

Azalea Moone

A Love is an Open Road story



Token of Hope

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

TOKEN OF HOPE

By Azalea Moone

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love is an Open Road* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love is an Open Road?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love is an Open Road*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

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each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

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Photo Description

A mage with green eyes and long, black hair is sitting on a throne. A black cat sits atop a nearby pedestal pawing at a green ball of magic, which is floating above the mage's palm.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Just look at all that arrogance. Bastard isn't so cocky now that I've got him in my dungeon. He and his damn cat have been a thorn in my side ever since I took over this kingdom.

I would love a fun, high fantasy, enemies to lovers story. Please no dub-con or non-con.

Sincerely,

Breann

Story Info

Genre: fantasy

Tags: mages, knights, enemies to lovers, slow burn/UST, non-explicit, captivity

Content Warnings: graphic violence

Word Count: 24,159

TOKEN OF HOPE

By Azalea Moone

Prologue

The carriage pulled into Misthaven. After the long five-day travel through the forest of Thowin, Jac was the first to hop out of the wagon and stretch his short legs. He'd never seen anything like this village before. Sure the cities of Thowin were overflowing with peasants and workers, but in Misthaven the streets were lined with special merchant carts and spectacularly dressed individuals.

Handwoven blankets, baked goods, and special fruit Jac couldn't even pronounce the names of were displayed beautifully along the side of the main road. *What a wonderful place*, he thought as he glanced around at all the finely dressed folk: mages from many countries in fine leather suits, warriors from Thowin and beyond in specially crafted chain mail. Everyone had donned their own complimentary style.

Spotting a child just as young as he, Jac flashed a grin in the boy's direction. "You there."

The young boy peered out at him from behind a roadside cottage. "Y-yes?"

"Fine city you have here." Jac placed his hands upon his hips, broadening his chest proudly. "Well, come on out here. You live here, right?"

"O-oh yes," the boy said as he shyly strolled toward him.

"You're a timid one, aren't you?" Jac tried not to laugh; such an action would frighten the young boy. "My name's Jac and I'm the future king of Thowin."

"A-Azai..." the boy stuttered. "I'm a mage."

"A Dennald, perhaps?" Jac asked. Fayvale was home to one of the strongest mage clans in the four nations. The Dennald mages were quite a force to be reckoned with. So to prevent war with the neighboring mages, his father signed a peace treaty three years ago with their lord.

"Yes." Azai's voice was tiny. His leather shirt and trousers sagged around his wrists and ankles. "I'm o-one of the strongest mages of my clan."

"Ooh, is that so?" He didn't look very strong to Jac. "How old are you?"

"Eight."

Jac chuckled. "I have a good two years ahead of you. Say, wish to spar then? See who's the strongest?"

"My mom says I shouldn't use my magic against Thowins."

"Why not? There's no harm in a friendly game." Jac had fought with swords in the field several times with boys ten years older than him. A chance to fight a mage was a big deal. "Real quick-like. If you know somewhere secret, I won't tell a soul." He ran his fingers across the hilt of his small practice blade.

Azai furrowed his brow. "Hmm. Suppose we can try the gardens just out of town."

"Very well. Show the way."

Five years later

Azai knelt on the soft grass, bloody and bruised from the fight. It'd been years since he'd sparred with Jac like that; not since their first match had he felt so exhausted. With blood dripping from his shoulder, courtesy of Jac's blade, he rose up from the ground and staggered to regain his footing.

"Have you had enough?" Jac asked, his breath heavy. He hadn't escaped their bout without a scratch. His face was equally bruised, and his skin still sparked blue with Azai's lightning strike, a surge he'd carelessly let go just as Jac had cut him down.

"Never."

"Very well." Jac tightened his grip on the hilt of his sword. "Prepare yourself, mage. If you're not careful, I may end your life today."

Azai grinned. Of course Jac was toying with him. Despite all the bruises, wounds, and words they'd suffered, neither of them truly meant to kill each other through all these years of sparring. Sure Jac spoke a lot of rubbish, but at the end of the day, they'd both be alive and looking forward to their next match.

It didn't take much for him to summon the green enchanted sword he'd been wielding. Made of magic, it wasn't sharp enough to cut but a piece of grass, however, the damage it could do if allowed to touch skin was mighty.

"I have gotten better at swordplay," Azai said, readying himself in a sword-wielding stance. "Wouldn't you say?"

“You haven’t touched me once with that thing, so how would I know?”

“Yes, but I can keep up with you now.”

Jac grunted. “Barely.” He propelled himself toward Azai, swords clashing against one another.

Azai’s green, magic-made blade flickered as Jac pressed against it, closer and closer, trying to break his guard. His heart was pounding, his breath heaving and arms aching. The tiredness was too much.

Azai dropped his arms and scooted out of the way just as the polished metal blade missed his other shoulder, sliced bits of his long black hair fluttering to the ground. “Enough.” He fell onto one knee again and retracted his magic. “You win this time.”

“I knew it. Prince of mages, ha!” Jac sheathed his sword and stood arrogantly. “More like prince of losers.”

Azai smiled. “You could be right, Jac. How many times has it been, now?”

“Three wins, I think, not counting last year when I just wasn’t up to par.”

You lost last year, just admit it.

Picking himself up again, he brushed off the dirt from his black leather trousers. “Prince of losers, then. I kind of like it. So this time next year, then?”

Jac tilted his head. “If only you work on your core strength. Maybe some bodybuilding, and... Want me to show you some tips?”

“Tips?”

Jac sauntered toward him and yanked his sword from his scabbard. “Take this. Hold it like you did your magic blade.”

Tension ran through Azai at the thought of holding a real sword. Mages weren’t allowed to wield real weapons, though he’d always wanted to try. His arm trembled as he reached out to grab it; once it was in his hand, he immediately felt the sword’s weight bearing down on him. “I-it’s a little heavy.”

“It’s supposed to be.” Jac disappeared behind him. “Straighten your spine. Not like that. Like this.” Jac pressed in on Azai’s back, only making his nervousness worse. “What’s the matter with you?”

“I-I’m just not used to a real sword.”

“Calm down and focus.” Warm hands guided up to his shoulders. Azai’s heartbeat thundered in his chest; his cheeks went red hot. “Just like that. Now do you think you could remember this pose for when you’re training?”

“I think so.”

Jac stepped around to face him. “Good. What’s that look for?”

“I... This feels weird.”

“What does?”

This overwhelming flush running through my body as I gaze into your maddened eyes. “Holding a sword.” Azai swallowed hard. What was this feeling?

Jac’s wicked smile teased his senses even more. “Good. Get used to it.” He turned and sauntered to his horse. “I’ll see you next year, mage. Be good and ready to battle me.”

Keeping his back upright ached. Azai dropped his arms—Doesn’t he want his sword back?—and stared out curiously at Jac as he steered his horse close by. His stomach dropped at the thought of Jac leaving; it always did every time he’d depart back to Thowin.

“Tell you what: you train real hard, and I’ll be back next season instead.” Jac winked.

A small light of hope lifted Azai’s spirits. “I’ll make sure to be at your level, then!”

Next season – Summer

The hot and arid air drained Azai as he leaned up against a tree trunk at the crossroads between Thowin and Fayvale. This was their stomping ground for the last four years, ripe for battle already from their last sessions despite the crushing heat. Summers in Thowin were surely brutal.

Pulling his canteen from his belt, he sipped the warm water and scooted until he was safely under the shadows of leaves. He’d wait for Jac’s arrival even if it took hours. Under the shade of the trees, he closed his eyes, deciding not to waste any precious energy before their match.

Just three months ago, he meekly traveled home with Jac’s sword latched to his belt, drawing up a plan to use it for practice daily. Once the rest of his clan

spied the long blade however, they'd immediately warned him to abandon it. *Where did you get that? A mage has no use for such things.* His father had said, "You must not stray from your rightful heritage. You are a mage, not a warrior."

Without the sword to train with, Azai found a suitable fire log of the same length and weight to practice his stances with. Around Misthaven, other mages regarded him with concern but kept silent as they witnessed him swinging the log around like a madman in the far gardens away from the village.

The whole time, he imagined Jac there with him. First, the warrior would stand in front, watching with subtle approval at his every move. When his posture would veer, Jac would come from behind, place hands on his hips, and set him right again. Azai's cheeks would flush—the same disconcerted feeling that had posed itself just three months ago during their last match together.

But Azai was fourteen now. His body had grown taller, his shoulders were broader, and his curiosity was sated as he discovered why Jac's contact flustered him so. He was so needy and wanton before—only another man's touch could make him weak like that, so he'd learned after a recent encounter with another mage.

As he thought of it now, his body reacted much the same as it had that day. He imagined Jac here with him underneath the shade of the trees, passionate hands exploring every part of each other's bodies, moist lips pressed together, melting in each other. There was so much he wanted to do and no other way but to fantasize.

His heartbeat quickened, and he dreamed he felt Jac's pulse as well, beating against his chest. His hot breath would waft against his neck while he whispered, "You've mastered these skills so well, Azai."

Daylight slowly dissipated. Azai spent the entire day against the tree, stuck in similar reckless fantasies like those from days past. The sound of horse hooves against gravel echoed in the distance of his dreams.

"Hey!" Jac's deep voice shocked him. "Sorry I'm late. Have you been here all day?"

Azai jumped up from his resting spot, adjusting himself; his body still trembled from his last fantasy. "It's okay, though."

When Jac jumped down from his horse, Azai took in the sight of a different man standing before him. Taller. Larger. A patch of beard blotched his chin.

He'd hoped to be the first to mature, but it seemed that Jac had beat him in that regard as well—of course, he was two years older.

“You've gotten bigger,” Jac said with a grin. “Trained with my sword, did you?”

Azai shook his head. “Weapons aren't allowed by our clan's principles. So I took up swinging a log around instead.”

“Oh, very nice of you to compensate. Are you ready to fight me, then?”

“As ready as I'll ever be.” Azai yanked up his sleeves and produced the flickering magic sword from the palms of his hands.

“Perfect!” Jac slipped off his riding gloves and thumbed across the hilt of his sword. “But I should warn you, I've done a lot of sparring in the field with my trainer. Refined my moves quite a bit. I'll try to take it easy on you.”

“No,” Azai replied. Jac narrowed his eyes at Azai's rebuttal. “Let's do this for real. No games this time.”

With a chuckle, Jac tugged his sword from his belt and took his stance. “Just the way I like it.”

Forty-five minutes later

“Get up.” Jac tapped Azai's arm with his boot. Rivulets of blood streamed from underneath Azai's motionless body, already attracting flies. “Come on. When will you admit you just can't beat me?”

Finally Azai laughed, a short snicker at first, but it grew into maniacal glee. “N-never.” Azai steadied himself on his palms, using all his strength to lift himself to his knees. The ending slash Jac produced would scar his body for life—the deep cut across his chest leaving his shirt dangling open, red splattered against the fine leather. “I'll never give up!”

“Oh, you are thick.” Jac sheathed his sword. “I could've killed you with that last blow.”

“And yet, you didn't.”

Jac jolted. He'd never meant for their sparring sessions to get so out of control. At first, he'd only wanted to know if he were as strong as a Dennald mage, but something had possessed him into being the best. For the past four years, he'd trained hard so he could master beating Azai—supposedly their

prince and strongest mage in Fayvale. Though Azai always acted too shy and careless. Now, he could see his real passion in war. He would make a great Lord some day.

“Maybe I should have.” Jac turned to his horse. He’d had enough. If there was one thing he’d learned from all of this, it was that... “You truly are dangerous,” Jac continued. Azai rustled with something behind him, but Jac brushed a hand over his mare’s snout. “I think this should be our last meeting.”

“But—”

“No arguments. We’re no longer children, Azai. I look forward to meeting you on the battlefield.” Jac hopped up on his horse. Staggering next to him, Azai stopped with a solemn glare in his eyes. “Go home. Fix your wounds and speak nothing of this to anyone.”

“I never have. But do you have to leave now?”

Jac breathed. Some days he wished to stay with the mage, learn more about their customs and about him. “I can’t. It’s my father. He’s...” The tension between them was thick as they stared at each other. “There will be a coronation soon. I am to be King of Thowin.”

“Then, congratulations are in order—”

“No!” Jac’s stomach tightened. “I am forever your enemy, Azai. Peace treaty or not, the conflict between Thowin and Fayvale has never truly ended. You do know that, right?” Azai nodded, his throat bobbing. “Good. Then, I shall see you again on the battlefield.”

The mage’s eyes were wide. “Then, please.” He reached into his pocket and held out a golden coin. “Take this. To remember me by. *Fir xum arsou*, faith and life.”

Their hands brushed against each other, a strange shock running through Jac at the embrace—a subtle handshake from his most resigned rival. The token wasn’t special, or so it seemed, with the only engraving being the raised ring around its outer edge, but it resembled nothing like the coins he’d seen before.

“Where did you get this?”

“I found it and thought it would be appropriate I give it to you. Trust me, I didn’t do anything to it. It’s just a token of our friendship, if you will.” Azai’s expression softened. He stepped away and waved his hand. “Good-bye, then.”

Fifteen years later

“Your immediate attention, my lord!” Standing at the cabin door was one of Azai’s common servants, his breath heavy and eyes wide.

Azai froze and furrowed his brow. Before the servant could speak, he searched deep inside his servant’s mind. Troops marching. Flags waving. Swords glistening. A battlefield. Destruction... His heartbeat hammered. What was he seeing?

“Thowin’s troops have invaded from the east.”

“What?” Azai stood promptly from his chair, and the papers on which he’d been meticulously writing scattered to the floor.

“Their king is asking specifically for you, sir. What should we do?”

That bastard. Azai chewed on his lip. If only he’d gained his greatest skill sooner: mind magic, the ability to read minds of those close to him. He could have read Jac’s plans all along. But it’d taken years to develop the skill, and several more to master.

Still, he knew this day would come, but he’d always held a glimmer of hope that Jac had abandoned his crude ideas. *I am forever your enemy, Azai.* That voice echoed back at him from so many years ago. Was this the moment Azai was training for?

“Very well. It’s time we fight.” Azai clenched his fists together. “Meu!” He motioned to his black cat, who pounced up onto his shoulder.

It would be a long three weeks...

Chapter One

His rival's dark, green eyes were narrowed, determined. And that grin, dreadful, as if he were planning something—of course, he was planning *something*; it was only proper for a mage so powerful. Jac furrowed his brow, tension brewing up his spine.

“Do you find this amusing?”

“Undoubtedly,” the mage said, unmoving.

