

In Darkness Burning



Bailey Queen

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

IN DARKNESS BURNING

By Bailey Queen

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.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

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.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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Photo Description

Photo 1: A young man, with striking light eyes, is dressed in ceremonial garb. Is he a magic user? He has seen something terrible. There is a heaviness to his gaze.

Photo 2: A second picture below of a man without any armor or garb on shows someone crying. Tragedy. Loss. Despair. Wistfulness.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

What is my story?

[Photo 1]

“You cry, not because you’re weak. It’s because you’ve been strong for too long.”

[Photo 2]

I love sci-fi fantasy; I only ask that you keep the quote. I don’t mind light BDSM, but please, no crossdressing.

Sincerely,

Russ

Story Info

Genre: fantasy

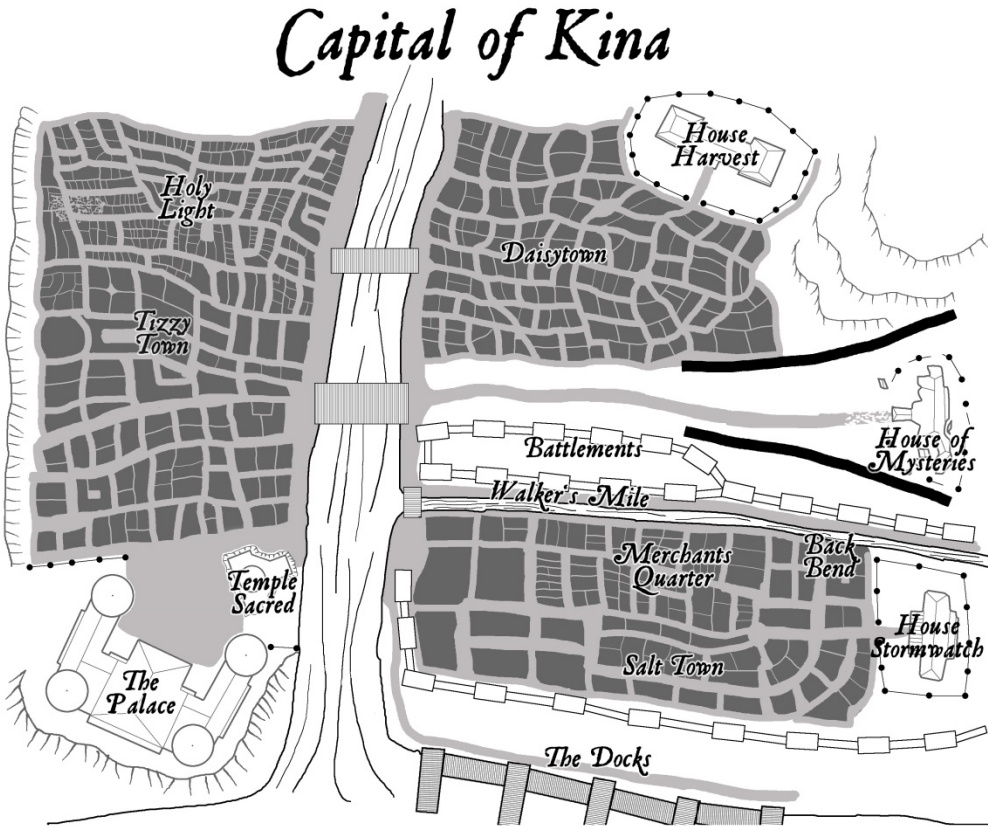
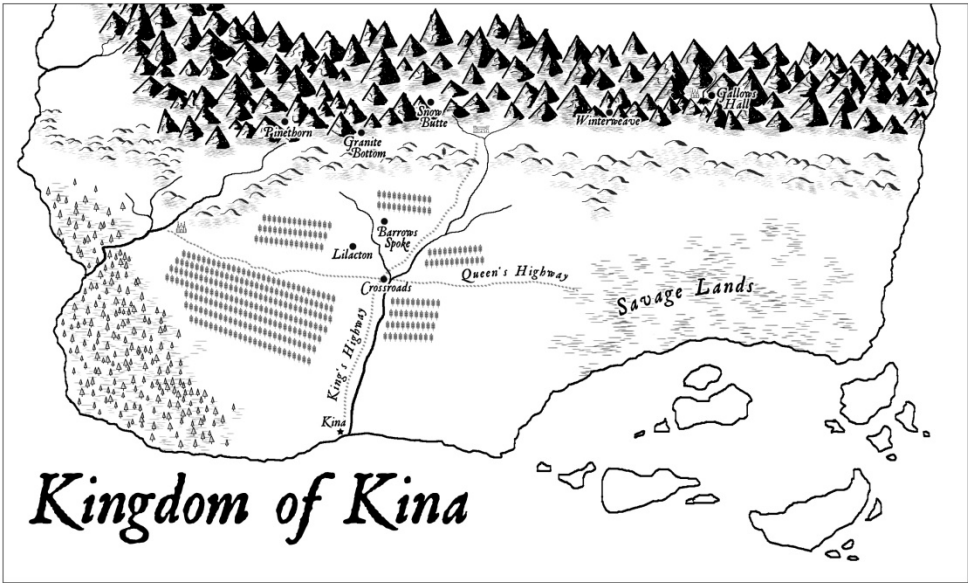
Tags: slow burn, friends to lovers, horror, mage/sorcery, knights, ranger, mystery, magic users, healer, mythical creatures

Content Warnings: graphic violence, battle scenes, torture, HFN

Word Count: 113,753

Dedication

Thank you to my wonderful beta, Marie, for all of her help, guidance, and support. You were invaluable! Thanks a ton! Thank you also to my husband. Your support means the world to me, now and always.



IN DARKNESS BURNING

By Bailey Queen

Prologue

Year 813 in the Kingdom of Kina;

Year 0 of the New Dawn of the Kingdom of Kina

This war was ending, one way or another. And, since Ryius was King, this war would end his way.

He stood on his balcony at the palace, overlooking the capital. Fires raged, burning into the afternoon sky, and screams caressed his ears. Cries of agony, of rage. The sounds of a people being crushed, of his kingdom's future being secured.

Across the cobbled streets of the capital, the House of Mysteries, the feudal House to which all Magi swore their allegiance, shuddered as another section of the keep collapsed into the raging inferno consuming the towering stone hall. His Knights Guard had barred the doors to the House earlier that day, locking hundreds of Magi inside.

Dark smoke hung over the city, great curling fingers stroking over rooftops and snaking down streets. Ash fell like rain, mixing with tears on the faces of the Magi. He could smell the char of burning wood, a dusky, sizzling scent—flesh melting—and the dry heat of the flames carried up to where he stood, overlooking it all.

Braying horses and the commands of his knights rose from the streets. Horses' hooves galloped over cobblestone, mixing with the sound of armor and the metal clash of swords. A deeper thud, then. The sound of a sword hitting a staff. A cry of pain.

Ryius smiled, thin and sharp. Let all the Magi burn. Every last one of them.

His knights rode through the city, quelling riots and chasing down Magi who had tried to flee. Martial law—and the newly enacted laws of the church, his Temple erected to the True Gods—had gone into effect, and all were supposed to be in their homes. Anyone not in their homes was in direct violation of a royal decree, and thus, subject to death. In the morning, his knights would go door to door, rounding up the last of the Magi, and the ones who had a touch of magical abilities, even though they had never studied at the House of Mysteries or taken a feudal vow to serve the House. Any person touched by the Winds and its Mysteries. Any person who dabbled in magic.

After, the church would slay them all.

It would forever be the end of those who dealt in the Winds and wielded accursed magic. The Magi were a blight, a pestilence, a festering wound upon the civility of those blessed to be human. Magi would always be a threat as long as they lived. It had been the Magi who had opened the doors to the darkness, to the Abyss, and let darkness and demons enter the land. Kina had spent far too long a time coddling to the House of Mysteries and accepting the Magi as regular folk within the kingdom.

No more. Without the Magi, there would be no gateway to the darkness. Without the darkness, there would be no war between the Magi and their Winds against the demons of the Abyss.

They would all perish. The Temple would rise and purify those tormented by years of struggles and war between the Magi and the Abyss. Inquisition fires burned, waiting for the bodies of the Magi. Pikes had been sharpened, ready for heads to mount. Seals had been lain around the kingdom, waiting for this day to choke the Magi's source of power—the Winds and their Whispers.

No more magic. No more war.

Even Ryius's own son had shown a predilection to the Winds. He'd been touched, whispered to, and the House of Mysteries had laid claim to his son's life. Labeled him a Mage.

Now, his son lay dead. Strangled. He would bear no Mage in his lineage. By the grace of the True Gods, his grandson—a bastard by a whore from the House of Mysteries itself—was untouched by the Winds. He was clean. Pure. His lineage would pass through to him, then. To Iiorian.

Iiorian would inherit a kingdom free of the ravages of the Magi, free of the destruction wrought from years of spiritual warfare. No more demon incursions. No more vympyres roaming the land. No more blood possessors, or soul screamers.

By the fading light of the sun on the morrow, not a single Magi would live in the capital, or even in his kingdom.

Last to fall were the Paladins and their leader, High Paladin Jakkur. Destruction was here, for Jakkur and his witch knights.

Ryius's hands gripped down on his palace railing, the stone cold and rough beneath his fingertips. He'd overseen the seal placement himself around the Paladin's Cathedral, choking the currents from the Winds and sealing away their access to their magic. A little bit of torture did a world of good, and the Mage who had supplied the formula for the coordinates of the Winds'

concentrations of power, their unseen paths of breath and breeze, was a twisted, mangled pile of bruised flesh and broken bones in the palace dungeons. Seals had been sent all over the country, lying in wait to be placed just so. The Master Seal lay in his palace, controlled only by him, and connected to all other seals. The rest had been placed by his knights, handpicked for the job.

The complete destruction of the Magi in a single day. Victory tasted glorious on his tongue, like flame and power, and he bared his teeth against the smoke-filled sky. This truly was ordained.

His knights were ascending to the Paladin's Cathedral, and without their powers, the Paladins would be helpless, hopeless, and they would fall. They would all fall.

At the Cathedral, Knight Captain Rujil, charged the battlements with a wild war cry. His destrier, a warhorse bred from the hard farms of the west, snorted and stamped, braying in time with Rujil's savage cry. Knights rode behind him, all bellowing, and they tore across the Paladin's drawbridge and into the courtyard with no resistance.

The Knights Guard slowed down and fanned out, surveying the Cathedral's inner battlements. The palace had been bombarding the Cathedral with trebuchets and Honey Fire for hours. Flames curled up the blackened stone sides of the keep, and where they had expected Paladins to be offering resistance, there was only silence and emptiness on the battlements.

Rujil dismounted. His glove caressed the butter-leather wrapped grip of his blade, a perfect fit. Many had fallen so far, and blood dripped from the tip of his sword. Now, he would slay Paladins.

"Into the keep," Rujil growled, motioning to his knights. "You, stay behind and secure the courtyard." Knights in the rear guard nodded and guided their warhorses, steering around the flames and the destroyed courtyard and taking up position.

Smirking, Rujil followed his company of knights into the keep. Their bellows resounded through the stone Cathedral, full of terror and power. They would bring the Paladins down, bring them crashing down from their bewitched ivory tower. The knights would destroy them all and stand on the wreckage of their ruins, and the Paladins would know, finally know, that they were not the chosen ones.

Paladin Lieutenant Shane coughed, choking on the roiling black smoke smothering the air in the barracks. He ran, though, pushing through the smoke and heading for the catacombs where the recruits and the aspirants had been training. Shane's lungs burned and tears flowed from his eyes. He hacked again, his lungs seeming to try to tear from his body. The heat from the flames nearly overcame him, and Shane sagged against the stone walls.

A whispered chant, and his fingers drew a ward rune on the stone. Ice grew from the path of his rune, spreading out across the stone and fighting the sticky flames of the Honey Fire. One of the pots filled with Honey Fire had slammed through the citadel's center window, igniting a firestorm that had only continued to rage. Had it only been an hour since the first attack had come?

Shane barely had enough energy to scrawl a simple ward rune. He could feel his power leaching from his bones, the last dregs of it leaving his body with no replenishments from the Winds. The Whispers were silent.

High Paladin Jakkur had rallied the main force of Paladins in the citadel. He'd sent four riders out through the kitchens, sending them out in their plain clothes on mules used for hauling supplies from the markets down in the city. They were to ride in each direction, spreading the word.

The Kingdom of Kina had turned on them, and the Winds were stifled.

Gritting his teeth, Shane pushed on, keeping one hand on the ice-coated stone wall as he skirted the flames consuming the barracks. Thirty harvests of his life, gone in a moment. He'd given his entire life to the Paladins and to the House of Mysteries, ever since he'd been tapped as Magi at an unheard-of young age. He'd fought in the ceaseless war, the never-ending struggle against the Abyss, and had kept Kina safe. He'd fought demons, the undead, corpse walkers, soul screamers, blood possessors, shades, warlocks, and hungry ghosts. He'd kept the kingdom and the capital safe, had watched two kings receive ordination. He had lived long enough to rise in the ranks, despite his acerbic tongue and hot temper, and had earned the honor of Recruit Master. Two units of recruits had passed through his training, sent out to the Paladin outposts and garrisons spread throughout the kingdom. He was about to graduate the third unit at the next cycle of the moons.

Jakkur had sent him away from the citadel, ordering him to the recruits. They'd been cloistered in meditation, letting the Winds and Whispers speak to each of them in the silence and stillness of their souls. The recruits would have no idea what was happening, not in the catacombs beneath the Cathedral.

At the end of the barracks, Shane found the trapdoor leading to the catacombs. Without time—or energy—for a spell, Shane kicked in the warded door, watching the last lingering tendrils of their wards fizz and sputter in dying arcs of light. Splintered wood shattered as he kicked again, and then he was through, climbing over the cracked door and into the darkness.

Stone-blocked walls shuddered under impact. Dust fell, mortar shaking loose from the archway above his head. Fading witchlight orbs flickered and disappeared with a clap. The Winds' power was fading away. Shane was plunged into darkness.

Steeling himself, Shane ran headlong into the dark, twisting and turning through tunnels he knew by heart. He descended a long, sloping ramp, dropping to the base of the citadel. Wet stone and the slow drip of an underwater spring greeted him. The river was to their right, and the aquifer crept under the Cathedral. It was cold and damp, and the mist of the river crawled over his skin.

Finally, he burst into the rotunda at the center of the Catacombs. Torches, burning low, sat in mounts on the walls, but the light was scattered and dim, soaked up by the darkness. Seven Paladin recruits jumped to their feet, distress vibrating through their bodies and pouring from their gazes. Even down here, he could feel the drain of the Winds and the stutter and boom of the trebuchet impacts against the keep walls.

Kone, one of the strongest recruits Shane had ever seen, strode across the rotunda. "Lieutenant, what's happening?" Behind him, Ementii, Kone's quiet friend and almost equally as strong recruit, stood with the others. Ementii's eyes were clear, but a soft frown creased his young face. Kone and Ementii, the eldest recruits, hadn't even seen twenty harvests yet. The others were younger, some just awakening to the Mysteries and their own Winds and Whispers.

Ementii had the rest of the young recruits gathered near him. Their cloaks bled into the shadows, and he could only see their faces through the flickering, fading torchlight. Eyes wide, lips thin, pressed together. Uwe, the youngest, was terrified. He had a handful of Ementii's cloak clutched in his fist.

"The King has attacked those who swore fealty to the House of Mysteries," Shane said quickly, without preamble. He saw their eyes widen, saw Kone's mouth drop open. "He's trying to eliminate the Magi and choke the Winds."

"But that's impossible!" Kone's anger was raw, and he shook with it. His hands clenched into fists as he stood before Shane.

“It’s not.” Shane held up his hand, trying to conjure witchlight in his palm. A single spark sputtered and died, flickering briefly before fading. “He’s succeeded.” It was enough, at least, to see the color drain from Kone’s face.

“The King has demanded unconditional surrender from the Paladins and has ordered our conversion to his True Gods.” Shane swallowed hard. Kone scoffed. Ementii was silent. “High Paladin Jakkur is making a stand in the citadel.”

Kone tried to push past Shane. “Then that’s where we need to go—”

Shane grabbed his arm, stilling him. “No.” His eyes met Kone’s, burning. “High Paladin Jakkur wants you to run.”

Silence. Then, “What?” Kone shook Shane’s hand off his arm. “Flee? Impossible! I will not run, not while I can stop this!”

“But you can’t!” Shane bellowed. “You can’t stop this! None of us can!” He was shaking, and he turned from Kone, trying to steady his breathing. “Without the Winds, our powers are nothing against the might of the King and the entirety of his knights. The most we can do is get who we can to safety.” He turned again, his gaze roaming over each of the recruits. “They don’t know where you are. You could be training in the fields or out on a mission. You have a chance to flee.” A sigh. “The rest of us are marked. They won’t stop until we are dead.”

Only heavy breathing along with the crackle of the torches in the walls. One sputtered, and the orange glow in the Catacombs dimmed again.

“Lieutenant, you are the best swordsman in the land,” Ementii said. His voice was rough. “Even among the Paladin, you are the finest.” Revered throughout the Great World, there was no equal to the Paladin’s sword skill. “Surely together we can—”

Shane cut him off. “My sword will guard your way to safety. We must go now.” The shudders and booms from above hadn’t stopped and more dust fell from the mortar over their heads. “Hurry!”

Turning back into the dank, dark tunnels, Shane ran through the twisting cut-throughs toward the aquifer and the spring that crept through the walls. The recruits could follow it to the river, and then from the river travel into the backcountry. They could hide, disappear, and survive. Behind him, the recruits ran, following his subtle sounds and the fading torchlight that Kone and Ementii carried.

Finally, they were at the aquifer, and the spring that trickled down between the Cathedral's walls. Snowcapped peaks and evergreens covered the mountain, wrapping the Cathedral in an ethereal forest. The Winds had blown strong there, rustling through the evergreen needles and swirling in the mountain mists.

No more. Fires raged, burning the trees to the ground and scorching the earth. The Winds, choked and strangled, were silent.

Shane kicked open the grate blocking the entrance to the spring. Debris, fallen logs, and forest detritus collected at the grate, keeping clear of the fortress's aquifer. The grate flew, busting off its hinges from the force of his thrust. He was furious, filled with hatred, with rage. He was shaking with the force of his feelings, all of them dark and bleak.

"Get going." Shane motioned to the recruits, herding the youngest through the grate opening. "The knights are in the courtyard and High Paladin Jakkur is drawing them into the citadel. You must follow the spring to the river, then around the mountain, and slip into the backcountry. Travel north, to the outlands, or further, to the wilds. To the west, you'll reach the low country and the farms. To the east, you'll find the savage lands." Shane pointed each direction out, trying to orient the stunned recruits. "South is the ocean. If you can find passage out of the kingdom, that should keep you safe. But beware the ports." He had so much to tell them, so many warnings to give. There was no time. "Stay out of sight. Disavow your allegiance. Forget your training." He swallowed down his black fury. "There are no more Paladins. Not after today."

Their eyes met his, gleaming with fear and shock and too many questions. "Go, go! There's no time!"

Kone and Ementii stood before him after the others had gone, scattering into the woods. Some ran together, others fled alone. He wished he knew which would be safer.

"The Paladins will never be forgotten, or lost," Kone growled. He seemed to have aged since Shane had seen him in the rotunda, suddenly angry and sharp-edged, his face lined with hate. "I will never forget this slaughter. Or forgive."

"Kone..." Swallowing, Shane gripped Kone's shoulder. There was too much to say, too much for their little time left. "The world will change around you. Stay true to your heart." He squeezed down and then slapped Kone on the back. "Now go, hurry!"

Kone ducked down and scampered through the narrow grate opening, down the tunnel through the walls. Thirteen feet deep, the walls had been built. They would fall today.

Only Ementii was left. Quiet, strong Ementii. He'd been like the son that Shane had never had, though he'd never told him how deeply he'd cared. "Ementii, go."

"Lieutenant." Ementii's voice choked off, halting his words. "Thank you," he finally said. "For everything."

"Thank me by surviving." Shoving on Ementii's shoulder, Shane pushed the last recruit through the grate opening and through the tunnel. "Stay hidden. Stay alive."

Ementii's eyes glowed in the darkness of the tunnel. "For what?" His voice was only a whisper, sad and empty, and Shane's heart clenched.

"This is not the end," Shane hissed. "I swear on my soul, this is not the end. Now go!" Shane shouted the last, kicking spring water at Ementii to shoo him down the tunnel. When the sounds of Ementii's near-silent foot shuffles faded, Shane pushed himself up and turned back toward the tunnels. He had to get to the citadel. His brothers were already there. Taking off at a run, Shane prayed he wasn't too late.

He was.

Shane burst into the citadel just as Rujil drove his sword down into High Paladin Jakkur's throat, skewering the old Master on his knees. Jakkur shuddered around the blade and then stilled. He fell forward, lifeless, as Rujil withdrew his sword, and blood seeped from the ragged slice at his throat.

Bellowing, Shane raised his sword and ran for Rujil. Fury blinded him, narrowing his vision until all he could see was Jakkur's blood spreading on the stone floor and Rujil's smirking face beneath his garishly plumed knight's helm. Shane threw his body into his swing, moving with everything in his being as he bore down on Rujil.

Rujil was a good swordsman, the best of the knights, in fact, but his victory in the citadel was due to the overwhelming numbers of knights he had massed against the Paladins, and not, in fact, to any type of sword skill superiority. He was the best of the knights, but he'd started out as a beat knight on patrol in the city, and he always fell back on a lazy beat knight sword swing when he was backed into a corner.

He was nothing against the full fury of Shane, Lieutenant of the Paladin Order and a legendary sword master throughout the kingdom. Shane beheaded him, letting his head roll down the hall of the citadel, before Rujil could issue any commands.

Still, Shane was swarmed, but he managed to slay another six knights before the crossbows set up against him. He only saw the crossbows at the last moment, just before the bow captain called out, "Fire!" Twirling, Shane hauled one of knights in front of him, letting the hapless man take the arrows to the chest. Wet gurgles and the slap-slick of the arrows slamming into the knight's body sounded before Shane dropped him, dead, to the ground.

More knights circled, penning him in. He slashed at their swords, but they kept him back, pushing him slowly into the corner. The crossbows rearmed, moving for height, and he saw them aim down from the balustrade. He was done for, the last of the Paladin in the citadel to fall. Still, he'd taken Rujil, and avenged High Paladin Jakkur. Swallowing, Shane pulled his blade to his body, kissing the hilt as he heard the order to fire ring through the hall.

Only a single arrow pierced his shoulder, but the knights surrounding him didn't waste his momentary stun. They raced forward, tackling him backward and disarming him, and then spent wasted minutes trying to restrain Shane as he thrashed and kicked and spat and bit. Finally, after he was dizzy and coughing up blood from the punches and kicks wailed down onto his head and stomach, the knights let up their attack. Backing away, they left him curled on the floor, bloody, heaving, and struggling to breathe with the copper-tang of blood pouring from his lips and staining the stone floor.

He didn't know why they had left him alive, or why they were backing away, but he tried to reach for his sword, knocked free in his beating, and tried to muster enough strength to push himself to his feet. He could barely push his chest off the stone. Something tore in his shoulder and he cried out, spitting blood and choking.

Rujil's replacement strode into the citadel. He took in Shane, battered, bruised, bloodied, and searching for death through more battle. Snorting, the Knight Captain nodded once and turned on his heel.

The knights hauled him up, then, not caring about his injuries, and lashed his hands together at his front. He couldn't keep his feet, and when he stumbled, when he fell, the knights kicked his sides and punched his head. He felt the crack of his ribs, felt the wet squelch of bruises bursting and blood running down his skin, down his neck.

He was led from the citadel, shoved and prodded, and he fell more than once when they kicked him in the shins and in the knees. His face slammed into stone and rock and he felt his jaw crack. They hauled him up, pushing him on, shoving him through the keep and out to the courtyard. He thought that would be where it would end, that they'd shove him to his knees and execute him there.

Instead, his hands were tied to the lead on the back of the Knight Captain's horse, and the rest of the knights mounted up around him. They set off, and he stumbled as they set a fast trot down the mountain and toward the city. He could barely keep his feet as they moved, and he jumped as much as he ran, stumbled as often as he stepped.

Shane could hear the city criers before they reached the edge of the pensive city walls. Crowded and full of twisting streets—some cobbled, some dirt and mud—the capital city was a muddle of neighborhoods abutting each other, each trying to escape the farmland outside of the city and vie for power and placement within the capital walls, near the Palace, the docks, or the Houses. Those near the edge of the city at the base of the Paladin's Cathedral had enjoyed the prestige of being in the holy neighborhood of Holy Light.

As Shane heard the criers spreading the news of the day, he knew there would be no more prestige left to any who bore the name Paladin, or who claimed any allegiance to the House of Mysteries.

"Betrayal!" shouted one crier.

"The end of the war against the darkness!" screamed another.

"The war is won! Magic is destroyed!"

"A day of blood shed to spare the blood of us all!"

"Salvation from the True Gods as they choke the Winds!"

"Kill the Magi and the war is won! Bless the church; shun the witchery of the Magi!"

Crowds had formed, lining the streets as Shane was dragged behind the Knight Captain's horse. The horse shit, and Shane was forced to step in it. The hot muck coated his boots, stuck to his leggings, and he felt a liquid splatter from the horse's ass spray his face. He tried to spit, but his broken jaw forced him to stillness.

The crowd was murmuring, staring, glaring at Shane, and he felt their wrath rising. "The last surviving Paladin!" the Knight Captain cried. "Murderer of our

knights! We will take him to the King!” The crowd’s unease grew as the Captain shouted, proclaiming Shane’s damnation.

When the shit flew, Shane expected it. Folk were openly swearing now, decrying him, decrying the Paladins, and cursing hate and vitriol against all Magi. Never mind that the Magi had been their neighbors the day before, or that they had cured their children in winters past. Or charmed their gardens—or farms, if they had outlying lands—to prosper. That they had bitterly fought against the darkness for years, keeping Kina safe. Never mind that the Magi had been, if not beloved, accepted, and appreciated.

Not today. Today, the citizens threw shit, flinging the excrement and piss from their chamber pots or scooped from the alleys at Shane. It landed on his armor, in his hair, on his face. Slid down his neck, between his tunic and his skin. Into his boots. Into his mouth.

He glared ahead, staring with murderous eyes at the palace. He was, he thought, to be a public spectacle, an execution by the King, the ultimate highlight of the day’s slaughter. The crowd was following the knights, more a mob than anything else. They cheered as they approached the palace, cheering on King Ryius as he stood on his balcony, waving and smiling at the cheering crowds.

The knights grabbed hold of Shane’s arms and hauled him up the steps, dragging him into the palace.

When he was dropped at the King’s feet, Shane expected to see the tip of a blade, the downward salute before his decapitation. He did not expect the King to order the Knight Captain—Cellor—out to the hall, or to be left alone with the King.

Silence hung in the air, mixing with the smoky scent of destruction, of murder. Heat and horror lay on the city, smothering the air like damp silk. The Winds, always present to Shane, were still. He couldn’t breathe, not at all.

He tried to spit to get rid of the shit covering his mouth. His jaw screamed, and he closed his eyes against the pain. Now, if the King could just get it over with.

He let his thoughts drift, thinking of his recruits. Had they made it to safety? Would they survive? At least they weren’t here. At least they had a chance to live.

Shane didn't hear the King's words at first. He tried to focus, slowly feeling the King's words penetrate the haze of pain surrounding him.

"...the last of the Paladin." Ryius circled him slowly. "Do you know why I have brought you here? Why I have kept you alive?"

Shane was silent. He glared ahead, not meeting the King's eyes as Ryius stopped in front of him.

"I am actually astonished that the Cathedral fell so swiftly," Ryius said, smirking. "I was prepared to send another thousand knights to slay you all."

His teeth ground together, his jaw shrieking in pain. Still, Shane was silent.

"With the mythic legends of the Paladin swordsmen, and your unimaginable sword skill, I thought you'd put up more of a fight." Ryius sniffed, looking down his long nose at Shane. "Looks like you're nothing without your Winds. Without your powers."

Shane swallowed, desperately wishing for the breath of the Winds against his soul, for the Whispers in his mind. He'd give anything to smite the King, just a bit, just for the moment.

"So why did I keep you alive?" Ryius was circling again, slow footfalls echoing on the marble palace floor. He stopped behind Shane. "Would you believe it if I told you that I wanted you alive?"

"No." Finally speaking, Shane glowered as he turned his head, his eyes shadowed with rage.

"I don't care that it was you," Ryius reassured. "Any Paladin would do." A flick of his wrist and he was walking again, completing his slow circle. "But I needed one of you. Just one."

"For what?" Shane growled. "A public beheading?"

"That will come later, but I promise, it will not be your head that goes. Not if you listen carefully." Ryius smiled, and it was a predator's smile, a smile with promises of danger and death hidden within. Shane swallowed, his throat bobbing up and down.

"The war was the abomination. Your magic," Ryius spat, "brought nothing but death and pain. Demons roamed the land. Ghosts hung in the air. Vympyres stole corpses and murdered with abandon." He sneered. "And you wanted us to turn to you for salvation. I," he smirked, long and slow, "found a better way."

"You are strong warriors, though," Ryius said, standing back at ease, "even though your magic is an abomination. The True Gods have ordained this, and

they foresaw the victory of this day. The church will flourish now, without your pestilence in the land. Safety,” he said, “is here. The war is won.” Smug satisfaction leeches from the King. “Still, your prowess as swordsmen is legendary, and the hold you Paladin have had over the folk—your popularity—has always been uncomfortably high.”

Shane felt shit and piss squelch down the inside of his tunic. He didn’t think he was very popular at the moment.

“What I want,” Ryius said, turning with a flare of his robes and a wild flash of his eyes, “is for you to join me. We have more wars to fight, other activities to attend to. Kina has been so consumed with the war against the Abyss that we haven’t looked to the world.” The King stood over Shane, glaring down at him. “Swear allegiance to the True Gods. Swear fealty to me and to the church. Give your sword to me. Serve the kingdom as you never have before.” Ryius’s gaze pierced Shane, darkness warring with madness. “This is your chance to become what you should have been. Loyal. Strong. Powerful. My right hand.” Ryius clenched his fist, gritted his teeth.

Throwing his head back, Shane let out a quick bark of laughter, despite the pain in his jaw, his sides, and his back. “Join you?” he scoffed. “My people’s murderer?”

“You will join me or you will die,” Ryius said simply. “What can you do as a dead man? And without your precious Winds to carry whatever it is you believe you have for a soul to your next world.”

A chill slid down Shane’s spine, followed by an empty ache. His soldiers, his comrades. The Winds had died before they had, and their souls were damned to wander the Wastes of the Abyss instead of being blown to the Light.

“Swear fealty to me,” Ryius continued. “And you will become the new head of the Templar, servants and warriors of the True Gods and the church. You will learn a new type of power, my fallen Paladin. True power.” Ryius’s eyes were still mad, but Shane held his gaze. “You will build up your own Templar command dedicated to the True Gods.” A smirk. “I will even let you practice your craft, let you teach your new Templar, with the deafened and blinded bodies of the Knights who sacked your Cathedral today.”

There was no shortage of men in search of work, and joining the Knights Guard was always a way to earn an income, at least as long as you were alive. That the King would kill his own knights shouldn’t have been a surprise, not after this day, but still, Shane’s stomach turned.

Then turned again, vicious glee at the thought of tearing into the knights who had desecrated his Cathedral, stolen his brothers' lives, and choked the Winds across the kingdom. Who had taken his life, his entire life, in the space of one day.

Revenge sat in his heart. He could taste it, through the shit and the piss and the agony. Sweet, like the roll of spiced wine tannins on his tongue and full of warm satisfaction.

"Join me," Ryius said, watching the play of emotions on Shane's face, "and you will live."

Shane blinked, and a drop of piss fell from his eyelash. "Folk will demand a beheading. You've set this up for one, no doubt. They clamor below, waiting for the head to fall from your balcony." The roar from the city streets was loud, even at the King's balcony.

Ryius chuckled. "And so they will have one. Will it be you? Or do you swear to bind yourself to me as a Templar for the rest of your days? Forsake the dead Winds. Worship the True Gods and serve the church. Do it now!" His laughter gone, Ryius hissed at Shane, spittle flying from his lips.

A pause, as the crowds cheered, chanting their hatred of the Paladins, of the Winds and of all Magi. The day, the kingdom, perhaps the world was lost. Shane closed his eyes. What could he do, other than die? What options lay before him, what paths? His guides, the Winds and their Whispers, were absent. Fitting, in a way, this final struggle. They'd been a people apart, separate with their own culture, their own ways, for so long. In his whole life, nothing had been easy for him, or for his Magi, and their lives were an endless testament to the bitter battles they had all endured together. But they'd served the kingdom, done what they could, tried to protect the folk from the darkness.

It had been Magi, he thought bitterly, that had laid the corners of the kingdom so long ago. When had they lost their way?

And, more importantly, what to do, now?

"I swear, my King," Shane whispered.

"I can't hear you."

"I swear!" Shane shouted. His eyes flew open, wild and overbright, and he met Ryius's crazed stare with his own. "I swear to become your Templar and to serve you for the length of my days."

A slow smile, long and wicked, uncurled across Ryius's face. "Excellent," he purred. He reached for Shane's face, cupping his cheek with his palm, despite the shit coating Shane's skin. "Cellor!" he called, ordering the Knight Captain back in.

Cellor slipped into the King's private solarium. "Your Highness?" he grunted, striding toward his King. He threw a glare down at Shane, snorting.

Standing, Ryius scraped Shane's cheek clean of shit and piss, cupping a handful of the offal in his palm. He waited as Shane frowned, breathing hard, and watched Cellor's snort.

That moment of distraction was what Ryius had been waiting for. Lunging, Ryius slammed his shit-covered palm into Cellor's face, rubbing the excrement into his eyes. Cellor screamed, trying to scratch at his eyes, but Ryius kicked him down, unbalancing the Captain. He kicked off Cellor's helm, leaving him unadorned and shit covered, just like Shane.

"Now!" Ryius shouted, beckoning to Shane. "Take his sword!"

Cellor thrashed, trying to block Shane's advance, but he couldn't see and the last thing he'd expected was his King to turn on him. Shane, though bloody and wounded and running on some crazed combination of battle fury and insanity, lunged for Cellor's sword. He grabbed the hilt, kicking Cellor in the ribs as he withdrew his sword. Cellor howled, cursing, and tried to stand.

Ryius backed away, grinning mad. "Do it!" he ordered Shane. "Enjoy it!"

Shane did. Gritting his teeth, he circled the helpless Cellor, stabbing him in all the weak parts of his armor, sliding Cellor's sword into all the gaps he knew the knights had. Between the ribs, under the arms. At the groin. Behind the knee. In only one circle, he'd slashed Cellor to the ground and the Captain lay in a whimpering, sobbing, shit-covered pile of scared piss and confused betrayal.

"Why?" Cellor muttered. He raised his hands, trying to surrender. "I followed my orders."

Gritting his teeth, Shane hefted Cellor's sword over his head. He saw his brothers, saw his Cathedral on fire. He reached for the Winds, for their cooling calm and for the Whispers and their advice.

Silence, save the fury of his soul, and then, Ryius's orders. "Kill him! Slice off his head and throw it to the crowd!"

Cellor howled, crying out, “No!” but Shane interrupted his shout with the edge of Cellor’s blade, slicing clean through the former Knight Captain’s throat and hacking through his spine in one swing. Cellor’s head rolled clear, spurting a line of blood after him against the cool white marble.

Ryius scooped up the head as Shane collapsed to his knees, heaving air that he couldn’t seem to pull inside of him. He was gasping, but he couldn’t breathe, and he felt blood rise in his throat. Distantly, Shane heard Ryius call for his physician, but the light was fading from his eyes.

The last thing Shane saw was Ryius, his King, hoisting Cellor’s head over the balcony and proclaiming the Paladin dead and the glories of the True Gods at hand. He fell backward, and warm hands caught him before he hit the marble floor, cradling him onto a soft gurney. Heads floated above him, hands moved over his skin, and he lost consciousness as a woman leaned over his chest and counted out his surging, racing heartbeats.

Chapter One

Twenty-Six Years Later

Year 839 in the Kingdom of Kina;

Year 26 of the New Dawn of the Kingdom of Kina

Snow was coming in the north.

Tarl could feel the cold cresting through the mountains, the chill of winter's breath unfurling from the ragged peaks of the Sky Pillars. He could smell it, even, the crisp cut of ice in the high air, tickling the tips of the peaks. Leaves in the forest were changing, turning to wine and ocher and falling in clumps to the ground. His mountains were rolling through the seasons, another harvest well on its way. Far in the northern outlands, these mountains jutted fiercely into the sky, sharp and angry, and they served as the northernmost barrier between the Kingdom of Kina and the wilds. They'd been named the Sky Pillars ever since the Magi who'd found them on their first expedition, laying out the very corners of Kina, had believed that the peaks thrust up the sky itself.

Of course, they weren't called the Sky Pillars anymore. They were called Ryius's Range and the mountains were dotted with the King's seals, choking the Winds that traveled down the peaks and breathed the Whispers into the Kingdom. For centuries, the Sky Pillars had long been a place of pilgrimage, a sanctuary for those of the Winds. A place where the Whispers were strongest, where the Mysteries seemed to be close enough to touch, to feel. Temples had dotted the mountains, as well as simple shrines and offerings of candles, incense, fruit, and bread.

On Sealing Day, they had all been burned. Knights had come that day and moved up the mountainside, sealing the Winds and choking the Whispers. Temples were torched across the mountains and smoke and soot rained for weeks after, as if the Sky Pillars themselves were crying.

Twenty-six years had passed since the seals had been placed and the Sky Pillars had been renamed, and since King Ryius had shattered the Magi in his kingdom. Since the rise of the church, of the Holy Ones, and since the first Inquisition. Since the extermination of the forbidden magics.

But not entirely, it seemed.

Stretching, Tarl gathered his leather bag—filled with herbs, spices, wrappings, and oils—and his cloak and piled dirt on the coals of his small fire.

He'd brewed his morning tisane while dawn's light hit the mountainside, awakening the forest birds and their lively chatter. A small breakfast of nuts, gathered from a secreted stash left behind by a squirrel, finished his morning meal. Tarl tied back his long dreadlocks, letting the dark locks hang down his back, and pulled his cloak onto his shoulders. He slipped out of his hideout and covered up the entrance to his mountain cave with fallen branches and boughs of evergreen. No humans ventured to this part of the mountain highlands, but it was better to be safe than sorry. Outside, charms hung from twine tied to a low-hanging tree branch. Bits of animal bone, a stone polished in the river, an eagle feather. Dried herbs woven into amulets. On the rock face, Tarl had carved runes for protection and for obfuscation. *Nothing here*, the runes whispered in a comforting ward. *Move along*.

He followed a passing game trail down the sloping curve of the mountain, descending from the heights of his cave to the foothills and the more traveled walking paths. The villagers in the foothills wandered as far as the mountain base, but no further. Still, the Sky Road at the base was well traveled from trading, and from moving their cows from farmstead to pasture. He checked the dirt path and, seeing no one, slipped onto the road. Tarl pulled his cloak tighter, letting the folds swallow him as the hood of the cloak drooped low in front of his eyes.

He had to travel to Pinethorn today, all the way in the west. A woman there was pregnant and the church physician had given up on her pregnancy. The baby was positioned wrong, and when it came—and it would come soon—both mother and baby would die from the effort of labor. The father, desperate, had clumsily tried to find Tarl, asking after him in all of the taverns and shops in the foothills. Where was the witch, the one who could heal and still felt a shiver of the Winds? How could he find him? Tarl had stayed hidden for a week, studying the family on his own, but had finally descended and found the man and his wife. They were simple farmers, low serfs in House Harvest, the House all farmers swore their fealty to.

Tarl had visited the father and his pregnant wife several times since, slipping through the backcountry to avoid the Knights Guard patrols. Ever since Old Man Etto had been killed, he'd been the only Mage left in the mountains. The knights—and the church—knew he still existed, and it was a constant game of cat and mouse with the patrols and their warrants. He found his likeness sketched onto parchment nailed to trees, offering a reward for the “witch of the mountains.” There were a handful of taverns in the foothills that let him darken their doorway, and the owners passed him notes with pleas for help from the local folk.

It was hard work, trying to help and heal and ward when he could, and avoid being arrested as well. If the knights found him, they'd give him to the church, and that meant his head, mounted on a pike in the capital. But he felt drawn to help, drawn to heal, no matter that risk.

It was also, Tarl thought, tightening his cloak around his body, lonely. Old Man Etto, the crazy old Mage, had been his only companion through the years. His parents had died on Sealing Day. Tarl had been only a toddler, sitting at his mother's weaving wheel while his father had been selling charms and warding their neighbors' farms. His mother had had just enough time to send him running before the knights had burst into their mud and straw home.

He never saw them again.

Old Man Etto had found him, gathering him from the holly bush where he had hidden. He'd dried Tarl's tears, cleaned his dirt-stained face, and taken him into the mountains. The first few years had been hard, Etto trying to learn how to live without the Winds and the Whispers. He'd been a Mage for all of his life and the loss of the Winds was like losing a limb. He'd never had to make a fire from scratch; he'd always conjured flame and witchlight, and suddenly, overnight, his powers were absent. Tarl had helped him in those years, using skills that he'd used at home when he was too young for the Winds and Whispers.

Old Man Etto had never recovered from the loss of his Whispers. The silence in his mind was too deafening, and Tarl slowly lost him to the mountains. Etto would wander for days, forgetting to eat and return with his robes torn, cloak missing, and raving about the seals and the silence in his mind. The years rolled on, Tarl trying to keep them hidden, keep them fed, and watching as his rescuer slowly slipped into madness and delirium.

One day, Old Man Etto had returned with a shard from one of the seals, glowing and pulsing from its broken ward. Spell light arced from the broken seal, snaking up Etto's arms and trying to burn him. Old Man Etto simply smiled.

He chipped away at it for years, but he only managed to scrape away a few slim inches from the mammoth seal. Barely a dent, really, but he never let up.

Until he was arrested and slain. Tarl could still see his wizened head impaled on an iron pike in the local Temple, down in the foothills. He'd crept down, the furthest he'd ever gone, to see. He wished, after, that he hadn't.

But whatever Old Man Etto had done, whatever had been in those few inches he'd hammered and smashed and chiseled away, the Winds had

responded. They trickled down the mountains, Whispers stealing into Tarl's dreams and into his thoughts. The day he'd conjured witchlight in his palm, he'd very nearly scared himself into a tumble down the hillside.

He felt his magic grow, felt his magic strengthen. He found he could heal. Could ward, like his father.

And overnight, he became an exile, and a hunted one at that.

The knights heard of him after he'd shared his healing powers with the folk from his home village. He'd naively thought that he could trust those from his home. How foolish of him. He'd narrowly escaped and had stayed in the mountains until the knights' patrols had finally lessened. He was more careful now, watched his back. The day would come, though, when he would be caught.

But for the moment, he did what he could.

Walking on, Tarl ducked into the woods and muttered an obfuscation ward whenever he sensed another traveler. He had to wait an hour for a herd of cattle moseying along, taking their time on their wander to the pasture. His charms, braided from forest pine and straw from the villages along this path, warmed when they sensed any villagers on the path. They burned when they sensed any strangers.

Finally, after hours of walking, Tarl slipped into the outskirts of Pinethorn. He kept to the village edges, staying in the shelter of the woods and the shade of the pines. He was early, and he could still see the farmer working in his small fields, harvesting the last of the autumn crops. Greens and herbs lined the farmer's barrows, fresh endives and arugula, rosemary, thyme, mint, and lavender drifting from their harvest and teasing Tarl's nose. A barrel of apples sat under a small tree the farmer had grown. Not a mandated crop, but a personal choice. He'd still have to pay tithe on it, though. A pig and a goat snorted in their small pen, munching on slop and straw and covered in mud. Flowers grew in the straw-hewn dirt behind the pen, wild and scattered. His eyes traced the colors of the petals, cataloguing their uses. The farmer's wife churned butter on their porch, wiping sweat from her eyes. Tarl eyed her carefully, taking in the flush on her cheeks, the full roundness of her belly, the tremor in her hands. He whispered to the Winds and the Whispers answered back, speaking at the base of his brain in soft, tremulous voices.

Waiting was one of the worst parts of his job as healer-in-exile. He wanted to go to the woman, have her sit down and brew a tisane to ease her into a

dreamless sedation so that he could work on the baby inside of her. But he couldn't approach them, not yet. Knights still patrolled during the day, and he'd have better luck sneaking into their home under cover of dark. He was not ready to face a beat patrol knight looking to prove himself to his superiors in the outlands of the kingdom. So, Tarl settled in, leaning back against a thick pine tree and wrapping his cloak around himself. Clover brushed his legs, and he rubbed his hands over his stained leggings. Living in exile didn't afford luxuries like bathing. Dirt ground into his fingernails and he could feel the thinness of his hand wraps. He'd need to find new cloth to wrap his hands with, soon.

Finally, when the sun had set and the Temple's prayer bells tolled their last cries of the day, the farmer lit the signal—one candle in the window facing the forest—and Tarl crept from his watch into the village. The farmer's gate opened at his gesture, closing silently behind him, and he slipped up to the farmer's mud and straw home, so like the one he'd been born in. Their baby would be a farmer, too, and would inherit this house, most likely. The days of children possibly being touched by the Winds and traveling to the House of Mysteries were over. Children stayed in the stations of their birth, stuck in the feudal roots of their family for generations.

The farmer was waiting at his door, nervous eyes darting up and down the dirt paths of the village. Tarl passed by him, and the farmer shut and locked the door, bolting the storm guard down on the inside for extra measure. His wife sat on a thatched chair by the fire, breathing hard. Her skin was red, and Tarl knew she'd be hot to the touch. Sweat beaded down her forehead.

Tarl pushed back his hood and knelt by the wife. She tried to smile at him, but he could see her exhaustion. Having a baby at the harvest was always a rough ordeal, but carrying a struggling baby was even more taxing. "How are you today, mother?" Tarl asked. He took one of her hands in his, stroking his thumb over the back of her palm. Hot, as he thought.

"Tired," she answered, swallowing. "I can barely stand."

The farmer hovered over his wife, gripping the back of her chair. His shoulders were bowed, tense as he watched Tarl.

"How many moons has it been since you last bled?" Tarl turned her hand over, tracing the lines in her palm.

"Eight moons." She grimaced, rubbing her hand over her swollen belly.

Nodding, Tarl met the father's eyes over her shoulder. "The baby will come," he said. "Tonight."

The farmer and his wife's hands met, grasping at her shoulder. She inhaled deeply, and he saw resignation and fear in her eyes. "The church physician says that the baby is positioned wrong," she said softly. "That we both will die."

Tarl smiled. "They cannot do what I can." He squeezed her hand and stood, looking to the father. "I will need garden mint, lavender, thyme, and rosemary from your stores, along with a bowl of water. And linens. All the linens you have."

The father nodded and headed for the sideboard, picking through their jars and wooden boxes for the herbs Tarl needed. Tarl saw his hands shaking, saw him close his eyes and steel himself, rubbing his hand over his mouth. The farmer looked up, staring at a rough-hewn painting stenciled on a lopsided sign. Crossed fists over a snubbed candle, in pale blue. The sign of the church, of the Temple. Tarl saw the farmer cross his fists over his chest and mutter a quick prayer.

Looking away, Tarl pulled his own herbs and supplies from his pack—chamomile, hyacinth, and mesquite. He set the mesquite in one of his clay bowls and summoned a flame, igniting the bark shavings. Gentle fire rose from the bowl.

The father returned, staring openly at Tarl's magic. He gripped his wife's shoulder again and shakily passed over the herbs and a bowl of water.

"Thank you." Tarl smiled, trying to be reassuring. He forgot, sometimes, that magic wasn't normal anymore. These two were young. They might have never seen the magic he so casually used. To him, and to all church faithful, Tarl's power represented the vilest evil the church could conjure, a doorway to the darkness. "Please, take her to the bed. Make her comfortable. I will bring her an infusion in a moment." Tarl bent to his herbs as the two headed for their bed, tucked in the back of their simple home. He split the chamomile, adding a handful of the herb to a cup of water heated over the fire. The rest he added to another bowl, and he finger-drew a ward rune in the herbs and then lit it in the center. Fragrant smoke curled from the bowl, sparking with his rune's power. *Rest*, the smoke whispered. *Relax*.

Taking both in hand, Tarl moved to their bed. The father had gathered blankets around his wife, making her comfortable. A pile of linens lay next to them both, frayed at the edges. One lantern swung above the bed, the candle burning low. He'd need more light. Tarl summoned witchlight with a thought and sent the orbs to the corners of the bed. He heard the father hiss, saw him grip his wife's hand.

“Please, drink this.” He passed the chamomile tisane to the mother and set the smoking bowl on the floor beside her. The smoke wafted upward, drifting over her. He watched her eyes slowly drift closed, and took the tisane from her before she dropped the cup.

“Is she all right?” Fear clung to the father’s words.

“She’s fine.” Tarl smiled again, smoothed back her hair. “I put her to sleep. I need to work on the baby for a little while, and then I’ll wake her up when it’s time to deliver your child.”

He nodded, but his hands shook as he buried his face in his palms. “Tell me what to do, witch. I’ll help with anything I can.”

Ignoring the insult, Tarl nodded back to the bowl of water. “Bring that, and the rosemary.” When the father returned, Tarl shook the rosemary herb into the water and stirred, then dipped his hands into the infusion. The fresh tang scent of the rosemary tickled his nose, and he closed his eyes as he drew runes in the water and washed his hands. The scent clung to him as he withdrew and dried off on one of their linens.

Next, he added lavender and thyme to the bowl of burning mesquite, once the chamomile had burned off. More herbs for rest and protection, and for strength. She would need it, when the time came to deliver.

Finally, Tarl ground the hyacinth and the garden mint, adding his spit to the herbs and a drop of rosemary water to make a paste. He reached for the Winds, asking for their help with his healing. He felt a brush at the back of his mind, the Whispers’ caress.

Setting the burning bowl back where the mother could inhale the smoke, Tarl placed the herbal paste beside her and knelt between her legs. The father hovered, arms crossed and frowning, as Tarl lifted her skirts and reached for her swollen belly. This close to her, he could feel the pulse of her life force pounding strong and echoing in his blood. One hand went to the warmth between her legs, resting on her regions. The other hand he rested on her belly.

He saw the baby, turned upside down and wrapped around its cord. Their baby boy would try to emerge feet-first, and there was no way to gently encourage him to tumble. He’d have to be told.

“Please, strip your wife of her dress,” Tarl said to the father, nodding toward the ties of her dress crossing over her breasts. “I’ll need to lay the herbs on her before I work on your son.”

Jerking, the father moved from suspicion, to shock, to wonder, all in one moment. “Son?”

“Yes, your son.” Tarl nudged him on. “Please, the dress. We don’t have much time.”

He moved quickly, kneeling beside his wife on the bed and stripping her of her clothing. Smoke curled around her head, encasing her in slumber. Lavender and thyme mixed with the heady smell of mesquite.

She was laid bare in a moment, breasts full and sagging with rich milk for her son, belly round and ready for birth. Tarl dipped his fingers in his herb paste and sketched a long line down the center of her belly, all the way to the center of her regions. He added runes to her breasts and her belly, and then laid his hands on either side of the baby boy inside of her. He called the Winds, called the Whispers, and pushed his power into her belly. He reached for their son’s mind, for his young soul.

Tarl felt the baby boy respond, curling toward his warmth and his power. *Follow me*, Tarl called. He closed his eyes, pressing on her belly, and used the pull of his magic and his hands to guide the baby. *Turn for me, little one*. He felt the baby respond, curiosity following the sparkle of his magic, and felt him begin to uncurl. A press, longer then, and a brush of the baby’s mind against his own. A question.

Yes, little one, Tarl whispered. *You’ll meet your parents tonight. But I need you to turn for me. You’re backward*. A chuckle, the sound of an infant’s giggle, echoed in his mind. He pressed on her belly again and felt warm wetness slick beneath his palm.

Finally, the baby boy kicked and punched, pummeling his way into position, and Tarl felt the baby boy touch his mind again. *Yes, this is good. Well done. You’re on your way now*.

Tarl opened his eyes. The father was staring at him, his knuckles clenched white, and the mother was breathing hard, panting in her sleep. “It’s time to wake her,” Tarl said. “Say her name.”

Leaning low, the father whispered in her ear, too soft for Tarl to hear. He knew of the fear that drove folk to hide their names from the Magi. Names held power. The power to bind, to summon, to conjure. To enthrall or enslave, if one had that sort of power and inclination.

She woke immediately, gasping, and he felt the wetness between her thighs gush forth. She grasped her husband’s hands, fear in her eyes, but Tarl spoke

first. “Your baby boy is ready to meet you both.” He smiled, and his hands shifted her thighs apart. “Let’s meet him.”

Hours later, in the dead watches of the night, Tarl rinsed his bloodied hands with the bowl of rosemary water behind their house and dried himself on one of the leftover linens. He took the bowl of burned lavender, mesquite, chamomile, and thyme and walked a slow circle around the straw and mud house, scattering the ashes with each step.

Inside, he could hear their quiet laughter, the happy sounds of the couple cooing over their healthy baby boy. He was a delight, and he had curled into his mother’s chest as soon as Tarl had laid him on her.

The father stepped outside, exhaustion and joy lining his face. Blood stained his shirt, as did the bed linens, but such were the effects of having babies.

He rubbed the back of his neck. “Thank you,” he finally stumbled. “You saved them both. The church...” He frowned, glaring out toward the center of their village.

“Church physicians have no knowledge of the Winds,” Tarl said. “Your son just needed a little bit of guidance and encouragement, but without any Whispers, no one could connect to him.”

The father swallowed, looked away. “So, what sort of payment can we offer?” He blanched, closed his eyes. “The bed linens are soaked in blood, if that’s the kind of payment you req—”

Tarl cut him off, laying a gentle hand on his trembling arm. “I am not that kind of Mage,” he said. “In fact, all I would humbly ask for are a few of your herbs.”

A week had passed since he’d helped birth the baby boy. He had sneaked out of the village just before dawn, weighed down with fresh herbs and flowers from the farmer’s harvest. The crossing back to his mountain cave in the highlands had been rough. He’d walked with farmers and herds heading for the rough mountain pasture, runners and criers spreading news from village to village, and the morning bustle of farmhands and laborers searching for a day’s work. He hadn’t been around so many in years, and as he walked past the morning beat patrols of the knights, he’d kept his head down and tucked inside his hood, kept his cloak wrapped tight around his body.

He'd slept for three days when he'd finally clambered into his cave, barely managing to pull the brush and branches back over his hideout. When he'd woken, he had been starving, the drain from the Winds affecting both his sleep and his hunger. Ravenous, he'd headed into the woods to forage.

He had enough herbs, though, to trade down in the villages.

Tucking a pack of herbs into his bag, Tarl wrapped himself in his cloak and headed down the mountain. He went to Snow Butte first, but the barkeep wasn't in, and moved on down the trail to Granite Bottom. There, he saw the curl of smoke rising from The Bearded Bear's tavern and he smiled. Don was in.

Don was the gregarious tavern keep of The Bearded Bear, and he knew everyone and everything in the mountain valleys. Tarl hadn't trusted him for years. Still didn't, to be honest. But he made a fantastic stew, brewed a rich ale, and he'd passed on more jobs and trades for Tarl than any other contact he had in all the villages combined. He was also an amazing storyteller. It was never boring at The Bearded Bear, even if Tarl did keep to the corners and the shadows.

Tarl slipped into The Bearded Bear and felt the warmth from the blazing fire pit slam into his body. After climbing down the mountain, the heat sank into his bones, and he nearly sighed and leaned against the wall. Smells of goat stew, of ale, of honey mead and red wine swirled in the air, mixed with grease from the game killed, dressed, and skewered on the spit in the center of the fire pit. His mouth watered and his stomach lurched. Nuts and greens were nice, but he could use a decent meal tonight. Rousing songs rose from tables in front of a stage, and a near-drunken bard bellowed a bawdy song as he sucked on a bottle of wine. Finally, Tarl caught Don's eye across the tavern. Don winked and nodded, then thumbed toward the back room. Tarl edged his way into the private storeroom, gambling hall, and all around den of mischief. It was empty, for the moment, and Tarl made himself at home. He propped his feet up on the table and pulled down a bottle of wine, uncorking it with his teeth. The tannins rolled over his tongue, sharp and bitter. A mountain vintage, and a young one at that.

Don made his way in later, laughing and waving down the hall before he closed the door with a quiet snick. Don stared at the doorjamb for a moment before turning around.

"How's it goin', witch?"

Tarl rolled his eyes and swallowed another drag from the bottle of wine. His dreadlocks jingled, the charms tied through his locks clinking against each other. “You know that’s crude.”

Don shrugged. His hulking body folded down into one of the worn chairs opposite Tarl. Massive, Don could fill the whole room just on his own. His shoulders were the width of the table and his hands could crush a man’s skull. “So, you been down the mountain recently?”

“Not too much. Did a job over a ways. Helped a family. Nice folk.” He shook his head, thinking of their hovel and the tiny farm they had toiled over. “I wish there was a way they could improve their station.”

“Hey, you and me know that that ain’t gonna happen. Folk are born, grow up, and die where they are. No one wants to go to the valley anyway, and the rest of the kingdom is fer shit. And the capital?” Don spat on the floor. “The church got us all where they want us, right under their claws.” Don peered at Tarl, then looked away quickly. “Folk like you are dead and gone.”

“But I’m not,” Tarl said, lowering his feet and leaning against the table. He braced himself on his elbows, his eyes burning. “If I’m here, there must be others. It can’t just be me, and it can’t just be these Winds.”

“Tarl...” Don shook his head. “Look, you done a lot of good ’round here. Helped folk, really. In a way that they ain’t seen in a long while. You should be proud of what you’ve done.” Don peered into the corner, one hand folding over the other. “Their baby’s doing real well, you know, and it woulda died without you.”

Tarl stilled, every muscle in his body freezing. “I didn’t say anything about a baby.”

When Don looked back at him, Tarl saw guilt bleeding from his eyes. “They wanted to say they were sorry,” Don started, speaking low and gentle. Tarl jumped to his feet, his eyes scanning the storeroom. They were caged in, and there weren’t any windows to try to escape out of. “Tarl!” Don called, rising to his feet as well. “It’s no use. They’re here.”

Knights Guard. *For all the Winds...* Tarl cursed and dropped low, summoning witchlight and pulling out his dagger. He’d fling the witchlight into their eyes and do what he could with the knife, but he was not going to be taken alive. “How much did they pay, Don?” Tarl hissed. Don was a card cheat and a gambler, and he played fast and loose with his tavern, but Tarl hadn’t ever felt his life in danger from him.

“The church let me keep my head,” Don said quietly. He held out his hands, palms up. “And they let the baby live.” Swallowing, Don shook his head. “They really are sorry. There were too many questions, they said, ’bout how the baby was suddenly healthy ’n’ the delivery was normal. Too much grace for the True Gods.” Don spat at the mention of the Gods, his face twisting in disgust. “Questions they couldn’t answer. You know that the church ’n’ the knights’ve been huntin’ you for years.” He was pleading now, and Tarl heard the sound of boots down the hall, of steel plates and knights’ metal. Of swords being drawn. “Their questions led them here.” A long exhale. “They’ve been waiting for you.”

The door burst open, kicked off its hinges, and Don swore at the knights that poured in. “Don’t wreck the place!” Don hollered. “You promised no killing! I won’t have ghosts in my tavern!”

Gritting his teeth, Tarl hurled the witchlight at the knights, blinding the first five. There were more than twenty pouring into the back room, though, and more waiting in the hallway. He struck, swinging with his dagger, and managed to keep them at bay for the moment needed to conjure more witchlight. He threw it again, but the knights were too fast, and they had him encircled within minutes. He beat at their sword tips with his own, cursing. In his mind, he saw Old Man Etto’s head mounted on a pike. He heard the tolling of prayer bells in his mind, felt the noose tightening around his neck. He called on the Winds, and the Whispers screamed in the back of his head, drowning out Don’s shouts, the music of the tavern, and the orders of the knights to close in.

He didn’t see the knight behind him raise his sword, or the fall of the pommel on the back of his head that brought him down. Tarl was unconscious before his knees hit the floor, and he fell forward in a ragged slump.

Chapter Two

The saddle maker was a swindler and a crook.

Emen grumbled as he passed across three gold coins to the greasy saddle maker's filthy palm. He kept the King's heads turned down, as always, not looking at the stamped profile on his coin. The saddle maker grinned and palmed the coins, rolling them in his hand. Soot and stench clung to him, an ash patina covering his skin and leather apron and streaking up his arms. His beard was even covered in tar and grease, long and scraggly and twisting into elflocks at the tips. Emen could see lice crawling in the filthy strands.

"You 'ave ta understand," the saddle maker drawled. "Ranger folk like you, wit' no sworn House... Wells, we Stormwatch gotta take payment up front. And insure our losses."

Emen simply glared at the saddle maker but said nothing. Three ingots of gold would buy him a new saddle in the west, in the lowlands of the horse tenders and farmers. But his stirrups had broken on a hard ride back to the capital, and he wasn't about to put his mare, Dava, through the long, unpredictable ride back west to save a few pieces of coin. Dava deserved better than that. She had gotten him through the past six years and scrapes he thought that he'd never escape from.

Chuckling, the saddle maker turned and waddled back to his work in the smith and tack shop. The forge blazed in the back corner, heating the hovel. Emen felt sweat form at his hairline and drip down his temple. It stank inside, the combination of men and horse sweat, oiled leather and soot. "Ye'll get yer stirrups in due time, ranger," the saddle maker threw over his shoulder. "Now leave, 'fore I call the knights."

A single nod, his lips pressed tight, and then Emen wrapped his cloak around his shoulders and disappeared from the shop. Long years had taught him to be swift and silent in his movements, and not even the door made a sound as he slipped outside.

He spared a moment to spit on the stoop, though, his mouth twisting as he glared. Stormwatch had always rankled him, and dealing with their folk sat uneasy in his stomach. House Stormwatch was the Merchants' House, the House that every crafter, trader, and sea captain swore fealty to if they wanted to conduct legitimate business within the kingdom.

“What’s this?” A deep voice chuckled mirthlessly as a sword tip touched the point of Emen’s chin. “A ranger spitting in the capital? I’m sure this violates some code of order. Perhaps even an order of the church.”

