had to stand before the elders of my clan or, even worse, my grandam—" Laurel broke off with a chuff, as he gathered his staff. Honor Ash and the unicorn started towards us and he watched them as they moved across the grass. "No, I'm nervous for other reasons."

Wynl's air of amusement increased. "'Tis an enigmatic cat we have for a companion, Two Trees'son."

Captain Javes and the doyen joined us as we made our way back into the castle. When we reached the main stairs, we would've continued on up to our chambers but Wynl stopped us. "No, we shall go and wait upon His Grace's pleasure." He caught my glance at the captain and me doyen. "Oh, your chaperons may come too, Two Trees'-son."

Not waiting for a response from any of us, he turned and headed for the audience hall—so I thought. The Enchanter, however, led us past the hall's closed double doors and around a corner to a smaller staircase. At the top of the stairs were guards, who stepped aside when they saw Wynl. The Enchanter opened the door without knocking and entered, but only Laurel followed him as Javes, Allwyn, the haunts, and I all stopped at the threshold, peering in. As I stared at the heraldic banners on the antechamber walls, I took a step back, Javes and the rest moving with me. We were not about to go into the Fyrst's private rooms without a specific invitation from His Grace himself. Preferably an engraved one presented on a velvet cushion with a flourish of trumpets.

"I-say," Javes said, "why don't we just meet you when you're done. Wouldn't want to intrude upon His Grace when he has important visitors, what? You know, affairs of state and all that."

"You've brought them," the Fyrst said from behind us and we spun around to see him climbing the stairs, with more guards at his back. "Excellent." The guards joined the ones already stationed at the door, and His Grace moved past us into the foyer. "Come in."

Encouraged by the guards, we followed the Fyrst through the small chamber into what appeared to be the Fyrst's council room. He led us past shelves filled with books and scrolls, a map table, another table with carved chairs around it, to more chairs set in front of the fireplace. "Tea," he said to a servant who silently appeared, bowed, and just as silently disappeared.

The Fyrst then indicated that we should all sit. As we did so, I noted that there were enough chairs for everyone—except the haunts—and while there were six of us seated around the fire, it didn't feel crowded. Instead of feeling at ease, though, I felt my spine tighten.

"Wyn and Laurel have informed me, Rabbit Two Trees'son, that you are an adept student and your grasp of working the talent is increasing apace," His Grace said lightly as the servant returned with a cart laden with tea and small delicacies.

"Yes, Your Grace," I said.

"That's good." The Fyrst looked at the servant. "Thank you. We will serve ourselves." He turned back to me. "So how is it to be back in the Border after, what? Five years?"

"Yes, Your Grace," I said again. Feeling reckless, I expanded on that. "I do admit that I find Elanwryfindyll to be almost as different as Iversterre, as I've never been to any of the coastal city-states."

"I see," the Fyrst said. "I understand your family has a farm in Dragoness Moraina's territory, right?"

"Yes, Your Grace," I said once more, then paused as I heard the distant snick of the outer foyer doors closing.

The Fyrst gave a faint smile. "From the farm but not, I think, a provincial."

"No," Captain Javes said, "Rabbit is neither stupid or naive, Your Grace." His yellow wolf eyes gleamed at the Fyrst. "Neither, I hope, am I. Why have you spirited us here? And why now?"

"I know the prince," His Grace said, "and I know of the vice admiral. I can figure out the vicar, the chancellor and the lordling. But I have no idea how you fit into all this. Yet fit you do." The Fyrst settled back, his hands steepled before him as he rested his elbows on the chair's arms. "Who are you, Captain Javes?"

Javes hesitated, then dared a slight shrug. "There's no mystery, Your Grace. I'm just a merchant's son who's been fortunate enough to make captain in His Majesty's Royal Army."

"A merchant's son who's privy to a king's confidence," the Fyrst observed, "and a lowly garrison captain who sits at councils and is sent on secret missions." His Grace saw the look Javes cast at Laurel and gave another faint smile. "Blame Chancellor Berle for my information, Javes Merchant'son." His brows rose.

"Again I ask: Who are you?"

Javes stared back a moment. He then gave his own faint smile. "My father trades with the Qarant, Your Grace."

"So do hundreds, perhaps thousands of others—" the Fyrst began.

"And my mother is Qarant. Of the Damas, a daughter of the line."

This time the Fyrst stared at Javes. "I see," he finally said. "A prominent Qarant family. Not nobility, then, but very powerful." His brows rose again. "Still, your king accepts you into his inner circle? How

egalitarian!"

"No, Your Grace," Javes said, his voice as dry as the Fyrst's. "Just practical. He is on very good terms with all the principal merchant families, and my papa is head of the merchant's guild." He now dared his silly ass smile. "His Majesty knows that a kingdom doesn't run on jousting tournaments, quests, and songs of chivalry, what?"

"Practical?" the Fyrst threw back. "He sends a son of a powerful merchant with strong ties to an even more powerful trade consortium, a Turalian dragon prince and"—the Fyrst turned his head to look at me—"a mageling who's both a son of the Border and his close cousin to argue his case. Your king is as twisty as a serpent's tail."

I lifted my head to stare at Laurel, knowing that the cat had told the Fyrst about my oath to Jusson, only to have my eyes collide with Wyln, who gave me his amused smile.

"Chancellor Berle—" Javes began.

"No," the Fyrst said over the captain. "Chancellor Berle is a mere formality, a perfunctory gesture to his court—and you cannot tell me that Lord Esclair wasn't included in her retinue to make sure the honored chancellor does not exceed her king's directives." His faint smile crossed his face once more. "Playing chess with Jusson Iver's son would be very interesting."

"He is elfin," Wyln pointed out.

"Yes," His Grace agreed. Finished with Captain Javes, he shifted in his chair to look at me. "The first of the Council members have arrived and they've already requested to see you, Rabbit Two Trees's son." His sardonic look came over his face as he reached for the teapot. "It seems that Magus Kareste has been busy, but I've put them off for now."

He poured a cup of tea and offered it to me. I hesitated, then carefully took it, waiting for everyone to be served (and take a sip) before drinking. The Fyrst's smile widened as he poured his own cup. "In the meantime, you will join my wife and me for the Midsummer celebration."

I forgot the tea as I goggled at the Fyrst. "Me? Uh, Your Grace?"

"You are Cyhn to our house, Two Trees's son." He took a sip of tea, his eyes enigmatic over the cup's rim. "It would be considered remarkable if you don't join us."

Javes frowned and the Fyrst held up his hand.

"Don't worry, I'll speak with Prince Suiden—" The Fyrst broke off and he, Wyln and Laurel all turned in their seats to face the door to the foyer. After a moment I could hear a commotion coming up the stairs and, looking at Captain Javes, pushed my feet under me, ready to rise if necessary. Javes did the same as the door opened and Harbormaster Lin and Uncle Havram walked in, followed by one of the harbor wardens. The Fyrst stood, while motioning the rest of us to remain seated. He said nothing as he watched the faerie walk towards him.

"I beg pardon for the interruption, Your Grace," the harbormaster began, bowing as she reached the Fyrst. "But I must inform you—" There was more commotion and the leopard haunt that was usually Groskin's companion came running into the room, making his way to my side to join Basel, Honor Ash and the unicorn. More haunts appeared at the door.

"Obruesk has escaped," Uncle Havram said.

## Chapter Sixty-two

"A careful watch has been kept on the human ships' crews, honored Fyrst," Harbormaster Lin said. "Their comings and goings monitored, so as to avoid any incidents. Last night a crew member left the Dauntless and entered the city. When he didn't return we did a thorough search. He's nowhere to be found, which makes us think that he doesn't want to be found—especially since we did find sailor's clothes ditched in a back alley." She nodded and the harbor warden produced the jacket, shirt and breeks that the sailors in His Majesty's Royal Navy commonly wore.

"Who is he, Vice Admiral?" the Fyrst asked after a cursory glance at the clothes.

"A renegade cleric, Your Grace," Doyen Allwyn said before Havram could answer.

"Aye." Uncle Havram agreed. "He must have convinced one of the crew to let him go. With the senior officers being occupied here, there wasn't anyone there to check his foolishness."

"But why?" I asked and caught looks at me. "Sirs, honored folk. Why jump ship? There's nothing for him here—the exact opposite, in fact."

"Probably for the same reason most people jump ship, lad," Havram said. "He doesn't want to return."

"All his supporters, though, are back in Iversterre—"

The Fyrst held up his hand and I shut up.

"Why are you telling me this, harbormaster?" the Fyrst asked. "Why aren't you telling Commander Pellan?"

"We can't find Eorl Pellan, Your Grace," Lin said. "Nor can we find his lieutenant or his sergeant. We tried to tell the City Watch commander or his second, but they're missing too." She frowned, her feathery brows pulling together. "I felt that we needed to tell someone as I am concerned that this vicar could pose a danger, especially with the High Council meeting here shortly."

"Is he a danger, Vice Admiral?" the Fyrst asked.

"I don't know, Your Grace," Havram said. "I don't think so, but who knows what mischief His Reverence would get up to in a Border city where there's everything he's made a career preaching against."

"So we should be concerned," His Grace said, "if only for fear this human will create a tumult in the city." He beckoned a castle guard to him. "Organize a search. Distribute the vicar's description—" He raised a brow at the harbormaster. "You did get a description?"

Harbormaster Lin bowed again. "Yes, Your Grace."

The Fyrst's brow came down. "Very good. See to it." The harbormaster bowed once more and withdrew, followed by the harbor warden and the castle guard.

"That was interesting," Wynl murmured as the door shut. "I wonder where Pellan has gotten himself to?"

The Fyrst shook his head, silencing the Enchanter, and this time, looking at Doyen Allwyn, asked once

more, "Who is this vicar?"

"As I said before, Your Grace, a renegade—"

"No, that's not true." The Fyrst frowned and glanced at the haunts still coming into the room despite the shut door, sliding between the door and jamb. "Or at least not all of it. Try again."

Doyen Allwyn frowned back, then looked down, sighing heavily. "He's our archdoyen, Your Grace."

"The archdoyen is second only to the patriarch, correct?" the Fyrst asked.

Allwyn nodded. "Yes, Your Grace."

"A very powerful elder in your church, then. Yet, if I understand correctly, he was serving on your ship as a—chaplain? Isn't that an army posting?"

Allwyn nodded again. "Yes, Your Grace."

"Why?"

"The patriarch assigned him, Your Grace," Allwyn said. "As a penance to learn obedience."

"So to learn obedience he was placed under guard?"

The doyen shook his head, looking miserable. "No, Your Grace. It was for something else."

"What?" Uncle Havram opened his mouth, but the Fyrst held up his hand. "Let the vicar answer."

Doyen Allwyn met the Fyrst's gaze, his face ashamed. "He declared Lord Rabbit apostate after his lordship saved us from the djinn storm, and said it was God's will that the world be, uh, cleansed of his presence."

"Seeing someone become the wind seems to have that effect on some people," Javes murmured.

Wyln looked at Javes and then at me, but the Fyrst ignored the captain and turned to Laurel. "Why didn't you tell me this, Faena? Didn't you think I should know what's in my harbor?"

"I informed Commander Pellan, Your Grace," Laurel replied. He held up his paw with the truth rune shining on it and my own rune warmed. "On our way to the castle the day we arrived I told him." He shook his head, his beads rattling. "It never occurred to me that he hadn't passed it on."

Wyln jumped up immediately from his chair and walked swiftly to the door, dodging haunts as he went.

"What else haven't I been told?" the Fyrst asked. "What other information has been withheld?" He sat back down and propped his chin up on his fist, once more looking like King Jusson. "Why don't you start with what transgression a high elder in your church committed that was so heinous that he was in essence exiled."

"There was a rebellion, Your Grace," Suiden said from the doorway, Groskin with him, "and the archdoyen sided with the wrong, ah, side."

Wyln, returning to his seat, spun around and the guard with them bowed.

"They were already coming up the stairs, honored Fyrst, Enchanter. Guardsman Dercha has gone on to look for Commander Pellan."

Lieutenant Groskin scanned the room until he found the leopard—and me—and his frown eased. "There he is, sir. With Rabbit, as I thought."

The Fyrst's gaze was fixed on Captain Suiden. "A rebellion?"

"Yes, Your Grace." Suiden wove through the haunts, followed by Groskin. "The House of Flavan rose up against King Jusson."

"Why?" the Fyrst asked.

"Because His Majesty has no direct heir and Lord Teram ibn Flavan e Dru only has forty lines to the throne, Your Grace," Suiden said as he reached us, "as opposed to Rabbit's sixty-four—and Rabbit has proved surprisingly impervious to attempts on his life."

Wyn once more turned his head to stare at me.

"Flavan e Dru! The House of Dru was involved also?" the Fyrst asked, frowning.

"Dru provided the funds for arms, horses, and mercenaries, Your Grace," Suiden said. "Some, as he was Lord Treasurer, through embezzlement, but the majority through smuggling."

The frown disappeared as the Fyrst's face went blank. "Dru was involved in the running?"

Everyone from Iversterre stared back at the Fyrst. "Chancellor Berle didn't tell you when you met with her, Your Grace?" Suiden asked, his voice careful.

"No," the Fyrst replied. "She just said that the 'ring' had been smashed and those responsible caught." He looked at the haunts. "Dru did this?"

"Among other things," Captain Javes said.

"Such as?" Wyn asked, his voice soft, now also looking at the haunts.

"He used his cousin in the assassination attempts on Lord Rabbit," Javes said.

"The same cousin also killed the White Stag, honored Fyrst, Enchanter," Laurel added, indicating Basel.

"And didn't you say, Your Highness, that this Slevoic also is a sorcerer?" Allwyn asked, somewhat recovered.

"Yes," Suiden said. "He came into his power during the rebellion while wearing a hauberk made of dragon skin and carrying a staff made of a murdered tree sprite."

"Slevoic ibn Dru," the Fyrst said, his eyes all of a sudden narrowing.

Again, everyone from Iversterre stared at the Fyrst. "You know him, Your Grace?" Suiden asked, his voice once more careful.

"He visited here a few years ago, in the company of the Turalian ambassador to the human kingdom," Wyn said.

"Slevoic here?" Javes asked, sitting upright, his head turning from the Fyrst to Wyn.

"Sro Kenalt," Suiden said at the same time. "A cousin of mine," he added at the Fyrst's look. The captain's clan markings were dark scars against the sudden grayness of his face. He took a breath,

hesitated, then took another breath. "I should tell you, Your Grace, that it appears that Tural was in league with Gherat." He took another breath. "Goods and slaves—"

"Slaves!" Wylm stood up, his black eyes full of fire, while the Fyrst leaned forward in his chair, his own eyes still narrowed.

"—were smuggled out of Iversterre while the Turalian navy played cat and mouse with ours."

"True, honored Fyrst," Laurel said. "The djinn storm was most likely sent by a Turalian wizard to stop us from reaching here."

I had sat silent as first Doyen Allwyn and then Captain Suiden admitted to the misdeeds of elders and family, mulling over what had been told—and not told—to the Fyrst, and what would happen if certain things became known just as I stood before the High Council. I now looked over at the Fyrst—and found his narrowed eyes on me.

"Yes, Two Trees'son?"

I opened my mouth and nothing came out. I took a deep breath, and tried again. "Did the chancellor tell you, Your Grace, that a near kinsman of the vice admiral's and mine was also involved in the smuggling?"

"No, she did not," the Fyrst said.

I swallowed the lump that suddenly formed in my throat, fighting the desire to look away from the Fyrst's gaze. "My da's eldest brother, Your Grace, Lord Maceal of Chause."

"Was he part of this rebellion also?" the Fyrst asked.

"No, Your Grace," Uncle Havram said before I could respond, his mouth like a wound. "Nothing so noble. My brother just likes his silver."

I took another deep breath. "I am also close kin to Teram ibn Flavan. He's the son of my mother's brother." In the abrupt quiet of the room I could hear the wind outside start to pick up, whistling a bit as it gusted around the buildings of the keep.

"May I ask why Slevoic was here, Your Grace?" Javes finally asked, breaking the silence.

"That's something for the High Council to answer," the Fyrst said, his face as remote and cold as it was when we first saw him in his hall. He turned his head again to look at Laurel. "All this you kept from me, Faena. Why?"

Laurel's ears were against his skull as he indicated the haunt-crowded room. "Did you know, Your Grace, that these are from just one shipment of—goods?" He nodded at Honor's haunt standing next to my chair. "I left Honor Ash Faena alive and well, but when I reached Iversly, I found her body already there, seasoned and fashioned into a church Staff of Office. With bells. As Rabbit Two Trees'son has said again and again—for five years the High Council couldn't find the runners preying on its people? On this scale?" He rumbled deep in his chest. "And just how did these runners manage to kill a Faena?" Both Loran and Wylm turned to look at Honor, frowns gathering on their faces.

"I also found out upon my arrival in Iversly that King Jusson had no intention of repudiating the treaty between Iversterre and us," Laurel said. "In fact, when honored Jusson discovered that the treaty had been violated, he charged me to find a way to prevent war."

"What are you saying, Faena?" the Fyrst asked, his frown deepening.

"Then I further discover that not only is Dragoness Moraina one of the treaty signers," Laurel said, ignoring His Grace's question, "but that she also carried on a correspondence with King Jusson's great-grandsire."

"What?" All remoteness fled as the Fyrst pushed himself out of his chair and stood staring down at Laurel, while Wynl shook his head slowly.