“Imprisoned, possibly for life, and you're wearing a smile bright as the sun?” Jac shook his head. “I'll never understand you, Azai.” He slipped off his gloves, the cool winter air biting at his skin immediately and drying the sweat that had pooled between his fingers. He rubbed his hands together. “In any case, wipe that grin away. This is no time to be in high spirits.”

Two guards stood next to Jac, frozen in place with arms at their sides, just as they should be. Everyone should be well behaved in front of him—the proper manner to greet a king. But Azai never had such patience.

He'd never been attentive to Jac's authority, even when they were children. If only he would wipe that smile from his lips and understand his position now.

“And what makes you think I'm so amused?” Azai's grin never wavered. “The Dennalds will continue to fight without me. We will win this battle. Or maybe I'm planning my escape.”

“Your people have been killed,” Jac said. “It would be pointless to attempt such a feat under my guard's watchful eyes.” Azai's rigid stare could almost burn right through him. Jac stepped back and adjusted his tunic. “In any case, you are here now. Make use of the time you have left.”

“So that's it, then? Will you have me executed as well? Bury me next to my kin in unmarked graves? Or would you prefer to dump me in the river?”

Jac's chest tightened. Capturing Azai was hard enough for him to grasp, but even thinking of his death had him strangely nervous. “It'll take time to decide. You'll know soon enough.” He slipped his gloves on again. “Until then—”

“Take care of my Meu for me?” Azai interrupted.

“Meu?” Jac glanced down at his feet. There, standing high as his knee, was a black ball of fur. “When did you get *that* thing?”

“He’s my cat.” Azai knelt down, poking his finger out between the cell bars as far as the clamps on his wrists would allow. The cat rubbed against him, then meowed. “Clearly, I can’t care for him while I’m here.”

Jac leaned down and grabbed the black fur ball by the scruff of his neck. “You’re going to make this tough for me, aren’t you?” Meu squeaked and squirmed, and Jac stuffed the thing underneath his arm to stop his wriggling. “Fine, but don’t blame me if he loses his tail. This fort isn’t a place for animals.”

“I’m not worried. I have confidence you’ll keep him safe.” Azai stepped back into the darkness of the cell where the light of the torch barely reached. His pale skin was a stark contrast against the shadows; his eyes gleamed in the flames.

Jac snorted. *A cat in a fort?* The mage had to be crazy. Strangely enough, Jac couldn’t remember Azai having a cat around during the battle earlier. Making his way up the stairs, he pondered what happened to the black shawl Azai had worn around his neck during their conflict.

The soft body underneath his arm was vibrating and creating such a loud purring noise that Jac immediately set him down once outside the dungeon. Meu gawked at him and mewed.

Damn that Azai! Appealing to my tender nature!

“Well, come on,” Jac said and walked out into the open room.

On the outside, a line of troops stood on the second floor awaiting any further attacks by the mages. Smoke lingered in the distance. The men chattered amongst themselves about the continuing battles out there.

The war had taken only three weeks to win; his battle against Azai was even shorter. The mage prince had dodged every attack and had retreated back into Fayvale countless times; Jac expected him to fight, not cower. Azai’s capture proved easy once the other mages were all but wiped out. But Jac had still lost many troops to the Dennalds’ power, and reporting those numbers to the church would cause uproar with the cleric upon returning to Thowin.

He took a deep breath, decided to worry about that later, and immediately joined his troops outside. “What do we have to report?”

A short, lean man ran up to him with a handful of papers. “All’s well, Sire,” the messenger said. “Recent reports are that a few Dennalds are giving our warriors a good fight, but most of Fayvale has surrendered to us.”

“Very good.” Jac let a grin slip. “Has there been any unrest from the other nations?”

“Rumors are the Redeemers aren’t so happy with this development, but the other nations rest, Sire—”

“I have a complaint.” A woman called from across the wall. Her chain mail armor clanked as she stomped her way around the troops to stand in front of Jac with disdain. “I was almost scorched to death by a stray fireball, shot down by a streak of lightning, and where were you?” She set her hands on her hips. “Too focused on the damned Dennald prince!”

Jac rolled his eyes. It was just like his younger sister Corina to find something to nag about in the middle of a war. “And yet, here you stand.”

“I could have used some help,” she barked. “You know this is why our father kept the peace treaty with the mages. We’ve lost so many men to their strong magic, that...” She raised a brow and focused on the fur ball at Jac’s feet. “You have a cat.”

Meu had been rubbing against Jac’s leg the entire time. “I know. It’s Azai’s.” Jac scooped him up by the scruff of his neck. “Can’t believe he would bring a cat into a battle.”

“Don’t hold him like that.” She held out her hands, and Jac happily pushed it toward her. “You didn’t know?”

Jac turned on heel and strolled around the troop to check their stronghold. “Know what?”

Her steady footsteps followed behind him. “The cat was around Azai’s neck the whole time. Wore him like a kerchief.”

“Is that so?” Jac paused. Corina held Meu in her arms, coddling him. “Put it down. Maybe he’ll run away.”

“Doubt it.” She smiled as she let Meu jump from her arms. “He’s taken quite a liking to you already.” Meu rubbed against Jac’s legs again, and his sister chuckled. “You should feed him.”

“We haven’t much to give.”

“He doesn’t need a lot. A few chunks of meat from a bone should suffice. Don’t want to give him a stomachache.” She leaned down and stroked Meu’s head.

Jac grumbled to himself. Just listening to this nonsense made him wonder if taking over Fayvale was such a good idea. As if Azai didn't pose enough trouble, this cat would be a thorn in his side.

With another sigh, he stepped inside the fort. Meu followed him down the stone pathway to the ground and outside where they'd just finished supper: a roasted hog over an open fire. Its chewed bones lay in a pile; one man worked to bury them before they attracted too many flies. Jac picked through the top of the waste, finding one bone in particular with enough meat to pluck from.

Meu curled his long, black tail around his body and sat patiently as Jac knelt down in front of him. Surely he could smell the remains, the smoked scent of pork, and blood. Jac dangled a piece of meat high above his nose.

“Want it?”

Meow, Meu answered, standing up on hind legs to sniff the offering. He snatched it from Jac's hand and chewed it down quick. Meow.

“More?” Jac laughed. “You sure are hungry.” He offered another bit, and Meu chomped it down. A few bites later, Meu happily licked his paws—a sign he was done with his evening meal.

“I suppose you're not too bad,” Jac whispered, reaching down to pat Meu's head.

His fur was unbelievably soft, comforting almost, even in this stressful time. Having a pet at the castle wouldn't be too bad, as long as he was quiet and out of the way. Jac stroked down Meu's back to his long tail, and the cat responded by lifting his hind end. He could confide in a cat about his trials being the king of Thowin; he really had no one else to open up to. His sister, as close as they were, was always busy in her room or in the training field, and she seemed to harp on him whenever she had the chance. As for guards and messengers, no, he couldn't trust anyone to keep his secrets as much as a cat could.

“How much do you know?” Jac wondered out loud. How many secrets had Azai told Meu? “Is he plotting his revenge?”

Meu stopped his seemingly endless grooming to look up at Jac with inquisitive, golden eyes.

“You wouldn't know, would you?” Jac chuckled. He touched Meu's head, prepared to pet him again, when Meu snapped and bit him on the thumb. “Ouch!” Jac pulled away quickly, examining the red bite mark. “What was that for?”

Meu backed away, ears flat against his head and tail between his legs. The once happy cat now seemed a feral animal, growling and hissing.

“That’s the payment I get for feeding you?” Jac stood at once. “Get out of here, then!”

“Sire!” Footsteps sounded from inside the fort, the sudden ruckus causing Meu to dart back inside.

Good, hopefully he’ll stay out of my way. “What is it?” Jac returned his attention to the approaching guard.

Chapter Two

Meu rushed across the empty room of the fort and to the downstairs entrance. It'd already been a long night. To play nice, he rubbed playfully across the stranger's legs and took food from the king's hand. Such greasy and disgusting offerings, he'd thought he would vomit. He purred and meowed like a gentle feline. All the niceties were making him sick.

And to think, it was all because his master was captured in a place like this, by a beastly man like that!

Meu rushed down the stairs as fast as his little legs could carry him. They surely built this fort haphazardly, even forgetting to install a door between the stairs and the dungeon. If one stood in his way, he'd never be able to see his master again.

In the dungeon, the guards slept kneeling on the floor. They twitched and moved, lances between their legs, keys dangling off their sides. Meu didn't need any of those; he slipped between the jail cell bars. His master leaned against the wall, arm stretched to rest on his bent knee.

"What do you wait for, master?" Meu asked. "They're asleep now. It's a perfect time to escape this place."

Azai turned to face him, the same grin he wore earlier still plastered on his face. "Have you forgotten about these?" He lifted his arms, his wrists secured together in magic-expelling manacles.

"Those petty things have never stopped you before." Meu wrinkled his nose at the idea that something so puny could affect Azai's strong magic. "Come now, I'll get the keys before it's too late."

Azai turned back to face the wall and sighed deeply.

"Master?" Meu stepped closer. He'd never seen Azai so hesitant.

"I am waiting," Azai whispered.

"May I ask why?"

Azai lowered his head. "For him to come around. This won't last long, I guarantee, Meu. We'll be free in no time."

"But sir, are you suggesting he'll free us himself?" Meu sat on the cold floor, unable to believe what his master was suggesting. Azai remained

motionless. “It’s nonsense, master. King Reinold is a scoundrel; he’d never let you go unscathed. Now, stand and let’s escape ourselves.”

“Meu?”

“Yes?”

Azai dropped his voice. “I need you to find something of great importance while we’re here.”

“What is it?”

“A token made of yellow metal. He should have it, or at least, I hope he still does.”

“Where shall I look, sir?”

Azai paused a moment, searching his thoughts. “On his person. In his pocket or hanging at his side. If you cannot find it before the dawn, return to me and we shall flee.”

“If I do find it?”

Azai remained quiet. Frustration drew up into Meu’s little body. Sometimes he wished he weren’t so small, but as a mage’s familiar, what else could he do to help his master? Instead of pressing Azai more, he bowed his head in agreement, and sprinted out of the dungeon in search of this token.

High on the tower, there were fewer guards on watch; the others were asleep outside near the fire. Leaning against the wall, Jac kept his tired eyes set on the land beyond. He’d been like that for hours this evening, not speaking a word, waiting and watching.

Meu wasn’t sure what he was preparing for; the king had won the battle earlier in the day. But if they didn’t hurry and escape, Azai would be escorted back to castle Thowin for persecution. He hoped this token his master required would help in some way.

All was quiet. He didn’t purr, best not to make himself known at all. Seated with his long tail wrapped around him, he examined Jac’s belongings hanging at his side. The bulky, silver sword strapped to his belt that he brandished quite well in their battle. Then, there was the annoying curved bull horn on the opposite side, together with several other ornaments—keys, rope, and...

As Meu focused in on the strange yellow coin hanging from Jac’s belt, the man stifled a yawn and closed his eyes. He’d sleep standing up? Meu couldn’t understand it at all, but this would be the perfect time to snatch the token.

He crouched down, preparing all his strength to make a high jump. He wiggled his hind end—another necessity, he always thought. He leapt off his back legs, and with an outstretched paw, tapped the corner of the coin, knocking it into better view. It was secured onto his belt, but it was clearly a *token* such as his master described. But as long as Jac stood to sleep, retrieving it wouldn't be easy.

Meu attempted a jump again, carefully making sure not to bump Jac as he rested. Annoyed he didn't move it that time, he growled a little to himself, then crouched down lower. He gathered all his strength into his hind legs. He'd do it this time—he'd knock that token away from Jac and bring it back to Azai. Making one final leap, he thumped the coin, and the horn, knocking them into Jac's side.

“Wh-what is it?” Jac grumbled.

The token dropped and twanged on the stone floor.

Meu froze. Jac's sleepy eyes were dead set on the token next to his paws.

“Why you little...” Jac knelt and picked him up by the scruff of the neck.

Ouch! Let go of me, you brute. Meu writhed in his grip, twisting and turning, desperately raising his legs, doing anything for Jac to let him go.

“Is this what you were after?” Jac picked up the token, and his eyes went wide. “*Fir xum arsou,*” Jac whispered in the Dennald tongue.

Meu stopped his squirming. *Faith and life.* How did the king know the Dennalds' proverb? It was a common saying when blessing loved ones going off into battle.

Jac straightened his spine, stuffed Meu under his arm, and wound his way down the stone staircase. His breath heavy and heartbeat pounding, Meu wasn't sure why the king was so on edge as he made his way to the dungeon.

The guards were still asleep when Jac stepped in front of the cell. Meu looked out from under his arm and saw his master crouched on the ground where he had left him. Shadows hid him well, but with Meu's superb eyesight, he knew his master was glaring at Jac with uncertainty.

Jac held up the token, letting it glisten in the light of the torches. Azai furrowed his brow. After moments of silence between them, he stood at last and approached the iron bars.

“*Fir xum arsou,*” Jac repeated, and his master's expression softened.

Chapter Three

Jac dangled the token in front of the cell. He'd almost forgotten it'd been at his side through the entire war.

"So you've kept it all these years," Azai said, green eyes focused on the token in front of him.

"Of course I have. Guess I forgot I had it during our battle." He pulled Meu from underneath his arm. "Your cat seemed very interested in playing with it."

"Apologies for that. He's quite the scamp."

"Certainly." Meu wiggled away from Jac's hold and slipped between bars to climb on Azai's arm, up to his neck. There he stood and hissed an awful sound at Jac. "See what I get for feeding him." Jac sneered, flicking at Meu's nose with his fingers.

"In any case, you've kept the token I'd given you." Azai smiled. "Why?"

Jac took in the token's weight, the sparkle of its ordinary yellow metal beaming in the torch light, and the memory of acquiring it came into mind. He'd almost forgotten it all; how much it'd meant at the time. His constant training and sparring to become the greatest swordsman in Thowin, then taking the throne after his father's death.

"That I could beat you," Jac sighed. "Once and for all."

Azai tilted his head. "I knew you could."

"I still don't understand." Jac cupped the token in his hand. Azai had claimed there wasn't any power to be had in it, nor did it represent anything other than a symbol of their friendship. "Is it blessed with magic?"

"Of course not." Azai chuckled. "You couldn't withstand something so strong."

"Then, what is it? Why has it granted me all of my dreams?"