Emen glanced up, meeting the eyes of Knight Captain Vedek, the head of the Knights Guard, astride his destrier. The warhorse stood as tall as Emen, and Vedek lorded over him even above that, covered head to toe in plate mail. His helmet, the face guard pulled up, sported the flaming poppy color of House Killsbane, the house of law and order, and of the Knights Guard, the sworn protectors of the land. Flowing around him, Vedek’s split-backed cape fell in bright poppy waves on either side of his horse. Brilliant and gaudy, Vedek stood out. He wasn’t a stunningly gorgeous man, but he had a rugged look to his tanned face and a wicked glint in his eyes that offset his crooked nose. He’d broken that nose over and over across the years. Still, he was charming in his rough-edged way, with an easy laugh, deep chocolate eyes, and a ready smile that had weakened more than one pair of knees.

“The criminal you seek is inside.” Emen jerked his head toward the tack shop. “Damned swindler.”

Vedek laughed, long and hard, and slid his sword back into his scabbard. He dismounted, his armor rattling and clanking, and tied his destrier next to Dava at the saddle maker’s post. Vedek pulled out two apples from his saddlebag and held one out to each horse. “It’s not often you come so far into the capital, Emen. What brings you to this particular crook’s shop?”

Emen thanked Vedek for the apple with a nod and stroked Dava’s neck. “Busted stirrup. Dava needs a solid saddle, and I won’t ride further and risk her injury.”

“There are saddle makers and tack shops in Daisytown.” Daisytown was the neighborhood bordering House Harvest and served mostly farmers, both inside and outside the city walls. It was near the northern gates and where Emen preferred to linger.

He shook his head. “My stirrups are a good deal stronger than your average farmers’. I need more heft and support and a width to cover longer rides.” Daisytown’s tack shops couldn’t help him. Instead, he’d come here, and the saddle maker’s shop sat in the middle of the Merchant’s Quarter, not far from the Walker’s Mile, the bustling hive of prostitution and debauchery. Painted men and women hawked their wares, urging the walkers to choose them for the hour or for the night. Whatever they could afford. Emen kept his distance.

Vedek's eyes twinkled as he scratched Dava's ears. "Now, you wouldn't have broken your stirrup on a fast gallop out of Lilacton, would you? Reports from the Knights Guard precinct there say a thief broke into their local Temple and stole the priests' purse."

Emen kept his face blank, practiced so. "Really? I hadn't heard those reports."

"And, while I was getting coffee this morning at the Drunken Bread," Vedek continued, leaning against the horses' tie bar and crossing his arms. "I heard from the Head Physician, Lian, that fellow who runs that charity hospital in the old Holy Light slums, the Healing Hand? I heard from him that an anonymous benefactor had dropped a sum of coin equal to that stolen from Lilacton into their mail overnight." Much beloved by the city, Vedek chatted endlessly with the capital folk. He earned more than his fair share of investigative leads that way.

"Interesting coincidence."

"That's not how I'd describe it." Vedek peered at Emen, and for a moment, it looked like he wanted to say something, like the words were on the tip of his tongue. Thieving from the church was a crime equal to dabbling in the forbidden magics. Beheading was the punishment, and the thief's head was mounted for all to see.

Instead, Vedek uncrossed his arms and shrugged. "Ah well," he sighed. "Must be a great benefactor to care so much about the indigents in the slums of old Holy Light to make such a donation from their own purse."

Emen grunted and peered down the dusty streets, squinting his eyes. Even with the cobblestone paving, the streets were still filled with dirt and mud. The city bustled, barkers hawking their goods, beggars, pilgrims, knights, wanderers, and shoppers running to and fro, merchants hauling supplies. It was more folk than Emen cared to be around, and he could feel the city swallowing him whole. Dust hung in his mouth, mixing with the sweaty scent of the crowds and the tang of salt air and fish. The docks, and Salt Town, were only a stone's throw away.

Vedek's hand dropped onto Emen's shoulder, squeezing. Beneath Emen's cloak, his leather armor creaked, hidden under his tunic. The cross strap from his baldric shifted beneath Vedek's touch.

The Knight Captain smirked and shook his head. "What I don't understand," Vedek said quietly, stepping close to Emen. "Is how a thief who

barely manages to scrape by with each turn of the harvest kept nothing for himself.”

Smiling softly, Emen met his friend’s eyes. They were warm, but he saw a depth of concern in them that grew with each time they met. They weren’t young men anymore, and a chance meeting in a tavern, one drunken night, and eighteen years of friendship had solidified into an odd caretaking of sorts. “I imagine the thief was doing better than those in the hospital,” Emen said, his voice low. “Or those in the slums. I reckon a sum like that could feed those there for a month.”

“Indeed. And that’s after buying the herbs needed for the medicinal potions.” Vedek inhaled. “Lian was overjoyed this morning.”

A small smile was all Emen allowed himself.

“But,” Vedek sighed, “it means much more paperwork for me as I have to mount an investigation, which will no doubt have me sending out a patrol to Lilacton in case the thief strikes again. The church will demand no less.”

“They are demanding.” Emen accepted the information gladly with a surge of gratitude. Vedek had been his one odd friend for many of the long years of his life. Before Vedek, Emen had lived in a far darker world, and hatred had plagued his soul.

Vedek shot him a look but said nothing. There were some things even he couldn’t cover. “Before I begin this tedious and laborious paperwork, and order so many knights out to extra patrols, I really must eat.” Vedek made a show of rubbing his armor-plated stomach. “And I insist you accompany me. It’s been too long, Emen.” An honest smile, then, from Vedek, full of warmth and happiness.

“Vedek, I can’t—”

“I insist. And it’s my treat, since I insist.” Vedek held up his hand, forestalling Emen’s protests. “Please, let me enjoy this time. Seeing you is all too rare an occurrence.” That warm smile held, fond as Vedek held Emen’s gaze.

Sighing, Emen gave in, knowing that Vedek would only protest and cajole him until he accepted. “All right. Lead the way.”

Because Vedek was a particular bastard, he led Emen through the city center and toward the palace and—next to the palace—the capital Temple, built against the mountains that circled the western city’s walls. Beyond the

mountains lay the lowlands of the kingdom of Kina. The capital, Kina, sat in a protected cove, a natural harbor at the delta of the river flowing down from the northern mountains and out to the southern seas. Across the sea, the Krek and the Orlais kingdoms sat tensely together on the continent. And beyond those kingdoms, only legend and myth spoke.

Made of gleaming marble and bejeweled with burgundy stained glass, the white palace thrust tall over the city, littered with towers and spires and wide balconies overlooking the cove, the bay, and the capital itself. The King's Balcony, midway up the palace, was where the King addressed the city and where, twenty-six years ago, he'd thrown the severed head of the last of the Paladin down to the angry mob of Mage-hating citizens. Emen had heard of the spectacle countless times, told and retold in the taverns across the kingdom. The story had become legend, and he'd heard of folk kicking the fallen Paladin's head, and of it being mounted on a pike at the newly built Temple, shrine to the True Gods, until only the skull had remained. Then, the skull had been mounted inside the Temple, a reminder of supremacy of the True Gods over the Magi for all to see.

Glistening next to the palace, the Temple had been erected twenty-six years prior. Shrine to the True Gods, the Temple was home to the church and to the Holy Ones, the masters of the church and the faithful. Prayer bells tolled over the capital six times a day, screaming for the citizens to turn to their Gods and pray for the salvation of Kina and deliverance from the evils of the Magi. On the spires surrounding the Temple, rotting heads sat impaled on iron pikes, the faces of the beheaded twisted in agony and terror. The church gave no quarter to those dabbling in the forbidden arts of the Magi, and even finding a homemade amulet of straw and thread, or a charm scrawled in dust inside a doorway, was enough to be sentenced to the pikes. During the Inquisition, heads had been piled in pyramids until the skin had melted away, decaying into heaps of flesh and chipped bone on the street.

Banners fluttered and flapped in the autumn wind, pale blue silk stitched with golden thread, showing the image of the church: two fists crossed at the wrists over a single snuffed candle.

Emen averted his eyes from the Temple, staring instead at the city surrounding him. They'd left their horses tied up at the tack shop and made the journey on foot. As they left the mercantile quarter, Emen wished for Dava's strength—and her height—as he was jostled and pushed in the throngs of the crowd.

People and carts and horses filled the road, and hooves and wheels clattered against cobblestone while conversations flew. Peasants hunched from backbreaking labors shuffled by, stinking and fetid and complaining. Merchants in gilded robes strolled, beady eyes staring at goods and customers alike. Pilgrims, devotees to the True Gods, huddled on corners in their rags, preaching of the Holy Ones and the church as they begged for alms and reached for grubby pennies. Street children—piss carters, fire watchers, criers, and thieves—all ran through the crowds, nearly tripping up those they darted in front of. Mud slicked against boots, sucking on worn leather, or on bare feet for those not fortunate enough to have boots. The perfume of the capital—whiffs of decadent fragrance, the latest in fashionable scents, rotting produce dumped from the market stalls at the end of the day, spilled urine and burning shit from fire pits in the backs of alleys, and salt air and day-old fish—assaulted Emen’s nose. It was madness, a cacophony of noise and human hustle.

Vedek turned them both before they reached the palace and the Temple, heading north on the river’s bank. Emen could smell the students’ quarter, Tizzy Town, before they reached the neighborhood, and he rolled his eyes at his friend behind his back. While Vedek had made Captain of the knights, responsible for not just the Capital but the kingdom as well, he still had a playful streak as long as the river Rea.

With a flourish, Vedek pointed out their spot for lunch. “Ta-da.” A narrow, patchwork building, colored in twelve different shades of garish, chipped paint, leaned sideways on a block full of mismatched and misaligned shops. Covered in weeping vines and dripping with bellflowers and honeysuckle, the sign read “The Starving Student.”

Emen arched his eyebrows. “You’re taking me to a place that advertises its clientele to be starving?”

“It’s irony.” Vedek clapped him on the shoulder. “I promise; you will not find better food in the capital. Not even in Goldenleaf.”

Later, Emen had to agree. The wraps of seared lamb and spiced yogurt were seasoned with fresh mint and ground pepper, sea salt and lemon juice, and warm bread drenched in olive oil kept appearing in baskets at their elbows. Cold beer, thick with pecan and chocolate on the tongue and bursting with a creamy head polished off the meal, followed by honey cakes covered in roasted nuts as dessert. They finished with two glasses of port, and Emen rolled the chewy tannins on his tongue, savoring the heady bitterness of the wine. He hadn’t eaten that morning, or the night before, and he felt his head grow light.

Vedek rubbed his belly over his armor. “If I keep this up, I’ll be fat in no time.”

Snorting, Emen shook his head. Vedek was a hedonist, always had been. He enjoyed the finest foods and wine and had a deep weakness for the tobacco grown in the mountain foothills, but he was also a consummate warrior. He spent as much time training and testing his knights as he did on patrol, and Emen knew there was a solid sheet of muscle beneath Vedek’s armor.

Silence, as they sipped their port. They’d already laughed over Vedek’s tales of woe in training his knights, over the newest recruits and their naivety. A lifelong bachelor, Vedek was forever fighting off invitations for tea and wine—and occasionally outright debauchery—and they chuckled over the newest round of soft-eyed maidens and widowed housewives to take interest in Vedek’s personal life. Vedek had already shared stories about the stupidest of the criminals he dealt with, and Emen had laughed and taken mental notes as Vedek casually described the knights’ newest procedures and practices. Vedek was a man of movement and flair, and the sudden silence had Emen staring at him.

Vedek swirled his port, frowning at the burgundy wine. “Can I ask you something, Emen?”

“Of course.” Emen scooted closer. In the distance, Emen heard the toll of the Temple’s prayer bells. Not many in Tizzy Town paid notice.

“I’ve been stuck in the capital for some time now. Running the Knights Guard... it’s exhausting.” He smiled, and Emen could see the lines around his eyes, and strands of grey at his temples that hadn’t been there before. “I don’t get the best news of the kingdom any more. I hear what’s read in reports, and I have a few travelers and merchants that I semi-trust with passing on information.”

Emen took a deep swallow of his port. He knew where this was going.

“I need more information. I need to know what’s truly happening in the kingdom. You, with all of your travels, all of your knowledge, could be such an asset.”

“No.” Emen fished in his pockets, searching for coins to pay for his meal.

“I told you, this was on me.” Vedek frowned, waving at Emen’s hands. “And don’t run out on me. I’m serious, Emen. You refuse to entertain my offers of joining the knights, no matter that you’d be the greatest we’ve ever had.

Better than me, even. I'm asking if you'll accept something else, anything else. A position as my eyes and ears, my right hand, if you will, in the kingdom."

"You want me to be a spy."

"If that's how you want to see it." Vedek sighed hard. "Aren't you tired? We aren't young anymore. Forty harvests and you're still playing the ranger. No House fealty? You're damning yourself to forever be on the outside of the law and, eventually, an unmarked grave, Emen." Vedek swallowed, and Emen watched his throat bob up and down. "It'd be nice to see you more," he finally said, his voice low.

Emen's fists hit the table, upsetting the flatware and knocking over Vedek's water glass. It spilled, sluicing ice water into Vedek's lap and in between the seams of his armor. Vedek cursed and scooted back, hissing at the cold on his crotch.

"I've told you before. I will never work for the King," Emen hissed, his voice low and growling. "Never."

Cursing again, Vedek threw his napkin on the table and crossed his arms. "You're going to have to tell me about why you are so determined to be a traitor one of these days." He shook his head again. "Look, if you won't work for the King—if you won't accept any coin—then can you at least help me out with something? As a friend?"

Emen studied Vedek, holding his gaze. "What do you mean? Problem in the capital?"

Another long sigh, and Vedek rolled his neck. Emen could see the exhaustion in the droop of his shoulders. "Let's go for a walk," Vedek grumbled. "It will be easier to show you." Standing, Vedek slapped down more coins than Emen managed to scrounge in a full harvest and gestured for Emen to follow.

Vedek led Emen back over the river, crossing the crowded midcity bridge across the King's Highway and leading him to the midcity battlements and the knights' precinct garrison stationed there.

Emen leaned closed to Vedek. "You know, I generally try to avoid the Knights Guard. You occasionally being an exception."

"Only occasionally?" Vedek snorted. He nodded to the knights standing guard at the base of the battlements and hurried up the steps to the precinct.

Hesitating, Emen's foot hovered over the bottom step. House Killsbane dripped from the garrison. Banners in blazing Killsbane tangerine hung from the battlements, flags flapped and waved in the breeze, and helmeted knights with flaming plumes strode to and fro, leaned against the stone walls, or chatted with their friends. Banners with the Killsbane crest—crossed swords, bleeding from the blades—hung from the rafters. If he didn't know better, he'd think Vedek was walking him into a trap.

Did he know better?

"Hurry up!" Vedek shouted, waving him up the steps.

Sighing, Emen trudged up the battlement steps. He swallowed his disgust and schooled his face into a blank mask of indifference to try to hide his contempt. One snort from Vedek and Emen knew he'd failed.

Vedek led him down a long hallway inside the garrison, passing by pockets of knights and groups of Sergeants-at-Arms. Everyone they passed stopped to salute Vedek, and Emen remembered that his friend, who he easily traded barbs with and insulted, was actually the second most powerful man in House Killsbane. He answered only to the House Lord, who sat on the King's Council and answered only to the King.

Except, of course, for the Templar. The secretive Templar had emerged at the fall of the Magi, created by the King in silence. Shrouded in more mystery than fact, the Templar existed as the military might of the Temple and the Holy Ones, and were responsible for enforcing the church's rule, for launching the Inquisitions, and for destroying the Magi in every corner of the kingdom. No one outside of the palace or the church knew their identities.

Finally, Vedek turned at a stone passageway and led Emen down a spiraled staircase. The air chilled, growing cooler as they passed further into the stone garrison and then descended underground. Emen could feel the earth above him as they dropped, spiraling ever further. Torches hung from the walls, but the light was oppressively dim. Emen's throat tightened. It almost felt like he was back in the catacombs. He shook his head, shaking off the memory, but he could feel the beginnings of a headache tickling at the base of his brain.

When they reached the lower landing, Emen didn't expect Vedek to have led him to the expansive underground cavern that served as the capital's morgue. He stopped, shock stilling him, and stared down the rows and rows of stone-cut crypts carved into the cavern's walls. Granite blocks balanced on rounds of timber served as smooth-polished tables, stretching twenty in a row

in between the walls of stacked crypts. Bone Sergeants, those of House Killsbane that tended the dead, worked over bodies on the slabs, some cleaning the bodies, other measuring wounds and taking notes.

The stench hit him after the shock. Mint, cloying and tang-sharp, fought with the rot of decay and the iron flood of blood in the air. The knights tried to use mint to block the scent, but it was only marginally successful. Oranges stuffed with cloves hung from the torch holders along the wall, another futile attempt to ward off the stench. The flames burned low, torches made of camphor wood and soaked in the same oil adding to the mint smell. The white smoke of the wood left little residue on the stone walls and the cavernous arches above, and kept the air breathable inside. On the walls, the crossed fists of the church had been sketched in chalk.

A damp chill hung like smothering linen, and the taste of moss and wet stone warred with the flavor of rot, sitting heavy on Emen's tongue. It was dank in the cavern, and Emen realized that they must be next to the river underground, or to an aquifer beneath the garrison. His eyes swam for a moment, and he saw Kone and Shane standing before him. He blinked, and his memories vanished, but the pounding at the base of his skull increased.

"Here." Vedek had pulled two masks from hooks lining the wall by the stairway landing. More masks hung from hooks by their ties. "Put this on. It will help." The mask covered the nose and mouth, leaving the eyes open and exposed. A long beak stretched out from the nose, hollow and curved. As Emen put the mask to his face, he smelled more mint, crushed in the mask's tip, and then a lingering sweetness. Along with mint, the hollow tube had been filled with jasmine. The knights must have kept a stock of the flower somewhere. Its season had passed and they were deep into autumn now. Emen tied the mask behind his head. Vedek simply held it over his face.

"You know," Emen said, his voice muffled by the mask and the herbs. "If you're planning on killing me, this is an exceptionally efficient way to complete the task."

"I'm not planning on killing you." Vedek gestured to the morgue and to the Bone Sergeants working on the bodies. "Let me show you something." Vedek waved the Bone Sergeants off, giving them privacy. The men and women wiped their brows and saluted, then headed for the stairwell. They kept their masks on, Emen noticed, as they climbed.

"Take a look at this." Vedek nodded toward the body on the first slab. A young man, naked save for a linen cloth lain over his throat, and white as a

ghost. His eyes were lined in kohl, and onyx and amethyst dust covered his eyelids and curled over his temples. The colors had been smeared, though, by tears if Emen had to guess. His lips were supposed to be plum, but the blue hue of death made them look black. The golden-rose rouge dusting the man's cheeks was stark and vivid against the ghost-white of his dead skin. Cold and stiff to the touch, the warmth that had been left in his body had bled into the granite beneath him, helping to preserve and to fend off decay. His fingers were curled up and bruises marred his forearms. Emen held his hand over one of the bruises, testing its size. A man's hand, restraining the other from behind. Looking further, Emen saw bruises on the dead man's thighs, reaching back behind his testicles and toward his ass. Scrapes on his knee.

He looked away. The young man's painted face stayed in Emen's mind. He seemed familiar, somehow.

"This can't be the first time you've seen a prostitute murdered."

Vedek pulled away the cloth covering the dead man's neck. Two deep stab wounds into the sides of his throat and twin ragged slices outward had severed the victim's vital arteries on each side of his neck. His skin was torn open, and Emen could see the jagged ends of the arteries, frayed and dulled. His throat hadn't been slashed through, though, as a common murderer might have done. This was an expert's kill, a kill designed to exsanguinate. Very few knew the anatomical structure of the vital arteries well enough to incapacitate someone in such a way. Fewer still knew the actual skill for that sort of killing act.

The implications were troubling.

Emen lifted his eyes, raising his eyebrows as he stared at Vedek. "Do you train your knights in this maneuver?"

"So you do recognize it. I thought you might." Silence, as Emen chose not to answer. "No, our patrol knights are not trained in this method of killing. Only advanced knights, the Superiors, those who have to respond to the most violent or dangerous incidents, get this instruction." Vedek held Emen's gaze. "I train them myself."

"Could one of them have done this? A liaison gone wrong, perhaps?"

"Maybe." Vedek frowned. "I don't like to think that. I'll be questioning all of the Superiors shortly. But..." He swallowed, shaking his head. "It's not just how the murder was done. It's what happened after. Do you see any blood on the victim?"

Emen shook his head. The Bone Sergeants had already come through. He assumed it had been washed clean. But his makeup had remained...

"There wasn't any blood," Vedek said. "Anywhere. Not where we found him, dumped on the Walker's Mile, or even in his body. He's bone dry."

Exhaling, Emen's eyes fell closed. The pain in the base of his skull throbbed, and memories poured like waterfalls through his mind. Endless hours of studies, bent over tomes and scrolls in the old Cathedral. *Exsanguination, the collection of blood. A possible sign of ritual blood magic. Search for the following signs.*

Grimacing, Emen rubbed the back of his neck. "Were there any runes around him? On him?"

Vedek eyed Emen carefully. "No," he said slowly. "But if there were, what would you be searching for?"

"A sigil. A—" Emen gritted his teeth as the pain blossomed, feeling like a stab wound through his skull. "The mark of a demon, or a ritual devoted to one."

"You're talking about magic." Vedek's voice had turned harsh, cold. "Banned magic from banned Magi. Which shouldn't even be possible since the Winds are dead."

Demons can also pull power from the Winds, but pull power first from the Abyss with the proper rites. Emen could practically smell the old tomes, the crinkling parchment he'd spent so many hours reading. "The Winds are not the only sources of power for those determined. Like demons."

"Or like exiled Paladin?" Vedek's tone could cut steel.

Emen's eyes flashed. "Paladins wouldn't do this," he rumbled. "It goes against everything in the code."

"That code is dead. And though we're meant to believe the Paladin are dead as well, the Cathedrals in the West and North were never taken. They've holed up in them for twenty-six years, and the Gods only know what they've been up to since then."

He couldn't help it. Emen laughed, chuckling without humor and shaking his head. "You really think Paladins have been plotting for two decades and are now infiltrating your city to murder prostitutes and perform blood magic?" As close as he thought he was with Vedek, there was still an impenetrable divide separating them. Forever. One Vedek could never know about.

“It’s not just here.” Motioning down the slabs, Vedek led Emen to another body. A woman this time, homely and built like a farmer’s housewife, lay dead on the slab. Stout and full hips led to thick thighs, and a plump bosom sat on top of a rounded belly. Like the prostitute, her throat had been slashed at the vital arteries. The rot was further along and Emen coughed at the stench of decay. Mint and jasmine couldn’t fend off the putrescence of her body quite so well. “She was brought here from Barrow’s Spoke.” It was a village on the King’s Highway just north of Crossroads, and not far from Lilacton. “The Knights Guard precinct there thought it was unusual enough to find a body emptied of its blood, so they sent it to the capital. I’m glad they did. She was murdered in the same way, nearly across the kingdom.”

“When?” Emen stepped back, trying to stand outside the woman’s stench. At least underground, there weren’t insects devouring the body.

“She arrived yesterday. The knights in Barrow’s Spoke say she was murdered two days before she arrived. He,” Vedek pointed to the prostitute, “was murdered last night. So. Do I have one murderer traveling the kingdom with speed, or do I have multiple murderers suddenly striking, using the same techniques and draining their victims of blood? And why?”

His head was swimming, pounding, screaming, and Emen could barely think straight. He shook his head, felt the copper-tang taste of blood flooding his mouth. He’d bitten his tongue, and he struggled to swallow back the taste in the foul silence of the crypt.

“I’m curious as to how you know about these things,” Vedek said carefully. “I thought you might, though. More of your secrets that you never share.”

“Did you show me this because you suspect me to be the killer? Or because you want my help in finding who it is?” Despite the raging in his head, Emen could feel the surge of adrenaline through his body, preparing for a fight. He and Vedek had a long history together, perhaps too long, and he’d assisted Vedek in more than one investigation. Nothing like this, though. Nothing larger than thieves and cutpurses, or a smuggler’s racket or an opium den. Nothing that bled dark magic or threatened to spill his secrets to his friend.

“Maybe both. I needed a mind to speak plainly to me.” Vedek smiled behind his mask, but he looked tired and his eyes crinkled with exhausted wrinkles. “You speak of troubling possibilities. The return of magic? Of Magi? And demons? They were supposed to die with the Winds. With no Winds to sustain the mages, the demons should have no course to be summoned. That’s what we were all told.”

Emen walked away, done with the bodies and the stench. He passed by the naked prostitute, and his eyes lingered on the tear tracks down his face. He closed his eyes, but continued on. Vedek's heavy boots rang behind him, stopping at the landing with Emen. Untying his mask, he hung it on one of the hooks. Above the hooks, another chalk drawing of the church's clenched fist sigil stared down at him. He closed his eyes. The pain in his head was nearly blinding him, and he leaned his forehead against the cavern wall for a moment, exhaling.

Vedek's hand rose, squeezing his shoulder again. "Didn't think you'd have a weak stomach for this." His voice was back to being warm and friendly.

Shrugging him off, Emen glared at the Knight Captain. "Do you honestly think that just because the Winds were choked, the demons would die? They were trapped, yes, unable to be summoned. But what do all trapped things do?"

He wished it would have been funny, watching the color drain from Vedek's face, or watching the way his expression fell and then hardened, trying to be strong. "They try to escape," Vedek whispered. His words shook, belying the false strength he attempted.

Boot heels clanged on the spiral staircase, running down toward them. "Sir!" a knight called, halting when he saw Vedek. "Sir, please, come quickly!"

"What is it?" Vedek was already running up the stairway, his hands skimming over the metal bannister.

"There's been another murder. They just found her body."

Emen doubted that Vedek would have let him leave the capital if he'd been in his right mind, but with the report of another body, Vedek had stormed off, leading his knights to the crime scene and working to secure everything he could. Knights scoured the neighborhood around the body—dumped in Salt Town, the seafarers' poor quarter—and Emen was able to slip away from the precinct unnoticed. Still, he paused atop the battlements, staring over the walls down into the Whispered Mile. White ash coated the street, the demolished shops, the burned remnants of trees. Bare branches twisted for the sky as if they were arms reaching out in a wailing scream of anguish. *Why?* At the end of the Mile, the burned ruins of the Fallen House of Mysteries sat in rotten tumbles of burned and scarred brick. In the debris, Emen could see pale stretches of bones poking out, and skulls rolling in the wind.

Off limits, the Whispered Mile had sat forgotten and ignored since that cataclysmic day. Walls had been erected, in fact, arcing away from the mile and blocking any view of the fallen House from the rest of the city. Called the Screaming Walls, they had been built when folk had claimed to still hear the screams and wails of the Magi's dying bodies, or of their ghosts, and no one had wanted to hear that. Never was a thought given to a rescue or to a proper burial.

Bile filled Emen's throat, and he turned away before he could retch, or before the rage inside him rekindled and he did something rash. His memories, unleashed in the crypt after being so carefully packed away in an empty, dead place inside his soul, were burning. He felt the horror, the anguish, as if it had just happened. *Days before, he'd been studying in the House of Mysteries, and Kone had teased him about being a parchment chaser and an ink nose. They'd brawled in the stacks, and nearly toppled a bookshelf, but their laughter was what got them really into trouble. Uwe, the youngest recruit, had followed him to the House, but was too young to go inside. He'd waited on the steps all day, getting his white tunic filthy, just because he wanted to spend time with Emen. He'd bought Uwe a frozen cream on the way home and fed it to him with sparklight, floating bits of cold cream in dancing arcs of glittering, harmless lightning. An indulgent day in the midst of their studies, and a happy one.*

Blood dripped from Emen's hands, and he hissed as he unclenched his fists. He'd gouged his palms and he cursed, trying to scuff the blood away with his boot. Wrapping his cloak around him, Emen hurried away from the garrison. He'd stayed too long.

Emen cut through the Walker's Mile to get back to the Merchant's Quarter, and his eyes lingered on the painted faces of the men. How many had known the dead man? Why did he seem familiar to Emen? The Walker's Mile was known as the place to secure any type of paid dalliance that one could want, and was generally seen as a safer alternative than the docks, or the taverns in the wider kingdom. Still, the risk was high, taking another into an intimate embrace and trusting them not to abuse that trust—or worse. The dead man had found out that lesson the hard way.

Hurrying on, he found Dava with her stirrups already fastened and attached outside the saddle maker's shop. A few quick adjustments, and then Emen mounted his mare and turned onto the street. Vedek's mount was gone.

The afternoon bustle crowded him and Dava, and he tried to wind his way down side streets and away from the crush of so many folk. Finally, he was at

the northern gates, and he barely nodded to the knights as he trotted out of the city walls. The King's Highway stretched north to the Sky Pillars, and beyond that to the wilds. Open road, and with the capital at his back, Emen could head anywhere, go anyplace. He'd be a fool not to head for the wilds, lay low, set up his encampment in the deep of the forest and live off the land. He could ignore the capital, the King, and the troubles they had gotten themselves into.

Sighing, Emen guided Dava down the highway. It would take a day to reach Barrow's Spoke, and that was if he used the royal highways. Vedek was supposed to be ordering extra patrols to Lilacton, and that was right in the way of Barrow's Spoke.

He cursed and urged Dava on, faster. Something was murdering innocents and draining blood from the corpses, and no matter who was doing it, blood magic or blood offerings offered a shortcut to powers beyond the Winds. Powers that had been trapped for years.

Chapter Three

Shane slipped into the King's private chambers, and he wasn't surprised to find the King shirtless, lounging on his chaise with an ancient scroll idly held in a careless hand while chewing on an apple. Bits of fruit had already fallen to the marble floor, and juice had splattered onto the delicate parchment. Not that the King would have noticed.

"Did you know," Iorian called out in between chews, "that the old Paladins believed that the year's end came now, after the harvest? As opposed to the dawn of spring?"

Shane quirked his eyebrow and smiled indulgently. "Dawn's Blessed Light to you, my King," he said first. Then, "Did they really?" He clasped his hands behind his back, relaxing into parade rest. His leathers rippled as he moved, his butter-smooth short black jerkin laced up over his bloodred silk-wrapped shirt, swirling around his waist with an elaborate tie. Black leather leggings wrapped his legs, a single stripe of burgundy tracing the outer seams. Tall war boots gripped his calves and twin sword hilts thrust up from his shoulders, secured in his scabbard.

Iorian leapt to his feet, tossing the apple core onto the chaise he'd vacated. "Dawn's Blessed Light to you too, my friend," he said around his last bite of apple. "The darkness of the night has once again been seared away." His own leggings hung low on angular hipbones, showing off a scrawny abdomen made firm from countless hours at fencing and cavalry. "Paladins. Ridiculous, really," he scoffed. He tossed the scroll he'd been reading, a history of the kingdom that had been banned from public eyes, on top of the apple core. "Who believes the end of the year is at the harvest? Clearly the genesis of a new year arrives with the burst of spring blossoms and the scent of women ready to mate." A toothy grin, sharp and pointed. "Has she been dispensed?"

A nod, once, and Shane smirked back at the King. "Your solarium is empty again, Your Highness. Ready for your next conquest." Moving to the platter of food and drink spread out on the King's sideboard, Shane poured himself a glass of water. "It hardly seems like you need a season in which to find a woman to bed, Your Majesty. They seem to fall from the sky into your arms. Or legs."

"Or flit into my bed like bees to pollen. It is so nice when they come in bunches to my flower." Iorian stretched, rolling his neck. "I will give them all

my pollen and send them back out dizzy, wanting more.” Padding barefoot to Shane, Iiorian poured himself a cup of coffee and added a healthy swig of brandy to the black depths. “We should get you a woman, Templar. I’m sure we can find some girl in this kingdom to suit your fancy.” A swallow of coffee. “Or a man, if that’s what you prefer. Men can have their charms, especially when restrained.”

Chuckling, Shane shook his head. “I’m afraid the time for such rambunctious activities has come and gone for me, Your Highness. I leave boisterous pollination to your particular talents.”

Iiorian gulped another swallow of coffee, running his fingers through his ragged, shoulder-length dark hair. “I have seen you battle all of the Templar and still have energy to spare. I daresay you could pound a woman *and* a man, one right after the other, and through the palace floor no doubt, with that strength.”

A sly smirk, and Shane’s eyes sparkled. “Perhaps that is why I refrain, Your Highness. To save the folk of the kingdom.”

Throwing back his head, Iiorian laughed aloud and then finished his coffee in a long gulp. He set down his cup and clapped his hands, rubbing them together. “Right, since I’ve returned from my travels in the country and dispensed with my welcome home party,”—a snort of laughter—“what is it we’re doing today?”

“House Harvest and House Stormwatch have delivered their reports on the expected harvest season’s scale and profits. Also, the ambassadors from the kingdoms of Krek and Orlais have set sail for our harbors. In a week, you will sign a trade agreement with the two kingdoms. You will be the first to open up trade to the continent.”

“Their desperation made the trade agreement easy.” Iiorian, never content to be still, was rifling through parchments on his desk as he rolled a jester’s ball in one hand.

Shane shrugged. “Desperation can make anyone weak. They were susceptible to your maneuvering. Kina will expand with their wealth, and our resources will flood their markets.”

Iiorian stilled, peering at Shane. “And do you still believe that we will be strong enough to take their lands? March on their kingdoms, seize their castles, force them to swear fealty and turn both into vassal states?”

“I know we can.” Shane’s eyes glittered, and there was nothing humorous about his smirk. “They showed their weakness, their desperation, by agreeing to these trade terms. They are despondent. Kina has been blessed, isolated and made strong through great gifts of the land. Trees as tall as castles, as strong as iron. Horses made for war. Men and women bred for strength.” Shane shook his head slowly. “Kina is a kingdom meant to rule. They will all fall before us. We will spread our empire from one corner of the Great World to the other.”

“Our?” Iiorian smiled, quirking his eyebrows at Shane.

“Yours, Your Highness.” Shane ducked his head. “Forgive the slip.”

Chuckling, Iiorian waved him off. “Just a tease, Shane. This is as much your victory as it is mine. You did raise me, after all.”

“Your grandfather—”

Iiorian interrupted Shane. “Was not very involved.” He cast a droll look toward Shane. “After father died in that hunting accident, Grandfather was lost in grief. Thankfully he had you in his retinue and assigned you to be my mentor.” Iiorian’s hand grasped Shane’s shoulder as he smiled. “I couldn’t ask for a better guardian, or friend.”

If only that had been how it had happened. Shane pressed his lips together, smiling tightly back at Iiorian. “The pleasure of mentoring you was all mine.”

Iiorian leaned one hard-boned hip against his desk. “The church has taken a keen interest in these negotiations. The Holy Ones have said they will be praying for the negotiations, and offer their blessings in a ritual tomorrow.” One eyebrow raised, questioning.

Shane grinned again, looking askance. “My invitation for their blessing was premature?”

“No, not premature. The Holy Ones are always welcome in my affairs. This is a Holy Empire, right in the eyes of the Gods.” Iiorian studied Shane. “You will notify me before the Crusades begin, yes? I trust there will be a waiting period before the church marches on Krek and Orlais?”

A deep bow, and Shane crossed his fists in the church’s salute. “Of course, Your Majesty.” He kept his eyes lowered. “I am but a servant of the True Gods, and their will is my command.”

Iiorian was already moving on. He turned away, flipping through parchment on his desk. “Just let me know what the Gods are planning ahead of time,

hmm?” He rifled through another stack of yellow parchment. “These reports, the estimates from House Harvest and House Stormwatch? Where are they? I want to review their figures with the Lords in Council. And, I trust you will be working with the Knights Guard and Captain Vedek to manage capital security for the ambassadors’ landing?”

“Of course, Your Highness. The knights will be deployed to their assignments. The Templar will have the palace secured, as always. And yourself, of course.”

Iiorian nodded. “Ta. Do we have their itinerary planned out? Three days in the capital. Should we shock them with debauchery and decadence?” Another grin from the ever-unflappable Iiorian.

“Perhaps on the second evening, Your Highness.” Shane plucked a wrinkled sheet of parchment, smudged from a sweaty, grasping handprint, no doubt slapped onto the desk in the heat of passion, and passed it to Iiorian. “We have an official state dinner planned for the evening they land, followed by a solemn blessing in the Temple that will last until moon noon. The second afternoon, they sign their treaties. That evening, you may throw the wildest and most debauched party you can think of, if you’d like.” Another eyebrow arched high.

“I think I shall,” Iiorian said, ignoring Shane’s chastisement as his mind plotted out extravagance and depravity. “They should know of our power and our revelry, hmm?”

“They will know soon,” Shane purred. “The whole of the Great World will know everything.”

Their eyes met and held for a long moment. Unspoken words stretched between them, trembling and stealing the breath from the room. Iiorian looked away first, busying himself with his papers, and Shane smirked as he gazed out of the King’s balcony to the Temple’s pikes and the impaled heads withering to sinew and bone.

Retching outside the caged wagon again, Tarl’s stomach heaved as he choked on bile, and he coughed hard, struggling to breathe while his stomach tried to empty itself of the nothing that was inside. Finally through retching, Tarl leaned his forehead against the cool iron bars of his cage and closed his eyes.

The clatter of hooves surrounded him, and the wagon that bore him in his cage creaked and clattered over the King’s Highway. Knights rode astride and

behind him, and two led his prison transport. He was being taken to the capital, he'd been told, to be beheaded and impaled at the capital Temple. The knights eyed him when they thought he couldn't see, and several made the empty warding gesture of the True Gods. Crossed fists clasped over their chest. No power flowed behind their hands, no light or spark, and the ward was an empty, meaningless signal.

They'd been traveling for the better part of a day, and they'd left before dawn. He'd felt the eyes of the highlands on them as they wound their way down from the mountains and the outlands. Any other criminal and the highlanders would have mounted a rescue, attacking the knights and freeing him. Any other criminal, except for a witch.

Tarl had been thrown into the wagon after being manacled and while still unconscious. His bag hung from the saddle of the lead knight. He'd been stripped of his charms, and the runes he'd painted on his skin with berry ink had been smudged and ruined. Even his locks had been untied from their messy bundle atop his head, and they hung in his face. He could feel where they'd tried to pull out the amulets he'd woven into his hair. Tarl smirked. They hadn't succeeded in that, at least. His locks were strong and the tangles around the amulets were stronger still.

The autumn sun of the valley flitted down on Tarl, and the dust from the King's Highway choked his nose and throat. It was dry in the plains beneath the mountains, and turning cold, and freshly harvested hay sat in heaps along the pockmarked road. He was parched, aching, and his head swam. That knock on the head had left him unconscious for hours and he could feel the lump growing. It hurt to touch, and when he moved too fast, his vision blurred. He was nauseous and though the knights hadn't offered him any food, Tarl doubted he'd be able to keep any down.

And, beyond that, the Whispers in his head were screaming.

Wincing, Tarl pressed his forehead against the iron bars, trying to relieve the pain in his head. He couldn't stop the Whispers, and he couldn't understand their shrieking. Normally, he could parse out their meaning, understand the Whispers that spoke as far-off words echoing in a void. This was new. This, he'd never experienced before. Shrieking, rage and anguish mixing with unintelligible harshness, a guttural bark that echoed in his mind. He sank down, curling in on himself as the wagon bounced on.

He must have dozed, because the next thing Tarl knew, the sun was setting and the knights had pulled off the King's Highway and were setting up camp in

a field. Crickets sang, warbling in the fading sunlight, and the drone of cicadas beat against the insides of Tarl's skull, scratching at his eyeballs.

The knights had let their horses graze nearby while they unrolled bedrolls and packs of food from their saddlebags. They were joking and laughing, talking softly as they started a fire and speared salted pork on homemade spits. Tarl's mouth watered at the smell, and his stomach clenched, yearning for sustenance. "Please," he called out. "Please, a piece of meat?"

The knights glared back at him, ignoring his pleas. They went back to their meal, passing a wheel of bread and a brick of cheese dipped in wax.

Leaning back, Tarl crossed his arms over his aching stomach and watched the knights through his iron bars. He was so tired, and so weak. If only his stomach would stop aching, and the Whispers in his mind would stop shrieking, he might be able to sleep again. The sun sank lower, descending past the horizon, and darkness settled over the field and the empty King's Highway. Traffic was always light in the stretches between the larger towns and settlements on the royal highways. Mostly knights and official couriers. There would be no one passing by, not until the morning. He was alone.

Tarl closed his eyes and hoped for sleep.

The pain in Emen's head was nearly blinding.

He'd ridden for the length of the afternoon and through the setting sun, though he had to slow Dava down to a gentle walk. Even the soft movements of his mare couldn't sooth his aching head, and Emen's skull pounded as if a thousand hammers were striking at the top of his spine. He could barely see, and he'd drooped low over Dava's neck, clinging to her as he tried to breathe shallowly. He'd had headaches before. Migraines had plagued him off and on, and he'd fought the pains in his head the night before he left Lilacton, and woke in the morning with the taste of death and cotton in his mouth. But this, this was different, more intense, more searing than anything he'd felt before. He half wondered if he was dying, and wondered if that would be so terrible a thing. The pain would stop, at least.

A new sharpness, a rail of agony spiking into the base of his skull and driving up into the center of his mind brought a cry to Emen's lips. He gritted his teeth, squeezed his eyes shut, and tried to exhale. He couldn't see, couldn't feel, and his balance wavered as he slipped sideways. Dava jerked, grunting beneath him, but couldn't stop his tumble from her saddle. Emen hit the dirt,

gasping for breath, clutching at his head, his throat, his chest. His eyes opened, panicked and searching for something, anything to help. The King's Highway was empty, desolate in this stretch of gentle hills and sloping farmland.

Struggling, Emen rolled onto his stomach and tried to crawl off the road. One hand scratched in the dirt, his fingers in the dust, but it was too much, and he felt the pain swallow him whole, pull him down like a weight suddenly yanked from his belly. Emen's eyes rolled into the back of his skull as he slumped, boneless and unconscious, in the dust-worn empty tread of the King's Highway.

Tarl had managed to slip off to sleep sometime after the knights had started feasting on their salted pork. Drool dribbled from one corner of his mouth as he snored, and he twitched against the iron digging into his back.

All at once, he was awake, grasping the cage bars with both hands and panting, eyes wide and panicked as he searched the black night around their small camp. Most of the knights were asleep in their bedrolls, save the two keeping watch over the banked fire and warm embers. He could hear their low voices, but not what they spoke of. "Knights!" Tarl hissed. "Something is coming!"

"Shut up, witch," one of the knights tossed over his shoulder, a slow drawl heavy on the vowels. Not from the mountains, then. Tarl shoved at his cage bars, banging on the metal. "I said," the knight stood, glaring as he advanced on Tarl, "shut up!" He had his sword out, ready to beat the bars of the cage, or nick him with the tip.

The Whispers in Tarl's mind shrieked, like the cry of an eagle before a kill on the mountain. Panicked, urgent Whispers painted pictures of pain and agony in swaths of burgundy, searing all the way through to his bones. His eyes prickled with the force of it, and he bared his teeth as he pleaded with the knight. "Please, I'm trying to help. We're all in danger."

Sneering, the knight heaved his sword back, ready to beat down on the bars and on Tarl's hands.

From the darkness, a deep rumble, trembling like the raging beat of a thousand war drums, stole over the camp. The knight froze and then backed away, staring into the night surrounding their camp. Nearby, the horses shrieked, high and wailing, before falling silent. The ground began to vibrate,

and the sleeping knights leapt to their feet and grabbed their swords in one move, falling into battle stances next to their brethren.

“What’s happening?” the knight closest to Tarl demanded. “What is this?”

Tarl shivered. He could see the whites of the knight’s eyes beneath his helmet. “I don’t know,” Tarl whispered. “I don’t know.”

Another shriek, a piercing scream that curdled Tarl’s blood and made his bones itch, rent the darkness, and the knights grabbed their helmets and fell to their knees, crying out in pain. Blood trickled from beneath their hands, pouring from their ears, and swords clattered to the ground as they clawed at their faces. More blood wept like tears from their eyes, dripped from their noses. Tarl watched in horror, the scene lit only by the fading embers of their fire, a dull orange glow that left more terror to the imagination.

The coals went dark, extinguished with a burst of searing wind and plunged the camp into darkness. In front of Tarl, the knights screamed in true terror, death cries that turned wet as their screams were choked. Slick sounds, the sounds of flesh tearing, sang all around Tarl, and he heard heavy grunts rumble in the darkness. More hot wind blew over his skin, rattled his cage bars.

Exhaling, Tarl scrambled back and knelt low. He untied his handwraps, ripping them off. He was trembling, nearly flying apart, and he closed his eyes as he heard heavy footfalls crunch bones underfoot in the darkness around him.

His hands were rough, wounds that hadn’t ever fully healed constantly reopening from his life on the mountain. They pained him, no matter how many herbs he stuffed in his wounds or how packed and tightly wound he wrapped them. Digging his fingernails into his palm, Tarl opened one of his scabs, and pus and blood flowed freely down his hand, down his fingers, and stained the floor of his wagon.

He shook his hand, squeezing more blood down his fingers. The footsteps stopped in the darkness, and Tarl heard a deep snort, heard the jangle of metal on metal. Another gust of wind, nearly burning, blew over his skin.

He couldn’t stop shaking, but Tarl stuck his finger in the pool of blood he’d managed to squeeze out and traced a ward rune for obfuscation and protection. He mumbled the invocation over shaking lips, reaching for the Whispers and the Winds. Tarl could only hope to pull some sort of protection from his ruined hands. Some way to survive the night and whatever hunted in the darkness.

The moment the invocation finished, Tarl heard the darkness roar and the ground rumbled beneath him. The wagon toppled over—Tarl’s cage with it—

and he tumbled to the field inside. His head hit the metal bars, right where the knight had smacked him, and he hissed at the violent pain that lanced through him. Retching, he vomited uncontrollably, bile falling to the field beneath his hands and knees. He heard the darkness shriek again, felt the roar of the ground, and then everything went black.

Emen lay low on Dava's back, closing his eyes against the morning sunlight. He'd lain unconscious all night, but at some point, he must have dragged himself to the side of the road. He had woken in the drainage ditch with Dava nuzzling his face. His sword had come undone, lying in the grass a fair distance away.

He didn't have the energy to ponder the mystery of his gear, however. It was all Emen could do to haul himself up to Dava's back and lay on her neck. She started the journey without any guidance from him, trotting gently, one hoof in front of the other, on the long, lonely stretch of the King's Highway, heading north.

His mouth tasted of decay and felt like worn cotton, as if stained filthy linen had been shoved in his mouth. He spat on the road, grimacing, and tried to sit up. Faltering, Emen rested his forehead on Dava's neck and just tried to breathe. His mind was roiling with echoes of nightmares, dark happenings in the night, of slaughtered horses and exsanguinated knights, of thatched roofs burning and screaming in the background. Of Paladins' bones burning in wild heaps, of Vedek shrieking in agony, and of the capital burning amid demon howls. The pounding in his head reverberated down to his boots, and he just wanted to rest.

Banging echoed up the road, a metallic clang and the grunt of a man tiring. Emen gripped his sword, forced himself to sit straight, and urged Dava forward.

Devastation greeted his eyes as he crested a low hill. Knights, six of them, their vital arteries slashed and their broken bodies thrown to the dirt road. Bloodstains soaked the ground, but not enough for six men with those cuts. Horses nearby lay dead and mangled, their heads severed and piled, bones in their backs and legs crushed. More blood there, bathing the hay field where the horses had grazed. Emen's stomach turned to ice, his breath to ash. He'd seen these images in his nightmares, only hours before.

And, in the center of the devastation, an upset wagon overturned and an iron barred cage holding a young man toppled into the dirt. He was kicking at his

bars, lying on his back and trying to force the walls of his cage out of alignment. By the looks of things, he wasn't succeeding.

A smeared blood sigil had dried on the cage floor. Emen stared at it, trying to read the lines of the rune. It had faded and flaked, and he couldn't tell what its original purpose had been.

Drawing his sword, Emen stopped just before the first of the fallen knights. "You there," he called, his voice, at least, sounding stronger than he was. "What has happened here?"

Inside the cage, Tarl whipped around. Sweat poured down his face, soaked his tunic. His eyes were wide, crazed, panic lining the blood-shot edges. "Please," Tarl whispered through chapped, cracking lips. "Please, help me."

Raising his sword, Emen held his ground. "What happened here?" Dava stuttered, sidestepping away from the fallen knights. "Did you kill these men?"

"No!" Tarl grasped the bars of his cage, reached one hand through to Emen. "No, I swear, I did not. Something came in the middle of the night. It destroyed everything." His hand reached again. "Please, please, I beg you. Get me out of here."

Glancing up and down the King's Highway, Emen saw no one. No footprints. Not even a dust trail. No riders in these stretches, not at this time of morning. He and this camp might have been the only ones in this whole area overnight, and he'd been unconscious in a ditch. If something had torn through the night, why had it left him and Dava alone? Where had they gone?

The most likely answer was that the man in the cage was actually responsible. Emen slid from his horse, taking a moment to steady himself on his feet. The pains in his head had finally receded, falling away until they were just waves lapping at the edge of his mind. Still there, but not crippling.

He gripped his sword and knelt beside the first slain knight. Identical wounds greeted him, vital arteries slashed. This was more violent, though, than what he'd seen in Vedek's morgue. Blood tracks trailed from the knight's ears and eyes, and his mouth was frozen in a rictus of pain, his hands grasping for his helmet. Whoever had attacked this knight, his passing had been agonizing. Emen closed his eyes, whispering a lament to the dead Winds in his mind.

His head pounded, the pain rising. He sighed as he pushed himself to his feet.

Raising his sword, Emen stalked close to Tarl, glaring as he moved. "What is that sigil you painted in blood? How did you conjure this power?"

“I conjured nothing!” Tarl pleaded. “I drew a ward rune for protection. For obfuscation! From my own blood!” He held up his ruined hands, showing Emen the scratches he’d opened in his palms. “It was the only thing I could do! The thing, the monster! It was all around us. Darkened the fire. Slayed the knights. I tried to warn them!” Tarl was frantic, breathing too fast, and Emen could see white ringing the hazel irises of his eyes. Panic, honest and true.

“How do you know this ward rune?” Emen stepped closer, tracing the lines of what the rune could have been. Yes, a ward rune of protection and of secrecy. A desperate gamble, perhaps, by a prisoner thinking he was doomed?

“I—” Tarl paused, swallowed. His outreached hand clenched into a fist and he shrank back inside his cage. He breathed deep, studying his new captor, and his eyes seized Emen, halting his steps. The two stared long into the other’s gaze. “I’m a Mage,” Tarl said, breathless. “I hear the Winds and the Whispers.”

Emen’s lips thinned. His stomach clenched and his fists hardened, gripping the hilt of his sword so tight the leather squealed. “There are no more Mages,” he growled. “The Winds are dead.”

“They aren’t.” Tarl swallowed and sat forward, reaching out for Emen again through his bars. “My parents were Mages, and they were killed on that day. Sealing Day. I was taken in by a hermit in the mountains, and he spent his life working to crack the seals. He succeeded. Well, sort of. He cracked one and I can feel the Winds from that seal.”

“You’re lying!” Gritting his teeth, Emen felt his blood run hot, felt his bones vibrate. Felt his rage, so long sheathed, renewed once more. His head was pounding, the agony back at the base of his skull.

“I’m not!” Tarl insisted. “I swear it! Please, wait; I’m not a bad Mage! I’m-I’m-I’m a healer. I worked in the mountains and I traded my craft for food and herbs in the villages.” He shook his cage bars, his eyes pleading with Emen. “I was arrested for delivering a baby the church physician had given up on. The mother and child would have died! I saved them!” His shoulders slumped as he sighed, and his hands slid down the bars. “Is that so awful a crime?”

Agony split Emen’s skull and he fell to his knee and dropped his sword, both of his hands grasping his head. He screamed through clenched teeth and his nails scratched at the base of his neck, trying to claw the pounding and wailing out of his skull.

Watching, Tarl leapt to his knees. “What’s wrong?” he asked. “I can help, I swear. I can help you. Just let me out of here!”

“Whispers, please,” Emen pleaded, not hearing Tarl or seeing the dirt beneath him, lost entirely in his brutalized mind and senseless with the pain stabbing into him. He reached for the familiarity he’d sought so many years ago, asking for help from the Whispers.

“Whispers?” Tarl frowned. “By the Sky and Winds, are you a Mage?” His mouth fell open as he watched Emen writhe in the dirt, scratching at the base of his skull. “Hey!” Tarl shouted, banging on his cage bars. “Let me out! I can help you! Let me out of here!” Emen didn’t move, and Tarl threw himself at the bars, throwing his weight against the cage frame. He chanted as he moved, calling on strength and pleading with the Winds, begging them for the power to escape.

The bars snapped as he threw himself against a crumpled corner once more, and he rolled out into the dirt, ending up splayed out with a mouthful of dust and hay. Spitting, he scrambled to his knees and crawled to Emen’s side. The ranger was keening, rocking into the ground and moaning. Tarl reached for his shoulders.

One touch of skin, on accident, as Tarl’s hand brushed Emen’s cheek, and everything changed.

Swirling, a maelstrom of dust tore up toward the sky, encircling the two mages. The vortex howled, bursting from the earth itself. High above, distant and seeming to fall from everywhere at once, a shrieking cry pierced the air and descended into the whirling storm. The shriek turned to a howl, and then to a dozen screams, and then to the wails and cries and bellows of thousands of voices, terror-stricken and lost. Torrid heat blazed, pressing down on the two mages, pressing them into the dirt, and Tarl screamed as the pressure and incalculable heat built. It seemed like a wall of fire raining down on top of them, like vengeance and scorn and terrible wrath given solid form. Next to Tarl, blood slipped like tears from Emen’s closed eyes, and Tarl threw himself on top of Emen, shielding his body with his own.

All at once, the furious vortex stopped, fading and dissipating into the curve of a searing wind, and then scattered into the cloudless, breathless morning sky.

Panting, Tarl tried to sit up, but winced. Dust had cut his skin, and cuts welled along his arms and along his cheeks like shards of glass. He grit his teeth and sat back on his heels, reaching for Emen’s body. Rolling the ranger over, Tarl got his first close-up look.

Emen’s skin was cut too, along his neck and face and hands. His cloak had covered more of his body than Tarl’s simple tunic had. Thin lines of blood

crisscrossed his cheek, mixing with the blood tears shed from his eyes. Older than Tarl, his dark temples had started to grey and there were the beginnings of lines across his forehead, but his jaw was square and strong. Pink lips flared, like a sun-warmed dahlia, wide and warm. Beneath his cloak, Tarl felt solid shoulders and the curve of well-defined muscle. Licking his finger, Tarl traced a healing rune on Emen's cheek and muttered the words. Emen's cuts closed and dust fell from his skin.

Beneath Tarl's touch, Emen jerked, hidden monsters plaguing him behind his eyelids. He jerked again, then reached for his dagger at his boot and sat up with a shout, ready to plunge the dagger into whatever had been before him in the darkness. Tarl reached for his shoulders, trying to soothe him with his touch.

Whirling, Emen brandished the dagger toward Tarl. "What did you do?" Emen shouted. Crazy eyes wandered over Tarl, taking in the highland Mage from his kneel in the dirt to the loose locks adorned with amulets. "By the Winds, what did you do?"

"I healed your cuts." Tarl gestured to the sky, brilliant and cloudless and without a breath of wind. "Do you not remember the vortex that almost swallowed us whole?"

Emen fell to his ass, panting as his eyes searched over the field, the sky, desperation in his gaze. "I saw a void," he muttered. "A black, endless void, shrieking and terrible." He swallowed and closed his eyes, but still his chest heaved. "There was a whirlwind in the void, in the ground. I leapt into it. Winds, I just wanted the agony to stop!" Emen slammed his fist into the ground and his dagger clattered from his grip.

Rage bloomed, sudden rushes of agony and bitter, searing hatred, cresting in waves, bursting free from his soul. The need to be destructive, to tear down and to destroy, roared within him. His entire world had tilted, veering unexpectedly, and he was cast adrift into a maelstrom of screaming, a cacophony of pain and anguish.

This pain was old, and—he'd thought—long laid to rest. This all-consuming burn, a sickness in his heart. Free from where he'd locked his feelings away, they flowed through him, buoyed within by an unspeakable power, and his torment wrapped around his soul. His breaths shuddered, faltering with the force of his emotions, so much more potent than any time before in his life. He waited for his despondency to unloose within him the dark depths of his bitterness, the darkest parts of himself.

All at once, his chest felt concave, his breath choked and caught midscream. He gasped, trying to breathe, but all he could do was rasp and choke for more air, trying to claw his way through.

He felt a chain fall around his soul, heavy and weighted down with more than just his own hate. More than just the sour taste of his own woe. It was collapsing him, tearing everything inside down to blackness, to darkness, to isolation and desolation.

Tarl moved toward him, but Emen's sudden whirl, and the anguish in his gaze, froze Tarl. "Why did the Whispers return?" Emen hissed. "Why can I hear their voices in my mind again?"

Chapter Four

Vedek rode hard, leading a column of knights from the capital north on the King's Highway. An anonymous tip, ridden in by a courier at a fast gallop on horseback, told of a crime committed on the highway in the desolate stretches between the northern mountains, the outlands of the kingdom, and Crossroads, the intersection of the King and Queen's highway. The missive was rushed and hurried, covered in ink splotches and smeared, but Vedek read of freshly slaughtered knights and beheaded horses.

Grim, he'd ordered a column to ride that afternoon. Lieutenant Mari was left in charge of the murder investigations in the capital in his absence. She'd been listening to a Bone Sergeant as he'd dissected the murdered woman's remains, trying to piece together the whys and when of her murder. Again, her vital arteries had been severed and the blood removed from her body. How? Why? And who would do such a thing? Vedek left private instructions for Mari, advising her to quietly search for ritual magics or sigils or signs of Magi around the body.

One thing was certain. It hadn't been a Superior Knight. The Superior had all been in cloister, ordered there by Vedek, when the second body was found. She was still warm when they found her, dumped in an alley bordering Salt Town and the Merchant's Quarters. And now, this fresh slaughter on the highway. The murderer was not one of his Superiors.

The sense of relief Vedek felt, that it wasn't a Superior, was small compared to the overwhelming pressure of finding this slayer, with so few clues and so little to go on. Hints of magic attached to the murders, suggested by Emen, cast dark shadows in Vedek's mind.

And Emen... Inhaling deep, Vedek tried to put his friend out of his mind. Emen, the wild ranger, a man of a thousand words in his entire life. A wanderer, traveling the kingdom and living for periods in the forests, in the dells, and even, he thought, in the savage lands of the east, but always returning to the capital to haunt the city's streets, at least for a time. As if he couldn't stay away, not entirely. Vedek had been off duty and thoroughly drunk when he'd first met Emen, drowning the passing up of his promotion in bottomless cups of ale. He'd made a pass at the ranger; tall, grim and mysterious, he was everything Vedek was not, and all of the wrong parts of his job as a patrol knight. He'd been too drunk to do more than stumble and fall, though, but

Emen had taken care of him that night with more friendliness than Vedek had known before, and he'd insisted on at least outfitting Emen on his ride out of the capital as recompense. Embarrassment had shamed him, but Emen was gentle over breakfast. Warm smiles and a gallon of coffee later, Vedek had managed to apologize for his drunken come-on.

Life rolled on, Vedek moved up the ranks, Emen continued to haunt the city, and their friendship, despite themselves, grew. Vedek never made another pass at Emen, and Emen never mentioned that night. It was better that way, Vedek told himself on lonely nights. He still cherished Emen's presence with a fierce tenderness that bordered on something unnamable, and he'd given thought—more than once—to following Emen out of the capital and throwing in his lot with the ranger.

But obligation and caution had stilled his actions. Emen was a closed book, a secretive man. That mystery had always added to his intrigue, had fanned the flames of Vedek's passion, but what if his secrets held darkness? What if Emen turned out to be less than what Vedek thought he was?

Somber and ominous his thoughts had become, lost between bloodless bodies and cold, ferocious murders. His investigator's brain teased out the commonalities between each murder. He and Mari had more yet to do, but he couldn't ignore one glaring impression pressing on his mind.

Emen.

He'd been in the vicinity for each of the murders. In the capital for both, in Lilacton, right next to Barrow's Spoke, for the comely housewife's murder. And the last report of his movements had been from the northern gate, the knights watching him ride hard out of the capital, heading up the King's Highway. He knew of the significance of the throats being slashed, the vital arteries cut. And he'd been the one to suggest a magical influence in the murders.

What Vedek knew about Emen's background, about his history, could fill a sentence. He felt a special kind of fool, at times, for befriending a man he knew so little about. For desiring him, even. He knew nothing of his past, nothing save that he had a survivor's skill to live in the wild, fierce sword skills—they'd fenced often enough for him to learn from Emen, though he'd never tell the man—and that, apparently, he knew something of the fallen Mages, of the Fallen House of Mysteries. Knew of sigils and signs and of a darkness that existed beyond the Winds, the home of the demons and the undead, the dark creatures that had walked the earth before the Sealing.

Questions remained. Where had Emen been the night he'd dropped the purse in old Holy Light, the night the prostitute was murdered? Where had he been last night when the knights—returning to the capital with a captured Mage from the northern mountains—were slain? Who was this man?

Whom had he fallen for?

Crazy. He was going crazy. That must be it. This was the end, and he was as crazy as Limping Lilly, one of the patients in the old charity hospital that the Paladins had run in the capital. Lilly had talked to walls, to corners, to chairs and cups, to anything but other folk. Closing his eyes, Emen felt a sudden kinship with Limping Lilly, and tears burned at the corners of his eyes. He banished them, shaking the tears away.

He rocked slowly, back and forth, as he perched on the stone hearth in front of a roaring fire at The Spitting Cow, a dark and hay-strewn tavern in the highland hamlet of Windweave, deep in the backwaters of the kingdom. Tarl had led them both there, staying to the east when they hit the mountains.

"I was arrested in Granite Bottom," he'd said. They stayed clear of the west.

Exhausted, weary down to his bones and wracked with the ceaseless, droning Whispers in his mind, Emen struggled to guide Dava up the highway. Tarl, sitting behind him on Dava, his arms wrapped tight around his waist, had had to wake him countless times on the road before he slumped from the saddle.

They finally arrived at The Spitting Cow, a way station in the mountains more than anything else, just after sundown. Already, farmhands and laborers from the area were pouring in, and an off-tune fiddle was trying to wreak havoc on everyone's eardrums. The Spitting Cow ran a dosshouse as well, and the farmhands and laborers who didn't have a family, a wife, or land of their own found a cot or a hammock at the Cow for a few pennies a night. Rooms to let were available as well, but none of the day workers could afford such luxury.

Winding his way back through the crowded tavern, Tarl carried two mugs of ale in one hand and a board with a wheel of bread, sausage, and hard cheese in the other. He'd covered his locks, after Emen had insisted that he stood out with his unruly hair, and had fashioned a snood wrap out of one of Emen's sword rags. He was still filthy, dirt stained and bloodied, but he'd wrapped his hands again and blended in well enough with the day laborers to pass for the evening.