Laurel's eyes glowed. "But am I told this? Am I told any of it? No. Instead, I'm sent off to search for Rabbit in the back mountains of the human kingdom. I'm even kept away from Veldecke, where there was a rape and murder of a fae—and, though the Faena who strode there knew who did it, he took no one." The Fyrst and Wynl turned their heads to Groskin, who flinched.

"Oh, no, Your Grace," Laurel said. "He was the only one present who hadn't, and he was punished for naming who did." He settled back in his chair. "You say I've kept things from you. Well, I suppose that's true. But I'm saving my questions and comments for the full Council." Laurel's whiskers swept back to show his eyeteeth. "Then I will question everyone most diligently, even the Council representative for the dark elves."

"Will you?" Wynl asked, his flame-filled eyes matching Laurel's amber stare.

"No, Wynl," the Fyrst said, putting his hand on the Enchanter's shoulder, and Wynl subsided. "The Faena can ask all the questions he wants, for I am very interested in the answers." It fell silent again and in the quiet we could hear trumpets. The Fyrst looked over at the window. "More of the Council arriving. I shall have to go greet them." He looked back at us. "The only way a secret between two can be kept is for one to be dead—"

A very faint smile came over Javes' face.

"—and even that is not certain." The Fyrst started to turn to leave. "Still, I'd ask that we keep what was discussed here—" He broke off as he caught sight of the guard sent to get Captain Suiden still standing in the room. His eyes went to the open door and the other guards bunched there staring back at us.

One stepped forward and then stopped, blocked by the haunts. "Slaves, Your Grace?" he asked.

The Fyrst hesitated, then nodded. "It appears so."

A moaning sigh ran through the guards, echoed in the wind outside. "Sold in the Turalian slave markets," another whispered, and Suiden's face clouded with shame.

The trumpets sounded again and the Fyrst once more looked at the window. "Even more arriving. At this rate the Council will soon be fully assembled and the Faena can ask his questions." He faced Wynl. "I have to go down and greet the new arrivals who, I'm sure, will also request to see Two Trees'son. If any such requests come to you, turn them down."

Wynl nodded. "Yes, Your Grace."

The Fyrst turned to me. "You will stay close to your Cyhn, young human. Even better if you stay close to both your Cyhn and the Faena. Do not wander off by yourself, or allow anyone to lure you away."

I nodded also, thinking that the space around me was going to be awfully crowded, especially as a couple of the guards, at His Grace's gesture, attached themselves to us. The trumpets blew again, signaling the arrival of another Council member, and the Fyrst moved towards the door.

"I will send for you again when I have time," he said, unclear on which "you" he was speaking to, but I



had a nasty suspicion that he meant me.

### Chapter Sixty-three

Uncle Havram went back to his ship, "to conduct an inquiry as to how the archdoyen managed to get past his vigilant guards." He looked at me, his face drawn with concern. "But I'll be back, lad." As he turned to go, he tried to smile at Captain Suiden. "Hmmp! Should' ve let you toss His bloody Reverence over the side—or at least hang him from the yardarm a little."

He didn't wait for the captain's response, which was just as well as Suiden didn't give one. The captain did rouse himself to follow Laurel's suggestion that we quit the Fyrst's chambers. As we left, I looked around the room, thinking that a battlefield had fewer wounded.

Laurel, Wyn and I did not bother to return to the garden, as the wind had risen to a continuous wail, and instead went with Suiden, Javes, and Allwyn to our chambers. Upon entering, I'd expected to see Chancellor Berle there, but besides the embassy staff, only Lord Esclaur was present. He sat before the fire with a goblet of wine and a book borrowed from the castle's library.

"Where is the chancellor?" Javes asked.

"Berle discovered the steam bath." Putting the book down, Esclaur stood and stretched. "She said rocks are heated and water poured over them to make steam while you sit in it. Supposed to be very relaxing, but it sounds much too much like summer in Iversly, indeed it does."

I smiled, sort of. "I don't know how relaxing the chancellor will find it as it's communal." I saw the question on Esclaur's face. "Males and females, lords and servants all share the same bath."

"My word," Lord Esclaur whispered, awe and glee fighting for supremacy on his face. He then took in the haunts pouring into the room after us and he sobered. "They took off a little while ago as if someone had yelled 'fire.'" He looked back at me. "Is everything all right, Rabbit?"

I opened my mouth to say yes, of course, but nothing came out. I blinked, took a deep breath and tried again. "No."

Esclaur frowned as he stared at me and it deepened as he looked around at the rest. "What has happened?"

"A reckoning, Lord Esclaur," Doyen Allwyn said. He also tried to smile but didn't quite make it. "I'm going to pray and meditate. Blessings." The doyen went into his chamber.

"Chancellor Berle did not tell His Grace who was behind the smuggling, Sro Esclaur, or why," Suiden said, his voice tired. He ran a hand over his face. "So we did." He went over to the wine decanter and poured a goblet.

"What?"

"Makes you wonder exactly what Berle did tell the Fyrst, eh?" Javes said. Esclaur shot a glance at Wyn standing quiet next to me watching all of us, and Javes gave a short laugh. "Oh, they've figured us out so completely that we've no secrets from them." He joined Suiden at the wine decanter. "On top of that, Obruesk escaped."

"What?"

"Some pious sailor apparently yielded to His Reverence's entreaties, dressed him as a crew member and helped him jump ship," Javes said, taking a gulp of wine. "He's now loose in the city somewhere, having cast off his seaman's togs for another disguise."

"It doesn't make sense, sirs," I said. "There's absolutely nothing or no one for him here." Javes shrugged.

"Perhaps he heard about the steam baths and decided to mount a holy campaign against them."

"But—"

"But," Laurel said over me, "mysteries and revelations aside"—he started herding me towards my chamber door, Wyln falling in with us—"there is much we still need to cover."

"Why?" Suiden asked.

We all turned and looked at the captain as he set his empty goblet down on the table. Javes started to refill it, but Suiden laid his hand over the top of it as he stared at us.

"Honored captain?" Laurel asked.

"Why?" Suiden repeated, distant curiosity on his face. "Do you really think you can affect the High Council's decision?"

"Do you know something, Suiden?" Javes asked, setting his own glass down as he also looked at us.

Suiden shrugged. "Think on it, Javes. The Fyrst dissolved Rabbit's indentures because he was disposed to do so, not because of any clever arguments, triple oaths, or jewels from dragon hoards."

"But the dead bird—" Esclaur began.

"That was just a convenience, Sro Esclaur. His Grace didn't even bother to verify whether you were telling the truth—which he could've very easily either through Laurel or the Witness Circle—even though you'd volunteered." Suiden looked back at Wyln and Laurel. "He was much more interested in King Jusson being an elf wizard—"

"Oh, no," Wyln said, smiling. "Not a wizard. Or an enchanter. Yet. Say talent-born."

"—and that Rabbit was both his cousin and sworn to him. I think it was then that the Fyrst decided to keep Rabbit, if not for himself, at least out of the—"

"Magus," Laurel said, shooting a glance at Wyln.

"—Magus' hands." Suiden shrugged again. "Up until that point, His Grace was more than willing to give Rabbit back to his master—and didn't give a pox-rotted damn what anyone else thought or wanted."

"Yet knowing this, honored prince, you were eager to negotiate Cyhn for your, ah, charge," Wyln pointed out.

"Protection is protection, Sro Wyln. Even so, I was assured by the Fyrst's refusal to jettison Laurel and appoint you in his stead," Suiden pointed out in return. "Why is that, I wonder?"

"Again, I'm amazed, honored prince, in your shrugging off the Faena's not revealing who sent him," Wyln said, ignoring both Suiden's question and Laurel, who turned and stared at him.

"As I said before, I trust Rabbit's instincts. He turns his back on Laurel. He does not turn his back on you."

In the silence I could hear the wind howl, and a gust rattled the windows. Javes jumped and then looked around, frowning as he took in the embassy staff watching us with wide eyes. "I think that perhaps we should have this conversation somewhere less public, what?" Without waiting for an answer, he turned and headed for the sleeping chamber he shared with Suiden.

The room was as decadent in rich wood as was the one I shared with Groskin and Jeff. Groskin followed us carrying the wine decanter and goblets. He placed them on the table as we sat down, and turned to leave.

"Stay, Lieutenant," Suiden said, indicating the doorway, and Groskin stationed himself on one side, the leopard haunt moving to the other.

"Have you ever been told, Your Highness, the history of the People?" Wynl asked as he poured wine into a goblet.

"I know that Iversterre was once Borderland and that there are those who want it back," Suiden said.

"Want it back'?" Wynl set the decanter down with a snap as he looked at Suiden, the fire in the fireplace echoed in his eyes. "It was my home, Your Highness, not something I lost out of my pocket. What is now Iversly was Morendyll, the jewel of the sea, and Loran the Fyrst ruled there as High Elf King. There are mosaics Molyu, my sister and his wife, placed into the walls of the palace with her own hands. Gardens, walks and arbors that she and my other sister designed and planted. My own wife was born and grew to adulthood there, as lovely as a sunlit rose, and there I married her." The flames in his eyes danced over the rim of his goblet as he took a sip of wine. "Ask me where my wife is now, honored prince. Ask me about my children."

No one said anything.

The Enchanter lowered his cup and gave his gentle smile. "I understand that the Royal Garrison stables sit on top of the pit where their bodies were thrown, with the other muck and trash."

Again, no one spoke.

"You say that the human does not trust me," Wynl said. "That he will not turn his back on me, with his sixty-four lines to the House of Iver. Iver who drove me from my home, who killed my family, whose vicars proclaimed their murder a purging of the land given to them by their God." The Enchanter shrugged. "Well, perhaps Two Trees'son is wise to be careful." The wind gusted hard, once more rattling windows. Remembering what Jusson had told me he'd seen when I touched him, I traced my reflection in the polished wood with my finger, desperately hoping that I did not look like my distant ancestor.

"Do not worry, Two Trees'son. You don't," Wynl said, his voice light as he took another sip of wine.

"Have we been fools to come, Lord Enchanter?" Javes asked after a moment.

"The honored Faena doesn't think so, do you, Laurel?" Wynl asked, turning to the cat.

"You can lower the bucket all you want, Wynl, but that well is dry," Laurel rumbled. "I refuse to quarrel with you." He looked at Javes. "I've been accused of playing fast and loose with my promises, honored captain, but I've made just one covenant and one oath, and so far I've kept both."

"When this High Council meets," Esclaur said, frowning at Laurel, "you may very well find your vows null

and void.”

"I have never promised peace," Laurel said. "Not to any of you, not to your king. However, I have sworn to keep Rabbit from the Magus, and so I will.”

"And I have sworn to his fosterage," Wynl said as he prepared to rise, "no matter Two Trees'son's antecedents.”

"Why?" Suiden asked, returning to his earlier question.

Wynl settled back into his chair, exasperation crossing his face. "Why what?"

"If Rabbit's forefather killed your family and destroyed your home, if humans caused you such anguish, if you hate us so much, why have you taken Rabbit as Cyhn?"

Wynl sighed. "You are worse than a young one with your plague of 'why's'.”

Suiden said nothing as he stared back and Wynl looked down into his wine goblet, a line between his brows. The Enchanter then shrugged, and finishing his wine, he lowered his goblet. But instead of looking at the captain, he turned his head to me, his eyes intense.

"There is a theory that human talent arises out of some strange alchemy of elf and human. That those mage-born have a touch of elfin blood—and the stronger the talent, the stronger the blood.”

I found myself staring back at the Enchanter.

"Are you saying that Rabbit is part elf?" Suiden asked, he and Laurel the only ones whose eyes weren't stretched wide open.

"His Grace alluded to it at dinner your first night here, as you negotiated for Cyhn, Your Highness." Wynl leaned forward and, reaching across the table, took my chin in his hand with a surprisingly gentle touch. I was startled into meeting his eyes but the Enchanter was more interested in examining my features than enthraling me. "Sixty-four degrees to an elfin king, a king to whom His Grace may be related. To whom *I* may be related—”

Wynl broke off as we became aware of a disturbance outside the common room, moving towards us. He dropped his hand and we all shifted to face the doorway just as the curtain parted and Harbormaster Lin stepped into the room. Her wings, which had been pressed together as she moved through the doorway, spread out behind her. Eyeing the butterflies resting in her hair and on her shoulders, I realized that Lord Commander Thadro's question of who'd want to be a butterfly had just been answered: faeries.

Two butterflies took off and headed my direction as Wynl sighed again. "This is becoming a habit, Harbormaster. Why aren't you out looking for the escaped vicar?"

"Because we found Commander Pellan first, honored Enchanter," Lin said. "Or rather, he and his City Watch have found my wardens and your guards. I just managed to escape.”

"What?" Wynl asked, frowning.

"A quorum of the High Council is assembled, and they've ordered His Grace the Fyrst held—”

Wynl stood up, knocking his chair over.

"—to answer charges of sheltering one human accused of the rape and murder of a fae—”

Groskin gasped and jerked as if he'd been hit.

"—of taking as Cyhn another human accused of practicing dark arts—"

"What?" I whispered as the wind rose to a shriek, banging on the windows.

"—of offering Hospitality to those who are guilty of running and slavery—"

"Why should we be left out?" Javes murmured.

"—all the while being aided and abetted by Laurel of the Black Hills clan, who not only has failed in his duty to the Council, but has turned reprobate, violating his Faena oaths." The harbormaster turned her head to watch as the butterflies landed on my shoulder, their weight connecting me to the earth. She then raised her violet eyes to mine. "The Council has sent Commander Pellan for all of you. He should be here any moment."

## Chapter Sixty-four

"Commander Pellan is coming to take us into custody?" Captain Suiden asked, as we quickly moved from the sleeping chamber to the outer room. Wyln looked at the faerie with flame-filled eyes.

"Yes, Your Highness," Lin said, watching the haunts surround me. "He was the one who delivered the Fyrst to the Council. As Laurel Faena has discovered, trust is a potent weapon." She didn't wait for a response, but nodded at the butterflies resting on my shoulder. "Two of my sisters, son of Lark and Two Trees. They followed the Magus' messenger bird and so found you in the Royal City."

"Why?" I managed to get out, still working on Pellan's betrayal of his Fyrst.

The fae's wings rippled with her shrug. "Dragoness Moraina isn't the only one who can do farseeing, and we were both curious and wanted to make up our own minds."

"Curious about what—" Javes broke off as the common room doors opened and Commander Pellan walked in. He stopped short when he saw us facing him, unsurprised at his appearance. Captains Suiden and Javes shifted to stand in front of us and were joined by the Enchanter, while Laurel and Groskin moved to my side.

"What are you doing here, nephew?" Wyln asked, his face calm but his eyes still ablaze.

Commander Pellan lifted a hand and several elves from the City Watch came through the open doors. He pulled a pouch from his belt, his face expressionless. "You all have been summoned to the High Council—"

"Before their appointed time," Laurel said, his tail lashing. "Without all the Council members."

"A special session has been convened—" Pellan began.

"Oh," Esclaur said. "I know all about those. Done in secret with no witnesses—I mean audience."

"—to address accusations of murder, slavery, the practicing of dark arts, and other charges," Pellan finished.

"Did you truly deliver His Grace over to them, Pellan?" Wynl asked, sounding as if he really wanted to know. The two castle guards joined him.

Pellan met his uncle's gaze for the first time since entering the room. "What else could I do? It's by the Council's orders."

"I see," Wynl said. "So you, who are the Fyrst's kin, felt no compunction in betraying him, while Harbormaster Lin, who isn't even of the same race, held true to her oaths."

Reminded of the diminutive faerie, I started to look around for her, but was distracted by the wind howling and slamming against the windows. I turned my head to them and the windows shook harder, the latches rattling, and I frowned.

"You think I betrayed my oaths?" The commander gave me a cold look, and the haunts pressed closer until they were a dense ring about me. "The Fyrst made a human Cyhn, a descendant of the same one who murdered our families and stole our birthrights. Do you remember, my mother's brother? The flames and soldiers and anguished cries as our blood was spilled? How no mercy was shown and even the smallest was slain?"

"Pellan was a child when we left Morendyll," Wynl said to the rest of us, "but he remembers our leaving very well—and the fact that his parents did not."

Pellan indicated the Watch standing behind him. "Not just my parents," he said, "but their mothers and fathers, sisters and brothers, uncle. Just as your wife and children. Even the Fyrst's daughter. His only child killed, and yet he takes a son of Iver Bloody-Hand into his household."

Wynl smiled at the commander. "Tell me, did you ask His Grace why he'd done what he had?"

"I didn't need to," Pellam said. "I heard the Faena—cousin to a human king he says looks elfin." He shrugged. "Her Grace Molyu is unable to bear more children, or perhaps the lack is with His Grace himself. So he seeks to continue his line with human filth." He indicated the Watch again. "You can see that the city is not too happy about it."

"So they'll be happy with you, kin-betrayer, as their new Fyrst?" Wynl asked.

Pellan gave the same gentle smile as his uncle. "Those who matter." He gave a signal and the Watch surrounded us, two going into the doyen's chamber. "You are summoned to stand before the Council," Pellam said once more.

The city guards returned to the common room, pushing the doyen before them.

"My lords, what's happening—" Doyen Allwyn broke off as a guard shoved him hard between his shoulders, causing the doyen to stumble against the table. He muffled a cry as one of the chairs caught him in the ribs.