"What makes you think it was the token itself? Maybe it was you who conquered the land," Azai said, and Jac's heartbeat seemed to stop a brief second. "Of all the times we'd met in the forest, all the sparring we'd done as children, you didn't once think you'd gotten stronger on your own?"

"Not after you gave me this." Jac opened his palm. The token had imprinted his hand, he'd been holding it so tight. "I always thought it was cursed. Even buried it one day, and left it."

“Ah, I thought you would dispose of it.” Azai closed his eyes. “Strange how you decided to keep it anyway. What made you want it again?”

“I don’t actually.” Jac held out his hand, and Azai opened his eyes wide to the offering. “Thank you for the gift.” Jac tried to smile, but found it difficult. After all these years of hanging on to something so trivial, it seemed a little frivolous to just give it back. “I’ve conquered the land and am now king,” he repeated, if only to remind himself. “Your magic’s no longer useful to me.”

“I told you already, it’s not imprinted with any enchantments.”

“Take it, then. You’ll need it on your way to the gallows.” Jac’s heart panged, though he wasn’t sure why. “To grant you luck.”

Azai seized the coin, and Jac’s shoulders tensed as their fingers brushed together. This would be the last time he’d rely on the token, and the last time he’d witness that crooked smile on Azai’s lips. Through their childhood, the mage wore it well, in each sparring match, and every time they met on the road through Fayvale. Now his grin wavered unlike it had before. In all the years Jac wanted to see Azai’s disappointment, this should have been a pleasant sight.

He forced a smile of his own. “We’ll be leaving for the castle tomorrow. Would you like me to care for your pet?”

Meu had lain across Azai’s neck like a black kerchief, seemingly asleep. “If you don’t mind him.”

Come to think of it, Jac had enough of Meu’s nonsense. “No. You spend these last hours with your friend.” Jac stepped away from the cell just as Azai narrowed his eyes.

A rustling followed, but Jac was already halfway to the stairs. There was no time, no sense in remaining here. He’d enough of Azai’s trickery, from childhood to now; all that was left was to establish their ground in Fayvale. A feat already accomplished.

Once out of the dungeon and on the main floor of the fort, he leaned against a cool stone wall and closed his eyes. Unable to stop the quivering in his legs, he huffed a breath. Why so nervous? This was what he always wanted: to destroy the once mighty Dennald mages and take over their land, plenty in resources—a fresh spring and green fields fit for any crop. It was never a deed completed out of hatred, only because Fayvale had assets that Thowin desperately needed.

But Jac’s heart wouldn’t stop thrashing; his legs wouldn’t stop trembling.

“There you are,” Corina’s voice came through the strain.

“What is it?”

“Were you down in the dungeon?” She raised a brow when he didn’t answer. “Visiting an old friend, perhaps?”

“Nonsense. We are not friends in the least.”

She tipped her head. “Are you sure? You two were always meeting each other on the road during missions.”

“Yes. To battle.” Jac scrubbed the sweat from his brow. “Not to frolic.”

“Well, how would I know? You two would disappear from our convoys each time. Of course, you had come back bloodied or bruised on a few outings. But you would never stop talking about him.”

Jac moved away from the wall. “What does that mean?” He pushed around her and to the outside camp, where most of the troops slept around the warm fire.

“I mean,” she lowered her voice, “you would go on and on about him. Your battles and who won. How *dim-witted* he was one day, and how gifted he was the next. Then, you would disappear from the castle, and be gone for days, only to come home bloodied. Brother, are you listening to me?”

Surely, Jac was. He couldn’t look at Corina now, though, for she spoke the truth. How many times did he secretly venture to Fayvale alone—more than he could count on one hand—just to fight Azai and test his own strength?

He moved quietly around the sleeping men to seek out the fire itself. Everything felt so peaceful and content, unlike the battle that had raged the night before. Sparks crackled off the burning logs; the flames burned bright just as the Dennald fire magic had scorched several of his men in the war. Jac froze. How many men had he lost out in the field to such trickery?

“It’s why our father kept peace with the mages,” his sister whispered.

“He knew of their power...” Jac breathed.

“Not just that.” She stepped up beside him, cupping his shoulder. “It was you.” Jac turned to her in curiosity. “He didn’t want you to get mixed up in such greed. Their land may be rich in soil, but you had always desired something more.”

“And what could that have been?”

She shrugged. “Not sure to this day. Tell me, if it’s possible?”

Jac wrenched away from her kind touch. “There is nothing else. Ridding Fayvale of mages, expanding Thowin, and making use of their prosperous land is all I ever wished for.”

“And as for Azai?”

The mention of the Dennalds’ prince made Jac shudder. He swallowed hard; being king of Thowin required strength, not weakness. “He’ll be executed upon arrival at the castle. And that’s final.”

Corina’s eyes widened. “Then, was this all worth it?”

Jac’s head spun. A question he’d asked himself since the beginning of the war. His mind was made up then, but now imagining what was to come made him nervous all over again. It would be a waste to execute someone with such power—and infectious smile—yet it was that power which made Azai his greatest enemy. Wasn’t it? “Of course.”

Chapter Four

The troop marched in three successive columns behind their leader, their kingdom flags waving high above them in victory. The air was particularly dry and warm for late winter, and waves of heat pooled up from the barren land and created mirages in the distance.

Azai sat cross-legged in the horse-drawn jail wagon; Meu attempted to stay grounded next to him through the bumpy ride. He'd been quiet all night, even when Meu persisted their need to escape immediately. Chewing on his bottom lip, Azai had looked at him once, and with a neutral expression, turned back to study the dungeon wall.

It would play havoc to escape in these conditions, with bands of archers marching next to him, but he could only try. "Master," he whispered. "They plan to execute you upon arrival at the castle."

Azai's eyes were closed. Unmoving.

"Sir, please." Meu was never known to beg, but he had to keep his master out of harm's way—one duty of a mage's familiar. "I heard them speak of it last night. Do you believe it is a trick?"

Azai tilted his head but still gave no answer.

The heat inside the carriage made Meu dizzy, and he stuck out his tiny tongue to help him cool down. If only they were back in Fayvale, he'd curl up under the Bombi trees next to the spring.

"Meu," Azai said.

"Yes, sir?" Meu straightened, his tail flickering happily.

"Promise me, no matter what happens, you will stay back with the troop." Azai opened his eyes, glancing out at the cell bars in front of him.

There was nothing of interest outside the cart: the archers with their bows strapped to their backs and the empty, yellowed field that seemed to stretch on for miles. It truly was a shame Thowin wasn't more flourishing, so the king didn't have to seize Fayvale.

Meu's tail stopped its playful wagging. "If we don't get out of this cart soon, master, we might just wind up dead of dehydration. Come now. Disintegrate those ridiculous cuffs and let's go."

“Meu!” Azai narrowed his eyes on him. “Do what I say.” He lifted his head, jerking his lips into a cunning smile. “Stay with the troop.”

The sun beat down on Jac, despite the water-dipped wrap twisted around his head. Sweat slid down his face; his tunic stuck to his body underneath a thin layer of chain mail. He yawned, seeking a breath of cool air, but sucking in dry and stuffy air instead. Winters in Thowin were disastrous. The biggest river was nothing more than cracked mud. The big field next to them, once green and blooming with healthy crops a year ago, was now arid.

Thowin’s state had worsened over the years. Jac’s father had called for help from neighboring territories; some came to aid with merchant carriages filled with water kegs, but others refused his request. The biggest fields were abandoned. All hands were hired to care for smaller pastures and gardens inside the cities. Further south in neighboring territories, the drought had caused many deaths; Jac would make sure not to let it happen to Thowin, whatever that took. So the taking of Fayvale should help immensely.

He made sure to locate several men to deal with the remaining Dennald mages before leaving the fort. With such few numbers of his troops staying behind, he could come back to a pile of dead bodies when returning to Fayvale, but it was worth it.

Wiping the sweat from his brow with the back of his hand, Jac gasped in another breath and glanced over the land ahead. Two days until they’d reach the castle and the execution of Azai. Heaviness grew in his stomach... Would such punishment be truly fitting for a mage prince?

A loud boom ceased his worries. The ground crumbled underneath his horse’s hooves; the earth caved in near the front line. In the far distance, a hazy procession of men was lined up in the open field. He reined his horse to a stop just as a red gleaming fireball soared in front of him.

“It’s the Redeemers!” he called and reined his horse toward the troops.

Grumbles sounded throughout the troop, “It’s a trap!” Horses kicked and reared as the earth crumbled near their hooves.

“Keep the horses steady,” Jac commanded. The warriors poised themselves in front of the archers like a shield. “Archers, on my signal, we attack.”

Another wave of magical attacks rumbled the land. The horses spooked and neighed their disapproval again. Fireballs landed near the roadside; the scent of

scorched dried weeds burned at Jac's nostrils. *Damn Redeemers should mind their business.* He needed to take care of them now.

Jac pulled his sword from its sheath and signaled in the air. On command, the archers fired arrows across the field, but with the haze, Jac couldn't tell if the attack wounded anyone.

"Why do they attack us, now?" Corina yelled from behind him. "The battle of Fayvale is over."

The ground shook again, cracks splitting the land in two and causing his horse to rear violently. Shrieks and shouts rang in the air as the troop balanced through the shakiness. Some horses trampled away from the sight, while others were soothed by their riders. In the back of the line, a loud smash caught Jac's attention.

The cell carriage lay on the ground, and the metal glistened as a fireball passed by it. Its cell doors swung wide open. Jac scowled. "Azai." His familiar figure was darting across the open field toward the approaching mages.

Jac urged his horse into a gallop. Another earth-rattling spell shook the land, causing his horse to slide to a stop and kick fiercely. Jac grasped the reins tight, but the sudden motion made him lose his grip, and he tumbled to the ground.

He struggled up to his feet and grabbed his head for a moment, breathing away the dizziness from his fall. In the distance, he spotted Azai's figure.

Once a quicker sprinter than Azai, he chased closely behind, breath heavy and still woozy. Clearly the mage had grown faster in his age, but Jac reached out, brushing fingers against his jacket. *Just a little closer and you'll be mine.* Azai's eyes were wide as he turned his head, a motion that slowed him down just enough for Jac to grasp onto him and tackle him to the ground.

"Gotcha!" He pinned Azai beneath him. Azai dropped his jaw, and his throat bobbed. "You really thought you could escape." He trembled at the closeness—Azai's skin unbelievably soft, his full lips open wide, and his breath wafting against Jac's chin.

Meeting his dark green eyes, Jac couldn't understand why he faltered. What should he do now—tie the mage up and escort him back to the troop, or...

Azai opened his palm, a flicker of yellow brightened in the sun, and he let the object roll off his hand and down in the tall scrub grass.

Jac's heart thundered. "The token!" He pounced up off Azai and picked the token up off the dirt. "It is enchanted, you bastard."

“You still believe I would do such a thing,” Azai said coolly as he brushed himself off.

“Of course I do.” It was the only reason the troop was attacked. “It’s a good luck charm.”

Azai grinned. “Is it now?”

“Yes. It’s why I’ve gained so much, because I had it in my possession.” Jac flipped over the token, admiring the way it glistened in the light. “But... it’s mine again.” He pulled his sword from his belt, keeping the token cupped in the palm of his hand. “Come get it.”

“I see. A battle, then?” Azai cupped his hands together; his wicked smile matched those he used to flash when they sparred as children. Slowly, he pulled his hands away from each other, producing a swirl of green magic that formed into a long, enchanted blade. “I must warn you, I’ve gotten better at swordplay since our last meeting.”

“It’s about time you fought me for real.” The sword was Jac’s specialty. He couldn’t imagine Azai ever beating him at his own game. “Ready yourself, then.”

Just as Azai had poised himself for their fight, Jac swung his sword, clashing against the mage’s. Sputters of magic flew from the two blades; Jac’s arms tingled, but he put all his strength into pushing Azai back. He swung again and again, but each time Azai blocked his attack with one of his own.

A boom exploded in the field and flashes of light twinkled in the corner of Jac’s eye—the troops continued to battle the mages in the distance. But he couldn’t let it affect his concentration now.

Certainly Azai wasn’t lying. The last time they’d sparred like this, Azai couldn’t hold his own. This time, he moved with ease, matching Jac’s speed and agility. Green sparks lit up the air each time their swords met. Jac sneered in frustration—how could magic produce such a solid blade?

As he slid back to ready himself for his next attack, Azai disappeared behind him, swinging his magic-made blade over Jac’s head. Jac ducked, but the grip on his own sword faltered, allowing the token to slip from his hand.

Damn it! He swooped down to pick it up, but so had Azai. Quickly Jac scooped the token and placed it between his lips. “No’, ’hat ’ill you do?” His voice was muffled.

“Ridiculous.” Azai chuckled slyly and thrust his sword toward Jac’s mouth.

Jac jumped back and countered; a pop and crackle sounded in the air as their swords clashed. “Come on.” Jac rolled his eyes. He’d wanted this to end; if only Azai would just give up.

Pushing back with all of his might, Jac tried to force Azai to retreat. Instead Azai drew closer and closer still. Both swords creaked and sparks of green magic flickered off the blades, the power strong enough to cause a tingle in Jac’s fingers and down his arms again. He clasped more tightly onto the token between his lips. Azai met his furious stare, pushing his metal blade to the side, allowing him to step up to Jac and...

It happened in an instant. Azai’s green eyes sparkled. Jac’s body froze. A strange warmth enveloped him. He pursed his lips, suddenly realizing the token was gone. With a blink, he spotted the token between Azai’s lips.

“W-what did you do?”

“Secrets.” Azai retracted his magic-made sword and took the coin from his mouth. “Believe me, it’s useless.”

“Impossible. It made me king. Granted me the luck to overtake Fayvale and save Thowin.”

“No.” Azai’s voice deepened. “It did none of that. Understand, it was you who accomplished your goals.”

“Then why did you steal it back from me?”

A fissure in the ground rumbled next to him. Jac’s body tensed. He steadied himself against the earth. A Redeemer had arrived and was directing magic attacks at him. Just as he readied for another attack, an arrow flew past him, tagging the Redeemer mage in the neck. The mage screamed, his hand grasping for the arrow.

Everywhere around the field, dead mages lay among his men, like an open graveyard, ripe for the picking for coyotes and flies. Those left standing continued to fight. Back at the road, Thowin’s archers waved the flags to signal victory. Taking in this triumphant moment, Jac breathed in a stuffy breath. His arms and legs were painful from the long battle already; chasing down Azai only added to the consistent ache.

“Very well,” Azai whispered next to him. “Your men have won another war.”

Jac's eyes widened. "You called the Redeemers to your aid?"