Ale and vomit and piss made the wood floor sticky, and straw had been thrown down to mop up the inevitable spills and waste. Smoke filled the room, tobacco and pipes mixing with the sizzle and pop of meat turning on spits in the center of the tavern. Along one wall, the barkeep kept a steady pour of ale from stacked barrels, and along the opposite wall, a long stone hearth, big enough for a dozen men, housed a steadily burning fire for warmth. Emen had retreated to the corner of the hearth as soon as they'd arrived, barely grunting at Tarl.

Sliding one of the mugs across the stone, Tarl tried to catch Emen's eyes. "Hey," he said softly. "You need to eat. Drink. Rebuild your strength."

Muttering under his breath, Emen continued to rock, his arms wrapped tight around his shoulders. The Whispers chanted, a ceaseless, beating drone that had replaced the agonizing pounding at the base of his skull. It was a different pain, the Whispers, hearing them again after so long. These were not the same Whispers Emen had enjoyed so long ago. Back then, the Winds and Whispers had been welcoming, and he'd thought of the Whispers as another friend in his mind. Hours of private conversations, laughing with the emanation of the Winds, and Emen had thought he had a connection, a kinship, a partnership that would last a lifetime. He'd loved being a Mage, being a Paladin, and his life had been good. He'd been happy.

Then, they'd been ripped from him, and his world had turned dark and terrible.

Twenty-six harvests later, the Whispers in his mind were not so pleasing or kind. They beat against him like war drums banging on his soul, and he couldn't make out their rumbling chants or their itinerant screams, fading in the distance. Gone were the gentle laughs, the bouncing of ideas back and forth. The teasing.

Maybe he'd been crazy then, too, and it had been a gift to have the Winds sealed. Rocking forward, Emen shook his head, and the clatter of noise in his mind drowned out the tavern around him. No, he couldn't believe that. He wouldn't. It had been good back then, they had all been good, even if the world was hard and the war against the darkness was long. It was everything after that had been terrible.

Tarl's hand gripping his arm struck like a bolt of lightning, clarity and focus in his touch that calmed his mind. For the moment, the Whispers banked, receding like the sea pulling away from sand, and Emen let out a breath he hadn't known he'd been holding.

“Emen,” Tarl said carefully. “I know what you’re going through. It was like this for me, too, when the Whispers started. It took some time to sort it all out. I can help you.”

Shaking his head, Emen pressed his lips together as he finally met Tarl’s gaze. “It’s not the first time, kid,” he grunted. “I’ve had the Whispers before.”

“Were you a Mage before the Sealing?” Tarl kept his hand on Emen’s arm, stroking down his cloak-covered shoulder to his forearm.

“I was a Paladin,” Emen breathed. “Or at least, a Paladin recruit. Days away from my solemn vows. We escaped from the Cathedral in the capital, just before—” He closed his eyes and bowed his head.

“I’m sorry.” Squeezing, Tarl tried to pass his care along to Emen. “You haven’t heard the Whispers since?”

Emen shook his head. “No, never. And now...” He winced. “It’s all I can hear. They roar, and they’re so angry. Screaming.” Emen’s grimaced, pain scratching across his face. “Nothing like before.”

Tarl swallowed. “That’s not like what I hear. My Whispers are... soft. Faded. I don’t hear what they say much, but it sounds like they’re far away and I can only barely hear them.” He chewed his lip as he sat back, letting go of Emen. “But not angry. Not screaming.”

“It’s all I can hear.” Emen grunted through gritted teeth, throwing his head back. Firelight gleamed off his suntanned face, catching on the stubble of his days’ beard growth. “I almost wish—” He cut himself off before finishing the thought.

“May I help?” Tarl scooted closer, eyeing the rest of the Tavern. So far, no one was paying attention to them. “Let me help. I’m a healer.” He raised his hand, smoothing a stray lock of Emen’s dark, loose hair behind his ear.

Emen sighed into the touch, turning his head toward Tarl’s palm. “Your touch soothes the Whispers. Makes them quiet.” His eyes fluttered closed.

Steeling himself, Tarl pressed his palm to Emen’s temple, then raised his other hand and rested it against Emen’s brow. Hot and sweaty, Emen burned beneath Tarl’s skin. He whimpered, leaning hard into the young Mage’s hands as if trying to bury himself within his touch. Softly, Tarl began to speak, low and under his breath, whispering words to unite their energies together.

Emen resisted, his energies hardening against the younger Mage. “Let me help,” Tarl whispered, one thumb stroking Emen’s cheekbone.

All at once, Emen's guard dropped and he let Tarl in, and the ranger seemed to sag with the drop of his restraint. Tarl pressed closer, leaning in to support the ranger, and delved into Emen's mind.

He didn't go far, just waded into the shallow pools of Emen's consciousness. Dark, turbid waters loomed further, deep and implacable, but Tarl didn't press to those depths. He let his hand dip into Emen's mindwaters, let droplets fall from his fingers. Next to him, Emen shivered, gasping.

The air was warm above his mindwaters, dry and swirling around Tarl. Different from other minds he'd joined with. The baby's mind had been cool and calm, like the morning blossoms of a bellflower. This was harsher, more hostile than any mind he'd touched, and Tarl wondered if this was the surface of Emen's tormented soul.

Find me, Tarl thought, reaching for Emen's soul. *Find me here*.

Emen's soul flew at him, plowing into Tarl's consciousness. He went down, falling with a splash, and Emen's soulweight clung to his shoulders. Sitting up, he managed to pull Emen off him only slightly, and he stared down at a much younger, shivering version of Emen. Maybe twenty harvests, if he had to guess. Maybe the age he was at the Sealing.

"Help me," this emanation of Emen's soul whispered. "It's too much."

"I'm here." No sooner had Tarl wrapped his arms around Emen's soul, the emanation vanished, dissipating with a pop and a breath of wind. Behind him, on the shores, a tall man cloaked and hooded all in black stood motionless, staring at Tarl. He couldn't see his face, though, and a searing gust billowed around him. Tarl raised his hand, trying to block the wind from burning his face.

"Emen?" No doubt it was him. He'd just met Emen, but despondence leeched from the ranger. And... something more. Something malevolent, dangerous. *Despair*, he realized, tasting sour blood and terror on his tongue.

"Help me," echoed again, this time carrying over and across the width of Emen's mindwaters. The words repeated, desperate, and Tarl circled, trying to find the source. Howling, the scorching winds stung at his skin, but still the cloaked man didn't move. He was frozen, standing with his head bowed low, seeming to stare through Tarl. Bitter and spiteful whispers, the hissing of odious words spoken too low to make out and raucous, crashing clangs seemed to shake the sky over Emen's mindwaters. Waves rolled in, breaking against Tarl's body and knocking him down. He covered his ears, crying out as he

squeezed his eyes closed. Water crashed down on him, foam falling into his throat and choking his breath.

The winds fell out of the sky and the cloaked man vanished, and everything stilled inside Emen's mind. Mindwaters receded, and Tarl crawled out of the surf and onto the sands on his hands and knees, coughing. If that was what Emen's Whispers were like, Tarl had no doubt that Emen wanted them gone. Something was wrong, very wrong.

Down the shore of Emen's mindwaters, Tarl spotted a body lying in the surf, facedown. Pushing himself to his feet, Tarl stumbled toward it, and then ran when he recognized the loose chestnut strands of Emen's hair. Emen clutched something in one hand, a fistful of brilliant poppy fabric. The plume from a knight, Tarl recognized as he drew closer. He fell beside him, his knees in the sand, and rolled Emen onto his back. This was the ranger he'd met, the emanation of the man he sat beside in the tavern.

Blinking, Emen came back to himself in bits and pieces. "I don't know what's going on," he whispered. Dry and parched, his voice scratched over his words. "I don't know what to do."

"I will help you." Tarl rested his hand on Emen's brow again, smoothing over his skin. He saw Emen's eyes widen beneath him, and voices echoed from across his mindwaters. *Help me! Winds, please! What's happening? Don't leave me!*

Exhaling, Tarl closed his eyes and he reached out with his soul, following the anguish and the black nightmares to the space where Emen's soul joined with the Whispers. He felt heat on his cheeks, felt a brush of flame against his face, but he pressed on.

Something was wrong with the joining of the Winds. Instead of a glistening, gleaming vortex of light, of brightness that could not be gazed upon, Emen's Winds somersaulted and swirled, tumbling around and over a pulsing, heaving black mass. Red lightning roiled, mixing with bursts of flame lashing out from the center, raging against the very depths of Emen's soul.

Inhaling, Tarl opened his Winds to Emen, letting his soul tangle with Emen's darwelcome home kness. Frantic, harrowing shrieks stole from the flaming nexus before fading away, falling from sight or sound. Tarl couldn't fix this—whatever was pouring through was coming from the other side—but he could shrink it. He imagined pressing it in both hands, collapsing the connection, and squeezed.

Beneath him on the sands, Emen trembled, shuddering as his eyes rolled back in his head. Next to him in the tavern, Emen began to seize, jerking and kicking next to Tarl.

Grabbing hold of both Emens, Tarl pulled out of his mind, withdrawing from the waters of Emen's soul and returning to his body in the tavern. Emen thrashed, but Tarl wrapped his arms around his back and pulled him close, holding on to him through the seizure. Others stared at him sidelong, but Tarl glared back, and they turned away, ignoring the two.

Soon, Emen's shuddering ceased, and he slumped in Tarl's arms, completely out. His forehead rested against his neck, and though Emen was damp and sweaty, he was cool to the touch.

Sighing, Tarl held Emen close and stroked his back. The Whispers in the back of his mind urged caution, whispered of danger, but he pushed them away.

Chapter Five

Tarl dozed lightly through the night, trying to keep an eye on Emen. After passing out in the tavern, Emen hadn't roused once and seemed to sleep as if dead. He'd struggled to carry Emen up the stairs to the single rooms for let, and he'd felt too many eyes boring into his back as he'd done so. When he got them to their cramped room—a single bed, creaking and rickety, a wooden chair with the thatched seat nearly frayed through, and a bucket of water all crammed together with barely enough space to open or close the door—he'd shoved the chair against the door and hoped for a quiet night.

Briefly, he thought of leaving. He had no ties to this ranger, no reason to stay. Emen was a stranger, a highwayman from the road, and though they'd traded names and Emen had carried him back to the north on the back of his horse, they hadn't said much else to each other.

But Emen was a Mage, a Paladin, and all Tarl's life he'd wanted to meet another. He'd always believed there were others, that he wasn't the only Mage still hearing the Winds and Whispers. No luck in the north; living in the mountains had been lonely, and he'd never heard even the slightest hint of another anywhere near.

There was so much he didn't know. So much about the Whispers and the Winds, about what had attacked the knights on the highway. About Emen, even. Questions poured from his mind, and he placed his hope in Emen. Somehow, the grim ranger and he had been brought together. Vortexes didn't thunder from the ground for no reason.

He chewed his lip and kept watch over Emen through the night, tucked into the narrow bed together. Tarl sat against the wall, holding Emen against his chest and between his legs. He kept one hand on Emen's breast, feeling the slight inhale and exhale of his chest. If not for that nearly absent breath, Tarl would have thought he was dead.

Drained and weary, Tarl's eyes slipped closed before dawn, and he let his head fall against Emen's.

Emen's eyes blinked open much later, still bleary and disoriented. He felt like his head had been stuffed with wool, as if he'd lost a wild fight to a stampede of warhorses. Everything ached. Even breathing hurt. He tried to turn

his head, figure out where he was—lying on something soft and comfortable for once—and then winced and froze.

His pillow sighed, and Emen realized he was resting against a warm, firm body. By the looks of the arms wrapped around him—and the hand wraps—he figured it was the kid.

He was still numb, disoriented, even, and everything felt unreal. He was moving too slowly, almost as if in a dream. His mind wasn't working right either; his thoughts were far too muddled. One finger traced lazily over Tarl's hand wraps, following the linen up to his wrists. A curious thing, a healer with festering wounds.

Leaning back, Emen let his eyes slide closed again. He should be moving, getting up, pulling away and leaving with no questions asked. He still had to figure out what was happening in the kingdom, what dark magic had befallen it and from where, and the knights' slaughter only added to the mystery.

But he couldn't summon the effort, not at the moment. The kid's warmth felt good, more than he wanted to admit. He'd been young when taken in by the Paladins and had lived by their vows ever since. Celibacy. Distance.

"Are you awake?" Tarl whispered just above Emen's ear. His breath tickled over his skin, ruffling strands of his chestnut hair. Swallowing, Emen moved to sit up. Time to move, face the day, and all that had happened. Tarl held him, his arms tightening around his chest. "You don't need to get up," he said softly. "After everything you've been through, you deserve to rest."

Emen couldn't argue with that. He sighed back against Tarl, but he sat a bit straighter, more aware of where he was leaning. "And what have I been through?" he rumbled. "What happened?"

"I don't have many answers for you." Tarl sounded like he was apologizing. "I have more questions, actually. But I did enter your mind and touch your Whispers—"

"You what?" Emen bolted upright, tearing himself from Tarl's hold. "How? Why?"

As if he were placating a wild animal, Tarl held out his hands and tilted his head to the side. "You asked me to," he said slowly. "Asked me to help you. The Whispers, they were angry, you said. Screaming. You were in pain."

Incredulous, Emen stared at Tarl. "And you just entered my mind? Decided to touch my soul?"

A shrug, and Tarl's wide hazel eyes frowned. "It's what you needed."

"It's also one of the most invasive procedures a healer can perform. You risk much when you touch another's soul. And... it's impolite!" Emen glared, his nostrils flaring.

"Well," Tarl said, arching his eyebrows high. "You're welcome for the healing. Since you're not screaming in agony, should I assume that the Whispers have calmed in your mind?"

Silence, and then a grunt and a short nod. Emen wouldn't meet his gaze.

"I'm sorry I was so impolite," Tarl drawled, "but you were hurting, and you didn't say no. I asked when I joined my mind and soul with yours, and you let me in so fully that I didn't think there was a problem."

Emen shifted, glaring at the dirty floorboards of their rented room. "What did you do?"

Tarl explained how he'd followed the Whispers in Emen's mind to where they joined his soul, and how the join within Emen was twisted and deformed, black and seething and roaring with flame. He spoke of how he'd let his own Whispers tangle with Emen's, and how he'd pressed his soul against the blackness, shrinking the joining. He left out the parts where Emen's soul emanations had pleaded with him, scared and alone, and the one shadowed figure who had stared and raised a searing windstorm against Tarl.

When he finished, Emen was staring, his jaw agape and eyes wide. He couldn't speak for several moments, opening and closing his mouth, trying to find words, any words at all. Finally, he spoke, his voice halting and low. "Only the highest trained of the Paladin clerics would ever even consider such actions, and they have had decades and decades of research, training, and practice. There are incantations. Rituals. Seven circles to guard. Salt and ice scattered. More herbs than you've ever seen, I guarantee that. And still it could go wrong. And you?" Emen exhaled, shaking his head. "You perform a mind-merge and tangle our souls with no preparation, and while sitting in a tavern?"

Tarl shrugged again, grinning. "It worked, didn't it?"

"Who are you?" Emen shook his head, breathless words tumbling out.

Another lopsided, easy grin from Tarl. "Guess we did do things backward, didn't we?" He sat back on the bed, leaning against the wall as he stretched out his long, slender legs and crossed his ankles. Emen sat cross-legged, watching Tarl warily. "Touching souls before we knew anything at all about each other. What would our mothers think?" He meant it as a joke, but Emen didn't laugh.

With a sigh, Tarl started talking, telling Emen of his parents, their small home in the mountain and their magic. How, on Sealing Day, his mother had sent him out to survive, and how Old Man Etto had found him. How they'd leaned on each other to keep going, even though it got harder as Etto had lost himself. Then, his victory at the seal, and how he'd chipped off a piece. Tarl's first feel of the winds.

Tarl reached under the bed and pulled out his bag, kicked there the night before. They'd scavenged it from the knights' horses before riding north. Rummaging inside, Tarl found the shard from the seal and tossed it to Emen.

Emen dropped it instantly, hissing and rubbing his palms. "It's burning."

Frowning, Tarl snagged it back. He turned the stone over in his hands. "No, it's not. It's just stone." He tossed it in the air and caught it, smiling at Emen. "And this was how I felt the Winds."

He continued on, explaining his first spells and charms, his rune wards. How he discovered he was a healer. Growing in his practice, learning the herbs of the land.

Most of it was folklore passed down through the folk of the mountains, mixed with runes, charms and simple incantations. But he could do so much more, somehow. Emen sucked on his teeth and shook his head at Tarl. "Pure, raw talent," he mused. "Mixed with folk magic. Somehow you've managed to survive."

Tarl just kept smiling his rogue's smile. His dark locks were free, hanging over one of his shoulders, and the amulets he'd woven into the ends jingled softly. A true folk of the mountains, wild and carefree, yet touched with a power Emen had rarely seen. More than a healer. A true Cleric.

"What about you?" Tarl asked. "I always knew I couldn't be alone. That there were other Magi out there." His eyes sparkled as he gazed at Emen. "And you're a Paladin. Everyone thought you had all been massacred."

Swallowing, Emen looked down into his lap. He didn't speak for a long moment. "We were. I do not claim to uphold the order. I am an exceedingly poor standard bearer for the glory of what we once were."

"You said that others had escaped with you?"

Emen shook his head. "We scattered. I tried to find them, but all I found were graves and empty leads."

“There’s a Paladin Cathedral not far from here. The mountain folk all say it’s still full of holed-up Paladins refusing to join the world, or full of demons depending on who you talk to.”

Emen stared down at his lap and shook his head. Tarl’s shoulders slumped. He’d just been trying to help, but Emen seemed determined to be gloomy.

Then, Emen’s head rose, his lips parted, and he smiled soft and slow. “The Cathedral,” he muttered. “Perfect.”

“Are there really Paladin there?” Tarl frowned.

“I’m not sure.” Emen was already sliding off the bed, standing and straightening his jerkin and cloak. “Not a word has been heard from the outlying Cathedrals since that day, and it was insane to try and go near. But if the Cathedral is still standing, then there may be something in there that will help me.”

“Help you with what? And what can I do?” Tarl stood as well, grabbing his pack and his cloak and sliding in front of the door, blocking Emen’s way.

Emen frowned. “No, kid, this is the end of our time together. Step aside.”

Tarl slid in front of Emen again. “We really should stick together,” he insisted. “Mage folk like us. Maybe the only two in the kingdom. In the world.”

“You tempered my Whispers. They are only a faint hum now. Hardly enough to qualify as an actual Mage.” Emen tried to slip around Tarl, but they ended up in an odd sidestepping dance, Tarl hindering his every move. Emen scowled and his face twisted, turning red.

“Have you tried?” Tarl backed up a step as Emen advanced. Emen was taller by only half a head, but with his armor and cloak hanging off his frame, he loomed over the skinny highlander.

Swallowing, Emen closed his eyes and exhaled. He stood still, and Tarl braced himself as though he was going to reach out and shove him away.

Instead, witchlight bounced in the air and the room filled with a soft, golden glow.

Tarl laughed aloud, not quite believing it, and leapt at Emen, throwing his arms around the ranger’s neck. “Talking about it is one thing, but you can’t deny this. Two Mages, Emen. We found each other in this crazy world.” Tarl summoned his own witchlight and blue orbs floated amongst the gold.

Emen's arms slowly wrapped around Tarl's back and his head tucked into his neck with a breathless, whispered sigh. He hadn't been touched, or showed any affection for anyone, since he was a child. His movements were stiff, as if he didn't know how to move, didn't know how to touch with care. "Thank you," he breathed. "Thank you, kid."

After that, Emen took Tarl with him, grumbling with a soft smile as he led them both downstairs and paid their bill with the barkeep. Tarl kept quiet and stayed back, keeping his head low and his locks covered, and they didn't speak again until they were picking through the untamed forests and fens of the outlands, traversing up toward the border of the highlands. It was colder in the mountains than on the plains or in the capital, and they kept their cloaks pulled tight around their bodies, hoods raised. Frost hung on pine needles and covered the fallen leaves. Fog hovered like ice-damp webs, slowing their movements and chilling their breath. Autumn had reached the capital, but in the mountains, winter's breath was already coating the land. Tarl huddled close to Emen on Dava's back, trying to soak up the older man's warmth as they headed for the northern Paladin's Cathedral.

"So." Tarl finally broke the silence. "Why are we headed to the Paladin's Cathedral?"

Emen guided Dava over a disintegrating tree trunk. They were staying off the roads—even the back roads—and following game trails through the fen. Muck sucked at Dava's hooves, and the mare blew irritated huffs every few minutes, her tail switching. Emen tried to soothe her with gentle clucks and whistles. He took his time answering Tarl.

"There are strange happenings in the kingdom," Emen finally said. "Unexplained murders."

Growing up in the mountains, Tarl had always heard that the capital was a cesspool for the strange and deviant, a place of intrigue, danger and filth. The capital plotted against the mountain folk, they said in the taverns. Old knights' helmets were used as target practice by highlanders and wildmen living in the woods. "I didn't think murder was all that uncommon in the cities." It wasn't uncommon in the mountains, either, but the motives were different, at least to Tarl's mind. He doubted one farmer would hack another to bits for stealing grazing land or poaching heads of livestock in the streets of the capital.

"What happened to your knights—"

“They aren’t my knights. They were my captors.”

“What happened to the knights bringing you to your jail cell, then,” Emen repeated, growling, “was not the first attack of its kind.”

“You mean, there have been other attacks like that? From monsters? Or demons?” Tarl shivered, remembering the snorting and snarling in the darkness, the crunch of bone, the spill of so much blood. He wished he’d seen what had done such horrors in the dark, but there had been nothing but the sounds of agony.

“We don’t know what is responsible for these attacks. It could be a demon. It could be a man.” Emen hesitated. “The murders are part of a ritual, though. The bodies. They’re emptied of blood.” He glanced over his shoulder at Tarl. “I don’t suppose you noticed that.”

“No,” Tarl breathed.

“It’s a very specific kind of murder.” Emen pointed to the sides of his neck and to his vital arteries. “If you were to slice into these arteries and sever them, you could bleed a man out in moments. Most street cutthroats slit the entire throat, and the victim ends up suffocating or drowning. The victims bleed, but not like this.”

Tarl stiffened behind Emen, leaning back.

“It’s a killing skill taught to only the highest ranked of those in House Killbane.” Emen paused. “It was also taught to the Paladin. For those in Killbane, it’s a way to put down and end the worst sorts of criminals. If the Superiors are called to answer a crime, they don’t want to mess with simple swordplay. For the Paladin, it’s two things. It’s a skill. You don’t want to play with a demon or a corpse walker, or even a blood possessor, without a way to put them down hard.”

“And the second?”

“It’s a sign.” Emen exhaled, letting his words hang in the air. Tarl could feel Emen’s hands clench on Dava’s reins, leather creaking in the silence of the fen. “Exsanguinated bodies usually mean blood magic. And blood magic has always been a dangerous aspect of the Mysteries.”

“I’ve never even heard of it,” Tarl whispered.

“You wouldn’t have, thanks to the Sealing.” Emen shook his head. “Blood magic was suspect even in my day. There’s incredible power in blood. Blood

possessors harvest the dead and walk the lands again. Disembodied demons steal blood and bodies from the living. Those who die that way are lost, their souls shattered. Blood contains life, contains the soul. Don't ever let anyone have your blood. Take care of it. Leave none behind, nowhere."

Tarl's mind spun. He had always known there was so much he didn't know, but the way Emen spoke, there were volumes and volumes that Tarl sorely lacked. "Someone took the knights' blood?"

"Not just the knights'. There were two murders in the capital before I fled two days ago. And before that, a farmer's wife in Barrow's Spoke was murdered. All had their blood drained from their body."

"For some kind of use?"

Nodding slowly, Emen said nothing. "The knights have been treating the investigation as a serial murderer. I asked about the possibilities of a ritual aspect to the slayings, and they weren't happy to hear that question."

Frowning, Tarl glared at the back of Emen's head. "How is it you seem to know so much about the knights?"

A low chuckle. "Somehow, and I don't quite know how myself, the Knight Captain is my friend. He asked for my opinion."

Tarl snorted loudly, then laughed. "Isn't that something? A Paladin and a knight, friends forever?"

"He knows nothing of my past, kid. He is not fond of Magi, or of magic. I have no doubt our friendship would end as soon as he discovered my former fealty." A deep swallow, and Emen shifted in the saddle.

"You're investigating the blood magic on your own?"

Another nod, almost lost as they rocked and swayed on top of Dava as she wound through a copse of bare maple, stepping over maroon and golden leaves, wet with mulch and mud. "We used to investigate together. He would drag me along when he was an Investigator Knight. Those were simpler. Smugglers. Opium dens. Thieves. Corruption. Nothing to do with magic or ritual murder." Emen paused. "There is something deeply wrong about these deaths," Emen rumbled. "The knights will miss it, searching in the wrong places. But blood sacrifice, and blood obtained from sacrifice, has long been a key component in demonology and in the magics of the Abyss."

"The Abyss?"

“It’s not just the Winds that bring a Magi their powers, kid.” Emen turned to look at Tarl over his shoulder, though his hood covered all but one eye. “The Abyss is the dark, the black, home to the demons and corpse walkers and soul screamers. Everything that opposes the Winds is of the Abyss, and just like the Winds, the Abyss calls to its own Magi.” Turning back, Emen felt Tarl’s arms close around him tighter. “Legend says that the Abyss ceaselessly tries to swallow the Winds, and the Winds in turn try to scatter the Abyss.”

Pressing his cheek against Emen’s cloaked shoulder blade, Tarl exhaled a long puff of frost-covered breath. “We’re searching for anything that could help us find a Blood Mage using dark magic to murder for a blood sacrifice, then?”

“Yes,” Emen said simply. “And after that, what does this Blood Mage want? What is their purpose?”

Briefly, Tarl wondered if it was too late to back out, to turn around and leave Emen to his quest. He’d wanted to meet another Mage, wanted to learn more, but this was so much bigger than he’d ever thought. And so much darker, deadlier. Even the forest seemed to turn, branches suddenly menacing, the fen a malevolent bog, the fog a delirium haze tugging on his mind.

Ahead of him, Emen rustled in the saddle, clearing his throat. One of Emen’s gloved hands squeezed down on Tarl’s, resting on his stomach. Tarl realized he was gripping Emen, fingernails digging into his armor. It wouldn’t have hurt Emen, but he seemed to sense Tarl’s tension, his rising panic.

“I suppose we should train you,” Emen finally said.

“Train me? Like you were trained?”

A chuckle, and this time, it sounded warm and honest. “I could never compare to my training Lieutenant,” Emen mused, a smile curving his words. “But yes. You’ve done a great deal on your own. Now it’s time to teach you more. You have an abundance of power. I’d like to help you figure out how to control it. Help you grow into a full Cleric, not just a healer.” A pause. “How old are you?”

“Twenty-nine harvests, give or take. I think I was three when my parents died. I could have been older, I suppose.”

Emen murmured, shaking his head. “Twenty-nine harvests. To have come so far. Amazing, kid.”

“And how old are you?” There was a challenge in his voice.

“Forty-five harvests,” Emen replied, his voice turning dark.

“Old man,” Tarl quipped.

“Prodigy kid,” Emen shot back. Stunned, Tarl stared at Emen’s back, a smile stretching over his face. The ‘kid’ comments stung, but he blushed at the compliment to his power.

Emen inhaled, deeper. “I should teach you a bit of combat skill as well.”

“I have a dagger.”

“That knife you keep hidden in your waistband?” Emen snorted. “You couldn’t fight off a single knight with that.”

Silence, though it spoke volumes. Tarl dug his fingers into the side seams of Emen’s armor, and Emen twisted away with a grunt. “So, you did try to fight them when they arrested you?”

“I took out at least five of them,” Tarl protested.

“Not with that blade!”

“With witchlight.” Tarl sniffed. “Some of us can do battle with more than just bits of steel.”

“A valuable skill,” Emen agreed. After a moment, he continued. “And, thanks to you, kid, one I can call on again.” As he spoke, golden witchlight began floating around them, illuminating the fen and cutting through the fog.

“It was nothing.” He smiled, though, watching Emen’s golden light bob in the air. “Your Winds returned because of that vortex.” He could feel Emen’s spine stiffen, felt his gruff laughter disappear within him. “What do you think that was?”

More creaking of Dava’s reins, and silence as Emen thought. “Perhaps some remnant of the demon. A trap, maybe. A ward we tripped up.” He shook his head. “I don’t know. I didn’t see what happened. I was lost in visions of my nightmare.”

Swallowing, Tarl let it go for the moment. Emen was practically vibrating, and he could feel the tension pouring from him. He could scarce hold on to Emen’s body. “How long until we reach the Cathedral?”

“Nightfall.”

Chapter Six

Vedek surveyed his knights' murder scene with narrowed, critical eyes. The field off the King's Highway was secluded, and though a farmer had baled the hay growing in the acres that stretched as far as Vedek could see, riders to the nearby towns and hamlets couldn't find any folk who claimed ownership of the land. Doubtless, the farmer had already disavowed his claim—if he'd ever had one to begin with. Land grab was a problem in the lowlands.

And, superstition ran hot in these parts. Wild stories of hungry ghosts and soul suckers traveled into the knights' precincts every spring, and then rumors of blood possessors over summer and into the autumn. Corpse walkers in winter. He could tell the time of the year by the stories circulating in the taverns throughout the hamlets of the kingdom. Already, cries of blood possessor and corpse walker sightings had flowed in the battlements in the valley, spurred on by his knights' murder.

They must have been delayed leaving the mountains. Traveling through the highlands was a nasty, horrendous endeavor, and trying to haul a prisoner's wagon down from the highlands and through the narrow crags and gnarled forests had to have made the journey nearly unbearable. A single rider could travel from the capital to the edge of the outlands and the northern mountains in two days at a hard ride. Once at the outlands, the forests slowed a rider considerably, and it took another two days just to ascend through the woods and crags to the first settlements in the foothills. Traveling further, into the highlands, added time to the journey.

On top of that, the danger brought from the mountain folk would have delayed their travel. Knights moved slowly through the outlands, watchful and wary.

The Bone Sergeants had taken the knights' bodies to a tent set up in the field. They'd strewn a hay floor to mop up any blood from their examination and dissection, but that hadn't been necessary. None of the knights had any blood left in them.

Vedek had taken charge of their belongings, and he'd thumbed through their official correspondence, personal letters, sketches, and, on one of his knights, a secreted amulet of the old ways. He'd pocketed that with a frown. The man had died horribly enough. Dishonoring his memory and remains due to an unexplained magical amulet wasn't a priority.

Their orders had been to apprehend and transfer a wild Mage, a young man living in the highlands and known only as the witch of the mountain. He had supposedly worked as a healer, but the list of crimes attributed to the witch ranged from cattle slaughter to petty theft. Clearly, a man to pin unsolved crimes onto in the highlands, but Vedek didn't discount everything entirely.

After years of chasing, the knights had picked up the witch in a tavern, though the exact circumstances of the arrest were left out. He'd been taken in Granite Bottom, one of the highland hamlets stretching along the Sky Road, the last real road heading up into the mountains. Wildmen and tribes of highlanders made their homes above the Sky Road, as had the witch, apparently.

The knights hadn't made good time, and they weren't able to make Crossroads, the town sprung up around the intersection of the King's and Queen's Highways. Taverns and inns aplenty, they would have been safe there. Instead, they'd pulled off and made camp for the last time.

Colored flags fluttered from stakes in the ground, marking the position of the knights' bodies, their horses' slaughters, and of a single set of unknown boot prints they had found. A horse's shoe prints stained the dirt as well. Nothing else, save the knights' boot prints, and those were identifiable from the knights' emblem embedded in each of their soles. Vedek's Investigator Knights crouched low, sketching the unknown imprints in the dirt and in the field. Trackers had traced the movements of the dead knights—their leap from the fire, one knight's run to the wagon, the others grabbing their weapons and readying for battle. Their death throes. Now, the Trackers stalked the boot and horse prints north and south, tracing the mystery rider's prints and pathways.

The broken wagon and cage lay on its side, flags marking how the Mage had escaped. He'd fallen with the cage, then kicked his way out and scrambled on his knees to the center of the camp.

To what? Suppliant to the murderer of the knights? Exhaling, Vedek moved closer to the prisoner's cage and crouched down. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his knights eyeing him sidelong, sharing pointed looks with one another. The others had stayed away, far away, and the only way Vedek had managed to get a sketch of what they had found was to do one himself.

He stared at the rune scrawled in blood on the base of the cage. It was smudged now, but undoubtedly a sigil of magic. Emen's halting words in the crypts of the capital rang in his mind. *"A sigil. The mark of a demon, or a ritual devoted to one."*

Had this Mage summoned something black and treacherous? Had he cavorted with demons, or given them leave through his blood to enter the world? Emen had said so little, and yet given away so much, in their little chat in the crypt.

This investigation was beyond the realms of men alone. Vedek knew it.

“Sir!” Hooves at a fast gallop ran up the highway, dust scattering beneath the rider. A cloud puffed as the knight hopped down from his saddle, plate mail clanking as he jogged to Vedek’s side. “Sir, the trackers have news to report.” A handful of parchment with sketches passed from the knight to Vedek.

Slowly, Vedek flipped through his trackers’ evidence. Sketches of the mystery man’s boots, his horse’s hooves. A heavier stride and weight to the horse’s gait on a track recovered heading north on the highway. Whoever the rider was, he’d taken the captive Mage with him. The horse carried two riders as it rode north.

Vedek reached beneath his chestplate and pulled out a folded piece of parchment. He hadn’t carried it with the official correspondence or with his evidence file. Not yet. This suspicion was too fragile, carried too much meaning. He turned away from the messenger, but still felt the bore of his knights’ eyes digging into his shoulders. Slowly, unfolding his private parchment, Vedek lined up his sheet with the trackers’ evidence.

Emen’s boot prints, taken from the dirt outside the saddle maker’s shop, and the imprint of Dava’s shoes, stared up at him, etched and rubbed into his private sheet. He’d paid a street child for the sketch on a whim, thinking it would help him keep Emen safe someday, or clear his name if ever he needed it. In his other hand, the prints recovered from the trackers of the unknown horse and man.

A perfect match. Even down to the ruined notches in Emen’s boots, worn thin from too many hours riding and hiking. Dava’s shoes were well kept, better than Emen’s, and her prints gleamed from both pages.

Vedek closed his eyes. His hands clenched, crumpling the edges of the parchment and his sketches, but he didn’t care. Bitter fury tore through him, flaming down his spine. Emen had been his friend, had been his confidant for years. He’d wrangled him into more than one suspect endeavor, and Emen had always tagged along with his quiet humor and his sky-blue, smiling eyes. How he’d loved those times, those moments when Emen would smile at him, laugh at a story he’d told. Vedek had lost his heart long ago, yes, but he never thought

he'd given it away to the wrong man. Just a man who was oblivious. Or gone, more often than not. Emen was an outsider, a ranger, scarce, distant, and guarded, yes, but never a man that Vedek would have suspected dabbled in the forbidden magics.

Or who would slaughter his knights.

His throat closed as his stomach churned. He felt his muscles tense, his passions ignited. His jaw was clenching and he forced himself to try to breathe, to stop the rising tide of rage in his soul. He couldn't stop the quaking of his hands, though, or the fire raging in his blood.

All of his memories were playing on an endless loop, and every question Vedek had was clamoring for attention, repeating ceaselessly in his mind. He was going mad with rage and betrayal. Why was Emen doing this, and why now? What had driven him to slay these men, knights under Vedek's command? He'd been his friend for years, almost two decades, and he'd never seen any hint of this. Why? Why now? For what purpose?

What and why haunted his being, driving him in circles around circles in his helm, pushing him to his limits. He had been pacing the scene of the crime, bending low over evidence flags and reading and rereading the magical sigil, and all he had to show for it was a wounded heart, a burning coil of frustrated, anger, and a soul-deep scream. Was there a way he could have stopped this? Were there signs that he'd missed?

"Knights!" he called. "To me!"

Assembling quickly, Vedek's knights took a knee and waited for their Captain to speak. Dust covered, the knights took the moment to pull a draught from their water skins, quenching their thirst. The harvest had passed in the kingdom, but dressed in full plate armor and working in the wan sunlight, the knights still felt sweat pouring down their backs and soaking their tunics. Still, none of them tarried or complained. Their comrades had been slain, and not a single knight would rest until justice had been wrought.

Vedek smoothed the sketches, folded the trackers' work into his own and tucked them back into his pocket beneath his chestplate. Inside, he was forcing his mind to the task at hand, to orders, to procedure, to processes. It was the only way to control the maelstrom of his rage, the eddies of fury that sucked on his soul. "Knights," he began, "through your efforts, we have uncovered a suspect. He has been in the vicinity of each of the murders, and his boot prints and his horse's shoes place him here—" Vedek gestured to the crime scene

around their huddle “—at the time of this slaughter. Based on his horse’s stride, we know he took off with the captured Mage just after. For what point and purpose, we do not know. However, he’s now implicated in these murders, in the abduction of the witch of the mountains, and is a suspect in the capital and Barrow’s Spoke murders as well.”

A deep inhale, as Vedek collected himself. He closed his eyes, exhaled shakily. “Knights, the man we seek is known to many of you. We seek the ranger Emen.”

Noises of shock, gasps and curses. Many of the knights had obliquely known Emen over the years, or had seen him spending time with Vedek in the taverns. Vedek had talked him into drinking with him at The Itchy Saddle, a dive of a tavern that catered to the knights, when he could. Emen stood out like a sore thumb, but he continued to go with Vedek whenever he was invited.

“Sir,” one of the older knights started, a frown creasing his sweat-soaked forehead beneath his helmet. His orange plume wavered in the wind, almost tangling with the knight standing beside him. “Isn’t this ranger Emen your friend?”

“No.” Vedek let all of his disgust flow into his voice. “Not if he’s done this. I do not hold friendship with murderers.”

More nods and grunts, and less suspicious glances thrown Vedek’s way. “Make no mistake,” Vedek growled. “We will run this bastard down. Shila.” Vedek nodded to one of his Knight Lieutenants. “Take your unit and ride north. Pick up the trackers and work with them to find Emen and this witch. Do not approach if you happen to find them. I will ride to you as soon as the Bone Sergeants have delivered their final report.” Shila nodded.

“The rest of you, continue your work. I want every piece of dust in this field examined. Every moment of what they endured, I want recorded. Cras, ride to Crossroads and procure a wagon. At morning light, take these fallen knights back to the capital. Ride with your unit under honor guard.” Cras, Knight Lieutenant in Vedek’s personal command, nodded.

“We have a murderer to stop and brothers to avenge. Let’s get to work.” Nodding, Vedek dismissed his knights. They sprang to their feet, Shila’s unit heading for their horses to ready their mounts for the ride north. Cras traded a few words with Shila, and then he set off for the south, heading to Crossroads at a fast gallop. The rest returned to their duties, marking evidence, tracing prints, sketching what they found.

In a shielded tent in the field, the Bone Sergeants continued their work, dissecting and examining the mutilated bodies of their fallen brethren. Vedek trudged their way, pulling out a sweat-stained cloth to cover his nose. The stench from the sunbaked carcasses rolled over the field, festering on the autumn winds.

The stench fueled his rage, like a bellows to a flame.

Sundown came early in the forests and the fen, and daylight trickled through the pine boughs and crowded branches in dribs and drabs. Mistletoe cramped bare tree limbs in clumps, and the shock of red berries was the only color Tarl had seen all day aside from the dim grey of the fog and the dull mud and muck of the fen and woods.

True to Emen's word, they neared the Cathedral as the sun touched the horizon, its last tendrils of light snaking into the forest like sharpened tips of pikes and lances. The Cathedral sat alone, mired in an untouched bog, and the sun's golden rays seemed to skirt the fortress, leaving it dark and barren.

It was obviously a ruin. Stone crumbled from the keep, open to the skies, and the citadel walls had been burned black before caving in. The outer battlements still stood, but the wooden doors had long rotted. It was a blight on the landscape, and an affliction on Emen's memory.

In the distance, smoke rose from twin chimneys in the center of a tiny hamlet, and both men could hear the cries and cheers of a tavern. Sundown, and the tavern would just be getting started on the night's bawdiness.

"That's Gallows Hall," Emen said, pointing to the smoke. "The town used to support the Cathedral and the Cathedral the town."

"Looks more like a hamlet now," Tarl said, peering at the settlement. "And where'd they get a name like that? Nasty sounding."

"Historical." Emen pulled Dava to a stop and rolled his neck. "Original settlers took a dim view on crime. One of the constables, before the knights took charge of the land, hung every criminal he could find. When the Cathedral went up, temperance finally arrived."

"But they kept the name?" Tarl waited as Emen slid down from the saddle.

"I think they like the tough reputation." Emen held out his hand for Tarl, ready to help him from the saddle.

Not expecting the generosity, Tarl smiled and gratefully took Emen's hand. He slid down, and then stumbled, pitching face first into Emen's chest as his legs buckled beneath him. Strong arms wrapped around his body, holding him up, and he heard Emen's throaty chuckle over his head.

"We've ridden a long day." Emen's hands stroked over his back, gentle and slow. "I should have had us stop more." Pulling away, Emen steadied Tarl and helped him stumble to a rock.

Hissing, Tarl felt the burn and protest in every inch of his legs. He tried to stretch, shake his legs out, but everything hurt.

Emen's eyes lingered on Tarl's hands. He reached out, tracing one finger down his wrapped wrist and to the center of his palm. "Why do you not heal your wounds?"

"I can't. Can only heal others." He shrugged, grinning through the pain in his legs. "So, what's the plan for tonight?"

Emen's eyes traced his wraps, still cradling his hand in one of his own. "A sacrificial cleric?" he mumbled, almost too soft for Tarl to hear. He murmured again, shaking his head, and Tarl tried to pull his hand back. Holding on, Emen smiled softly. "I was a low level healer back in my day. May I?"

Swallowing, Tarl nodded, jerking his head up and down once. His hands had always been destroyed, and it had been a cruel joke of the Winds to be unable to heal himself. Wraps were all he could manage, packed tight with herbs to dull the pain and kill any infection. He refused to get his hopes up over Emen's gentle touch or the way his roughened, dirt-crusted fingers ghosted over his skin as he carefully unwrapped his wrists and hands.

"What other kind of Mage were you?" Tarl blurted out. He averted his eyes, not looking at the packed puss and mushy herbs that his palms had become. "You talk about healers and clerics and Blood Mages. Different types?"

"Yes, different classes." Emen's fingers scraped over his cuts, firm, thick strokes that cleared away the herbal mush and gooey pus. Tarl gritted his teeth and kicked his feet, but didn't make a sound. He felt Emen's eyes on him, felt the brush of Emen's thumb over his wrist.

Emen kept talking as he grabbed his water skin and poured a sluice of water over Tarl's palm, rinsing away the detritus of his attempted healing. "Clerics are higher level healers. Able to do, after much training, what you can do without a thought." Emen caught Tarl's eye. "A hundred Clerics would have given their Winds to be able to wield your skill."

Tingles began in Tarl's shoulder, a warmth that quickly grew, consuming his blood until he felt his veins turn to horses, until he felt something else slithering and slipping through his body. Gasping, he tried to pull back, but Emen held him fast, pressing his fingers deep into the center of his palm. Golden light shimmered in his hand, and then he was hot, searing hot, Winds, he was burning up! He had to get away. He hissed, gritted his teeth, and tried to jerk back.

Emen let go, and Tarl fell sideways off his stone perch. Emen stared down at him with wide eyes, his mouth agape, breathing hard.

Holding up his hand, Tarl expected to see blackened flesh, expected to smell the singe of burn. Instead, his unmarked palm stared back at him, pink and plump and smooth.

Tarl thrust out his other hand, still wrapped and filthy, with a grin. "So, what kind of Mage were you?"

Smirking, Emen knelt and unwrapped Tarl's other hand. "I was a true Paladin. My magic focused on combat. On battling our foes."

"Kina's foes?" This time, Tarl watched everything.

"The Winds' foes. The Abyss." Golden light again, illuminating Emen's strong jaw and his crooked nose. How many times had it been broken?

"You know how to beat this thing, then. This Blood Mage summoning demons?" Emen's healing still felt like burning, but Tarl gritted his teeth and bore it with only a slight grimace.

Emen was silent. The glow in Tarl's hand faded away, leaving his palm smooth. He couldn't help the grin that exploded over his face. His hands had been rotten for years, and now, made whole.

"I'm going to the Cathedral." Standing, Emen turned away, everything in his face closed and dark once more. Gone was the soft smile, the gentle light in his eye. Even his hands seemed hard again, grasping the hilt of his sword and dagger.

"What? Now? It's sundown. What do you possibly think you could find now? There's no one there, Emen. It's an abandoned wreck."

"You never know." Kneeling, Emen summoned flame in his hand and lit a branch he pulled from the forest floor. "You stay here. Dava will guard you."

Shock stilled Tarl as he snorted. "Dava will guard me? Don't you think that's a bit backward?" He was speaking to Emen's back as the ranger stole down the hill toward the edge of the bog encircling the Cathedral.

“Nope,” Tarl heard. Emen’s voice was quiet, but pitched enough to carry to Tarl’s ears. “You still have that pitiful dagger, and you haven’t had any real training yet.”

“Well, train away!” Tarl called back, raising his voice the loudest he dared. “Bring me anything to train, just make sure I can do it sitting down!”

Silence.

Sighing, Tarl’s shoulders slumped. He threw back his head. He was hungry, and he was sure Emen was hungry, too. If the ranger ate at all. Tarl had seen him eat a piece of bread on their way out of the tavern that morning, but it had been hard bread, nearly moldy and about to be tossed to the pigs. Other than that, nothing.

He stomach grumbled, complaining. Well, he knew the forest at least. Emen wasn’t the only one who could summon a little fire. With a whisper, firelight danced on Tarl’s fingers and he set to work building up a fire pit of scattered logs and stone, all the while keeping one hand aflame for light. Finally, caressing the logs he’d packed into a pyramid and tickling the kindling beneath, he transferred the flame from his fingers to the wood.

Standing took a moment, and he bent over to catch his breath. Once he was moving, it was better, but he still felt the soreness through every one of his muscles. Even his ass ached with every step. Fingers alight again, Tarl set out, searching for food.

Emen stole over the bog, stepping carefully in the shallowest patches of mud and swamp water. He tried to move as delicately as he could to stop the sound from carrying to Gallows Hall. A fog bank had closed around the Cathedral, sealing him from the villagers’ eyes, but the sound still carried across the bog. If the folk there were anything like the folk in the capital, then there would be fables and legends and ghost stories aplenty to dress the Cathedral in. He didn’t want to add to the lies.

The bog stank, acrid and sulfuric. Reeds and bog-marsh grass pushed up through the sodden swamp. Bubbles rose, releasing rancid odors that clung to the surface and coalesced into a misty blanket covering the waters. Grey and pallid, the wan light from the forest barely reached the bog, and the mists seemed to greedily hold whatever bits of light they caught. *Ghosts*, Emen thought. *Ghosts live in these mists*. Decay clung to everything, the stench of rot mixing with the sulfur fumes. As he walked, muddy waters gripped his calves,

sucking his legs deeper into the murk and mist. He sank further with each step until the bog waters surged over his boots.

Branches creaked, but no birds sang. He heard the muted sounds of his own footfalls, the sucking of the muck and mud, but little else. Life seemed to vanish.

Memories bounded into his mind, another evening slipping unseen through waterlogged passageways. He and Vedek, trying to replicate some thieves' passage through the river Rea. Vedek was sure that they were sneaking up under the docks and traversing the muck and sewage-laden spaces between the docks and the river. How he'd convinced Emen to try it with him, he couldn't remember. They'd rowed out to the cove and then jumped into the waters and swam their way in, lugging packs to see if they could make the journey laden down with supposedly stolen goods. A disgusting crawl up under the docks, and then a wade through the shit-filled underways, and they had made it all the way to the river. Vedek insisted on traversing the river all the way to the midcity battlements—his posting at the time, when he was a new Inspector Knight—just so he could rub his success in his superiors' faces.

Filthy, disgusting, and smelling worse than a pisspot, they'd cleaned off in Vedek's barracks and celebrated at The Itchy Saddle. So many years, and so many times they'd investigated together. Now, again, Emen sought answers, but he missed Vedek at his side. The Knight Captain couldn't follow him in this, though. His sharp glare at the mention of magic had stilled Emen's tongue in the crypts. For all that he and Vedek were friends, he still was a knight. A slayer of the Magi.

Taking a draught of putrid bog air, Emen pushed on, shoving Vedek out of his mind. He neared the Cathedral, clambering up the stone boulders, and stood before the battlements.

Walking through the rotten wood gates brought different memories flooding back. His eyes misted, and he saw his own Cathedral, remembered walking through the gates on his first day. He'd been awed, then, blown away by the majesty of the order. They'd made a mistake. He knew it, and he wasn't actually supposed to be there. They'd kept him, but he never quite believed it.

He tried to strangle the wild beating of his heart. Faces and names danced in his head, laughed in his heart. All of it, destroyed in one day. His whole world, shattered.

Swaying, Emen closed his eyes and took a breath, trying to find his center. *Winds, I have missed you.*

Instead of the comforting, soothing warmth he'd remembered—had longed for all these years—Emen heard a throaty, vile chuckle in the back of his mind, but faded and dim, as if it came from across the bog.

Enough. Shaking himself and gritting his teeth, Emen drew his sword and clenched the hilt tight. Witchlight hovered around him, casting a circle of gold that raced over the blackened scars covering the Cathedral. He traced one hand down the singed brick of the citadel wall. The doors had collapsed, but the crumbled wall was as good a way in as any. Vaulting over the ruined stone, Emen hopped down, finally inside the Cathedral.

Bones crunched beneath his feet. He jerked back, pressing against the stone wall, and he flooded the ground with witchlight.

Instead of the bones of his brothers, he saw the smaller bones of vermin, of dead rats and bog badgers, of foxes and wild hawk. Snakeskin tangled with brittle bones, and his feet scattered the creatures' long forgotten bodies from their deathly slumber.

Exhaling, he shakily stepped forward, casting his witchlight in a wide arc, sending his orbs swirling and pulsing as far as they could stretch. His torch crackled in his hand, smoke winding its way up the drafty hollows of the Cathedral's broken roof and shattered walls.

Each Cathedral had been built the same, laid out with the same footprint and floor plan. He stepped carefully, crunching animal bones and desiccated bats beneath his boot heels, winding his way through the citadel and to the back corridor. To the left, the barracks. To the right, the library and the labs, each devoted to a specific Whisper of the Winds. Healing and combat and elementals, illusion and defensives. And then, the Forbiddens. Blood magic. Necromancy. Demonology. Knowledge to study, but not to wield. Not anymore.

Much of the corridor had collapsed, and Emen picked his way carefully over fallen timbers, struts and archways torn down under the weight of attacks. Stones lay in haphazard heaps, and he had to scramble over the largest piles. Finally, he was at the cracked and unhinged doors of the library, and he managed to slide his way in between two fallen beams.

Devastation greeted his eyes. The golden glow of his witchlight revealed toppled shelves, books molding in sodden puddles, and broken desks and benches seemingly crashed against the walls. Scrolls and parchment sheets lay scattered all around, some only shards and fibers like dust in the air. He was

afraid to move, afraid to step, should one wrong move spell ruin for a piece of parchment or long-forgotten book.

It would take hours to search through the library, and more than just his strength. He'd need Tarl to help him move the shattered benches from where they had pinned toppled shelves, and to help him free the trapped tomes stuck under the destruction. Another set of eyes couldn't hurt in this mess.

Bending, Emen reached for the first few books he could reach. His witchlight pulled close, illuminating the worn leather spines of the books. His torch was dying, fading away, and he wiped away the flame with a thought, then tossed the burnt stick into a puddle. The sound of embers hissing filled the library, overly loud in the empty tomb of the Cathedral.

Advanced Healing Magic for the Cleric greeted his eyes. He smiled, though it was thin, and rubbed his thumb over the letters. *Healing Arts*, read the second book. *Illusory Concepts Defined*, read the third.

He set down the third and gripped the first two. He'd bring them back to Tarl. Paladin knowledge hadn't been shared with those outside of the Order since its founding. Tarl might have learned a great deal at the House of Mysteries, had he studied there, but he'd never have read these. Smiling, Emen clenched the books in his hands, imagining the look on the kid's face when he returned and handed them to him. Happy, he hoped. The kid wanted to know more, had dreamed all his life of finding another Mage. It was the least he could do, Emen told himself, to gift him with the remnants of what could have been his culture. A culture he'd never know, knowledge he'd never properly learn. Emen was a poor substitute for the teaching he could have had.

Emen's thoughts lingered on the kid's face, on his thin features. A lifetime of privation in that one. And those tangled locks, dreaded and cascading down his back. He tied them back—literally, tying two at the side behind his head to keep the others at bay—but he'd covered his head when Emen had pointed out how wild he looked. Dirt covered, his hair in tangled locks and jingling with forbidden amulets, he looked like a creature of the old legends, a true folk of the mountain from before the first mages had built the temples to the Winds.

He was also everything Emen had never known: liberated and content.

The Paladins had taken Emen in when he was young, and he'd led a life of order and discipline as a recruit. When his world had been shattered, he'd tried to cling to that order and that discipline, and he had pledged to cherish his vows in honor of his fallen brothers. He'd been as shattered a man as his world had become, dark and bitter.

Tarl's unflappable nature was infectious, though, and Emen found his thoughts drifting back to the young highland Mage as he picked his way back across the bog.

When he made it back to where he'd left Dava and Tarl, he found a small fire banked in a stone circle and two pieces of wood laid out with a pile of cracked nuts, picked and washed berries, and a small mountain of herbs and greens. Dava munched on her own pile of grasses, and she twitched her ears at Emen, but ignored him in favor of her food.

Frowning, he peered into the gloomy forest, searching for Tarl or some sign of his presence. He wasn't where he'd left him, moaning on the flat stone and kneading his sore thighs. Conjuring witchlight, Emen pushed his golden orbs into the woods, though they barely made a dent in the impenetrable black.

"Sorry," Tarl breathed into Emen's ear. Blue orbs floated around him, almost caressing Emen's cloak. They tangled with Emen's golden orbs around the birch and pine trunks just beyond their camp. "I was foraging for us," Tarl continued, stepping around Emen silently and seeming to flow across their campsite, silent, lithe, caressed by flame and shadow. Kneeling, he set down the last of his find from the forest—two blue eggs, snatched from a Fell Robin's nest.

Emen shivered, but could only stare as Tarl crouched by the fire and placed a bright blue egg in each mountain of herbal greens. The firelight traced over Tarl's cheekbones, arching high and sweeping back. His eyes gleamed and a single lock fell over his shoulder.

"Join me?" Smiling, Tarl gestured to their simple meals placed on squares of bark. "How was the Cathedral?"

Starting, Emen finally moved, uprooting himself from his shocked stillness. He felt like an oaf, lumbering across the camp behind the kid's deft and silent grace. His leather armor creaked, and his scabbard scraped rocks as he walked. "Here." He thrust the two books he'd recovered and looked away.

He missed the stunned shock that stole across Tarl's face, then the delight that lit his eyes. "May I?" Tarl asked, reaching for them.

Shaking the books at Tarl, Emen grunted, "'Course. I brought them back for you."

Tarl plucked the books from Emen's hands and traced their spines, caressed the covers. He lifted the tomes and inhaled, smelling the old parchment and

dried ink. "Thank you," Tarl breathed. "I never thought I'd read a book on our kind."

Emen smiled stiffly as he crouched next to Tarl. Reaching for his dinner, he picked up a handful of nuts and berries and popped a few into his mouth. "How did you learn to read?"

"Old Man Etto would take me down to the outskirts of the villages. Made me read signs and flyers. A lot of tavern signs. A lot of wanted posters for him, and then for me." Tarl quirked a wry smile at Emen. "You learned in a fancy hall, I bet. Gilded candles and chandeliers?"

Nodding, Emen chewed on his nuts, choosing not to speak.

"Well, could you help me with the hard parts, then?" Tarl's eyes were wide, imploring, and Emen felt himself succumbing to their dark depths.

He cleared his throat. "The Whispers can help you through the books. They guided me in my studies."

"I know," Tarl said. "They've guided me for twenty years." A soft smile and the tilt of his head. "But I would like to learn from you."

This time, when Emen looked back, he held Tarl's gaze as he chewed and swallowed, and finally smiled. He looked away quickly, glancing back down to his foraged dinner.

"Thank you," Emen grunted. "For this." He gestured to the food and stared into the fire.

"My pleasure." Tarl's hand rested on Emen's arm, just over his bracer, and Emen couldn't hide his body's trembles. He was shaking, and he didn't know why.

Emen only had one bedroll packed on Dava. Tarl said he didn't mind; he'd been sleeping in the wild and in the forests since he was four. Another night was simply another night.

Emen wouldn't hear of it. He protested, insisting that Tarl take the bedroll while he curled up in his cloak. Finally, Tarl relented, and as he bedded down in the ranger's roll, he thought that maybe Emen might have been right. The boiled wool, worn soft through years of use, was far more comfortable than the rocky ground. It smelled of old leather and smoke, a hint of pine and sunbaked sweat. It smelled like Emen, and Tarl smiled as he turned his face into the woolen bedroll.

The next thought Tarl had was hours later, much, much later, in the dead watches of the night. The moon had already sunk below the horizon, and only the stars still speckled the black sky through winterbare branches. Sitting up with a gasp, Tarl felt his nightmare fade away, felt the claws of terror jerk from his skin and slink back to the darkness. He heaved, breathing hard, and reached for their shared water skin in between where they slept.

He froze. Emen wasn't asleep. He wasn't lying on the ground, wrapped up in the cloak like he'd insisted he was happy to do. Like Tarl had seen him last, lying down facing the fire and staring into the flames. He was simply gone.

Sitting up, Tarl tried to find him, or to spot his golden orbs hovering in the woods. Perhaps a piss break.

But there was nothing. Grim darkness, the blackness of the forest and the bog, and the rolling waves of frost-coated fog coated the air, suffocating their camp and the woods. At the dead watches of the night, the forest seemed sinister, seemed punishing, and the trees reached for Tarl with their hooks and claws.

Only leftover fear from my nightmare. I am safe in the woods.

But these woods were far from his home, far from his mountain, and he didn't know what lurked in their depths. He didn't know what lurked in the world, really. Only yesterday, he hadn't known about blood magic and the Abyss, and of the war between the Winds and the darkness. Knowledge, what he'd wanted for so many years, hurt, and it scratched at his sense of safety.

If only Emen were here.

He chided himself. He'd gotten along just fine without Emen for nearly thirty years. He could get along fine without him now, too.

But you don't want to. You feel safe with him.

Tarl didn't know if that came from his own mind, or from the Whispers.

I will be fine.

He lay down on Emen's bedroll and rolled over, facing the fire on his side, and watched the last of the embers fade away.

Chapter Seven

Shila and her knights, along with the trackers, stalked Emen and his captured Mage all the way to Winterweave by sundown.

Vedek joined them, riding hard to catch up after conferring with the Bone Sergeants over his murdered knights. Dropping down from his horse, he surveyed Winterweave, a suspicious frown marring his features as he stared down the hamlet's citizens.

They stared right back, scowling and silent. Winterweave was in the outlands, almost to the highlands, and the Knights Guard hadn't been to these parts since the church and Templar had led the Inquisition that hunted down the last of the Magi. They had never made patrols into these backwaters. Justice was meted out locally, when needed, and no reports were filed with the local Knights Guard precinct, all the way down in the foothills. Vedek had heard reports from the precinct warning of the unease and distrust threaded through the mountains. Still, he hadn't had time or resources—or knights—to devote to the outlands, and the mountains had stewed in tension for years.

Perhaps that was a mistake, now that he was deep in their territory. There wasn't much that he, even as Knight Captain, could do, though. Their disgust came from the policies of the King and of the Houses and, if he was honest, from the church. The mountains were taxed high for the services of each House, both on import and export. Even if he had deployed more knights to try to establish a presence, the mountain folk would have paid for their postings. The church and Templar had done a fair amount of beheadings two decades back, quelling an uprising and slaughtering the highland leaders before they got any traction. The True Gods had ordained Kina as a whole kingdom, unsullied and undivided. Revolution threatened the Gods' intentions, they said.

And the highlander revolutionaries had been aspiring Mages, trying to pull the Winds back into the kingdom and break the seals. For that, and so much else, they'd been slain.

Vedek ordered Shila and her knights to set up camp opposite the hamlet's greasy tavern. Snow fell, a breezy dusting that melted into the ground and didn't stick. Frost was forming on barrels, though, and puddles turned to crystals on their edges.

Up the road, Vedek could see riders and day laborers turning around and veering away from The Spitting Cow, warned off by the presence of the

knights. No doubt, there were fugitives in these parts, but Vedek wasn't here for them. Not tonight. But by the looks of the crowds descending on the Cow, this tavern was the place to be. One boot print in the mud had led them to its door, and Vedek wondered why Emen would have ventured to such a rowdy and public place. Not his usual scene.

It bothered Vedek that he knew that about Emen but didn't know that he was a murderer. That the wool had been pulled so completely over his eyes. He knew Emen's favorite foods, his choice in ale, how firelight caught on the curve of his cheek when he smiled, or how his eyes danced with mischief when they laughed together, but he couldn't see that the ranger he'd come to know had a dark secret running through him.

Snarling, Vedek stormed across the mud and shit-filled road, heading for The Spitting Cow's doors. Shadows of men and women slithered away, disappearing into straw-thatched shacks and ramshackle barns. Goats bleated behind the Cow, no doubt startled by those choosing to flee instead of retiring to their chosen lewd tavern for the night. As a doss house, the Cow housed hundreds of homeless wanderers each evening. How many hammocks and cots would be empty tonight?

Shoving the heavy oak doors open, Vedek paused at the doorway to stamp the melting snow and stinking shit off his boots. He felt the barkeep eye him up, saw the bard idly pluck his strings as he sat on a stone ring circling the fire pit in the center of the tavern. Scattered chairs and tables were empty, save for a drunken few patrons who never left. One was snoring flat on the bar top, lying in a puddle of his own drool.

"What you want?" the barkeep growled, not waiting for Vedek to finish stamping his boots.

Pausing, Vedek lowered his heel and stared down the barkeep. He could feel the eyes of the hamlet on him. "I am here to hunt down a man," he said, almost shouting. He wanted everyone to hear. "A murderer. A Mage."

Vedek saw the barkeep blink, saw his throat bob as he swallowed.

"I am here to find the ranger Emen. We know he was here in these parts, in this tavern. We want no trouble with any other man or woman." Vedek turned, glancing over his shoulder. "We aren't here for anyone else." Looking back at the barkeep, Vedek nodded to him, then turned and strode out of the Cow.

Now, he would wait. With luck, someone would report they'd seen Emen, and where he was headed. He didn't hold out too much hope that anyone had

spoken to the ranger. That wasn't like Emen. He preferred solitude, preferred to be alone. Vedek had been one of the few men who could call him a friend, who had had the pleasure of his company.