"Any resistance will be severely dealt with," Pellam said.

Doyen Allwyn started to straighten but the second guard knocked him down on his hands and knees. The guard drew back his booted foot to kick him.

Hearing scabbards rattling, I glanced over my shoulder to see Javes, Esclaur and Suiden all holding their swords as they advanced on the Watch. Groskin stood with a knife in each hand. "Come on, boyo," Groskin murmured to the city guard facing him. "Please."

I pulled my own sword but the city guards paid no attention to me. The windows rattled again in a gust of wind, and I turned completely to face them, taking a couple of steps in their direction.

Laurel stalked over to the doyen, his rumbling growl echoing in my bones, while Wynl, bracketed by the two castle guards, moved towards Commander Pellan, his long fingers tracing fire in the air. "This will cease now—"

"Yes, it will," Pellan agreed, opening the pouch he'd been holding, and a glowing corpse green sphere with angry red and dull black streaks floated out. As it rose in the air, the haunts piled up behind Honor Ash and, ghostly eyes wide, they moved back—way back. Wynl skidded to a stop, all color draining from his face, while Laurel's growl stopped as if someone had shut a spigot.

The windows rattled once again and, still holding my sword, I slipped past city guards and haunts, and went around the embassy staff huddled together in front of the fireplace, all watching Pellan.

"My sister's son, her only child, what have you given yourself to?" the Enchanter whispered.

I reached the window and the wind gusted against the panes, the latch shaking. I lifted my hand.

"I wouldn't, human mageling," Commander Pellan said, and I spun around to find the sphere hanging in my face. I flinched back, the back of my head striking the fireplace mantel. "It's a slow, painful way to die."

"Sorcery," I said, not bothering to rub the lump on my head as I glared past the slowly spinning abomination at the commander.

Pellan shrugged again. "You shouldn't have been so strong in your aspect." He glanced at the rattling windows. "Even now the wind screams its frustration because it can't get to you."

"The Council," Laurel said, looking at the sphere. His paw came up in an automatic warding gesture, the rune bright. "They've blocked Rabbit."

I looked down at my own rune. It was dark.

"What is it?" Suiden asked, his eyes narrowed, still holding his sword in front of him.

"A glory sphere," Wynl said. "It's the corruption of pestilence and the grave." Pellan gave another faint smile, once more looking like his Enchanter uncle. "If the human had stayed with his master, he would've recognized the block sooner, perhaps to overcome it. Instead you and the cat decided to keep him for yourself and what you couldn't teach him has become his undoing." The smile died as he looked at the city guards. "Take their weapons."

The City Watch relieved us of our swords and knives (Groskin's had grown to eight), and Laurel's staff. "You have been declared reprobate, Laurel of the Black Hills," Pellan said, "and all your appointments and privileges are so forfeit."

"They've not that right," Laurel said, his claws unsheathed in his rage. He turned a snarling face on a guard as he reached for the staff.

The commander gestured and the sphere floated a hairs-breadth away from my nose, and I fought not to move or cross my eyes. "Your choice, cat," Pellan said. He shrugged once more at Laurel's growl as the staff was yanked from him. "You can take it up with the Council," he said as the guard passed Laurel's staff to him.

We were herded out of the common room, Pellán leaving two of the Watch to guard the embassy staff that was still clumped together in fright by the fireplace. The haunts tried to follow, but Pellán once more threatened me with the glory sphere and they moved back into the room. When we reached the stairs, I offered an arm to Doyen Allwyn who was limping badly, but our guards took exception. I felt the air change behind me and ducked just as one of the Watch swung at my head, catching the blow on my shoulder instead. I staggered and fetched up against the stone wall, just stopping myself before I fell down the stairs. My muscles tightened as I started to lunge back, but the bloody sphere was in front of me again.

"Be easy, Rabbit," Laurel said, moving so that he was between me and the guard. The guard raised his fist again and the cat looked over his shoulder past him to Pellán. "I am still of my clan, Commander. I would dearly love to see the High Council declare them null and void."

The Black Hills clan must've been formidable, because Pellán frowned. "No bruising," he said.

The guard hesitated, then allowed his arm to drop. Laurel dismissed him with a flick of an ear and helped Allwyn down the steps.

Commander Pellán led us down several flights of steps that grew narrower and darker the deeper we descended.

We finally reached a passageway that was just as narrow and dimly lit, and we were marched along it until we came to a series of doors. While there wasn't any dungeon stench, I expected to see chains and cages when the door was opened. Instead we were pushed into a bright, spacious room decorated in the same style as the rest of the keep. Several of the Watch followed us in and Pellán shut the door, turning the key in the lock. A moment later it shimmered as it was warded. Footsteps then sounded against the passageway's stone floor as the commander took Wyln and the castle guards away. Two of the Watch moved to a door on the opposite side of the room, but we paid them no attention as our own eyes were on Chancellor Berle and Archdoyen Obruesk sitting at a table by the lit fireplace, enjoying a repast of tea and dainties.

The archdoyen set his cup down and smiled at us all. "Grace to you, messirs." He met my eyes, nodding. "Lord Rabbit."

"Berle?" Lord Esclaur said as he started to walk towards the table, only to be thrust back by a city guard.

"I'd obey them, Esclaur," the chancellor said, dabbing her mouth with a napkin. "We don't want to cause a diplomatic incident."

Esclaur made a sound between a gasp and a growl. "You absolute, traitorous—" He broke off as the guard hit him hard, making him stagger.

The chancellor's russet fox eyes swept over us to rest on Laurel. "Well, it seems as though promises made are not going to be kept after all, are they, Ambassador? Even with all the will in the world."

Laurel rumbled, but no one dared to stop him (the Black Hills clan must've been extremely formidable). "The day's not over yet, Chancellor."

"Such optimism," Berle marveled, reaching for a small cake.

"Such treason," Javes drew back before Laurel could reply. The guard made up for his weakness with Laurel by grabbing Javes' arm and twisting it up his back, forcing him to his knees.



"Oh, no, not treason," Berle said, ignoring Javes' pain. "We don't want to overthrow the throne. To curtail it, though, yes, with perhaps a more balanced allotment of power so that the faults and failings of one person do not shake the kingdom to its foundations." She made a moue of distaste. "King Jusson had allowed such unsavory characters free rein! If only he had paid closer attention, we wouldn't have had lawlessness, rebellions and threatened wars with neighbors."

"That's very true, Chancellor," Obruesk said. He selected another cake. "However, if it weren't for His Majesty's inattention, there wouldn't be this chance for change."

"Change?" Suiden asked. He was another one the guards left alone.

"The High Council will agree to not pursue war if we make certain changes in the governing of Iversterre," Berle replied, "the first being a parliament through which all appointments and laws shall pass."

"Is this their idea or yours?" Suiden asked.

"Oh, I may have planted the notion." Berle took a sip of her tea. "But once I did, they immediately saw the advantage."

"Whose advantage?" Suiden asked. "Yours when you become grand vizier?"

"That's a Turalian office," Obruesk said, wiping his fingers with a napkin. "We would have a first minister."

"And Chancellor of Foreign Affairs is not so bad for the daughter of a mere governor of no particular House," Berle said. "I'm content where I am."

"I see" said Esclaur, shifting away from the guard nearest him. "Jusson a figurehead, while your cronies run the kingdom, and you play the power behind the throne—ah, council."

"Not just me, Esclaur," Berle said. "There are others too—a certain vice admiral among them—who were very concerned about Lord Gherat's influence not only over the king but also the Lord Admiral and other high officials."

Please no, I thought as I stared at the chancellor, not Uncle Havram.

"Whose influence is now broken, but you've done this anyway," Javes said.

"Because Jusson has no discernment whatsoever and allows his sudden whims and caprices to dictate who gets close to the throne," Berle said, looking at me. "So we will make it so that it doesn't matter what fancy His Majesty has next."

"You actually think the king will allow this?" Suiden asked. "You think the Great Houses will?"

"Or the patriarch and the Church?" Doyen Allwyn added.

"Ah, Pietr," Obruesk said, his deep voice filling the room. "Not a bad man, you understand, but weak and easily led." I blinked, trying to reconcile Obruesk's statement with the man I had met on Iversly's docks. I failed.

"Treating gently and even blessing an accused sorcerer." Obruesk shook his head. "Turning a blind eye to the persecution of those who dare oppose wickedness in high offices. Even allowing smuggled wood from the Border to be used as Staves of Office throughout the realm."

"Of course, your hands are clean," Esclaur said. "It is amazing how everyone from the patriarch on down had one of those spritewood staves—except you."

"Isn't it?" Obruesk said. "But that may be because I've accepted the call to purity and righteousness, no matter the cost. Unlike certain of our elders." He gave Doyen Allwyn an earnest look. "Perhaps it is time for the patriarch to step down so that the Church may recover under strong leadership."

"Such as yours?" Groskin asked, his voice a rumbling growl.

Obruesk smiled. "Among others."

"Not Uncle Orso!"

Obruesk merely smiled again as he picked up a peach and bit into it.

"Most times it's the simplest of sins that will snare a person, gracious people," Doyen Allwyn said. "Behold Covetousness, coupled with Unchecked Ambition."

"They and Teram Flavan'son," Laurel said, "have suckled at the same teat."

"Indeed, yes. They're all reavers and they will all tear the kingdom apart," Esclaur said, his eyes still fixed on the chancellor.

"Oh, no, not us," Berle said. "It is the king who has brought us to threatened annihilation. It is our efforts that will save us and create a stronger kingdom."

"Of course," Suiden said. "And your wants and desires have nothing to do with it."

"I was told to obtain peace," Berle said, her voice light. "I did. This is its price. As for the king and Great Houses—" She shrugged just as lightly. "It's all in the presentation, messirs. 'Yield, or die in a war you can't win and thereby have everything you hold dear destroyed' usually works."

I lowered my head to stare at the floor, as a vision of Iversterre ravaged from warfare both with the Border and with itself rose before me, and I wondered if the chancellor was naive in her estimation of the Great Lords' responses and so a natural fool, or willfully blind to how they would fight for their people and land, and therefore a deliberate one.

The wind picked up again, shrieking and slamming the panes, causing everyone in the room to look at the windows, and a couple of the guards near them edged away. In the relative quiet inside the room, it dawned on me that I couldn't feel the butterflies anymore, and glanced at my shoulder. They weren't there. I looked around the room for Harbormaster Lin. She wasn't there either. I was wondering if Pellan had taken her with him when the door to the hallway opened and I heard a clinking noise. I jerked my head around to stare at a guard carrying chains and shackles heading my way.

"Ah." There was a rustle as Chancellor Berle shifted in her chair. "As in any negotiation, there is give and take, and I'm afraid you, Lord Rabbit, have just been taken."

Obruesk laughed as I took a step back.

"But then, you are a runaway apprentice and, regardless of any promises made or degrees to dead and distant kings, should be returned to your master." I retreated another step and a guard struck my lower back; pain radiated down my legs. He hit me again, and I fell to the floor with a deep groan, rolling away from a well-aimed boot. The sphere swooped to hover in my face and I continued rolling, terror lending me strength to rip my tabard at the seams. As the sounds of scuffles, shouts and Laurel's deep growl

filled the room, I came up on my knees and flung the tabard over the abomination, figuring that it could corrupt my ruined clothes all it wanted. Gripping the ends of my tabard with one hand, I started to rise, as the wind shrieked and crashed against the windows—only to have it go quiet inside the room.

"Oh, hell," Groskin said into the sudden stillness, and I looked up to see Doyen Allwyn on the floor, a guard's boot in his back. The guard bent forward and gripped the doyen's hair, lifting his head. Blood trickled from Allwyn's mouth as the guard stretched his neck, placing a knife just under his ear, and the doyen's eyes met mine, his hot and ashamed that he'd been unable to fight harder.

Groskin and Suiden lowered the chairs they had grabbed and Laurel dropped his paw. Esclair was against the wall, his arm at a strange angle, and Javes stood in front of him, one eye swelling shut. Esclair allowed his head to drop and Javes closed his other eye as I let the tabard go and was hauled to my feet.

I stood unresisting as guards attached manacles to my wrists and, pulling off my boots and stockings, placed fetters on my ankles, the weight of them cutting into my skin. One guard snatched the covenant feather off my braid and dropped it on the floor, grinding it under his boot heel. He then fastened an iron collar around my neck, the bolts dropping into their holes with loud clanks, and Chancellor Berle gave me her wry smile as she drank her tea.

The door opened once more and the chancellor stood. "Is the Council ready, Lord Commander?"

"Yes," Pellan said, stepping into the room. He looked over at the elfin guard holding the knife to Doyen Allwyn's throat.

"The human resisted when the chains were brought in, Commander Eorl Pellan," the guard said.

Pellan nodded and walked across the room to the other door. "Bring them." As the guards pushed us into the next room I caught a pattern in the floor and turned my head. The Witness Circle. I glanced around and discovered that we had entered the main audience hall through a side chamber. Pellan signaled us to stop so that we faced a long table on a platform, opposite to the Fyrst's throne. And at the table, some sitting on chairs and some not, was the High Council. Or at least a portion of it.

Chancellor Berle swept to the front and bowed, making it clear that she was separate from us. "Gracious lords—" she began.

"If you please, Chancellor," said an elf who was seated at the middle of the table. Ribbons woven into his pale blond hair indicated that he was a northern clan chieftain. I stared, trying to see if I knew him, but the sphere, apparently taking exception to my interest in the Council, floated in front of my face, and I lowered my head.

"There are a few things we must take care of before we can start," the elf said, and I heard Laurel beside me growl. "Are you ready, Kareste?"

My head shot up; all of a sudden I didn't care about evil spheres. Magus Kareste, though not a Council member, sat at me end of the table. He saw my look and gave me a wintry smile, laying his hand on something before him. I blinked as I recognized Laurel's staff, and Kareste's smile widened a bit before he turned to the elf. "Yes, I'm ready, Ilenaewyn."

At Ilenaewyn's nod, the hall's main doors opened and Kareste stood, picking up Laurel's staff, raising both it and his free hand. Laurel's growl exploded into a bellow, and a guard, emboldened by the Council's presence, backhanded him, knocking the cat to the floor. I turned around, my chains clanking, and my mouth gaped.

The haunts were coming into the hall but instead of their usual flowing, pouring and running, it was a

halting progress as they fought each step they took. Honor's arms were locked to her side and her head thrown back as she strained against whatever was pulling her into the room; Basel's antlers were lowered as he too was dragged in stiff-legged, the unicorn, the leopard, and all the rest bucking, twisting, resisting.

I shifted so I could also see the Magus, and his ice shard eyes were glittering as he began to move Laurel's staff in a complicated pattern, murmuring. He brought the staff sharply down and there was an unbearable moment when the haunts distorted, their mouths stretched open in silent, prolonged screams. Then they were gone.

"No," I said, ignoring both the metallic taste in my mouth and the sphere that floated back in front of me, splitting my view of the Magus.

Kareste dropped the staff onto the table with a thunk before he sat down. "A summoning, a binding, a banishing. Easy enough to do with ghosts—if one's aspect is earth." He gave another wintry smile. "Mine is not, but fortunately I do have a staff that once belonged to one whose aspect is."

"Vile necromancer!" Laurel roared. He staggered to his feet. "You have twice murdered them!" His rune was white hot, light radiating from it as he began to raise his paw at the Magus. "By the Lady Gaia I pronounce you cursed—"

The guard hit him again, this time in the stomach, and Laurel bent over, gasping.

Kareste looked at Laurel as if the cat were horse droppings he'd just stepped in, then turned to the northern elf. "I'm finished, Ilenaewyn."

"Very good," Ilenaewyn said. He looked at Pellan. "Bring in the first group."

Pellan bowed, signaled the guards at one of two doors, and the Fyrst, Molyu and Wynl were escorted into the hall. Molyu turned her head to take in our battered group, and I heard Berle's swift intake of breath at her blazing gold eyes—so much like Jusson's.

The guards led them to the dais and Ilenaewyn leaned forward in his seat, looking at them. "A binding has been placed on Her Grace Molyu. The High Council will have your paroles for good behavior, or she will bear our displeasure." He waited for a moment, but the trio remained mute, their own faces blank as they stared back, and he nodded at the Magus. "Go ahead." Kareste gestured at Molyu, and she stiffened, her mouth flattening out in pain.

Javes cast a side glance at the chancellor. "Your new allies, Berle," he murmured.

The chancellor hunched a shoulder. "Can't have eggs for breakfast without breaking a few."

"Your parole, Loran, Wynl," Ilenaewyn said. He waited a moment, then signaled Kareste again, and Her Grace gave a grunt, her face drawing. A spot of blood appeared at the corner of her eye, dark red.

"I give my parole," Loran said, and Kareste started to lower his hand.

"No," Ilenaewyn said. He looked at Wynl. "You too, Enchanter."

Wynl said nothing, and Ilenaewyn signaled once more. Kareste raised his hand again, making a fist, and Her Grace jerked and gave another grunt, the blood welling up and spilling over.

"I give my parole," Wynl said, and Kareste lowered his hand. The tension abruptly left Her Grace's body, but Her eyes remained fixed on Ilenaewyn as a single drop of blood coursed down her face.

"Good," Ilenaewyn said. "Take them to the other prisoners."