"Why wouldn't I? They are mages, after all." A ball of green magic swirled in the palm of Azai's hand. "Even though they're a different kind. Taught the skills, instead of born with instinct." He flicked his hand, allowing the magic to float—a trick Jac had witnessed through several past sparring matches.

"Our battle is over," Jac warned. "Don't even think of it."

Azai tipped his head. "I wouldn't dare."

"Liar!" Jac reached into the pouch at his side. If nothing else had worked to keep Azai from escaping, this would be his last attempt. The tiny capsule seemed to be filled with nothing but air. It was something commissioned from Thowin's Priestess to stop the mages if they were too dominant in the war.

"What are you doing?" Azai chuckled in amusement.

"Preparing myself," Jac said. "Go on, are you going to attack or not?"

Azai hesitated a moment. He waved his hand to and fro, and the ball of magic followed his movements. It would be a powerful blow if Jac was fooled enough to fall for it—the thrilling sparkle which it created in such gloomy surroundings.

"Hmm, maybe... not this time." Azai reached out. The magic stuck to his palm, and it dissipated quickly back into his skin. "So what should I do? Surrender to you or will you let me walk?"

With his free hand, Jac grabbed him by the collar and wrapped his arm around his neck. "I'm not daft." He squeezed the capsule, letting out the magic trapped inside.

A jolt of power ran through Jac's core, zapping him of his strength and causing his legs to quiver.

"Wh—" Azai heaved a breath. "I-is this the w-work of the P-Priestess?"

"I-it is," Jac could barely speak.

The haze circling his sight made him dizzy. His hands and arms went numb, then it continued down to his feet. The Priestess never said anything about this. The damn capsule was supposed to drain any mage of their magic, rendering them helpless.

Once the strange shock was over, Azai writhed out of Jac's arms and stumbled away. He examined his hands; so did Jac. Something wasn't right about this.

“I... never thought you’d rely on *her* magic,” Azai whispered.

“There you are!” Corina rushed to them, concern etched on her face. “Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Jac answered, though his stomach tightened. *Of course I’m not alright.* “Is it over?”

“The battle? Ye—” She stepped forward. “Stop!”

Jac turned on heel to spot Azai dashing across the open field. “Damn you.” He took a step, prepared to run after him, but his knees quaked and he fell to the ground.

“What happened?”

“I... I don’t know.” Maybe exhaustion was finally catching up to him? She was yanking on his armor, attempting to help him up to his feet. “Stop that! I-I’m fine.”

“What have you done to my master?” A squeaky voice penetrated the air. Next to his sister’s feet, a tiny puff of fur stood; Meu’s ears were down, his nose crinkled, and whiskers pointed down. “You brute!”

“H-he talks!” Jac couldn’t believe his ears. The cat... how could he speak?

“Why do you smell like my—”

“Aww, how cute!” Corina scooped Meu up and snuggled him tight. “I’ve never seen a talking cat.”

“Un-unhand me, wench!” Meu snapped, writhing in her arms.

“A familiar, huh?” Jac huffed. It never occurred to him Dennald mages could also have familiars like Redeemers could, but of course, everything was far different in their worlds.

“In any case,” Corina said, trying to hold Meu still, “we’ve won the battle. Maybe it’s just as well Azai escaped since the cart is destroyed.”

“How are the soldiers?”

“We lost another eighty-nine men.”

Jac grumbled to himself. They’d lost so many already fighting in Fayvale. He’d pay hell trying to explain their losses to the families waiting for their loved ones and the church officials as well, who never approved of his methods since he took the throne. At least with Azai’s escape, he wouldn’t face a lynch mob when executing the Dennald mage prince.

Jac looked back at the now empty field, wondering where Azai could have run to. “Very well,” he said, meeting Corina’s fatigued expression. “Let’s go.”

There simply was no explanation for it. Why did that brutish king smell like his master? It was a familiar musk he’d known for years. Meu stilled in the wench’s arms, spying on the man walking slowly behind her. Something had happened during their confrontation, but Meu might never know what it was. His fears were suddenly realized—Azai told him to stay with the troops forever. Did he know this would happen?

“That’s a good boy,” the wench cooed. “You’re starving, aren’t you? I’ll get you some water when we get to the road.”

“Don’t baby it, Corina.” The king rolled his eyes.

Baby? Meu wanted to jump from her arms and scratch his eyes out if it weren’t for the one fact—this man gave off that presence, the same as his master’s.

“What did you do to him?” Meu asked.

The king furrowed his brow. “Cats shouldn’t talk, so keep quiet.”

Meu sneered, but he supposed the king was right. As they walked from the field, he spotted a familiar shiny yellow token lying on the ground, sparkling in the sunlight where he’d found them. He decided to keep silent...

Chapter Five

It was the work of the Priestess... The enchantment Jac had used somehow drained Azai of strength. Once he was fully engulfed in such power, it was as if his magic was sapped and he could no longer conjure a spell no matter how hard he'd tried. If that weren't enough, when Jac pressed his hard, muscular body against Azai's, he thought he was stuck in a dream like those from before. Or maybe it wasn't a spell at all. Was the weakening of his power all Jac's doing? He recalled the strong arms wrapped around his body, the fierce words—all so full of hatred yet possessing a veiled compassion.

He sat cross-legged against a tree, picking at his nails and debating what to do next. He could try another spell—a greater one this time. He could seek Jac out and... Azai sighed.

Their volatile relationship had endangered Azai at every turn. He knew of Jac's plan all along; he could read his mind: destroy the Fayvale mages, imprison Azai, and execute him. Azai's heart sank when the visions came to him.

Didn't Jac enjoy their fond memories of sparring in the forest together? Why did Jac come to hate him so?

Azai fisted his hands upon his lap, all the frustration from the last few days eating away at his nerves. He punched at the air, expecting his magic to shoot from his fist in rage, but nothing came. With a huff, he tried again and again. His body was shaking, shoulders tense. "No!"

Standing straight up, he hit the tree using all his strength in hopes of spreading a bolt of lightning straight through it. Dried leaves fluttered to the ground. The tree stood. *Odd*. He studied his bloodied fist and then his palms like he had earlier in the day. No one can just lose magic; if it was truly gone, it had to be somewhere else.

Hoofbeats sounded across the dead grass nearby; Azai swiftly eyed the group of approaching men from behind the tree. Swords dangled at their sides. Grease covered their faces. The small candlelit lantern led their way through the small, lifeless forest. Their voices crackled as they laughed.

Bandits? Azai twisted away from them, his back against the tree to keep hidden. Without his magic, he couldn't protect himself against thugs. Surely, he didn't have anything they'd want to steal except a life, if they were so inclined.

“Heh, what a waste.” One of them chuckled. “Them folk ain’t got nothing of worth in this bag.” Something hit the ground. “We should head east to Fayvale, instead.”

“We camp tonight over this hill.” Their nasally voices trailed off as they kept moving. “Leave in the morning.”

Fayvale never had problems with raiders before. Now without his clan to protect the land, Thowin’s trouble would travel to his homeland. Azai’s stomach dropped when he thought of what could happen to his beautiful country—the once green and prosperous land being depleted of its riches. Without his clan or his magic, he would be forced to watch everything he loved perish: traditions, culture, and friendly smiles, all of it.

Azai lowered his head. He’d never felt so helpless and alone. A thought niggled at the back of his mind: if he’d succumbed to Jac, he would’ve been executed. Could death be worse than this?

As he sulked through the trees, he debated where to go. The Redeemers could help restore his magic—couldn’t they?—or they may denounce him since his clan was now gone. It would be a long night...

Townfolk from each province waited near the heavy gates as the troops moved closer to the castle. Women and children ran toward them; Jac’s ears rang with shrieks when they found their loved ones were killed in battle. A group of children played swords with broken sticks nearby, seemingly uninterested in the clamor around them. Jac was once like them, practicing his skills, uncaring of what was to come.

He hadn’t felt the same since leaving the field. Hot and tired, all he wanted was to escape inside the castle walls and have some peace. But a strange tingle had announced itself, starting from his spine and working outward, growing worse through the two long days of travel back to the castle.

The gates opened for them. Inside stood their maids, farmhands, and workers, all ready to tend to Jac’s and Corina’s wounds and help prepare for their next great journey. *Ah, such a journey it will be...*

Jac reined his horse onward through the gates and stopped near the stairs.

“Welcome back, my liege.” A young, lanky servant boy greeted him. “May I help with your bags?”

“Yes, and I shall cook your favorite meal, sir,” the maid said.

A round of applause echoed off the buildings around them. Up on the staircase stood the clergymen. In front of the white robes, the tall cleric clapped the loudest for his safe return. Strange how they commended him now, as the church was opposed to Jac's plans to overthrow the mages in the first place.

Jac hopped off his horse, his knees aching, and stomped past the tending workers toward the cleric.

"Happy you have survived such heroics, my King," the cleric said with hardly any expression. "I do imagine the mages gave you a good fight."

"Quite." Jac nodded. "But why so content with my choice now?"

The cleric turned his palms upward, and with a shrug he said, "Why not? You are your own king, not your father. We're still not thrilled with your decision, but you have succeeded in that which you've set out to do. Congratulations."

Jac furrowed his brow. "Thank you." He'd prepared a speech just in case they didn't approve. Now he didn't have to use it. With a sigh of relief, he moved past the clergymen and sought out his chambers.

The castle hadn't changed in the long four weeks he'd been gone. Large tapestries hung on the walls, dusted and straightened. Glistening suits of armor and statues were lined up below the tapestries in gorgeous fashion. The maids kept the place immaculate, knowing that upon his return, he would anticipate it to be such. Echoes of voices came from every direction. Servants and keepers greeted him along his way across the hallways, but he hadn't the energy for more than a quick nod in their direction as he walked. As he proceeded up a flight of steep and rounded stairs to the second floor, the exhaustion was almost agonizing.

Finally opening his door, he spotted his servant there, ready to take his armor.

"Leave me for now." Jac motioned him away.

Once the man was gone, he set his sights on the bed. Plush and warm, it was better than sleeping on dirt or leaning against hard stone. Jac fell onto the bed, his dirty chain mail clanking together; the strange tingling had finally settled, allowing his tired muscles, eyes, and mind to relax for the moment.

A gentle breeze whipped his hair against his brow. He brushed it back and stared up at the mosaic-tiled ceiling. This once was his parents' room—they'd

hired the best architects of Thowin to design the beautiful view of sirens seeking out the guiding hand of the Maker, describing peace, prosperity, and serenity for all of mankind. So why didn't he feel such tranquility?

"There you are," a tiny voice said from across the room.

Jac sat up and spotted the ball of fur, Meu, standing just inside the door. Damn, he'd never get used to a talking cat. "What do you want?"

"Now that my master is gone, I seem to be in need of a place to live."

"And what about Corina? Why don't you bother her?"

"For your information, she's too grabby for my tastes. I'd rather someone to feed me, pet me for a moment, and then let me on my way."

"Hmph, don't look at me." Jac folded his hands upon his lap. Stuck with Azai's familiar... just thinking the name made the tingling sprout again. "You should have stayed with your master."

Azai... Jac's face went red-hot.

"One problem." Meu stepped forward on tiny legs. "My master ran away without me." He tilted his head. "And there's another problem."

"What is it?" A painful ache shot through Jac's head and he closed his eyes tight. At the back of his mind, he saw Azai. Smiling. Fighting. Green eyes. Long, black hair. Everything about him made Jac tense. Damn it, he was supposed to be here now, chained in the dungeon awaiting his death. It was Jac's plan all along—to capture the prince of the Dennaids, to execute him... A splash of red entered his vision and he opened his eyes quickly, focusing on the ball of fur in front of him. "Leave me alone!"

The hot tingling swept through his spine, across his arm, and to his palm. He opened his hand, and with a flash, the wall nearby tumbled in with an explosion so great it shook the entire castle.

"What the—" He pounced off the bed, his heart thumping, and hand still tingling.

Screams from outside warned him. The strange strike had blasted through the wall, scored the tops of houses nearby, and dispersed somewhere near the castle gates.

"I knew it," Meu said. "It's why you smell like my master..."

Jac examined his hand. Blue wisps of lightning twirled around his fingers—did he cause the explosion? "You mean—"

Persistent knocking at his door came next. “King Reinold, are you okay?” the servant boy yelled from the opposite side.

“I-I’m fi—”

A louder knock came. “Sir, open this door immediately!” the captain of the guard commanded.

Jac’s heart thundered even faster. He held his arm close to his body, unsure what do to. “Azai?” he whispered to himself.

“I-it’s not right,” Meu said, shaking his head. “Such a wild brute like you shouldn’t have such power.”

Jac grimaced. Of course he shouldn’t have magic, none at all. But having Meu regard him as a *wild brute* upset him even more.

“Open the door, now!” The loud pounding continued.

With each passing second, the heat of the strange magic pulsed down his arm like an ache. He couldn’t move, couldn’t breathe. Clutching onto his arm, he wanted the yelling and hammering to stop or to just sink away and disappear.

The door burst open. Several guards came rushing in, stared in concern at Jac, and then at the broken wall next to the bed. Sunlight spilled out over the tiled floor; crumbling stone fell from the top of the damaged wall.

“What happened here?” the captain of the guard asked.

Jac shook his head, hiding his trembling hand as best he could. The warmth spread up his elbow to his shoulder. “M-maybe it was an attack?”

At the doorway, Jac spied the five clergymen dressed in white robes. Their brows were raised in suspicion.

“Were you hurt, sir?” The guard regarded his arm. “Would you like to see the healer?”

“N-no. I’m well—”

“You are not.” The cleric entered the room followed by his men. “Show us your hand, my king.”

“It’s—”

“Please,” his voice grew. “By order of the church, reveal your hand, King Jac Reinold.”

Being called his full name stung, but not as much as holding out his arm to reveal the odd wisps of magic sparkling across his skin. At the sight, a wave of gasps sounded through the room.

“Magic,” the Cleric exclaimed as he quieted everyone around. “Our king possesses magic? Do you know what this means?” His tone was severe, dire. Jac regarded him with caution. “Your father’s treaty with the mages, and now your taking of Fayvale...”

“This is not what it seems.”

“Is it so? Or have you always had these abilities and never told a soul?” The cleric turned to address the men while others idled by the door in curiosity. “Or is it possible our king’s acquaintance with the Dennald prince has granted him the teachings of such power?”

“Impossible!” Jac denied.

“And your breaking of the treaty meant you could take control of the land for yourself, for your wicked undertakings.”