Gritting his teeth, Vedek clenched his hands into fists and felt the stitching on his gloves nearly burst apart. Forcing himself to breathe, Vedek unclenched his hands, but Emen's laughing face burst into his mind, his bright eyes, his wry smile.

Roaring, Vedek slammed his fist into the side beam of a nearby barn, hurling his rage against the wood. Wet and warped, the beam splintered and the barn's roof shook worriedly. A shingle fell, slapping into the muck and spattering his leg armor with specks of brown filth. Gods, they should be doing this together, searching for clues and mapping out the mystery over flagons of ale by the candlelight in Vedek's barrack quarters. They should be on the same side, as they'd been for years. Almost two decades. Why now? Why turn to demons and sin and black magic now? What was Emen hiding?

This hunt was as much personal as it was for the kingdom, Vedek knew. He was hunting the murderer as much as he was hunting down his heart, desperate for answers to both mysteries. What was this criminal up to? And why, Emen, why?

"Sir."

Turning, Vedek looked up at Shila, big, buff Shila, her hair shaved on one side of her head and long on the other, braided close to her scalp down to her neck where she'd tied it off with a bit of leather. Blonde strands flowed down her back.

She had her sword raised and a smile on her lips. "Care for a round?"

Grinning wildly, more bared teeth than anything else, Vedek ripped his sword from his scabbard and attacked.

By moon's noon, The Spitting Cow was nearly empty, the main bar room silent. Those who could stay in the doss house retired early. Those avoiding the knights at any cost steered clear, avoiding their camp in Winterweave and severely reducing the population for the night.

Vedek sat at the bar, nursing a tall glass of water. He'd watched the barkeep carefully while sharpening his dagger, making sure his water wasn't tampered with. Or spat in.

“Sure hope you lot leave,” the barkeep growled, leaning against the dark-wood bar opposite Vedek. “He ain’t here.”

“But he was.” Vedek twirled his dagger, tip down, into the wooden bar. Splinters and wood shavings fanned out from the tip. He saw the barkeep’s lip curl. “Where did he go?”

“No fuckin’ idea.” Growling, the barkeep pushed back and stormed off. His broad shoulders were hunched. No doubt, he was a man apart from the law as well, and Vedek just knew that if he searched the man’s stores, he’d find contraband. Opium, if the cloying pall to the tavern was anything to go by. Smoke-sweet and sticky, the residue clung to the walls, the stools, the bar top itself. He swiped a thumb down the dark wood and touched his tongue to his glove. Oh, yes. Opium for sure.

Banging behind him made Vedek jump, made the entire tavern turn toward the door. Bursting in was a man, doubled over and breathing hard, bleeding from a slice across his forehead and a shorn-off ear. Blood soaked his shirt, his jacket, dripped onto the straw.

The barkeep knew him. “Capson!” Vaulting over the width of the bar, the barkeep ran to the newcomer’s side and helped him sit, guiding him to a table. “Who did this?”

Vedek felt the tavern’s eyes on him. He’d left Shila and her knights sleeping and on watch, and they’d had strict orders to stay away from the mountain folk.

“Not who,” Capson panted. He grimaced, reaching for his shorn ear, and the barkeep grabbed his rag from his waistband and pressed it to his friend’s head. “What.”

“Fuck do you mean?” The barkeep motioned for one of his patrons to grab more rags and a bucket of water kept in the corner for the inevitable puke or blood spill.

Vedek stood and moved closer.

“Don’t know what the fuck hit us. But it had to be a monster. Or some kind of demon. Out of the dark, it came.” Hissing, Capson tried to jerk away when the barkeep splashed at the stump left of his ear with a handful of water. “I went on to Gallows Hall after I heard you ’ad visitors.” Capson glared at Vedek, murderous and dark. “They was talkin’ there, ’bout the Cathedral. Said there were noises in the bog. Weird noises. Like before, when they went in and walled e’rythin’ up, you remember like?”

The barkeep nodded once.

“We kept drinkin’. Some lot said they’d go in and check it all out on the morrow. Got right drunk, like. Good time.” Capson swallowed and looked away, looked down. “And then it came,” he grunted. Snorting, he hiccupped, trying to breathe, gasping, and the barkeep held his shoulders tight, helped him stay upright, grabbed his cheeks and forced him to look him in the eyes. “Madness,” Capson whispered. “So dark. We couldn’t see. Then, there was fire e’erywhere. Burning. And then... slaughter.”

Vedek stood next to the barkeep, studying Capson. “When did this happen?”

“Just now,” he gasped, bending over again. “I kicked out a window a’ ran for me life. Others tried to follow, but I don’ think they made it.” Capson bit his lip and shook his head, and Vedek didn’t think he knew he was doing either. One of the barkeep’s large, mutton-chop hands grasped Capson’s shoulder, steadying his friend. He closed his eyes with a shudder.

“Yer right,” the barkeep growled. He turned to Vedek. “Yer man was here. He had that witch with him. Tried to hide himself. Didn’t succeed.”

“Did they travel toward Gallows Hall?” Vedek grasped the hilt of his sword, squeezing the pommel.

A single nod from the barkeep. “Saw ’em take a game trail. They kept off the main road. It was in that direction.”

Swallowing, Vedek marched past the barkeep, heading for the door. Crimson rage colored his vision, tunneling all he saw to the point of his sword, driving into Emen’s chest. He heard nothing, save for the wild beating of his heart.

A hand grasped his upper arm, stilling him. Glaring, Vedek met the stone-hard face of the barkeep. “The main road will be clear for you,” he growled. “It will be faster.”

Emen woke face down on the bank of the bog, his boots still mired in the muck. He tasted ash on his tongue, smelled rot and decay. His muscles ached, burning, and he struggled to push himself up from his collapse.

Winds, how had he gotten here? He’d fallen asleep by the fire, watching the glow curve around the kid’s young features. Then, the nightmares. Screaming,

flames, and unquenchable rage. Blackness and shrieking, and the heat of a thousand fires. His mind ached, and Emen groaned, pressing his forehead to the squishing ground as a wave of dizziness crashed through him.

Nightmares of death and destruction, and then of bones burning in heaps. And Vedek. Vedek, shrieking in agony, impaled at the point of a savage lance, dark but glowing. Blood spilled from his chest, flowing down his armor, and Emen wanted to stop it, to save him, but all he could do was watch. As if he were the one wielding the spear, twisting it deeper into Vedek's chest. Dreams of farms burning, folk screaming, masses of refugees wearily plodding toward the capital. Dark crypts and dank tunnels, witchlight extinguishing with the taste of terror. Blood, blood everywhere, pooling in frost-covered mud puddles, dripping from stone walls, flowing down iron pikes and gleaming white marble.

Finally, the dizziness faded and Emen pushed himself to his hands and knees. He opened his eyes, panting deep.

And saw the flames tearing through Gallows Hall.

By the time Vedek arrived with Shila and her knights, hamlets from the highlands and the outlands had poured out to rush to Gallows Hall. Men and women with buckets formed a chain from the bog to the worst of the fires, trying to save what they could. Bodies, blackened and burned, lay in the streets. Others, dead but not burned, were scattered as well.

Jumping from his horse, Vedek ran to the nearest unburnt body and dropped to one knee. Grasping the dead man's chin, he looked at the neck, searching for the killer cuts.

There. Both sides of the neck sliced open, the vital arteries slashed. Blood, warm, still dripped from the wounds, but there was no pooling beneath the body, and the skin was cold and white. Drained.

Shila shouted a warning right before Vedek felt the slam against his helmet. Flying backward, he landed in the muck next to a burned body, sliding in the slick mud. Melted snow and village shit squeezed into his armor, slipping down his back and his sides. Rolling to his feet, Vedek drew his sword and faced the mountain man who'd slammed a beam into the side of his helmet.

To his side, Shila and her knights were already fighting, taking on furious outlanders beating into them with rocks and fallen beams. Shila slashed with her sword, but the outlanders were fighting with split timbers that had held the

houses of Gallows Hall together, some still burning, and their blades lodged in the wood and stuck. Vedek saw Shila get thrown to the ground as her sword caught in a flaming beam.

Swaying, and trying to figure out which of the three duplicates of the mountain man were actually real, Vedek barely dodged the first blow from his attacker. Leaping sideways, he almost fell, sliding again on the slick road.

“Fuckin’ knight!” his attacker roared. “Get out of here!” He swung his timber one-handed, and the beam smacked the side of a burning shack. The flames jumped, igniting the ends. Vedek’s eyes widened.

“We’re tracking this murderer,” Vedek grunted, trying to avoid being flattened with another sidestep. He thrust his sword, slicing the man’s side. Blood wept from the wound, but it wasn’t deep enough to stop him. “Let us help!” Vedek roared.

“We take care of our own!” Bellowing, the mountain man charged, swinging his timber at Vedek’s head. Vedek managed to duck, but he was trapped, backed against a burning building. He lunged, trying to impale the man, but he pushed away Vedek’s broadsword with his bare hands, squeezing around the blade until blood poured from his palms. With a roar, the mountain man threw Vedek’s sword away and rushed the Knight Captain. Wrapping him up, he crashed them through the burning walls of the shack behind Vedek, landing in the middle of a rotten granary.

Gasping, Vedek struggled to catch his breath, but the man was beating into him. One of his meaty hands grasped his flame-orange plume and ripped his helmet from his head. A moment later, fists were pounding Vedek’s face, and he felt his nose crack, felt his bones shift.

Leaning up, Vedek spat in the man’s eyes, spewing blood all over his face and blinding him for a moment. Vedek grabbed his face and head-butted the hulking mountain man, but his attacker moved quickly, grasping Vedek’s neck. As the hand squeezed, Vedek lungs strained for air. His muscles protested, and by the Skies, his neck was going to break—

A metal *schwing*, and then his attacker’s head flew from his shoulders, rolling across the granary floor and trailing a line of hot blood in the millet.

Gasping, Vedek met Shila’s eyes. She was limping, blood running down her cracked thigh armor, but she still had her helmet on. She held out her hand. “Sir.”

He let her help him up, still swaying. “Fall back,” he commanded. “We don’t have enough men.” These murders were lighting a powder keg of rage in an already distant and distrustful region of the kingdom. “Let’s go!”

They hobbled together to their horses. Three knights lay dead in the muck, the others continued to fight. “Fall back!” He hollered. “Fall back!”

Leaping onto their mounts, the knights galloped out of Gallows Hall with the outlanders chasing them, roaring and cursing and flinging flaming debris at their tracks.

Vedek didn’t see the march of torches heading into the swamp.

Frozen, Emen stared breathless at the carnage occurring on the opposite shore of the bog. He saw knights fall, saw their poppy orange plumes flutter as their bodies fell beneath the furious outlanders.

Gripping his sword, Emen waded into the bog, intent on getting to the knights. Why were they there? What was the local precinct doing out in Gallows Hall? He watched, horrified, as one by one they fell. The muck sucked at his boots, slowing him down, but he finally saw the knights withdraw, clamber onto their horses and gallop out of the hamlet. He sagged with relief, gasping, and his thoughts turned once more to Vedek. His heart ached for the knights his friend had lost. Odd, that he would care at all about the knights’ deaths. They had slain his kind, after all.

A new noise drew his attention, and Emen spotted a band of highlanders storming the Cathedral. Running through the bog, they flung torches at the remains, hurled flaming remnants from Gallows Hall. They shouted curses as they circled the Cathedral and clambered the rocky outcropping. A band of wildmen, hair unkempt and dressed in furs, tore through the rotten outer doors and into the battlements, shouting and wailing at the stone Cathedral.

“No,” Emen breathed. “No, no, no!” He plunged forward, weaving through the bog. He couldn’t let them destroy the Cathedral, and not just because he needed the research. He couldn’t see it again, couldn’t see the destruction of his life, of his blood and soul, all over again. “No!”

Flames crept up the keep walls. Crashing booms echoed across the bog, and then the battlements collapsed, and the wing housing the labs and library shuddered and fell.

Screaming through clenched teeth, Emen pushed onward, drawing his sword. He’d let this happen once, turning tail and running. Not again.

More shouting from the Cathedral, more vile curses. Curses on the Paladin floated to Emen's ears, insults and degradations heaped by the highlanders. Torches flew over the crumbled walls of the citadel. Emen watched the crowd circle the old barracks.

He heard splashing behind him, felt the bog ripple as another man rushed him from behind. Turning automatically, he raised his sword, swinging with a growl, and barely missed as Tarl ducked and dove to the side. Sputtering, Tarl rose from the bog waters, wide-eyed.

"Emen!" he shouted. "What are you doing?"

"They're destroying it!" Emen hollered, one hand flying to the Cathedral, now roaring in flames that stretched to the sky. "They're burning it down!" Rage stewed within him. His soul screamed, an empty maw and a pit of darkness.

Shocked confusion broke over Tarl's face. His mouth fell open as he frowned. Gallows Hall burned to the ground beyond the angry highlanders leaping back over the crumbled walls of the Cathedral. They were taking up position in the waters of the bog to watch it burn, shouting and cursing still.

"I have to stop them!" Emen shouted. He made to run, grunting as he took his first step.

Tarl tackled him from behind, bringing him down to the bog. They splashed, Emen fighting Tarl's hold as he struggled to find his feet. "Get off me!"

"No!" Tarl knocked his sword from his hands and wound his arms through Emen's, pinning his hands behind his back. A lucky move thanks to the water and Emen's senseless rage. "You'll die! They'll kill you, Emen! There's nothing you can do!"

"No!" Emen bellowed, shrieking his rage. He struggled, pulling against Tarl, but slipped in the muck and only brought them both splashing down into the bog.

Finally, the last stone wall crumbled and fell as the heat from the flames within the barracks broke the walls. Stone tumbled, rolling away, and Emen fell to his knees, screaming, at what burned within.

Mountains of skeletons, the bones of his Paladin brothers, lay in scattered heaps. Some still had the colors of their vestments clinging in rags to their bones. Piles of his murdered brothers, all the dead of the Cathedral, stacked and

locked away in the barracks. They'd been there earlier, and Emen hadn't known. He'd walked right by his brothers' tomb, their desecration, and now their bones were burning.

Even Tarl was speechless, standing behind Emen. He saw a skull sizzle and pop off from its body, rolling in flames from the stone floor of the barracks and out to the grounds. He lost it behind the battlements, but one of the highlanders leaped over the rotten walls and snatched it up, not caring about the flames that still licked over the top of the skull. He thrust it to the sky with a roar, and all the rest followed, bellowing to the flames and the burning bones as they shook their weapons and shouted their hate.

Emen pitched forward, curling around himself, and clenched his eyes shut as he roared his fury and his torment into the murky bog.

Vedek rode at full gallop until they reached The Spitting Cow. His exhausted knights nearly fell from their horses, breathing hard and stumbling from their wounds. He helped Shila limp to the Cow's doors and kicked them open.

He wasn't surprised to see the place deserted. All of Winterweave was deserted. The folk had fled to the mountains, to the highlands, stoking their rage and pain.

"Knights, move in," he ordered, and they gladly stumbled inside and collapsed against tables and benches. Pefer, who hadn't been wounded as badly, jumped over the bar and rummaged through the stores. He came back with old bread and summer sausage, and piles of linen.

"They left in a hurry," Pefer said, tossing bread and sausage to his fellows and distributing the linens to the bleeding. Vedek took several and helped Shila slide her armor down her thigh. Her leggings were torn, and blood soaked her thigh down to her knee.

"We're staying here until dawn." It was only hours away, but hopefully they'd be safe for the time being. "Set up watches, fill your bellies, and get some rest."

"What do we do next, sir?" Shila gritted her teeth as Vedek pressed against her wound, but she refused to curse or hiss.

Sighing, Vedek rubbed his forehead, smearing the mud and blood on his skin. "We don't have enough men for the mountains," he said, his voice low. "We need more. We need reinforcements."

“Bringing more men might piss them off, sir.” Shila bit her lip as Vedek poured water over her thigh.

“Then they’re pissed, but we will still fight them. We must stop this, Shila.” When Vedek pressed against her wound, Shila jerked and cried out, wincing beneath his too-rough touch.

Mumbling an apology, Vedek pulled back slightly. He wouldn’t meet Shila’s eyes.

Chapter Eight

Tarl packed up the camp while Emen, seemingly made of stone, readied Dava to ride. Flames arched high behind them, but Emen refused to look back at the bog. He'd stared at the flames destroying his fellow Paladins' bones while Tarl had stayed back, watching Emen in silence.

Later, Emen pulled himself from the muck and hauled back to their camp, barely glancing at Tarl as he passed. He was readying Dava before Tarl followed, and Tarl swept up the bedroll and his bag, then smothered and scattered their fire ring in moments.

"Where are we going?" Tarl asked as Emen slid into the saddle.

"Anywhere but here," Emen growled. He wouldn't look at Tarl. "I'll drop you wherever you want to go."

Tarl rested his hand on Emen's thigh and felt him jerk beneath his touch. "Emen, I want to stay with you." Emen's eyes flicked to his and looked away. "We should stick together." Perhaps more than ever, now. Tarl didn't say it, though.

Exhaling, Emen held out his hand and helped Tarl onto Dava's back. He let him settle in, and then they were off, picking their way through the forest and the fen. Golden orbs hovered in front of Dava, lighting the way for Emen's mare. Tarl added his blue witchlight to the glow. Dava snorted, bobbed her head, and picked up the pace.

Hours later, when the late-morning frost fog was just beginning to lift and Tarl could finally feel his hands again, he felt the shift in Emen's body. Dava slowed just in time before Emen began to pitch sideways.

"Whoa!" Tarl grasped on, holding Emen in the saddle as Emen's eyes flew open. "You fell asleep?"

Emen swallowed and grasped the pommel, hauling himself back up. "I didn't sleep well."

"Where did you go last night?" Tarl frowned at Emen as he gathered Dava's reins and settled back in his seat. "I woke up and you were gone."

Emen shook his head. "Just had to take a walk," he finally grunted. His voice was thick and choked, and Tarl had never heard that particular tone before. Emen almost sounded scared.

“You sure?” Tarl laid his hand over Emen’s, halting his adjustment of the reins. Dava stilled.

“I’m sure,” Emen bit back, growling as he turned over his shoulder. “What do you want me to say?”

Tarl stayed silent, simply staring at Emen. “You had a long night,” he finally said. “Why don’t we rest? You need it.”

“I’m fine.” Emen turned back in the saddle and stiffened, ignoring Tarl’s deep sigh. “I’ll drop you back at Winterweave,” he finally said.

“Emen—”

“I’m dropping you at Winterweave.” Emen’s bark left no room for protest. “You can make your way from there.”

“And you?” Swallowing, Tarl stared at the back of Emen’s hood, imagining the pinched face, the closed eyes, the pursed lips all failing to hide Emen’s anguish.

Silence was his only answer.

They made Winterweave by late morning. Dava whined and canted to the side, wary of entering the village. Emen tried to hush her, guiding her forward on the road, but she threw her head and stamped her feet.

Sliding down from Dava’s mount with a wince, Tarl limped for a few feet before he steadied himself. Behind him, Emen continued fussing with Dava while Tarl peered down Winterweave’s main thoroughfare. Puddles of snowmelt had frosted over, a layer of ice undisturbed. None of the piss pits had been lit from the night before. The doors of The Spitting Cow hung from their hinges.

“It’s abandoned,” Tarl called over his shoulder. “They’ve left.”

Emen’s boots hit the mud, ice cracking beneath his stride. “What are you talking about?”

Tarl gestured to the desolate Winterweave. “Gone. Everyone.” He pointed to the Cow’s unhinged doors, cockeyed and splintered. “And in a hurry.”

Emen’s eyes narrowed. “Why?”

“These folk are almost highlanders.” Tarl knelt, peering at the frosty ground and the muddy tracks left from horses. “They can be more comfortable in the wilds than in the towns, especially when spooked.” He strode down the

thoroughfare, stopping in the middle of the road opposite the Cow. “And what else can spook a highlander, but a unit of the Knights Guard coming through town? There haven’t been knights this far out since the Inquisition.”

Emen followed, his eyes flicking over the evidence of the knights’ passage. Bent tent stakes left in the ground, wrappings from padding under plate armor. Heavy boot prints, and the smudge of the seal of the Knights Guard in the sole. Tracks led to the Cow, and Emen pushed his way inside. Mud-spattered prints everywhere, and blood. Soaked linens, piles of them, dotted the tables and floor.

“They used this tavern to rest after Gallows Hall.”

“They may have seen the knights coming and fled?” Tarl hesitated at the doorway. He shook his head. “Why were so many knights out there in the first place?”

Emen’s eyes caught on the barkeep’s ledger, pulled from behind the bar and flipped open to a recent page. His stomach dropped as he crossed the tavern, sidestepping festering linen, and blood and piss-soaked hay strewn on the floor. Slowly, he pulled the ledger toward him. There, in the center of the page, was the name he had used to settle his debts two nights prior: Kede~~v~~. Vede~~k~~, backward. Someone had searched this page out, had searched for this entry specifically. He saw a bloody fingerprint under his scratchy signature.

“He’s searching for me,” Emen grunted. *Vede~~k~~*. “They’re all following me.”

Tarl met Emen’s gaze across the tavern, silent and still. In the distance, they heard a barn door whine in the wind, slapping against its wooden frame. A lonely howl, a feral dog, and the rustle of branches creaking in the winter breeze.

Why hung unasked in the air.

Turning back, Emen’s finger ghosted over the page, following the path of the bloody fingerprint. He hesitated, then pressed his touch to the imprint. Was it Vede~~k~~ following him? Had he been in Gallows Hall? Their hands were about the same size, the same shape. Would this print match?

Before Emen could finish his thought, his mind fractured, splitting in two with a cleaving shriek from the base of his skull. His Whispers wailed and roared, guttural grunts and barks mixing with a raging howl. Grabbing his head, Emen collapsed to his knees, his eyes clenched shut and his face screwed up in agony.

“Emen!” Tarl raced to his side, grasping Emen’s shoulders. “What’s happening?”

Keening, Emen couldn’t speak. He couldn’t breathe, couldn’t feel anything at all, save for the anguish and horror splitting him apart. In his mind, Emen saw his nightmares unfold again, more vivid than ever before. Screaming, terror-filled wails, cries of pain and horror. Farms burning, folk running. Horses’ hooves, galloping in time with the clang of plate mail and bellowing commands from knights. Fire, destroying everything.

Then, Vedek, riding astride his horse, hollering as he rode, his sword held high, flame-poppy cape billowing behind him. Blood splattered his armor, his face, and he raised his sword in a great swing, ready to deliver some final blow.

It never came, and Emen saw Vedek get knocked from his horse, thrown to the dirt road as if he were but a straw doll. Alongside the road, haystacks burned, and as if it was Emen himself, he watched Vedek’s attacker advance on the fallen Knight Captain. Twisted snarls and the heavy fall of war boots striding on the dirt, heading for his friend.

Vedek lay gasping, pressing one hand to his side as he raised his sword. Cursing, he pushed himself to his feet and squared off, seemingly against Emen.

“What are you?” Emen heard Vedek hiss.

A braying laugh, and then a dark gloved hand shot out from Emen’s vantage point, flame flying from the center of its palm. Vedek rolled, screaming through gritted teeth, but avoided the flame. As he stood, the gloved hand backhanded him, and he went down with a hard tumble. His helmet rolled off, leaving his blood-smeared face bare.

Emen saw fear in his friend’s eyes, saw honest terror. He watched Vedek scramble backward on his elbows, saw him hiss and curse and wince with every move. Saw blood pouring from his side.

A chuckle, low and throaty, and then Emen saw the gloved hands before him form an obsidian staff, molded from shadow and flame, made solid in the ether between his palms. *No!* He wanted to shout. *No! No!* Instead, all he could do was watch as the gloved hands cradled the staff in their palms and hefted it up, raising the pointed tip above Vedek’s body. He saw Vedek’s lips press together, saw the moment his friend accepted his death. Watched as the staff fell, as the black hands plunged the obsidian point into Vedek’s chest, impaling him clean through his armor.

Vedek never blinked, never closed his eyes as the staff fell, but as he was struck, Vedek roared, arching rigid and shrieking. His hands clawed at the dirt and he writhed, and Emen saw tears snake from the corners of his eyes.

“Emen!”

Shaking, then, and smoke curling around the edges of his vision. Vedek’s body, still screaming, still convulsing, still impaled on the staff, slowly faded, obscured through black smoke. He could hear the crackle of the hay fires, still felt the heat from the inferno surrounding him. “Emen!” Another shake, another deluge of black smoke covering his vision.

With a gasp, Emen opened his eyes, pulling himself out of his waking nightmare. Falling forward, he gulped for air, coughing and choking as he tried to breathe again. He felt like he was drowning, like smoke had choked his lungs, and no matter how much he coughed, he couldn’t shake the black tar weight clenching his ribs.

Tarl knelt beside him, his eyes wide as he stared at Emen. “What happened?” Tarl asked. His hands shook Emen again, refusing to let go. “I couldn’t reach your mindwaters.”

Emen shook his head and pitched forward, pressing his forehead to the urine-soaked straw on the tavern floor. He couldn’t speak, not yet. He coughed again. “I saw,” he croaked. Another cough, ragged, and he spit out black, smoke-scented sputum. “I saw—”

He froze. He had seen Vedek, falling in battle at night. Battling amid farms on a dirt, pockmarked road. The night before, he’d seen Vedek die, and had seen bones burning in heaps. He’d dreamt of slaughtered horses and exsanguinated knights before that. He’d seen a whirlwind, the swirling mass that had returned his Winds.

What was he seeing? The future? Or something else? Emen’s blood ran cold, turning to winter’s ice in his veins. For a moment, his heart stopped, clenching in his chest. His Whispers turned to growls, and he felt their howling scratches at the base of his skull.

“We have to go,” Emen whispered. “I have to find Vedek.” Vedek, his one friend, the one person who could stand him. His one companion for so many years. He never let himself get as close to Vedek as either of them wanted, but he still meant something to Emen. Something intractable, something deep. Something he wasn’t willing to let go of, not without giving everything he had to stop this. Struggling to his feet, Emen leaned hard on Tarl.

“Vedek?” Tarl frowned. “Your friend in the Knights Guard?”

“He’s in danger.” Emen lurched forward, nearly falling as he tried to get to the door. “I need to—” Needed to what? Save him? Or kill him? What was he racing off to do? Fear stilled his movements.

Tarl’s hands steadied him at his elbows, and Emen felt the coolness of winter water sluice through his mind, quieting his frantic soul. He sighed, turning his head toward Tarl’s and resting his forehead against the Cleric’s locks. “I need to help him, kid,” Emen whispered. “I have to try.”

A soft sigh, and then Tarl’s hands squeezed at Emen’s elbows. “Okay,” he simply said. “Let’s go.”

When nightfall came, Vedek pushed his knights onward.

They held formation, riding hard down the King’s Highway for the capital. Coming down from the outlands and the mountains had taken the better part of the afternoon, and they were still north of Crossroads when the sun slipped below the horizon. In the rose-gold shimmer of dusk, Vedek had stared at the cerulean flags flapping on the side of the highway, crossed fists stitched in gold marking where his knights had been slain days before. He pushed on, ignoring the roar of his heart, and spurred his horse on to a faster stride.

Night fell, and the darkness closed in around them. Vedek ordered a quick halt, and his knights dismounted to piss and light torches. Within minutes, they were on the move again.

The darkness seemed to move, seemed to shift and tremble around them. Vedek’s gaze darted over the harvested fields, barely visible in the black night. The clatter of horses’ hooves thumped against the dirt road, a hard cadence galloping for miles. Nothing else in the darkness seemed to stir. Vedek didn’t hear any owls, or the lonesome howl of a coyote; not even the darting brushes of hares moving through the hay could be heard. Even the cicadas were silent. The only sound that reached Vedek’s ears was the slapping of horse hooves, the heavy breathing of his knights, and the clatter of their armor.

Vedek cursed himself. *Stop being paranoid!* Shaking his head, he closed his eyes, exhaled, and forced his shoulders to relax. *You’ll catch him. You’ll get more knights, get the Superiors, and head out again. You will stop this madness. You’ll find Emen.*

If he repeated it, he knew he’d eventually believe it.

In the rear of their march, one of the junior knights fell out. His horse stamped and whined, tossing his head to and fro, and the young knight cursed as he tried to settle his mount. Vedek pulled up and rounded back, riding down the column to his knight.

“Problem?” Vedek’s destrier snorted, breathing hard through his nose.

“Not sure, sir.” Sliding down from his mount, the junior knight ran his hands over his saddle, checked the girth, tested the reins. His steed kept whining, uneasy steps circling around the young knight as he snorted and snapped.

“He’s spooked.” Vedek backed away from the startled steed, guiding his destrier back slowly. “Give him space.”

The younger knight let go his steed’s reins and took a step back. His steed, sensing the freedom, reared back, rising on his hind legs and kicking into the air. He wailed, braying, and then fell back to his hooves. The young knight cursed again and tried to grab for the horse’s reins, but he was too slow. The steed took off, galloping north and deserting them both.

Glaring, Vedek stared down at his now-horseless knight.

Abashed, he stood silent, waiting for his Captain’s censure. Vedek opened his mouth, scathing words on the top of his tongue.

He smelled burning. Smelled smoke and a woodland char, the scent of homes and farms burning.

Whirling around, Vedek saw flames billowing in the middle distance, blooming in a roaring fireball out of the farmsteads and hamlets dotting the southern valley. Shouts and cries rolled toward him, his knights calling out orders to respond.

And, woven throughout, Vedek heard screaming. Harsh, terrified, blood-curdling wails.

“Follow on foot!” Vedek barked at the horseless knight. He nudged his destrier. “Go!”

Together they took off, galloping down the highway. He passed his knights, winding through their mounts as they rode en masse toward the flames in the southwest. Only ten miles, maybe less. He pushed on, gritting his teeth.

When the fires exploded on the eastern sides of the highway, Vedek’s heart plummeted. He heard the tolling of the Temple’s bells at Crossroads, the call to

arms for his knights garrisoned in the farmland valley. Flames roared into the sky, surging into the blackness, burning both sides of the King's Highway. More screaming, more wailing, surrounded Vedek.

Shila rode up alongside Vedek, her mount straining. "Sir!" she shouted. "Shall we split up?"

A moment's hesitation, and Vedek's eyes darted from west to east, taking in the roaring infernos. The prayer bells sounded, a continuous rumble in counterpoint to their gallop, and they were close enough now to hear the shouts and calls of farmers and villagers trying to find order in the chaos. Screams still echoed through the valley, mixed with the whine of horses and the crackle of barns and homes burning, of breaking timbers and storehouses collapsing.

"We're under attack," Vedek growled. The valley, the kingdom's cornucopia, was aflame. Miles of farmland were now burning along the Queen's Highway to the west and east. "Take your unit and head to the east."

A nod, and then Shila was off, hollering to her knights to follow her. Vedek kept on, guiding his to the west. They cut through farmland, galloping through harvested fields and leaping over stacks of hay. Flames rose before them, and Vedek ordered his knights to fan out. "Help where you can!" he barked. "Find who did this!" They sprinted off in every direction, and Vedek pulled up his destrier, circling and taking everything in.

He watched another fire burst to life, flames roaring to the sky, in a farm further afield.

Cursing, Vedek nudged his mount and took off, chasing the burgeoning fires and the valley's attacker. His thoughts turned to Emen. Had the ranger made it to the valley before him? Emen knew the backwoods and the game trails better than any other man alive. Vedek had kept to the royal highways—safer for his knights—but Emen didn't have that concern. Was he here now, destroying the farms?

He grit his teeth and drew his sword, galloping up a narrow dirt trail to the farm, now engulfed in a raging inferno. He could see a shape, dark and formless in the sweeping smoke, standing in the dirt trail. Tall, nearly as tall as Vedek on the back of his destrier, but he saw no horse beneath. "By order of the King, I command you to halt!" Vedek hollered. "Stand and be known!"

He felt more than saw the shape turn toward him, shadows and smoke rippling around his hulking, massive form. Blazing eyes, gold and rage red, seared into him. He couldn't see the face, though. Whoever it was hid themselves in the cowl of a hooded cloak.

A hot wind gusted, billowing his poppy cape behind him. Vedek saw a flash of teeth, pointed and sharp, and the shadow turned away.

With a snarl, Vedek kicked his mount and raised his sword, galloping toward the valley's attacker. Flames licked the night sky, curling through hay piles, lines of wheat, and the dry branches of produce trees on either side of the dirt. Ahead of him, smoke curled around the shadowed being, nearly blocking his view, but he saw flame pour from the center, arcing into the night sky and igniting the farmer's barn.

Hollering, Vedek raised his sword, ready to strike, ready to slam his sword into the side of this shadow's neck.

The shadow whirled, smoke swirling around his form, snaking over and around Vedek and swallowing his sight. He swung anyway, but missed, and then the impact of a thousand horses slamming into his chest knocked him from his mount. Tumbling to the ground, his destrier kicked up and bolted, fleeing down the dirt trail and away to safety. He clutched his chest, pressing his hand to his armor and struggling to breathe. Whatever had hit him in the smoke had dented his chestplate, slamming the metal armor into his body. He felt ribs shift against one another, felt the sharp stab of lancing pain that he knew to be broken bones. A punctured lung, even, since he couldn't catch his breath. He pressed his hand to his side and felt blood between the seams of his armor.

Heavy footfalls, leather boots impacting the dust, shook the ground. Vedek felt the rumble of each step beneath his hands. The shadowed man was moving toward him. Easily seven feet tall, thick legs wrapped in leather rose to a tight, trim waist and then exploded into a broad chest, massive and as wide as two men. Solid shoulders gave way to corded arms, sinew and muscle and veins bursting from copper skin. Garnet sigils glowed in etched lines down the man's arms and chest, luminescent in the dark night. Beneath his hood, the man's eyes gleamed, gold and crimson flecks sparking with arcs of lightning. His face was huge, the bones of his forehead and cheeks more colossal ridges that cast long shadows and dark hollows over his expression.

Smoke and rolling gloom poured off his body, clinging to his cloak.

Grasping his sword, Vedek heaved to his feet with a curse. He grunted as he squared off against the shadowed beast. "What are you?" Vedek hissed. His eyes darted over the monster's body. He remembered Capson's fear, his trembling and his stories of flame and terror. *Demon*, his mind screamed. *Run!*

Laughter, dark and deadly, poured from the cloaked being. A black gloved hand, the leather snaking up to his forearms, reached for Vedek, and the Knight

Captain saw flame curling in his palm. In moments, the flame grew, lancing toward Vedek like a spike. He lunged to the side, rolling as he stumbled, but managed to avoid the flame. Agony seared his sides and his breath caught again, hitching on his cracked ribs. He tried to stand, but his eyes swam, and the demon's fist slammed into the side of his helmet, knocking him back down to the ground. The impact jarred his helmet, rolling free, and his helmet's poppy plume tore as it slid against the dirt and rock.

Scrambling back on his elbows, Vedek felt the moment of his death loom before him. He heard heavy footfalls as the demon strode toward him. Saw curling flame lick the palm of the demon's gloved hand. Blood poured from his side, soaking the dirt. He was going to die, murdered by this monster, this demon. Where had he come from? Swallowing, Vedek met the monster's gaze.

He chuckled above Vedek, and his hands floated over each other, smoke and flame mixing in the space between his hands. Formlessness turned to solidity, to obsidian, and out of the shadows and smoke, the demon formed an obsidian staff, speared at one end. Cradling it, the demon hefted the staff high, both hands above his head.

The demon met Vedek's gaze. He smiled, his pointed, yellow teeth sharpened to spikes. Blood stained the tips.

Vedek pressed his lips together and jerked his chin high, refusing to give in to his fear. In his last moments, he felt his heart lurch, felt tears prick the corners of his eyes. *Emen*, he thought, his soul whispering its sorrow. *I wish everything had been different.*

When the staff impaled him, Vedek lurched, roaring as flame seemed to engulf his soul. Fire raced through his veins, searing his insides. The staff plunged into the dirt, through the ground, impaling him. His fingers scratched in the dust, scrabbling for something, anything, and his lungs gasped for air that wasn't there.

"No!"

Horse hooves, a hard gallop, and a roaring bellow swam in Vedek's mind, each sound pouring and crashing into the next. He saw a man leap through the flames on the side of the road, jumping from a horse and tackling the demon standing astride Vedek's body. They went down in a tangle of shadow and grunts, and Vedek heard the demon curse and snarl. He heard the snapping of teeth, of leather creaking, and then a sword sliding from its sheath.

“Get back!” Vedek heard. His heart clenched, and the tears he’d been holding back slid from the corners of his eyes. *Gods, Emen!* “Get away from him!”

A roar, and then the hot rush of flame bursting from the demon’s hands. Vedek tried to roll his head back, but he was stuck, impaled to the earth, and he couldn’t move, couldn’t see.

“Who summoned you?” Vedek heard Emen bellow. “What is your name?”

Sinister, wicked laughter bubbled from the demon’s chest. He straightened, his eyes flashing, and Vedek saw his cloak fall away, revealing the naked copper upper body, corded with thick muscle and gleaming with etched garnet runes snaking over his skin. Seven feet was too short, Vedek realized with a cough. He tasted blood on his tongue, felt the heaviness of his own mortality fill his throat. He tried to spit, but the blood ran over his lips, dripping down his cheek instead.

“I know you, Ementii,” the demon rumbled. His voice was darkness and sand combined, a whirlwind swirling through each syllable, buried in bass. “I know you better than you know yourself.” The demon grinned again, savage. “Traitor.”

His vision was blurring, and Vedek could barely see through his tear-filled eyes. He heard Emen’s roar, saw a swirling white light bloom in Emen’s palm. The light sharpened, tearing from Emen’s hand and slamming into the side of the demon’s head. What was he seeing? What had Emen done? He heard a clash of steel against stone, and then Emen’s grunt and the ranger’s harsh slide in the dirt. Emen had fallen, shoved or kicked by the demon, he didn’t know. Vedek braced himself for Emen’s shriek, his own death cry, but it never came. Instead, a crack tore the air and a rush of hot wind, a vortex swirling in the road, opened. Vedek heard Emen grasp the dirt, trying to stop himself from sliding toward the whirlwind. He felt the pull of his body against the staff impaling him, and the sudden, sharp torment stole his breath.

In the next moment, the whirlwind had stopped and Emen knelt beside him in the road. Emen’s hands floated over his armor, his fingers tracing the obsidian staff impaling Vedek. His mouth was open, whispering silent words, pleas and curses mixed with apologies that Vedek could barely read on his lips.

It was his eyes, though, that tore into Vedek, that ripped the last of his soul to shreds. Anguish and sorrow, and guilt, so much guilt. Emen was drowning in guilt.

“What have you done?” Vedek choked. He coughed on his blood, sputtering and speckling Emen with his froth. “What have you fucking done, Emen?”

“Vedek...” Emen’s hands pressed on his chest, circling his wound. “Winds, Vedek, I wanted to stop this.”

“You caused this!” Vedek reached for Emen, grasping his cloak in a tight grip. He pulled the ranger close, snarling. “You caused this,” he hissed, gesturing to the infernos blazing around them. “All of this! Everything is your doing!”

Frowning, Emen’s breath raced, harsh pants burning Vedek’s face. “No,” he whispered, his voice shaking.

“You’re some kind of black magic worshipper! Collecting blood for that demon!” Vedek hollered, coughing again on the blood filling his throat. “You were in Lilacton and the capital when the murders happened. You slew my knights on the King’s Highway, murdered them in cold blood. I found your boot prints, tracked you to the highlands. You destroyed Gallows Hall. Murdered those folk! What sort of monster are you? What sins have you conjured?” Shoving Emen, Vedek released him with a wince and another choking cough.

“No,” Emen whispered again. “No, no, no, no...” In his eyes, doubt and fear rained like tears.

“That demon knew you,” Vedek hissed. “How did you summon it? Blood magic, like you said? Am I to be your sacrifice now?” He held out his bloodied hand. “My body empties on the dirt. Surely you need this blood for your black magic?”

As if snapping out of a trance, Emen suddenly was a whirlwind of movement. Reaching for Vedek’s armor, he sliced through his side-lacings with his dagger, slitting the chestpiece from his back plate at the side and shoulders. Blood oozed from Vedek’s ribs and pooled on his chest, soaking his linen tunic and coating the obsidian staff. Emen slid the torn armor over the end of the staff and hurled it to the side.

“Tarl!” Emen bellowed into the night. “Kid, where are you?”

A braying horse, and then Vedek saw Dava leaping through the flames, jumping clear over him and Emen in a wild dive from the burning farmer’s field. On her back, a highlander guided her reins, his hair a wild mess of dreadlocks and amulets. He slid down and raced to Emen.

Vedek chuckled. “This is your witch of the mountains,” he tried to say. He was shaking, suddenly, trembling uncontrollably, and he felt the chill of death steal into his soul. “You and he working together then? Destroying the kingdom? Becoming the traitor you always wanted to be?”

“Shh,” Tarl hushed, smoothing Vedek’s hair back from his forehead. “We’re here to help you.”

He tried to snort, but his lungs wouldn’t work, wouldn’t draw another breath. He reached for Emen, grasping anything he could and came up with two handfuls of cloak. Frantic eyes found Emen’s gaze, and his mouth worked soundlessly as he tried to form words.

“He’s dying!” Tarl grasped the obsidian staff in both hands and yanked, tearing it from Vedek’s body. Vedek’s eyes rolled back in his head and his grip went limp, his hands falling to the dirt.

Emen placed his hands over the hole in Vedek’s chest. His fingers slipped in the blood spilling from the wound, squelching under his touch. Tarl rested one hand on top of Emen’s and one hand on Vedek’s side, over his ribs.

“I will not let this man die,” Emen rumbled. “Winds, pour through me and stir this man’s soul. Give to him strength from me—”

“And me,” Tarl interrupted.

“—and heal these wounds,” Emen ground out between gritted teeth. Lurching, Emen barely held himself upright as the Winds responded, and his hands glowed gold where they touched Vedek’s skin. Tarl’s soft blue hue wound into Emen’s golden light, and then together they slipped into Vedek’s body. Above the men, a whirlwind was forming, slowly drawing a tighter and tighter vortex that pressed down against Vedek.

Tarl whispered under his breath, his eyes closed, and a second rush of blue light slid into Vedek, pouring into his open mouth, his ears, his nose, and through his eyes.

“I will not let you die,” Emen ground out again. “Not like this.” *Please, help me!* He reached, farther and further than he’d ever thought possible, and pulled on the Winds, tugging them toward Vedek. Raw power flooded through him, and Emen arched against the surge. He screamed, golden light blazing from his entire being. Leaning forward, Emen pressed his hands against Vedek’s chest, and sent the Winds into his friend.

Tarl watched agape, his mouth dangling open.

Beneath their touch, Vedek's wounds closed, stitching together with magic what a surgeon would never have been able to repair. Emen felt Vedek's skin close and seal beneath his touch, felt the bones of his ribs knit back together. He felt when Vedek drew in a gasping, choking lungful of air, and he caught his friend in his arms as Vedek surged upright, panic in his eyes.

Emen's arms drew around Vedek, cradling him close. "You're all right, Vedek," he breathed, shaking. "You're all right."

"How..." Trembling, Vedek didn't have the strength to shove Emen away. Vedek closed his eyes, letting the ranger's warmth and the scent of his body—smoky leather, sunlight, and the tang of herbs crushed with snow—fill his soul.

A swallow, and then Emen's hands gripped Vedek tight. He held his breath, and in that moment, in the eternity that passed between Vedek's breathless, choking question and what Emen had to say, Emen felt an icy stab of regret and despair plunge through his quivering heart. All the times he'd left the capital, had left Vedek's side, pushed away by his own darkness and his fears. All the times he'd let himself feel, let himself be a breathing, living being, with an almost-heart, when Vedek was near. All the times that he regretted not being with Vedek, in all the ways that they should have been together, as men. All of the ways that he had always, always hated himself.

"You're right," Emen finally whispered, "about me." He paused. "I am a Paladin. I escaped the Cathedral in the capital that day. I'm a Mage, Vedek. And I saw you in my visions, over and over. Saw you hurt. I couldn't let that hap—"

Weak, Vedek tried to push away from Emen, groaning. "No," he moaned. "Stop. I don't want to hear anymore."

"I'm sorry I lied to you," Emen whispered. "I couldn't tell you this. I couldn't stand to see your hatred." Another shaky exhale as Emen's heartbeat surged in his chest. "But, I swear to you," Emen growled. "I swear, Vedek. I have never tried to harm you. I—" Emen cut himself off with a swallow. "I've always cared for you," he finished in a breath.

It was too much for Vedek, the battle, the demon, dying and resurrecting, being filled with magic and then being cradled by Emen, and his body and soul couldn't take it. He pitched sideways, falling into Tarl, and consciousness slipped from his body.

Tarl held Vedek loosely in his arms. Shouts for water clamored in the distance, growing closer. The villagers, coming to fight the farmer's fire.

There'd be knights with them. "Emen, we have to go." He searched for Emen's gaze, finally catching the ranger's eyes. "We have to go now."

"I won't leave him. Not like this."

Vedek was too heavy for Tarl to lift, a muscle-bound knight in full armor. He passed his unconscious body back to Emen and stood quickly. Dava waited nearby, and he repeated the whistling sound he'd heard Emen use when calling for his mare. "We need to ride. Can Dava support three of us?"

"A short way only." Emen cradled Vedek in his arms as if he weighed nothing. Tarl's eyes traced Emen's neck, watching the bounding of his pulse. Battle rage, then. He'd crash hard when this was through.

Nodding, Tarl hauled himself up to the back of Dava's saddle. "I'll steady him," he said, reaching for Vedek. "We can drop him in Crossroads."

Emen's narrowed glare pinned Tarl back.

"We can drop him in Crossroads with his knights," Tarl clarified, his words growing harsh. "Or we can wait here for them to find us and blame us for his attack. If you want to stay in Crossroads with him, by all means." Dava stamped her feet, impatient as the sounds of others neared. "But we have to go now, Emen!"

Emen hefted Vedek's body over Dava's back and then hauled himself up. With a nudge and a whistle, Dava took off, jumping over the smoldering hay in the farmer's field right before the knights and villagers arrived at the blood-soaked battle site on the dirt trail.

Chapter Nine

Vedek woke at dawn's light on a polished wood table inside one of the taverns at Crossroads. Shila was next to him, fast asleep with her cheek pressed against the tabletop near his hand. Knights bustled through the tavern, hauling blood-soaked linen to the kitchen to boil and clean, and taking back linens that had dried over the fire. Priests from the Temple in the valley had converged on Crossroads, part of the refugee exodus from the scorched earth and devastation wrought the night before. Priests stood over the wounded, praying or offering their last words before their souls drifted across the sea.

The wounded covered the floors, the benches, the tables. The yards outside. They lay stretched along the road in ditches, burns and stabs and crush wounds maiming so many villagers and farmers. Stacks of the dead lay north of Crossroads. So many had fallen, including more knights.

His waking startled Shila, and she jerked up, wiping drool from her chin and glaring around her. Soot covered her face and darkened her helmet's tangerine plume and cape. Smoke clung to her skin, her armor, her hair.

"What happened?" Vedek asked. He tried to sit up, but he was dizzy, and he ached like he'd been run over by a stampede of cavalry. He faltered on his way up.

Shila helped him, steadying his elbow. "The valley was destroyed," she said.

He froze. Met her exhausted eyes. "Destroyed?"

"Burned to the ground. Almost every village." She stayed near, hovering as Vedek threw his legs over the side of the table and slid to his feet. "They're still counting the dead."

Pausing, he closed his eyes. "Are throats cut?"

Shila nodded.

Vedek winced as he stood. His chest pulled. His ribs ached. "Folk aren't through dying, either," he growled. Across the tavern, he watched a priest deliver final rites to a burned villager, trembling as he lay on the floor and coughed black sputum into a torn rag.

"The King has declared the valley a disaster. He's ordered the survivors be brought to the capital as refugees." Shila bent and pulled Vedek's armor, sword, and helmet from under the table, passing it to him.

“Refugees?” Vedek paused, taking the armor from Shila with a frown. “Where does His Majesty intend to put them?” Quickly, Vedek threw his chest and back plate over his head, then cursed as he remembered the laces had been cut. His hands shook, tugging on the ruined laces at his side. “And how does he intend to feed everyone?” The valley supplied most of the food to the kingdom—and especially the capital—and the storehouses had gone up in smoke and flame.

Shila shook her head. She was silent, watching Vedek fight with his armor. “The King has ordered you to report to him at once. We told the royal courier you were wounded and recovering, but he said the King demanded your immediate presence.”

Cursing again, Vedek tore the ties from his armor and balled them up, then threw them to the floor. He yanked his armor over his head and slammed it down. Bracing himself against the table’s edge, he let his head fall forward and hang between his shoulders.

“What happened out there, sir?” Shila stepped close, speaking softly. “You were left here covered in blood, but with no wounds. We found your armor and your helmet. Your helmet was nearly crushed and your armor was impaled, clean through from the front to the back.” Her nostrils flared as she studied him.

Vedek closed his eyes. He could still feel Emen’s arms cradling him close. Could still hear his heart beat, wild and frantic, through the soft leather of his simple ranger’s armor. Could still smell him, that intoxicating smell of sunshine and herbs and smoke that Emen wore around him like a cloak.

Damn that man! Damn him! He was a Mage, a Paladin, even, still wielding magic after all these years. How was that even possible? It shouldn’t be, not if what they had all been told was true—that the seals had choked the Winds forever and the war was over.

But evil and dark magic had crept into the kingdom. Vedek had faced a demon, a shadow from his nightmares. He’d fallen, even, to the demon. Had lain in the dirt, impaled and dying.

And Emen had saved him. He’d leapt through the fire and taken on the demon single-handedly. Had he used magic? Was that what that white light had been? He’d sent the demon running, Vedek knew that much. And then he’d saved his life.

Vedek remembered dying. He remembered every single searing moment. Emen, crouching next to him, guilt stricken. Him, hurling accusations and

hatred and all of his rage at Emen. His life slipping away, and despite everything, despite all of his fear and his anger, he wanted the last thing in the world that he saw to be Emen's face. How he'd clung to Emen, breathless and lifeless and pleading for the strength to stay just a tiny bit more.

Emen flooded his body with magic—with those damned Winds—and his soul had jolted back into his body. He'd been hovering above Emen, watching his desperation as he called on his powers and demanded that Vedek live. Had watched, before his soul snapped back to his body, as his wounds closed and healed beneath Emen's hands.

Damn that man. Vedek knew, absolutely knew, with an investigator's certainty, that Emen had just catapulted himself to the tip-top of his suspect list. Too much coincidence, and now, with the proof of his magic? If nothing else, he had enough to arrest Emen and have him sentenced by the church to a swift beheading. It was his right, and his sworn duty.

I saw you in my visions. I saw you hurt. Vedek shook his head, trying to shake away the memories. *I have always cared for you.*

Damn him! Vedek's heart clenched, shriveling and shrieking as the pain of Emen's admission—of what he was, of what he'd kept from him, of what he had to do now—sank deep into his bones. Still, his soul protested, shouting that Emen had saved him, that all he had were coincidences, not proof. Where did the truth lie, when Emen had lied to him for so long about who and what he was? When the worst tragedy to befall the kingdom since Sealing Day was the work of magic, and the only two confirmed mages were Emen and his young witch?

Bile rose, slipping and sliding on ugly waves of jealousy. Were Emen and that boy witch intimate? Was that what the ranger wanted? Youth, and the smoothness of a wild highland witch? Gods, had they been together for years? Emen was a wanderer, a ranger, and he'd spent years away from the capital. Time in the highlands, even.

What a fool he'd been, for oh so long. His heart withered under the crushing weight of his shame. He'd loved, he could finally admit to himself, the wrong man.

And in doing so, he'd let his whole kingdom down.

"Sir?"

Shila's question broke his maudlin reverie. He jumped and then growled. "I don't remember."

A single raised eyebrow, delicately arched and smeared with soot, called him a liar.

“I need to get to the capital. Has my horse been found?” Turning, Vedek walked away from the tavern table, leaving his armor behind.

“No, sir.” Shila grabbed his chestplate and strode after him, winding through the wounded lying on the floor, and knights running water and bandages back and forth. She pushed the tavern door open for him. “You can ride mine.”

Vedek shielded his eyes as the morning light pierced his skull. His head, already aching, began to pound. Before him, lines of burned and bloody village folk sat on the edge of the road, taking sips of water from flagons passed by knights. Two Bone Sergeants waddled past, hauling a body between them. Beyond the wounded, Vedek saw smoking ruins and black fields, and the stench of flame and smoldering embers turned his nose.

“So much destruction,” he murmured. “For what?”

“Sir?” Shila held out his armor, a question in her eyes.

He shook his head. “Destroy it.”

Shila’s mount was tied up outside the tavern. He moved to her steed, unlacing the reins from the tie bar and steering the horse onto the road.

“You’re going to meet the King like that?” Another eyebrow arch, this time with a frown of disbelief. “Sir, you’re covered in filth.”

Vedek hauled himself up, grunting at the lancing pain streaking from his chest and ribs. “You said he ordered my immediate presence.” Vedek gestured to his blood-soaked tunic, torn and ragged, as Shila’s steed stamped his feet. “He can see the price we paid in blood.” A press of his knees, and Vedek took off, galloping south toward the capital. A line of refugees were already marching, heading for the shelter the King had promised.

“Sir!” Shila called after her Captain, but Vedek was out of range, and he didn’t turn back. He kept his eyes on the shuffling mass of refugees, searching for dreadlocks and a set of broad shoulders in a dark cloak. His eyes tracked every horse and rider. He spotted farmers in cloaks riding their mules and workhorses and clinging to their crying wives or children in front of their saddle. With every mile, his quiet rage bloomed anew, a new facet of betrayal and pain rising to the fore of his mind.

A cold mass hovered within his chest, and the fracture of his heart sent shocks of quiet pain to the corners of his soul.

He had no idea what to do. He had no idea what to believe. Emen was a Mage. A Paladin. What that meant was still mysterious, mercurial, eluding his heart and his mind as one. Emen, the man he'd desired, was a refugee of the old ways, a survivor of the last age. A criminal, sentenced to die as an enemy of Kina so many years ago. Perpetrator of a ceaseless war against the demons and the darkness.

Was the demon roaming the kingdom connected to Emen? How, when, as a Paladin, he was a sworn enemy of the darkness?

It was too much, and he wanted to push the world at bay, hold it off, even for just a little bit longer. At least until the anguish, the burn, the screaming in his soul had a chance to uncoil.

As the capital walls drew near, Vedek couldn't say whether the burning in his chest came from his ribs or from his heart, melting inside of him.

He'd ridden to the palace at full gallop, not even slowing through the gates. He must have looked like a madman, tearing through the city in only his leg armor, his torn tunic flapping off his body. Blood smeared across his face, along with bruises that dotted his jaw and cheek, and one impressive black eye still forming beneath his skin.

The stable boys at the palace raced to his side as he finally drew to a stop in the semicircular path outside the formal entrance to the palace. When he dropped down from Shila's steed, dried shit flaked off his boots and spattered the porcelain marble flooring gleaming in every direction. He caught the stable boys' wide-eyed glances as he strode around them and entered the palace.

A Templar was waiting for him, casually leaning up against the palace's grand staircase. Clothed in black leather and crimson silk, the Templar smirked as he caught sight of Vedek's bedraggled and bloody state. Without a word, he flicked his head and started up the stairs, not waiting for Vedek to catch up.

Gritting his teeth, Vedek followed. He didn't run, though, and he took a perverse joy in forcing the Templar to wait for him at the top of the branching staircase. Young and brash, the Templar arched his eyebrows and drummed his fingers against the polished bannister. His hair was cut short, a shock of barely buzzed blond hair accentuating his square jaw and corded neck muscles. As Vedek walked past the Templar, he saw his arms clench and the ripple of the muscles in his arms travel through the black leather of his cropped jacket.

All thoughts of the Templar vanished, however, as Vedek walked down the hallway at the highest level of the palace. He could hear the King shouting before he reached the royal council chambers. Swallowing, he paused outside the door, hesitating before he turned the knob.

The Templar at the end of the hallway smirked. Vedek shoved open the great oaken door, towering over his head, and slipped inside.

Lords from the three great houses, Harvest, Killsbane, and Stormwatch, sat in the council, along with the Holy Ones of the capital's Temple, the masters of the church. Lieutenant Mari, his second in command, stood behind the Lord of House Killsbane. She looked petrified, and cast Vedek a tight, pleading glance as he entered. Dour and dismal, long faces watched the King pace across the round chamber floor. He spun on his heel, shouting as he went, and the Lords cringed.

All heads turned as Vedek shut the council doors behind him. There was no sneaking in when the entrance was as large as two men.

"Ah, Vedek!" the King crowed. He gestured to the Knight Commander, a wide, terrifying smile plastered to his face. "Do come in. We were just speaking of matters that concern you."

Swallowing, Vedek descended into the council chambers and took his place, standing next to the Lord of House Killsbane. His Lord did not look up or acknowledge him in any way.

"You're out of armor," the King said, crossing his arms and standing with his feet spread wide before Vedek and his Lord.

"I..." Vedek hesitated. "My armor was too badly damaged to salvage while fighting in the valley."

"And what happened in the valley?" The King's voice was as hard and frigid as diamonds slicing through glass.

Velvet robes shifted against silk and gold as the Lords all shifted to stare up at Vedek. No one breathed.

Vedek's lips thinned. His anger, still singeing his soul, flared. "A demon attack, Your Majesty."

All around the chambers, the Lords and Holy Ones crossed their fists and bowed, muttering words of prayer to the True Gods. Only the King stood unmoved. "A demon attack? How is that possible?"

“I’m not sure, Your Majesty—”

The King cut him off. “Demons were sealed, along with all foul witches, when the Winds were choked. How can a demon be summoned to Kina?”

Inhaling deep, Vedek felt every one of his forty-two harvests. “Your Majesty, we believe that there might be a rogue Mage operating within the kingdom. I have personally heard intelligence which suggests that a Mage, so inclined, may use blood and blood sacrifice to gain access to their magical powers—”

“Their sinful magical powers,” interrupted one of the Holy Ones, an old man with flypaper thin skin, clothed in pale blue silk.

Vedek nodded to the church master, taking a moment to calm his rage. It wouldn’t do any good to lose it in front of the entire council, much less the King.

The King spoke before Vedek could continue. “And you believe,” he said, gesturing toward Vedek with a lazy roll of his wrist, “that this witch is, say, murdering to obtain the blood they need for these vile rituals?”

It felt like a trap, suddenly. What did the King know? “Your Majesty, there have been suspicious murders in the kingdom recently. In the valley and in the capital, we recovered three bodies that all bore the signs of ritual bloodletting. On the King’s Highway, a squad of my knights were brutally slain, and their blood taken. In the highlands, an entire village was slaughtered, again, with their blood taken. And then, last night, in the valley.”

More whispers and hushed prayers as the Holy Ones conferred amongst each other. The Lord of House Harvest dabbed sweat from his brow as he wheezed, then coughed into his rag. In hours, he’d lost so much of his House. It’d be a miracle if his heart withstood the shock.

Pacing slowly back to Vedek, the King spoke again. Vedek saw his dark eyes flash, heard the force of his anger in the short, heavy clip of his boots against the marble floor. “So,” he said, his voice sharp. “Murders in the capital. Bodies drained of blood. Murders around the kingdom. You believe this to be the work of a rogue Mage, then?”

“Or the work of this demon, Your Majesty,” Vedek said. *Why are you involved, Emen? What else are you hiding? Did you summon this demon?*

The King’s eyes narrowed viciously. “The ultimate question is, then, how did a demon enter Kina?”

Silence. Only the rustle of fabric, dry silk and sweat-stained velvet again, rustling amidst coughs and the tense clearing of throats.

The King continued, growling. “You left the capital, Captain.” The King stared at Vedek. “Why did you leave when your kingdom needed you so much?”

“I was investigating my slain knights, Your Majesty. I personally led the investigation.” His knights had been shocked and shaken, and a crazed mixture of raw fury and indignation had seized hold of his ranks when word had come that knights had been so brutally murdered.

“And then you went up into the outlands? And the highlands?” The King frowned, shook his head. “Why?”

A pause, a breath. “I thought we had a lead, Your Majesty. I thought we were tracking the Mage who could have been connected to these murders, and to this demon.” He inhaled, held his breath. Gambled everything. “I was wrong.” His heart sang as his soul burned, and he clenched his hands into fists, digging his nails into his flesh until he felt the skin break.

More silence, as the King stared Vedek down. “Am I to understand that in four days, there have been ritual murders throughout the kingdom and the capital, as well as these slaughters in the villages, and you have no leads, no idea what’s happening at all, and the most you can tell me is that you believe there was a demon in the valley and that you believe the demon is your murderer?”

Quickly glancing at Mari, Vedek saw her wince again and turn her eyes to the ground. No leads in the capital, then.

The old Holy One interrupted. “Temples across the kingdom report troubles and unrest, Your Majesty. The outlands whisper of revolt again. There is fear. Doubt. We must contain this.”

“When I appointed you, Vedek, on the highest recommendation,” the King cast a droll look down to the Lord of House Killsbane, “I expected more from you. I counted on you to act when needed.”

Vedek returned the King’s stare, meeting his eyes instead of politely staring over his shoulder as protocol commanded. “I didn’t just think I saw the demon, Your Majesty. I fought it. Challenged it.”

A snort, loud and long, from a man out of sight, leaning against the King’s desk in the recessed alcove outside and above the sunken chamber. Looking up,

Vedek watched the man push himself off the desk, unfold his arms and then saunter to the top of the stairs leading down into the chamber. Black leather caressed the man's strong legs, and a crimson top tied around his waist showed off his lean, trim stomach and broad shoulders. Short hair, trimmed to a spikey cut, stood out in a shock of silver. Despite his age—almost sixty harvests, Vedek guessed—his face was trim, his jaw cut, and his strength obvious.

“Demons are no easy foe, Knight Captain Vedek,” the older man said. His voice filled the chamber, and all turned to him, silent and reverent. “They have the strength of ten men, the cunning of the worst sort of criminal, and are quite resistant to death. Fighting them head-on takes incredible skill, and a bravery that is nearly suicidal. Most men die, facing down demons.” Slowly, he started down the stairs. “I do not doubt your courage, Knight Captain, and based on all that we have heard here today, nor do I doubt your account of what has occurred.” Reaching the chamber floor, the older man moved to the King's side and bowed before continuing to address Vedek. “What happened to the demon?”

Emen came. A Paladin rescued me, like out of legends of old. He cast a spell—Vedek ruthlessly shoved his heart's protestations aside. “He fled,” he said instead. “After we fought. He was extremely good.” Vedek nodded to the newcomer. “He wounded me, but fled when others arrived.”

A long look, from both the King and the newcomer. They shared a glance before the King spoke again. “Well, we are so very grateful for your survival,” the King purred.