The guard guided the Fyrst, Her Grace, and the Enchanter over to where we stood. As they reached me, they stopped, ignoring the guard's efforts to move them behind us. Loran turned and faced the High Council, his face calm as if he weren't standing dispossessed in his own hall, having just watched his wife being tortured. Molyu, however, gave me a searching look, taking in the glory sphere and the chains, while Wyn looked at Pellan, his face still blank but his eyes flame filled. The commander frowned and started to move toward them.

"Let them be, Pellan," Ilenaewyn said, and the commander stopped. "They're impotent." Dismissing us, he turned his head to look down one side of the table and then the other. "Are we ready?"

The Council members made various noises of assent.

"Good." Denaewyn looked back at Pellan. "Bring them in."

Pellan signaled once more, the other guarded chamber door opened, and Lord Gherat ibn Dru and Ambassador Sro Kenalt walked in. Archdoyen Obruesk smiled and gave a slight bow to Chancellor Berle—before he went to join them at the front of the dais.

Heedless of the iron collar, I threw my head back and howled with laughter. "Fools!" I cried. "Fools, fools, and three times fools!" A guard hit me again in my lower back, and I doubled sideways in pain, still laughing as tears rolled down my face.

## Chapter Sixty-five

It was Chancellor Berle's turn to stand with her mouth hanging open as she stared at Gherat, Obruesk and Kenalt arranging themselves in front of the High Council, making it clear that they were invited guests.

"I say, Berle." Javes had managed to keep his quiz glass and now raised it to his good eye. "I thought you said that you were the only turncoat here."

"You're looking a little worse for wear, Javes," Gherat said from where he stood, smiling. "Not quite your natty self." He looked at Lord Esclaur and shook his head. "You also look beat, Esclaur. Rough day?"

"What's—" The chancellor stopped and tried again; her voice rasped. "My lords, what's happening here?"

"Isn't it obvious, Berle?" Esclaur lisped around his split and bleeding lip. Even though one arm was dangling useless, he used the other to raise his own quiz glass at the trio by the council table. "You've been duped, indeed yes."

Ilenaewyn looked up from where he and the rest of the Council were conferring. "What's happening, Chancellor, is an investigation into charges that those close to Jusson of Iversterre, with his knowledge and approval, engaged in the murder and enslaving of the People."

"But I—" Berle stopped, swallowed, and tried again. "I told you about them, about how the king didn't know."

"So you did," a gnome Council member said, stroking his beard. "We don't believe you."

Gherat gave a genial smile.

"Vicar Obruesk and Gherat Dru'son have both testified to the Council how the human king encouraged the 'poaching' for sport and profit," a sprite wearing water lilies and very little else said. She turned her gaze on me. "As they have also testified about his encouragement of Rabbit Two Trees'son's sorceries."

"A sorcerer," Kenalt said, sounding shocked. He turned his gaze on Suiden. "My cousin, what have you done? You had so much, and now look at you. All because of a concubine. If only you had admitted your fault to the amir and begged his forgiveness!" He shook his head, his beaded braids clacking. "But now! Friend of dark wizards and others of ill intent. And smuggling! When you were once heir to the empire."

Suiden said nothing, his green eyes fixed on his cousin.

Kenalt turned to the Council and bowed, hands and arms waving. "Sroene, I am exceedingly sorry to report that Prince Suiden, through rascally associates, sold goods and slaves stolen from the Border in our markets. This has been stopped and the amir is hunting down the miscreants to visit his wrath upon them."

"Thank you, Ambassador Sro Kenalt," Ilenaewyn said. "It is clear that the human kingdom is once again doing violence against us with such brutality that the Council has no recourse but to declare war—"

"No!" Berle clenched her fists. "You cannot—"

"Someone shut her up," Ilenaewyn said. "She wearies me."

A guard struck Chancellor Berle across her face and she jerked, as much from startlement as from pain. Suiden moved to stand in front of her, and the guard drew back his fist.

"Don't hit him," Ilenaewyn said. "Despite Sro Kenalt's intimations, the Amir of Tural hasn't disinherited the prince and I'm sure the amir will be glad to get his heir back reasonably whole." He ignored Kenalt's sudden scowl as he turned his head to look at me. "Just as Kareste is glad to have his apprentice returned."

The wind gave a sudden howl, shaking the windows hard and long.

"Hear how the wind cries for him," a sylph said, her voice like the rustling of leaves in a summer breeze. The air elemental looked at me with large sky blue eyes full of scudding clouds, and I realized who'd blocked me. "Are you sure this is wise?"

"What do you mean?" the water sprite asked.

"Giving the human to the Magus," the sylph replied. "He managed to get away once."

"I also have reservations," a fire Drake hissed. "It's taken a glory sphere, chains, and an elemental to contain him." He rustled his leathery wings. "But where else can we put him?"

"Nowhere," a gossamer-winged faerie said. She also turned her moss green eyes on me. "It's either that or kill him."

"Don't worry, honored folk," Kareste said. "This time Rabbit will be bound tight enough so that he'll stay put." He gave his wintry smile again. "The sphere alone will ensure his obedience."

Ilenaewyn nodded again and settled back into his chair, looking at Berle. "We will send you back to your

king with our declaration of war, Chancellor.”

Chancellor Berle, her hand to her cheek, whispered, "But the parliament—”

Ilenaewyn ignored her, turning his attention to us. "Bring the accused forward to stand before the Council." He waited until the guards prodded, shoved and pushed us into position before the dais. "The Council will hear what you have to say in your defense, before we render judgment.”

"Against what charges?" the Fyrst said. "Have they been published?"

Ilenaewyn smiled and held out his hand, and the gnome handed him a scroll. "These charges, Loran, given into Pellan's hand and published by him. As he will attest.”

"Including the human vicar's accusations?" the Fyrst asked. "He could have made them only a short while ago, as he has just escaped the ship's brig. Have you had time to write his charges out and publish them also? Will Pellan attest to that?"

Ilenaewyn's smile disappeared as he gave the Fyrst an annoyed glare. He then turned to Pellan. "Bring us paper and writing implements."

Pellan nodded and sent a guard scurrying. Ilenaewyn beckoned Obruesk to the table, Gherat and Kenalt following, and we were once more shuffled off to the side.

"Why are they bothering?" Esclaur said. "They're going to kill us anyway. Might as well get it over with, and pox rot all this sodding nonsense.”

I supposed Esclaur's posturing came of hanging about with royalty to whom dying valiantly was, at least in bards' songs, better than victory. But I didn't want multiversed eddas of how I died a hero's glorious death. I didn't even want a refrain. I wanted to live, and live free of the Magus. The glory sphere kept interfering with my view of the Council, but I caught glimpses of Kareste. While he wasn't outright gloating, he oozed a terrifying subtle satisfaction, reminding me of a spider in its web anticipating a leisurely meal of a particularly plump and juicy fly.

But more than the thought of being back in the Magus' hands, more than the betrayal by Berle, more than the looming death of my friends and war with the Border, the memory of Honor Ash, Basel, and the rest of the haunts struggling as they were compelled by the Magus' summoning, and their look of terror and agonizing silent screams as they were banished, kept prying at the edges of my mind. Anger crept up on me, a knot in my chest. I took a deep breath trying to ease it—and got a faint smell of sweet grass and rich earth. I shot a glance to Laurel, but he stood staring at the Council, his tail lashing back and forth.

"They must follow the form, even if the substance is gutted, Esclaur Dhawn'son," Wyln said, "so that they'll be blameless when the true session begins and they announce that we've been executed for crimes against the People."

I looked over at the council table, trying to see if the scent was coming from those who had the earth aspect, but the damn sphere floated in my face and I lowered my head, only to get another whiff of green life. I lowered my head further and inhaled, filling my lungs. It was coming from where I stood.

"But why?" Berle asked, her hushed voice anguished, her hand still on her bruised cheek. "Is it because of the smuggling?" Her fox eyes were wide on Gherat. "Do they truly believe that I lied? That Dru is innocent?"

"No, Chancellor," the Fyrst said. "You had secret meetings with certain Council members, yes? Before they officially arrived?"

Berle's unbruised cheek turned red. "Lord Pellan took me to them, Your Grace," she admitted.

"And they asked you not to reveal to me that Dru was involved in the running?" the Fyrst continued.

"Yes, Your Grace. They said if it were to get out, it would undermine any chance for peace."

"No, it would've undermined them." The Fyrst turned to look at the Council. "They know exactly who was felling and running and where it all was going, because they initiated it."

"Their own people?" Javes asked, his uninjured eye wide as he looked at the Fyrst. "Slaughtered and enslaved and sold to us! What on earth for?"

"It's a spur, Javes Merchant's son," Molyu said. She shifted her stance so that she partially blocked my view of the Council—and theirs of me. "They will blame your king, thereby roweling the People with such rage and grief that this time when they go to war they won't stop until the entire human kingdom is swept into the sea."

I inhaled again, feeling intoxicated.

"If you continue chattering, I will nail Molyu to the hall doors," Ilenaewyn said, raising his head from speaking with the archdoyen.

"You will harm the surety for our parole though we've not broken it?" the Fyrst asked. "That's not wise."

"And then I will kill the vicar and rub your faces in his blood," Ilenaewyn snapped, goaded. A guard placed his knife once more against Doyen Allwyn's neck.

"Is that supposed to be a threat?" Wynl asked, sounding interested.

"Not to me," Allwyn said, his voice calm. "My soul is prepared to meet my God." He looked at Obruesk. "Is yours, Your Reverence?"

"Perhaps a little flaming will convince them to remain quiet," the fire Drake suggested before the archdoyen could respond.

"Flame me, Senass?" Wynl asked, just as interested. He shifted to look at the guards around him and, parole or no, they eased back.

"Perhaps we just should kill them anyway," the faerie said. "We have the prince and the apprentice. We don't need anyone else." She smiled, showing pointed, sharp teeth. "How about an escape attempt? Those can be lethal."

I inhaled again, the fragrance of the earth suffusing me, and I was once more behind a plow on my parents' farm. The sun was warm on my back as I followed the horse, the fertile loam a song of spring and new beginnings. I stumbled and, looking down, I saw a branch reaching up from the ground towards me, a single ripe fruit hanging from it. My hand yearned towards the fruit's smooth fullness and I slid my fingers around it, gently pulling. As I did, the branch came up also and, catching it in my other hand, I saw it was really a staff of ash wood—

"Where did he get that?" Ilenaewyn shouted.

My head snapped up to see the glory sphere flying at me. I knocked it away with the staff, my chains rattling.

"Stop him!" Kareste jumped up, knocking over his chair.



Laurel roared, his claws raking, as he fought to get to the table and his own staff. Kareste snatched it up and started backing away, his free hand weaving, his fingers crooked as he muttered. The fire Drake flamed at the cat, and Laurel flung up a paw, deflecting it. The water sprite shrieked as the fire stream hit the table and she cupped her hands, pouring water over the flames.

The Council members tipped the charred and wet table over on its side, some sheltering behind it while others leapt over it to join the fray, those with weapons drawing them. The fire Drake inhaled to flame again, but staggered back, his eyes wide. He quickly turned around to see Wyln. The dark elf Enchanter gently smiled, tracing fire in the air as he moved to face the winged fire serpent.

The glory sphere spun back, and I knocked it the other way. The windows started to shake as the wind rose again to a shrieking howl. The sylph rose over the melee and flew at me, her eyes full of jagged lightning. I raised my staff and the elemental slammed against the wall.

"He has taken a human as Cyhn. A descendant of the accursed Iver." Pellan strode to the front of the guards, rallying them against their Fyrst. He drew his sword, and stood facing his uncle. "We will replace his polluted line with one that's pure."

"Whose? Yours?" The Fyrst held up his hand and the great sword of his lineage shimmered on the wall. In the next blink it was in his hand and he brought it before him. "No, Pellan. I think not." The glory sphere circled again and I swatted it away again. The smell of sweet grass and loam was strong, and I looked at my hand to see an earth sphere there.

Suiden and Javes ran towards the High Council and Gherat came against them, his sword drawn. Javes pulled the lens off his quiz glass, revealing a thin dagger. He lunged forward, stabbing Gherat's arm, and Gherat dropped his sword in surprise. Suiden scooped it up without breaking stride, just in time to meet Kenalt and Ilenaewyn, and the clash of their swords added to the tumult in the hall. Groskin had slipped by and jumped, knocking down the guard with the knife on Allwyn's throat. The other guards converged on them as they rolled and fought on the floor. Esclaur grabbed Berle, his own quiz glass knife in his hand, and he dragged her towards the dais, where Obruesk was hunkered down out of the way of swords and magic.

I absently hit the glory sphere away once more, staring down into the earth sphere as it pulsed with the promise of life. I opened my hand and it rose—

"NO!" Whatever Kareste had worked up he flung at me, a zigzagging streak flashing across the hall to where I stood, folk diving to the left, right and down as it went by, their weapons clattering on the marble floor.

"Rabbit, get down!" Laurel bellowed.

"Move, Two Trees'son!" Wyln shouted.

The wind shrieked and the entire keep shook.

Watching the earth sphere rise, I brought my staff up and deflected the Magus' working. It struck a window, shattering the glass, and the wind became still.

The earth sphere had apparently reached as high as it could go as it now floated down, spinning slowly. It touched the floor and was gone.

There was silence; then Ilenaewyn laughed as he rose from the floor, dusting himself off. "Well, that was a bust." The other Council members laughed with him as they all gave me derisive looks, some peeping

over the table's edge. "It appears that this human is overrated," the elf said. "I know the rest of the race is." He picked up his dropped sword and turned to face an obsidian dragon, its outspread wings shot with gold. He dropped his sword again, and Suiden caught it in one taloned hand while he held Kenalt in the other. The dragon prince showed an excellent set of teeth, flames licking out of his muzzle, and Ilenaewyn backed away into a corner. With a sweep of his arm, the captain herded the rest of the Council members there to cower with the northern elf.

I pulled the iron manacles off, dropping them on the floor, and kicked off the fetters. The iron collar followed, falling on the chains and shackles with a clank. I looked up, expecting to see the hall full of wind and fury, but it was silent. I glanced into my hand; the rune remained dark.

"Your air aspect is blocked, Two Trees'son," Molyu said. She gave my arm a tentative touch.

Oh, yeah. I frowned and looked around.

Laurel had reached the dais and now faced the Magus, both with hand and paw aimed at each other—at a standoff. Wyln also stood with his hand raised, a tracery of fire around him and the firedrake. A gray wolf, one eye swollen shut, paced in front of Gherat, growling as the Lord of Dru shifted, trying to find a way around him to the dagger on the floor. In the shadow of the platform were two sets of gleaming eyes, one snow wolf blue, the other russet fox brown. Obruesk edged towards Esclaur's own dropped knife and the snow wolf turned his muzzle full of teeth on him. The archdoyen backed away again.

I looked the other way and saw a black panther crouched in front of Allwyn, his golden eyes fixed on the city guards, not moving except for the tip of his tail. Allwyn stood behind the cat, holding a dropped sword. Beyond them was the Witness Circle, in front of the Fyrst's throne. As I stepped over the chains and ran towards it, the glory sphere came after me, and I batted it away. My bare feet slapped against me marble floor and, skidding to a stop, I stepped into the Circle, placing a foot on each weighing pan.

But the runes remained dark.

"You allow this presumption?" Pellan asked, his light voice echoing in the hall. "This intrusion?" The city guards who had fallen back from the Fyrst's great sword hissed and pulled their own swords, and some broke off to head my way. Laurel shot them a glance and they paused. The Magus, taking advantage of the Faena's distraction, began to move his hand again, muttering.

I reached for the wind but, feeling resistance, turned to look at the sylph still plastered against the wall. Standing in the rune circle, I could now see a thin thread leading from her to a dense weaving around and over me, like cloth. Leaning the staff in the crook of my arm, I took the weaving in both my hands and pulled.

"No!" Kareste flung his hand out again.

There was a ripping sound and the sylph screamed, convulsing. My ears popped and I was encircled with white light as the runes blazed, painting their symbols on the high ceiling in light. I raised my hand, the truth rune on my palm as bright as the sun, and the Magus' working was knocked into the floor, the marble stone crackling and breaking.

"Sixty-four lines to an elfin king," the Fyrst said.

"Miscegenation," Pellan said. "An unholy mixing with a lesser race."

There was a booming, rushing sound as the wind poured into the hall and swirled around me, howling its rage and frustration at being blocked. My body started to resonate, rising from the floor, but Molyu once more placed a tentative hand on my arm. Recalled to myself, I looked at her and, seeing pale threads that

were wrapped around her, frowned. I gently brushed them off and she smiled.

"No, my sister's son," Wyln said as he watched the fire-drake. The serpent wove, trying to find a way past Wyln's defenses, and Wyln snapped fire at him. "Not a misbreeding, but a breeding true." There was a flash where the Magus' working had cracked the floor. I glanced at it, but it was gone.

"Yes," Laurel rumbled. "Lady Gaia herself is calling out, and the human kingdom has answered, fiat! They have become fae and their king elfin, dark and gold."

"The cat blasphemes—" Pellan began.

"Dark and gold," the Fyrst repeated. "My daughter was not lost when Morendyll fell, and now her blood runs through the Royal House of Iver." Molyu gently cupped my chin with her hand as Wyln had done earlier, staring into my face.

"One of my lineage sits on the throne of the human kingdom," His Grace said, "and Two Trees'son is his close cousin and so of my line too."

"Misbegotten," Pellan said. He began to move, raising his sword. "An obscene offense." He lunged at his uncle.