Another round of gasps went about the room.

“No! It was all for the people of Thowin.” Jac fisted his hands at his sides. “You must believe me.”

“Heretic!” The cleric turned back with a furious glare.

“No!” Outside the doorway, Jac spotted Corina still donned in her heavy gear, blood splattered across the chain mail and dirt around her eyes. He’d never put her at such feats for his own need. “This is all a misunderstanding.”

“Should we be sure, then? Guards.” the cleric motioned for them. “Cuff him and take him to the dungeon. A trial of analysis will be set for dawn.”

The three guards approached, delicately at first. “Be still, sir. It’s for your own good.” But Jac burst through their defensive line. A rattle of heavy chains came from the doorway as he sought it. Four more guards stood with cuffs ready to capture him.

Warmth ran through him. The tingling was back as reddish waves of embers twisted around his arms, making the small hairs stand up on end. He waved it away as he pushed through the guards. He writhed in their grips while his heartbeat hammered. The heat was now scorching his skin. He screamed in dismay until he was freed.

He stepped back with ease into the hallway. The four guards stood wavering, their torsos blackened with ash. The burns spread down their legs and up their arms. Jac glanced at his arms—black as well and still painful—then back at the guards as their bodies collapsed to the floor.

The cleric widened his eyes. “How dare you murder your own people!”

A group of guards had already rushed up the stairs along with fellow troop members who’d accompanied him through the battle.

“You’re no king. You’re a traitor!” the cleric yelled, and another wave of gasps echoed louder this time.

“Jac?” His stomach dropped at Corina’s voice.

He gave her a sidelong glance, and then stormed through the ranks and down the long hallway to the stairs. The clanking of armor followed, and he heard the hissing of swords being drawn.

Behind him, the cleric barked orders. “Seize him!”

Into the main hall of the castle, Jac passed by maids and servants who seemingly hadn’t been aware of his charge. A tiny voice called out for him and echoed off the hallowed walls like a chime.

“Meu!” He had no time to look back, though, as the other voices that pierced his ears were still fierce and accusing.

Outside, he found his horse still being tended to in the front courtyard. He hopped up on her backside and steered her past the servants. The crowd surged out of the castle: guards ready to strike, the clergymen still hanging on to their surprise, and the cleric motioning the army to attack.

“Stop this ridiculous act!” Corina yelled over the cleric’s voice.

Meu took a step back and crouched low, wiggling his rear end. With a great leap, he tumbled into Jac’s awaiting hands before the first arrow nicked past his whiskers. “Quickly now. We must escape!” Meu directed, and Jac took hold of the reins, setting the horse at a gallop across the courtyard.

“Open the gates!” Jac commanded to the guards lazing beside the turn-crank.

They must not have heard word, because they were quick to follow his order and the gate lifted.

“No!” the cleric yelled from behind. “Stop him. He must not leave.”

Too late. Jac ducked low as a fury of arrows whizzed past him. He continued out of the gates and to the open road; he'd have better chance to hide from his accusers in the forest, as long as he could prevent the blasted magic from happening again.

Chapter Six

The outside air was cooler than before. Without the moon or a lantern to light the way in the dark, Jac steered the horse around thick trees, staying as far away from the road as possible without getting lost. His eyes burned from exhaustion, and his entire body lacked strength and vigor—he'd spent it all outrunning the guards who'd chased him throughout the day.

Jac had tried to close his eyes, but every time he'd witness something he wasn't sure of. He'd see a black space, full of misery and despair, just as everything was around him. He couldn't understand why the Priestess hadn't warned him, why he suddenly possessed such magic like Azai's, but he couldn't control it. He didn't know how to weave it properly. Strangely enough, the thought of wielding a sword frightened him almost as if he didn't remember how to use one. It dangled in its sheath at his side. The weight was strange there.

He lowered his head, his eyes slowly closing again. The blankness was back, filling his thoughts with gloom... No, with lifelessness. The panic raced through his body and he quickly raised his head.

"Meu," he whispered.

"Yes?" Meu had ridden on the back of the horse quietly the whole time. Hearing his voice was a sudden welcome.

"Tell me, what other magic did Azai possess?"

Meu remained quiet a moment. Jac wasn't sure if he'd get an answer until Meu squeaked back, "I'm not sure. I was only his familiar. Like a servant."

"Then this blackness I see when I close my eyes..." How could he have any sort of magic? Jac sucked in his bottom lip. The strike at the castle was just a ruse, wasn't it, from the Redeemers or from Azai himself. The Priestess gave him the capsule not to gain the ability, but to drain Azai of his. "Never mind," Jac breathed. "Perhaps we should stop for the night and rest."

"It does sound like a swell idea—" Meu paused suddenly.

Jac reined his horse to a stop and glanced behind him as Meu sniffed at the air. "What is it? Are they still behind us?"

Meu tipped his head. "Someone's close. Not the guards, but—"

Jac hopped off his horse and yanked his sword from his side. “Who’s there?” The awkward weight of his sword in his hand made this all the more perfect; at least he could swing haphazardly enough to maybe maul whoever was following them. But the tingling in his hand was back, and lighting the forest on fire was last on his agenda.

A petite figure passed around the trees, his body shadowed. Clacking sounded as the thing moved back and forth, taunting him. Jac tightened his grip around the sword’s hilt and walked faster in hopes of catching it.

A bandit? Or maybe...

As the silhouette slinked around another tree, Jac grabbed him by the arm, yanking him close to take a good look. An old man’s eyes widened; his thick beard was dirty with dead leaves and twigs. “Don’t hurt me.”

“What are you doing?” Jac huffed as he let the old man go.

“I’m catching bats, ’ey. They like trees.” The man motioned toward the branches, and Jac caught sight of a group of black bats hovering just above him. He cringed and backed away. The man chuckled. “Not dangerous, and they make good eatin’.”

“That’s...” *Disgusting!* But with the kingdom’s current condition, residents did all they could to survive, even if that meant eating strange wildlife. “I believe you, old timer. But you were following me.”

“I was. Them bats seem to like you.”

“Me?” Jac sneered.

The old man nodded and laughed again. “Not sure why. Maybe they like your smell.”

Jac rolled his eyes. He didn’t have time for this: to be chased by guards and now by bats. *What next*, he wondered. His smell? And what exactly did they like of his smell, the sweat and blood from the three weeks of war he’d just been through?

“Well, please keep them away from me.” Jac sheathed his sword and made his way back to his horse.

“Will do.”

Meu still sat on the horse when Jac hopped back on and traveled a few more paces. Where would be the perfect place to sleep for the night, away from bat catching old men and the guards?

“There’s someone else out there,” Meu said, interrupting his thoughts.

“Are you sure it’s not another bat catcher?” Jac let a smile cool his worries for the moment.

“No. It’s... familiar.”

Jac glanced around the area. Up ahead, another silhouette came into view leaned against a tree. If it was a guard, he didn’t think he’d the energy for a fight. He came to a stop and studied the figure—tall, lanky, and seemingly asleep. *Or waiting for the perfect time to strike.*

Scooting off his horse once more, he stepped silently toward the being with his hand twitching against the hilt of his sword. Attacking someone while he was asleep was a dirty trick, but one that would work if the figure proved to be dangerous. Standing in front of the being, he examined the form—motionless with arms crossed around his chest and possibly dressed in a cloak.

He raised his sword. The silhouette tilted its head. “Don’t do anything you may regret later.”

Jac’s stomach dropped. He let the sword slip from his fingers. “Azai?” Just speaking the name brought on the all-too-exotic tingle through his hands. Blue wisps of lightning entwined his fingers once more.

“I knew it,” Azai said crossly, stepping away from the tree. He grabbed Jac’s hand to have a better look. “You stole my magic.”

“Why would I do such a thing?”

“You tell me. Maybe jealousy that I’d grown so strong?” He raised his voice. “Or were you so upset you couldn’t hold me, that you’d rather weaken me—”

“No!” Jac pulled his arm away. “It wasn’t supposed to happen like this. The Priestess—”

“Then what was it for?” Azai stood face-to-face with him, dark eyes like black orbs stealing into him. Jac swallowed hard. In a situation like this, he’d be more apt to fight off accusations if it were anyone else, but not after what he’d been through today. “Tell me now.”

“I’d commissioned the Priestess.” He lowered his head. “Before the battle. If you posed too great a threat, I’d use the capsule to drain you of your magic, but I...” Jac took a long breath, his legs shaky and tired. “I never wanted to use it. I could have on our first meeting in the battle of Fayvale.”

Azai huffed. “Why didn’t you?”

“You were... I wanted... a good fight. Not some trick.” *Just like when we would spar as children.* “You’ve always been a worthy opponent.”

Azai stayed quiet. Dried leaves rustled on branches above them. There was an awkwardness in the air that Jac couldn’t quite shake off. Did Azai believe him at all? He shifted but kept still, waiting and watching for Azai’s next reaction. If it were true that Azai no longer had magic, he wouldn’t raise a hand, would he?

Finally, his deep sigh broke the silence. “No. This can’t be.” He scrubbed his palm across his face and turned away. “If it’s true, you have all of my power, now.”

“And you?”

Azai stilled. “Why are you here? Shouldn’t you be at the castle basking in your glory?”

“Yes, I should, but,” Jac glanced around the forest, suddenly remembering why he was running away, “something happened upon my return. A bolt of lightning.”

Azai turned around, regarding him with furrowed brows. “Lightning?”

“They’re calling me a heretic, Azai. With this *magic* I’ve hidden all these years.” The word created a burn at the back of his throat. To think he could weave spells and create such havoc now scared him. “They were never proud of my decision to take Fayvale from the mages, and now they have more reason to hold a trial. I’ll never sit on the throne again... I’ve killed...”

“Uncontrollable magic—” Azai shook his head. “—is a dangerous thing.” Suddenly, his eyes went wide. “Wait. That means...”

“What?” Jac’s heart stammered in his chest with fear.

“If you possess all my magic...” Azai crossed his arms again and pursed his lips. “In any case, we must figure out how to reverse this spell.”

“What do you suggest?”

Azai stepped around him, seemingly in thought. After moments of awkward silence, he gasped. “Most spells wear off in a couple days.”

“We don’t have a couple of days, Azai. They’re searching for me as we speak. I could be dead by then.”

“Then we could commission the Priestess for a reversal.”

“Do you know how crazy that sounds?”

A rustle of grass brought Jac’s interest to the ground near his feet. The familiar black ball of fur rubbed against his leg and meowed for attention.

“Meu!” Azai knelt down, holding his arms out for his pet. “You’re okay.”

Meu stopped with his head lowered and his ears flattened atop his head. “Master.”

“You won’t come to me?” Azai asked.

“You left me with these brutes,” Meu said with a shake of his head. “And now this man smells of you.”

“That’s a little cold, isn’t it?” Jac interrupted. “To just disregard your owner like that.”

“No.” Azai straightened. “He’s right. Since I’m no longer a mage, our contract is void. He’ll go where he’s needed, and if it’s with you, I have no right to protest.”

“Trust me, I have no interest in this violent man.” Jac caught Meu’s glare with one of his own. “Only that I have nowhere else to go at the moment.” Meu’s tail wagged behind him and he bent around to catch it between his paws. After grooming the tip for a short moment, he turned back. “Your plan to accost the Priestess could work.”

“Great. Now I’m being advised by a cat.” Jac shrugged and took a couple of steps away.

“It could work,” Azai said, cupping Jac’s shoulder. “I could train you to use magic, and you could train me to use a sword. We can fight off any guards who come for us, break into the gates, and seek your Priestess.”

Meu nodded. Jac couldn’t believe what they were proposing. “Such an attempt would—”

“You want to prove it to your kingdom, don’t you?” Azai’s words made Jac’s stomach drop.

To be king was all he’d ever dreamed of. Now with all that had happened, and the rumors spreading that he was a mage in disguise, that dream slowly faded. “Of course.”

They'd camped there in the darkness. Azai lay upon the dirt, first staring up at the stars and wondering if their plans to break into the castle grounds would cause more harm than good. When Jac tossed and turned as he slept, Azai's attention drew to him instead.

His eyes were shut tight and his lips drawn into a grimace. Sweat glistened off his brow. He was having a nightmare, maybe, but Azai wouldn't dare wake him. They both needed sleep and waking him unexpectedly could be hazardous. Besides, if Jac's recent days had been anything like his own, he knew even a few hours of rest was good for them both.

But sleep wouldn't come easy.

It was true that Jac now maintained the power of a Dennald mage, a strong force that no one but those born with could understand or command. Training would be difficult, especially if Jac had also taken the ability to read one's mind—his most fearsome skill, only reserved for true Dennalds.

Azai would have to make sure to keep his fascinations with the man at bay, but an odd excitement came over him as he watched Jac writhe in his sleep, his face in pure misery. No, he shouldn't be so thrilled to be here with the one man that wanted him dead.

Throughout the war, Jac had fought hard for what he wanted. Azai had idled. It made his capture easier that was for sure.

He could only hope they'd be friends, or... Oh, who was he kidding, Jac had never wanted to be comrades even when they were children. Jac's strategy had always been to get stronger, figure out how to beat the mages, and take over Fayvale.

The flush through his cheeks faded and Azai turned back to stare up at the stars. His desires would go unanswered...

Chapter Seven

“Wake up,” a small voice demanded.

The lightweight pounced on Azai’s chest; he knew those paws and that commanding voice. He opened his eyes to Meu’s soft face glaring down at him. “Good morning.” His throat was dry.

“The king is gone,” Meu said. Azai sat straight up, and the cat leapt back.

Sure enough, Jac was nowhere in sight. His horse was still tied to the tree nearby, and he’d left his cloak laid out on the ground where he’d slept. For a moment, Azai wished he’d dreamt it all: their switch, their meeting, even the battle. After a quick stretch and a yawn, he rose off the ground and stood in a daze.

Where the hell could he have gone?

He glanced around the trees; to his right, twigs broke and leaves crunched under heavy boots. Jac walked out from the thick, stopping as Azai flashed him a look of concern.

“What’s wrong?”

“I thought you left,” Azai breathed.

“Without my horse or my cloak?” Jac tipped his head, eyes narrowed. Azai sucked in his bottom lip. “Besides, we’re training today, correct?” Azai nodded, and Jac continued, “I thought it appropriate to eat something first.” He lifted up a stiff, burnt carcass skewered on a thin branch.

“Where did you get that thing?” Azai was immediately sick at the sight.

“Old buggers in the forest were catching them last night.” Jac sat near him with his legs crossed, his lips turned downward. “Found their camp just a ways out. Spoke of a trade, paid two coin for this.”