Vedek felt his bones wither, and he closed his eyes. “Thank you, Your Majesty,” he whispered. Failure stung deep, all the way to his marrow, as the King snorted at him.

“Your Majesty.” One of the Holy Ones, a younger man this time, with long, raven-black hair plaited down his back. “What does the High Templar think?”

The newcomer nodded to the Holy One as the King gestured for him to speak freely. “Master,” he said, bowing low with his fists crossed over his chest. “Blessed Light to you, Holy One.”

The Holy Ones each bowed low in response, indulgent smiles spread over their faces. “Blessed Light to you as well, High Templar.”

Vedek watched the High Templar as his failure swirled and settled in his soul. The High Templar stood tall and straight, confidence pouring from him,

and all the Lords and Holy Ones looked to him with fond regard and a bone-deep respect.

"I think it is obvious that this is no longer a problem to be solved by the Knights Guard," the High Templar began. "Knight Captain Vedek and his men are certainly examples of the best sort of folk Kina can produce." He nodded to Vedek, a small grin curving his lips. "They have kept the kingdom secured for years, and never have the Knights Guard failed."

"Until now," the King groused. Vedek flinched.

"Perhaps not their fault," the High Templar offered. "Doing battle against the Magi and the forces of sin and darkness requires proper training and equipment. That the good Captain managed to hold his ground against a demon..." Another nod from the High Templar, and Vedek lifted his chin slightly.

"The Templar have fought this kind of darkness before." The oldest Holy One spoke again, his voice more a breathless wheeze.

"It is a war, Master, and one that spans eternity. The Magi fought it before us, but we are stronger. Better. We will be victorious. I swear to you on that." The Templar turned to the King and bowed low. "Your Majesty, I request your leave to return to war against the darkness."

"What do you propose, Shane?" The King tapped a finger against his lips, his arms crossed loosely.

"Somehow, forbidden magic has returned to Kina. The Knight Captain speaks truth—blood sacrifice can open dark doorways." Murmurs and prayers rose around the council chambers. "We must put an end to this. We must find this dark Mage and eliminate all those who still bear ties to the Magi, or who dabble in those forbidden magics. We must leave no opening for this darkness to seep into the kingdom. Give no quarter to any who betray our foundations or turn their back on the True Gods."

The King stared into Shane's eyes. No one moved. Finally, the King nodded, once.

Inhaling deep, Vedek held his breath. *No, not this again.* He'd barely gotten through the first, and his nightmares had nearly been the end of him. Only ale, and then Emen's friendship, had gotten him through.

"As High Templar and the protector of the church and the spiritual foundations of our kingdom, I declare open war against the darkness," Shane continued. "I declare the Second Inquisition begun."

The Holy Ones rose from their seats and crossed their fists, bowing deeply to Shane, who bowed in return. They held their hands to the sky, speaking prayers that fell from Vedek's ears. Together, the Holy Ones laid their hands on Shane's arms, speaking too low to hear. Shane lifted his face, a rapturous ease closing his eyes and seeming to send him into bliss. The King watched, smiling, and nodded at Shane when the Holy Ones stepped back.

Shane crossed back to Vedek, relaxed and yet deadly, ready to strike, to rip from the world any Magi or trace of magic. Vedek felt his power, felt the force of the High Templar pulsing off his body and slamming into his own. Swallowing, Vedek held his ground, staring up into Shane's grey eyes.

"Captain." Shane grasped his shoulder, squeezing. "As the Inquisition has been reopened, I would like to formally ask you to cede authority of your Knights Guard to the Templar. I would benefit greatly from your expertise and your advice. Would you sit on my war council?"

Saying no meant his head. No one said no to the Templar, and especially not in the midst of an Inquisition, even one only moments old. "Of course, High Templar." He bowed, long and deep.

"Shane." The King was suddenly a flurry of movement, ascending the steps to his private desk and rifling through his parchments. "When the refugees have all arrived, set them up in the Holy Light neighborhood. No one uses it anyway. Recall the knights from their postings in the valley to assist in your Inquisition. Begin in the capital. I want everything locked down and contained before the ambassadors' arrival."

Shane nodded. "The city will be controlled, Your Majesty," he said. "And we will destroy these sinners and black magic worshippers, just as we did before."

After that, the council meeting was effectively over. More prayers, which the King excused himself from, and then the Lords of House Harvest and Stormwatch began to squabble. House Killsbane's Lord bowed deeply to Shane, and Vedek understood why his Lord had been silent. Like Vedek, he was out of the King's favor. Currying favor with the High Templar and the Holy Ones might be the only way he could save his station.

Mari came to Vedek, fumbling over apologies that Vedek swept aside. She gave him a rundown of the capital in his absence, and the souring of the city and the folk as fear and panic had started to close their fists. With every word, Vedek's mood turned even darker, more grim.

When Mari finished her fast recitation, her eyes widened and she bowed low.

“Thank you, Knight Mari,” Shane said from behind Vedek. Vedek closed his eyes. “You’re dismissed. Please return to the battlements and make room for me in the Knight Captain’s office. We will share space to work more effectively together.”

Nodding, Mari bolted, and Vedek felt Shane circle around to stand before him.

“I know that I have failed, High Templar,” Vedek began.

“Captain.” Shane once again grasped his shoulders, this time with both hands. “Vedek. Facing down dark magic is not part of your duty. That you came so far, and figured out so much, is admirable.” An indulgent smile. “Dark Mages working in blackness are cunning. They live on lies, feed on mind games. They enjoy confusion. Obfuscation. They want to see you spun around and confused, chasing your own tail. They want you to suffer before you die.”

Bile rose in Vedek’s throat. If possible, he felt worse. Where was up and where was down? What was right and what was wrong? Where were the cardinal points of his soul, and why did he feel like everything pointed back to Emen?

“You stood in front of a demon and emerged alive.” Shane squeezed again before letting go. “That tells me that there is strength in you, Captain. That you, in all likelihood, should be a Templar.”

It was considered the highest praise to be compared to a Templar, and the Order of the Templar only ever recruited in secret. Vedek should have been overjoyed, should have puffed out his chest and swelled with pride. Instead, all he could manage was a weary half grin.

He hadn’t quelled the demon. He’d been lying in a pool of his own blood, dying.

“Get washed up, get some food in you, and meet me in your office. I’ll brief the Knights Guard on the Inquisition and set up patrols for the afternoon and evening. I want to know everything you know about magic in the city. Who keeps amulets? Who draws in the dust? Who attends Temple and who does not? What have you seen? What have you heard?” Stepping back, Shane nodded to Vedek, dismissing him. “We begin sweeps before dawn.”

Swallowing, Vedek bowed before turning to leave. He trudged up the steps, his filthy tunic making him feel even more bedraggled in front of the exquisite High Templar.

“And, Vedek?”

Turning, Vedek arched his exhausted brows down to Shane.

“You did very well. You should be proud. I will make sure the King knows this.”

It was all he could do to nod back at Shane and flee the chambers before he embarrassed himself. As soon as he made it out into the palace hallway, Vedek collapsed against the cold marble wall, heaving great draughts of air and trying to calm his wildly beating heart.

By the Gods, they were going on the hunt. Another Inquisition, another slaughter. He thought of his knight, slain on the road with an amulet secreted in his pocket. What had he believed, to turn to amulets and the old faith instead of following the Temple? That amulet would have meant his head, had it been found when he was alive.

How many others would they find with hidden amulets, with secreted charms? Who looked to the north and to the Winds instead of to the Temple’s spires?

And Emen. By the Gods, what would happen to Emen? Emen’s frantic fight against the demon was suddenly cast in a new light, thanks to Shane’s cautious words. Why had Emen risked it? Risked his life to battle a demon and exposed his true heritage? The possibility of Emen working with the demon seemed thin now, distant. But was that just what he wanted to believe? What did he truly know?

He knew Emen was a Paladin, a Mage, an outlaw. He knew that, by all legal codes, Emen should be arrested. And, following his arrest, he’d be slain with his head mounted on a spike. One less Mage in the kingdom, in the world. Wasn’t that the point? Safety and security through the elimination of the Magi. Everything that had happened was all due to some black magic. How did he know that Emen wasn’t tied up in that? Only the protestations of his heart, and his heart was not to be trusted.

By the Gods, what was happening to the world?

As much as he wanted to be angry, to despise Shane for taking his command, and as much as he dreaded what was to come, it was hard to dislike

the High Templar. Shane exuded confidence, and he'd praised Vedek when the King had shamed him. There was understanding there, and compassion. Maybe that's what the world needed, Vedek thought. Maybe they did need the Templar, and Shane, to make everything right again. He certainly was powerful enough, exuding authority and holy righteousness as easily as he breathed.

He returned to his barracks and bathed, standing in the cold stream of rainwater piped into the Knights Guard barracks' washroom, until his whole body was shaking and shivering. Purple bruises spanned his chest and wrapped around his ribs, and he could barely bend or twist to reach his back or legs. Still, he got the worst of the blood and muck off his body, and then returned to his quarters for a fresh uniform. He stopped at his doorway and leaned against the wall, exhaling hard. Everything that made up his life was in this room, and yet, it all seemed so foreign to him. Parchment from cases he'd taken back to read. Sketches of idle moments in the city. A training sword, and his spare uniform. A drawing of Emen, half cast in shadow as he sat in the firelight at The Itchy Saddle.

Vedek sank down, leaning back against his locked door before burying his head in his arms. He was trembling, and he couldn't stop. The silence, the stillness, the quietness of his quarters closed in all around him. For a moment, he yearned, wishing with everything he was that things were different. That he could change the world. That he could go back in time and stop all this from happening. Or, go back further, and leave the capital with Emen, one of those days he'd just been on the last dangling string of his patience. Or, to the night he'd met Emen, and then he would have seized on with both hands and never, ever let go. Closing his eyes, Vedek let his head fall back against the wall.

He wanted everything to be different.

He dressed mechanically, leggings and tunic and boots and his secondary set of armor tied on in perfunctory fashion.

Vedek hesitated when it came time to fasten his poppy cape to his shoulder guards. Bright as a summer's peach, his cape stood for law and order, for protection, for the security of the kingdom. Those who wore the color had sworn to be the land's guardians, the beacons of safety for folk in need. His hands lowered and his cape dragged on the floor. He didn't feel worthy enough to wear it.

His responsibility lay in the safety of the kingdom, and in the safety and security of the folk of Kina. Anything, anything at all that threatened the kingdom or the folk had to take priority over any suspect personal feelings, or

the quibbles of his heart. And, if Emen was the threat, then he'd have to face him. He'd have to protect his folk, from anything. What that meant... Inhaling, Vedek closed his eyes. What had to be done would be done. He couldn't falter, not now, not with so much at stake. He fastened his cape on with a sigh and avoided looking at himself.

When he arrived in his office, the Knights Guard had already heard about the Inquisition. They were abuzz, conversations flying in hushed voices and with wide eyes, and all knights, even those off duty, had been called in. The battlements were overflowing, poppy capes and plumes fluttering in every direction. Shane had already ordered increased patrols, and the Temple's prayer bells were tolling, far outside of the afternoon prayer. Vedek heard the priests declare a holy martial law and impose an evening of silence and solitude for the people, cloistered in their homes. A curfew, and one that began at sundown.

The rest of the day and into the evening was spent preparing for the city sweeps. They had enough Knights Guard and Templar to secure and hold the city, and folk didn't stand a chance of resisting.

He wondered how many would.

Chapter Ten

Tarl sat in front of Emen astride Dava, his hood pulled low over his face and obscuring his features. Morning had come after the fight in the valley, dull and grey and with a cold wind sweeping in from the north. The smell of snow was in the air. Tarl glanced side to side, warily eyeing the mass of refugees from the valley stumbling alongside their mount and heading toward the capital.

“Are you sure this is a good idea?” Tarl whispered. “Walking into where we’re both the kingdom’s most wanted criminals?”

“We blend in better in the crowd,” Emen rumbled. His chest pushed against Tarl’s back, and he felt his words rumble through the young Mage. They were pressed together, hip to shoulder. “There are hundreds of refugees from the valley heading to the capital. We’re just two of many.”

“That doesn’t change that fact that we’re still wanted men,” Tarl hissed. “Mages. They behead folk for far less.” He turned his head, meeting Emen’s eyes. “And very quickly in the Capital.”

Emen stared at him until he turned back around. “We still need answers,” Emen finally said. “The ruins of the capital’s Paladin’s Cathedral rest on the mountain, and then there’s the Whispered Mile. I need to search both.” He paused. “And I told you that I would be happy to let you off at Winterweave, kid.”

Snorting, Tarl whipped around again. Emen glared at him, but Tarl ignored it. “You couldn’t stand up in Winterweave. Do you honestly think that I was going to let you ride off on your own when you could barely walk?”

“You don’t have to accompany me.” Emen pushed Tarl’s chin forward, his touch more than gentle. “But your help has been... good,” he conceded with a growl.

A long sigh, and Tarl’s shoulders slouched against Emen. “I still think it’s better if we stick together,” he whispered. “This unsettles me, Emen.”

Silence, and then Emen’s hand wrapped around Tarl’s waist, an odd sort of hug. “Me too, kid.”

Veering off to the Cathedral outside the city walls took some finesse. Emen slowed Dava down and maneuvered his way to the side of the swell of

refugees. Tired eyes covered in soot stared up at him, seeing past him or through him. No one spoke. Some folk sobbed. The valley, and most everyone's homes, farms, and storehouses, had burned to the ground. Dozens were missing. Hundreds were homeless, terrified, and hungry.

A horse and two riders slipping past their path was the least of the refugees' worries.

Still, they had to move before the patrol knights from the capital picked up the tide of refugees. They were riding out and escorting the refugees into the city, guiding them into squatters' camps hastily set up in the slums of Holy Light.

Avoiding the knights, Emen guided Dava through a copse of pine, and then behind a tumbled pile of boulders. The ground turned to shale, and Dava struggled with the loose earth. Emen and Tarl slid from her back and stretched, and, sheltered by the curve of the mountain, ascended slowly through the pine forests with Dava.

The first blush of winter had made its way down to Kina. In the old calendar, the Paladin had called this the end of the year, when snow blanketed the ground and the first press of winter stole away the warmth and light. These were the Black Days, dark days of bleakness, when life seemed to flee. All around, the air had turned biting, and ice coated the tops of puddles and blades of grass. Snow had fallen the night before in the mountains. They could see the white brush of fresh powder in the north. More was on the way, headed south for the capital.

Winter and the Black Days were here, and on the heels of a great tragedy. Without the food from the farmers of the valley, hunger would be the first threat come winter. Shelter, too, with so many houses burned to the ground, and families lost with nowhere to go. Emen wrapped his cloak tighter around his body as his breath fogged before him. Who would do such a thing? Starve a kingdom? The valley's food stretched in supply lines to the corners of the kingdom. How many in the outlands, or in the capital, wouldn't see the new year come spring?

I know you, Ementii. The demon's words echoed in his mind. *Better than you know yourself. Traitor.*

Why would a demon call him a traitor? Why had he seen flashes of the horror the demon had wrought? He'd seen the knights attacked on the highway, he was sure of it. He had seen the fires engulf Gallows Hall, and then the bones

of his brothers burning. He'd seen Vedek's death. And more, sights he hadn't witnessed yet with his waking eyes. Blood in the capital. Riots. The taste of terror. Why?

"Is that it?" Tarl's voice, panting around his words, interrupted Emen. The ruins of the capital's Cathedral rose from a frost fog encircling the mountain's northern slope. Once towering over the capital, the stone battlements surrounding the Cathedral had crumbled beneath Honey Fire and a bombardment of trebuchets. The keep had fallen, and only fragments of the once-magnificent tower still reached for the sky. More destroyed than the ruins in the bog, the capital's Cathedral had endured hours upon hours of attack from the knights on Sealing Day.

Moldy stone fragments lay scattered in the forest, blown away during the attack. The forest had reclaimed the ruins. Pine trees grew through the courtyard as vines snaked over and around the remnants of the battlements and through the rotten wood doors of the citadel.

Emen nodded, glancing once over the ruins. He looked away quickly, turning instead to Tarl. "You're winded, kid?" He grunted. "You live in the mountains. This should be nothing."

Tarl shook his head, resting his hands on his knees. "I climbed mountains, yes," he said. He pointed at Dava. "But never after riding for days."

Emen was silent, then, staring up at the ruins of his former home. That burning, that terrible, sickening rage was back, churning up his soul. Blackness, as dark as the Abyss, threatened to consume him, and he heard a maelstrom of screaming, of guttural shouts and barks, and the cry of war drums in the back of his mind. Ever since his Winds had returned, since he'd jumped through that whirlwind in the blackness of his mind, he had felt the rekindling of his wrath. Sickening, he felt his soul curling inwards, trying to escape.

He'd suppressed this. He'd lived with this fury, this madness, for years, ever since that day. But he had worked so hard, for so long, building a new world out of his own strength and his own determination. He'd dedicated himself to the memories of his people, living for the Paladin. He'd continued the fight as much as he could, righting wrongs and hunting down ghosts and rumors of darkness. He'd focused his rage, turned it into a tool, a perfect, deadly tool. He'd molded himself into a shell, an unbreakable, iron-willed force. He'd buried the wrath and the fury and hardened his heart.

Dread rose full force within Emen, and he tried to clamp down upon it. He was losing control, and that was just another thing to rage over. In dark

moments, in moments that he was not proud of at all, he wanted to kill. To lash out. To seek revenge. To destroy, like he'd been destroyed, and to hurt, like he'd been hurt.

Somehow, and he wasn't sure how, he'd let his soul be mapped and charted even before he knew he was vulnerable. Now, there was a new kind of vulnerability, a new terror, tugging at his being. He couldn't face it, not yet. He couldn't name the feeling that centered around Vedek and stole his entire focus.

Opposing surges rose within him; to be destructive and devoted, to devastate and to weep, to rage and to cherish. To kill and to rescue. To hate and to love. He didn't know who he was any longer, and the agony was simply killing him. Why were his Winds back? Who was this Blood Mage? Why did the demon know him?

When had Vedek walked off with his heart? He hated Vedek for that, but at the same time, he knew he only had himself to blame.

"You all right?" Tarl said behind him, less out of breath after resting.

"Let's get this over with." Emen trudged his way up the slope to the battlements' archway. In the twenty-six years since the Cathedral had fallen, the road the Paladins had meticulously maintained had fallen into disrepair, now almost totally reclaimed by the mountain. Emen remembered the careful cleaning all recruits had helped with, fixing the roads after winter and bolstering them in summer and autumn. Now gone, the wild slopes of the mountain were all that stood outside the Cathedral's gate.

Tarl stayed close to Emen, walking behind him through the battlements and into the destroyed courtyard. Tumbled stone, rotten wood, and shattered glass lay in heaps. But no bones, not that Tarl could see.

"Are the bodies of your brothers here?" Tarl asked, wincing as he spoke.

Emen shook his head slowly. "No, not here." He exhaled, circling and taking in the totality of the damage. "The church claimed the bodies. Everyone was dead, but they still beheaded the corpses and mounted their heads on the Temple's pikes." Or played ball with the Paladins' heads in the streets. Swallowing, Emen looked down and closed his eyes.

A hand touched his shoulder, warm and gentle. "I'm so sorry," Tarl said.

"I grew up here," Emen said suddenly, surprising even himself. The words poured from him. "I was sent here when I was a child. Touched by the Winds at a young age. My parents were merchants, I think. They never came back." He stared at the citadel ruins, but in his mind, he saw how they once were.

Gleaming stone, white banners fluttering in the breeze with the Paladin's sigil—a single lit candle before a swirling spiral—flying proud. “I learned how to ride a horse there.” He pointed to the ruins of the stables, a collapsed pile of moldy wood rot and fallen pine boughs. Shane had spent hours with him, hours and hours, and they'd ridden across the moors and the cliffs above the palace more times than he could count. “How to wield a sword there.” Across the courtyard, where stone had fallen, a practice court had once stood. He'd fought his fellow recruits—and Kone in particular—for years. “I used to stand on the battlements and look out of the capital. On a clear day, you could see the ocean.” His voice caught, finally, hitching on his words. His hands clenched to fists instead as he gritted his teeth. “They killed everyone,” he growled. His voice turned hard as his fists shook. “Everyone.”

Trembles settled over his body, fueled entirely by the unshed rage spewing from his soul. He tried to contain it, to bottle it back up. His hands clenched, creaking against his leather gloves, and he felt the ties of his vambraces strain. He could feel every single piece of his soul, each bit of darkness within him crying out, screaming for revenge. Screaming for an answer to a question his soul was begging for. Screaming for that which he had never known. Clawing toward something indefinable, something unknowable. The force of it was overwhelming, and Emen closed his eyes with a growl.

Tarl's lips pressed together, thin. “Let's get to the library,” he said. “Get what we need and go.” He gestured forward, motioning for Emen to lead the way.

He didn't move. “Should I even save them?” Emen whispered. “Or even try?” Lifting his head, Emen's eyes pierced Tarl, overbright in the dim frost fog of the mountain. “Look what they did to my family.”

Silence, as Tarl held Emen's gaze. His eyes seemed to see straight through Emen, straight through to his soul, and Emen remembered that Tarl had been in his mind. Had seen the state of his being. A shiver, as Tarl stared him down, and then the taste of rosemary swam in his mouth and lavender filled his nose. A wash of comfort, a mental caress, from the Cleric.

“Would you be the monster that destroys them, Emen? Are you capable of letting them all die?”

Emen looked away, staring at the old practice field as his jaw clenched and unclenched. Finally he moved, brushing past Tarl and striding into the citadel.

“What if I already am?”

The library had already been picked through.

Less disheveled than the bog Cathedral's library had been, the capital's Cathedral library had been restacked. Broken shelves lay in a twisted pile in the corner, some used for firewood only recently. Stacks of books lined the walls, all grouped by subject. Illusions, defensives, healing arts, charms, runes, herbs. The subjects ran the length of the library, all heaped together.

With one exception.

As Tarl poured through a manual of wards, Emen circled the library again, searching for the stack he was specifically looking for. He fingered the spines, stroking over titles and subtitles in each pile of books.

"They're not here." Frowning, Emen glared around the library. "They're not damn here."

Tarl set down the warding book and met Emen in the center of the cavernous library. Water had gotten in, rotting one corner of the room, but the books had been piled away from that destruction. "What's not here?"

"The books I need. Studies on blood magic and the history of Kina."

Tarl eyed the stacks. He knew better than to ask if Emen had searched every one. "Someone has clearly been here before us. They must have taken them."

Exhaling, Emen closed his eyes. "Which leaves us back at square one. Chasing a Blood Mage who is summoning demons, with no leads and no way to stop them." He kicked a pine bough that lay in the center of the floor, fallen in through one of the broken windows.

"We've seen the demon," Tarl countered. "That's something."

And he knows my name. Knows me. Emen didn't share that thought.

"Someone took these books. We need to find them. If we can find that, we might be able to find out who has been studying this. It might lead us right to the Blood Mage." Tarl tilted his head. "We have to try."

Nodding slowly, Emen pursed his lips. "The university in Tizzy Town was always begging for copies of our books. Maybe students came up the mountain and took them for themselves."

"Tizzy Town?" Tarl's eyebrows shot up.

"Students' Quarter." Emen smiled softly. "They drink a lot of tea. You'd like it there."

“I’d be surprised if I like anything in the capital.” Wrinkling his nose, Tarl shot a disbelieving look toward Emen.

“Let’s get going, kid. We want to be inside the city walls before nightfall.”

Moving through the Cathedral, Tarl watched Emen keep his eyes focused on the floor, studiously not looking at the degradation and destruction wreaked upon his home. “How will we get inside the capital?” he asked, trying to distract him. “The refugees are already inside. We can’t sneak in that way anymore.”

“We swim.”

Tarl stopped short.

Another smile, this time a smirk. “There are two ways in by water. One, through the city’s river gates. They don’t extend to the bottom. It’s a deep dive, but it’s doable. Or, two, leaping from the cliffs and then swimming around the palace and crawling up under the docks. Which would you prefer?”

“Neither.”

“The river, then,” Emen said, “since you’re not a strong swimmer.”

“That’s an understatement.” Tarl felt his stomach plummet, felt his feet drag. “What about Dava?”

“I’ll leave her here. She needs rest, and the city stresses her out. She’ll be fine on the mountain.” They slipped through the citadel’s rotten doors and down the stairs to the courtyard. Dava was already munching on winter rye growing through the cracked courtyard stone. Emen stroked her neck and rubbed her nose. “Stay alert, Dava,” he whispered. “Keep yourself safe.”

She snorted in his face and plucked another patch of rye from the ground.

Wrapping his cloak around his arms, Emen gestured for Tarl to take his elbow. “We have a walk ahead of us,” he called. “Stay near for warmth. The river will be cold.”

When Tarl took his elbow, Emen pulled him close, seeming to gather strength from the simple act of caretaking. Tarl kept his smile to himself, but let Emen guide and shepherd him down the mountain.

Cold didn’t even begin to describe the river.

Frigid snowmelt was what Emen should have said. Tarl couldn’t stop shivering, huddled in his soaking cloak beneath one of the bridges crossing the

river Rea inside the capital's walls. Under the arch of the bridge, old ward runes from before the Sealing were still etched into the stonework. He wanted to be interested in them, but he was too damn cold and couldn't focus on anything else.

Boots marching in cadence thundered over the bridge, and Emen shrank back from peering out to the capital's streets. Nearly deserted, the streets were usually bustling swarms of activity. Now, they were almost dead.

"It's two hundred yards to the Whispered Mile, due east," Emen whispered in Tarl's ear. "We can keep to the alleys once we get across the main road." Shivering and nodding all at once, Tarl bobbed against Emen. Emen's arms wound around him, stroking his arms briskly. "We'll get dry once we reach the House." Another nod and another chatter of his teeth. Emen pulled him closer.

"On my count, we run across the highway." Peering out again, Emen surveyed the dead streets. "One..."

Tarl couldn't stop shivering, couldn't stop his teeth chattering.

"Two..."

He forced himself to unfold, to stand, and his legs wobbled beneath him.

"Go!" Emen scrambled out from under the bridge and off the ledge they had clambered onto. Stumbling, Tarl almost fell face-first back into the frigid Rea, but Emen's arms caught him and hauled him out. Wrapping Tarl close and slinging one hand around his neck, Emen half-carried Tarl as they ran across the main highway in the capital. A block away, Tarl heard the clatter of the knights' boots in cadence, and somewhere nearby, he heard the bray of two horses meeting. Closer, a knight reported to his superior, clear as day, and Tarl wondered how near they truly were. He couldn't see, though, with his cowl tucked up over his head as far as it was, and with how he slouched against Emen. He could barely move. His limbs felt so heavy.

"Just a bit more," Emen grunted. "Winds, you're nearly frozen, kid."

"You... don't say," Tarl managed to chatter out. He saw them bypass an alley and keep on running. "Have to stay hidden," he protested.

"We have to get you warm." Emen kept running, breathing heavily, and darted from building to building, doing his best to stay out of sight. Tarl whispered an obfuscation charm through chattering teeth and felt the cool wash of magic slide down his and Emen's skin. Emen grunted his thanks.

They slowed then, trusting in the ward, but kept to the shadows. Not a soul stirred on the streets. The clapping of horse hooves and the steady footfall of

knights' boots were the only sounds, save for the prowling of street dogs and their idle barks. As they neared the Whispered Mile, the patrols lessened and the dogs faded away. Nothing living came near the Mile, not by choice.

Except for them. Emen steered them both through the twisting alleys sprung up in Daisytown at the edge of the Mile, built to keep a greater distance from the curses and the hauntings reported in the ruins. As they slipped through, Emen sagged with relief, relaxing once they were walking down the desolate, ash-strewn street. Shops had collapsed, rotted through over the years or burned to the ground, and the entire Mile was a walled-off quarter of death and abandonment. Bones peeked through piles of moldy leaves and fallen timbers. Bits of decayed and fraying cloth whipped in the wind, evergreen in color. The old House banners, long abandoned.

"We head for the House." Emen gestured to the ruins at the end of the Whispered Mile, the Fallen House of Mysteries. More ruined than both Cathedrals, the fallen House barely stood at all. More rubble than stone, more splinter than timber, it had been the last resting place of the Lords of the House, and of so many Magi who had fled there seeking sanctuary when the worst slaughter had begun.

"It doesn't have a roof," Tarl chattered. He stumbled, and Emen pulled him tighter against his side.

"We'll be safe in the grottos beneath the House." Emen picked up the pace, glancing sidelong at Tarl's nearly frozen locks.

"Oh, good." Tarl snorted, trying to laugh. "In a grotto beneath the most haunted place in the kingdom."

Emen didn't answer. He guided them down past the ruined House and around to the back. Crumbling brick that had once been a grand stairway sat abandoned behind the ruins, covered in twisted vines and dead tree branches. There had been gardens behind the House, once. Emen shuffled Tarl around the side of the rotted stairs to a dark archway, now half collapsed, cut into the foundations. Knocking aside dead tree branches and tumbling vines dripping with Grave Flowers, Emen picked Tarl up and carried him over the threshold and into the darkness. A metal staircase, rusted and creaking with every step, spiraled down into the depths, swallowing them whole. Emen descended as fast as he dared, holding Tarl's shivering body in both arms.

"I can't summon my witchlight," Tarl shivered. "Too drained." It was more than the cold of the river leeching energy from his body. They'd been on the

run for days, going far and fast with barely any rest. And then, the valley, and everything that had happened there. He was crashing, and hard.

Gathering Tarl tight to his chest, Emen cast his witchlight orbs as far into the dark grottos as they could reach. Spiders shivered out of sight, scattering from a glow they hadn't seen in decades. He heard rats squeak and scurry away. "Hang on, kid," Emen whispered into his ear. Tarl could barely hear him, though, and he felt the world fade away as Emen carried him through forgotten stone tunnels and tangled knots of spider webs.

He woke again stripped naked, bundled in wool blankets and lying on a cold slab floor beside a roaring fire.

Emen huddled across from him, warming his hands at the fire's side. From the reaches of the firelight, Tarl could spy the edges of an underground cavern, circular and domed and held up by carved pillars. Arched recesses lay tucked in the shadows. On the pillars, Magi stared down at Tarl, each one a different type. He recognized the Cleric by the herbs, and the Paladin by the sword. His eyes swept over the others, twelve in all. One held a skull, as if offering it to Tarl. The next had his eyes covered and palms up. Another had a third eye, right in the center of their forehead. It was open while the other two were closed. Another held fire in the palm of his hand, while water dripped in marble drops from between his fingers. Next to him, one of the statues held out cut and bleeding palms, marble blood flowing from his fingers. One statue drew his eyes, and he stared at the carved Mage holding his hands to the sky, his eyes closed and mouth open, as if caught in rapture.

"The Invoker," Emen said, watching Tarl. "A Mage who can commune directly with the Winds and Whispers." He exhaled, and Tarl saw his lips thin as he stared at the statue. "There hasn't been one in hundreds of years."

"Where are we?" Tarl dragged his gaze back to Emen, and tried to relax in his nest of blankets.

"The meditation rotunda." Emen offered a sad smile to the statues surrounding them. "This used to be a sacred place. These statues," he gestured to the room, "are representations of each possible Whisper the Winds may grant." He pointed to the Cleric. "Cleric." Then, the next. "Paladin. Necromancer. Seer. Mystic. Elemental." He paused. "Blood Mage."

"I thought blood mages were bad?"

"How the gift is used may be bad," Emen corrected. He was staring at the statues, lost in his thoughts, and Tarl watched him sway in his crouch.

Exhaustion wept from his body. His eyes were rimmed in red, bloodshot and sagging, and dark circles stained his face. “Blood is not something that can be easily supplied, and the Blood Mage constantly needs more. They’re always running out of stock.”

“So they murder?”

“Not all of them.” Emen glared at Tarl. “Someone is murdering now, yes. But Blood Mages were mostly researchers in my day. Excellent physicians. They partnered with Clerics more often than not.” He chuckled, watching Tarl wrinkle his nose. “Not everything is black and white,” Emen rumbled.

Tarl started to respond, to snap back and counter that that hadn’t been what he was thinking, when Emen suddenly stood and paced away, retreating to a darkened archway behind the statue of the Paladin. He watched as Emen rubbed one hand over his eyes, then sagged against the stone wall and buried his face in his forearm.

“You’re crashing,” Tarl called out. “Your energies are bled out, like mine were. I’m shocked you’re still standing, Emen, with everything you’ve been through today.” He bit his lip. “You need to rest. Come here.” It took a minute, but Tarl pushed himself up, struggling against the bundle of blankets he’d been wrapped securely in.

“I need you to do something for me,” Emen finally replied. His voice was rough, ragged, worn through with more than exhaustion. Tarl frowned. “I need you—” A noise in the darkness, metal on metal, the clinking of a chain. Then, Emen walked back toward the fire, slowly, carrying a long chain.

Tarl’s throat clenched. “What is that?”

“I need you to chain me down,” Emen whispered. His voice caught, shook. “I need you to lock me up.”

Silence, save for the crackle of the fire licking the air and the sound of their racing hearts. “Why?” Tarl finally breathed.

Deep breathing, harsh and frantic, erupted from Emen. He collapsed, sagging to his knees as he clenched the chain in both hands. “I think it’s me,” he finally hissed. “I think the murderer is me.”

Tarl forced himself to stay still, to not move. “How is that possible?”

“I—” Emen could barely speak, and Tarl heard the trembles taking over his body in the clinking of the chain. “I’ve been there, for each of the murders.

Barrow's Spoke, the capital... the Knights Guard on the highway. Gallows Hall."

"That doesn't mean—"

"I black out," Emen said, cutting off Tarl. "I black out, and I wake up somewhere different. I have visions of what happened, almost as if I were there. I saw—" He swallowed, sniffed. "I saw the Knights Guard slaughtered. I saw what happened to Gallows Hall. You said you woke and couldn't find me. I woke up face down in the bog, my sword in my hand." Emen finally looked up, and his burning eyes bored into Tarl, pleading. "Vedek believes I am the murderer. He's been tracking me, hunting me. That's why he's hurt now."

Tarl bit his lip. He inhaled, holding Emen's tortured gaze.

"The demon knew me," Emen continued, nearly breaking apart. "He knew my name."

"What do you think?" Tarl finally asked. "Do you think you're the murderer?"

Emen faltered. He stared at Tarl, his breath shallow through his open mouth.

"And what have you done with the blood?" Tarl pushed himself up further, letting the blankets pool around his waist. "The murders have been to harvest blood, right? To use in the Blood Mage's rituals? So, where is the blood?" Tarl looked around the rotunda. "I don't see you hiding any barrels around here."

Emen blinked rapidly and pressed his lips together. Heavy breaths pushed through his nose, still frantic.

"How were you responsible for what happened in the valley?" Tarl pushed out of the blankets, crawling on his hands and knees to where Emen knelt. His naked body gleamed in the firelight, and goosebumps erupted as the cold air bit into his skin. Emen's eyes darted to Tarl, widening as he crawled close. "You were trying to save Vedek, not kill him. You saved him from the demon that was trying to destroy him." Tarl crouched next to Emen and wrapped one hand around his neck.

Exhaling, Emen turned into Tarl's touch, resting his forehead against Tarl's locks. "What about my Winds? You said the join in my soul was black and festering. Twisted. Angry."

Tarl sighed. "I don't know," he said softly. "I don't know why your join is dark, or why your Whispers are angry. I only helped you keep them quiet."

Silence. Tarl felt Emen's breath, hot and harsh, brush over his collarbone. "What if I am possessed?" Emen finally whispered.

Pulling back, Tarl fought for Emen's gaze. The ranger refused to look at him, refused to meet his eyes until Tarl forced his chin up. He stared, watching panic war with terror deep in Emen's soul.

"I've only been with you for a few days, Emen," he whispered back. "But I feel safe with you." He grinned. "Safe enough to stick around and not run for the hills."

"You should run." Emen gripped Tarl's arms, squeezing hard. "You should leave me. I'm dangerous. I know it." Emen swallowed. "I'm afraid I am going to hurt someone, either me, or you, or..." His words were barely breathed now, near whispers of breath. "I think I already have hurt folk. I have so much rage in me." He shook his head. "I thought I had locked this away—"

"Shh." Tarl pressed a finger to Emen's lips, silencing him. Emen still tried to speak, silent words falling against Tarl's warm skin. "We will figure this out together," Tarl said. "If you're possessed, the last thing that you need is your Cleric abandoning you."

A long swallow, Emen's throat bobbing up and down, and then his eyes closed. "Chain me," he pleaded. "Please."

"No." Tarl shook his head. He stood, holding out his hand for Emen. "It's too cold for that nonsense. I'm not going to chain you in some dark corner all night. If you feel you need to be contained, then I have a better solution."

Emen stared up at him, politely avoiding looking at his naked body. "What?"

Smiling, Tarl reached for Emen, gently plucking the chain from his hands and throwing it back into the darkness. "Come with me."

He led Emen, stumbling, back to the nest of blankets. Emen looked anywhere but at Tarl, at the gleaming, fire-lit planes of his smooth, naked body and his wiry muscles. His hands hung limp at his sides, until Tarl began untying his leather armor.

"What are you doing?" Emen's hands rose, grasping Tarl's.

"You need to rest." Tarl shook Emen's hands off and continued unlacing the sides of Emen's armor. "It's freezing outside. Snow is coming. The warmth in this fire won't last all night, and it will get cold down here. We need to huddle together for warmth. If you leave, if you're possessed, I'll know it when you try

to get up.” Emen’s eyes blazed, wide as saucers, as Tarl slipped the leather chest and back plates over his head and laid them to the side, followed by his bracers. Only his tunic, leggings, and boots remained. Tarl reached for his hem, but Emen stiffened and closed his eyes.

Gently, Tarl rested one hand on Emen’s cheek, cupping his face. “I’m not trying to take your virtue, Emen,” he breathed. His thumb stroked Emen’s cheekbone. “I know your heart already belongs to another.”

Emen’s eyes flew open, wild, and Tarl smiled at him, soft and sweet with only a trace of sadness. “What?” Emen whispered.

“You rode across the kingdom for him and leapt in the face of a demon. When he was dying, he clutched you and couldn’t take his eyes off yours. You commanded the Winds to your aid, for him.” Tarl smiled, and this time he managed to pull Emen’s tunic off, taking advantage of his shock. “He lives now because of you.” Tarl’s eyes traced over healed scars on Emen’s chest, ridges from sword fights and stabbings, and a burn that curled around his flank.

Crouching, Emen slipped his own boots off. He stared into the fire. “I am a Paladin,” he said. “My vows do not allow for love.”

“That doesn’t mean it isn’t there.” Tarl lay back down in the nest of blankets, shaking them out to give Emen some room.

Slipping off his leggings and sliding behind Tarl, Emen pulled the blankets up to his arms. Tarl pressed close, lying with his back to Emen’s front, and the younger man’s warmth poured into Emen’s flesh. He sighed, finally feeling the exhaustion wrought through his body and soul.

“He would never accept me,” Emen finally breathed. Tarl could barely hear him over the splitting of a camphor log and the shiver of embers. “He’s part of a Knights Guard. *The* Knights Guard, in fact. Captain.” A long sigh. “They murdered my people. I don’t even know if we’re...” Emen trailed off. After Vedek’s livid accusations and his confession, they certainly weren’t friends any longer.

“Emen.” Tarl threaded their hands together, laced his fingers through Emen’s free hand. One finger drew an idle symbol on the back of his palm.

“Yes?”

Finishing the rune, Tarl smiled. “Rest.”

Emen closed his eyes and slept.

Hands aching from clenching tight to the crenels on the midcity battlements, Vedek tried to unclench his fists. His gloves creaked, and snow that had collected on the back of his hands fell to the ground, far below where he stood. It was late, late enough that the knights that always gathered on the battlements in the dead watches had retired to their barracks, and the capital, encased in falling snow, was somber and silent.

Snow rested on Vedek's arms, and his shoulders supported small mountains that had collected from the hours he'd stood, still as a statue and glaring out over the city.

Gods, what had happened to the world?

From his vantage, Vedek could see smoke curling from fires scattered in the slums of Holy Light. Tarps had been strung between ruined buildings and served as tents covering squalid alleys, and knights guarded the gated entrance in the brick-walled fence to the formerly glorious neighborhood. Refugees, some already freezing, huddled. Swallowing, Vedek closed his eyes and grimaced.

The sound of boots marching through snow and over stone rose from between the city's buildings. Another patrol, marching in the night. Blocks over, a horse clapped on cobblestones, but it wasn't a knight riding. The knights had been dismounted. The only riders out now were Templar.

Vedek's hands curled into fists again as he grit his teeth. Indignation bubbled inside of him, screaming at his breastbone. The King's words, cutting and harsh, still rankled.

He had watched the capital settle into cloister as night fell, heard the bustle and noise of the city fade and die under the smothering coat of gently falling snow. Alone, his mind raced ahead, thinking of those who didn't have warm enough lodgings, or those who were aging and who would be in agony tonight with the snowfall. The homeless, the orphaned kids that lived under the docks. Where had the beggars gone for shelter? What would they eat if they couldn't scavenge from the taverns throughout the night?

Snow continued to build on Vedek's shoulders, on the backs of his hands, as he watched over the city. He was hanging onto the edge, the very, very edge, of the remnants of his sanity.

Somewhere out there, he knew, Emen and the young witch had found shelter. They were here. He could feel it, deep in his bones, deep in his soul. And, deeper than his soul, he yearned with every fiber of his being.

What doesn't kill you makes you wish you were dead, he thought, bowing his head. Why should he care at all about Emen? Emen was a liar. He was a foresworn enemy of Kina. He truly shouldn't care about the freedom or safety of a fugitive and a witch. He should be eager to arrest Emen, to run him through with his blade. He still couldn't put into words Emen's involvement in this madness, and only the corners of his heart protested the Paladin's innocence. Could he hunt Emen down, in the face of all of their history, and against the pull of his heart?

A mere hint of the thought of attacking Emen—of killing him—sent his mind stuttering into oblivion.

He shouldn't care, not one bit, but he did. Damnit all, he did.

And, he burned inside, yearning for Emen.

Hours upon hours of stillness and rage, and all he could manage was his pleading and his fitful prayers. He was beseeching, but to whom? If not the Gods, then something else, begging for Emen to be safe.

Still, he doubted the Gods would look after a Paladin. Which meant that he would have to himself.

The snow billowed, swirling in an eddy before Vedek's face. Howling wind, blowing in from the mountains, down from the north. The clouds obscured the sick sickle of the moon, and snowfall dulled the candles in the street lanterns, or extinguished them entirely. The darkness, the stillness, the somber way the city seemed to hold its breath matched the gloom inside Vedek's soul. By the Gods, he was adrift, lost, grasping for something in a suddenly spinning world.

He stayed on the battlements, watching the snow descend on the city. Shane joined him, watching in silence, until it was time to begin the first of the Second Inquisition's sweeps before dawn.

Chapter Eleven

When Tarl slipped away from the Whispered Mile in the morning, tension hung over the capital, thick and vibrant. He could feel it in his bones, in his blood, a thrum that caught in his chest.

He waited under an overhang, pulling his cloak's hood low over his eyes. The city was alive again, folk moving to and fro, but there was a somber pall to the snow-covered streets. No one looked at one another. No one spoke, other than an occasional curse as someone slipped on the frosty streets. Snowmelt ground into the dark dirt lay in uneven clumps in the middle of the street, left there by horses running patrols. He'd slipped out of the Whispered Mile on the Walker's Mile side and made his way south to the Merchant's Quarter, thinking that would be the best place to disappear into the crowds in the capital. While folk were out, but it wasn't the hustle and bustle he'd expected.

A whispered conversation, hushed and frantic, caught his attention. He turned slightly, listening to a man and woman squabble behind him in an alley.

"They're coming this way! They've gone through Back Bend! Salt Town is next. You know how that is going to go."

"I hear Daisytown's gettin' hit too. That won't end pretty."

"What are we going to do?"

"Burn everything."

"But Kal—"

"It's all we can do! Do you want to end up on a pike?"

"What about Jon? Do you think he can help us?"

"If Jon's got any sense at all, he'll be doin' the same thing." A pause, and the woman sighed. "Go, now! Hurry!"

She hurried off, wrapped up in a thin cloak and carrying her skirts over the snow-laden streets. The man stayed, leaning against the ice-covered brick in the dark corner of the alley. He caught Tarl's eye and glared. "What you want?"

Shaking his head, Tarl moved on, slipping onto the streets and darting through the clumps of shoppers and sellers as the man came out of the alley, shouting at him.

Though tempered by snow and fright, folk continued to live. They needed to eat, and the early snows meant that homes had been caught without enough firewood or food. Open stalls hung salt and pepper chicken over fires burnt in iron kettles, and sausages stuffed with thyme and coriander twirled on spits. Dried duck strips hung from hooks, sold with a pot of honey for five pennies. Spiced ale and thickened wine sat in jugs and barrels, and shoppers lined up to fill their flagons and replenish their stores. Firewood, freshly chopped, sat at the feet of barkers, each one hollering out prices to the passing crowd. Men and women hefted bundles onto their shoulders and headed for their homes, trying to keep warm. Those that couldn't afford the wood turned to the street children, running a brisk trade in dried shit. It burned—not cleanly—and kept a small house or hovel warm. The children traded handfuls of desiccated shit for a penny, or a piece of meat.

Tarl's mouth watered, and he eyed the fire-baked chicken. Grease from the bird's flesh fell into the iron kettles, and the flames crackled and roared as the scent of flame-broiled chicken wafted over the street. They hadn't eaten yesterday, and he knew both he and Emen needed to. He kept his eyes open, looking for any opportunity to snatch an unguarded bit of food. He didn't have any money.

As he headed across the city, winding his way down the main drag of the Merchant's Quarter, Tarl spotted the Knights Guard blockading the docks and the neighborhoods by the cove. Back Bend and Salt Town, if he remembered the map that Emen had scratched out for him in the dirt. The poppy-caped knights were dismounted, and black and red soldiers sat astride warhorses. One-shouldered crimson capes billowed behind the backs of the grim soldiers, soldiers Tarl figured must be the Templar folk had so often hissed and whispered about. He moved away quickly, disappearing behind a man carrying bundles of firewood on both shoulders.

When he stepped onto the bridge crossing over the river Rea and cleared the drool-inspiring scents of the market, Tarl could finally smell smoke on the winds and the singe of burned brick and stone. He turned, and though the skies were grey, he could still make out a rising column of smoke coming from behind the Knights Guard barricade leading to the docks.

Tarl made his way through the winding streets and found his way to Tizzy Town. It was just as Emen had described it—flashes of garish, vibrant color all arrayed in a wild mismatch, and more taverns and tea shops than he could count. Behind the jumble of buildings, the University rose, set on a hill, and white marble columns and a broad staircase led to grand red archways.

The buildings were close enough that the snow gathered in piles where roofs met or had tumbled against one another. Patches of snow had made it to the street, though, and the drifts were almost up to the knees in certain parts. Students gleefully escaping their classes ran through the streets, pitching snowballs at each other. One girl held her skirts up as a bucket for her friend, who pelted snowball after snowball at a group of boys seeking shelter around the corner from a tea shop. On the balcony of the tea shop, a minstrel strummed a fast jig, alternating between plucking and sawing over his violin strings.

He lowered his hood as he pushed deeper into Tizzy Town. The streets were narrow—no carts could fit, and only a single horse and rider at a time. He peered down brightly lit lanes, eyed the lanterns strung between balconies. Signs over shops declared their wares for all passersby—tea shops, taverns, herbalists, papermakers, quill and ink sellers, perfumeries, art ink blends, tradescraft tools.

Everything but a bookstore. Emen was supposed to pore through the Whispered Mile, search the ruins there, while Tarl infiltrated Tizzy Town. Emen had slept like the dead, never moving once, and Tarl had had to shake him awake that morning. Grumbling, Emen hadn't appreciated Tarl's comment on his morning adorableness.

Winding down another bright, laughing street, Tarl felt a presence settle in behind him. He sped up, and ducked down a dark alley. Wheeling around, he crouched low and drew his dagger. Pitiful, Emen had called it. Useful now.

A cloaked man, tall, peered down the alley where Tarl hid. He looked up and down the street and then strode toward Tarl, his cape billowing behind him, cutting off the light from the street. Tarl fell into shadow, and he saw his chance. Lunging, Tarl slashed at the cloaked man's face, shoving him back with an elbow.

He grunted, but leaped back, and Tarl missed with his dagger. "Whoa!" The man said. "Easy! I'm not trying to harm you!"

"Why are you following me?" Tarl backed into the shadows again, keeping his distance.

"I assumed you were looking for us." Confusion filled the man's voice.

"Why would I be looking for you?" Equally confused, Tarl gripped his dagger.

"The color of your kerchief." The man lowered his hood and stepped forward, gesturing to the shadows where Tarl stood. "It's the same green as the Fallen House."

Cursing, Tarl spared a moment to growl at Emen. Emen had insisted he cover his hair again. Dreadlocks were uncommon, he said, in the capital and a known feature of Tarl's. He'd grabbed a banner from the meditation rotunda and wrapped Tarl's locks up, securing everything inside with an elaborate tie around his forehead. It felt like a constraining jacket for his head, but Tarl had grudgingly agreed to wear it.

Now, he grumbled at Emen's insistence.

"What does the color matter?" Tarl snapped. "It's cold out."

Slowly, the man backed up, suddenly wary. He widened his stance, blocking the alley exit, and Tarl saw the hilt of a dagger tucked into the top of his boot. "That shade of green is the rallying color for those of us who seek to return to the old ways. Who seek to restore the Fallen House. No one wears that color for any reason other than pride and insurrection. Not anymore." A flash, and then the dagger was out, ready to strike. "Who are you?"

He couldn't believe what he was hearing. He lowered his dagger. "Are you Magi? Do you feel the Winds?"

"Answering that could cost me my life," he growled. "Even having this conversation. Who are you? I haven't decided to let you live yet."

Standing straight, Tarl pulled the kerchief off his head and let his locks fall free. "I am a Mage," he declared.

"By the Gods' balls..." The cloaked man started and backed up a step. Shock broke through his tough-guy impression, and he looked more like a delighted kid than anything else. He slid his dagger back into his boot in a flash and beamed. "You're the Mage from the mountains!"

Had his infamy really reached this far? Tarl nodded once, stiff. "And you are?"

"Jon." Reaching out his arm in greeting, Jon looked Tarl up and down, grinning like a madman. "We've heard of you. Heard about how you can still wield the Winds. We've been trying to tap into the Winds for a few years now. We're sure some of us are Magi, like-like you, but without the Winds, we'll never know." He was babbling, and he didn't let go when Tarl gripped his forearm in a return greeting. "I never thought I'd get the chance to actually meet you. I wanted to travel north, to try to find you, but the rumors were that you lived in the Winds, or that you only showed your human form when you wanted."

Tarl laughed aloud. "I assure you," he said. "I am very much a man."

Still smiling, Jon gestured down the alley. “You must come with me. Please. So much is happening. We heard about your capture, but then the rumors were that you’d escaped. The city trembles, and it’s time to strike back. You can help us.”

“What?” Tarl frowned and didn’t move. Nothing Jon said made sense.

“Please, I’ll explain everything.” Jon looked over his shoulder, wary. “The city is under the Temple’s martial law. The Templar have ordered the Second Inquisition.” Tarl sucked in a breath. “They started sweeping the city today, first at the docks and in Daisytown. They’re hunting any remnant of the Magi, anything to do with the old ways. They’ll be entering Tizzy Town when they’re done, and I have to get you to safety.”

“Where’s that?”

“We have a meeting place. It’s secure. Others are there.”

“Other Magi?”

Jon shrugged. “We do what we can. You’re the only one we’ve ever heard of that can still touch the Winds.”

Other Magi, or Mage-hopefuls, messing with power and trying to connect to the Winds. Could it be this easy? “I’ll come with you,” Tarl said. “But I have questions.”

Jon beamed again, joy breaking over his face. “Ask anything,” he said. “But, please. Put up your hood. Your hair is distinctive.”

They walked quickly, ducking through side streets and taverns until they came to a dead end at the back of a black alley. Tarl quirked his eyebrows at Jon. “If you’re planning on trying to kill me, I’ll be very upset with you.”

A bark of laughter, and Jon dropped down and hefted the round iron cover off a rainwater collection hole. “This hole dried up,” he said. “We’ve been carving into it. We’ve got space down below.” He shrugged, gesturing into the darkness. “It’s not much, but like I said. We do what we can.”

“After you.” Tarl smiled at Jon. “You’ll understand my hesitancy.”

Nodding, Jon sat on the edge of the rain hole and then let himself fall through the opening. A short drop, and Tarl heard his feet hit the ground. “All clear,” Jon said. “Come on down.”

Winds, I hope I don’t regret this. Wrapping his cloak around him, Tarl slipped through the hole after Jon.

Vedek stood beside Shane's destrier, watching the Templar lead their sweep down another neighborhood in Daisytown. Behind them, blocks of homes that had been turned asunder sat empty and a unit of knights stood guard every ten feet. Destroyed possessions lay in the snow, sodden. Half the houses had been marked with a red X, splashed in bright paint across the front. The mark of a forbidden find.

In one house, amulets under the pillow, a charm hanging in the kitchen. In another, a rune drawn over the doorway. In a third, a ward on the back fence post, meant to keep prowlers out of their simple garden. A forbidden book, a study on herbs in relation to spells, old and dusty and passed down for generations.

Vedek hadn't expected this many. His stomach churned, tied in knots as his bile rose. He seemed frozen, and from more than the snowdrifts he and the others had waded through. Where had this come from, this unrest and sudden devastation? The capital, the kingdom, had been peaceful and good. Very good. The autumn harvest was winding down; winter crops were being sown. Hogs were fattening as apples ripened and flowers and herbs dried, and the smokers were curing meats to last through the winter. It had been a time of prosper, of bounty, the happiness of the harvest. An odd murder in the valley, and then another in the capital, and suddenly everything had spiraled out of control too fast to understand. Days ago, he'd traded friendly words with folk while waiting for coffee in the morning, and had lunched with Emen in Tizzy Town. Now, he recognized terrified faces huddled in the snow, tear tracks staining their ruddy faces as they begged for mercy from the Templar. It was the folk against the church, now, and the Templar had taken control of his knights, his command, and his capital. He was frozen, unable to do anything but watch as another house was condemned.

Old Lady Lyla, dowager of Daisytown, had shrieked from her front door, waving her gnarled cane at the Templar and their horses as she spat bitter curses toward them, castigating the church and their Inquisition. He'd closed his eyes as the Templar had beset on her, knocking her cane away and then punching her to silence. They had carried her body to the dungeons, and Vedek felt the city's eyes turn on him.

The sweeps were a surprise, to both Daisytown and the docks. The north and south ends of the capital, cut off simultaneously. To the west, the palace sat, blocking any exit, and to the east, cliffs rose, sheltering Kina in her natural cove. The capital gates had been closed before dawn, before the sweeps, and the city was now sealed. They'd moved in under cover of darkness, banging on

doors and hauling men, women, and children from their beds. Daisytown held mostly farmers and families that worked on plots outside of the gates, but there was a doss house for the day laborers tucked against the city walls.

There had been screaming, cries of shock and fear as the Templar stormed homes. Bearing torches, the mass of knights and Templar descending on the folk had been more than imposing.

Shane ordered that prisoners be separated at once. In homes where forbidden magic had been found—amulets and wards and runes—children were separated from their parents and sent to the Temple. Priests waited for the sinners, holding them in the main temple and praying for their souls with corporeal punishments. Adults went to the dungeons to wait in the darkness for the final cut of the sword.

Any person who interfered with the Templar, or with the Inquisition, was also sent to the dungeons.

Vedek watched the Templar kick in the door of another house and storm inside, bellowing at the top of their lungs. “Templar! The Second Inquisition is upon us! Stand fast!”

Screaming, shouting, and then a woman and two teenaged girls ran into the street, huddling together for warmth. The father continued bellowing inside, screaming for the Templar to leave them alone. Vedek watched one of the Templar punch the father in the face, laying him out, and continue on his search. Drawers were ripped out, cupboards torn open. Dishes thrown to the floor. Every piece of glass examined, every pane of window. Books and bookshelves, chairs and blankets, beds and mattresses—everything was overturned and thrown asunder.

“Sir!” One of the Templar rushed to his commanding officer, holding out a handful of amulets and a forbidden book on spellcraft.

Vedek’s heart sank. He tried to swallow, but couldn’t past the lump lodged in his throat. He looked down instead. He couldn’t look at the women. He’d spent his life trying to protect the folk from this kind of pain. He’d lived his life protecting the folk from invasion, from attack. And now, this.

“Mark this house!” The commander nodded, and his men marched out into the snow. Two dragged the unconscious father with them. Blood dripped down his nose. When the women saw their husband and father, they screamed, and the daughters raced to his side when the younger Templar dropped him. He glared at the family, daggers in his eyes, as they helped their fallen father.

“Take them all to the dungeons!” The commander ordered, already moving on to the next house.

Vedek stiffened, but Shane’s hand closed around his shoulder in a gentle squeeze. “The girls are too old to be retrained,” he said softly. “It’s a difficult process to endure. The young do better.” Shane smiled, but it was sad at the edges. “This is a mercy for them, Captain. Dabbling in these magics. It always leads to darkness and sin. The demon came through someone dabbling just like this, or worse.”

Nodding, Vedek turned back to the street. His head swam, swirling, and he desperately tried not to be sick. Sweat beaded on his forehead and dripped down his temple. The girls, their daughters, were only teens. Too young to have their heads mounted on pikes.

“You disagree, Captain?” Shane’s voice was soft, and his words were spoken only for Vedek.

He hesitated before answering. “They are young, High Templar,” he breathed. “Perhaps, if things were explained to them...” Vedek trailed off. Where was the kindness in this? Where was the salvation in destroying life before it had begun?

Shane was silent, and his destrier whined next to Vedek. Finally he spoke, stepping close to Vedek’s side. “I will speak to the little girls personally,” Shane said. He gripped Vedek’s shoulder and fingered his poppy cape. “Your compassion for these folk is strong, Captain. It is no wonder they look up to you and your knights. You are much beloved by the kingdom.”

Vedek tried to smile as Shane ordered the daughters to be separated from the mother and father and sent to the Temple. He could do this. He could save these girls.

Shrieking, the mother refused to let go of her crying daughters, until a hard punch from one of the Templar soldiers knocked the mother back into the snow. Her daughters screamed, then, kicking and flailing and crying as tears and snot and spit ran down their faces and soaked the snow-packed ground. The Templar hauled the mother and father up, dragging their sluggish and unconscious bodies between them. Vedek cringed, then waved to his knights standing guard in the rear. They were to transport the guilty to the dungeons after the Templar passed them off. He watched his knights—pale, wide-eyed, thin lipped—take the unconscious father and mother into custody. Waiting priests took charge of the sobbing daughters, pulling them by their hair into the

back of a caged wagon where other children in nightgowns and tattered sleep clothes sat huddled together. Tear tracks lined their faces, and fear and malice darkened their heavy gazes.

“High Templar.” The commander from the last sweep stood before Shane, saluting.

Shane saluted back. “Another red house, Commander?”

The commander grumbled. “A worrying trend. I hope our unit in the south is faring better.”

“How much more to go?”

“Another four blocks, sir.”

“Get to it, then. Let me see the amulet.” Shane held out his hand. The commander dropped the family’s amulet into Shane’s palm and nodded smartly, barking orders and leading his unit on to the next home.

Candles and lanterns had already been lit down the street, and families waited outside, wrapped in blankets and swallowing their fear. Vedek smelled smoke on the air, and his heart sank further. The Templar automatically arrested anyone who showed signs of trying to burn away evidence or magical materials.

It was only midmorning. Tizzy Town lay next, and he heard wagers being passed among the Templar, bets on how many of the university students would be dabblers in the forbidden. The Templar seemed to look forward to it. Several hoped for a riot.

All except Shane. The High Templar shared long-suffering looks with Vedek, and sad, wearied eyes filled with grim pain.

Shane peered at the amulet in his palm. A simple piece of string, tied with beads, bells, bits of wood, and a dried husk of corn. It dangled in a long cord, able to be tied around a person’s wrist. That morning, they’d found amulets of all lengths and colors, strung up in homes or tied around wrists, or dangling like necklaces and tucked under clothes.

“Do you know what this is for?” Shane let the amulet swing from his fingers, holding it out for Vedek to see.

Swallowing, Vedek shook his head, mute. One of his slain knights had had an identical amulet in his pocket. He’d shoved it into his pants instead of letting it be found by the Bone Sergeants. It was still in his pocket, discarded in a heap in his quarters.

Palming the amulet again, Shane traced a finger over the beads and bells. “This amulet is designed for protection. The Mage will weave it during meditation, tying on these bits.” He pointed to the beads and bells. “The rest is tied on by the person who receives the amulet. Wood and corn, here. Most likely to protect the home and farm.”

On his knight’s amulet, there had been a torn bit of poppy cape tied on the end. “Doesn’t seem to have worked out for them,” Vedek mused, almost grumbling.

A heavy sigh as Shane pocketed the amulet. “People cling to whatever they can to bring them hope. In the old ways, Magi could show, truly show, their magical powers. Prayers to the True Gods are answered in the ethereal.”

“Looking for a short cut to results?” Vedek frowned at Shane, not sure where the High Templar was going.

“People should cling to whatever power gives them safety. Gives them strength.” Shane’s voice had hardened, and his destrier stamped beneath him, tossing his head.

Vedek looked away. His folk had been happy before all of this. The city had been happy, and calm. They’d had their amulets and their dust-drawn wards, then. The world hadn’t been about to end. It had simply been. Whatever had started this—whatever black magic had summoned this demon—had succeeded in tearing the kingdom asunder. Where would they go from here, after the houses had been burned down and the magic dabblers had been slain? When countless heads were mounted on pikes and fear seized the kingdom once more?

The Inquisition had to flush this murderer out. Then, he could work on setting the kingdom back to rights. On rescuing his folk from this pain.

And, Emen would be all right. He’d be fine. He’d survived before. He would do it again.

Vedek tried to tell himself that everything would be all right. That they would all get through this. *Hold on*, he pleaded in his mind to his folk in the city. *Just hold on. We’ll get through this.*

His words rang hollow in his soul, echoing into a bleak despair. Vedek’s thoughts stewed angrily, turning over and around themselves as the ferocity of the Inquisition roared, rising to a fury that shocked him. He could feel the stares of his knights boring into his back, watching him stand next to the High

Templar. Gods, what could he do? He was clawing at the dark rage of his soul, pushing at the scream of his heart that tried to pull him down, and no matter how he turned or where he went, he couldn't be free of the city folk's dark, crying eyes or their terrible screams. Which way was up? Which way was out? What was he even doing?

Jon led Tarl down a short, stubby walkway—more a crawlspace than anything else, and into a cave that the students had spent the better part of a year hollowing out. Others were there, huddled around lanterns and short candles, and talking in hushed, harsh whispers.