With minimal movement, the Fyrst parried, and Pellan disengaged, circling around His Grace. Loran tracked him, waiting, at ease. "Obscene? Again, I think not. He has made the rune circle alive and full of light, as he has also done in Morendyll. As you have never done, Pellan." The Fyrst's lips pulled back, showing his teeth in a snarl, even as his voice continued calm and even. "He is mine as Jusson Iver'son is mine, and cursed be anyone who takes either one from me."

"The curse will be yours, Fyrst and Cyhn to obscenities."

Pellan lunged again, hoping to take the Fyrst by surprise, but Loran was waiting for him, and sword met sword in a clangor that filled the hall. I watched for a few moments, noting that the centuries' difference in experience was telling as the commander, though good, was outclassed by his uncle. Apparently a city guard thought the same and crept up to the Fyrst's unarmored back, a knife in his hand. I looked closer. Damn it all, it was my boot knife. The wind murmured in outrage and the guard was frozen midstep. So were the commander and His Grace.

"Release me," the Fyrst said, his eyes annoyed. Freed, he took his great sword and, ignoring his nephew and the would-be assassin, stalked over to where Illenaewyn and the rest of the Council were penned by Suiden. I tried to follow, but was buzzed by the glory sphere as soon as I stepped out of the circle. Tired of it, I raised my staff.

"No, Two Trees'son, you do not want to knock that who knows where," Wyln said from where he still faced the fire-drake. "Contain it, so that it may be safely disposed of later." The air solidified around the corpse green ball and it too froze where it hung.

"Very good," Wyln said. "Now, a little help here, please."

There was a very brief scramble by Council members attempting to escape (they survived), but a moment later they, the Magus, the city guards, Obruesk and Gherat, were all held by a solid mass of air, with only enough give so those who needed to could breathe. Laurel made a couple of passes with his paw over Karesta, and I could see the white lines of his binding. Snatching his staff back, Laurel yowled something at the Magus, and Wyln looked startled, his eyes rounding. The Faena then turned away with a flick of his ear and tail and jumped off the dais to walk over to me, his own eyes wondering.

"You have worked translations, even though your aspect is air." He looked at the staff I held, gently touching it. "And you were Gifted with a staff—"

He looked back into my face. "It was you in the embassy in Iversly, no? You changed everyone into fae and fantastic beasts."

"Honored Laurel," Groskin growled, "the doyen's hurt bad."

The Faena turned and hurried to where Doyen Allwyn had folded in on himself, collapsing to the floor. Groskin watched for a moment, then padded over to stare at Arch-doyen Obruesk, frozen in a crouch behind the High Council's platform. The archdoyen moaned in terror.

"Tell me, Illenaewyn, why I shouldn't remove your head right now," the Fyrst said, standing eye to eye with the northern elf.

"He cannot, Your Grace," Wyln said as he came to stand next to the Fyrst, fire sparking from his hands.

"Yes." The Fyrst backed up and raised his great sword, ready to dispense elfin justice. Ilenaewyn's eyes rolled up to watch the blade ascend.

"No, my husband," Molyu said, a thin line of dried blood on her face. "You have given your parole. Will you now violate it?"

"A parole obtained through torture, my sister," Wyln said. "Yours."

"Most are given that way, my brother." Molyu gave the same gentle smile as her brother. "We will bring the parole, Ilenaewyn, and the rest before the true Council to judge, and so our honor remains."

The Fyrst hesitated, then lowered his sword, and Ilenaewyn closed his eyes.

"Ah, Your Grace, it's easier you are than I, then," Harbormaster Lin said from the open doors, butterflies fluttering about her. "As I would be after having his head on a stick." Behind her were the castle guard, officials, and servants, all pretty much glowering at both Pellan and the Watch as they spilled around her to fill the room.

"Where had you gone, honored harbormaster?" I asked as two butterflies once again lit on my shoulder.

"For some reason the commander and his Watch didn't seem to see me or my sisters, so we slipped away to find the keep's guards and servants," Lin replied. "But the doors were warded and it took a while for us to get through." She looked around and found the faerie council member frozen in midflight, and a smile flashed across her face.

"Sister," the faerie said. "See how the human has treated us. Please—"

Lin's smile broadened, showing her own pointed teeth, and I suddenly felt nervous about the butterflies on my shoulder. "I told you, Ro, did I not? Yet you wouldn't listen." Lin shrugged, rippling her wings.

"Now your consequences are upon you."

I went over to Suiden, who sat on his haunches as he held Kenalt before him, the Turalian ambassador dangling from two talons gripping his silk jacket. In the captain's other hand was a sigil, and he stared down at it. He saw my interest and lowered the sigil so that I could see it better. "A device for calling storms, with my own insignia worked into it."

I peered closer. "Your own insignia, sir?" It looked like a dragon in flight. I gave a wide-eyed glance

back up at Suiden.

The dragon rumbled, still staring at the device. "I am prince and heir, Lieutenant. This guaranteed that the djinn would find me—and anyone else with me." He looked at his cousin. "You must've paid some wizard a pretty drackel for this, Kenalt."

Kenalt said nothing.

"Why, cousin?"

"Another simple sin, sir," I said when Kenalt remained silent. "Envy. As you said, you are prince and the amir's heir, and he's not."

Laurel rumbled in agreement as he helped Allwyn sit up. "Folk wanting what's not theirs, taking what they shouldn't even touch." Kenalt stayed in sullen silence and Suiden's sides heaved in a sigh. He spared a glance as Javes and then Esclaur on three legs, with Berle scurrying behind, joined him. The russet fox slipped in front of the dragon prince and huddled down, trembling. Suddenly small and furry, she must've figured he was the lesser of all the evils in the room.

Loran had turned away from Ilenaewyn and now stood mm looking into his wife's face, his hand under her chin. His thumb traced the line of blood. "Art thou well, wife?"

Molyu curled her fingers around his hand. "Yes, husband."

"Good." Loran released her chin, but intertwined his own fingers with hers, holding her close to his side. He turned to look at the commander, still frozen with his sword raised. "I suppose you'll also ask me not to touch Pellan."

"My sister's only son, husband," Molyu said.

"Will you argue for the Magus?" Wynl asked. "He's not Council nor kindred."

"I would ask for him, honored folk," Laurel said from where he was still tending Allwyn's cuts and bruises, the castle healer now helping. "He has dishonored the Lady, my staff, and the tree who gave it to me."

"There must be someone we can wreak havoc on," Wynl said, his fingers twitching.

"Gherat," Javes offered.

"There's Obruesk," Esclaur suggested, and Doyen Allwyn, ignoring Laurel's efforts, made a sound of agreement.

Suiden held Kenalt, arms and legs dangling, towards the Enchanter, while Chancellor Berle, casting a nervous glance towards the dragon above her, met my gaze and ducked down again.

The Fyrst touched his wife's face once more, then walked to his throne dais, climbed the steps, and sat. Laying his sword across his knees, he looked out over the hall. "Where's my scribe?" The same clerk who recorded my Cyhn separated from the mob of castle servants, petty officials, and guards who were busy disarming and taking prisoners, and hurried to His Grace.

"Record in the Acta that I declare Rabbit, son of Lark and Two Trees, and Jusson of the House of Iver to be of my line—"

Ilenaewyn made a sound of rage.

"—their lineages to be my lineage, their oaths to be my oaths, their debts I shall owe, what's owed them I shall collect, those they love, I love, those they hate I set my face against. Fiat."

"Betrayer of your own kind," Pellán said, struggling against his bonds of air.

"No, he's not," Suiden said, distracted from Kenalt. "You have no idea what your Fyrst has done, do you? Ilenaewyn does." The dragon turned his head to consider the northern elf. "Any House with pretensions has at least one line to Iver. The entire kingdom is descended from the Fyrst. Or at least the ruling class is."

"But I have sixteen lines," Esclaur began. "Even Gherat has ten—" His voice trailed off and his ears laid back as he stared up at the Fyrst. He gave a small whine.

"But the lines are to Iver," Berle said, daring to sit up, "and he's not related to the Fyrst."

"Iver didn't beget children alone." Suiden looked down at Berle and she shrank back into herself.

"Marrying the heir, willing or not, is a time-honored way of securing a throne. By the laws of primogeniture, both human and elfin, Iversterre has been passed down through the Fyrst's heirs."

Inheritance and landlaw, and the right of the firstborn to continue in the parent's stead. I stared at the father of our kingdom and my somewhat remote grandda, who looked back at me with intent eyes. I then felt a touch on my arm and met Her Grace's golden gaze.

"And as the Fyrst is not dead," Suiden continued, "he can say that the inheritance is not yet his heirs' and Iversterre is his. All of it." Ilenaewyn made another sound of rage, his face full of fury.

"No, not the Fyrst's," Wylín corrected. "To his line, which is in elf law a little different, though just as binding." He gave the fair and northern Ilenaewyn his gentle smile. "Which must stick in the craw of others who want the human kingdom for themselves, isn't that so, Ilenaewyn?"

"A line of half-breed mongrels born of rape and bastardy," Pellán said before Ilenaewyn could respond. Pellán's eyes shifted to the fair northern elf. "At least the northern clans have kept their lines pure."

At that moment, First Lieutenant Falkin ran through the open double doors into the audience hall. His pale blond hair shone in the light coming through the broken window and his slanted dark gray eyes set above high cheekbones in his elf-narrow face were rather round as he skidded to a stop.

I smiled, showing all my teeth. "Oh, really, Eorl Pellán? You think?"

## Chapter Sixty-six

"I'm looking for Vice Admiral Havram ..." Falkin's voice I trailed off as his eyes skittered over the hall, lighting on me as I stood once more in the middle of my own personal windstorm with butterflies fluttering about. "Rabbit?" He then looked past me and goggled. "Lord Gherat?" He caught movement and turned to see Ambassador Sro Kenalt dangling from Suiden's claws. Falkin's lips moved but nothing came out.

"The lieutenant's northern fairness was pointed out by the Faena, my sister's son," Wylín said into Pellán's stunned silence.

"Outraged ambition has a way of selecting what one sees and hears, Wylín," the Fyrst said, his voice dry.

Falkin ignored the byplay as he studied the audience hall and its inhabitants. His eyes rounded further as he noted the frozen High Council and the great sword resting across the Fyrst's knees. "What—what has happened?"

His Grace propped his chin on his fist and answered for me. "A cabal, Lieutenant, seeking to overthrow the human kingdom and the Lady curse anyone that got in their way."

"And now the curse is theirs," Laurel rumbled as he and his traveling medicine show moved to check on Javes and Esclaur. He gently tilted Javes' face up so he could look at the wolf's swollen eye. "Making glory spheres and banishing ghosts before the moon season is ended."

"It's good, then, that we have come early," a voice rumbled and I quickly turned around. Dragoness Moraina's head and shoulders just cleared the double doors, her wings pressed flat against her back. Her brilliant sapphire blue eyes swept over us, resting a moment on Suiden as she squeezed through the doorway, her talons loud on the marble floor. As the light from the windows struck her gray, blue and charcoal scales, we all bowed, falling back to give her room. As I did, I again caught a flash where the stone had been cracked. I frowned, moving so I could look closer.

"Rabbit!"

"Da?" I snapped upright to see my father coming into the hall. "Da!" I hurried towards him as he came to meet me, Uncle Havram with him. Everything blurred as I was caught up in a hug that played merry havoc with my bruised back and damn near cracked my ribs.

"Well, lad, I'm glad you're all right," Uncle Havram said, peering into my face.

"All right?" Da drew back and held me at arm's length, his face anxious. "Look at him." I could imagine what I looked like: bruised, disheveled, barefoot, braid half undone. Not to mention the staff and butterflies.

"Look at you," Da said, his voice changing. "You've grown. You are grown." He dropped his hand to touch the empty scabbard at my side. "And a soldier." His face became anxious again and he touched the bruises on my wrist. "Was there a battle? Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine, Da. I'm fine." I stared back, noting the streaks of gray in his hair and lines on his face. My eyes blurred again. "Is Ma here?"

"No," Da said. "Sage and Harmony have decided that since they are twins, they should marry, get with child, and then give birth at the same time. Your mother's with them. I came with Dragoness Moraina and Brother Paedrig."

Smiling at the thought of my sisters, I searched the hall until I found the short, rotund brother kneeling next to Doyen Allwyn.

"I met them right outside the castle," Uncle Havram said. "I didn't quite make it to my ship as I was stopped at the docks and told my presence was urgently required back here." He rubbed his arm. "None too gentle were they about it too, though they had a complete change of heart when the dragon landed in front of them as they came out of the park."

Uncle Havram's eyes widened. "The trees moved back to give her room, lad—"

"Cyhn Rabbit Two Trees'son, bring your family forward," the Fyrst said and the tumult in the crowded hall died down, all eyes turning towards us.

My da shot me a wild look at the "Cyhn" as he, my uncle and I approached the Fyrst's throne. As we bowed, Molyu and Wyn joined us. Her Grace and the Enchanter gave my da and uncle searching looks.

"You've the same look," His Grace remarked.

He was right. All three of us were long and rangy, with the same narrow face and dark hair, the only difference being my uncle's blue eyes as opposed to our dark brown. (My brothers, sisters, and I were the laughing despair of our short, blond, and—after eight children—rather plump ma, who claimed she'd done every bit of the work but had nothing to show for it.)

"Cyhn," Moraina rumbled from where she sat next to Suiden. Her voice was filled with satisfaction.

"You've taken Rabbit into your House?"

"I've declared him and his family of my line," the Fyrst said. He glanced at Ilenaewyn, a faint smile on his face. "Including the human king."

"What?" Now my da cast a wild look at Moraina. "What do you mean—" He broke off and stared at Suiden—or rather at who was dangling from Suiden's grip.

"Well, now," Uncle Havram said, also staring. "Would you look at that. Sro Kenalt, and"—he turned his head to the dais—"Gherat. In the flesh."

"Obruesk is in the corner, sir," I said, pointing. "It was Commander Eorl Pellan who helped him escape."

"Obruesk? Here?" Brother Paedrig rose and hurried towards the dais—to come to an abrupt halt as he ran into the glory sphere still hanging midair. He took a step backwards. "Who made this abomination?"

Fingers, claws and other appendages were pointed at the warded and frozen Magus, and Brother Paedrig's eyes narrowed. "You dare!"

"He created it to control Rabbit, honored Paedrig," Laurel said, splinting Esclaur's leg, "and so to control us through Rabbit."

"What the hell did you get yourself into?" Uncle Havram whispered, as my da looked at me, his face horrified.

"Everything," I whispered back.

"What is it?" Falkin asked, his eyes fixed on the sphere.

"Evil," Moraina replied, "and forbidden." She shifted her gaze between Wyn and Laurel. "Who handled it? Are they still recognizable?"

"Pellan was one," Wyn said, "though he was smart enough to have it put into a pouch."

"We will gather all that it touched to burn, and deal with the sorcerer's other effects," the Fyrst said. "In the meantime, I would like to speak with you, honored Moraina—"

"A sorcerer?" Falkin came to himself with a start. "You mean Slevoic?" He looked around the hall, found Havram and hurried over to him. "That's what I came to tell you, sir. I saw Slevoic in town, with Commander Pellan."

Wyn had started to frown at Falkin interrupting His Grace, but his face changed. "Slevoic ibn Dru?" He turned to look at the commander. "With Pellan?" His Grace rose and light glinted on his sword as he hurried down the steps. "You brought another sorcerer and murderer into my city?"



"A murderer—" Pellan began.

"He killed the White Stag," Laurel said. "He slit his throat and spilled his sacred blood on the ground."

The cat's ears went back. "Even his own call him Vicious."

"He is beyond Vicious, Sro Cat," Suiden said. He turned to Falkin. "Did you see where he was headed?"

"Uh—" Falkin went back to goggling, this time at Suiden's voice coming from the Very large, very fiery black and gold dragon next to Moraina.

Uncle Havram went very still beside me. "Turalian dragon," he whispered.

"And besides the commander, was he alone?" Javes asked, trotting up to Falkin.

"Uh—" The first officer turned his gaping face down to the wolf with a black eye patch standing before him.

"Yes, yes. I'm a wolf. So's Esclaur."

Esclaur dropped his muzzle in a tongue-lolling grin as he dipped his head in an elegant bow despite having a splinted leg. "Grace to you, Lieutenant Falkin."

"Answer Dragon Prince Suiden," the Fyrst said, "and Javes Wolf Merchant'son."

Falkin's voice was reduced to a mere thread. "He and Commander Eorl Pellan were ahorse, Your Grace, and looked as though they were coming from the docks and heading here. I tried to get through earlier, but the city guard were sweeping all the crew up and forcing them back on the ships."

"Heading here?" Wynl repeated, his brows crooking. He stepped quickly to his nephew, all humor gone. "Where is he?" Unable to move, Pellan still managed to give the impression of shrinking back from the expression on his uncle's face. He then caught himself and gave a defiant glower, saying nothing.

"My sister's son," Molyu said as she walked over to the commander. "Where have you taken the other sorcerer—" Her Grace broke off, staring. "Pellan, what's on your hand?" Wynl's eyes shifted to where Pellan held his sword upraised. The next moment he grabbed Molyu, yanking her with him as he quickly backed away to where the Fyrst stood, and a wall of flame suddenly encircled all three.