A good idea. They’d need their energy and what better than meat for breakfast. He plopped on the ground beside Jac and took a small piece that he’d offered, quietly eating enough to wake up.

After their meal, Jac stood and yanked his sword from his belt. “I’ll start first. Take it.”

Azai suddenly wasn’t too sure. It’d been years since he held a real sword. Wielding magic swords were much different; those weren’t so heavy or as

painful as a cut from a silver blade. As he grasped the hilt tightly, Jac stepped back. The weight held Azai down; he could barely move his arm to position the thing.

He cringed at the ache through his shoulder as he kept both hands wrapped around the hilt and held the sword as high as he could.

Jac let out a sly laugh. “Heavy is it?”

“A little. It’s just been so long.”

“Come at me with it,” Jac said, holding his arms out to create a target of himself.

Azai narrowed his eyes. “But—”

“You should know how to swing a sword. Remember? And you’ve mastered your magic one so easy. A real one is just the same.”

“I suppose,” Azai sighed. He gripped the hilt tightly with both hands and rushed at Jac, swinging down in attempt to jab him. Jac leapt out of the way with ease, caught Azai by the arms, and knocked the sword free. It tumbled to the ground. Azai turned on his heel. “That wasn’t fair.”

“You’re still not fast enough. Let’s try again.” Jac swept up the sword and handed it to him. “First of all, you’re still not holding it right.”

Positioning behind him, Jac pressed close with hands directing Azai’s body stance: first his hips—Azai immediately went flush—then his legs. “Don’t you remember how to hold it? Just like that.” Jac directed his arms last by holding Azai’s shoulders. The closeness was too much; Azai couldn’t help the tremble or the warmth running through him. “What’s wrong? You had it.”

“I’m...” Azai dropped his arms and turned to face him. He had to ward away these feelings; if Jac caught sight of his true emotions, he could read them and use them to ridicule him. “Why don’t we start on your training first?”

Jac’s face scrunched, and he diverted his eyes to the ground.

“What is it?”

“I-I don’t know.” He shook his head, and then met Azai’s curious stare once more. “It’s nothing. Okay, what do I have to do?”

“Well, as you have already figured out, magic can be fueled by your emotions. So I need you to quiet your mind and breathe.” Azai closed his eyes and took a deep, relaxing breath, hoping Jac would follow his motions. He

focused on his surroundings: a gasping breath trailed on his, a bird chirped high in the trees, and the grass rustled gently nearby where Meu slept. "It's peaceful, isn't it?"

"Y-yes." Jac's voice staggered.

"Are your thoughts at ease?"

When there was no answer, Azai opened his eyes to Jac gawking at him with wide eyes. "Were you listening at all?"

"I tried. Really I did. But... It's hard to say."

It was just as Azai feared. *Has he unlocked the skill to read minds already?* "What do you see when you close your eyes?"

"I see... darkness, of course." Jac scrubbed his face with his hands. "But it's not the normal darkness, it's gloomier. There are figures within, bodies, skin, but I can't make them out. Do you know what this is?"

Azai remained still. Knowing Jac could use his own magic against him, he had to pursue delicately. "I believe so. It's a part of the ability in being a Dennald mage. You can now draw into what anyone is thinking, and given how long this spell on us may last, you may be able to read one's mind fully." A numbness swept through him; that was a lot to give away, the born skills he never wanted to announce to anyone, and no one but Dennalds were said to possess. "You must learn to block it if you wish to learn control."

Jac's eyes were wide again, his jaw agape. "You have to be teasing. Tell me it's all a joke."

"I'm sorry. I can't." Azai shrugged. "But I know it's possible to control it."

"How long will this spell last?"

"It could be two days or a week. Jac, we don't have that kind of time, you said so yourself. Let's move quickly with our training."

Jac furrowed his brow slightly, and then he nodded. "Very well, let's continue."

Since Jac felt so uncomfortable closing his eyes, Azai thought of another way he could relax. "Instead of closing your eyes, I want you to focus on this tree." He stepped out of the way, and Jac's eyes immediately attended to the large trunk ahead. "Take a deep breath and quiet your mind."

Jac's chest heaved a breath; his face relaxed ever so slowly until he seemingly was emotionlessly staring at the tree.

“Very good. Keep at it and do not strain.” Azai stepped away and quickly gathered leaves into a pile away from the trees and brush. Jac had scrunched his nose when he returned to stand next to him; the noise had broken his attention. “Calm, now. That’s it.”

He let Jac regain his composure. The tension breaking from his shoulders, his once visible shaking eased. Azai took a calming breath himself, the worry gently melting away for the moment.

“Gently turn your attention to the pile of leaves,” Azai said, motioning to where he’d built the target. “Stay still. Let your perception be your guide.”

When he held his gaze on the leaves for several moments without fail, Azai continued, “Think of creating a fire there, Jac. A warm, burning fire among those leaves.”

Jac’s face scrunched again. Yellow-orange magic flourished at the tips of his fingers, but he hadn’t broken his concentration this time.

“Yes, that’s it. Can you imagine it?” *The stinging of magic.* Azai wished he could feel it now, the familiar throb, the need to expel it. “The orange and red flames rising up into the sky? Create it, Jac. Create the fire.”

Jac’s throat bobbed. He raised his hand toward the pile, and the yellow sparks grew in number until they encompassed his entire forearm. With a flash, a fireball flew from the palm of his hand to the pile, lighting them as instructed.

Azai’s heart skipped a beat. Excitement filled him.

“I did it,” Jac announced proudly. “I-I can’t believe I did it!” The magic around him waned and disappeared.

“Good job.” Azai stepped to the fire, stomping it out with his boot. “Should we try another, then?”

“Wait a moment. I’m still a little shaken.” It wasn’t long—a quick sigh of relief and a stretch of his arms over his head—and Jac said, “Ready now.”

“This time, let’s try some manipulation.”

“Manipulation?”

“Focus again on the tree and calm your mind.” Azai closed his eyes and allowed himself a moment of repose. “Imagine the earth underneath your feet. The tree roots growing underground. The flowers, grass, plants, everything inside the dirt,” Azai whispered. “Imagine as we both stand atop the soil.”

He put his mind to work, doing the same as he instructed Jac to do.

“Now, shake it like a baby’s rattle. Shake us.”

He peered out of half-lidded eyes, spotting Jac staring steadily at the ground. Pebbles rose into the air and the topsoil shook, but he couldn’t manage anything larger.

“Throw me, Jac. Use the earth to make me tumble,” Azai said, hoping that making himself a target would help.

The ground underneath them shook; Jac had shifted his gaze to the earth near his feet. Soon, the leaves rustled around him, and the eerie creak of the shifting earth unnerved him. Before Azai could steady himself, the ground gave way and he tumbled to his ass in partial shock, partial joy.

“Th-that’s very good.” His voice seemingly snapped Jac from his trance. Azai stumbled to his feet and shook the dirt from his leathers.

The rumble had awoken Meu, who rushed to their sides with a rowdy and anxious meow.

“That one was a little more difficult and exhausting,” Jac said breathlessly. He dropped his shoulders, his eyes droopy.

“Yes, but you—”

“It came from this direction. Over here!” Armor rattled and boots stomped across the forest floor.

“Guards?”

“You idiots gave our position away,” Meu chided.

Jac’s eyes widened. “Damn, come on!” As if he’d regained his energy in an instant, he hopped up on his horse and waved for Azai. “Hurry.”

The guards were close, but Azai couldn’t tell which direction they were coming from. *A patrol? How could they be so careless?* Meu was already in Jac’s arms when Azai straddled behind him. “Where do we go?”

“Anywhere but here,” Jac answered, kicking his horse to a fast gallop.

Chapter Eight

Jac swerved around trees; he jumped fallen logs and fences. He rode fast through the old forest, keeping away from paths and roads. They passed a few abandoned houses—or so he thought. It didn't really matter; they needed to escape.

Teaching him earth magic was a mistake on Azai's part that was for sure. A rumble like that would have woken up the entire forest, but he remembered the excited warmth that ran through him as he completed another spell almost flawlessly. It was too easy, somehow. It shouldn't be, or he thought it would be much more difficult. Closing his eyes to relax seemed daunting with whatever was happening to his mind, but keeping his focus on one area really helped.

A smile lifted his lips slightly.

"They're gone," Azai said behind him. His fingers twitched against Jac's stomach, and he trembled. "We've been riding for hours, Jac."

How disquieting it was to have Azai pressed against him this time—the mage's solid body against his, hands embracing around his sides, and warm breath against his ear. It was something different. Something good?

The visions within the darkness he'd seen niggled at the back of his mind: a muscular body, a pair of hands brushing against naked skin, the flush of such contact... What was this he saw?

"Jac?"

Heat rose through his cheeks. *Yes?* He swallowed hard. *Please tell me what this is?*

"Are you okay?" Azai shook him wildly.

The horse had slowed. The forest thinned out; a broken wood fence stood in their way, wrapping around a house with burned, soiled walls. The door creaked in the wind. Pieces of fabric lay scattered around, hung from the fence and up in the scorched tree branches.

Jac's excitement faded. "I think I know where we are." A sudden sense of melancholy took its place.

"What happened here?"

“Fire last season. We’re close to Resville. They didn’t have much, let alone a means to put out the flames,” Jac sighed. “Let’s move on.”

“We should find a place to stay for the night.”

“Not here. I’d rather not disturb the dead.” Jac steered the horse around the fence.

“Why not? There could be supplies untouched by the fire. And there’s a village close by.”

“It’s courtesy not to agitate the deceased. Besides, I’d rather not be haunted in my sleep.”

Azai chuckled, the vibration rattling Jac’s back. “You won’t be haunted. They’re at rest, I guarantee.”

“Please tell me you can’t read their minds?” Jac pulled the horse to a stop and turned to catch the playfulness in Azai’s green eyes. “I mean, I can’t…” A numbness ran through him at the thought.

“No, you or I can’t read a ghost’s thoughts. It’s an opportunity to gather what we can, as long as bandits haven’t made it through first.” His gaze was firm, defiant but trusting.

“Fine,” Jac huffed as he turned around. “We stay outside of the house. You can rummage through the property if you wish. I want nothing of it.”

“Very well.”

Sparks flicked up into the sky; the flames burned bright, illuminating everything in an enchanted orange glow. Shadows danced on the ground. Tree branches appeared as tiny hands reaching to grab. After spending the evening here, Jac still wasn’t used to it. Were the ghosts angry they were there?

The scent of roasted meat hung in the air; the taste of dinner lingered on his tongue.

“That was excellent. Thank you,” Azai said, picking the remains from his teeth with a small twig.

Jac had caught a jackrabbit with a simple trap. He skinned and roasted it over the fire earlier in the evening. The small beast held just enough meat on its tiny bones to help their hunger.

He nodded and sat back on his hands to stare up at the sky. Though his appetite was sated, he couldn't push away the thoughts that lingered—those fantasies he'd seen, not his own—and how they rattled his nerves. Coupled with the fear of never being able to return to the castle, he was ultimately surprised he hadn't lost his mind yet.

“You're not much of a conversationalist,” Azai mumbled. Smoothing out the dirt, he created a suitable place to lie down. “We should train again tomorrow.”

“Will we be ready by nightfall?”

“To storm the castle? Doubt it.” Azai paused a moment. “What's wrong?”

Jac sighed and lowered his head. “Why didn't you fight me at the start of the war?”

Azai struggled to sit up. “I did fight you.”

“No. You're much stronger than the petty spells you cast then. Capturing you seemed too easy. Why didn't you truly battle me?”

“The truth?” When Jac nodded, Azai sighed. “Our clan was dying.” Jac met Azai's solemn, moist eyes. “For two decades, we have no longer been able to produce a child born of the power. They'd tried so many times, but all of the children were normal. Thus we gave them a choice, at age five they can join the Redeemers to learn magic or stay with the clan as common folk.”

“And so you sacrificed your family to Thowin? Why not just sign a treaty, giving away your land for free?” Jac's stomach dropped. He hadn't meant to sound so rude.

“That would have been easier, but we're not so willful. Dennalds were a powerful force in our time. I believe it's why your father had signed a treaty with our Lord before his passing.”

“What about yourself? You are the strongest mage in the clan. Did you try to create a child?”

“Oh... no, actually. Whether I'd want to, I haven't the ability from a defect in birth.” Azai folded his hands upon his lap. “Besides, I prefer the company of men.”

“M-men?” Jac gasped a breath.

Azai grinned. “Mind you, I had many women fawning over me. They believed the Maker, or magic, could miraculously heal my defects if only I

accepted them. But really, even I knew that wasn't true. I was born without the capability and no amount of worship or spells could affect it."

"I-I never knew..." After all these years, Jac didn't know a thing about the mages, or Azai. Their constant sparring taught him nothing, especially when he was only interested in getting stronger. Finally, after fifteen years, he understood Azai to be a human with a heart like his own, and a body not immune to physical imperfection. He sucked in his bottom lip, unsure of what to say.

"You never really gave me a chance." Azai lay on the ground. "But I understood. Getting stronger was your only motive." A yawn escaped his lips. "It's time we sleep."

The flames crackled against the night sky. Soon, it would be dawn and time to train again. Exhausted and worn, Jac lay upon the ground and tried to close his eyes. The wind tussled his hair against his face, and the dry leaves crumpled and fell from the trees. As much as he tried, he couldn't will his body to relax.

He tossed and turned. Azai let out a small snore... How many hours had passed?

In his mind, a vision began to play out again, this time clearer than before. A pair of masculine hands, not his own, were reaching to touch naked skin. Fingers were gliding across a man's bare chest—his body tingling to the contact, reacting in ways it shouldn't. There were still no faces in his dream, but somehow he knew...

Lips pressed against each other in passionate embrace. A wave of desire spilled over him, tenting his trousers. Hands traced every muscle line. A pinch to the nipple made him tense. Breath wafted against his neck.

"*Jac*," the voice whispered in his vision all too familiar.

His entire body flushed, trembling from the wanton ministrations.

"*Azai*," he breathed back.

With a gasp, Jac opened his eyes. Rivulets of sweat dried to his brow. His cock was painfully hard, trapped within tight pants. He set his sights on Azai sleeping peacefully next to him.

He could read minds? But if this was the case, the mind he was reading was... Azai's?

A flush ran through him. How long had Azai fantasized like this? As much as he tried, he couldn't get the memory out of his head: their bodies pressed up against each other, drowning in passion, in lust.