One young woman, a university student, rushed to Jon's side. "Jon!" Her blonde hair was pulled back in a tight bun and she wore a plain shift dress. "What are we going to do about the refugees? The Inquisition will be on them soon." She didn't even glance Tarl's way.

Jon apologized for her. "Sorry, this is Emra. Emra, we have a guest."

She spared a quick glance to Tarl and moved on. "Jon. Our people are in there. We have to do something!"

"What's going on?" Tarl stepped forward and let his cloak hood fall back. Emra finally saw his dreadlocks and did a double take.

"Who is this?" Emra whispered to Jon. Her wide eyes stared at Tarl.

"The Mage from the mountains." Jon smirked at Emra. "I found him in Tizzy Town."

"By the Winds, are you here to help us?" Emra brightened, hope flowing from her eyes. "It's like our prayers to the Winds have been answered!"

"I'm here to talk," Tarl gently corrected. "But first, what's going on with the refugees?"

Emra's expression soured. "They haven't been given any food. What they carried with them is running out. We can hear them shouting from over the fence. Folk are starting to panic." She rubbed her eyes, bloodshot and starting to puff with exhaustion. "But with this Inquisition, the Templar are going to arrest hundreds of our own. They came with their amulets, and some managed to save the books we gave them."

Tarl's head spun as he listened. An underground Mage-worshipping cell in the capital? "Our own? I thought you said there weren't any Magi here, Jon."

“We don’t know if we’re touched by the Winds or not. We suspect we are. We feel something. A kinship with the old ways. We’ve been trying to study the Winds and figure out how to break the Seals.” Jon shook his head. “It’s hard. We’ve worked for so long, but the most we can do is string together an amulet and hope it works. When we try any spells...” Jon shrugged, sighing.

Emra jumped in. She spoke forcefully, glaring at Jon. “But we believe. We know this war against the darkness isn’t over. We’ve heard too many stories of ghosts and vumpyre and blood possessors across the kingdom. The church likes to pretend everything is done, that the war is over, and we just have to pray for our souls. But that’s not true.” Emra looked ready to fight the Holy Ones herself, all spitfire and burning passion. “We honor the old ways and keep the traditions alive. We meditate and reach out to the Winds. We’ve tried other ways. One day, we know they will return.”

Tarl nodded slowly. *We’ve tried other ways.* He watched Emra from the corner of his eyes, taking in her bullish personality and commanding figure. Was it possible? He certainly felt something in the group. A tickle at the base of his scalp, some kind of tension coiling around his spine. He needed to know more. “You have others that feel as you do? In the valley?”

“In the valley, in the capital. We wanted to travel north and see how far we’d get in the mountains.” Jon grinned at Tarl. “You were legend.” He reached out for a slap of Tarl’s palm, but pulled his hand back when Tarl just stared at him.

Tarl didn’t know how to react to Jon’s hero worship. He’d lived as an exile, hunted by the kingdom and ignored for the most part by his folk. His life hadn’t been glamorous.

“There are so many who agree with us,” Emra cut in again. “We converted hundreds in the capital. Refocused them on the good of the old ways, on what the Magi had truly done for us. How the church and the Temple has been nothing more than empty promises and brutality.” She gestured vaguely north, nearly hitting the cave wall. “Folk in the valley agreed. We would slip out and hold meditation circles once every moon.”

“And, as Emra said, when the Templar search the refugees, they’ll find all of it. Amulets, charms, wards, runes, books. Everything they managed to bring.”

“Folk hold on to what gives them hope. I heard them praying to the Winds when I went to the fence.” Emra sighed again and rubbed her forehead.

“By the Winds, do they know how dangerous that is?”

“What else do they have, Jon? They lost everything. We need to help them.”

Tarl watched the two bicker back and forth. “What can we do about their food? Anything?”

Emra and Jon shared a long look. “The Knights Guard might let a mercy wagon in, if we loaded it up with food?” Jon sounded hopeful and doubtful all at once.

“The Knights Guard would. I don’t know about the Templar.” Emra pursed her lips, thinking.

“It’s worth a try.” Both nodded as Tarl spoke. “Where can we gather food?” His stomach rumbled.

“We can ask the taverns. They should be able to donate.”

“Let’s get going, then.” Tarl nodded, and Emra and Jon both smiled back at him. Jon still looked wonderstruck and Emra exhausted, but they all set out, clambering out of the rainwater cave and back into the streets.

In an hour, they’d collected enough food to fill a small wagon. Day old breads, pastries, barrels of coffee and tea, dried sausages, anything the taverns would give out. It was an impressive show, and Tarl eyed the goods with hungry eyes. Jon caught him, and paid for a full farmer’s breakfast at the next tavern they went to. Eggs, slices of ham, baked spice apples, and a thick chunk of bread drizzled in goat cheese, and topped off with a warm mug of ale. Tarl almost embarrassed himself with the speed at which he ate, nearly scarfing down the food. Jon smiled as he watched and then fell over himself apologizing for not offering sooner. Tarl waved him off.

“You eat what you can when you’re on the run,” he said. “I’m used to it.”

That quieted Jon.

They headed down the main drag of Tizzy Town, passing by students lounging on snow-covered patios drinking coffee and spiced tea, and smoking dried herbs through long hoses over a boiling kettle. Men and women waved and cheered, and passed over their own food, and the atmosphere was festive and uplifting. Tarl felt himself relaxing, felt the smile bloom across his face. They were about to slip out of the students’ quarter, laughing, when the runner arrived.

Breathless, the runner was a younger student, maybe a first-year-university accept. Bundled in long pants, knee-high boots, layered tunics and a thick scarf

and hat, he skidded to a stop and slid on the ice in front of Jon. “News, Jon!” he gasped, doubling over to catch his breath.

“What is it?” Suddenly alert, Jon helped steady the runner. His eyes were wide.

“The sweeps have finished at the docks and in Daisytown.” He was still trying to catch his breath. He must have run across the whole of the city. “They arrested hundreds. Took most of them to the dungeons.” A wince, and the runner shook his head, rubbed his forehead. “We don’t have any hope of rescuing them.”

“Don’t say that,” Jon admonished. His eyes slid sideways to Tarl, bundled back up in his cloak and hiding his features. “Don’t give up yet.”

“They’re headed this way, the lot from Daisytown. The sweeps at the docks are moving into the Merchant’s Quarter.”

“Then go. Go warn everyone inside.” Jon nodded back toward Tizzy Town. “Make sure everyone knows! Tell them to get ready!” Emra and Jon watched as the runner nodded and took off, sliding on ice and kicking snow into the air.

“We need to hurry,” Emra said. “We have to get back, Jon. It’s time.” Her eyes pierced Jon’s, bright and sharp

“Yeah.” Jon nodded, but his eyes were wide, nervous. Gone was the confident man who had accosted Tarl in the alley. Looking at him now, Tarl could see Jon for the young man—boy—that he was. A young university student, maybe only twenty harvests at the most. Probably younger.

They set off again, hauling the wagon through the snow and trudging as fast as they could to the gates of Holy Light. Beyond the fence, inside the slum, refugees sat crowded together, huddling under tarps and broken slats of wood, trying to stay dry and warm. Fires burned in shallow pits dug by hand, and men and women crowded around the flames where they could. Children blessed with warm clothing ran and played in the snow, while others—barely clothed or still in their sleepwear—huddled with each other for warmth. In one corner, men and women were shoveling snow into a bucket and trying to hold it over a fire to melt and boil for drinking.

When they arrived, the Knights Guard holding post at the gates to Holy Light studiously avoided their arrival, looking everywhere but at their group.

Emra marched up to one of the knights. “We have aid and mercy for the refugees.”

Grimacing, he finally looked up, meeting her gaze. “I’m sorry,” he said, and sounded like he meant it. “We’re under orders to keep it locked up.”

Emra refused to back down. “They’re starving in there.” She pointed at a crying child. “They came yesterday morning with nothing. How much food have you passed out?”

The knight looked down at the snow.

“Look.” Jon stepped forward, close to the knight. “I know the Templar are fucking scary, and there’s the Second Inquisition going on. I get it. We’re all terrified.” He swallowed, and the knight squinted at him. “But we’re really just here to help.”

A long sigh, tired and strained, and the knight finally nodded. “Be very fucking quick,” he growled. “It’s my head if you’re caught.” He nodded to his fellow knights and they made quick work of the gate, sliding it open just enough for the wagon to slip through.

Tarl kept his head down as he passed behind the wagon, but one of the knights, fussing with the gate and waiting for them to pass, leaned in close and whispered in his cloak-covered ear, “Blessed Winds.”

Snapping his head around, Tarl tried to meet his gaze, but the young knight was already shutting the gate behind them. He finally looked up, just once, and Tarl smiled at him. The young knight couldn’t smile, but his eyes glittered, and he nodded before turning back to his post.

The refugees descended on their wagon, queuing up for a morsel of food and drink. Emra, Jon, and Tarl passed out food by the handfuls, trying to distribute everything to everyone. Children thanked them while munching on sweet pastries, dripping crumbs on their shirtfronts. Men and women smiled and clapped their shoulders, or pressed their foreheads to Jon and Emra’s.

Eventually, Emra slipped off, a long look passing between her and Jon. She ducked down a line of ramshackle buildings, run down and falling apart, and two of the larger refugee men flanked her, Emra’s cape billowing behind as she walked. Turning, the threesome disappeared into one of the slums’ hovels. Candlelight and lanterns flicked from inside broken windows, though tattered oilcloth had been tacked up to try to provide some privacy.

She emerged after a short time, holding her forearm close to her body and shielding it with her cloak. Her refugee bodyguards were back, and Tarl thought he spotted something on their arms as well. The crowd blocked his sight, however, and he lost the guards as they dropped Emra back at the wagon.

A young woman carrying a baby approached Emra, smiling. She leaned in close, whispering something in her ear, and Emra nodded and then cupped the woman's cheek. Reaching a hand into her cloak, Emra pulled out something, hidden in the palm of her hand, and passed it to the mother.

One of the beads slipped out the mother's palm, and the tail end of an amulet flashed in the open.

"Magi!" bellowed a voice from the gate. "Betrayers and infidels! Seize them!"

Whirling, Tarl saw one of the Templar soldiers astride his horse, hollering at his fellow Templar and Knights Guard under his command. Two Templar shoved aside the knights formerly standing guard at the gate, and the one who had let them in was on his knees, his hands in the air. Fear tangled his face, but he screwed up his expression and hardened his eyes. The young knight, the one who had whispered to Tarl, stared down the Templar that had pushed him against the brick fence, a sword tip pointed at his throat.

"Run!" Emra shouted. "Run!"

The refugees scattered, screaming as the Templar tore into the slums. Jon flipped the wagon, spilling the last dregs of bread and sausage on the snow-covered ground. He kicked the base, sending it sliding across the slick ground and into the Templar. They stumbled and lost moments dodging the wagon, moments that Jon and Emra used. Grabbing Tarl, they ran after the refugees, ducking into the twisted alleys and side streets of Holy Light.

They ran as fast as they could, turning every which way, trying to avoid the Templar. Templar boots echoed against the snow-covered cobblestones, but started to fade as they kept running. They could still hear the shouts of the Templar trying to block them off, to cut off their escape route.

"To the fence," Jon said, breathless. "This way."

Turning, Tarl saw the brick fence surrounding the slum at the end of the alley. He sprinted and then launched himself up the seven-foot-tall barrier and managed to grab hold of the top. Jon helped heft Emra up, giving her a boost with his hands before he stepped back and jumped. Together they scrambled over. Emra's skirts billowed but didn't catch, and Tarl helped her down on the other side while Jon scampered over the top.

"Halt!"

They froze, staring guiltily down the fence. Snow had gathered in drifts against the red brick, small mountains of powder that they had sunk into when

they landed. A knight, caped in poppy, stood in the drifts, all alone and glaring at the trio.

Tarl hissed. "I know this man," he breathed. "He's hunted me and my companion across the kingdom."

Vedek.

"We have to run!" Emra grabbed his arm, tried to pull Tarl away.

Tarl saw the moment Vedek recognized him. The knight froze and his mouth dropped open. Heavy breaths, for a moment, and Tarl stared into Vedek's eyes. Vedek grit his teeth and charged, trying to run through the knee-deep snow.

"No." Tarl pulled his arm free from Emra's grasp. "I can reason with him. You two go."

"No! We need you!" Jon was pleading now, and Emra stared at him, incredulous.

"I'll be back. I promise. This man won't hurt me." He pushed them gently, guiding them away. "Go, stay safe! I'll be back."

Emra groaned but listened, and she grabbed Jon as she took off, dragging him behind her. As she moved, Tarl spotted a slash of red across the linen sleeve of her dress.

Blood. She'd cut herself.

Tarl almost ran after her, demanding answers, but then Vedek was before him. The knight snarled, but dropped his sword, shoving it tip-down into the snow so that the hilt jutted into the air. He lunged at Tarl, grabbing his neck in both hands and shoving the younger man against the bricks. He hit with a heavy thud, nearly losing his breath, and he felt his head smash back hard enough to see stars fall before his eyes.

Vedek's breaths were harsh, more pants than anything else. He leaned close, driving his body against Tarl's until his lips barely brushed Tarl's ear. "Where is he?" Vedek breathed, choked and halting. "Is he safe?"

Tarl nodded, once.

Vedek exhaled, sagging against Tarl. A hiccup, almost a sob, and then he pulled back. "Take me to him."

Chapter Twelve

They were stopped at the river by a Templar guard, glaring at Vedek and Tarl with his sword drawn. “Where are you taking this idolater?”

Vedek’s hand pressed against Tarl’s chest, holding him back and keeping him silent. “Questioning,” Vedek barked. “He was caught in the vicinity of other possible Magi. He needs to be interrogated.”

The Templar’s eyes narrowed, darting from Vedek to Tarl. “All prisoners are to be taken to the dungeons. He can be interrogated there.” He sneered. “By Templar.”

Muted horse hooves clattered against the snow-drenched cobble behind them. Vedek didn’t turn. He glared at the dismounted Templar soldier, his breathing harsh and hard.

“What’s the problem?” Shane’s voice rang over the group as he pulled to a halt beside Vedek.

Tarl’s eyes darted between the High Templar, Vedek, and the Templar soldier. No one spoke.

“I’m taking this man in for questioning,” Vedek finally growled. “We were stopped by your Templar.”

“All folk found dealing in magic are to be taken to the dungeons.” The Templar repeated his orders. “If an interrogation needs to happen, the Templar can oblige the prisoner. Magical interrogations are not for the untrained.”

“You’re right, my Templar.” Shane nodded to his soldier and smiled softly as the young Templar straightened under the praise. “But Knight Captain Vedek has my full trust and confidence. He has stood down this demon that plagues us. I trust him implicitly.” Shane turned his attention to Vedek, his gaze burning into the Knight Captain. “He has my leave to pursue his course.” The young Templar gaped and scowled, but saluted Shane and stepped aside.

Vedek nodded smartly and hauled Tarl forward, shoving the younger Mage in front of him and across the bridge. The Templar soldier snarled as they passed, but said nothing. No one stood up to the High Templar.

Vedek could feel Shane’s eyes on him as they crossed the bridge, searing into his shoulders through his cape and his armor. His heart was pounding out of his chest, drowning out all other sound until all he could hear was a dull roar.

Tarl slowed, walking almost beside Vedek as they stepped off the bridge and turned toward the midcity battlements. Vedek felt his eyes sliding toward him, staring at him sidelong. He shoved Tarl's shoulder, sending him ahead once more. "Move quickly, witch," Vedek spat. His voice shook, and Tarl glanced over his shoulder at Vedek again. Snow crunched under their boots, and Tarl stumbled as his feet slipped on a patch of ice hidden in the powder.

Exhaling, Vedek let his eyes fall closed. His breath clouded before him, mixing with the frost and fogging the air. What Shane had said... Tarl knew that Vedek hadn't stood down the demon. It had been Emen, Tarl's companion—and Vedek sneered at the sudden thought, the image of the two Mages locked in an embrace, thrusting and writhing with passion—who had fought off the demon. Tarl could have spoken out to Shane, could have revealed the lie for what it was.

Knight Captain Vedek has my full trust and confidence. Would Shane feel as he did if he knew Vedek wasn't steering Tarl toward the battlements? How was it possible that the High Templar, who seemed to know everything, didn't know Vedek was shielding a Mage?

Vedek guided Tarl past the turnoff to the midcity battlements, drawing him instead down a darkened alley and pulling him closer to the outskirts of the Whispered Mile. "Where is he?" Vedek growled. He couldn't meet Tarl's eyes, and instead, he glowered at the ice-covered stones behind the young Mage's head.

"You aren't turning me in." It wasn't a question.

Vedek shook his head. "No. And if you both have any sense, you'll get out of the capital the same way you came in."

"We have work to do. We're trying to stop the Blood Mage. We're on your side, Vedek."

A breath, harsh, and then a short, mirthless laugh. "I'm not on anyone's side." Vedek looked away after he spoke, his lips thinning.

Silence. Tarl's frosty breath hit the side of Vedek's face. "Come with me. But you must do what I say." He fought for Vedek's gaze. "I won't let Emen be hurt. Not by anyone."

Bile rose again, ugly waves of jealousy that roared from deep within Vedek's soul. He felt his heart, so bruised already, give a pitiful cry. He didn't have a claim to the ranger—to the *Paladin*, he corrected himself—but this younger man, apparently, did.

They set off together, this time Tarl leading, and Vedek followed him through narrow alleys and darkened streets. Eventually, they turned down a row of abandoned houses and ducked through the side streets. Vedek inhaled as Tarl slipped past a crumbled section of moldy brick and trudged through knee-deep snow. He followed, and as he waded through the drifts, Vedek looked up and down the ruins of the Whispered Mile.

He'd seen the Mile before, as a child and then as a teen. Bustling with activity and bursting with magic, the Whispered Mile had been a bevy of shops, cafes, and lounges. As a child, he'd been entranced with the Mile. Glittering apparitions of fairies and miniature dragons had swum through the streets, trailing sparkle behind their luminescent forms. Philosophers stood on barrels, speaking about the Winds in turn with other Magi. Wild music that played from instruments with no musicians tumbled from balconies, bows racing across strings all on their own. Magi students sat on the steps of the House of Mysteries, trading notes and spells as easily as they breathed. He remembered their robes, the washes of color adorning the marble steps. Greens and browns and reds and purples, gold and black.

And white. White for the Paladin recruits, stately and proud and standing tall whenever they were in the city.

Tarl motioned for Vedek to catch up, snapping him out of his reverie. He trudged through the snow, meeting Tarl outside the charred remnants of an old sweets shop. "Swing around the back of the Fallen House," Tarl said before setting off again.

Vedek followed, trying to still the frantic whirls of his body, mind, and soul. His body was hollering at him, telling him to flee this haunted place. He felt the prickle of ghosts and the grim weight of death settle over him as thick as last night's snowfall, nearly choking his breath away. His mind was desperately trying to get him to think, trying to reason with his emotions and his soul. What was he doing? Lying to Shane, to the Templar? Shielding a Mage? These were crimes, crimes he would die for if he were discovered. The Second Inquisition was upon Kina, and there was no room for any misstep.

And his heart... his heart and his soul were quivering, suspended in the desolate spaces of what remained of his hope. An image of Emen's smile, his laughing eyes, hung in the center folds of his heart, pulsing with warmth and desire and brutally painful love.

His breath caught as Tarl slipped around the back of the Fallen House. By the Gods, what was he doing? This could be a trap, and Tarl could be waiting to

slay him. Or Emen could be waiting to finish off what should have happened in the valley.

Inhaling, Vedek followed Tarl. Anything, anything that happened would be better than this unknowing, this terrible tension fraught with despair. Even dying would be better.

Tarl hesitated next to a darkened walkway, chewing his lip. He held up his hand, motioning for Vedek to stop as he neared, not twenty paces away. "Wait," Tarl called.

"You said you'd bring me to him." Vedek was glad his voice didn't crack.

"And I will. But you need to wait here." Tarl's eyes hardened. "He's not expecting you, and I don't want him to go out of his mind if he sees you unprepared."

Bristling, Vedek drew his sword, an impulsive, wild gesture. "I have known him far longer than you, boy!"

"You don't know him at all!" Tarl shook his head, looking down at Vedek as if he were the kingdom's biggest disappointment. "You'll wait here. Do it for him." Turning, Tarl headed into the darkened alcove.

And backed away a moment later, his lips pressed in a thin line and his eyes wide. From the shadows, Emen jogged out, a worried frown creasing his forehead. "Tarl?" Emen's gaze caught on the younger Mage. "I heard shouting. What's wrong?"

Vedek dropped his sword. It clattered to the ground, to the moldy marble covered in vines and old dirt. He didn't stoop to pick it up, just let it lie where it fell as his eyes roamed over Emen.

Emen had taken off his leather armor and his worn cloak, and he was dressed down, casually attired in just his tunic, leggings, and boots. Emen was reaching for Tarl's shoulder, worry in his eyes, but froze when he caught sight of Vedek.

In all the years Vedek had known Emen, he'd never seen him in anything less than his full ranger garb, complete with armor and cloak.

And, he'd never looked at Vedek like he was looking at the younger Mage, his eyes full of worry and fear. The look in his eyes, the care, the concern, hit Vedek deep in his gut.

Tarl spoke first, breaking the suddenly fragile silence. "He saw me outside of Tizzy Town," he said to Emen. "I could have run." Emen's wide eyes turned to Tarl, shock, fear, and desperate agony laced through his pained gaze. Wary,

too. Uncertain, and that hurt Vedek more than he cared to admit. A thousand words passed between Tarl and Emen, then, spoken only through their eyes. “He asked to see you,” Tarl said softly.

Emen turned back to Vedek. His lips thinned, pressing together, and he looked like he was about to face the church’s executioner.

Vedek couldn’t breathe.

He watched Tarl turn toward Emen’s shoulder, hiding his body from Vedek. They whispered together, too low for Vedek to hear. Emen grabbed Tarl’s arm and squeezed, holding his gaze. “Be careful,” Vedek heard Emen say. “Everything is infinitely more dangerous now.” Vedek watched Tarl nod, and then, with a single glance Vedek’s way, the young Mage slipped back around the Fallen House and disappeared back into the city.

If he were caught again, it would be Vedek’s head on a pike. He couldn’t bring himself to care, not standing before Emen as his soul shuddered once more.

“You’re all right.” Emen spoke first, though his words shook. A nervous sort of relief flooded his voice. He tried to smile. “I’m glad.” His almost-smile waned as Vedek stared at him.

“What did you do to me?”

“I...” Emen pressed his lips together, sighed. “I healed you. Do you not remember what happened?”

“I remember everything, Mage!” Vedek shouted, suddenly shaking. “I remember you leaping through the fire and taking on that demon. You cast a spell. Fought it with some kind of magic. And then—” Vedek’s words died as his throat closed.

Emen had paled, but he stood his ground in front of Vedek. “I couldn’t let you die,” he breathed. “I couldn’t.”

“And why not?” Vedek hissed. “It would have been convenient. Tidy. Getting rid of me after I learned your secret.”

“Vedek!” Emen’s eyes flashed. “I did what I did so that you would live.” He grit his teeth. “I tore across the kingdom for you, ran Dava to the ground. I thought I was going to be too late—”

“And why did you care so much if I lived or died?” Vedek spat. “Am I some kind of pawn in your schemes? Convenient, hasn’t it been, having a Knights Guard as your puppet? To be used and ignored whenever you wanted.”

Emen's hands clenched, and Vedek saw him shudder, saw his shoulders curl with anger. "Don't, Vedek," Emen growled. "You have never been a puppet or a pawn. I care for you. You know that."

"I know nothing!" Vedek bellowed, and his shout echoed against the ice-coated stone and crumbling brick that stretched down the Whispered Mile. Crows screamed and took flight, circling over the ruins before scattering. "I don't know you at all, Emen," he said, and his voice finally shook. "Eighteen years, and I know nothing of who you truly are."

Wilting, Emen's mouth fell open. "I am who I am—"

"You're a Mage—"

"I kept my secret from everyone. It would have meant my head! You're the only—"

"You lied to me from the moment we met, and you expect me to believe that that is the only thing you've hidden? What about your highland witch?"

"The kid? I'm only trying to help him. Leave him out of this."

A scoff and a snort. "'Trying to help him.' What else have you lied about?"

Groaning. "This is why I never told you, Vedek!"

"Because you were using me! You never trusted me. We were never friends—"

"You're my only friend! And I didn't even want that. But I couldn't get rid of you!"

"I knew it! I knew you never truly cared. It was all just a game for you, playing on my emotions."

"No! I could never leave you for long!" Emen roared, pounding his fist against the crumbling brick wall. "I was always coming back against my better judgment. For you!" Another heave, another choked grunt. "And I never, ever wanted to see this look in your eyes." Meeting Vedek's gaze, Emen turned away quickly. "Your hatred," he whispered.

Heavy breathing as Vedek tried to control the roaring of his soul. His hands clenched at his sides. "Eighteen years," he breathed. "And I don't know you at all."

A long, pained sigh. "What do you want to know?" Emen held his hands out, open, palms up. "I'll tell you anything. Everything. Whatever you want to know, Vedek."

He was shaking, suddenly, consumed by his soul and his blazing heart. He wanted to scream. He wanted to shriek to the skies and collapse to his knees, to sob and yell and shout, to profess his undying love, even now. He wanted to hold Emen close, to hide him from the Inquisition, from Shane, and to protect him from everything that was dark and painful in the world. He wanted to love him, to never stop loving him, and to go back in time to where it was just the two of them laughing over a flagon of ale by the side of a fire, and all thoughts of magic and dark secrets and demons and death were so far away.

He wanted Emen to love him, even half as much as Vedek loved him. Because he couldn't stop, no matter how much it hurt. He'd loved Emen for so long, had loved his quiet strength, his quick wit, and his stubborn insistence on being exactly and entirely who he was, and damn the world. He was a flame that could never be controlled, never be caught, and Vedek had wanted to be burned, wanted to be consumed, by his inferno.

Shaking, Vedek tried to swallow. His words were stuck, but he forced himself to speak through clenched and gritted teeth. "I want to know," he began, hissing, "why I love you, even now, and why I have always loved you. I want to know why I can't seem to breathe when you're not near me. Why I have waited, for eighteen years, for you to ride into the capital and make my life suddenly bright again. Why I feel like I need you to be able to live."

Emen had gasped, inhaling deep as he spoke, but now he trembled, uncontrollable shakes rocking his body all the way down to his fists. He squeezed his eyes shut and turned away.

"There are dark magics in the world, Emen," Vedek continued. "We were lied to. The war didn't end." He watched as Emen's jaw clenched. "The Second Inquisition is here, and they've already arrested thousands of folk for dabbling in the old ways and the Mysteries. There's a demon on the loose. We're hunting a Mage." He swallowed. "And in all of this, in all of this madness, all that I can think of is you." A humorless smile. "By all rights, you should be suspect number one."

Opening his eyes, Emen finally met Vedek's gaze. His eyes seized Vedek, pinned him back. Terror, raw, bleeding terror, poured from him.

"I know it's not you," Vedek breathed. "I know it in my bones." He thumped his chest. "In my heart." He thought back to his rage, his swirling, agonizing fury on the hunt for Emen. By the Gods, what had he done? Oh, the state of his soul. So much darkness and hatred and anger had seized hold of

him. He'd lost his center, and he was spinning and spinning out of control, desperate for a handhold and for the compass rose of his life to return to him.

Maybe it was right in front of him.

Emen's eyes closed and he exhaled.

"Emen," Vedek said, stepping forward. Halting steps took him to Emen, and he stood before the love of his life, letting Emen's shaking breaths hit his face. Why them, when by all rights they should be mortal enemies? Vedek was the head of the Knights Guard, who had slain Emen's people, and Emen was one of the last of the Magi, one side of a never-ending war of darkness and light, and sworn enemies of the kingdom. There was no reason, none at all, why Vedek should be standing close enough to embrace Emen, or for him to be desperately begging for Emen's touch in his heart and soul.

"Emen," he repeated, as a wisp of his poppy helmet plume wafted over his shoulder and tickled Emen's cheek. "The world is mad. Demons rove the land, and all the Magi are dead. I watched folk get arrested this morning because they put their hope outside the church. That's..." Vedek swallowed and shook his head. "This war still rages. Light and dark, good and evil. Where do we fit in, we simple humans, set against the power of the Magi?" He exhaled, and a dark part of him understood, for a moment, why King Ryius had done what did. "I don't understand. I can't. I'm just a man. I'm not a Mage. Not like you." He bit his lip and risked everything. He lifted his hand and tore off his glove, then cupped Emen's wind-blown cheek with his bare palm.

Shuddering, Emen curved into Vedek's touch. He opened his eyes and met Vedek's gaze.

"I can only do so much with my life," Vedek whispered. "I can't conjure a miracle. I can't fight a demon. I can't create magic. But I can love." He swallowed, holding Emen's eyes, and felt his heart unfold to its very depths. Emen's smile still lay in the center of his heart, and he clung to the memory and pushed through his fear. "And you need to know. I love you, Emen," he breathed. "And I am man enough to stand my ground in this world gone mad and say this. To hold my ground when everything else is destroyed." He paused as Emen closed his eyes, squeezing them shut. "To stand at your side, no matter what comes." The Inquisition, or worse.

"Vedek," Emen breathed, and Vedek shuddered. His name had never been breathed in that way before, said with such longing and need and pain. "I—" Emen pressed his lips together, groaned, and turned his face into Vedek's palm.

“Tell me you don’t want this.” Vedek’s thumb stroked over Emen’s lips, and he felt Emen’s swollen pink lips press against his skin. “I’ve been in agony for eighteen years, always wondering. Always wanting. I’ve hoped for so long, Emen. Tell me now. Tell me that it can’t happen. Tell me that you have another already. Do it. End my uncertainty.”

Another shiver, and Emen’s lips pressed against Vedek’s palm. Vedek moaned.

“I am a Paladin,” Emen breathed. He kept his eyes closed, but his words were mixed with pants as his body shook. “I have lived my whole life by their code.” Tortured eyes opened, met Vedek’s. “I’ve never—”

A tiny smile, devoid of humor and filled with pain, stretched Vedek’s lips. Of course, the Paladin’s code. Devotion to the Mysteries and the Winds above all else. A marriage of the Mage to the magic. Honor and sanctity through celibacy, through purity to the Winds. Vedek guided Emen’s face to his and rested his forehead against the cold metal of his helmet. Emen moaned, and their mouths were close enough to feel the chapped roughness of Emen’s flaring lips.

Vedek swallowed. “In all the ways I imagined telling you, I never thought that that would be how you turned me down.” He tried to chuckle, but it died in his chest.

“Vedek...” Emen exhaled, and his hands rose, removing Vedek’s helmet. He tossed the heavy helmet into the snow, and the poppy plume spread wide against the white powder, like spilled honor. Emen’s cold hands rose again, cupping Vedek’s cheeks. “Vedek...”

With a tortured moan, Emen’s lips fastened to Vedek’s, his chapped, wind-roughened skin pressing against Vedek’s worried-red mouth. Vedek froze, for a moment, not breathing. Then his hands wound around Emen’s neck, and he hauled the Paladin close as their lips moved together. He groaned as his lips parted, kissing him back with all of the longing and terrible desire he’d secretly nurtured. He wrapped his arms around Emen, trying to envelop him, draw him in, merge with him, to pull him inside of his armor. Emen was kissing him with a steadily building frenzy and grinding his hips against Vedek’s armor. He growled, pulling Emen tighter against him, and he grinned at the choked gasp that fell from Emen’s kiss-bruised lips.

When Emen’s tongue slipped against Vedek’s lower lip, Vedek’s knees weakened.

Emen pulled back with a gasp and rested his forehead on Vedek's again. "By the Winds... I do love you, Vedek," Emen breathed. "And that's why I couldn't let you die." He found Vedek's eyes, overbright, watery, and blazing with too many emotions. "Your life is worth more than my secret."

Pulling Emen close again, Vedek swallowed Emen's moan in another bone-melting kiss. Emen had given up his anonymity, the twenty-six-year long secret of his heritage that promised a quick trip to the pikes. He'd risked Vedek's hatred, had stood his ground when Vedek railed. Vedek didn't deserve him, he knew. Gods, how much he knew, now, how little he deserved this man.

Emen's arms wrapped around Vedek, pulling him flush against his body, even though his armor was cold and creaking and his poppy cape smelled like smoke and tears.

Breathing hard, Tarl stayed hidden beside a butter shop in Daisytown. Smoke choked the air, burning houses smoldering as neighbors tried to throw snow on the destroyed remnants of their friends' houses. Curses flew, and Tarl heard more than one vicious denouncement of the Templar and their brutality. He'd spent the afternoon dodging between shadows and keeping to the alleys, trying to stay out of sight as he made his way back across the capital.

Across the river, Tarl heard muffled shouts and the clang of steel. Smoke rose from Tizzy Town. The Templar had moved into the students' quarter. He swallowed.

A blur rushing past caught his eye, and he ducked out of his hiding spot. Racing over the slick cobblestones, he caught up with the runner he'd seen earlier talking to Jon. He was tearing through Daisytown, headed for the river and Tizzy Town, now, breathing hard and fast.

He stuck out his arm and shoved Tarl away as Tarl neared.

"Hey!" Tarl shoved back, grabbing a handful of the younger student's jacket. "I'm trying to help you!"

Finally looking, the runner's eyes boggled as he spotted Tarl. "You!" he said, breathless. "Thought you were with Jon and Emra?"

"I had to go." Tarl slowed, dragging the runner with him. "But I need to get back to see them. How do you get in?"

A beat, as the runner looked him up and down. "Come with me." The runner took off again, after shaking Tarl's fist out of his jacket. "I'll show you."

They ran together toward Tizzy Town, but veered off at the river. Tarl followed the young runner around to the backside of one of the bridges, a smaller span connecting Daisytown to the northern end of Tizzy Town and the slums of Holy Light. They scampered over the side of the bridge and ducked under the brick arch, setting their backs against the dirt retaining wall beneath the span. There, carved out of old brick and forgotten earth, a tunnel sat above the waterline, disappearing into the dark ground and traveling under the city.

“This head to Tizzy Town?” Tarl caught his breath as the student crawled for the tunnel opening. The black maw opened over his head.

“Yeah.” The young student hauled himself up, crawling on his belly into the tunnel. Ice had frozen out of the dregs of river water that had snaked into the tunnel’s opening, messy with twigs and leaves that caught on his clothes. “It’s a smugglers’ tunnel. You can go from the docks to here underwater if you have the right kit.”

Smiling, Tarl shook his head and followed him into the tunnel, sliding on his belly on the ice. Did Vedek know about this tunnel? A complicated man, that Vedek, and one who had somehow captured Emen’s heavily guarded heart. Hopefully they were blurring a few new lines in their convoluted relationship.

Tarl followed the student down the tunnel, into the depths of the city’s underground. It was cramped, but the frozen water helped them slide quicker than they could crawl. Tarl pulled himself forward with his hands, palming the sides of the tunnel to propel him forward. His bag banged on his thighs and Tarl shoved his leather satchel onto his back. With a thought, Tarl sent blue witchlight ahead of them, lighting the darkness. He watched the younger student start, jumping with a curse, but he played it off and kept pulling himself along with only a small glare over his shoulders. “How much further?”

“We’re only on the outskirts now.” The student’s voice was muffled, but echoed on the dirt walls. “We’re going to Pyre’s Peak. Do you know it?”

“No.”

“It’s supposed to be well behind the front lines.”

“Front lines?” Tarl frowned but remembered the shouting and the clang of steel that rose from Tizzy Town.

“We’ve known this was coming,” the student growled. “We’ve been preparing. We wanted to start this on our own terms, but the Templar forced our hand.”

“What? Riots, rebellion?” Tarl slowed as the student in front of him glared over his shoulder.

“Revolution,” he hissed. “Don’t you want to be free of this oppression?”

“At what cost?” They picked up again, sliding down the tunnel on their bellies. The ice had turned to dirt and they moved slower. The world, and all of the noise and terror of the Second Inquisition, seemed far away in the still depths under the city.

“Whatever it takes.” A pause. “Certainly the destruction of the Templar.” The student stopped, one booted foot suddenly right in front of Tarl’s face, stopping him. “You’re either with us or you’re against us,” he growled. “We don’t have any room for traitors. Or church faithful.”

Tarl snorted and knocked the younger man’s boot aside. “I am hardly a church faithful,” he crooned, nodding his head toward one of his blue orbs dancing in the darkness. “I’m here to talk to Jon and Emra. I can help them.”

A long beat, and Tarl felt the student taking him in, saw his eyes dart from the witchlight to Tarl and back again. “You’re a real Mage?”

Tarl nodded. “All my life.”

He turned back to the tunnel “C’mon. We’re almost there.”

‘Almost there’ turned out to be another ten minutes crawling through the tunnels, catching clothes on dirt and rocks. When they reached a dead end, Tarl backed away so the young student could kick at the tunnel’s ceiling. At first, he only kicked dirt, but after a curse and a readjustment, he was suddenly kicking wooden planks, rattling the trap door covering the tunnel entrance and making a hellish racket. Dust fell from between the wooden boards, flying into their eyes.

Cursing from above, and then the sounds of a heavy rug being pulled aside. “Coming! We’re fucking coming!” Tarl heard, and an iron bar slid back, unlocking the tunnel’s trap door. Blinding light pierced the darkness and Tarl wiped his witchlight away as he squinted. Arms the size of a knight’s thickly muscled thigh reached into the tunnel and hauled the runner out by his jacket, pulling him clear up to his feet in one swing.

“What’d you find?” the beefy, muscular man asked. Tarl crawled his way forward, peering up at the largest man he’d ever seen in his life. Towering above everyone else in the crowded room, the greasy giant wore a stained linen shirt, stretched near to bursting over his monstrous beer gut, and loose breeches. A bloodstained apron was lazily tied askew over his filthy clothes.

More patches than original fabric, the clothes had been worn through and resewn more than once.

“The Templar are setting up barricades,” Tarl heard the younger student gasp. “They’re locking down Tizzy Town for the night. No one in or out.”

A growl, low and deep, and then Tarl saw the giant notice him in the tunnel. “Who the fuck are you?” he roared, reaching in with one hand. He grabbed Tarl by the neck and pulled, jerking him out of the tunnel and holding him in the air all in one go. Tarl’s toes desperately reached for the floor, but it was useless. He grasped at the man’s hand closing around his throat. All around them, students turned and gaped.

“He says he’s here for Jon and Emra. I saw him earlier with them both, heading to the refugee camps.”

“And he didn’t come back with them?” The giant’s eyes narrowed.

“We all ran,” Tarl wheezed. “I caused a distraction so they could get away.” His fingers clawed at the giant’s hand, still squeezing around his throat.

“He cast witchlight in the tunnel,” the runner said, shrugging. “Says he’s a Mage.”

The giant boggled, and he peered at Tarl closely. “Witchlight?”

All at once, Tarl had the room surrounded with floating blue orbs, bouncing to and fro. “Please,” he choked out. “I’m here to help!”

Tarl dropped to the ground. He landed in a heap, gasping at the giant’s huge feet. Leaning over Tarl, he sniffed the young Mage. His flat nose sprouted black, wiry hairs, the same wiry hairs that speckled his scarred and pitted cheeks and chin.

“I’m Big,” he grunted.

“You don’t say.” Slowly, Tarl pushed himself to his feet. He spared a glare to the young runner, who simply smirked and then disappeared into the crowd of students. Most of them had stopped paying attention to Tarl, turning back to their work.

“That’s my name,” Big growled.

“It’s appropriate.” Tarl sighed, finally on his feet, and rubbed his neck. “I really need to find Jon and Emra. Can you point me in their direction?”

“They’d be on the front, mate.” Another student, older, called out to Tarl from the corner. In his lap, he held a bundle of sticks that he was whittling

down and smoothing out. Next to him, a young woman split feathers and another girl, younger, sharpened triangles of iron and bronze.

Arrows. They were making arrows. Tarl's eyes flew around the room, and he saw weapons of every variety being assembled, sharpened, or readied. Axes, short swords, daggers, bows, arrows, and shields. Everything looked scavenged from the storerooms of a tavern. The shields were made out of the sawed off backs of tavern chairs, the daggers from steak knives. Broken knife points and bits of molded metal were the arrow tips.

"What is this?" Tarl breathed.

"We're building more weapons. As much as we can." The young woman snapped up at Tarl with a glare. "Everything we had ready is being used at the front. But we need more."

"The front?" Tarl heard a boom echo in the distance, and everyone fell silent for a moment.

"We were never going to let the Templar into Tizzy Town," the male student said. He rolled his head against the wall, smirking. "When they started marching toward us, we got word out. There were barricades burning in the streets and weapons waiting for them." A slow smile, and the flash of his eyes. "We took out five Templar before they knew what was going on."

"And now?" Tarl's blood turned to ice. What price would the Templar demand, after this? Would Tizzy Town be drenched in blood? Would any survive?

"We've held them back. We're fighting between the first and second barricades now. But, your little friend," he motioned to the young runner that had slipped from the tavern, "says that the Templar will pull back for the night. We have time to regroup." He held up his stripped arrow shafts. "Rearm."

"Jon and Emra are out there?" He glanced past the frost-coated windows, searching the streets outside. Behind the barricades, students milled in the streets, all armed. Young women and men, students Tarl had seen throwing snowballs at each other only hours before, now huddled in small groups, testing bowstrings and the edges of their blades.

"Aye, they're out there. Head for the main gates. Knowing Emra, she'll be in the thick of it." A sly smile, and then he ducked back to his whittling.

Tarl pushed through the crowd of students, stumbling as he went. He heard curses tossed his way, but he managed to push out to the snowy streets. The

banks were lower in Tizzy Town, more stamped down, and his boots crunched through the compressed snow as he jogged down the street. He felt the students' eyes on him, watching his every move.

He was disoriented, lost in the maze of twisting streets and tumbled buildings. He didn't think Jon and Emra had taken him by this way the first time.

Another earth-shaking *boom*, and Tarl felt the ground beneath his feet tremble. Bricks jostled worriedly in the wall beside him, the side of a building, and down the street, he heard a pane of glass shatter. A woman cursed, long and loud. In the silence following the crash, Tarl heard shouting and a clash of sword on sword coming from the south.

He ran toward the battle.

As he neared, smoke choked the air, rolling black and grey clouds that rose from collapsed buildings gone up in flame. The fires fizzled and died as they reached the edges of the snow banks surrounding the buildings, but left wet lakes of snowmelt running in rivulets through the streets. Broken bottles lay in the snow, some stuffed with rags and reeking of whiskey and ale. He saw blood splattered on the brick walls, but no bodies. Not yet.

Turning down a side street, Tarl ran face first into the raging battle.

The first barricades had been erected at the entrance of Tizzy Town, and the bodies of Templar soldiers lay overtop the hastily erected blockade of tavern tables and chairs, of crates and splintered wagons. Between that block and where Tarl stood, the battle for Tizzy Town raged, funneled to a single zone by fires raging in alleys and side streets. Burning buildings threatened to collapse on top of everyone. The second barricades, ringing the inner neighborhood, were manned by students, young men and women hurling flaming bottles and homemade arrows at the Templar.

And, in the middle of the block, poppy-caped knights fought against the Templar, shoulder to shoulder with the students.

Tarl gaped, but ducked when a Templar arrow zinged by his cheek and bounced off the brick by his face. He crouched low, then started when he heard a knight cry out in pain. He saw an orange cape billow, and then a knight fall face first into the snow. Blood seeped from his shoulder, an arrow impaled in his flesh.

Ducking, Tarl ran for the knight, dragging him to safety as flaming bottles, arrows, and swords flew. He heard knights hollering orders—to each other and

to the students—and then a fierce yell as the mass of students and knights charged against a line of Templar.

He hauled the knight with him behind the second barricade. The knight moaned, reaching for his shoulder. Blood was already seeping through his linen tunic and down his arm. Tarl pressed his hands against the knight's wound, feeling for the arrow tip.

Hissing, the knight scrunched up his face and turned away.

"Careful," Tarl warned. "I don't want this to go any deeper." The knight stilled, and his eyes, bright with pain, slid open, staring up at him. "What happened here?" Tarl asked. "You turned on the Templar?"

Gritting his teeth, the knight braced himself as Tarl tore his poppy cape into a long stretch of fabric, a makeshift bandage. "What else could we do?" the knight mumbled. He closed his eyes.

Staring down at the knight, Tarl pursed his lips and fished in his bag for monkshood and clove. He found the herbs, mostly by feel, and pulled out two sprigs. "Brace yourself," Tarl said, just before he broke the arrow's shaft and crushed the herbs between his fingers, then pressed the wet mess of clove into the knight's wound. He slapped a bandage on his shoulder and felt the knight shudder and wheeze. Still, he wrapped the long orange bandage around his shoulders and under his arm, securing the ends together tight. "You need a healer," Tarl said.

"So do a lot of us." The knight's helmet rolled back, banging against the barricade.

"Find me later, then." Tarl smiled tightly at the knight. "Stay down and get safe."

Crouching low, Tarl ran the length of the barricade, searching the students' faces for ones he might know. He couldn't see Jon or Emra, but he saw nasty wounds and lots of blood. Fallen poppy capes spread over the snow, tangling with the bodies of dead students.

"Fall back!" Tarl heard, the bellow breaking through the crazed cacophony of the students' pitched battle. "Fall back, Tizzy Town!"

First, there were curses, and then the mass of blood- and sweat-stained students and knights ran for the second barricade, leaping over the obstruction and ducking for cover.

Creaking sounded, and then the splinter of timbers, the crash of a building coming undone at the seams and the joints. Tarl turned, his mouth dropping

open, and stared as the three-story tavern—a hulking building of old ships’ timbers and crumbling brick—swayed under the weight of fire and axes. Students and knights, breathless, stood at the back of the tavern’s foundations, leaning on axes as they struggled to catch their breath. They’d chopped the tavern from its foundations, and the fire had taken care of the rest. It was coming down.

Backing up, Tarl saw where the falling tavern was heading. It would obliterate both barricades, but in doing so, create a new inferno of destruction. He saw the knight he had just bandaged struggling to get to his feet.

Rushing to the knight, Tarl tucked himself under his uninjured shoulder. Grateful, the knight leaned most of his weight against him, but kept his feet enough to shuffle as fast as he could. Still, the crack of timbers ten feet tall shattering seemed too close, and Tarl could swear that he felt the singe of flame roaring over his cloak. He ran faster, dragging the knight alongside, and risked a glance behind him.

The Templar had tried to beat the building’s collapse, running at a full sprint down the block toward the students and knights. He saw the fear in their eyes, saw them brace themselves as the tavern shattered to the street, burying their bodies in a raging inferno and a mountain of destruction.

Cheers rang from the students and the knights, huzzahs and wild whoops of glee. Through the flames, Tarl saw the piercing eyes of Templar soldiers who had just watched their comrades fall.

Slowly, Tarl turned away, helping the knight stumble onward. The students were already calling out for the wounded to pass through, to head to a meeting hall up ahead, and groups of knights stood wide-eyed and panting as the realization of what they had done sank into their bones. Students high-fived knights that they passed and whooped for joy, slapping armor and capes as they shouted their rebellious zeal to the darkening sky.

Within an hour, the sun would be down, and a long, frozen night locked in Tizzy Town lay ahead. He sighed but trudged on. He would do what he could, heal who he could, and find Jon and Emra.

Come morning, there would be a reckoning. He just hoped that it was human, and not demon-borne.

Leading Vedek down to the meditation rotunda should not have been as easy as it was. Emen, in all the years that he’d known Vedek, had always shied

away from the corner of his soul that whispered to him to give in, to turn to Vedek and pull him close, to cup his cheek, to wake up next to a warm body and possibly feel a stirring of contentment for once. Giving in to his desires should have felt different, he thought.

Love was not something he'd ever expected to have, not in his life. Not with, at first, his duties, his intentions to the Paladin. And then, with the Sealing, and all of his fury and torment over the loss of everyone and everything in his life. It was ridiculous, this notion of love for him. The darkness within his soul, the irreparable bitterness that had sunk inside of him, and the new life he'd carved out of forged steel and bitter battles had been barren and empty for so long. There was no place for love in the war, in the struggle against the Abyss. Certainly no room for love on the run, nor as an exile in hiding.

And yet, here he was, clinging to Vedek like the knight was the answer to his lifelong question. Like Vedek had the secrets to the Winds imprinted on his soul. Like Vedek was everything that he'd ever dreamed of.

Emen was close to believing that he was.

They had kissed in the ruins for what felt like hours, exploring each other's tongues and mouths and stroking what little skin they could reach. The wind had turned biting, and Emen took Vedek's hand and guided him down the metal staircase to the catacombs. He'd conjured witchlight to guide them, and he heard Vedek's short gasp, felt his hand squeeze down on his.

"I'm sorry," Emen had breathed. "There's no light."

"Don't apologize," Vedek choked back. "Not for who you are. I want to see. I want to know. Everything."

Emen squeezed back, then, and they didn't let go until Emen guided them into the meditation rotunda and into what had become his working space. The camphor fire was still going, bewitched by Emen, and the flames burned for light if not for warmth. A pile of blankets—obviously a sleeping nest for two—lay rumpled next to the fire, and along one of the walls, Emen had drawn in chalk a messy map of the kingdom, a list of known victims, and the dates of the demon's attacks. His visions, in order. Beneath the chalk drawings, a small stack of books lay on the ground, several open, though they were water damaged, burned, and rotten through. Half of several books were missing entirely, and loose, cracked papers had fallen in a pile beside the slate. New lists of data on the Blood Mage's possible activities were scrawled messily in

the diagonal above the stack of books. It was everything he knew about the demon, the Blood Mage, and the murders, all laid out.

Vedek tore his eyes from the nest of blankets and frowned at the wall. "What are you doing?"

"Trying to investigate," Emen said. He smiled sadly and conjured flame from his fingertips, lighting the slate wall and his messy scratches. "I'm no good without you."

Vedek's eyes widened again, and he stared at the fire curling from Emen's palm. He turned away, poring instead over the lists, over the map marked with X's, and laid his hand on the cold slate, covering the mark for the valley's attacks. "You know things I do not. And I, likewise. We should have been doing this together," he breathed. "Like before."

"This is a crime of magic," Emen said. "A demon has been summoned. At first, I thought we could stop the Blood Mage before they were able to open a doorway to the Abyss, or summon the demonic. We could hunt them down while they were just harvesting, before they managed this. Now..." He looked away. "You didn't want to hear of this in the morgue."

"I know." Vedek paused. "I think I knew that this was demonic before, too. After you planted the possibility in my mind, it wouldn't leave. And then, my knights." He closed his eyes and shook his head.

"I'm sorry," Emen breathed, "for what happened to them."

"Why were you there?" Vedek frowned.

"I was headed for Barrow's Spoke. I wanted to see the first murder for myself. Check for runes or sigils." He frowned. "I blacked out on the highway. Woke up in a ditch. When I started up again, I came upon..." He trailed off. "What had happened to them," Emen finished.

"And you took the Mage?"

"The kid was petrified. He'd survived a demon attack by the seat of his pants. He drew a rune out of his own blood and pus. I don't know if I would have been that quick-thinking." Emen smiled, thinking of Tarl. He didn't see Vedek frown. "The kid gave me back my Winds."

Vedek's frown deepened, furrows burrowing into his forehead. "What? I thought... You said you were a Paladin. I thought you've always had the Winds. Managed to keep them, somehow."

Emen shook his head. “No. I lost my Winds, just like everyone else. Except the kid.” Emen shrugged. “I am a Paladin. I always will be. But, like everyone, I was cut off.” A heavy sigh. “Somehow, the kid was able to bring back my Winds.”

Vedek was silent.

“He says there was a vortex. A whirlwind. I was blacking out again, I don’t remember. I had a vision. It’s the same vision I’ve been having for a while now.” Swallowing, Emen rubbed his hand over his mouth. “I stand on the edge of a precipice. There is a giant swirling whirlpool before me, and I have the choice. Do I step in or not? That time, I jumped into the center, and when I woke up, the kid was shaking me, and I could hear the Whispers again.” His eyes slid away from Vedek. He wasn’t used to talking so plainly.

That image, that choice, had appeared in every one of his visions, from the night the Knights had been slain, to the crushing vision he saw foretelling Vedek’s death. In the bog, and on the highway. Always the same thing. Blood, and screaming, and death. Vedek. And then the whirlwind, and his choice to leap.

Silence, again. Finally, Vedek shook his head. “There’s so much I don’t know about you,” he croaked. “It really is like relearning who you are.”

Emen’s shoulders slumped. “It shouldn’t be, Vedek. I am who I am. I’ve never hidden that.”

Vedek licked his lips, and his eyes caught on the flame licking Emen’s palm, the witchlight pulsing through the meditation rotunda, and the single nest of blankets again. He closed his eyes. “I thought I knew you. But then, you—” He stopped. Swallowed. When he opened his eyes, he gestured to the chalk on the wall. “Tell me what you know,” he said, softly.

Emen spoke, telling Vedek of his flight to Winterweave with Tarl, and how they were headed to the Cathedral to search for anything they could find on the Blood Mage. He spoke of fire, of Gallows Hall burning to the ground, and of watching the knights as they were attacked and beaten. Then, of the villagers sacking the remnants of his Cathedral, and his brothers’ bones burning to ash. Of his vision about Vedek, and the breathless race to save him. Finally, of their journey to the capital, and to the capital’s Cathedral, searching again for answers, only to find missing books and a plundered library.

He spoke carefully about the Blood Mage, telling Vedek that the victims’ blood was the way to unlock the doorway to the Abyss and how the demon had

entered the world. Somewhere, the demon answered to the Blood Mage who had summoned it, and the murders spoke of a ritual sacrifice specifically designed to harvest the victims' vital blood.

He bit his tongue, though, holding back his theories on the Black Days and the timing of the murders. Vedek's eyes were dark and hooded, and he still seemed wide-eyed when he spotted the golden orbs of witchlight hovering around them.

Vedek filled in Emen's gaps, telling him of sleepless nights and rage-filled days, convinced that it was Emen at fault—the single prints at the crime scene of his knights, the way he casually spoke of a magical nature to the murders before anyone else, his secrets and his distance—and how much he hated himself for thinking that it was Emen.

"You were trained to follow the evidence, no matter where it leads." Still, Emen wanted to be sick. "What else could you have thought? No one was thinking about a demon." He shook his head. "You were the one who constantly said to look beyond personal bias in the course of an investigation."

"That's because I knew that ship's captain." Vedek remembered that smuggling investigation and working side by side with Emen. "I was reminding myself as much as I was doing anything."

"Vedek, I would never—" Emen's words choked off, and he looked away. He could see the edges of the chain he'd asked Tarl to tie him down with, thrown into one of the alcoves. "I would never consciously hurt you. Or your knights." As much as he might have wanted to, so long ago. In the beginning, even being around Vedek had been hard. Sitting in The Itchy Saddle for the first time, he'd thought about how to murder every single knight sitting near him. He could have torn open throats, slashed off arms and hands, stabbed thighs and severed muscles. He'd thought about so many different ways to kill that night that he barely remembered anything else about the evening, other than Vedek's soothing presence by his side. Somehow, in the years that had passed, his hate had faded, and in its place... Emen stared at the lines in Vedek's face, the roughened, hard-won expression that spoke of a lifetime of purpose and diligence.

His heart burned. In his hatred's place, something new had formed, silent and secret and without his knowledge or permission. Something that had now changed everything, revealed everything.

What was he going to do now?

Vedek continued, telling Emen about him and Shila stalking with the trackers to Winterweave, and then the terrifying escape from Gallows Hall and their midnight ride to the highlands. Then, the highlanders' open revolt against them, and after that, the valley.

Coming back to the King, Vedek clammed up, shaking his head when Emen asked how the council meeting had gone.

"Let's just say that the King has no more use for me than I have for him." Vedek tried to smile, but it was strained, and his eyes were full of grim sorrow.

"You were appointed to your command by the King," Emen said. "He handpicked you."

"He would rather I had died in the valley," Vedek spat. "His disgust was open and obvious. He thinks I am incompetent, and he granted the Templar leave to begin the Second Inquisition. I can no longer protect these folk." Vedek's eyes screwed closed as he inhaled, long and ragged. "It's been a rough day," he breathed.

"How many folk were arrested?"

"Over twelve hundred suspected of dabbling in magics in just Daisytown and the docks." Vedek shook his head. "About a hundred or so who challenged the Templar. Gods only know what happened in the Merchant's Quarter, Walker's Mile, or—" Vedek closed his eyes.

"That many?" Emen's eyebrows shot up, blending into his messy chocolate hair. "By the Winds..."

"The city is in turmoil. The folk are outraged. This isn't like the First Inquisition, when the church bowled everyone over and folk were happy to be rid of the war against the darkness." Vedek's face grew long, and he rubbed one hand over his eyes. "I found Tarl as we were marching toward Tizzy Town. Gods, the Templar! They were hoping for a fight with the students." He met Emen's gaze. "Folk in Tizzy Town will not quietly accept this. You know it's always been a hotbed."

Emen's thoughts turned to Tarl. *Winds, kid. Be safe!* The kid had whispered to him that he had a lead in Tizzy Town, a circle of Mage-worshippers that were dealing in amulets and trying to resurrect the Winds. He'd seen one of them cut herself and he needed to go back to know why. Dread filled Emen, and he wanted to race across the capital and find the kid before he got himself into too much trouble. Or worse.

“I am sure the King is absolutely beside himself,” Vedek said, laughing humourlessly. “His delegation arrives this evening. And everything has gone to shit.” Another chuckle, cold and empty.

Emen’s eyes hardened, turning to Vedek. “Delegation?”

“He’s hammered out a trade alliance with the kingdoms on the continent.” He waved his hand. “State dinner, an official signing ceremony. We were under orders to have the capital secured.” A wry grin. “Half burned to the ground is not secured.”

Mind swimming, Emen’s eyes darted to the dates he’d scrawled in messy chalk against the slate. So much swirling at the close of the year, according to the calendar of the old ways. Was it all for a purpose?

Vedek interrupted his careening thoughts. “How do we get you to safety?” Vedek whispered.

“What?” Emen shook his head, frowning. “I’m not leaving. This Blood Mage and the demon have to be stopped.” He stared at Vedek. “And, what about you? Helping me? This is dangerous for you. I won’t let you risk yourself for me.”

Vedek shrugged, and a half smile tumbled from his lips. “I’m done for in this city, Emen. The King has no use for me. And the folk here? Gods!” He spat. “I watched the Templar burn houses down, cart hundreds and hundreds off to the dungeons. Tear children from their parents and send them to the Temple so old men could pray for their souls and whip them into true belief.” He shook his head. “If it weren’t for Shane, I think I would have run myself through.”

“Shane?” Emen’s eyes blazed.

“The High Templar. I thought he’d be a fucking asshole, but he’s actually not bad.” Vedek shook his head. “I asked him for mercy for the folk when I could. He always granted it.”

Exhaling, Emen unclenched his shaking hands. He blinked, trying to clear his eyes. He’d seen red, the color of spilled blood, had felt it, even, warm on his hands. For a moment, he’d reveled in blood as his ears had roared. “I knew a Shane, once,” he whispered. “A Paladin.”

Vedek’s head tilted to the side. “Close?”

“He was like my father.” Emen’s frown faded into a grimace. “I try not to remember him,” he growled.

“Why?”

“Because his head was tossed over the King’s balcony and the city folk played with it in the streets.” Emen braced himself against the stone wall, hanging his head between his arms. The flames in his palms hissed and fizzled as his hands hit the slate, plunging the rotunda into long shadows. Only the camphor fire crackled across the divide.

Vedek didn’t speak. Emen heard him move, though, and then felt Vedek’s hand resting between his shoulders. “I’m sorry,” Vedek whispered. “I am sorry, Emen.”

Tension thrummed through Emen, heat and fire and bloodred rage. His fingers scraped down the slate wall, scratching. “Where were you on Sealing Day?” Emen hissed through gritted teeth.

Vedek hesitated. “I was a squire,” he breathed. “Sixteen harvests and pissing myself at the midcity battlements. I worked in the stables.” He waited, not speaking. Beneath Vedek’s touch, Emen trembled. “I was knighted a year later.”

“I was in the Cathedral,” Emen whispered. “Shane, my Shane, got us out. He slipped us out the back. Seven of us, all recruits. Kone and I were days away from our vows. Uwe was the youngest. He was only ten harvests.” A heavy sigh, long and deep.

Vedek ducked under Emen’s arm and rose between his trembling lean against the slate wall. Emen tried to shield his eyes from Vedek, overbright and burning, and lined with a pain he’d never shown to the world.

Vedek cupped Emen’s cheek, guiding his face back up. “Emen.” He swallowed. “Let’s go. Let’s just run. Run away from this place, from all this pain. Let’s go to the continent. I know ship captains. Smugglers. We can pay for passage and disappear. I would remake the world for you if I could.” Vedek pressed his forehead to Emen’s, breathing deep. “I don’t want to see you hurt again. And I can’t see you fall to this Inquisition.”

“Vedek.” Emen closed his eyes, and one hand dropped to cup Vedek’s cheek in return. “I can’t. Not now.”

“Don’t you realize they are hunting you? They’re hunting anyone who dabbles in magic, who draws in the dust. Do you know what they will do to you if they find you? An actual Mage? A Paladin?”

“I can’t let a demon roam free. I can’t let black magic and a Blood Mage of the Abyss wander the world.” Emen shook his head. “It’s in my blood, in my soul, to stop this.”

“No one will thank you for it,” Vedek breathed. “They’ll just want to kill you all over again.”

Emen smiled sadly. “Probably,” he whispered. “But I still have to end this.”

“Gods!” Vedek groaned. He sagged, falling against Emen as the Paladin straightened. Vedek buried his face in Emen’s shoulder and gripped his head, shaking the man. “This is one of the blasted reasons why I do love you so much. You’re insufferable.”

“Paladin.” Emen quirked a tiny grin.

“I will not let you get hurt,” Vedek growled. He said it like he was saying vows, like his entire soul meant it. “I will not let anyone or anything hurt you. Not again.”

Cupping Vedek’s hands, Emen drew their clasped hold to his chest. He pressed Vedek’s palms over his heart and looked into his eyes. His heart surged, frantic and joyful all at once. So much was happening, so fast, swirling in an incomprehensible eddy before Emen could figure out what it all meant. But one look into Vedek’s eyes, and he felt, for the first time in twenty-six years, a stirring of peace. Almost as if he could be happy, truly content, in this forlorn disaster of a life.

Emen pressed his lips to Vedek’s forehead, slowly. He was only barely taller than Vedek, but their bodies fit together as if made for each other. “I will not see you hurt either,” he whispered into Vedek’s skin. “I swear it.”

Vedek shivered beneath Emen’s hands. “There have been times,” he said, “that I worry that I’m nothing but this position anymore. That I’ve lost myself, somehow.”

Emen frowned. He looked down, into Vedek’s eyes.