"The Lady preserve us! He's been touched by the glory sphere." Laurel, who had moved to check on my bruises, spun around, the hair on his ruff standing straight up. "Everyone away from him. Now!" Immediately there was a wide ring around the commander. Pellan's face drained of color as the Watch that had been frozen around him also strained to move away, terrified.

"The Magus promised it was safe," Pellan whispered, his chest heaving in his fright. "He said he'd placed protections on it." I could make out a discoloration on the back of Pellan's hand. As I watched, the spot spread, creeping up his arm into his sleeve.

"The Magus lied," the Fyrst said.

The rot appeared on Pellan's other hand, sliding down around his fingers.

"My sister's only child," Molyu said, distressed, "being eaten alive. Shall I lose what remains of her?" She looked at Laurel through the flames. "Help him, Faena. Please."

"No, Your Grace," Harbormaster Lin said, before Laurel could respond. "It's sorry I am that your nephew has been corrupted, but the law is clear that those who willingly give themselves to sorcery shall not be rescued from its effects." Lin looked over the audience hall. "We need to close this off, quarantine those who've come in contact with the abomination."

"You forget yourself, Harbormaster," Molyu said, her eyes molten in the fire around her.

The corruption had spread up Pellan's other arm and a spot appeared on his neck. I caught a sudden whiff of the sweetish stink of rotting flesh.

"I am the harbormaster, true, and as such am answerable to Your Grace and the Fyrst," Lin said as she curtsied. She then straightened. "But I am also"—she shot the frozen-in-flight faerie a glance—"Queen Mab's newly appointed representative to the Council, and it is as such that I am saying that you cannot."

One of the City Watch guards near Pellan screamed; his eyes rolled down as he stared in horror at the spot on his wrist.

"It spreads," Moraina said.

"My city," Loran the Fyrst said. "My people." He turned to the guards, speaking through the flames. "Have the black flag raised on the front tower and shut the gate to the castle. Now." The two guards started to run out the door, but one staggered and fell.

"I say," Javes said, his voice faint. "He must've taken a sword from one of the infected ones." There was a silent moment as everyone contemplated that. Then one of the keep's servants cried out, holding her hand away from her.

"Not just the guards," Moraina observed. She turned her head to the Magus. "It appears, Kareste, that whatever you had planned, it has gotten away from you." She cocked her head to one side. "Or is this what you wanted? Everyone dead by pestilence?" The Magus remained silent, his ice shard eyes glittering at us. I caught a movement and frowned, as it seemed his fingers had just twitched.

Pellan laughed. "The servants said the humans called Kareste 'Maggot.' Such impertinence, they said." He laughed again, and I could see his gums bleeding. "Such truth." I thought I saw Kareste's fingers twitch again. I turned to my da to ask him if he'd seen the same and terror filled me. There was a faint mottling on his hand. "Oh, sweet merciful heavens."

"What's wrong, Rabbit?" Da asked, staring at me.

I reached out and grabbed his arm. I had been chained, beaten and otherwise handled by the City Watch. Then my da and uncle arrived and touched me. I looked over at Uncle Havram and he too had dark spots on his skin. My eyes dropped back to my da's hand and saw the mottling had crawled up his wrist. I reached out my own hand.

"No, Rabbit! Don't touch it!" Laurel snatched at me and missed.

The mottling tore off of Da like rotten cloth and hung twisting and seeking from my fingers. Frantic, I looked around and, seeing the Enchanter's fire, I dodged Laurel and ran over, grabbing a handful of flame and shaking the corruption into it.

The wall of flame parted and Wyln was beside me. "Make it hotter."

The flame turned yellow-white in my hand.

"Good, now contain it," Wyln said.

The flame compacted down into a ball and my eyes narrowed against its brightness. I hurried back to my da and, by its light, I pulled off the remnants of the corruption, throwing it into the fire. I then held it up and looked at my uncle, doing the same for him.

"My sister's son," Molyu said. "Please." The harbormaster opened her mouth and Her Grace snarled back at the faerie. "Take it up with the Council, Lin." I started to go to the commander, hanging limply in his bonds of air, but was distracted by a thin webbing of pale lines, finer than the ones that had been around Molyu, now visible by the bright light and entangling everyone in the hall. I reached down and pulled one—and the Magus jerked. I looked closer and saw all the strands led back to him.

"Sodding spider! You're feeding off of them!"

Kareste began to weave his fingers openly, pushing against the bonds of air, his lips moving. I hunkered down and ripped one-handedly at the web, but the strands only waved in the air for a moment, then settled down again. Frustrated, I stood up and flung my own fireball down on it. "Burn!"

"Don't! You'll kill everyone!" Ilenaewyn shouted, straining against his bonds, the others making noise with him. "Stop him!"

"Quiet," Moraina said. "We are dead already."

Fire ran along the strands and the Magus flung his hands out, frost spreading from where he stood on the dais down and along the floor. The fire turned from yellow to dull red.

"Hotter, Two Trees'son," Wyln said. "Make it burn hotter." Laurel's binding around Kareste burst away from him with a tinkling crash of broken ice, and the Magus stepped off the dais, walking towards me. Suiden moved to block him, but then staggered, his legs giving way. Beside him, Moraina swayed, dark patches appearing along her back.

Distracted, I turned to them. "Captain! Moraina!"

Wyln caught my arm. "The fire, Two Trees'son. Make it hotter."

Seeing the dragons affected, some broke and ran for the door, only to slump to the floor, drained, the mottling of corruption also blooming on their skin. A small blizzard now surrounded the Magus, the frost spreading further out before his feet. The fire began to wink out.

I stared at both Suiden and Moraina through the Magus' storm and thought of the ice dragon Gwynn who had his lair on the side of a fire mountain in the Upper Reaches. A fire mountain that led straight to the heart of the earth, hot and molten. I reached down and touched a strand. The fire turned bright red, then orange with flickers of yellow, and the Magus staggered back.

"Hotter," Wyln said.

I thought of the sun burning across my back on summer days, so hot that the sky was white with heat. The lines turned solid yellow and steam rose from the floor. The Magus pushed his hands out in front of him and more folk swayed, some falling where they stood. The lines dimmed again.

"Hotter," Wyln said.

I thought of the sun and the earth together, the Creator's forge that crafted life—steel blinding hot under the master's hammer as it is struck against the anvil. I called, and the wind roared along the floor as from

a bellows, the strands brightening until they sang with heat and light. The Magus was shoved back, sweat pouring down his face.

"That's it, Rabbit," Laurel said, joining Wyln. "Bind them together, earth, wind and fire." I bound them together, a three-cord binding that flashed over the strands, and I closed my eyes against it, shielding them with my hand. I felt the rune flare hot and fierce in the moment between two heartbeats; then it was gone, the hall becoming cool again. The wind blew gently around me and I staggered, Wyln catching me before I fell.

The flames died down around the Fyrst and he hurried over as Wyln once more took my chin in his hand, looking into my face. "Earth, wind and fire," he repeated. "Of my line—"

"Not to interrupt your exultation, honored Enchanter," Moraina said, steadying herself, "but we're not finished here." Beside her, Suiden slowly climbed to his feet.

Everyone stared at the dragoness—except me. I slipped through Wyln's hands and sort of folded down to the floor, all the while focusing on breathing as I dealt with the metallic taste in my mouth. Da came over and stood by me, followed by Uncle Havram. Beyond them, though, I could once again see a flash where the Magus' working had cracked the marble. Wary, I turned my head fully to look at it.

"What do you mean, honored Moraina?" Wyln asked, his hand now resting on my head.

"The sorcerer who had everyone upset," Moraina said. She turned her sapphire eyes on Falkin and the lieutenant jumped, shutting his mouth with a snap. "Slevoic, you called him?"

"Yes," Molyu said before Falkin could. She walked back over to Pellan and tapped his cheek. "Where is he?"

There were tears on Pellan's face as he looked back at Her Grace. I supposed having a second chance at life could be rather intense. He considered his aunt for a moment, then hung his head. "He's with the Magus. As another apprentice." He closed his eyes.

"Why am I not surprised?" Javes said. The wolf looked at the Magus, who had fallen to his hands and knees, gasping, winded. "You are a bad man. I'd bite you if I weren't sure you'd poison me."

"Where is he, Kareste?" the Fyrst asked.

Several castle guards approached the Magus, and he lifted his drooping head to glare at them out of ice shard eyes. The guards stopped and looked to His Grace.

"I think you should touch Kareste, Laurel Faena," the Fyrst said, "for if I lay hands on him, there won't be much left." Laurel moved swiftly to the Magus, the truth rune glowing on his paw.

All brooding malevolence drained out of the Magus' face, to be replaced by panicked terror as he tried to evade the Faena, staggering to his feet. "No!"

"He says that a lot, indeed he does," Esclaur remarked as the guards caught the Magus by his arms, holding him still for Laurel.

I started to watch Laurel lay his paw on the Magus' forehead, but was distracted by another flicker. I managed to stand, pulling away from my da and Wyln, and went to the damaged marble. Resting my haunches on my heels, I held my staff in one hand and stared at the floor.

"What do you see, Two Trees'son?" Wyln asked as he and my da moved with me. Laurel hesitated, his

paw just above the Magus' head as he turned to look.

Once more I saw the light flash along the stone. An earthy fragrance rose up from the cracks and bubbles, evoking summertime in the forest.

Laurel's nostrils flared, scenting, and he dropped his paw. "I'll be right back," he said to Kareste. "Don't move." He hurried over to where I was, the beads on his ears and staff clacking, as he stooped next to me once more. He inhaled again and smiled, showing his fangs.

"What is it?" Wyln asked.

"A gateway," Laurel said. He held out his paw. "Like this, Rabbit." I mimicked him, holding out my hand, and felt something grasp hold.

"Now pull."

I stood, pulling.

"Rabbit," Da said, his voice hushed. "What have you become?"

"I—" I began, staring into Honor Ash's face. She reached out and almost touched the staff, and she smiled.

The High Council once more erupted in screams and frantically pulled at their bindings as haunts flowed after the sprite's shade, filling the room with ghostly fangs bared, claws unsheathed, horns lowered. Basel, flickering rapidly between man and stag, started towards Kareste. Still staring at the sprite Faena's haunt, I put out my arm, and he stopped, his eyes red with rage.

"Necromancy," one of the clerks said, warding against evil, others muttering, gesturing and hissing with him. "Ripping ghosts from their rest, moon season or no."

"No, not necromancy," Doyen Allwyn said from where he sat a little ways from me on the floor. "It's a reckoning. These are the phantoms that the Magus had banished, and they have now returned. With a vengeance."

I looked down at Honor's hand in mine, truth rune to truth rune. My eyes widened as I saw—Honor shook her head, gently disengaging, and it faded into a memory of a dream that maybe I once had. But other things remained.

"You killed her!" I spun around, glaring at Kareste as he hung limp between the guards. "You bound her, took an axe and sodding cut her down! For her staff!" Laurel growled, showing his fangs again, his own claws unsheathed.

I walked towards the Magus, Basel and Honor on either side. "Tow killed honored Moraina's son! For his bones and hoard!"

Moraina gave a muted roar.

The unicorn paced with me. "You killed her for her horn!" The leopard joined us as I leapt onto the dais. "You killed him for his claws!" The rest of the haunts crowded behind me as I raised my staff. "All done for power! All of this done for pox-rotted power!"

"Rabbit, stop." Laurel caught up with me, stepping in front.

"Give him to me!" I howled, trying to get past the Faena. "I will cut his heart out and eat it with a spoon!"

Laurel cuffed me with his paw. "The Magus is forfeit to the Lady!"

As I glared at the Magus, dragging air into my lungs, he suddenly raised his head, staring back at me with iced eyes. Then he yanked his arms from the surprised guards and I was blown off the dais with the shrieking blast of an ice storm. He must've caught his breath. I slid along the floor, spinning, managing to stop and get back to my feet just in time to see folk thrown aside as the blizzard blew out of the audience hall.

"Kareste," I belled, exploding out the remaining windows in the hall.

"Rabbit, wait—" I reached for the wind, and was gone.

## Chapter Sixty-seven

I flowed down the steps, out into the castle courtyard, streaking past the inner gate, through the bailey and out the main gate, everything blurring as I chased the fast-moving ice storm. We flashed over the moat, the water freezing as the Magus passed, icicles dripping from the bridge. Full of winter, he streaked into the park, rime coating the trees' needles and branches.

We sped along the hard-packed sand of the road, made crystalline by ice, Kareste always just out of reach. Then he veered off into the trees, dodging around their trunks, and I could hear the park denizens fighting to escape the killing storm. Some didn't, and I flew by frozen birds' nests, a hedgehog, a doe and her two fawns. We exploded into a large clearing, the pine needle ground cover turning brittle and the surrounding trees becoming tinted with frost. Kareste abruptly stopped, changing back into the man, facing me. I also stopped, allowing myself to form, ignoring the icy ground against my bare feet.

"Well, if it isn't Lord Sweet Cheeks Puke."

My head snapped around to see Slevoic, wearing the dragon skin hauberk, standing with the rebel troopers, lit cheroot in one hand, Pru Oak's body in the other.

"Vicious," I said. "You slither into the most amazing places."

Slevoic glanced at Kareste, holding out Pru Oak's body to him, then looked back at me. "I told you you should be careful who you let get behind you."

Kareste plucked the death staff from Slevoic's grasp and gave his wintry smile, speaking to me directly for the first time since I returned to the Border. "Apparently, the captain of the Valiant is a good friend of Lord Gherat and not averse to a little free trading." He settled the tip of the staff into the ground, the dead sprite's eyes black pits in her tortured face.

"Yeah," Slevoic said. "It's not the first time he's slipped me into the Borderlands. This time right under sodding Suiden's nose." As he spoke, I caught the heavy smell of burnt wood and I looked beyond the horses and other obvious evidences of a camp to see that the trees ringing the clearing bore scorch marks.

Reading my expression, Slevoic shrugged. "I never understood the tree problem during the Border War, puke." He took a drag on his cheroot and was briefly outlined in fire. "A little torching took care of any freakishness." My gaze returned to Kareste just in time to see a thread shoot out from him to Slevoic, and I quickly lifted the truth rune, the ice on the trees catching its reflection. The rebels cried out as the

blinding brightness filled the clearing, but Kareste just did his wintry smile once more, while Slevoic laughed.

"What's that supposed to do?"

"Makes us see the truth about ourselves," Kareste said. In the light I could see tendrils attaching themselves to the soldiers, the one between him and Slevoic swelling into a thick, pulsing cord. The Magus was feeding again.

"Oh, yeah. Groskin said something about tiat." Slevoic drew on his cheroot again, his blue eyes and open face mild and inoffensive. "I already know the truth about me, puke. And I like it. I like it a lot."

"Now if it were the Faena and he was using his rune to touch us," Kareste said. His smile faded as his face became intent. "I want him alive, if possible. If not, keep his body whole."

"Yes, Magus," Slevoic said, licking his lips. He dropped his cheroot and fire whooshed up, engulfing him. Steam rose from where he stood as the flames met the frost on the ground and I could feel the terror of the park at the threat of a fire.

"It's not just the truth about yourself, Vicious," I said, still holding the rune high. "But the truth." I nodded at the cord, now as big as my forearm. "What do you think that is?" The burning man jerked his head around and down, staring. "What the poxy hell?"

"He's feeding off you," I said. "He likes them young and tender, seasoned with talent." Slevoic hit at the cord; it grew larger. "No." He reached out both hands and pulled. "Stop it!" He grabbed his sword, raising it, but Kareste flicked his fingers and Slevoic's eyes rolled back as he collapsed, more steam billowing up as the ground hissed and popped under him. The soldiers cried out again, breaking and running. They reached the trees only to slump to the ground, drained.

Kareste turned to me. "Now you, apprentice." His voice was the winter storms in the Upper Reaches.

I didn't wait for him to finish, but leapt—and slammed into a wall of ice.

Kareste smiled as I bounced back. "No Faena or Enchanters. No swords, spheres or dragons. No rules, no 'thou shalt not's'."

I tried to go around, and met another wall on the side.

"I've underestimated you three—no, four times," Kareste said, producing a dragon talon. He tossed it into the steam around Slevoic.

I stretched out a hand to the other side, and touched ice. The same behind, and beneath was frozen solid, cutting me off from the earth.

Kareste pushed the tip of the death staff farther into the ground, and Pru's screaming mouth moved as he gouged power. "But I believe I now have your full measure." The steam started to coalesce, freezing as it formed.

Reaching up and discovering more ice, I considered a moment, then brought my staff before me, centering. As I found balance, I heard the wind ask a question. Faena-like, I asked one in return. The wind shifted as it carried my query out to sea.

"You've three aspects, apprentice," Kareste said. "Well, now so do I. Water." He flicked his fingers again and a snow flurry appeared. "Earth." He shoved the staff down, and the earth shrieked. "And fire."

He indicated Slevoic. "Talent-wise we're matched. But I've more. More knowledge, more experience, and this." The iced steam became denser and wings spread as the vapor shaped into a dragon.

"Hadn't you wondered why you never saw the dragon or sprite's ghosts, even though you had parts of their bodies?" Kareste asked. "They are mine, just as you once were, and will be again." He gestured, and the haunt started in my direction, the ice shimmering with echoes of green, purple, pink, its eyes as black as the death staff's. As it floated closer, it opened its mouth, showing the abyss. "Yield or be consumed, and I'll have you anyway."