The quiet of the night only helped to make his tension worse.

Explain to me, what do you truly want, Azai?

Jac could still feel Azai's hands over his body, could taste the sweet kiss on his lips. But Azai lay motionless next to him, his chest heaving slightly as he slept. Carefully, he scooted closer and gazed into his closed eyes.

Serene. Innocent. No, never truly naive as he made himself to be all those years. There was always a true fervor there, though at first Jac believed it to be a passion for war. Now, he wasn't so sure.

He reached to brush a finger across Azai's warm lips. In response, Azai puckered them tight. Could he be dreaming now?

Jac's heartbeat skipped. He wanted... His breath seized in his lungs. He wanted to touch those lips to his own and press up against Azai's body, not in some fantasy or dream, but to truly know how it felt.

Finding himself leaning across the space that separated them, Jac drank in Azai's sleeping face, his red lips, his soft skin, and everything about the mage that he'd never thought to pay attention to before.

Beautiful...

"What are you doing?" Meu asked, snapping Jac's attention to the small black cat standing between them.

"Meu!" Damn how could he have forgotten about the cat? "I thought I saw something, that's all." Jac scooted away from Azai with a huff. "Anyway, what are you doing awake?"

"I'm partly nocturnal, don't you know? Nighttime is the best time for a cat to hunt. Although in this country, I'm not finding much."

"Well, it is winter." Jac scrubbed his face with the palms of his hands, desperately trying to get the images out of his mind.

Meu circled around next to Azai's feet, and lay on the ground with his paws outstretched. "Tell me, king. You and my master have a past together, do you not? Why haven't I ever heard about it?"

"Well, we weren't friends if that's what you're asking. It probably wasn't that important to him, so you just never heard about it." Right. How could six

years of frequent meetings in the forest, and apparently endless sexual fantasies, not be important to Azai? Jac sighed. “We used to spar in the forest together as children.”

“That’s it?” When Jac nodded, Meu asked, “Then why were you about to kiss him just now?”

Jac lowered his head, his chest heavy as he pulled his knees together. *I wasn’t about to kiss him, was I?* “I told you, I thought I saw something on the ground next to him.”

A brief silence had him on edge. “Okay, I believe you. Was it a bug, because I would love to eat a bug right now?”

With a slight chuckle, Jac said, “No. Sorry, it wasn’t. But if I see one, you’ll be the first to know.”

Azai woke to the rumbling of thunder and a flash streaking across the darkness. Shielding his face, he half expected it to start pouring rain. But as he peered out, he spotted the dawn’s light and the blue sky. Jac was gone.

Jolting up off the ground, he glanced left and then right. A figure stood near the edge of the fence. Jac held his arms in front of him, his skin engulfed in magic. In the base of his palms, he controlled two small bands of lightning, the continuous thunder just loud enough to shake the leaves on the trees above.

“What are you doing this early in the morning?” Azai asked.

“I’m learning control,” Jac answered, his concentration breaking enough that the lightning strikes waned. His nose scrunched up in disappointment, in strain, but then he relaxed and allowed the magic to come back brightly. “How am I doing?”

“Impressive.” A feat that Azai had only learned when he was a teenager, now seemingly so easy any human could pull it off. “Did you sleep at all?”

Jac’s throat bobbed. “A little.” The magic wavered again. This time, despite Jac’s force to keep it alive, it dissipated with one last tiny *boom*. “Damn it!”

“No. You’re doing good. Try not to get discouraged.” Azai stretched his arms over his head, his muscles sore from lying on the hard ground. “Do you think we could start training this morning?”

“Yes. The sooner the better.” Jac yanked his sword from his scabbard. “We’ll enter the castle grounds tonight and seek out the Priestess.”

“Tonight?”

Jac nodded. “We can’t wait any longer to reverse this spell.” A hint of unease flashed across Jac’s eyes. “And I know how to get inside without the guards on our backs.”

“A secret entrance?”

“Take my sword and keep it. You’ll need it just in case.” Their fingers brushed against each other, and Azai stilled at Jac’s noticeable tension. “L-let’s start our training.”

Chapter Nine

Riding quietly through the night with Azai clutching around his sides allowed Jac time to think. This was their chance, their only chance, to seek out the Priestess and beg for her help. But if she agreed, what next? He could prove to the clergy he truly didn't possess magic, but would it even help?

And what of Azai?

Before leaving, they'd sent Meu back to Fayvale. Invading a castle was no place for a small cat, and although Azai had protested his leaving, he eventually agreed to Jac's plan.

Clouds blocked out the moon's light. A cool breeze whipped up the grass and leaves into small piles alongside the road. Azai's fingers twitched and he leaned closer to Jac, tightened his hold, and shivered at the cold brushing against his back. Jac wanted to smooth his hand over the mage's, prove to him it would be okay, but he wasn't even sure what to expect.

Without the moon's light to guide the way, it was difficult gauging the time when he approached the castle. Most everyone would be asleep, though—everyone but the line of guards blocking the castle gates.

"Damn," he murmured, leading his horse to the nearest group of trees.

"How many do you suppose that is?" Azai whispered.

"Twenty or so." Jac scanned through the formation. A band of four marched back and forth across the roadway, their swords carried on their shoulders, waiting to investigate anyone who requested passage into the castle. "The church must have issued the extra guard."

"To watch for your return?"

Jac eased off the horse and began tying the reins to the tree. "We'll walk from here."

"Where's this entrance you spoke of?" Azai was on the ground, the sword dangling from his side, large and broad—too awkward for him. But it was his only protection.

"Around the corner." Jac nodded behind him. "We'll make passage around these trees and hope they're not waiting for us there."

After a look of exasperation from Azai, he led the way through the small patch of forest and closer to the large wall. In contrast to the rows of guards at the front gates, Jac grinned when he found the secret entrance lacking protection. Though this also could be a bad sign. “Let’s just hope they never found out about this.”

“Who do you think could’ve taken the throne in your absence?”

Jac groaned. *The cleric?* It would’ve been the only option at the time. But his sister Corina would’ve made a better choice. “It doesn’t matter.” Jac ran his fingers across the heavy stone in search of the familiar crack in the wall—one he was shown only twice before by his father. Once he found the fault, he dug his fingers in and pulled hard. “Here we are.”

The wall gave way and on the opposite side revealed the small row of dwellings within. The lamps inside were dark; all was quiet and motionless. Sneaking through the village seemed too simple. Jac had never seen such lack of guards, as he would order a night watch just in case of intruders. Clearly those guards must be outside the gates now.

Weaving around alleyways and passing clotheslines not tended to in days, something just didn’t seem right about it all. On instinct, Jac sought out his sword quickly realizing where it hung. He’d have magic instead, and Azai had his trusty blade.

At the courtyard, Jac ducked behind a small stone bench. Near the castle door, a single night watchman’s lamp flickered in the darkness. Azai knelt beside him. “Is that the temple?”

On the opposite side of the large courtyard, the temple stood proud. When he was a child, Jac often wondered if it were just as big as the castle. The large insignia atop the slanted roof sure made it as tall; he remembered pretending to touch the tip of the decoration when he stood on the second floor balcony.

“Just have to get around the guard.” Jac motioned toward the castle. “We crawl low to the ground. Hope he’s asleep and won’t see us at all.”

He was the first to crouch on all fours. If the need to be quiet weren’t so important, he would laugh at such a futile attempt. Tiredness from lack of sleep made his eyes sting and his arms shake.

The temple door was close by... he jumped to his feet and barged through, held out his palms and readied his magic for an onslaught of clergy and guards, but found it oddly quiet inside.

“They’re all on the outside?” Azai breathed.

Jac shook his head. “Keep quiet. We can’t be sure.” He stepped further inside, expecting someone, anyone, to be expecting him. “This is...” Impossible? Crazy? What did he expect, a welcome party?

Azai cupped his shoulder, the gentle touch soothing his worries. “Where’s the Priestess?”

“Let’s hope she’s in her room.”

In the far corner of the temple, in a room placed out of the way in case of war, she worked meticulously at her desk. Spell beakers bubbled and boiled next to her. Her flowing white gown spilled over the floor, hiding her feet.

Jac immediately knelt before her, and Azai did the same. She continued to write, seemingly unaware of their presence until Jac quietly cleared his throat.

“My liege,” she said, her voice light. “And the Dennald mage... Azai, correct?”

“Yes, ma’am,” Azai whispered.

“Pardon my intrusion.” Jac kept his head lowered. “But we have come to seek your help.”

“You used the capsule in your battle against the Dennalds?” she asked, turning in her chair to hold Jac’s head in her supple hands. Slowly, she tilted his face to hers; her eyes were soft and understanding. “Yes, I see. Are you not happy with the spell?”

“It wasn’t meant to switch our abilities,” Jac replied. “I only wanted it to render Azai helpless during the war.”

A smile graced her lips and she turned to glance at Azai. “Ah, of course. For so long I watched you both grow into two fine young men. You both possess such great influence and skill. Jac, you were born to be a fine king.” She moved her hands and placed them atop Azai’s head. “And Azai, I do believe you were the strongest, most influential mage in Fayvale.”

His cheeks flushed. Jac couldn’t imagine how he felt being addressed by the Priestess.

“But you are each just as stubborn and cowardly as the other.”

Jac furrowed his brow. “Ma’am?”

“I have watched you build quite a relationship from afar.” She moved away and stood, letting her gown brush against the floor. “Yet it remains unpredictable. To be seen with a Thowin meant weakness in your clan, did it not, Azai?”

Azai lowered his head. “Yes.”

“And Jac, proving your strength and determination for years, where did it truly lead you?”

“I hav-had the thron—” Jac fisted his hands at his sides. “What does this all mean?”

“It means,” the Priestess sighed. “I cannot help you reverse the spell.”

“No.” Jac stood immediately as she moved away. “You’re the only one who can. It was your magic—”

“Oh, but I never said there was a reversal when you commissioned me to help you, my king.” She kept her back turned, fiddling with something on a side table. “Consider this a lesson learned. Although, it would be quite the interesting sight to see if you both master each other’s skills.”

“So you, the Priestess of Thowin, are defying your king?”

“Just as well as the rest of your people, Jac,” she said lightly.

Jac sneered. She knew? With the fact the Priestess never stepped a foot outside the temple most days, Jac was surprised she knew the claims against him. The entire army must’ve warned her, but then, that meant she realized the true effects the capsule would have on him, and on Azai, if they were near each other at the time.

Next to him, Azai remained kneeling, but gazed at him, eyes wide, with his lips open, unable to speak. Disappointed. Jac tilted his head and softened his anger. “Then, we live like this forever?” he whispered.

“There may be a way,” the priestess interrupted. “You must find...” she paused and turned around. A smile graced her lips once more. “A symbol.”

“A symbol?” Azai repeated.

“Yes, something that is very dear to both of you, though perhaps neither of you know. A gift. Something that resembles your true bonds. Enemies. Friends.” She tapped a finger to her lips. “Lovers, perhaps?”

Jac’s heart panged and he quickly pushed it away.

“Friendship?” Azai stood, green eyes sparkling in the lights. “Is it—”

The temple’s doors flew open, hitting the stone wall. “My lady? Are you here?” A rush of footsteps alerted them to oncoming guards.

Jac grabbed Azai’s wrist and yanked him to the wall near the room’s entrance. Pressed up against the wall, they both waited there as the Priestess delicately excused herself from the room. “Good evening gentlemen.”

“Ma’am, we have reports there are intruders about. Have you seen anyone come into the temple?”

Sudden quiet had Jac on edge. He peered at Azai, whose eyes were narrowed, focused.

“Can you hear anything?” Azai whispered. When Jac shook his head, he added, “Try to concentrate. You should be able to read their minds.”

Concentrate? The last time Jac concentrated on anything, he ended up in the middle of a lust-filled fantasy. Still, he closed his eyes and focused closely on imagining the Priestess and the guard: where they were standing, what they were saying... *I will see you both fight to save yourselves.* The Priestess’s voice came to him.

Azai gasped behind him.

“King Reinold, you are under arrest.” Jac opened his eyes to a guard standing near the doorway, sword drawn and prepared to attack.

“She ratted us out,” Azai said, yanking the sword from his belt.

Jac held out his hands, palms up, and flashed a smile. “Of course she did.” With his palms out, the now familiar tinge of magic swept through him.

A flash lit from his skin; the guard shook violently from the strike of lightning jolting through his body. Azai quickly darted around Jac with a jab to the next guard. Three more waited for them after rushing the Priestess out of harm’s way.

“Azai!” Jac hollered. “Hurry! Before more come.”

Azai nodded and dodged an overhead attack, then swooped across with one of his own, taking down the guard who had rushed him. A moment of conceit swept through Jac; he’d taught Azai those moves when they were children. He’d mastered them well enough now to be a great opponent to anyone standing in his way.

Lightning was Jac's specialty. He shot another surge through the two guards, the shockwave hitting the third man as he was falling to the floor, blood oozing from the large cut on his chest.

"Come on." Jac grabbed Azai's hand, leading him out the door.

In the courtyard, shadows darted in their direction from each side, a voice screamed for help, and the whole village was awake with the noise. Jac cursed under his breath. "We'll have to lead them to the entrance."

Just then, a horse galloped toward them and stopped. The guard drew his sword. Jac gathered a strong beam of magic into his palm and shot it at the guard, causing him to fall backwards off his horse.

Azai gasped, "Wh-when did you learn all—" But Jac yanked on his arm and hopped up on the horse with Azai straddling behind him.

Across the village, he galloped the horse faster, past the rushing guards and weaving around cottages and worried residents to the secret entrance.

"Did you practice more without me?" Azai asked.

He jumped down from the horse, pulled open the stone, and was back again. "It just... came to me."

"Came to you?"

Riding out of the entrance, a line of troops awaited them. Azai swooped down with sword in hand, tagging several men in the shoulders. Jac rode hard, away from the castle; troops on horses followed closely behind.

"You know what she was talking about!" Azai said over the rush of wind.

Something that is very dear to both of you. The Priestess's words came back to Jac. *A gift.* "Do you still have the token?"

Azai gasped. He moved a hand away briefly, then the next one. "I thought you did."

"I haven't seen it since the battle against the Redeemers."

"The field!" He grasped hold of Jac's sides again and leaned in close. "We have to hurry."

A sliver of dawn's bluish yellow light showed across the horizon. Jac fought off a shiver; with the troops following close behind, how could they make it before getting caught by the army? Even though he rode hard, the field was still a day away.