“But for the folk, I would do almost anything. Keep them safe. Protect them. Give them everything.”

Nodding, Emen smiled sadly. He’d felt the same once, as a Paladin, before his fury had taken over.

“And, for you,” Vedek continued, inhaling deeply. “There is nothing that I wouldn’t do.” He held Emen’s gaze. “Nothing.” He cupped the curve of Emen’s jaw and leaned up, their mouths and lips nearly aligned. “You don’t know what you mean to me,” he breathed, whispering the words in ghosts of air across Emen’s breathless lips. Slowly, he closed the distance, sealing his lips to Emen’s.

It was perfect, feeling Vedek in his arms, tasting him on his lips. Emen was trembling, again, and trying to hold back. He wanted to savor this, to make it last. To hold on to it with both hands.

He felt Vedek's quiet whimper, the exhale of his breath as he broke the kiss and his brief sag into Emen's chest. Vedek pushed himself back after a moment, blinking quickly. "Let's get this over with, then," he grunted, waving toward the slate wall. "We have a Blood Mage and a demon to catch, yes? And a city to save."

Chapter Thirteen

The etched vase, carved and painted in the first hundred harvests of Kina's kingdom, shattered against one of the gleaming pillars leading out to the balcony in the King's solarium. Bits of glass turned to dust, and ancient paint flecked off the remnants and disappeared into the frigid winter air.

Arching his eyebrow, Shane stared at the irreplaceable vase's remnants before turning his gaze to Iorian. "Your Majesty—"

"Don't!" Iorian roared. The King whirled on his heel, pacing the length of his balcony overlooking the capital. Wreathed in day-old snow, the capital was a mix of slushy mud, frozen cobbles, and drifts of powder, as well as roiling smoke and crackling flame and the rising cheers of the rioters and rebels in Tizzy Town. From where Shane stood, he could see the Merchant's Quarter, silent and abandoned. The Temple's prayer bells tolled ceaselessly, droning on and on, but only the mad barkers on the street corners seemed to give the bells any mind. The barkers shrieked, bellowing about the end of the world and the fall of the Gods.

Spinning again, Iorian pinched the bridge of his nose, his eyes squeezed tight as he frowned. "Explain to me again, Shane, how this is 'under control'?" Behind the King, a fire roared in the solarium's great fireplace, nearly the length of the room.

"Your Majesty—"

"Because I specifically ordered that I wanted this kingdom and this city to be perfectly under control," Iorian roared. Spit flew from his lips as his face reddened, and dark veins stood out from his skin, pulsing with the force of his rage. "Fucking riots?" The King threw his hand out over the balcony. "And the fucking Knights Guard? Turning against us? Find that shit, Vedek." Iorian spat his name as if it were a foul curse. "I want him executed. Immediately." A breath, shaking with ire. "This is a complete disaster," he growled.

"The folk have an alarming familiarity with the old ways and with magical rituals, Your Majesty." Shane pressed his lips together. "I would not have expected this many to be rounded up." He swallowed. "And, Captain Vedek, Your Majesty—"

The King cut Shane off. "What the fuck has the church been doing?" Iorian's hands slammed down on his desk, shaking the thick oak. Wooden feet

scraped over a plush carpet, but caught in the grooves of something etched beneath the rug. Shane blinked.

Iorian roared on. “They’re supposed to be on guard against this sort of blasphemy! Why aren’t they heeding the church? Where are those fucking masters? I want them here, now, and I want them to answer me!” Iorian flung a stack of papers from his desk, and the parchment sailed across the solarium’s floor. One sheet landed on top of Shane’s boot. He didn’t shake it off.

“You asked me to deploy the Templar. You asked me leave to start a Second Inquisition.” Iorian stalked close to Shane, shoving his finger into the High Templar’s face. “You said it would solve our problems,” the King hissed.

Shane leaned away from the King’s finger. “Your Majesty, I couldn’t predict the extent to which this kingdom had plunged into sin and darkness. You’re quite right to demand answers from the church. They should have done more.” Shane watched the King carefully.

“Fucking pricks,” Iorian hissed. He spun again and paced away from Shane, short, clipped falls of his boots echoing against the marble. “I don’t give a shit about their fucking Gods,” he snapped. Shane closed his eyes, breathed deep. “But they were supposed to keep everyone in fucking line!”

Shane licked his lips before speaking. A log splintered in the fire, sending sparks flying. “Someone in Kina has summoned this demon, Your Majesty,” Shane said. “We will find them, my King. We will.”

Iorian snarled and kept his pacing.

“But,” Shane began. His eyes tracked the King, watched his every move. “With so many that we have arrested, and with still so much more to go, finding this one Mage—or even a circle of Magi, if it was a group—will be difficult.”

Iorian’s eyes snaked to Shane. He halted, his arms crossed, and stared down the High Templar.

Shane pressed on, his chin rising. “And, with Tizzy Town in open revolt, the chances of finding the perpetrator drop again. There is too much chaos right now, Your Majesty. Too much uproar. This is not a good time for an investigation.”

“An investigation?” Iorian hissed. His chest heaved as he stalked toward Shane. “If I wanted an investigation, I would call for that traitor Vedek and his Knights Guard! I don’t want an investigation!” he shouted. “I want them all

dead! Do you understand me? Dead!” Again, spit flew from his lips, landing on Shane’s cheek.

“There will be many bodies,” Shane said softly. “Almost two thousand arrested today. Another twenty-five hundred in Tizzy Town. All of the knights.” Shane swallowed. “Captain Vedek.”

“Do you think that I care?” Iorian breathed. He shook his head, staring at Shane with barely disguised disgust and incredulous wonder. “I ordered you to start the Inquisition because I wanted them all dead. All the Magi. Every single fucking one of those magic worshippers, every one of those insipid pieces of filth.” Stepping closer, Iorian leaned close to Shane. “Do you understand me?”

Turning his head just the slightest, away from Iorian, Shane nodded, once.

“Kill them all,” the King growled. “That should solve the problem, shouldn’t it?” He snorted and headed back to the balcony. “We already did this once!” Iorian shouted.

Shane’s eyes followed his King, dark as they watched him lean against the railing. Shane remembered that railing. He remembered Iorian’s grandfather saying the same thing. His heart skipped a beat as his hands clenched into fists.

A quick knock at the King’s solarium doors preceded the slow glide of the glass doors parting. The King’s *aide de camp* slid inside. Shane met her eyes briefly and shook his head, thinning his lips.

She sighed, but threw Shane a quick smile of thanks. “Your Majesty,” she began.

“What?” Iorian growled.

“The ambassadors have arrived. The Templar ship escorting them both into the docks arrived an hour ago, and the Templar guard escorted both ambassadors here under protected carriage. They are repasting in your hall.”

Silence, as Shane watched the King grip the balcony railing. He straightened, breathed deep, and pushed himself back. Walking past Shane without acknowledging the High Templar, Iorian snapped over his shoulder, “I have to go and secure the future of this kingdom. Do try and make sure there is a kingdom left for me to rule, yes?”

Shane bowed low as the King swept to the doors. He held his bow, waiting for Iorian to exit. Instead, the King lingered, and he raised his eyes, finally meeting the King’s gaze.

“Shane.” The King’s eyes glittered, rage-red in the light of the twisting fire. “Make an example. Tonight.”

“Your Majesty.” Shane bowed low again and closed his eyes.

Exhausted, Tarl slumped against the wall inside the makeshift infirmary beside a group of dozing knights. The knights had wrapped their poppy capes around their bodies and huddled close, trying to stay warm. Outside, the temperature had dropped, and more snow threatened to fall overnight. The night was crisp, so sharp it seemed like it would fracture, cracking and falling down all over the world.

In the streets, pockets of students huddled around bonfires, laughing and calling out score for the students practicing with each other and with knights. Swords clanged and arrows flew, slamming into tattered couches hauled from taverns and apartments into the snowy streets. Tarl watched one of the knights—the leader of this unit, if he were to guess—change the angle of a student’s sword swing and beckon him to attack once more. The student, a young man, probably in his last year of studies, advanced, swinging slightly less sloppily than he had before as he fought with the knight.

Nodding, the knight clapped the student on the shoulder and sent him on his way with a smile.

Tarl wondered what he was studying. Medicine, or maybe navigation? Was he destined for the trading routes, for the sciences, or for law? Accounting, perhaps? The royal treasury?

No matter what he was studying, Tarl doubted he’d see his term complete. The knights’ help had been invaluable, but there wasn’t much they could do against a full attack by seasoned Templar soldiers. Those Templars were the best in the land. Tarl wondered how even the knights would hold their own.

Pushing to his feet, Tarl stepped between the resting and recovering bodies of students and knights. Arrow wounds, sword slashes, and burns made up most of the injuries, with the odd sprain and broken bone. He’d gone through his supply of monkshood and clove and had moved on to pepper and poppies and stone pine. He’d exhausted his supply of yarrow and fox’s clote. It would help, at least, to stave off the pain and prevent infection.

In another hall, where they laid their dead, Tarl had already lit bowls of yew and birch bark and set them in the corners. He closed each of the deceased’s

eyes and drew a spiral on their foreheads. He had asperged the bodies with a sprig of asphodel, sprinkling their repose with melted snow flicked from the crushed white petals. Some of the living sat with their dead friends, holding their hands on their last night. Tarl could feel the cold curl of ghostlight form off the bodies. Ghosts were birthed from sudden tragedy.

He did as much as he could.

Stifling a yawn, Tarl leaned against the doorway and watched the knights' leader practice with another student. The girl had a better swing and a stronger form, and they parried back and forth in the snow for longer than the previous students. Pleased, the knight smiled broadly at her and squeezed her shoulder, then sent her on her way.

Catching Tarl's eye, the knight excused himself from the practice and headed toward him. He sheathed his sword, but gripped his belt, and Tarl heard the tired sigh of his armor as the knight leaned against a barrel beside the tavern's door.

"I know who you are," the knight said, his voice rumbling. He glanced sidelong at Tarl, raising an eyebrow.

"You have me at a disadvantage, then." Tarl smiled, thin. "Should I expect an arrest, sir?"

The knight held Tarl's gaze, long and hard. "I served in the outlands once. Eight harvests ago. You had a reputation, even then."

Tarl shifted, wrapped his cloak tighter around him. Frayed on the edges, he'd collected enough mud and snow on his hem to last for the whole winter.

"I didn't believe that you were responsible for our brothers' slaughter on the highway when I heard you were suspected," the knight said, speaking low. "And after the valley, there wasn't a single knight who still believed that whatever had befallen us was the work of man."

Swallowing, Tarl scraped snow from the heel of his boot. "I tried to warn them," he whispered. He closed his eyes. That night, the sounds of the knights' screams, the crunch of their bones, all came rushing back. He inhaled, shaking his head, and sweat erupted along his forehead. He stumbled, and the knight caught him, steadied him.

"Easy," the knight breathed. "It was horrific to see the remnants. I can't imagine surviving it." He peered at Tarl. "How did you?"

“I cast a ward.” Holding his chin high, Tarl held the knight’s gaze. Far be it for him to deny what he was now. “Protection. I wish I could have cast it sooner, protected more than just myself.”

A small, sad grin, and the knight turned away. “A few of the guys wanted to run you through when they saw you earlier. I sent them to check barricades and run patrols.”

Tarl nodded his thanks.

He nodded back to the infirmary, and to where Tarl had spent hours toiling over the wounded. “When they saw what you did for their fallen friends, they stopped asking for your head.” He sighed. Finally, the knight stuck out his arm. “M’name is Cras. Knight Lieutenant Cras.”

Grasping Cras’s arm in kind, Tarl smiled exhaustedly. “You’re doing a good thing,” he said. “Helping these kids.”

A heavy sigh, and Cras rumbled without speaking. He leaned on his knees, watching the students continue to practice with their bows against the tattered couch. One leg had broken, and the pink silk cushions had been ruined long before the students chose to use the furniture as a target. Ale stains mixed with spilled stuffing, pouring onto the snow.

“They wouldn’t have survived the first onslaught if you hadn’t turned,” Tarl said, quiet.

“Oh, they’re all right.” Cras pushed himself up. “They took out those Templar all on their own.” Pride filled his voice, and a gleam in his eyes told Tarl that Cras heartily approved of the students’ actions.

“Days ago you were hunting a Mage—me—and now you’ve turned on the Templar?” Frowning, Tarl bit his lip. “What is happening here?”

Cras looked away, but he turned back and stared into Tarl’s eyes before he spoke. A hardness that hadn’t been there before settled into his gaze, ferocious and cold. “I’ve given my life to these folk,” he growled. “My entire life, devoted to keeping them safe. Now, there’s a demon on the loose. We were told this wouldn’t ever happen again. The war was over.” Cras shrugged. “Looks like it’s not. So what do our leaders do? Destroy the city? Kill folk who have done nothing wrong? There are other ways than this.” He paused, looking Tarl up and down, and Tarl spotted a thin cord dangling from his wrist, a thread of bells and beads and a bit of poppy cape tied through it. “And it’s not like every single one of you is awful.” Cras gestured to Tarl and then to the infirmary. “We’ve known that for a while.”

His lips thinned suddenly. “We’re here for them. The folk out there.” A deep swallow, and Cras looked away. “Our Captain always said that. He—” Another swallow. “He disappeared, sometime between Daisytown and when we started sacking Tizzy Town. I was watching him all morning. I know he would have given this order.” Cras spat into the snow. “One of the fucking Templar must have dragged him off.” Cras stood, clenching the hilt of his sword. “We do this in his name.”

Warmth filled Tarl’s chest, and he smiled at the Lieutenant. “I wish everyone could hear you speak like this.”

“Everything is harder in the outlands,” Cras said.

Tarl nodded. The outlands, the mountains, were a colder, harsher place. He’d expected so much else from the capital. “Your captain,” he asked. “Captain Vedek?”

Cras’s head shot up. “How do you know him?”

“I know that he’s safe,” Tarl said with a smile. “He’s working with an ally right now. I escorted him there safely.”

Beaming, the sudden intensity of Cras’s smile threatened to bowl Tarl over. “Damn, witch,” he said. “Best thing I’ve heard all night.” He kept grinning, and Tarl saw his shoulders sag with relief. “When’s he coming back? Is he bringing help?”

Arching one eyebrow, Tarl glared at Cras. “I am a Cleric,” he corrected. “Or Mage, if you must. ‘Witch’ is disrespectful.”

Cras chuckled. “All right, Cleric,” he said with a nod. “I thank you for what you’ve done for the wounded. And for our dead.”

Tarl nodded again. “I’m always happy to heal and to do what I can. As for the good Captain and his ally, I don’t know what their plans are. But I know they will come.”

His grin hadn’t faded. “We might just live through this.” He slapped Tarl on the shoulder. “Just might, with some sweat, a good ass-kicking, and some luck.” Cras pushed himself up with a deep sigh and strode off, heading back to the cluster of students still practicing.

Tarl watched him and couldn’t help but share in Cras’s rough hope. Days ago, he’d thought he was dead. Headed for the pikes, and then on the run. Now, he was fighting alongside knights against Templar, and the whole kingdom had gone topsy-turvy.

He still needed to find Jon and Emra, though. As hopeful as this rebellion was, it would all be for nothing if Emra was secretly conjuring demons and working in dark magic. For the first time in his life, Tarl felt a whiff of acceptance from the folk of the kingdom. From the knights, or at least Cras, which had been a surprise. Would it linger? Would it last once the Templar had been dispatched?

If Emra really was conjuring dark magic, then any acceptance, any grudging familiarity, would die in the shadows of fear and terror.

Wrapping his cloak around himself, Tarl headed down the block. The students had set up a headquarters of sorts at the central tavern, a place called Candle's Wick. He trudged through the snow, sidestepping students and dodging arrows spitting out of mispulled bows.

When he finally found the tavern—blazing bright, lit with every candle and lantern the tavern could find—he spotted Jon leaning against the bar with a flagon of ale in front of him and seven friends, all laughing heartily into their cups. In the back of the tavern, a group of drunken students sang a song, made up on the spot, of their victory over the Templar.

Tarl sighed.

He waited by the door, simply watching Jon. He was young, and every time Tarl seemed to look at him, the younger he seemed to appear. He'd been born after the Sealing. Much after. An idealist, then. Or something.

Finally, Jon seemed to catch notice of Tarl, and he nearly spat out his ale as his eyes boggled. "Tarl!" Jon waved, inviting the Mage to join them. "Can I get you a drink?" Jon hopped over the bar and tapped one of the barrels of ale himself, pouring an overflowing cup. He slid it down the bar top toward Tarl before hopping back to his place. He bowed and spread his arms with a wink.

Tarl picked up the cup with his fingers, trying not to spill any more than he had to. "No barkeep?"

"We took over the tavern after he fled." Jon smirked as his friends laughed. "He didn't want to support the revolution."

"Revolution?" Tarl's eyes sharpened as he set down the mug.

"You don't think we're going to stop here, do you? Once we take the Templar, we can take the church. Even the palace." Jon's eyes gleamed. "This! This right now, this is our moment!"

Swallowing, Tarl squared his shoulders. “Jon, I need to talk to you and Emra.”

Jon traded glances with his friends, all suddenly quiet. They sipped their ale and watched Tarl. “You said you were here to help us,” Jon said, straightening.

“I said I was here to talk,” Tarl corrected. “And I have helped you. I’ve just spent hours taking care of your wounded and your dead.”

That sobered Jon and his friends. Jon looked down, and when he met Tarl’s eyes again, he looked properly contrite. “I need to talk to you too, actually,” he said. “Alone.” Jon’s eyes bored into his friends.

Grumbling, they grabbed their flagons and headed outside, standing in the cold as they drank their ale and shared stories of their actions in the battle against the Templar. Tarl heard curses and laughter and cries of disbelief as the stories got too huge.

“Good guys,” Jon said, nodding toward his friends. “We’ve been looking forward to this day for forever, it seems.”

Tarl frowned and leaned against the bar. “What do you think is happening here, Jon?”

“I told you. Revolution.” Jon swallowed a long pull of ale. “What exactly is it that you think is happening here?”

A beat. “I don’t know,” Tarl finally said. “And that’s why I’m here to talk to you. And Emra.” He looked around the tavern. “Where is she?”

“She’s not here right now.” Jon drank again.

“Where is she?”

Jon ignored Tarl’s question. Instead of answering, he reached inside his tunic and pulled out a tattered sheet of parchment, dirty and worn through. Obviously folded and refolded a hundred times, the creases on the parchment were nearly fibrous fragments. Jon unfolded the parchment reverently, smoothing it out on the driest section of the bar top. “Do you know what this is?”

Tarl glanced at the parchment. What looked like a poem was messily scribbled on it. “No.”

Jon swallowed, and his fingers traced the left side of the parchment. “Do you know much about the history of Kina?”

The history of Kina. Emen had been looking for books on the kingdom's history. Tarl only knew what Old Man Etto had shared, and he had never known if what he'd shared had been true or had been a product of his damaged mind. "What are you trying to tell me?"

"About 900 years ago, the first Magi entered Kina. They were on an expedition, and they laid the corners of the kingdom in their travels."

Tarl frowned.

"While there were many interesting happenings that occurred during this expedition, two things are of note." Jon held up his fingers, counting down. "One. This Sealing isn't the first sealing. The first Magi, those explorers? They had to banish darkness from these lands, and they did that through a Sealing. The war between the darkness and the Magi really got going then. And two: one of the Magi was a seer. He had visions, prophecies. Many were lost, many came true. The Fallen House used to keep records of the Mage's prophecies and which had come to pass."

"You think this has been prophesized?"

"I know it." Jon smoothed his hand down the parchment again. "This is one of the prophecies from him. He talks about the end of an age, and someone rising up to change the world. When else would this be but now?"

Twisting the parchment, Tarl peered down at the scratchy handwriting.

*In the Black Days, a man from the last age will rise
Returned from his dispersion
Guided by his heart, fallen before him.
He will wrought change unto the world, to the very corners of Man
And death and despair shall follow in his wake
For he leads that which he is not,
And brings the last hope to the Great World.
He is the inhale, before the exhale,
And upon him, the entire world shall be weighed.*

"Where did you get this?" Tarl whispered. His breath ghosted over the parchment, sent it fluttering across the bar top.

"I copied it out of a text on the ancient history of the kingdom."

He looked up sharply. "Did you get it from the Cathedral?"

“Oh, fuck no,” Jon hissed. He shifted, uneasy. “That place is fucking haunted. We wanted to go, but could never get near. Halfway up the mountain and the ghosts would come out, scare you right off.”

Tarl was silent. He stared at Jon, until Jon turned back to the prophecy.

“The Black Days are now,” Jon said, counting off the similarities he saw. “The end of the year, according to the Magi’s calendar. Days of darkness, of change. Turmoil.” He looked to Tarl. “Days of the demons.”

Tarl said nothing.

“‘A man from the last age will rise.’ The last age, meaning before this Sealing, and that means a Mage.” He moved on, his finger tracing over the words. “‘Returned from his dispersion.’ Someone in hiding. Or,” Jon eyed Tarl, “‘an exile. ‘He will wrought change unto the world, to the very corners of Man.’ Clearly, this Mage is starting a revolution, one that will change the world.”

“‘And death and despair shall follow in his wake.’” Tarl arched an eyebrow at Jon.

“Revolutions are never clean, nor are they pretty.” Jon skipped ahead. “‘And bring the last hope to the Great World.’ See, it’s a good thing, this revolution.”

Sighing, Tarl covered the prophecy with his hand. “You have no idea if this is talking about now.”

“I used to think it spoke about Emra.” Jon pushed Tarl’s hand off the parchment and smoothed it again, trying to buff out all of the creases and wrinkles.

“Even though it says ‘he’?”

“I’m sure the old seer didn’t think that we’d be living in as egalitarian a time as we are.” Jon nodded to the street, and a band of knights passing by. “We have women knights now. Why can’t Emra be the savior?”

“You said you used to think.” Tarl watched Jon’s eyes dim, his head dip.

“Em, she’s... powerful. If there’s anyone who can get us through this, I know it’s her.”

Warning bells tolled in Tarl’s mind, and his breaths came hard and fast. “Jon—”

“I used to say that the ‘fallen before him’ bit meant that the Magi that had fallen before the Sealing were Emra’s ‘heart.’ Her Mage-family, you know?”

Who she was fighting for. And, the dispersion.” Jon shrugged. “She’s been in hiding ever since she really started developing her power.”

“What power, Jon?”

He kept ignoring Tarl. “But I’ve been thinking.” He chewed his lip. “What if this is about you?” Eyes blazing, Jon finally looked at Tarl.

“Me?” Impossible. There was no way. He wasn’t anybody; he was Emen’s sidekick, if he was anything. “What are you talking about?”

Jon reread the prophecy aloud. He pointed out passages as he spoke. “‘A man from the last age will rise...’ That is you. You’re the only real Mage that there is. Emra is powerful, but she’s not from the last age. You are. ‘Returned from his dispersion...’ Again, you, as you were in exile. ‘Guided by his heart, fallen before him.’” Jon paused. “Your family?” he asked.

Tarl couldn’t speak. He saw Old Man Etto’s head mounted on a pike, his tongue protruding from his mouth, flies covering his face as maggots swallowed his eyeballs. He closed his eyes.

“All the rest, the prophecy, it’s talking about taking back our power. About unleashing the Winds again.” Jon stared at Tarl, his eyes pleading with him. “It’s you, Tarl.”

Slowly, Tarl shook his head. He tried to speak, but couldn’t, not through the roaring in his ears or the pounding of his heart.

“That’s why you’re here,” Jon pressed on. “You’re here because you’re meant to be here. This is our time!” Jon smiled, and the light from the candles gleamed in the darkness of his eyes, making them shine with a dark, dangerous glimmer. Too old for Jon’s young age.

Tarl inhaled deep. “Jon,” he said. “Where is Emra?”

A heavy sigh, as Jon leaned against the bar top. “The Master called her away,” he said.

“The Master?” Suddenly alert, Tarl stood straight. “Who is that?”

“The Master taught Emra how to channel her powers. Said she was the strongest Mage in the capital, but that she was choked by the seals. He taught her how to get around them.”

His heart pounding, Tarl grabbed Jon, shaking his shoulders. “With blood?” he hissed. “I saw her arm. She cut herself with the refugees.”

Jon shoved Tarl off him, frowning. “Squeamish?” He frowned, glancing around the tavern. “We’re not supposed to talk about it. The Master is very secretive.”

“Who is he?” Tarl demanded, nearly shouting. He grabbed the parchment, fisting it tight.

“I don’t know!” Jon grasped for the prophecy, plucking it from Tarl’s hands.

Letting it go, Tarl sagged against the bar, glaring at Jon. “I assume the books, then, came from this Master? This secretive Master of yours?”

“You have nothing to say about him,” Jon snapped. He shoved his finger in Tarl’s face, wagging as he spoke. “You stayed in hiding, too. You weren’t out and flaunting your power or helping any other Magi while you were in the mountains. You stayed hidden. Secret.”

Tarl’s lips thinned, and he grabbed the front of Jon’s tunic, dragging him close. “I never summoned a demon,” Tarl hissed. “Now. Take me to Emra.”

Vedek rubbed his tired eyes and exhaled. “I get that this Blood Mage is harvesting blood. I get that they summoned a demon with that blood, and that that demon has been going through the kingdom.”

“It must be very powerful if it’s teleporting.” Emen tickled a ball of flame over his fingers as he leaned back on the stone floor, his brow furrowed in thought. “A lot of blood.”

After casually discussing magic and demons for the past several hours, the comment must have been just another in Vedek’s new understanding of the world. He didn’t boggle at Emen, not anymore. “But what’s next? Why would the demon destroy the valley? What is this Mage up to? We had a week’s worth of murders almost daily, and increasing in severity. Then, last night... nothing. What’s the goal?”

Emen was quiet. He thought of the sleeping charm Tarl had put on him, and how he’d stayed deathly still all night long, wrapped up in the kid’s arms. “I don’t know,” he grunted. His eyes landed on the books they’d gone through, leafing through destroyed pages and shards of old knowledge. “There is a purpose to this, though. The darkness does not move without a plan.”

“Are humans a real target? I mean, non-Magi?” Vedek frowned at Emen from where he sat, leaning against the stone wall beneath their chalk scribbles. “I don’t remember much of the war.”

Sighing, Emen wiped the flame from his palm and sat up. Rubbed his eyes. “Humans have not been the targets, no. Magi are. Humans get caught in the middle.” He looked away. “Many died in the past.”

“Many died this week,” Vedek said. “How many didn’t have to? If they had been Magi and had been able to defend themselves? Or others?”

“Nothing can change the past.” Emen’s voice was cold and hard, and Vedek looked down.

The rotunda plunged into silence. Without the dancing firelight in Emen’s hand, shadows stretched across the cold stone, reaching for the two. They sat close, their legs almost touching, but not quite, as if it were a gulf that had to be leapt over, a divide to be conquered.

“Do you need to get back?” Emen asked suddenly. His voice was rough, and he looked sidelong at Vedek through hooded eyes. “It’s been hours. Your knights. Don’t you need to check in?”

Sighing, Vedek let his head fall back against the stone. “I do need to go,” he croaked. He closed his eyes. “Part of me doesn’t want to, though. I’d rather stay here.” He looked at Emen. “With you.”

Emen held his gaze. He said nothing.

Vedek blanched, and then he was scrambling to his feet, looking anywhere but at Emen. “I’m sorry,” he muttered. “I didn’t think. I know you said that you were honoring your vows.” Vedek cursed under his breath as he searched for his sword, discarded sometime while they had been talking, trying to strategize against the Blood Mage and their dark ways. “I’m sorry,” he said again. “I’m not trying to—”

Emen held out his sheathed sword, hilt toward Vedek, and tried to smile. Vedek took it with a muttered thanks and turned away.

“Vedek,” Emen began. He stopped.

“I know, I know.” Vedek blew out a rush of air and let his head fall forward. “I should have seen that for what it was. Your polite dismissal,” he growled.

“I wasn’t trying to send you away.”

Vedek turned slowly.

Emen stared down at Vedek, his face seemingly set in stone, grim and yet determined at the same time.

Vedek frowned. “Emen?”

A heavy inhale, and then Emen stepped closer. “I chose to honor my vows,” he began. His voice was low, too low, scraping over the stone with rough whispers. “Because, for the longest time, the Paladin were the only thing that meant anything to me. It was what my life should have been, and I clung to that.”

“I understand.” Vedek tried to smile. “I do.”

“There is more in my life now, Vedek.” Emen swallowed, the curve of his throat bobbing up and down. Desire, flaming, screamed through his body. “If I were more honest with myself, there’s been more for a while.”

Emen knew, in a sacred, primal way, what his temptation was. His heart was reaching for Vedek, all the broken parts and pieces of his soul stretching out and reaching for his touch. There was some kind of settling within him, a shift somewhere deep within, a quiet that seemed to calm his rage for the moment. He let go, surrendering to his soul’s yearning.

The words he wanted to say, however, wouldn’t come, and Emen’s lips moved soundlessly as he struggled to bring voice to the feelings thundering through him, the urge, the craving he’d finally acknowledged. It was pouring out now, bursting free from his heart as he chose to set aside his vows, his devotion to the past, and looked into the face of his future.

He saw the answer to a question he’d always needed to ask. A refuge of solace in a world turned upside down. A face he could call *home*, and a man he could—did—love.

Vedek hadn’t moved, but he stared at Emen as if he would disappear in the next moment, just vanish into the darkness. His eyes darted over Emen and then away, just before he cleared his throat. “Emen, I’m not—”

“You mean a great deal to me, Vedek,” Emen breathed. He took a step, moving closer to the knight, and reached for him. “I want you. Want this, with you.”

Squeezing his eyes shut, Vedek clamped his hands around the sheath of his sword. He exhaled, a fast burst of air, and then turned to Emen. “Are you sure?” he grunted. “I didn’t mean—I’m not trying to—” Vedek stuttered and stopped, grimacing.

Emen grinned, and he reached for Vedek, grasping the top of his chestplate and tugging the knight closer to him. Vedek stumbled, but his hands grabbed Emen’s waist and he swallowed, turning wide eyes up to Emen. “I should have

done this a long time ago,” Emen breathed, just before he lowered his lips to Vedek’s.

Vedek moaned into the kiss. His arms wound around Emen, one hand cupping the back of his head. Emen’s hands rose, stroking down Vedek’s cheeks until Vedek broke away with a shiver. “Emen,” he whispered. He tried to speak, but whatever he wanted to say, he couldn’t find the words.

“I do love you, Vedek,” Emen rumbled. He quirked a half smile. Fingering Vedek’s poppy cape. “Somehow.”

Vedek choked on his own pained laugh, more a gasp. “I know I don’t deserve it.”

“Shh.” Emen cupped his face again and drew Vedek’s lips to his, dropping a warm, chaste kiss that lingered. “I don’t deserve your devotion either. There are things I’ve done.” He pressed his forehead to Vedek’s, exhaling.

Vedek grabbed his wrists. “Doesn’t matter. Not anymore.”

Slowly, the rotunda filled with golden witchlight, orbs pulsing with a soft glow. They hovered, surrounding Vedek and Emen with a flickering warmth. Vedek stole a kiss from Emen’s lips. “That’s pretty incredible.”

Emen dragged his thumb over Vedek’s cheekbone, taking his time. Vedek’s breath warmed his wrists, and Emen smiled. A thousand hopes thundered through him, from wonder to warmth, awe to joy, and a calming sense of peace even as his passion was rising within him. How had he pushed this away? Why, when this was everything he’d needed? And why hadn’t Vedek simply washed his hands of Emen so long ago? What power, what depth of love was this that had nurtured these feelings over the long years of their friendship? A small part of his mind protested, insisting that he honor his vows, especially now, as the Winds had returned to him. He quieted that thought. No, this was right. This love was the rightest choice he’d made in his life. “I do love you,” he repeated, just before he caught Vedek’s lower lip in a slow kiss.

It was apparently too much for Vedek, and he cried out as the force of his passion crested and broke. His hands were everywhere, suddenly, slipping under Emen’s loose tunic and roaming over the hard planes of his warm back and then around to his front, where his hands drifted over ridges of scar tissue and old wounds from long ago.

Emen tugged at the side laces running under Vedek’s arms, holding his armor. He pulled at the leather, tossing the strings to the side when he’d

finished. Vedek broke their kiss for only a moment, just long enough to rip away his cloak and tug his breastplate over his head. The armor clattered against the stone, sending a gentle wave through the bobbing witchlight. Vedek reached for his shoulders, ready to rip the leather thong strung across his back and holding his armored sleeves on, but Emen stilled his movements. Instead, Emen leaned close, untying the strap as Vedek sucked at his neck. When Emen was finished, Vedek let the sleeves fall to the ground with a crash.

Turning, Emen guided Vedek backward across the rotunda, leading him to the blankets. He helped Vedek down, his shaking hands laying him back against the soft nest with a nervous smile. As they moved, as they lay down, the witchlight orbs slowly fell until they were hovering just above the ground, a sea of flickering warmth that surrounded the two, wrapping them in gilded light. Vedek grinned again, chuckling at the orbs, and poked one near his head. It floated, moving as if a vapor, and settled with a soft pulse.

Emen shucked his tunic, sending it sailing across the stone room. He smothered an orb or two, but they floated free. Vedek's eyes darkened, and his hands caressed over Emen's chest and the smooth planes of his stomach. Sparse chest hair ran through Vedek's fingers, and Emen shivered when Vedek brushed over a hard nipple. With a grin, Vedek did it again, and then fingered the worn amulet dangling in the space between them. A strip of thin leather, tied with beads and silenced bells, and at the end, a ring of tattered white silk braided into a circle. Old, the white had long turned dull, stained with sweat and blood. "Your old tunic?" He held the amulet as if he was holding a relic, reverent in the palm of his hand.

Nodding, Emen laid his hand over Vedek's. "I've worn it since that day." The last, the very last, of his fading Winds had been woven into the amulet, and he'd clung to its protection ever since.

Vedek smiled and let go, then pressed his hand over Emen's heart. Emen's breath caught in his chest, staring down at his closest friend, and soon, his lover. His beloved. Smiling, Emen made fast work of Vedek's boots and leg armor, tossing everything to the side. Beloved. Yes, that's what Vedek was. So long beloved in the silence of his heart.

Vedek hauled his own tunic off and tried to smother his wince, but Emen's hands, wandering up his sides, ghosted over the warmth of his bruises. He pulled back, and Vedek tried to grab his neck, hold him close, but Emen stilled. "You're hurt."

“Bruised. Nothing more.” He tried to drag Emen down for a kiss, but the Paladin wouldn’t budge. His fingers traced Vedek’s ribs, playing over skin stitched together by magic and the force of his love.

“I thought I’d lost you.” Emen’s throat bobbed up and down, long and slow. “I thought I was too late.”

“I’m fine. I’ve had far worse than these bruises.” Tracing Emen’s swollen lips with his fingers, Vedek nuzzled his lover’s cheek. “You saved me like some kind of hero out of legend,” he breathed over Emen’s stubbled jaw.

Shivering, Emen’s arms stroked up Vedek’s sides and wrapped around his shoulders, pulling him into his lap as he sat up. One hand cupped his head. “Never again,” Emen promised. “Never, ever again will I let you be hurt.” His heart lurched at the thought of Vedek harmed, and he felt the first stirrings of panic rise within him, already trying to find ways to keep his Knight Captain safe. Ridiculous, when Vedek was who he was. Even now, he sported another black eye and crooked nose, and bruises from more than just his brush with death.

But this was the man he loved. The call to protect was in his blood, the need to shelter a part of his soul. He’d lost his people, but he wouldn’t lose Vedek. He’d die first. He’d die for Vedek.

Rocking forward, Vedek pulled himself higher on Emen’s lap, until their cocks were nearly touching. He nuzzled Emen’s jaw, pressed a quick kiss to his chin, and then held his eyes as he rolled his hips forward. When they touched for the first time, Vedek gasped, arching his back high as Emen shuddered and buried his face in Vedek’s neck. His lips mapped the curve of Vedek’s throat, gentle sucks against his skin, and Emen rocked his hips and his swollen cock against the rough fabric of his leggings and the warmth of Vedek’s body.

They still had their leggings on. Emen leaned low over Vedek, slowly laying their bodies together, and their breaths and groans mingled as Vedek dragged his shin up Emen’s thigh and rubbed his calf over his leg. A nudge with his knee, pulling, and Vedek tried to press Emen closer.

Growling, Emen pressed another near-bruising kiss to Vedek’s swollen lips. Their bodies lunged, pushing together, arms and legs and hips and chests caressing and undulating and melting. Emen was drowning, lost in the touch, the feel and the smell of Vedek, surrounding him and swallowing him whole. He cupped the back of Vedek’s head and trailed kisses over his eyes. What was this moment, this fantasy of time that let all of his darkest dreams come true?

“Emen,” Vedek breathed, arching into the heat of his body. Their shared breaths were coming fast and harsh. “I need you.”

Emen burned, and then he was snaking down Vedek’s neck and chest and across his hard belly as Vedek moaned. His hands followed, teasing and caressing and dragging out Vedek’s gasps and grunts. Vedek threw his head back, a silent moan caught on his lips, and his feet scrabbled against the floor as Emen licked a long line up from his waist to his chest, and then devoured one of his hardened nipples. He stuttered and forgot to breathe entirely when Emen’s hand closed over his hard cock above his leggings.

Slowly, Emen hooked his hands in Vedek’s waistband and tugged, pulling his woven leggings down. His cock jerked free, jutting high, and a bead of precum glistened at the tip. Emen couldn’t tear his eyes from the sight as he slithered the leggings off. Crouching over Vedek, Emen caught his eyes before he licked the tip of his cock.

Vedek cursed, clenching his hands into fists as he threw his head back. “M not gonna last,” he grunted through gritted teeth. “Not if you do that.”

Emen rose, crawling up Vedek’s body, and he nuzzled his nose against Vedek’s cheek. “I’m not sure what I’m doing,” he said with a chuckle, his voice pitched low. Fantasies that he’d tried to ignore, quick jerks to calm his body, and dreams that plagued him whenever he’d left the capital—left Vedek—were a poor preparation for making love to his beloved. He was woefully underprepared, and the weight of Vedek’s long line of former lovers weighed on his mind.

“Well, you’re fucking perfect. I’m already trying not to come.” Rolling, Vedek captured Emen’s lips and pressed him down against the blankets, rising to kneel astride the Paladin. “My turn,” he breathed with a sly grin. His hands roamed low, tucking into Emen’s waistband, and he pulled down his leggings every bit as slowly as Emen had. Emen’s cock, rock hard, jerked free, and Vedek licked his lips.

Lowering his head, Vedek breathed deep around Emen’s cock, moaning at the scent of the Paladin. His tongue flicked out, lapping at his heavy balls, and Emen grasped the blankets with both hands. Smirking, Vedek wrapped a hand around the base of Emen’s cock and sucked the head into his hot mouth.

Emen cursed, nearly bolting up, but Vedek pushed him back. He arched his hips as Vedek hummed around his cock and sucked deep, taking him down his throat, and his tongue swirled around the head. Emen chanted his name over

and over. Breathless pants and grunts were laced with moans and curses, and then Vedek popped off his cock with a wet smack. By the Winds, that had been nearly too much. He was lucky he didn't set the grotto ablaze.

Grabbing Vedek behind the neck, Emen dragged him up for a deep kiss and wound his arms around his back, stroking his battle-scarred skin. Tongue and teeth followed, and then Vedek shifted, and their cocks brushed against one another. Hissing, Emen bucked against him, one hand dropping to Vedek's firm ass and holding him close. He could feel the heat rising between them, could feel sweat prickling against his shoulder blades, even though it was the Black Days and the snows had come. Nothing but heat and passion between them, in the ruins of his people, in the darkest days of the years.

Oh, to have this. To have this friction, this torment rising in his veins. His body was racing toward orgasm, and he wanted to bury himself within Vedek's touch, to feel his body shudder against his warm skin. No space between them, then, as Emen writhed against Vedek, his sweat-slick skin caressing his lover's body. Wanton hips rocked together, Emen dragging his cock against Vedek's hard length over and over.

Vedek's eyes were too bright, too fierce as they gazed down at Emen. Vedek was thinking, pondering something, even as his chest heaved with deep breaths. Too much thought, and Emen tried to distract him with a kiss. Vedek moaned, shivering as Emen sucked on his lip, but he finally pushed Emen back with shaking arms. He reached out a hand, trailing his touch down Emen's neck and chest, and then over his heart. Reaching up, Vedek cupped Emen's face with both hands. Stroked his cheeks and smiled.

It stole Emen's breath, that smile on Vedek's face.

Vedek took Emen's hand and raised it to his mouth. He held his gaze as he wrapped his lips around his fingers, twirled his tongue and made them wet. Emen shivered as Vedek lowered their hands and pressed Emen's fingers between his legs, behind his heavy balls.

Emen's eyes blazed. He could barely breathe as his drenched fingers stroked over Vedek's hot hole. He was offering himself, and Emen saw in Vedek's eyes, suddenly, the depth of his trust and the depth of his love. It was like looking into an unfathomable chasm, the center of the world, a place and a time with no end. He stuttered, tried to speak. Failed. Finally, Emen managed, "You sure?" He hadn't expected this.

Vedek nodded. He swallowed, and then inhaled as Emen's first finger pressed inside. Emen watched his face, his eyes darting across every inhale,

every gasp, every flick of his eyes. He worked it deeper, and Vedek shivered. He added another finger.

“I have oil, too,” Vedek gasped. He tossed his head toward his discarded armor. “My belt. Sword pouch. Oil for my blade.”

It was just barely in reach. Emen stretched for the belt, and Vedek clamped his lips over Emen’s nipple. He nearly collapsed on Vedek.

The phial of oil was full, thankfully. Emen smoothed the oil—almond, by the scent—onto his fingers and dropped his hand beneath Vedek’s balls once more. He sat back, watching his fingers disappear into his beloved’s body and watching him writhe into his touch. Vedek groaned, long and loud, and his eyes rolled back into his head when Emen dragged his fingers deep, raking over his insides. Oh, Emen wanted to draw that out again, wanted to play Vedek’s body like a violin, to bring him so much pleasure.

“I’m ready,” Vedek grunted. His eyes met Emen’s, burning near black, and his body trembled. “Please, Emen. I’m ready for you. Please.”

He managed to coat his cock with a palmful of oil, somehow, and only just shivered at his own touch. Emen could feel his blood prickling, surging through his body, and he didn’t know how long he’d be able to last. He wanted this to be good for Vedek, though. He wanted to make him moan, make him tremble, make him shout his name into the cold stone.

Lining up, Emen rested the tip of his swollen cock against Vedek’s opening. He looked up, met Vedek’s gaze. He wanted Vedek to remember this night, forever.

Vedek swallowed, his throat rising and falling. “Say it again,” he breathed.

“I love you, Vedek.” Emen pushed in, pressing his cock into Vedek in one slow, smooth slide. Vedek’s mouth dropped open, forming a perfect O, and he grasped Emen’s shoulders, his neck, the back of his head. When he was in, all the way in, Emen rested his forehead against Vedek’s, panting. “I love you,” he whispered again.

Witchlight caught on the blaze in Vedek’s eyes. Their lips met, slow, lingering kisses running together as Emen started to move. Hands traced over arms and legs, grasped thighs and waists, and nails scratched down backs. Emen’s lips pressed against Vedek’s neck as Vedek arched, and he licked salt sweat and love from his skin.

Vedek raised his legs, rubbing his thighs against Emen’s flanks. Emen’s hand grasped him, cupping the rounded smoothness of his ass and the strong

lines of his muscled leg. His cock kept sliding into Vedek, slick with oil, and as he grasped Vedek's leg, he sped up his thrusts. Driving in and out, Emen let the depth of his own love, long buried, long denied, pour out. He pushed everything that he had, everything that he felt, into every thrust. He was pounding into Vedek, his balls slapping against his ass, and Vedek moaned aloud in his arms, shuddering and trembling with every thrust. His cock bounced on his stomach, leaking hot lines of passion over his skin.

Emen wanted to imprint himself into Vedek, burn away all of his past loves. He wanted to be his, and he suddenly wanted to go back in time and claim Vedek in this way, so long ago. He wanted his love to be the greatest, the deepest, and the only love that Vedek would ever want or need.

Writhing, Vedek bucked in Emen's arms, impaling himself on Emen's cock. "So close," he breathed. He hadn't touched his cock, not once. "So close. Emen, Gods, Emen..."

Vedek's back arched as he cried out, a silent scream frozen on his lips. Emen gasped, suddenly driving into Vedek's clenching body, and he watched as thick ropes of burning cum burst from Vedek's shuddering cock, streaking the hard planes of his stomach. He leaned down, captured Vedek's lips, and then shouted his own release as he plunged deep. His cum filled Vedek, scalding, and he felt the force of his orgasm burst from the tips of his toes.

He collapsed on top of Vedek, resting his head on his shoulder, his face in his neck. Vedek panted, his eyes closed, and he still had his legs wrapped around Emen's waist. They lay together, breathing hard as their sweat and spunk cooled. Vedek's fingers trailed over Emen's back.

Finally, Emen pushed himself up, and he balanced on his elbows as he pressed a kiss to his beloved's lips.

"Better than I ever dreamed," Vedek whispered against Emen's lips.

Emen smiled. "Me too." He kissed Vedek again. "I do love you," he breathed. "Don't ever doubt that."

Vedek's arms wound around his neck, and they lost themselves in a long, lingering kiss as the golden witchlight danced on.

Chapter Fourteen

The streets of the capital were deserted.

Vedek jogged through Daisytown, looking every which way but saw no one. Not even Templar. No candles burning in windows or smoke curling from chimneys. In one block, a dairy farmer's gate had broken and cows milled aimlessly up and down the block, munching on flowers and slop spilled from kitchen windows. An annoyed moo chased him in the darkness, but nothing else.

Not even the city's lanterns were lit. Darkness, everywhere.

He'd left Emen—albeit reluctantly—after they'd managed to pull apart from each other's arms and pull themselves back together. He was smiling, he knew, and Emen had cuffed his chin with a tender laugh that seated itself in the center of Vedek's heart. The witchlight that had flickered with them on the floor had risen once more to float in the air as they'd confirmed the last details of their plan. Vedek would get back to the battlements, check in with the knights. His closest officers—Mari, Shila, Cras, and the head of the battlements in the valley, Appleworth—would brief him on what he'd missed. He knew, deep down in his bones, that his knights wouldn't be happy about the day's events. He'd felt Cras's eyes boring into his spine, had felt his sullen anger simmering even from where he'd been standing with Shane.

They'd make their move, then. For the folk. For freedom.

Once he had regrouped with the knights, and once he knew more about what had transpired, he'd return for Emen. Emen said he'd be meditating, gathering himself mentally for the task to come. When he'd left him, after a lingering kiss, Emen had been studying their chalk scribbles as a golden orb hovered next to his head.

Vedek frowned when he reached the midcity battlements. The usual guards posted at the base of the steps rising to the parapet were gone. The banners hung limp and lifeless, and not a soul stood on the battlements' partitions or walked along the curtain wall. He saw no lanterns, no candles lit in the windows within the walls. Again, the city, and its battlements, seemed deserted.

His boots clacked against the stone steps as he took them two at a time. They echoed, bouncing off the crenels as he jogged down the curtain wall and finally slipped inside.

Empty. This time, his boot heels sank into the orange carpet running the length of the battlements and his steps were muffled as he ran for his office. His eyes had adjusted to the darkness, and he could make out the edges of the suits of armor standing at attention in recessed alcoves, honorifics to fallen knights slain in their duty over the long years.

The door to his office was broken open, kicked down and splintered. The iron hinges had held, but his lock had been broken, and wood shards lay scattered across the floor. His desk was upturned. Parchment lay everywhere. Spilled candles littered the floor, and ash from the fireplace had been stamped around the room. He frowned, staring at the destruction. Who would have done such a thing?

A rough shove pushed him into his office and he fell forward, stumbling over a splintered and jagged bit of door. His hand caught the edges, and he hissed as blood seeped from the wound. Whirling, his hand was on the hilt of his sword, but he stilled as the edge of a blade kissed his cheek.

“Ah, ah,” the Templar said, waving his finger as he clucked at Vedek. “Don’t even try. Get your hands up.”

Vedek slowly raised his hands. His eyes narrowed, and he glared at the Templar soldier. “What is going on?” he barked. “I demand to see the High Templar. Who has done this to our office?”

“‘Our office’?” The Templar laughed. “You have the balls to say ‘our office’ when it was your fucking Knights Guard who betrayed the kingdom?”

His eyes narrowed. “What are you talking about?”

“Don’t play fucking dumb with me,” the Templar hissed. “We knew one of you rats was going to come back. Doesn’t matter, though. We’ll find you all. Kill every last one of you traitorous fucks.”

The Templar dropped his sword to Vedek’s neck, digging the tip into the soft skin above his pulse. Vedek cringed, tried to step back, but he was pinned against the ruins of his desk. Caught unawares, in his own office. What a way to go. He felt the blade slice his skin, felt warm blood seep down his neck. *Emen!*

The sharpened tip of a broadsword thrust through the Templar’s chest, sticking out a good foot from his red silk top. Staring down, the Templar boggled at the sword, and his free hand stroked the tip, stained red. When he looked up, Vedek saw blood dripping from his lips, burbling in his mouth. The sword withdrew, and the Templar crumbled to the ground.

Behind his body, Mari stood tall, bracketed by Appleworth and Shila. The three were grim, but their faces brightened when they saw Vedek. Relief flooded their expressions, and Vedek saw Shila quirk a tiny grin.

“Captain!” Mari straightened to a brief salute. Then she dropped down and wiped the Templar’s blood from her blade with the back of his shirt, but kept her eyes on Vedek. “We all thought you’d been captured.”

Shila helped Vedek back across the ruins of his door. Her hand lingered on his forearm, and he felt her touch steadying his shoulder stay on his armor. “All right, sir?” she asked.

Nodding, Vedek gestured to the remains of his office. “What happened?” He nodded to the dead Templar. “And that?” He quirked an eyebrow to Mari. “We killing Templars now?”

“Yes,” Appleworth grunted. Older than Vedek, he’d commanded the battlements in the valley for over a decade. “After what they’ve done, and the folk they’re planning on killin’, yes, we’re killing Templar now.”

Mari threw Appleworth a long glare. The older commander was crotchety in the best of times and never minced words. “There’s been a turn, Captain,” she said. “Each of us made the decision—independently—to stop the Templar’s Inquisition.”

Vedek smiled. Mari had been in charge of the docks and the Merchant Quarter sweeps, Appleworth of the refugees in Holy Light, and Shila had manned the battlements while they’d been out. “Where’s Cras?” Cras had been his second in the sweeps.

Mari and Shila shared a tight look. Vedek felt his heart sink. “Cras took charge of your unit after you disappeared. He ordered your knights to turn on the Templar when they began to sack Tizzy Town.”

Gods bless his knights. Vedek felt a surge of pride for his officers. They were the best sort of folk, honorable to a fault, even to turn against the most imposing force in all of Kina. “What happened?”

“Tizzy Town held.” Mari smiled quickly. “They collapsed a burning building on the barricade, and the Templar lost five soldiers. They called a retreat overnight.” She hesitated. “But Cras, his unit, and the students are all barricaded inside the quarter. They’ve closed the gates and have burned the barricades at all the entrances. There’s no way to get any reinforcements in.”

Vedek smirked. “Is Captain Woo in town?”

Frowning, Mari's head tilted, just slightly. "Yes. I watched the Templar search his ship this morning."

"And I'm sure they found nothing." Captain Woo was a notorious smuggler, guilty five times over in Kina alone. He was also a close friend and an occasional dining companion whenever he was in port. "Can we get a message to him? I know he knows a way into Tizzy Town. We've found too much of his contraband in there."

Mari nodded. "I've got the folk of the Merchant's Quarter and Salt Town holed up in the warehouses on the docks. The folk from Back Bend are sheltering in their homes. But there's no Templar, sir. We can move freely."

"Most of the bastards are in the palace or building fortifications around Tizzy Town. We shocked 'em today," Appleworth grunted. "They didn't expect that." His mustache twitched, an almost grin on his lips. "Serves 'em right, the bastards."

"Daisytown and Holy Light are sheltering together. I brought them to House Harvest." Shila saw Vedek's raised eyebrows and shook her head. "The House Lord wasn't in. I took the House in the name of the Knights Guard."

"He might be sheltering in the palace." Vedek didn't quite care about the Lord of House Harvest.

"The King won't be happy, when this is all over." Shila, looking pointedly at the Templar's body.

"Fuck him, and his pretty Templar," Appleworth roared. "If we do this right, he won't have enough Templar left to hunt everyone down."

That quieted the group, and Vedek looked from Appleworth to Shila to Mari. "We're doing this," he said, finality in his voice. "We answer to them." He pointed to the city, to the folk that should have been resting comfortably in their homes. "Let's get going. We need to get Woo out here. He needs to show us his smuggler's access. Shila, go pull all the weapons you can from the armory. Pikes, swords, daggers, arrows, bows, shields, maces. Everything. Get sacks from the stores. We'll smuggle them into Tizzy Town in them." Vedek turned to Mari. "Mari, how many of our knights are with us?"

"All of the valley," Appleworth interrupted. "Every one of 'em."

Mari tossed another long-suffering, tired look at the old knight. "I let five knights go from my unit. Shila let three go. We don't know about Cras."

“Eight.” Vedek whistled. “Out of a force of almost three hundred.” He nodded to Appleworth before the old man could open his mouth again. “And that doesn’t include the battlements from the valley.”

“We’ve got this,” Appleworth grunted. He grinned beneath his mustache.

“But we have to keep the folk safe. That’s the goal.” Vedek spoke to Appleworth and Mari. “We have fourteen thousand folk in the city. It’s winter, there’s snow on the ground. They’re cold, probably hungry, and scared. And angry. We need to keep them safe.”

“I had my unit empty the galley in House Harvest. Fed the people for the night. We’ll need more tomorrow.”

“Tonight, we focus on three things.” Vedek counted off on his fingers. “Relief and resupply to Cras and his unit. Reconnaissance and preparation for tomorrow. I want to know where the Templar are, what they’re doing tonight, and what they’re planning for tomorrow. And,” he nodded to Mari, “we get these folk to safety, and we keep them fed and warm.”

“I’ll have my unit scour Daisytown for supplies.” Appleworth and his men were most familiar with the neighborhoods of the farmers, the people of the valley.

“Don’t forget the Merchant’s Quarter. I’ll send some there, too.” Mari turned to Vedek. “And I’ll get Captain Woo here right away.”

“Go. We need him.” Vedek dismissed Mari with a smile and his second in command jogged off. “Commander, get going in Daisytown. Check back in when you’ve secured supplies and report on what you’ve gathered.” Appleworth nodded and saluted, somewhat loosely, but Vedek wasn’t going to harangue him on it. He turned to Shila. “I’ll help you strip the armory.”

They fell into step, walking quickly down the battlements to a spiral stone staircase that took them to the base of the battlements. Blacksmiths’ huts and leatherworking stalls lined the stone corridors, craftsmen vetted by the Knights Guard to work inside their walls. Ahead, the armory.

“Where were you, sir?” Shila broke the silence, and Vedek felt her eyes trace his profile.

“Working with an ally,” he said after a moment. “We shared our intel. We’d each been coming at this investigation from a different path. Together, we figured out more.”

Shila was quiet. She helped him pull open the heavy oak doors of the armory. “The demon, sir?”

“Yes. The Templar’s solution is to kill everyone, but that might not work as well as they hope. They tried that once before, but a Blood Mage still managed to summon a demon here, didn’t they?” Vedek pulled a battle-axe off the wall and tested its edge. Sharp. “Once we secure the city, we can search for this Blood Mage with a better head on our shoulders. And without so much bloodshed.”

“Do you think it’s all related, sir?” Shila had a pile of swords in her hand, the blades nearly cutting into her leather gloves.

“Related?”

“The Templar started the Second Inquisition in response to the demon, yes?” She braced herself against the cutting block in the center of the armory, leaning on the worn wood. “And we have reacted to them. The Templar have torn us apart. Here we are, getting ready to empty our armory and fight them.” She pressed her lips together. “It feels off, sir. Like we’re part of someone else’s plan.”

“Outsiders planning an attack?” Vedek’s brow furrowed. “Maybe the delegation? A threat from the ambassadors, or the continent, trying a surprise attack?”

“Perhaps. I don’t know enough of the politics there to really have a say, sir.” She flicked at a torn bit of wood splintered from the cutting block. Her eyes lifted, and their piercing gaze stilled Vedek. “But the truth is, Kina is weak right now. And this is the perfect time to strike.”

Stumbling ahead of Tarl, Jon glared over his shoulder. He snapped, peevish, and kicked at the snow. “We’ve never summoned a demon!” he shouted again, for the twentieth time.

Tarl shoved his shoulder. It was an odd repeat of Vedek’s escort earlier in the day. “I think I know a little bit more about this than you do.”

Jon snorted. “You didn’t even know about the prophecy.” He glared at Tarl again. “And as much as I might not want it to be you anymore, even I can understand that you have a part to play in all of this.”

Tarl ground his teeth together. “How much further until we reach Emra?”

“She’s not supposed to be disturbed!” Jon whirled on Tarl. “You’re interfering in something you know nothing about.”

“I know enough.” Tarl stepped closer, holding Jon’s gaze. “I saw the demon, Jon. We fought it, my partner and I. It’s out there, thanks to a blood summoning. So don’t tell me that you haven’t done anything.”

Jon’s face scrunched up, frustrated and worried all at once. “We had nothing to do with that,” he finally hissed. “We use a little bit of blood for meditation. For focus. It helps when we try to reach the Winds!”

“Go.” Tarl pushed his shoulder again. “Walk.”

Trudging on, Jon kept talking. “You have a partner?”

He didn’t know what Emen would call what they had. A five-day-old partnership? Friendship? Him, tagging along where he wasn’t wanted, most likely. Tarl snorted at the thought. Grouchy, grumpy Emen. Still, he wasn’t leaving him, not now. Not ever. He’d probably have to start getting along with Vedek, though, if he planned to stay. “I’m not talking about it.”

They trudged on, leaving the brightly lit and joyous section of Tizzy Town behind. The buildings turned dark, no fires or lanterns lit within. Abandoned, for all the exuberance of the rest of the quarter. Ahead, one slanted building, ramshackle and leaning precariously to its side, was aglow with a soft light burning from the second story window. Jon glanced at Tarl, but sighed and pushed ahead, leading him to the building.

The wooden door creaked as Jon pushed it open. It hung uneven from its hinges and a deep groove was furrowed in the floor where the door swung and had ground the wood down. Old furniture sat inside, a hodgepodge of stained sofas and torn silk chairs. Iron candlesticks hung from the walls, covered in dust. The air had the stale taste of disuse, a dry dust that clung to the back of Tarl’s throat.

“This used to be a professor’s house,” Jon said. “This block is for them.”

“Is your Master a professor then?” Tarl peered up the steps. If Emra was up there, she hadn’t moved. No boards had creaked beneath her feet.

Jon scowled and looked away.

Tarl shook his head and headed up the stairs slowly, taking his time with each step. The wood groaned underfoot, but he caught the scent of melting candle wax and a whiff of smoke.

And something else. The taste of copper hit his tongue. Tarl swallowed. Blood.

The stairway opened to a landing, speckled with dark doorways headed off to different rooms. He didn't need to worry about those, though. Emra was kneeling on the landing, a single candle burning low before her. The wax had melted, pooling around the base of the pillar in odd whorls. One tendril had reached the bunches of her skirts, staining the russet wool, but she didn't seem to notice. In front of her, stone white bowls filled with blood were scattered on the floor, and a severed arm lay discarded to her side. The arm was wreathed in garnet silk and slashed through the wrist. Blood pooled in the grey palm, spilled to the floorboards.

A severed head sat in front of Emra, a fallen Templar, his dead expression twisted in pain and brutal agony. Blood seeped around the messy stalk of his neck.

She'd drawn a rune on his forehead.

Emra herself was chanting under her breath, fast whispers as she rocked with her eyes closed. She hadn't heard Tarl approach, lost in the midst of a meditation. Tarl felt the hair on the back of his neck rise, stand straight up, and he heard his Whispers hiss and shout, braying in his mind against the power rising in the air.

"Emra," he said. "Stop."

The dark power coursing through the room vanished, disappearing with a crack. He felt the pull of it, a whirlwind against his skin, and Tarl stumbled forward half a step. Behind him, Jon thundered up the stairs, halting at the top.

Emra whirled on Tarl, a snarl on her face. "What have you done?" she hissed. Gathering her skirts, she hauled herself up, spitfire in her narrowed eyes. "You broke the casting!"

"What have you done, Emra?" Tarl gestured to the bowls of blood and the severed limbs. Behind him, he heard Jon fall back against the wooden walls and his boot slip down a step. "You bled out a Templar?"

"Their blood is powerful!" she cried. "He died in battle. We took his corpse. I didn't kill him!"

He'd spent hours tending to the wounded and the dead, ushering the fallen on their final journey. He'd hoped to make their passing easier, if possible. And here she was, creating ghosts.

"Emra, what have you done?" Jon's voice, plaintive and thin, from behind Tarl. "This... this is madness! This is more than just a little blood."

“We need more,” Emra snapped. “You know what time this is, Jon. You know what we need to do. We need more power.” She glared at Tarl, fire in the depths of her eyes. “I was close to breaking through to the Winds. Close to harnessing their power! You broke all of that!”

Tarl shook his head, his lips thinning. “You weren’t even close to the Winds, Emra. And you don’t harness their power. They grace you with their Whispers.”

She snarled again, and made to push past him toward the stairs. Tarl stood his ground, blocking her path. “Why did you summon the demon, Emra?”

She paused. Turned narrowed, confused eyes to him.

“Who is your Master? Who is the Mage that taught you these rituals?”

Emra scoffed and tried to shoulder past him. Tarl’s hand shot out of his cloak, grabbing her by the arm and whirling her around. “What are you trying to do, Emra?”

Fire roared in the centers of her eyes, just before they turned to blackness, a deep rush of midnight. From deep within her, too deep to be her own voice, a growling rumble shook the room. “Stay out of my way!”

Tarl’s eyes went wide before she backhanded him, hard, far harder than her diminutive body could possibly do on its own. He flew across the landing, smacking hard against the wooden wall. His impact cracked a beam, and dust rained down on him where he crumpled. He didn’t move.

On the staircase, Jon stared, frozen, as Emra swept past him. Her eyes were filled with fire, set against pools of blackness, and when she spoke, it wasn’t her voice any longer. “Are you coming?”

Jon followed her down the steps, not once looking back at Tarl.

When Captain Woo arrived, right on Mari’s heels, he grinned at Vedek and traded a warm, back-slapping hug with the Captain.

“Captain! Always good to see you outside of the Judiciary.”

Mari snorted, and Vedek remembered all the times that they’d been able to pin charges on the Captain, and all the times they hadn’t.