The wind blew back with not only the sea's response, but the wells, fountains, brooks, streams, waterfalls and rivers that ran through and filled the land, all murmuring, singing, babbling, laughing, crashing and thundering, as now they asked. Yes, I softly exhaled, and they rushed in, until I was full to overflowing. I raised my head to the sky and Kareste started to frown.

"What—" He broke off at the sound of hoofbeats coming closer and he shot a side glance to the edge of the clearing. "It appears we have company." The dragon haunt hesitated.

A moment later, the Fyrst and Wyn, Jeffen, and the rest of the troop mingled with castle guards rode into the clearing, Javes, Groskin and Laurel loping alongside, and followed by Basel, Honor Ash, and the other haunts. There was the flap of wings and Dragoness Moraina, Suiden, and Harbormaster Lin landed, along with hundreds of butterflies that exploded into the trees.

Kareste brought up his hand, aiming it at me. "That's far enough. Any closer, and he—well, I'm sure you know the rest."

"Rabbit!" Suiden roared.

"No," Moraina said, extending her wing to stop him. Her sapphire eyes moved between Kareste and the dragon haunt. "Let the young human prove his mastery."

"I thought he already had," Javes said.

"So he did, over earth, wind and fire," Moraina replied.

Wyn and Laurel both snapped their heads to stare at Moraina, while Lin's mouth rounded into an "Oh."

"Sod mastery!" Jeff tried to ride past Laurel, but the Faena caught his horse's reins. "There's a wicked ghost coming at him."

"My poet son," Moraina rumbled. "What has been done to you?"

"Sirs," Groskin said at the same time. "Over there." He nodded at the rebel soldiers.

Javes turned his head to look. "Oh, I say."

Also looking, Suiden signaled and, despite (or because of) being ordered by a dragon, several troopers started edging around the line of trees to where the rebels lay on the ground.

"What is that?" the Fyrst asked as he stood in his stirrups looking over at Slevoic, still burning. His brows drew together at the scorched trees. "Who dared use fire on my trees—"

"It's enough nattering to drive one mad!" Kareste raised his hand higher and the snow eddied faster around him. "One more word and I swear I'll call a blizzard down on all of you—"

He broke off at the sudden warm wind gusting over us, smelling of rain and sea. He looked up to see



dark clouds rapidly filling the sky, and fat drops started to come down, quietly thudding into the frozen cover. The ones falling on Slevoic hissed as they hit the flames and the dragon haunt wavered.

"There seems to have been a weather change," Lin said, holding her hand out to the rain.

Ignoring the faerie, Kareste yanked the death staff out of the ground and gestured at the sky. The snow spinning around him spiraled up and for a brief moment the rain became frozen flakes, and the ice dragon solidified. But the wind blew again and it was once more a gentle summer's storm. The drops fell faster and faster, until they were a steady soft drumming, and the rime on the trees began to melt. They stirred, awakening.

"Can an air talent do this?" the Fyrst asked, also holding out his hand.

"No, Your Grace," Laurel said, his ears pressed forward as he watched me. "Bring the storm, yes, but not control what falls from it. Only a water mage can."

"Earth, wind, fire, and water" Wyn said.

I pushed at the wall in front of me, feeling it give, then shatter, and stepped out into the rain. Hearing the ice breaking, Kareste jerked his head down—and gaped. "What the—" His eyes frantically searched the clearing; then he spun around, looking behind him.

"Where did Rabbit go?" Groskin rumbled, other troopers crying out with him. They too searched the glade.

The warm rain came down harder and little rivulets started to run under the pine needle cover, carrying away the last of the frost. There was a tinkling crash as the rest of the box of ice collapsed. The ice dragon's haunt began to dim as the flames around the Vicious flickered, then went out.

"I think that's Slevoic," Javes said, his good eye squinting through the rain.

"Who is now a feast for the Magus," Wyn said.

"A pox on Slevoic." Jeff tried to yank the reins from Laurel. "Where's Rabbit?" Ryson joined Groskin as the black panther raised his head, trying to scent.

Kareste gestured again and the snowstorm around him expanded, the dragon haunt becoming solid once again. But the wind blew, the warm rain poured down, and the snowstorm shrank as the flakes melted. A raindrop fell on Kareste, darkening his hair, and he started.

"No!"

More drops fell on him.

"I'm the master mage!"

Kareste stared about the clearing, his eyes coming to rest on Moraina. He bared his teeth and waved Pru Oak's body; the dragon haunt started in the dragoness' direction. "Show yourself, apprentice, or I will let the ghost loose on his dam."

"Uh, isn't there something we can do to help?" Falkin asked, shifting in his saddle.

There was a cracking sound, like the breaking of a bone, and the dragon talon flew through the air to land at Moraina's feet. She picked it up, gently closing her claw over it. The dragon haunt paused, then turned to Kareste. Its empty eyes started to fill.

Kareste took a step back, his own eyes widening. He then lifted Pru Oak's body to slam it back into the earth, but it was wrenched from his hand and flung, landing beyond the clearing's edge. There was another crack, this time the breaking of a branch, and a sprite haunt with oak leaves in her hair appeared at the clearing edge. The trees rustled, shifting.

"Stay back," the Fyrst said to them. "Two Trees'son is proving his mettle."

Soaked to the skin, Kareste scanned the clearing, his eyes skimming over Slevoic, but they snapped back, as I formed out of the rain next to the Vicious.

"You." He raised his hands, his fingers crooked.

I dropped my staff to snatch up Slevoic's sword from where it lay next to him. Lifting it double-handed above my head, I brought it down, severing the cord between the Vicious and the Magus. Kareste jerked and howled in astonished rage as whatever he worked up fizzled out in his hand. He grabbed at me, but I moved to the other side and brought the sword down once more, severing the threads to the rebel troopers. He jerked and howled again.

"All by himself, Kareste," Moraina rumbled. "Without Faena, Enchanters, dragons or spheres." Thrusting the sword into the ground, I stepped in front of Kareste, raising my own hand.

"Does Rabbit know not to kill with his talent?" Wynl asked.

"He should," Laurel said.

My fist caught Kareste under his chin, and I could hear his teeth click as his mouth was slammed shut. He flew backwards, his eyes rolling up into his head as he landed on the ground. I walked over, yanked him up by his robe, and hit him again for good measure. Then once more, because he was there.

"That's enough, Two Trees'son," the Fyrst said. "Leave some for the Faena."

I dropped Kareste and he fell back with a splat. The ice dragon and Pru Oak floated over, staring down at the Magus in the mud oozing up between the pine needle cover. The unicorn, leopard and other haunts joined us, surrounding him.

There was a soft groan as Slevoic started to come to and Basel, shifting into his man form, quickly floated over so that when Slevoic's eyes fluttered open, he was staring into the haunt's face. Slevoic gave a muffled shriek and scooted back. He rolled to his feet, staggering, his terror-filled gaze taking in not only Basel, but Suiden and Moraina too, both focused very hard on him. He made a quick gesture and he was once again outlined in fire. "Stay back, or I'll burn the whole freaking place down."

"That's a poor threat," Wynl remarked, holding his hand out to the rain.

I sighed and, picking up my staff, faced Slevoic. "The trees weren't torched during the last war, Vicious, because the Royal Army found out that wood doesn't burn well when it's soaking wet. It's astonishing what a little water magic can do."

"Do we have to let Rabbit fight this one?" Suiden asked.

"No," Moraina replied, eyeing Slevoic's hauberk.

"Good," Suiden rumbled. He started towards the Vicious.

This time Slevoic's shriek was piercing loud, and he took off running into the trees. I started after him.

"I wouldn't," Wynl said. "They are not very happy right now." I came to a sudden halt as all the tales I'd heard of angry forests rose up and I stared into the rain-misted dark beyond the clearing, vaguely glad that I wasn't Slevoic. Behind me, however, was an explosion of hooves against wet ground, and Ryson sped by, riding hard after the Vicious.

Sheep-biting— "Ryson, no! Bloody hell, stop! That's an order!"

I ran to the tree line and stopped; however, Basel flew past me after him, followed by Honor and several other haunts, all swallowed by the forest. I stared into the murk but couldn't see anything.

"Come away, Rabbit," Wynl said. "There's nothing you can do." He rode over to where I stood and, turning his horse, placed it between me and the trees. "Even I wouldn't go after them. Not now, and definitely not with my fire aspect." He started moving me back into the middle of the clearing. As he did, there was a long, drawn-out scream. Then silence.

"Pox rot it," Jeff whispered.

"Your soldier was brave, if stupid," the Fyrst said. "We will hold a memorial—"

He broke off as the shadows moved and, a few moments later, Ryson emerged, Basel and Honor on either side of him. I glanced away from the awful gladness on Basel's face, only to collide with the dragon skin hauberk lying across Ryson's saddle front. As he got closer I could see streaks as the blood on it was washed away by the rain.

"The trees gave this to me," Ryson said. "For his dam, they said." He swallowed, the sound loud above the rain. "I would've gotten the staff, but Basel and the lady ash tree sprite didn't seem to think it was a good idea."

"We will retrieve it later," the Fyrst said. "After they calm down a bit."

I looked over to where Pru Oak's and the Dragon Gwynn's ghosts hovered by Kareste, still prone on the ground, and saw how Laurel cautiously approached them, his ears flat against his skull. The ice dragon haunt turned his head towards Ryson.

"Uh, maybe you ought to give honored Moraina the skin, Ryson," I said, stepping a little closer to Wynl. The Enchanter glanced down at me and then slid a smug look at Suiden.

As Ryson hurried to the dragoness, Jeff brought one of the rebels' horses for me. "Are you all right?"

Sudden weariness weighed down on me, but I nodded. "Yeah, I suppose." I started to mount.

"Rabbit, your eyes!"

I paused with my foot in the stirrup, staring up at Jeff.

"What—?"

Wynl leaned down, cupped my chin, raising my face to him. The others crowded around.

"The mark of his water mastery," Moraina murmured, taking over my chin with a talon and turning my face to her. "They are such a pretty blue, like some jewels I have—"

"Rabbit, Wynl, I need you," Laurel said from where he stood over Kareste. He glanced at the harbormaster. "You too, Lin."

I stifled a sigh and, handing the reins back to Jeff, walked over to the Faena, my eyes on the haunts, ready to backtrack fast. Joined by Wyn and Lin, I watched as the three, Laurel with earth, Wyn with fire, and—to my surprise—Lin with air, drew wards over Kareste. Laurel looked at me. "Water, Rabbit." I hesitated, then traced the race of a river to the sea, strong and swift.

"Excellent," Laurel said when I finished and, stooping down, patted Kareste's face until the ice shard eyes opened. "Awake?" Laurel asked.

Kareste glared, saying nothing as his hands flexed, testing his bonds.

"Good." Laurel straightened, raising his paw, the truth rune glowing. "For your use of the forbidden, for your spilling blood with your talent, for your defilement of the Lady, I pronounce you accursed and declare her judgment." He rapped his staff end against the ground and even through the rain it sounded like a judge's hammer. "You are bound, Kareste. By earth, wind, fire and water, you are bound, until the Lady has mercy." Laurel stepped back, motioning for us to do the same, and gestured with his staff. There was a rumble, and then roots burst out of the ground, arcing over the Magus and plunging back into the ground on the other side, tightening.

"So you are bound," Laurel repeated, "in talent and in body." He then smiled, showing his fangs. "But lest you feel lonely"—he indicated Pru Oak, Dragon Gwynn, and the other haunts ringing us—"by the Lady's will, these'll bear company with you. Moon season or no. Until they will otherwise."

Laurel turned away with a flick of tail and ear, and after bowing at the haunts, walked back to where the Fyrst and the rest were. Wyn, Lin and I followed, and in a moment those who rode were mounted and we left the clearing, with the Magus' shouts and curses fading behind us.

"Well done," the Fyrst said. "I would add just one more thing." He turned to me, waving a hand at the sky. "A little drier, if you please, Two Trees'son."

"Yes, Your Grace." The clouds immediately started to thin.

"Except over the Magus."

I smiled. "Yes, Your Grace."

He continued to stare and my smile faded. "Your Grace?"

"They are a very pretty shade of blue," the Fyrst said.

I stifled another sigh as I heard not only Jeff, but Javes, Groskin, and the rest of my troop mates snicker. Even Suiden gave a suspicious rumble. "Yes, Your Grace."

## Chapter Sixty-eight

"Had you lost your mind, Lieutenant?" Suiden said, whatever amusement he had felt at my eyes turning blue gone. His own green eyes flamed down at me as I lay on my stomach on a table. He and all the other translated folk had been changed back, so I faced the wrath of my captain in man form. I didn't think it was any better.

We were in the castle guard's bathhouse, complete with a steam room, tubs of hot, warm, and cold

water, and a small infirmary where minor hurts were seen to. I was there instead of in the castle because it was attached to the barracks on the ground level, and those who couldn't fit into the infirmary were able to stand in the armory courtyard and watch through the various openings. Dragoness Moraina took an entire window for herself. The fae and fantastic, not being really big on modesty—or at least mine—saw nothing wrong with my examination by Laurel and the castle healer, and, my subsequent hot bath to ease the aches and bruises, being an open-air show. (Jeff snickered a lot.) Things were happening and they wanted to be in on them. Even His Grace's bard was there, lute slung over his shoulder, having squeezed into the room by threat of satirical lyrics. He was no doubt composing eddas preserving for future generations how I looked naked.

Laurel was now slathering salve on my bruised back, having already attended to my wrists and ankles. Wyln stood next to him, with a cup of the same vile tea as I had on the ship in his hand. An entire teapot of it rested on a lit brazier. By the looks on either of their faces, there was no escaping it.

"He was a master mage," the Fyrst said, picking up where Suiden had left off, "who had given himself over to the dark arts. However well it turned out, it was not wise to go after him by yourself, Two Trees'son."

"Apparently Rabbit thinks he's invincible because he has magical powers, Your Grace," Javes said.

"Nay," Uncle Havram said. "All lads his age think they're immortal, and are stupid with it."

"Indeed, that's true," Esclaur said, his splinted arm in a sling.

My da said nothing, but glancing up I could see the lines on his face had deepened as he watched Laurel tend to my bruises. He laid a gentle hand on my head. "Are you all right, Rab?"

"Yes, Da," I said. In spite of myself—and Suiden—I started to smile at my childhood name, but winced as Laurel found a tender spot.

"Sticklebutt heedless," Suiden started again. "Sheep-biting, bucket-head, pox-witless, cow-baiting, dead-fish, numb-arse, gape-seed stupid, Lieutenant."

Jeff and my other troop mates standing at a window watched wide-eyed, while Groskin's lips moved as he committed the captain's invective to memory. Ryson, though, was trying to play least in sight. It didn't work, as he'd mildewed again and Suiden was able to find him by smell.

"And you, trooper. What the pox-rotted hell were you thinking of?"

Ryson slid a look at Laurel, then down at his feet. "That if I caught Slevoic it'd show that I wasn't, uh, his anymore and then maybe everyone would talk to me again, sir."

Suiden gave Laurel a narrowed glare. "Been spreading goodness and light through my men, Sro Cat?"

Laurel finished, draped a towel over my shoulders and helped me sit up. (I was thankful I'd been allowed to put trousers on.) "I'm a Faena, no? It's what I do. Bringing balance and so forth."

"Balance," I repeated, spreading my hand and tracing the rune, feeling it warm under my fingertip. "I lifted the rune against both Kareste and Slevoic, Laurel, but nothing happened." My mouth twisted. "Slevoic said he liked what he was."

My da's hand slid to my shoulder and tightened.

Laurel sighed, wiping the salve off of his paws. "There are those who have so seared their

conscience—usually through some fatal flaw, such as the Magus' lust for power or the Vicious One's pleasure in others' pain—that lifting the rune against them would be like trying to drown a fish.”

"But didn't you lift it at Kareste?" I asked, tracing the rune again. "Before, in the hall, when we were fighting?" The rune grew warmer and started to glow. My father stared at my hand.

"No," Laurel said. "As I've told you, Rabbit, you're not the only one to chew the mentha leaves. My battle with Kareste was with the talent." His whiskers swept back to show his fangs. "Kareste used my staff to work abominations, and so I came against him as one of the Earth, in the name of the Lady Gaia. And as one master against another." Laurel walked over to where his staff leaned against the wall, next to mine. "Honor never taught you to read a staff?"

"Read a staff?"

"What the feathers, cloth strips and beads mean, Rabbit," Laurel said as he picked his staff up and hefted it a couple of times, making everything flutter and clack. "The fact that it's carved." I stared at the cat for a moment; then my mouth fell open. "They sent the head of the Faena to come get me?"

"Never send a novice to do a master's job." Laurel brought the staff down again. "What you should be asking yourself, though, is whose staff do you have?" I stared at my plain staff made of ash wood and felt the hair rise on the back of my neck.

"What did you see, Rabbit?" Laurel asked, and our audience leaned in to listen.

"It came up out of the ground," I said, my voice faint. "I was plowing a field and it rose before me, a fruit hanging upon it."

"The earth sphere?" Wyln asked.

"Yes, honored Cyhn."

"So mystical," Wyln said. "Not like fire at all."

"The Lady has shown her acceptance of Rabbit," Laurel said, and a murmur swept through the courtyard.

I pushed down the thought of Doyen Allwyn's and Brother Paedrig's reaction to that. "Is it Honor's?" I asked, my voice hushed.

"Yes," Laurel said. "It must have given the Magus a shock to see you with it." His whiskers swept back again. "A very big shock."