Despite the apprehension and Azai's heavy breath against his neck, Jac closed his eyes. He focused closely on the stomping of horse hooves and the ground underneath them, rumbling... He imagined a tower of dirt and rock building across the road behind them to block the troops. Higher and higher, the mountain rose into the air.

The noise reverberated off the ground, making his body twitch. Or was that his magic?

"Jac!" Azai said excitedly. "You're blocking them." He rustled, but Jac dare not lose his concentration. Not yet.

He continued to imagine it, growing higher and higher, though it was difficult to keep his attention on both steering the horse and the magic.

Azai's grip around his waist tightened. "You'll tire yourself at this rate."

"Did it work?" Jac let out a pent-up breath and opened his eyes.

"For now. You may need to try it again soon, though."

Jac nodded. Of course he would, and he'd build it even bigger. He hoped it would be enough.

Upon return to the field, Jac noticed the piles of bodies had been slowly picked off—from vultures and from the Redeemers who took their dead back for proper burial. Still, the gruesome flat land sickened Jac. Why hadn't anyone taken Thowin's soldiers back for burial...? No time to think about that now.

He quickly hopped off the horse and gazed around the pasture. Where had they fought over the token? There was a small hill surrounded by lots of flat scrub grass. Azai was already scanning the ground. Jac rendered a small ball of light on the edge of his palm to help him.

"Where is it?" he groaned under his breath.

A pattering of horse hooves rumbled the ground in the far distance. No matter what measures he took to ward off the troops, they'd followed their target to their destination—exactly what they'd been trained to do.

"Is it even here?" Azai asked, hoarsely. "Could someone have picked it up?"

Jac shrugged and continued to search the ground. Despite the fading daylight, it should be easy to spot with its familiar yellow gleam against his

bluish-white magic. Maybe they weren't close enough? Finding a small coin like that in this big field was like...

"Here!" Azai said.

Jac's heartbeat hammered as he swept down to pick something up. The token had been scuffed up; maybe birds had chipped away at it or it was damaged during their battle against one another. "Give it to me."

"What do we do now?" Azai handed him the coin, but Jac didn't let go of Azai's hand.

"Stay still." He wasn't sure what to do, only that he'd try anything. "Maybe if we stay close to one another."

The rumble of the troops grew closer.

"Come on." Jac shook Azai's hand. "This has to work."

Trails of dust whipped in the breeze around their feet. The silence around them was deafening.

"Jac?"

He met Azai's worried gaze. That look of nervousness didn't fit too well, no. He was too used to being witness to Azai's wicked smile, to the fiendish glint in his emerald eyes. It all used to make him wonder, "*What is he planning?*" and made their sparring sessions much more exciting.

In those eyes, he saw... Another shiver ran through him. A friendship? No. Love?

He pulled Azai closer to him and cupped his flushed cheek in his palm. "I need to tell you something. Things I've seen these last two days."

Azai's eyes went wide and he lowered his head. "Jac."

"Your fantasies. They are yours, right?" Now he wasn't so sure if they weren't his own. "Our lips pressed together. Hands over each other's bodies, exploring. Touching. All of it."

Azai's body went stock-still. "Wh-why didn't you tell me?"

"You didn't tell me how you felt all these years, so how could I?" Jac breathed. "I thought I was going mad, or falling in—"

Azai's cheeks reddened even more, straight down to his neck. "You don't know what I've gone through. How many times I've wanted—"

“No, I don’t. And I’m sorry for never recognizing it before.” Desire seized through Jac. He tipped Azai’s head to look at him again—the mage’s lips were trembling. “I do now. Azai, will you—” He leaned in, their lips brushing against each other’s. “—forgive me?”

Azai’s hot breath wafted past his cheek. “No.” He clutched onto Jac’s tunic with shaky hands. “Kiss me.”

He pressed his lips to Azai’s, drinking in his passion, his taste, his scent. Though his heart hammered, the need to be closer grasped at Jac. He laced his fingers around Azai’s and tightened their grip around the token. Azai’s breath faltered; so did Jac’s. He felt a sudden dizziness, a shock that rattled at his core. He felt as if he were floating or falling; he wasn’t sure which. As he pulled away, he spotted a yellow glow between their hands.

Opening his palm, the token shone beautifully, unlike anything he’d ever seen before.

Azai tilted his head. “It...”

“Worked?” Azai stepped away and opened his palms. Jac marveled at the green glowing ball of magic he’d summoned. The tingle through his skin was gone; replacing it was a normalness that suddenly felt alien. “It’s back.”

Azai nodded, his jaw tensing. “I should... give you this, then.” He pulled Jac’s sword from his belt and handed it back. His lips twitched into a smile.

The rumble of approaching troops shook the earth. At the oncoming confrontation, Azai slid around Jac, taking up a fighting stance. Jac was quickly beside him, sword in hand, ready to attack.

They met each other’s glance.

“King Jac Reinold of Thowin,” Azai said with his wicked smile. “Are you ready to forsake your kingdom?”

“A thought difficult to swallow.” Jac raised a brow. “And are you still a prince, Azai, Prince of Dennald mages?”

Azai let out a brief chuckle. “I had no choice, remember?”

“Yes. So I suppose we’re even, now.”

They turned to the approaching troops, dust kicking up behind their horses’ hooves...

Chapter Ten

Four months later

All was peaceful in Fayvale; somehow it was hard to believe that there'd been a war here just a few months earlier. If it weren't for the tracks left in the mud, by horses and humans, Azai would believe it was like it used to be. Normal.

But it wasn't normal at all, now. The countryside seemed just too quiet. Most of his clan members were gone, leaving Misthaven a desolate village. Blankets still hung from merchant carts, dirty with splotches of mud and dust. Baskets of fruits left unattended had gained the attention of flies and of wildlife. Houses stood empty, clean clothes hanging near the stoops dripping wet from the overnight rain.

The only other visitors were Thowin's troops, guarding what they'd won from the mages four months ago under Reinold's reign. The few guards would march along the roadside from Misthaven to the border and back.

The sight left Azai empty... almost. However, today was glorious.

He ran through the village, kicking up mud under his heels. He'd been on secret patrol this morning, seeking any news about Thowin and their control of Fayvale. A job he'd performed every morning ever since he and Jac fled back to his homeland.

That day would never escape him though... the day Jac abandoned his throne. They'd taken on near thirty of Thowin's best men single-handedly, but not without a scratch. He was left bloodied and bruised—some of the wounds continued to ache. Jac, unfortunately, came away with slashes across his legs and one across his ribs, leaving him ill for a week afterwards. Azai's menial healing magic proved barely enough to cure the infection that had seeped in.

Despite it all, Azai would never forget the way Jac's lips felt on his own. Warm. Soothing. Loving. They'd held each other tightly while the Priestess's magic reversed itself. Who would have thought such an easy task would quash the spell?

He burst into the cabin, finding Jac sitting at the small desk near the bed. His chest wrapped in white, red-stained gauze—the long, painful consequence of the war still oozed at times. He'd not done much these days but sit, writing

letters to his family back at the castle and other narratives. Azai never questioned him. Instead, he'd speak of them of his own accord—brief tales of their sparring as children, or his missions, or of the war.

When he wasn't writing, he'd step outside for a short time, taking in deep breaths of air, then rush back in the cabin. The one thing he hadn't done was kiss Azai, or even speak of it, since that day... He'd approach on his own, or so Azai hoped.

"I have wonderful news," Azai said, pulling back his hood from around his face.

"What is it?" Jac flashed him a curious look.

"Thowin's pulling their troops. The peace treaty has been reissued."

Jac stood from his chair. "You mean, my sister..."

"Has she taken the throne?" Azai wondered. This whole time Jac was writing letters, Azai never knew he could've sent one away in secret.

A smile spread on Jac's lips; it'd been months since he'd held such a large grin. Quickly, he brushed past Azai toward the door. "Do you know what this means?" After a brief pause, he pushed open the door and stood outside, looking up at the sky. The paleness of his skin reddened under the sun.

A rush of excitement ran through Azai. To see Jac so happy again—he'd never thought Jac would regain his composure after sacrificing his country.

"I don't have to hide," Jac said. "Azai! I don't have to stay inside anymore."

"Yes. It's wonderful," Azai whispered.

Jac turned to face him, his smile stuck on his face like a madman's. But Azai knew this wasn't the case. After being trapped inside a small cabin for four months, it was only natural to go a little crazy.

"Thank you."

"For what?" Azai tipped his head.

Jac stepped lightly across the ground to him. "For all your help." He reached out to cup Azai's face in his hands. "I might not have survived. I might not have had the courage to wait out these long months."

"I-I didn't do much," Azai stuttered. Jac's hands were warm on his skin, causing gooseflesh to tickle his arms.

“You did...” Jac breathed. “Healed me. And...” He leaned in close.

Azai swallowed down the thrashing of his heartbeat. At a blink, Jac brushed his lips against Azai’s. His entire body sank into Jac’s embrace. It was like a dream or a fantasy coming true. It was all Azai ever thought about since escaping back to Fayvale four months ago—to kiss Jac like this again.

He pressed closer, tongues mingling, tasting each other’s passion. A gentle moan escaped his throat.

Jac broke away long enough to breathe, “Azai.” The mention of his name made Azai’s knees quake. He nuzzled into Jac’s muscled chest. “You...” Jac chuckled and lifted Azai’s chin to meet his wanton gaze.

A heated flush stung Azai’s cheeks. The closeness had fueled an overwhelming need—his pants suddenly tight and his entire body hot. He tried to lower his head again, but Jac’s hold stopped him.

“Come back inside with me,” Jac said.

He slid his hand away from Azai’s chin and opened the door. Azai stepped inside—what was he up to?—and Jac closed the door behind him. Slowly, he approached again with half-lidded eyes and embraced Azai in his arms once more. He pressed his lips to Azai’s, sending a swath of pleasure running through Azai’s core. In this... silently seductive but sweet moment, Azai could almost melt.

In his arms, Jac walked with him, never breaking their kiss, until the back of his leg crunched against the hard hay-stuffed mattress. He tumbled onto his ass with Jac between his legs. At the jolt, Jac finally pulled away.

The bed rustled. Meu had jumped off the bed and with an irritated meow. He slinked out of the cabin.

“You scared the cat,” Azai whispered. “Are you okay?”

“Shh.” Jac placed a rough finger against his lips.

“What are you—”

“I want to hold you. Fulfill you... Bring your desires, explore my own.”

“Yours?”

“Shhh. I can’t help but admit this frightens me.”

“Being with another man?”

Jac shook his head. “How I feel when I’m with you. When we were together, training to learn each other’s skills. And these last four months, I’ve thought long and hard of what it means. Love has always been difficult; it’s why I’d never chosen a wife.”

Now, he didn’t have to. Jac was no longer king; he didn’t have to commit to the kingdom’s ancient ways of political marriages. Somehow this not only comforted Azai, but it also sent a little shiver down his spine. What would the future hold for them? Could they possibly marry someday?

He wrapped his arms tighter around Jac’s back. “Are you saying you’re in love with me?”

“I’m... I’d like to explore it more.” Jac’s throat bobbed. “If you will.”

“Of course.” He leaned in to kiss him, but Jac froze, eyes focused between them instead. “What is it?”

A grin lifted his cheek. He smoothed his hand down Azai’s button-up shirt, sending shock waves through him until he reached his waist. Azai’s arms gave way, and he found himself lying on his back on the mattress. Suddenly, the flush was back. Jac idled there a moment, each second harrowing, and then explored underneath Azai’s shirt.

Jac ran his fingers around his abs first, tracing lines up and down where his muscles were, then up his ribs and to a turgid nipple. Azai’s lungs hurt as he let out a pent-up breath; his entire body trembled underneath Jac. He’d been with other men before, but not like this. No one had even dared to spend but a second with him, just long enough to expel themselves into Azai, bow their thanks, and leave.

“Mmm, please...” *Touch me more.* “It’s...” Azai bit at the back of his hand to quell his pleas. His words had only caused Jac to chuckle anyway.

Jac leaned over him, placing tiny moist kisses on his lips, his neck, and his collar. His fingers pinched and tweaked at Azai’s nipple. Azai slammed his eyes shut—the visions weren’t his own; they were Jac’s now.

But this was real. Everything he saw happened: Jac’s puckered lips sucking on his neck, his hand exploring down the line of muscles again, and stopping on...

“Are you so excited by this?” Jac’s voice came out deep, playful.

Azai gasped a breath as Jac squeezed his crotch. “O-of course.”

Jac raised his head, eyes narrowed and focused, his cheeks rosy red. He loosened his hand and trailed to the button on Azai's slacks. The drumming of Azai's heartbeat quickened. Jac had found his way to Azai's hard length—Azai moaned at the sensation—and he began to stroke.

When he tipped his head, the sunlight caught his eyes, glistening brown in delight. "I never saw your whole fantasy. Was this included?"

Azai nodded, the flush blooming through him again. "Some were more than this." He sucked in his bottom lip. When Jac's hand stroked against the crown, he let out another lengthy moan.

"I see." Jac chuckled. "Tell me what you want, then."

Azai's eyes widened. "I want..." He wanted this to continue, he wanted relief, but yet he wanted to lay like this with Jac every waking hour of the rest of his life.

"Yes?" The pad of Jac's thumb smoothed over the very tip, and Azai bent away from the bed, a wanton groan easing from his throat, a white heat washing over him. "Like that?"

"Please..." Azai pleaded.

Jac grinned wickedly and nuzzled into Azai's neck, sucking at the spot he'd attacked before. His hand stroked faster, tighter, and it all made Azai lose himself. The white heat came again, and he exploded into Jac's awaiting hand. With another gasp, he sunk into the bed, eyes closed, the visions waning.

Those fantasies truly happened.

"That was..." Jac's breath whisked past his cheek. He rustled with something. The clank of his belt loosened, and he slid his hard length against Azai's. "Can you teach me more?"

Azai gazed up into his wanton eyes and embraced him tight. "Yes."

The End

Author Bio

Azalea Moone is a 30-something writer of M/M fiction. Born and raised in the American Midwest agricultural region, Azalea loved to write horror and suspense short stories in her teens. She'd write in school while in class. With her head down and pen in hand, she'd travel into her wonderland of horror. Two years ago, she turned her attention to M/M romance.

She enjoys writing and reading both contemporary and paranormal romance genres. She also has a newfound interest in sci-fi and fantasy.

When she's not writing, she's gaming on the computer, browsing the interwebs, or spending time with family. She loves computer art and dabbles in various computer art programs such as Poser, 3DMax, and Photoshop.

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