"I bet," Uncle Havram murmured.

"But I thought everybody got their own," Javes said, aiming his quiz glass at the staff. "Didn't you say you were Gifted with yours during some ceremony?"

"Usually that's true," Laurel said, putting his own staff back against the wall. "Every once in a while, though, a staff is passed on. Just like every great once in a while, someone has more than one aspect." He watched me closely. "You've worked earth before, no? In the embassy in Iversly when everyone translated for the first time."

Groskin, Jeff, and the rest looked at me. Hard.

"Yes," Javes answered for me. "Contrary to what you said at the time."

Laurel sighed. "I have the truth, honored captain, but not the whole truth. No one could contain that and live. I just knew that I hadn't, and I didn't think Rabbit could, so I reckoned that the Lady herself took a part. As she has been known to do." His eyes returned to me. "And as my rune didn't burn, perhaps she did."

"Perhaps," Suiden said, uninterested. He returned to what was important, pinning his glare back on me. "But I don't care if the heavens come down and declare your glory, you will not go off by yourself again, Lieutenant. Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir."

"I said, do you understand, Lieutenant."

"Sir, yes, sir!"

"Good," Suiden said. He started to lean back against a table, folding his arms across his chest, but Javes cleared his throat. Suiden shot a look at the vice admiral and then the Fyrst and straightened quick.

A faint smile passed over the Fyrst's face as he looked at me. "I found it very interesting to see you disappear in the rainstorm, Two Trees'son. That is a master's ruse."

"It was also very familiar, Your Grace," Suiden said, his green eyes glowing once more.

So it was.

"But not just you being lost on the mountain, what?" Javes now aimed his quiz glass at me. "The lieutenant is known for hiding in plain sight."

"That's right, sir," Jeff said, also staring at me. "Everybody talks about how he stood right in front of Slevoic and the Vicious didn't see him until it was too late for him to do anything."

"Sliding through the gates at Veldecke," Groskin said, "and no one stopping you." He considered me. "It's also probably how you got away from the convoy leader and her grog guard."

Probably so.

"Even others—the harbormaster slipping away from the commander without being seen," Javes said.

"He always could disappear right under your nose," Da said, looking down at me, worried.

"But I didn't do anything," I said. "At least not those times. It just happened."

" 'Just happened' happens a lot around you, lad," Uncle Havram said.

"That's true." Da sighed. "It was why we allowed Kareste to convince us to apprentice Rabbit to him."

"Raw talent can be capriciously unsettling, which is why those who are talent-born must be apprenticed," Wyn said. "Drink your tea, Rabbit."

"But sirs," Jeff said as I gagged down the bittersweet tea, "I can see why he disappeared against the Magus, but why cause us to get lost in the mountains?"

"Not why, Trooper Jeffen," Suiden said, now looking at Laurel. "Who."

"Me?" Laurel's ears flicked back as he refilled my cup. "What did you say?"

"I didn't even know he was coming," I said at the same time. I scowled at the tea.

"No, but your aspects did," Wyn said, handing me the honey pot. "So they kept you where you were until the most propitious moment, when Laurel Faena crossed your path."

I blinked at the thought of the elements thinking, and outthinking me. "They can do that?"

"They did with you," Wyn said.

"What did they do?" Javes asked.

"Earth, wind, fire and water." Wyn saw Suiden's frown. "Illusion is of water, Your Highness. It's the reflecting and bending of light, like the surface of a lake, where you don't see what lies beneath it—even when you know it's there." He looked back at me. "Four aspects," he said, his face once more smug, his look proprietary.

Laurel rumbled as he packed away his medicines. "And he was nearly in Kareste's hands. Was in his hands for a short while." He saw my father's stricken expression. "No, honored Two Trees, it's not your fault. Honor Ash told us— told me and none of us listened. Besides, Kareste should've been the best person to apprentice Rabbit to."

He shook his head, his beads clicking. "I knew he craved power, but I didn't know he had slipped over into the dark arts in his desire for more."

"What will happen to him, Laurel?" I asked, setting my cup down. I sighed with relief as it wasn't filled again.

"He will stay where he is until the Lady says otherwise," Laurel replied, his tone implying that it would be as close to forever as possible.

The vice admiral looked at the Fyrst. "If I might be so bold to ask, Your Grace, what's next?" Laurel, looking out the window, picked up my shirt and handed it to me, indicating that I should finish dressing.

"For now, Ilenaewyn and the rest have been placed in the dungeons," His Grace said. "Except for Obruesk." He watched me stamp into my boots and begin to lace them up. "Brother Paedrig asked for the Church elder so we lodged him with the brother and the other vicar."

I paused in my lacing as I thought of the archdoyen in close quarters with both Brother Paedrig and Doyen Allwyn, and almost felt sorry for him. I moved to the other boot.

"If I may ask, is the doyen all right, Your Grace?"

The Fyrst looked at Laurel, who was packing away his medicines.

"Not yet," the cat said, "but he will be. All he needs is rest and gentle care so that his injuries can heal."

I stood up, pulled my tabard over my head, and sat down again so that Laurel could braid my hair. Apparently he'd found time to go back for the feather, for he produced it— bent and mangled, but still there—and attached it to my queue.

"Unfortunately," the Fyrst said, "we cannot do anything to Ambassador Sro Kenalt."

Suiden rumbled low in his chest, his eyes very green.

"No," the Fyrst said. "We cannot do anything to him, Your Highness. Or others will feel free to abuse our



own ambassadors." He gave a faint smile. "So we will send him back with a strongly worded letter of protest, asking for an apology and for the return of all our folk who have been enslaved."

"Do you think you'll get either, Your Grace?" Uncle Havram asked.

"Javes Wolf Merchant's son has provided a letter of introduction to the head of his mother's family," the Fyrst said.

Suiden, Uncle Havram, and Esclaur looked at Javes, all frowning.

"She's Qarant, of the Damas. A daughter of the line."

The frowns wiped off, leaving blank faces.

"We will ask the Damas to intercede, to use their considerable influence for us. Of course, we'll have to tell them the entire story, including Sro Kenalt's part." Suiden actually began to laugh, a basso rumble as his eyes danced.

"Well, now, I bet you do," Uncle Havram murmured, his own blue eyes twinkling.

"Does Berle know about your mother, Javes?" Lord Esclaur asked.

Javes shook his head. "No. Even though she's only a daughter of a governor of no particular House, a merchant's son is still too plebeian for her tastes, so she never bothered to find out."

Esclaur took a deep breath. "Can I tell her? Please?"

"Where is the chancellor?" Uncle Havram asked.

"With her diplomatic staff in our old chambers, under guard," Javes replied. "Reflecting, as Doyen Allwyn said, on the folly of the sin of pride."

"She will go back," the Fyrst said, "with a representative who will outline in great detail what she has done, as she too is an emissary of another kingdom."

"Aye?" Uncle Havram looked at Wyn. "Will it be yourself, Lord Wyn?" His voice was mild, but I could see a tinge of worry at the thought of an elfin enchanter with the fire aspect aboard one of his windriders.

Wyn, though, shook his head. "No, not I. It'll be someone who has the authority to speak for the entire Border—most likely a High Council member." He gently smiled. "Besides, I shall be with Two Trees's son."

It had been a long day filled with all sorts of interesting things and my mind had started to drift. But suddenly I found myself paying very close attention. "With me? Uh, honored Cyhn?"

"Well, I am your Cyhn. It's either go with you or you staying here with me." After a startled look at Wyn, Laurel suddenly became very busy with tidying up while Javes, Esclaur and Havram all frowned at the Enchanter, then at Suiden. Suiden, however, ignored their accusatory stares. "But that's supposed to end when the High Council declares Rabbit's mastery," he said.

"Two Trees's son's mastery is something the Council will decide," the Fyrst said before Wyn could answer. "But I determine his Cyhn." His Grace's dark eyes gleamed. "It's an elfin house he belongs to, honored prince, and coming of age tends to be a little different for us. For one thing, it takes longer. Much longer." Elves did live forever, barring fatal injury. I stared at the Fyrst, seeing myself as an old graybeard before I was deemed adult enough to be let out on my own.

"Don't worry, Two Trees'son," Wynl said, even more amused. "I will make sure you have playtime." The Fyrst softly laughed at Suiden's disconcerted expression. Then His Grace's amusement faded as he gave, for him, a massive frown and looked out the window at Dragoness Moraina. "Speaking of things done and not done— Honored Moraina, did you really sign a treaty with the human kingdom?"

A shocked gasp ran through the courtyard.

"No," Dragoness Moraina said.

"Of course she didn't," one of the Fyrst's eorls called from the courtyard. His Grace's bard, however, was staring at the dragoness wide-eyed. He pulled his lute off his shoulder and began to strum, apparently feeling an edda coming on.

"I used a scribe."

It became very quiet, the only noise the soft playing of the bard. Even the wind lay low.

"Why, honored Moraina?" the Fyrst asked.

"What has gone around is coming around, Your Grace," Moraina said. "What was once fae land is now becoming fae land again, under an elfin king. One who is tied strongly to us. As was farseen—"

"You are saying, then, honored Moraina," Laurel asked, his voice careful, "that you came across a prophecy that said that the land would be ours once more? And for this you transgressed your own beliefs against ciphering?"

"No, not prophecy," Moraina said. "Not obscure ramblings open to every manipulation by lackwits, fanatics, and the insane. *I* did a farseeing, and that made me hire a scribe." She settled her wings against her back with a soft rustling sound. "A check was needed on the human kingdom's fervent belief that what was ours should be theirs until the farseeing came to pass, and I thought a treaty would be the best way." She sighed. "It never occurred to me that we'd be the ones who would need to be stopped."

"But why?" Wynl asked. "Why not allow the humans to attack us? With what happened last time they did, we would have had the land back that much sooner."

"Yes, perhaps," Moraina said. "But again, perhaps not. Right now we do have it, and without striking a single blow in anger. With very strong ties that bind us together."

"A dragon advocating peace," Javes murmured. "Extraordinary."

"It is wisdom," Moraina said.

"A dark elf who is linked to only one lineage, and, if I understand it right, through a hated House," Suiden said, recovering from the shock of realizing that he'd bargained my life away to the elves. "A king who rules the entire land, not answerable to anyone, the Fyrst's declarations notwithstanding. Will the northern clans accept these ties, Sra Moraina? Will all the Borderlands?"

The Moraina's sapphire eyes rested on the dragon prince. "Who said anything about the king of Iversterre?"

It grew quiet again.

"All right," another eorl called out. "Who are you talking about?"

Moraina turned her head to me.

The entire courtyard erupted in laughter. After all, they'd just seen me bare-arsed. Lin, though, at another window, nodded. The bard noted that, his fingers now flying over the strings of his lute.

"Just how is he supposed to accomplish this great feat of unification?" the first eorl asked.

"Covenanted to Laurel Faena," Moraina replied, her brilliant eyes still on me. "Three times sworn to King Jusson. Cyhn to Enchanter Wynl. Declared of Loran the Fyrst's line. Lieutenant in His Majesty's Royal Army under Captain Prince Suiden. Ibn Chause and eso Flavan. Chosen of the moon ghosts. Nephew of Vice Admiral Havram ibn Chause. Mage-born. Son of Two Trees and Lark. Truth rune on his hand. Sixty-four degrees to the throne. Baptized and catechized into the human Church. Brother Paedrig's student. Keeper of my favor. A fourth time sworn to his cousin the king to bring peace." The wind swirled in through the open windows, carrying fluttering butterflies.

"It seems that Queen Mab has taken an interest in him too," Moraina said.

Lin smiled, showing her teeth.

"He doesn't have to do anything," the dragoness continued. "He's already done it by getting himself so tangled between the fae and the human that not even your Lady Gaia could get him undone." She also smiled. "Because he is so very much ours as he is so very much the human kingdom's, we will therefore share in who he is, and so he becomes the bridge that spans us, leading us back to where we can both begin anew." The courtyard fell silent again, everyone impressed in spite of themselves.

"The lark ascending, honored Moraina?" I asked, remembering my dream aboard the Dauntless.

Moraina's smile became gentle (for a dragon). "Yes, young human. If we are fortunate."

There was a stir in the back of the courtyard and Moraina turned her head. People parted and bowed as Molyu made her way towards us. The blood was gone from her face, but she'd drawn a red line from her eye down her cheek. As she reached the doorway and paused, I could see behind her the sun sinking through the last remnants of the storm clouds. Almost the end of the last day of spring—and the moon season.

Her Grace's eyes lit on the Fyrst and she smiled. "It is time, my husband."

The sun hovered above the ocean as several silk-draped carts, loaded with pelts, skins, bones and wood, started out from the castle. In the lead was His Grace, Loran the Fyrst, dressed in elfin splendor, his great sword on his back. Laurel Faena came next, holding the reins of a horse also draped in silk, upon which Prudence Oak's body and Dragon Gwynn's skin were placed. After the rattle of crossing the moat bridge, the only sound was the muffled clop of the horses' hooves and the swish of the wheels against the sand road. And the soft thud of our boots, as the human contingent was allowed to walk behind the carriages. Lord Esclaur first as an emissary of King Jusson IV, Vice Admiral Havram next as the Royal Navy representative, Captains Suiden and Javes, and then the rest of the troopers at the last.

The park was still and dark, the gloom undisturbed until flashes appeared among the trees, few at first, then more, as the haunts we'd left in the clearing joined in the procession, until they were a thick stream behind us. We exited the park and stepped onto cobbled streets, but even then there was no noise. I looked down and saw grass and meadow flowers thickly carpeting the stones.

We wound through the city, its citizens lining the streets, caps and hats off, heads bowed as the cortege went by, until at last we came to a square overlooking the ocean. We were joined there by the town folk, Dragoness Moraina, Wynl, Molyu, my da, and other dignitaries, who helped place the bodies on a pyre. Then, as the sun descended into the water, last rites were held for all the haunts who journeyed

with us. Basel stood next to me, striking his pose with his antlers held high, Honor Ash on the other side, the unicorn with her, the leopard next to Lieutenant Groskin, the rest intermingled with those alive. They all were quiet as various vicars took turns in the ceremony for the dead. To my surprise, Brother Paedrig was last and his sweet tenor was a soaring counterpoint over the basso roar of the sea.

"To the last embrace, to return to that from which we were formed," the brother said.

"To the last embrace." I blinked and the troopers stirred a little in surprise at the Fyrst, Wynl, Dragoness Moraina, Laurel, and the fae of the city joining in our responses.

"Until the day we are summoned forth," Brother Paedrig said.

"Until the new morn when we shall arise anew," we said. The leopard stood, stretched and affectionately butted Groskin. The haunt then turned and started walking towards the ocean. Groskin watched, his eyes glinting gold.

"All corruption left behind in the cleansing earth," Brother Paedrig said.

"All shining with joy, reflecting God's glory," we said. Other haunts started pulling away and moving towards the water.

"The earth keep you," Brother Paedrig said.

"The earth enfold and keep you safe," we said. Honor reached across me and touched Basel. Basel turned his head towards her, then on his delicate stag legs joined her and the unicorn as they went to the square's edge and over.

"Peace," Brother Paedrig said.

"Peace and rest be yours," we said. I turned my head to see them flow out over the water into the last rays of the setting sun.

"Goodbye, Basel, Honor," I said, tasting salt. I wiped my wet face as the Fyrst, Laurel, Suiden and Moraina picked up torches and lit the pyre. As it burned, the outline of a dragon rose, spread his wings and took off, flying over the waves. On his back I could just make out a sprite with oak leaves in her hair.

"Peace and rest be yours."

## Chapter Sixty-nine

Laurel and I crested the mountain trail and looked down on Freston as the wind laughed and pulled on our clothes. Well, my clothes, as the Faena stood clad only in his feathers and beads that hung from his ears. They gently swayed and clicked as he pressed his ears forward, looking down on the mountain town that lay basking in the rare warmth of a fall day. "And so it begins," Laurel said.

So it did. I smiled down at the familiar sights, but men gave a wistful glance over my shoulder towards the Border—and my family—that we'd left a few weeks before.

"What's the building with the yellow tile, Two Trees'son?" Wynl asked, sitting on a horse next to me.

"It's a theater, honored Cyhn," I said. The wind laughed again, plucking at my braid's ties and ruffling both my feather and the butterflies' wings.

"A playhouse?" Wyln leaned forward in his saddle, his face intent.

Captains Suiden and Javes also looked down upon the city, their gazes aimed towards the faded purple tiles of the garrison—and King Jusson's standard that flew above it. I wondered how Commander Ebner's mustache was handling a royal visit.

Suiden shot me a glance. "Keep it down, Lieutenant."

"Yes, sir."

Jeff, pulling up next to Laurel, snickered.

Groskin joined us, his eyes golden in the afternoon's light, while the rest of the troopers came to a halt behind us.

All of our horses lifted their heads, perhaps scenting the garrison stables and the promise of currycombs, warm stalls and hay. Groskin's horse gave a soft whicker and reached over to nip Laurel's ear.

"Home, sirs," Groskin said. "Yes. Give the order to move it out, Lieutenant," Suiden said, starting down the trail, the wind blowing his horse's tail behind them like a streamer.

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lorna Freeman started reading fairytales at an early age s in reaction to an ordinary life. Though not a true native, she has lived most of her life in southern California, the land of sunshine and earthquakes. She now is at work on the next book in The Borderlands series.