“It’s good to see you too, Captain. Especially since we need your help.” Heaps of weapons wrapped in rough woven sacks were piled at Vedek and Shila’s feet. “We need to get these into Tizzy Town.”

Woo's eyebrows nearly scaled his forehead, almost disappearing into the slicked-back hair he'd pulled away from his face. "You mean to arm these rabid revolutionaries against the Templar?"

So word had reached the Back Bend. "Yes," Vedek said simply.

Woo held his tongue. "This sounds almost like a coup," he said, his voice laced with suspicion. "What will happen after you arm these students? Perhaps, beat back the Templar?" His tone showed how little he believed that Vedek and his Knights Guard were actually capable of such a feat.

"We free the folk of Kina. We return a sense of calm to the city. We're not about to stand by and watch many thousands of our folk be slaughtered."

"And if the King disagrees?" Woo's eyes narrowed.

"He won't be able to kill all of us." Not, at least, if they managed to quell the Templar. Either through force or through negotiation. Vedek didn't know if he'd be able to fight Shane. The High Templar had been a surprise.

"You hope." A long sigh, and Woo surveyed the sacks of weapons arrayed before him. "If I were to help you," he started, "I would have to be assured that any knowledge of any possible assistance stays in this room."

"We're the only ones who know." Vedek nodded. "Your secret will be safe."

"I've no wish to invite the wrath of the Templar to my person. And, with this trade agreement, any black mark against my ship would transfer to the continent. I'd be out of the business entirely."

"I can assure you," Vedek said, holding out his hand, "no one will ever know that you helped us."

Woo peered at his outstretched arm as if it were infected. "My reputation would almost certainly be sullied if anyone were to know that I helped the infamous Knights Guard of Kina, as well."

"Not a soul. I promise. Not even the House Lord."

"Especially not the House Lord."

Vedek gritted his teeth, but plastered on a smile. "Do we have an accord?"

Finally, after an interminably long moment, Woo clasped his hand around Vedek's forearm and sealed their deal. "We do, Captain. We do."

"Great." Vedek gestured to the multitude of sacks. "We need to get these in, and quickly."

Captain Woo hummed and stroked his chin. “This is a lot to move. I’ll have to get my crew out here to help bring the cargo in.”

Vedek suddenly knew where this was going. “And I’m sure that’s going to cost extra?”

A wide smile. “You always were a smart one, Captain. You know how to conduct business. I like that. Yes, I’ll happily accept a larger bounty for the services of my crew. They will thank you as well.”

“I’m sure they will.” Vedek arched a single eyebrow toward the Captain. “But I’m still coming with you.”

“Captain—”

“Ah ah!” Vedek raised his hand, cutting Woo off. “I will know this smuggler’s entrance you have, Woo.”

A grumble, but Woo agreed. He hefted a sack and then sent Mari back to his ship to bring his crew. While they waited, Shila sharpened her blade as the ship’s captain regaled them with stories of the continent, of silks and sand and slithering desert snakes, and the taste of humped horse steak and phoenix meat dipped in sow’s milk. Despite himself, Vedek felt his stomach rumble, and he saw Shila hide her grin at his expense. A moment later, she passed him a sachet of nuts, and he sated his hunger as Captain Woo told him, in excruciating detail, of the taste of flame-roasted bull’s balls.

The crew arrived, dark and silent in the night, and set to work on the sacks. Each carried at least two, leaving Vedek with one. He nodded to Shila and to Mari as he set off, and the trail of arms smugglers disappeared into the blackness of the winter night. Only the faint crunch of snow underfoot belied any movement at all, and most of that was from Vedek himself. Captain Woo and his men moved with such speed and such silence that Vedek knew, in his gut, that they’d been through the city like this before.

They wound their way to one of the northern bridges, a narrow pass that spanned the river from Daisytown to the slum of Holy Light. It was an older bridge, one that had been passed up for repairs after the downfall of Holy Light, and a place Vedek never went to.

The sailors disappeared under the bridge one by one.

Cursing, Vedek followed, and he found the sailors waiting by a darkened tunnel entrance. Woo followed, and he gestured for Vedek to lead the way. “I’m not sure whoever is on the other side will appreciate my sailors arriving so armed,” he said, his voice smooth as silk.

Vedek cast a scathing glare toward the Captain, but he hauled his bag close and slithered into the tunnel on his belly.

When he reached the dead end in the blackness at the end of the tunnel, one of the sailors banged on the wooden door above his head, a heavy rattle that shook dust down onto the flaming poppy of his cape. He closed his eyes against the dust, and then against the light that flooded the tunnel when the trap door was opened. He tried to squint, but all he saw was a hulking shadow.

He heard a roar.

Meaty hands grabbed him and hauled him up, straight into the air, by his neck. His bag of swords dropped to the wooden floorboard, clattering against one another. He blinked, trying to orient himself, and a giant pushed his misshapen face into his own.

“The fuck are you doing ’ere?” The giant roared. Brown spit flew from his lips, landing on Vedek’s cheeks. “Another fuckin’ visitor?”

The sailors were pouring out of the tunnel, each with their sacks. The giant paid no mind to them, and Vedek knew, again, that they were familiar sights to this giant in Tizzy Town. “I’m here to help you,” Vedek croaked. “We brought supplies.”

Growling, the giant pulled Vedek close, peering into his eyes. “You’re the fucking Captain,” he spat. “Why should I believe you?”

“Because I ordered the Knights Guard to help you!”

“Big!” Captain Woo’s smooth voice broke over the room, and the sea captain pulled himself from the tunnel with barely a thread out of place on his midnight silk cloak. Vedek looked like he’d lost a round in the mud pits, but Woo looked as clean as if he’d been lounging in his cabin. “Big, this is Captain Vedek. He is here to help, as dubious as this sounds. I ran into him while bringing you this boon.” He held out his hands, gesturing to the sacks of weapons.

Vedek shot Woo a slit-eyed glare, but forgave the man when Big set him down. He drew in a ragged breath, gasping.

“You’re giving us weapons?” Big looked from Woo to Vedek. He frowned.

“Yes.” Vedek spoke before Woo could. “We’re offering you support. My knights have turned against the Templar. We stand with the folk.”

Big was quiet, and he studied Vedek as if the Captain were an animal he’d never seen before. He apparently liked what he saw, because after a moment,

he grinned, revealing a gap-toothed mouth full of misshapen teeth. "You know the knights who joined up earlier?"

Vedek nodded. "Those are mine. My own unit."

"Well, the leader's been up all night training the younger students." He grabbed all of the sacks in his two hands. "I'll get these passed out. We do need 'em." Turning, he set off, utterly ignoring the sailors, Captain Woo, and Vedek.

Woo was already shepherding his sailors back into the tunnel. Vedek called after the giant. "Wait! Where is he? Where is Cras?"

The giant jerked his chin down one of the winding, snow-covered streets outside of the tavern he apparently lived in. A large pallet was pushed into the corner, covered with a woolen blanket. Chairs were strewn about the broad room, as if dozens of students had been there earlier, but were gone now.

Glancing over his massive shoulder, the giant jerked his chin again. "That way." He turned the opposite direction and walked down the snowy streets, barefoot.

"Good luck, Captain." Captain Woo winked at Vedek before he dropped into the tunnel and pulled the trap door down after him.

Vedek cursed, alone in the empty tavern.

He followed the smoke and the sound of revelry as he left Big's tavern. The streets wound around, twisting into abandoned alleys and snowdrifts up to his waist, but he plowed through, until he was parallel to the sound of clashing steel and the gruff baroque of Cras's voice. Vedek clambered down a snow-covered alley with a smile and narrowly missed an arrow to the face.

"He's not a target!" Cras, one hand forcing a young woman's bow and arrow down, beamed at Vedek. "Captain!"

They jogged for one another, embracing with hard slaps on the backplates and wide grins stretching their cheeks.

"Thought you were nabbed by the Templar," Cras said, pulling back. "But the Cleric said you were working with an ally?" There was a question in his voice.

"The Cleric? Is Tarl here?" He walked with Cras outside of the dubious firing range as his officer called out for the students to keep practicing without him.

"He was. Spent hours healing our wounded. Tended our dead. He wandered off a few hours ago. Haven't seen 'im since." Cras rolled his shoulders, his

head, and his bones cracked loud enough for Vedek to hear. "So, what's the plan, sir?"

"I brought weapons. A giant took them." He frowned.

"Big'll bring them by. He's probably taking them to the other practice field. They've got kids there trying to make weapons." Cras shook his head and whistled through his teeth. "You just saved a bunch of lives, sir."

"We're trying to even the odds. Everyone is on board. Shila and Mari are reconnoitering the Templar tonight. Appleworth is securing the city. By morning, we'll be ready to strike."

"Course everyone is in," Cras said. He shrugged at Vedek's confused look. "We're your knights, sir. I did this," he gestured to the students practicing, to the whole of Tizzy Town behind him, "in honor of you. I thought you were gone, and I knew you'd order it." Cras slapped at Vedek's arm. "But I'm right glad you're not gone." A beat. "Sir."

Vedek reached out, clasping Cras's arm in his. "Remember. You're not alone, come morning. Pass the word on to whomever is in charge here."

"Will do." Cras straightened and saluted. "Best get going, sir. Don't want you trapped in here."

He nodded, but his eyes caught on a dark figure moving toward them, stumbling through the snow. One hand pressed against the crumbling brick building, leaning heavily against it for support. Halting footsteps, and then another stumble. Vedek watched the figure fall to the snow. He didn't rise.

Jogging to the fallen figure's side, Vedek rolled the grey-cloaked man over.

He cursed at what he saw. Tarl lay before him, a jagged cut slicing down his forehead. Blood poured from his skin, dripping into his eye, and had already soaked his neck and the top of his linen tunic.

Cras, behind him, started. "That's the Cleric!" He grumbled. "If one of the knights did this, I'll have their hide."

"Not a knight," Tarl whispered. He winced, and his eyes fluttered open. Vedek held his pained gaze. "I need to find Emen," Tarl breathed.

Nodding, Vedek scooped Tarl up into his arms. "I'll take you to him."

As Vedek hustled through the dark streets, carrying Tarl, Mari appeared, jogging beside him. "Reports from the Templar, sir." She stared hard at Tarl's

face, and even though Vedek had tried to cover his head with the kid's cloak, his bloody forehead and his dreadlocks couldn't be hidden.

"Go ahead." Vedek slowed, ducking down an alley with Mari.

"They've set up trebuchets at the main barricade in Tizzy Town and along the palace walls. They have a stock of Honey Fire. Looks like they're almost done with building the first trebuchet. They should be able to launch the Fire in two hours. Maybe less."

Vedek cursed. "Is Appleworth done with gathering his supplies?"

"He just reported in, sir."

"And Shila?"

Mari paused. "I haven't heard from her since you left the armory."

"Damn." He chewed his lip. Frowned. "Mari, try to get back into Tizzy Town. There's a tunnel under the north bridge crossing. Leads to a tavern in the middle of Tizzy Town. There may be a giant there." Vedek sighed. "If you tell him you're with Captain Woo and with Cras, it should be all right. But we need to warn them. They need to seek shelter before those Fire Pots start flying."

"I'll get it done, sir."

"Be careful." Vedek nodded to Mari and prepared to head out. Her hand on his arm stilled him.

"Sir," Mari began. She looked down at Tarl. Her face was stone, and yet her eyes were filled with storms. "This is the Mage. The one our knights on the King's Highway were transporting. The fugitive." Gleaming starlight reflected off the ice-covered snow and filled her eyes with lightning and shadows. "Is he a suspect?"

Vedek swallowed. "No."

"Where are you taking him?" He could see her struggling in the pinched lines around her eyes, the way she held her mouth, tight and almost grimacing. Doubt, fear, confusion, and worry bled together and twisted her round face until she bit her lip. "And why?"

He sighed and then remembered the carved idol of the Weeping God Mari kept on her. A reminder, Mari had said one time he'd asked about it. She hadn't elaborated. He'd carried an idol, too, of the True Gods until very recently, but his faith had never been as strong as hers. "He's an ally," he said carefully. "And yes, he's a Mage. But he's a good person." He hesitated. "He's not the only Mage you know, Mari."

She closed her eyes and turned away, and he saw her shoulders rise and fall.

“I’m taking him to be healed. He’s been helping us this whole time. Him, and another.”

“You mean the ranger.” She spoke over her shoulder.

“I never said any names.”

Mari let her head fall back as she exhaled. She slowly turned back around, though she made a point to not look at Tarl in Vedek’s arms. “Sir, what are we going to do about the church? About the Temple?” She gestured to the city, bleak and desolate without the folk and beneath a layer of snow. “Saving the folk is what we’re meant to do. But are we really planning on attacking the church?”

Vedek’s jaw clenched. Beneath his tunic, he felt Emen’s amulet rub against his chest, just over his heart. Emen had torn a strip of his poppy cape and had woven it through the braided white ring before he’d blessed the amulet in his palms. The whole string had seemed to gleam, and when Emen had laid it around Vedek’s neck, he’d felt a shiver course through his body.

He had tossed his idol—a carved figure of the Penitent God, kept in his sword pouch—into the snow on his way out of the Whispered Mile.

But Mari hadn’t seen what he’d seen, or heard what he’d heard. She didn’t love a Mage, a Paladin, and she was being forced into a black choice.

“After you’ve informed Cras, go to the Temple. Make sure the priests are all right. Keep them sheltered in their Temple until this is over. We don’t need to involve the church in this.” He paused. “I would welcome their support. They should be happy that we’re protecting the folk.” He wasn’t holding his breath.

Mari smiled, though, and he saw her shoulders unwind just a bit. “Yes, sir,” she said. “Do you need anything else?” Her eyes briefly darted down to Tarl.

“Just to get him to the healer.”

She nodded and saluted and then checked the streets. “All clear, sir. Go!”

Vedek nodded his thanks and jogged out into the night. Breath ghosted in front of his face, fogging his sight, but the night was clear, and all of the stars were out. A black moon, though, rose in the east, darkening the sky. A night for endings.

He slipped into the Whispered Mile through Daisytown again. The sidewalks in the ruined Mile were too cluttered with debris to walk, so he ran

down the snow-covered street instead. On his way out, he'd dragged his cape behind him, smothering the boot prints he and Tarl had left. Emen had been more careful, apparently. There would be prints now, but nothing he could do about that.

Vedek eyed the Fallen House as he rounded the edge. He'd have to ask Emen about it later. He wanted to hear stories about the past, about what the House had been like, and about being a Mage. He wanted to know everything there was to know about Emen and about his folk.

He shifted Tarl to his shoulders for the descent down to the House's catacombs. Without the witchlight, he nearly stumbled, but managed to find his feet. He called out for Emen, shouting into the darkness.

There was no reply.

His heart pounded and worry clenched his throat as he raced down the main corridor in the catacombs, heading for the meditation rotunda. Emen should have responded. He should be there. What had happened?

Vedek ran when he caught sight of the camphor wood fire, spelled by Emen to stay ever lit. He was breathing hard, and Tarl was heavy in his arms, but he pushed on, and then skidded to a halt when he entered the rotunda. Gently, he set Tarl down, laying him out, and rose.

His eyes searched the chamber. It was empty.

On the slate wall where they had scrawled their evidence and shared theories on the Blood Mage and the demon, only a single line of chalk remained. New words, written by Emen, after he'd erased everything else. *Get the kid and get to safety. Please.* And below that, two more, and the sight of those stilled Vedek's heart in his chest. *I'm sorry.*

"No..." Vedek breathed. He turned, circling in the chamber, staring into every recess and alcove. The fire cast long shadows, but enough light to see that he was alone. Entirely, utterly alone. Emen had vanished, fled, left him behind, and the only words he'd left for Vedek had been *I'm sorry.*

He whirled again, and his eyes caught on the camphor fire. The blankets had been there, right there, and now they were gone. Everything, gone. All evidence of Emen, all evidence of his presence, utterly vanished. Of them, and of their lovemaking, gone. Of their words and promises and vows, erased.

Vedek's breath came hard and fast, short, ragged gasps that made him light-headed. His heart was pounding, racing, and his blood burned and froze in the same moment.

He circled again, slower. Emen was gone. *Gone*.

They were supposed to work together. Supposed to stop the Mage and the demon and save the city together. Damn that man! He wouldn't have run; that wasn't his way. Vedek's heart plunged, and his throat closed as he realized that Emen must have gone to face this darkness on his own. He'd left Vedek behind.

In the back of Vedek's mind, he recognized a noise, some kind of sound, grating on his ears. He pushed it away, and instead stared at the patch of stone where they had made love, and where Emen had blessed his amulet and slipped it over Vedek's head. Frantic, Vedek reached under his armor, his sweaty palms grasping for the leather braid. His hand closed around the circlet.

It was only after he'd crashed to his knees, the amulet in the palm of his hand, that he realized he was shouting. Bellowing, he hurled his rage at the silent rotunda. His broken heart cried out, bleeding inside of him, and he screamed Emen's name, pitching forward. Resting his helmet on the cold ground, the first of his tears fell.

His tears rained onto the stone, and rivers formed beneath his eyes.

Across the rotunda, Tarl pushed himself up, blinking owlishly and rubbing his head.

What would he make of Emen's messy handwriting, his farewell scratched in chalk? Or of Vedek huddled on the floor, his poppy cape sweeping around him, an ocean of misery?

"Oh Emen," Tarl finally breathed. "What have you done?"

Chapter Fifteen

There weren't many ways into the catacombs. The Knights Guard kept them sealed tight, since the catacombs connected the battlements at the docks and in the midcity, and to the dungeons beneath the palace grounds. They held the tombs of the dead Kings and House Lords, and of honored Knights Guard. It was impossible to break into, or so the stories went.

Emen shucked his cloak at the edge of the tributary running down the length of the Walker's Mile. The water bubbled toward the river Rea, calm and deceptively welcoming. It would be cold, bitterly so, and Emen had to swim all the way to the docks. He sent a brief plea to the Winds before he dove in.

For a moment, he couldn't move, shocked by the sudden power of the frigid water. A thousand ice shards seemed to stab him, inside and out, and he shuddered through the pain. Breaking the surface, he heaved in a gulp of air, coughing out river water, and then started pulling himself forward. Stroke after stroke, he swam down the tributary, huffing out his breaths.

When he hit the river, beneath the main crossing of the docks and the city, Emen pushed himself across the stronger current, losing yards to the downflow in his crossing. He still managed to reach the stone pilings of the palace's undergirding above the catacombs' corpse gate. He hand walked himself down the stone wall, clinging to jutting rocks.

By the time he reached the corpse gate, his teeth were chattering as his blood slowed. He clung to the gate, wide bars of iron crosshatched over the palace's outflow. A word, and he summoned fire to his palms. He pressed them to the iron bars, and then breathed the incantation to heighten the flame.

The iron was old and the water had rusted parts of the crosshatch. He focused his fire on the weakened parts and felt the bars tremble beneath his hands. Finally, the iron snapped, and his flames died as he wrenched the broken grate out of his way.

Emen swam up the palace's outflow, against the downhill current. He heaved himself along with his hands on the stone walls, helping to push him forward. The water slowed, tapered off until just a trickle remained, and he crawled up the outflow on his hands and knees.

He kept crawling, moving in the darkness as the river dripped from his clothes. His teeth finally stopped chattering, and he shook his head to clear the last of the river's icy grasp from his mind and body.

The catacombs' dungeon outflow lay ahead, joining to the palace's. Emen turned right, sliding on his belly through the narrow tunnel. He smelled the sour stench of old piss and heard the skitter of tiny creatures fleeing in the darkness. Roaches, or spiders, what with the filth down in the catacombs. Rats squeaked, but Emen pushed on, ignoring the light press of many legs running across his back.

Ahead, the tunnel opened, the trash and filth chute for the dungeons. Guards posted down below would throw the waste of the prisoners—and their guard post—down the tunnel and out to the river. He took a breath, finally free of the fetid stench of the narrow tunnel, and hauled himself up to his hands and knees.

Keeping to the shadows, Emen hung back inside the mouth of the chute. The dungeons were dark, pitch black, and he didn't see any guards or torches or fires lit. He frowned. There should be fires.

There were noises, though. He heard crying, low, mournful keens and belly-aching sobs, and the high-pitched tears of a younger teen. Too young for the dungeons. He grit his teeth, growling in the dark.

He heard something else, too. A wet sucking, almost like lapping. Like a creature, or a beast, drinking down some sort of liquid.

Emen sniffed the air. Above the piss and the shit and the near-frozen stone, he smelled something else.

Blood.

He was moving before he knew it, muttering the incantation, and white light burst from the palm of his hand, shooting to the top of the arched dungeons and illuminating the black interior. In the cells, the prisoners of the Templar sat huddled together for warmth and comfort and crying in the darkness. He counted hundreds, the cells going on and on, cut into the stone walls and packed to the brim. His eyes caught on the cells spanning the opposite wall where the prisoners were silent.

Pools of blood stained the stone ground, dark in the shadows of his spell. The light was fading, but Emen still saw the outlines of the prisoners' ravaged bodies, their necks torn open. Dead eyes stared at nothing, faces contorted in a last gasp of agony. At the edges of the darkness, Emen saw the first wisps of ghostlight forming. New ghosts made tonight.

Movement above caught his eyes. Emen jerked his head up, and he spotted three crawling blood possessors slithering across the ceiling. Their hairless,

mottled, grey-skinned bodies caught the dying light of his spell, and he could see the twisted rot twining around the remnants of their flesh. Not vumpyre. The blood possessors were never alive. They were hungry, angry ghosts, or disembodied demons, stealing flesh and blood to walk in a body again. More beast than any type of human, though they often stole human flesh. The three above had human bodies wrapped around their darkness, but they moved like spiders, crawling upside down and shrieking through dead and shattered vocal chords. Sounds like rustling parchment and the crack of flame echoed through the dungeons.

Emen ripped his sword from his scabbard and stood fast, circling beneath the blood possessors. He saw them spread out, skittering to the corners, and, as the light forming his spell finally disappeared, he heard them jump.

He cast again, this time a blaze of white light arcing around him in a circle, a pure breath of the Winds shooting from his palms. He caught one as it fell, incinerating the beast in his blaze. The other two missed the arclight, landing instead on their hands and feet and screaming again. Up close, he saw their jaws were unhinged, shattered off of their dead hosts' bodies, and rot had set into one of the blood possessor's jaws.

Emen muttered again, drawing on the Winds and the Whispers in his mind. The Winds were strong, stronger than they had ever been, and gone was the bitterness, the rage, the screaming and the gruff shouts in the base of his skull. He felt full, full of life, of power, of lightness.

He drew on that, raising his palm at one of the demons. The demon snarled and charged, slobber and blood falling from its destroyed mouth. *Winds, draw into me and push your energy through me. I am your vessel. Destroy this creature of the Abyss!* He pushed with his soul, and another burst of light leapt from his palm, slamming into the blood possessor and incinerating the beast into a wisp of ash scattered across the stone.

Behind, he heard the wet slick of the last blood possessor's lips, panting as spittle fell from their mouth. He whirled, but a dark shape blocked his view, and he couldn't see the undead beast charge. He heard a grunt—female, human, alive—and then the cut of a blade slicing through the darkness. A cry, the blood possessor's death squeal, and the gurgling sounds of blood slipping from the beast's body.

Panting, then, in the dark. "Could you cast that spell again?" A woman spoke, her voice gruff and standing close to Emen. "Give us some light?"

Emen conjured flame to his palm and sent it shooting to the demon's body. The undead corpse burst into flames and the body's fat and rotten skin pickled and curled beneath the fire, shooting up black smoke.

Next to him, Emen sized up the woman knight, her cape sweeping the floor and catching the firelight. Blonde hair trailed down from one half of her shaved head, held tight to her skull in a twisted braid. She was easily two heads taller than Emen, and she watched the blood possessor turn to ash beneath his spelled flame.

"What is that?" she asked, pointing with her sword.

"Blood possessor." He guessed she was barely thirty harvests. A child, then, during the Sealing. She wouldn't remember the darkness or the stories told to kids about demons in that darkness. Too young. "Undead souls that possess corpses. They drink blood to draw power into the stolen body."

"Like vumpyre?"

Emen shook his head. "Vumpyre were once alive. Their souls are trapped in their undead bodies. It's a prison, and they slowly go mad."

"Ah." She kept watching the flames. Eventually, she turned to Emen and held out her arm. "I'm Shila. Knights Guard."

Emen smiled, though it was tight. "I've heard about you," he said, grasping her arm.

She nodded back, a tight, professional smile quickly curving her lips. He could barely see her face in the shadows. "Thank you," she said, "for saving Captain Vedek in the valley."

Emen faltered. Vedek wouldn't have said anything. He could barely believe it himself, and he wouldn't have risked Emen's secret like that. He breathed deep, trying to still the sudden frantic beating of his heart. Vedek wouldn't betray him. He just wouldn't.

Shila saw his eyes widen. "He didn't say anything," she said. A small smile, more honest this time, and sad. "I know you two are close. He was destroyed when he thought you were a suspect."

"How did you know?" Emen watched her carefully, trying to read her shadowed eyes.

"I am a knight." She arched a thick brow high on her forehead. "He wouldn't talk about what happened, but I took the remains of his armor and

went back to where we'd found his battle. He had a sketch of your boots in his armor and your prints were all over the road. But not attacking him. Defending him. You must have healed him, somehow, after he was stabbed. I found his blood everywhere. The impaling. It left a hole in the road. And I saw his armor." Shila stopped, swallowed, and blinked. "After, you brought him to Crossroads." She paused, eyed him carefully. "It was you who fought the demon. You saved the Captain, and everyone." Another long look. "You're a Mage, aren't you?"

Emen stayed quiet. "Answering that could get me killed," he said carefully, after a moment.

"Not by me." Shila grabbed a handful of poppy cape and cleaned her sword, wiping away the blackened blood of the undead and a brighter, more vibrant color of blood beneath that. She sheathed her sword into its hilt. "You're a friend of the Captain and that's all I need to know."

Emen nodded, but didn't acknowledge her words. He was already uncomfortable with how exposed he was, with even being known so openly to Vedek, and then with casting spells and fighting demons in front of the prisoners. Now there was Shila, who knew what he'd done in the valley. Unease crawled through him and he yearned to flee, back to his shadowed anonymity. "How did you get in here?" He changed the subject. "Aren't there Templar guards at the entrance?"

"Not anymore." Her voice left no room for questions.

"Let's get these prisoners out. We need to get them to safety."

Shila nodded, and together they strode across the dungeons, heading for the cells. Dank rooms carved from stone and sealed with iron bars, the cells were bursting all down the length of the stone dungeon. The prisoners, the city folk, pressed their faces to the bars and gripped the cold iron in both hands, their eyes wide as they watched the two come near. "You here to save us?" A woman cried. "Oh please!"

Shila answered, her booming voice thundering down the dungeon. "Stand back," she shouted. "We have to get you out of there."

"I've got it," Emen muttered. He smiled at a young teen, a girl with blonde pigtails and tear tracks on her face. "We'll get you out," he whispered to her. "You're going to be safe." She swallowed and nodded, and took a step back when Emen gestured to her.

He laid his hands against the iron bars, testing their strength. The metal was old, but not as old as the corpse gate had been. He'd need more for this. Drawing inward, Emen focused his mind, dipping down into the join in his soul to the Winds. He felt the Whispers respond and pulled their power through his soul.

Flame curled from his hands, wrapping in sinews and snaking over the iron bars and the stone walls, down the length of the cramped and crowded cells. The fire burned white and blue, swirling around the metal until the joints were soft and melting and the locks were glowing white. "Shila," he muttered. "Your turn."

She grunted, then stood back and kicked. The lock snapped, and the door broke off its hinges, and the cell was open. Cheers rose as the prisoners slipped through the gap, and Shila went down the line of cells, hauling back and kicking at the spelled locks, breaking open the cells.

They had just finished opening the last of the cells when the stone floor trembled beneath Emen's feet. The prisoners had followed Shila, working down the line, and they were near the arched stairway that led to the underground entrance attached to the battlements. They hadn't felt the shaking.

It could only be one thing. "Shila!" Emen hollered. "Get them out of here!" He turned, letting go of the bars, and saw the dungeon floor break apart. Stone and brick fell into the earth. He saw movement in the black depths, twitches of rock and earth that belied the creatures moving beneath. He drew his sword, swallowed, and waited.

A skeletal hand shot up, grasping onto the cracked stone. A bleach-bone arm followed, and then a grinning skull pushed through, shaking debris and black dirt from the top of its head. Behind the first, six more bony hands shot out of the crumbled and destroyed dungeons. Possessed bones rose from the crypts. Mad cackles echoed from the grinning bones, dry as dust.

"Shila!" Emen shouted again. "You need to go! Now!"

He heard her boots slapping against the stones, running back toward him. "I'm not leaving you!" she bellowed back.

"Get them to safety!" Emen turned his back on her and looked up. Stone archways crisscrossed beneath the catacombs' cavernous ceiling. Rocky spires thrust down, some dark, some white as foam. He eyed the connections, the loadbearing joints chiseled into the roof.

Summoning his power again, Emen felt his heart strain, felt his body waning. He was out of practice, and as strong as he felt, there were still physical limits to his power. He'd expended so much in so little time, and he didn't have much left to give.

It would have to do, though. He raised one hand high above his head and aimed for the crossbeams.

The possessed bones stalked closer, their bodies brittle and trembling beneath the dark magic holding them together. Pomegranate flame curled over their bones. He could feel the pull of their magic, black and as cold as the river, tugging on his soul.

With a whisper, he shot another burst of light—this time with substance—to the roof. He felt the impact down to his teeth, felt the tremors rocking through the ceiling and down the struts holding the crossbeams aloft. *Vedek*, he thought with a swallow, *I do love you*.

The possessed bones never looked up, and the ancient stone rained down on them, turning their bodies to dust. The ceiling kept trembling, though, and Emen felt a heavy section of the archway slam into the ground behind him. He ducked, trying to shield himself, and heard another section break free.

Something slammed into his side, and he grunted, rolling along the cold floor. The ceiling creaked again, long and loud. Orange caught his eyes, the bright poppy of a cape, and he saw Shila running toward him.

"No!" He shouted. "Get back!"

She skidded to a halt, throwing her arms up to shield herself just before a dark spire, twice the height of a man, let loose from the cavern above their heads. It fell, plunging down through the darkness and shattered in the space between their bodies. Stone crumpled all around Emen, tumbling on top of him, and he choked on wet dust and the vapor of rock. He stumbled, trying to free himself, and then the heavy weight of debris slammed into his shoulder. Falling, he tried to shield himself, but the ceiling was creaking again and the last thing he felt was a sharp pain in his leg before everything went dark.

She wasn't speaking in that terrifying, otherworldly growl anymore, but Jon was still petrified of Emra. He'd bitten his nails down to bloody stubs and he was dead certain his heart was going to give out. His entire chest was tight, as if caught mid-drowning, and he was two seconds away from screaming.

Still, he trailed behind Emra as she glided into the curtain-covered back room of Big's tavern. Their full circle was there. All of the students who had first joined with him and Emra, curious about the Winds and yearning for more. They'd meditated together, woven amulets together, studied together, but when the Master found them, it was Emra he'd pulled aside. Biting his lip, Jon's eyes slid across to Emra as he took his place next to hers.

Candles lay strewn on the floor, and the scent of wax and the crackle of wood wicks hung in the air. Their circle stood for Emra, standing shoulder to shoulder. Silence, save for the slow beat of Emra's boots hitting the floor as she walked to the head. Jon looked away before she faced him. He couldn't stand to see her eyes. This wasn't the woman he knew, not anymore.

Emra looked over her circle. She smiled, indulgent, and Jon's pulse quickened.

"Tonight," she began, spreading her hands wide. "We will finally realize our true potentials and harness the powers we have so long sought."

Murmurs from the students, excited gasps and whispers as heads shot right and left. Jon swallowed and looked at his boots.

"We must draw our energies together." Emra lifted her palms slowly, and grey smoke began tumbling through her fingers. The others gasped again. Jon's throat clenched as the smoke began to curl in and out of everyone's legs and boots. He shivered when it caressed his calf, and he felt the shock of ice stabbing into his skin. This was too much. Too much, and he couldn't take it, not anymore.

Heaving a breath, Jon tried to speak, but the smoke snaked up his spine, slithering under his cloak and tunic. He trembled, and a thousand pinpricks of ice stabbed him in the back. He tried to twist away, tried to step out of the circle, but he couldn't move. Panting, Jon's eyes darted to Emra. She was watching him, her flaming irises blazing.

"Emra," Jon pleaded. He could only whisper, but she heard him. She smirked when she did. The smoke continued to rise, swirling around his neck.

"Raise your hands." Emra spoke to the circle, now consumed by currents of her twisting smoke. Everyone's hands rose. Jon watched his rise, too, without his permission.

A sick wash of disgust crawled down Jon's spine as Emra's magic crashed over his body. This wasn't right. A tear slid free from the corner of his eye. He should have stayed with Tarl. He should have helped him.

Power rose within Jon, a response to Emra's magic. The patter of something wet hitting the floorboards sounded, a few drops at first, and then more, until it seemed to be raining. Something wet was sliding down Jon's back, hot against his skin. He looked sideways. Crimson blood fell like waterfalls from the swirling smoke, soaking the floorboards. Drips ran down his fingers, down the palms of his hands, and splashed to the floor.

One of the others shouted, high and nervous. Another was breathing hard, panicking. If only he could help them. Jon swallowed and tasted blood on his tongue. He couldn't even help himself.

Emra laughed suddenly, the sound grating against Jon's ears and scratching on his soul. "Now," she cried, "prepare yourselves!"

Before them, the roiling smoke tumbled together, seething in the center of their circle. It roared, rising high in a great eddy, and then fell, smoothing to cold satin. Shimmering, the surface of the smoke seemed to harden, turning to blackened glass. Flame curled around the edges of the glass, struggling to break free.

Through the smoke and on the other side of the darkness, Jon saw shapes moving, coming toward them.

Vedek sat in the snow, leaning against the ruined walls of the Fallen House. He stared at the stars and at the black moon hanging low over the capital. A night for endings, he'd thought, only just before. His breath caught in his chest again, and he looked down. Fuck it. He wasn't going to cry again, not over this. He wasn't.

He was no stranger to heartbreak. He'd loved and lost over the years. Emen had been a fantasy, a yearned-for hope, but he'd taken lovers while he had been wishing that Emen would see him. Nothing lasted. Was it all because of him? Had he done something to chase his lovers off? He hadn't cared in the past. He hadn't been serious before, not about any of them.

This, though. He had been serious about Emen. Deathly, eternally serious. He'd spend the rest of his life at Emen's side if the Paladin would let him. He'd leave Kina, desert his post, abandon his station, with just one word. He had tasted, for one brief moment, the fruition of all of his dreams.

And now, agony. It was all-encompassing, all-consuming, drowning his heart in anguish. All of his dreams were now mocking riddles scratching at the

inside of his skull. His world, so many times destroyed in only the past few days, shattered again. The parts and pieces were struggling to reform in some new way and Vedek was just trying to catch up.

Emen had loved him. He *had*. He had been there, kissing Vedek and holding him close, whispering in his ear and stroking him deep. He'd given him his amulet. He had been there with Vedek, all hot skin, and the scent of smoke and herbs and leather, and of magic tickling the charged air between them.

But Emen had left. He'd cast him aside, ignored their plan. He'd left him behind, and the words *I'm sorry* had *good-bye* written in the spaces between the letters.

What now? Vedek's world was torn asunder, and he didn't know which way to go. He had fled the meditation rotunda. Too many memories clawed at his mind.

Snow crunched beside him. Worn boots stopped, stained and laced as the highlanders wore their boots. His mind flashed, remembering one of the charges Tarl had been implicated in. *Theft from villages along the Sky Road, multiple counts*. He closed his eyes.

"We have to stop her."

Vedek rolled his head against the crumbled brick. He felt dull, his mind slowed. In the starlight, Tarl was a dark statue wreathed in his grey cloak, and the wild mess of his locks stood out in all directions. He looked almost like a demon.

Vedek shuddered and looked away. Too much magic. Too much for his battered heart. "How?" he grunted. "We've lost our Mage." A deep swallow, his throat rising and falling.

Tarl squinted, glaring into the distance. "I don't know where Emen has gone," he finally said, his voice tight. "But we can't give up. Not now. Not while Emra is out there." He turned blazing eyes back to Vedek. "She's the Blood Mage. I saw her with a sacrificed Templar. She's a murderer."

Case closed, he thought. A tiny smile, pained, quirked his lips. The case of his lifetime, and he'd gained the love of his life, and then lost him, as well as his command, the city, and so many of the folk. Was it worth it? Or should he have just filed those bodies as nothing more than another murder in the capital?

"Again, how?" Vedek shook his head. "I don't know about you, but I don't know how to stop a Blood Mage. Do you?"

Tarl's lips thinned. He didn't speak. The bruise on his forehead was a dark patch that sucked in the starlight, though he'd rubbed away most of the blood from his face.

"She's in Tizzy Town? They're locked down. If Mari got in, then everyone should be hiding. The Templar are about to lay siege to the quarter."

"And kill everyone?" Anger stained Tarl's cheeks a ruby red.

"I have people in there too," Vedek growled. "We're warning them. Trying to save them."

"You're not doing anything!" Tarl loomed over Vedek, a shadowed scowl in the darkness. "You're sitting in the dark, pouting."

"Boy..." His heart roared, and his breath came hard and fast. "Don't even start."

"Do you think Emen would like to see you like this? Wallowing? Or do you think he'd want you to act? To do *something*?"

Roaring, Vedek lunged at Tarl, grabbing him around the knees and tackling him to the ground. Bloodlust surged in his veins, and as he pushed the Mage down into the snow, he thought he might kill the highlander. His rage rushed hard, thundering through him. He felt the burn, the crystallization that froze his mind right before the kill, right before he prepared to strike. He felt the coil of his muscles, the strength in his body, ready to lunge.

Tarl stared up at him, defiant to the last, his chin high and his eyes gleaming.

His bloodlust vanished, replaced by a formless ache. Vedek rolled off Tarl, flopping on his back into the snow. "Emen doesn't give a shit what I do," he growled. "But he did ask me to keep you safe." Bitterness rose at that. He never did like sharing.

"No one will be safe until Emra has been dealt with." Tarl pushed out of the snow, shaking out his cloak and his tunic. "We have to act. Now."

Vedek sighed, long and loud. Everyone had turned against everyone in the city. They were defending the students against the Templar but now had to attack one of the students and save the Templar and everyone else. It hurt to think about.

Stilling, Vedek saw Shane's pained face in his mind. Heard his quiet voice agreeing to show mercy to two teenaged girls. He'd been almost... understanding.

Could he risk it? Gods, he'd be a fool to even imagine Shane wouldn't run him through the moment he saw him. Would he listen at all?

"There may be one thing we could do." He sat up and met Tarl's questioning gaze. "But you won't like it."

Tarl had, in fact, hated the plan.

Vedek had to remind him that it wasn't just his life that was at risk. Vedek, too, was a fugitive from the law and a betrayer against the Templar and the King. If it came down to it, there should be a fight among the Templar to see which of the two of them would be executed first for the bigger offense.

They didn't speak as they strode across the city. The plan was simple. Find the Templar.

No sign of them, though, not until they crossed the river. Vedek squinted as he spotted the rising frames of the trebuchets and stacks of Honey Fire pots. Torches blazed, lighting up the trebuchets and the Templar working fast to finish their building. Crimson and black figures jogged to and fro, hustling over the snow.

And, standing apart, Shane watched. His arms were crossed and his face was pinched, his eyes squinting. Thickened muscles bulged, straining against the bloodred silk.

Next to Vedek, Tarl hissed. They shared a quick glance. Vedek rested his hand over Emen's amulet on his chest, tucked back beneath his armor. He remembered Emen's smile, the taste of his lips. He could still feel the echo of him, deep inside his body. *You should be here.*

A heavy sigh, and then they moved, heading straight for Shane.

Templar soldiers guarding the perimeter grabbed them first, cursing and drawing their swords. Vedek felt the cold bite of a sword press against his throat. Next to him, Tarl had a sword pressed to his chest. He raised his hands and tried to shout over the Templar, asking to speak to Shane.

"Get on your knees!" The Templar bellowed. "Get the fuck down!"

Tarl moved too slowly, and one of the soldiers kicked him in the back of the legs, sending him sprawling to the snow. Vedek reached for him, trying to help, but got the butt end of a sword in the face. He heard a crack, and then a crunch, and blood streamed from his nose again.

“We need to see Shane!” Vedek shouted. “The High Templar!”

“Fuck you!” One of the Templar pressed his sword to Vedek’s neck. “I have every right to slit your throat right now.”

Shane wasn’t too far away. Vedek darted his eyes to the Templar, pressing his blade against his skin. He peered around the man. Spied Shane.

“Shane!” Vedek hollered. “Shane!”

A heavy backhand sent him to the snow, and then there were boots holding him down as swords cut the ties of his armor and hands stripped him down to his tunic and leggings. Free of the protection from his armor, the Templar started to kick, throttling him with their boots as he curled in the snow.

“Stop!” The booming voice broke over Vedek and the Templar, halting everyone. *Gods, Shane.*

“Sir!”

Vedek clung to the snow, breathing hard, and heard one of the soldiers address the High Templar.

“Captain Vedek and this infidel were headed for you. They’re up to no good. They’re trying to hurt you.”

Groaning, Vedek struggled, but rose to his knees. He felt Emen’s amulet swing free of his tunic. No going back now. “Shane,” he grunted. “We have information for you. We’ve found the Blood Mage.”

Down the street, Templar shouted as they worked on their trebuchets. Next to Vedek, Tarl lay on the snow, watching him silently. Templar circled them, and Shane stared into Vedek’s eyes as his jaw clenched hard.

“How?” Shane finally asked.

A heavy sigh. “We’ve been investigating together.” Vedek nodded to Tarl. “This Mage is an informant and a healer. He’s given me information.”

“He’s also been seen helping the rebels,” one of the Templar spat. He stepped on Tarl’s back, pinning him with his boot. “He’s an infidel. He deserves to die.”

Tarl swallowed. His eyes flashed to Vedek, shining with unshed panic.

“Shane.” He flinched as he moved, but managed to stand. “Please. He’s done nothing but help us. He was with the rebels because the Blood Mage is a student.”

Shane's eyes were fixed on Vedek's amulet, on the white circlet woven with a braid of his poppy cape. His jaw worked over, clenching and unclenching, and even the Templar started to fidget.

"Leave us," Shane finally breathed.

"Sir!" The Templar standing on Tarl's back protested.

"Leave us!" Shane shouted. Spit flew from his lips.

Cowed, the Templar withdrew, retreating halfway down the block and taking up position again. Their eyes dug under Vedek's skin, but he didn't care about them. Only about Shane.

Shane spoke first. "You turned against me." His voice was hard, firm.

"Not you." Vedek tried to read those dark eyes. "The Inquisition. We couldn't stand by and watch all those folk be put to death."

"I lost eleven men tonight."

His knights had been busy. At least five from the students, more from his knights. He wondered who, and where. "I am sorry that it has come to this, Shane."

Shane's eyes dropped to Emen's amulet. "You should have told me."

"I didn't feel like dying." Vedek left out that he hadn't had his amulet until very recently. "I lost knights, too. An entire unit escorting this Mage down to the capital. He was the only survivor." Tarl had pushed himself to his feet and he stood just behind Vedek's shoulder.

Shane glared at Tarl. "You're the witch of the mountains?"

A beat, and then Tarl nodded. He didn't speak.

"And you're sure he didn't summon the demon?"

Vedek nodded. The blood dripping from his nose caught in his mouth and he spat crimson onto the snow. "He found the Blood Mage working with one of your Templar's body's. She used his blood in some kind of ritual. Cut off his head, drained him of everything."

Shane's eyes blazed, widening, and he turned to Tarl. "Tell me."

Tarl's eyes slid to Vedek's first, but then he spoke, sharing Emra's blood ritual and how she'd been on the brink of summoning, drawing darkness to her like silk. He spoke of how she'd been enraged, and powerful, more powerful than was possible. His cut forehead and blood-smeared cheek told of her attack.

Shane's jawline spoke of grim rage, a thundering anger buried deep. Vedek watched him carefully as Shane growled. "These are the Black Days. The days at the end of the year when the Abyss is at its zenith."

"How do you know so much about the Magi and the old ways?" It couldn't just be research.

Shane fixed a hard stare on Vedek but said nothing.

"We just want to help, Shane," Vedek finally said. He prayed that this would work. "It's not about us. It's not about the Inquisition. It's not about the knights. She's dangerous, and she—and the demon—will kill everyone that they can. Templar, knights, the King, ordinary folk. We have to band together."

"Magi and Templar?" Shane's eyebrows arched high.

"I am not a Mage." Vedek clenched Emen's amulet. "This was a gift."

A new darkness filled Shane's eyes. "Everything is changing, Vedek," he sighed. He pressed his lips together and closed his eyes. "What do you propose?"

"We need to get in there and find her, Templar and Knights Guard together. We don't want to hurt anyone else. These trebuchets?" Vedek frowned and jerked his chin toward the construction. "You're going to kill so many folk and anger everyone. That's not what we're here to do. We're here to safeguard the folk. Safeguard Kina."

"That's your job," Shane corrected. He swallowed. "Mine is to keep the darkness at bay."

"Then we have the same goal." Vedek held out his arm. He was shaking, but he grit his teeth and held on. "Let's work together. Stop this Blood Mage."

Shane stared at Vedek's outstretched arm. He closed his eyes, exhaling. When he spoke, his voice was softer, quieter. "The King told me to make an example tonight. He wants all of the Magi dead, and anyone associated with them." His eyes pointedly looked at Vedek's amulet.

"What do you want?" Vedek held his breath. He could die here, right now. "We can do this together. Our forces, together, working for the folk, working against this Blood Mage."

"You have," Shane started and then stopped. Gritting his teeth, he started again. "A pure heart, Captain Vedek. Such things diminish after pain." He inhaled, held his breath. "Most men don't think like you do anymore."

“We can do this together, Shane.” He thrust his arm at the High Templar. “We can.” He swallowed, ignoring how his heart cried and how the shackles of pain had started squeezing down on his love in the empty rotunda.

Shane met his gaze. He smiled. “This day will be remembered.” Reaching out his hand, Shane clasped Vedek’s arm.

Beaming, Vedek exhaled. His spine uncurled, the tension draining away. Everything went black and he slumped forward, crashing into Shane.

Jon screamed as the black glass wavered. Flame roared over the edges, dancing along the circumference of the glass. So many bodies moved on the other side of the glass, snarling and roaring.

It wavered again and then bulged. His eyes darted to Emra. She was chanting, her eyes back to blackness and flame as she undulated, rocking and writhing in time with her chants and the roars beneath the glass.

Another bulge, and the glass cracked. Snaking across the surface, black smoke hissed from the breach, and creaking filled the room.

Jon shivered from fear and from the ice leeching all of his heat and his energy from the marrow of his bones. The smoke kept crawling up his body, stroking his face, and he felt a curl of grey slither against his temple. Blood smeared in its wake.

“Emra,” he whispered. He pleaded with her, begging with his eyes for her to stop. “Emra!” Smoke poured into his mouth, filling it with blood, and he coughed against the copper-tang flooding his tongue.

Before Emra, the flat plane of dark glass shuddered, creaking in every direction. Cracks spider-webbed from the break, and thundering beats pounded on the other side.

“Come, my beautiful one,” Emra purred. “Come to me.”

Rumbling seized the room, and then the glass shattered, splintering into thousands of shards that fell into the Abyss. Roaring dark clouds of oil-slick gloom rolled over the edge of the portal, filling the room. Shrieking followed, demons and ghouls and shades and the undead rushing the portal and breaking into the world. In the distance war drums sounded, harsh beats mixing with the guttural grunts rising from the hordes of dark creatures.

Frozen, panicked students came face-to-face with the demons as they clambered through the portal. Snarling, the demons tore into the students in the

circle, slashing throats and stabbing ebony swords and flaming maces through their stomachs and into their skulls. Blood burst through the air, raining down, soaking the demons, and they roared with glee.

One lithe demon sprang from the portal, grinning madly as he took in the chaos raging around the portal. His eyes fixed on Emra.

She stood before him, suddenly still, watching with eyes no longer filled with flame. Her chest heaved, deep breaths coursing through her.

“Well done, child,” the demon purred. One claw stroked down her cheek, the tip slicing her jaw line as he flicked his hand away. “You performed perfectly.”

“I did what I was taught,” she breathed.

The demon struck, stabbing her through the throat and then slashing her neck, opening her up with a flood of hot blood. He cupped his hands, catching the rush that spurted from her, and drank. His dark eyes rolled back in his monstrous skull as he downed her fluids. He spilled, tipping too much, and it poured over his face, sticking to his mottled black skin and his roughened scales.

Emra fell to the floor, rolling on her back, and her dead eyes stared up at Jon.

Jon shrieked around the black smoke trying to choke him. Tears flowed from his eyes, and he struggled, trying to move when the demon turned to him. Emra’s blood dripped from his lips, stained his fetid teeth, and Jon’s bowels loosed as the demon stepped toward him. He looked down once more at Emra and then squeezed his eyes shut.

The demon’s hand closed around his throat and the smoke vanished, peeling away from his body like water evaporating into steam. His hands grasped at the demon’s arm, trying to break free.

Smirking, the demon pulled Jon close, sniffing him. Tears and shit and blood covered his body, and Jon tried to curl in on himself, tried to shrink away and disappear. The demon snorted, laughing at him, and tossed Jon over his shoulder.

Jon flew through the portal, screaming, and then, a hundred hands were on him, demon, undead, and shade, and they tore into his flesh, ripping into him as they feasted. He felt their teeth, and their claws, until one of the undead grabbed his spine and pulled.

Mari froze, unable to move, unable to even think. Tucked out of sight on the other side of the curtain, she'd spied on Emra's circle. She'd clambered out of the tunnel right as Emra had started chanting, and Mari had felt the cold pull of power, the rush of malevolence dancing over her skin. She had crept over to watch, just to see, but had stayed, transfixed in horror, and had watched the portal open.

Demons were pouring into the world, so many more behind them. Gods, what could she do? She was only one knight, and she wasn't a Templar. She didn't have this sort of training.

She needed to run.

Mari fled, tearing from the tavern and racing into the snow-filled streets. She needed to find Cras. She had to warn them. She had to warn everybody.

Booming sent her to her knees and she tumbled on the ground, rolling into a snow bank. Lifting her head, Mari stared at the remains of the tavern, now a blazing inferno rising into the night. In the center, the portal still stood, and flame-covered demons clambered through. They roared into the night and took off, running in packs into Tizzy Town. Others scaled the walls of buildings nearby, clambering across the roofs and perching on eaves, grinning as they stared over the city filled with humans. Howls filled the night, not of this world, and Mari's bones prickled. She felt, suddenly, like a hunted animal.

One of the undead spotted her, a lithe, rotting creature, once a demon and now little more than a skeleton with dead, scaled flesh hanging from its face. She saw it grin, half of a putrid face tugging upward, and the other half dried bone, malformed and massive. A demon's skull. Red eyes stared her down.

She clambered to her feet, but stumbled. She fell again, screaming as she hit the ground. She forced herself back to her feet and ran, hauling off down the snow-covered street. Her blood screamed, pumping fast and furious through her body, and she hollered at the top of her lungs, shouting warnings about demons and the undead like a fanatic on the street corner.

Finally, she ran into one of her knights standing patrol, and she crashed into him, not stopping her run as she dragged him down the street after her. He was young, a newer recruit based in the midcity barracks. She'd seen him a few times when she came over from the docks. Too young to die by a demon. Too young to die.

"Lieutenant!" he shouted. "What's happening?"

She tugged him around the corner of a building, but looked up, trying to see if there were demons hovering above, or ghouls waiting on the eaves. She saw nothing, but that was no guarantee. Doubling over, she tried to catch her breath, but she couldn't breathe. Not now. Not after this. By all the Gods, what had befallen the world?

"Demons," she panted. "They're here."

More howls rose in the night, closer, and maniacal laughter that chilled her blood. Her knight's eyes went wide, and the young knight paled beneath his helmet. "Demons aren't real," he whispered. "Right?"

"They're very real, and they're here." She grabbed his arms, shaking him. "Where's Cras? Who is in charge of the students? We need to get everyone out of here, now!"

"Ev-everyone is sheltering inside," he stammered. "We put watchers on the roofs and saw the Templar building trebuchets."

"That's the least of our worries. We need the Templar's help now. Where is Cras?"

Another howl, and scraping from above, scratching against the roof. Mari pressed the knight against the building's wall, shielding him in darkness. They froze, not breathing, and listened to the demon scamper away.

"I'll take you to him," the young knight finally breathed. He drew his sword and looked to Mari for reassurance.

She drew her sword and set her jaw. "Don't let them take you alive."

Chapter Sixteen

Honeyed wine rolled over Iiorian's tongue, heavy and sweet, and balanced with orange rind and clove spice. "That truly is delightful," he said, grinning at the Krek ambassador. "I insist on ordering a pallet."

"Your Majesty, I am afraid I only brought a case with me." The Krek ambassador's rolling accent hugged each vowel. He was smirking.

"Ah, but since we are now trade partners," Iiorian tipped his head to the table set off to the side of the lounge, "I can freely order goods from your lands." After dinner, Iiorian had beautifully distracted the ambassadors from any talk of his city, and they'd retired to his lounge for wine and conversation. Both flowed, and the ambassadors ordered their gifts for the King brought up as the dark moon rose. They feasted on honeyed wine and butter shark, salted olives and sun-ripened figs. The Orlais ambassador shared a chest of herbs for smoking, and the three had laughed an hour away in high spirits.

Deciding not to stand on ceremony, Iiorian had pulled out the trade agreement and scrawled his rounded signature along the bottom. The ambassadors followed suit with a sigh of relief, and they had all toasted the occasion with fresh bottles.

"I must say, Your Majesty, your own gifts are absolutely incomparable." Orlais's ambassador gestured to the open chest before him. Bars of gold gleamed, and a spilled pile of rubies lay in a heap across the gold. A similar chest sat by the Krek ambassador's feet.

"Your kingdoms need supplies to rebuild. You can use these materials to bolster your internal finances, get some traction in your banks." He took another sip of honeyed wine and smiled. "Every kingdom falls on hard times," he said. "Our alliance should be built on good faith and trust. I, for example, have it on faith that you both will rebuild, and with exports like these—" he took another sip "—your kingdoms will be back on their feet in short order. Trade will flow." He shrugged, one shoulder rising, and grinned. "It's also not even a dent in our stores." He couldn't resist that last line, impressing upon the two Kina's unbridled wealth and prosperity.

Both ambassadors' eyes gleamed. "You are very kind, Your Majesty," the Orlais ambassador purred.

"Yes, Kina has always been blessed," the Krek ambassador crooned. He leaned back, crossing his legs, and resettled his silk robes around his legs. Long

and loose, apparently, was the fashion on the continent. Iiorian enjoyed his leggings.

“Blessings have been incredibly good lately.” Iiorian raised his glass.

“Blessed, and cursed,” the Krek Ambassador said. His voice had turned sharp, hard. “Our people were adamantly against this treaty, Your Majesty.”

Iiorian stilled. He lowered his wine glass. Stared at the ambassador. “You have something to say? Now?” They had already taken care of official business. It was bad form to be insulting so soon, but not unheard of. Typically, one waited until they were back on their ship, or had left port, even, before denigrating their new allies.

“Merely an observation, Your Majesty.” He bowed his head, and silk shifted in the silent room. “Kina is known for a troubled past with darkness and magic.”

“Which we have firmly eradicated.” Beaming broadly, Iiorian grabbed the bottle of wine from the floor. He’d dropped it next to his chair for easy refills. Behind his smile, his teeth ground together, and he drew in a breath of air through his nose. “There’s nothing to fear. We broke the Magi. They are dead and gone.” He spread his arms. “A neat, simple solution, in the end. Eliminate the Magi and all of the darkness will be locked away.”

Iiorian fought not to frown as the doorknob turned behind him. He’d ordered no interruptions.

“Your grandfather was a great man.” Orlais’s ambassador raised his glass, clinking against Iiorian’s.

“Hear, hear.” Iiorian downed a quick swallow and glared at Shane over the rim of his glass. The Templar was dour, his face long and haggard, but he held Iiorian’s eyes as he drew near. He stopped at the King’s side and came to attention.

Both ambassadors stared at Shane, unabashedly curious. “A fine warrior you have, Your Majesty,” Orlais’s ambassador purred. His painted lips curled into a sly smile.

Shane ignored him. “Your Majesty.” He bowed deep. “Forgive the interruption. There has been a development.”

“Must we do this now?” Iiorian swirled the wine in his glass and arched an eyebrow up at Shane. The Templar had his orders. Whatever this was, whatever development had occurred, Iiorian was in no mood to hear about it.

“Your Majesty.” Shane’s eyes hardened. Was he angry? Iiorian waited, and waited some more.

He moved in a blur, first standing beside Iiorian and then whirling in the middle of the sitting area, standing between both ambassadors with his swords out. A twist, and then burning blood sprayed, arching into the air. Drops landed in Iiorian’s wine glass, splattered his face, and he froze, shocked. Another spin, and the Krek ambassador’s head went flying, landing with a wet thump before it rolled into the crackling fire.

Iiorian stared up at Shane. His Templar loomed over him, swords held in both hands. Blood dripped from the edges of his blades. With the fire rising behind him, he’d never looked so ferocious before. Nor had he stood over him in quite a menacing way. “Shane,” he started. He set down his wine glass with a shaking hand and wiped the blood from his cheek. “What are you doing?”

Shane smirked, and he sheathed his swords behind his back with one quick swing. Iiorian’s eyes narrowed. The Orlais ambassador’s body emptied of blood, and Iiorian saw the two slices Shane had nicked in his throat, right over his vital arteries.

Just like the murderer’s victims.

He cursed, jerking back and kicking out when Shane grasped him by the neck and hauled him out of the chair. “The fuck—” he sputtered. “Have you lost your mind?” Shane’s fist slammed into the side of his head. His cheek crunched at the impact, bone turning to pieces.

“Shut up, Your Majesty,” Shane growled. The Templar shook him, snarling, and stalked out of the lounge, dragging Iiorian behind him by the throat.

Iiorian grunted, fighting Shane with everything he had. He kicked out, scraping his boots against the thick carpets and reached for bookshelves and doorframes that they passed. Nothing stopped his captor, and even though he wailed, bellowing around the hoarseness of his throat, no one came to his aide.

Cold marble pressed against Vedek’s cheek. His eyes fluttered, trying to focus. Roaring echoed in his head, circling his brain, and he groaned. Gritting his teeth, Vedek started to push himself up.

He froze when he saw black boots curling around giant thighs and a copper chest blazing with glowing runes.

Beside him, Tarl was slowly waking. Vedek slid in front of the Mage, shielding him from the demon.

The demon chuckled. He was watching them.

He whirled around, trying to understand. Where were they? What had happened? He was talking to Shane, and then—nothing. Where were they now? White marble surrounded him, and a fireplace stretched along the entire length of one wall. Pillars graced the edges of a wide balcony, overlooking—

His heart stuttered and his mind stopped. Refused to think. Gods, they were at the palace! He turned back. Yes, there over the door was the King's seal and Iorian's family crest. Ceremonial weapons hung on the walls, stretching back to the ancient days. The balcony had to be the King's. But where was the King? And why was a demon there, watching them? Why were they even alive?

The doors banged open. Vedek's eyes darted over, and he watched two rotting corpses drag in an unconscious knight. Blonde hair tumbled down the side of her cheek, matted with blood. *Shila!* He took a step toward her.

Growling, the demon raised his hand, and a smoldering burn settled in Vedek's chest, scorching his lungs. He gasped, unable to breathe, and finally stepped back. The burn faded. He dropped to his knees but kept his eyes on Shila.

The corpses dragged her across the room. They looked at the demon, who nodded. They traded a look, then heaved Shila with more strength than any human possessed, and certainly more than any corpse could wield. She sailed through the air and slammed into the wall behind Vedek face-first, then tumbled down in a ragged heap.

He skittered across the floor to her side, carefully rolling her. Cuts on her face, a black eye. A massive bruise forming on her jaw. Split knuckles. She'd fought hard, wherever she'd been. He cupped her cheek and felt for a pulse. Fast and thready, but there. He closed his eyes. She needed a healer.

Tarl, awake, knelt next to him. Vedek met his grim, bloodshot eyes. "We're in the palace," he breathed. "Do you know what happened?" Tarl shook his head. Vedek cursed and turned back to Shila. "She's hurt." He stroked his hand down her braid.

Tarl took in her injuries, his eyes darting over each bruise and cut, and then listened to her breathe. He swallowed and met Vedek's gaze.

"I'll do what I can." He laid his hands over her eyes and exhaled.

Behind them both, the demon chuckled. “You’re wasting your time and energy, Cleric.” His voice was like the pounding of a bass drum, tremulous and reverberating in Vedek’s bones.

Tarl ignored the demon, and as Vedek watched, Shila’s breath came easier and he felt her pulse slow. Thank the Gods.

“Thank you.” Vedek brushed her hair out of her eyes.

Slumping, Tarl nodded, but his eyes were hooded and dark circles grew beneath his lids. He leaned back against the marble wall and closed his eyes.

Vedek watched the demon. He lounged against the King’s desk, rifling through parchments and tossing papers aside. He crossed his arms. Cracked his neck.

He was waiting for something. Vedek inhaled deep. What would a demon be waiting for in the King’s palace? In the King’s private solarium? And with them?

The doors flew open again, slamming against the wall with an earsplitting crack. Vedek jerked, but stilled himself. He braced behind Shila, ready to strike if he saw an opening. If Shila were to wake, they could try to fight.

His thoughts died, strangled, as Shane stormed through the door, dragging King Iorian by the throat. The King was howling, screaming as he clawed at Shane’s arm and lashed out.

Smirking, the demon pushed up from the King’s desk. He reached down, twitching aside the throw rug emblazoned with the King’s seal. Beneath, another seal was etched into the marble, not the King’s sign and crest, but a twisting spiral of knotted lines set against a black whirlwind. The grooves glowed, pulsing a deep scarlet seemingly from within.

Shane threw Iorian face down onto the glowing whorls. He and the demon bracketed the King on either side, hovering above and glaring down as Iorian ground out a ragged cough. He paled as he saw the demon. Sputtering, he turned to Shane.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Iorian bellowed up at the High Templar. He made to stand, but the demon backhanded him, sending him sprawling down on the seal. Iorian wiped his split lip with the back of his hand. “Shane?” His voice shook.

“You always were a spoiled fucking brat,” Shane hissed. “You don’t know how much I have always hated you.” Bitterness laced with hatred fell from

Shane's lips. "Your grandfather was an idiot, and so are you." He pulled one of his swords out from over his shoulder, slowly. "You will never destroy the Magi, or the Abyss." He pressed the edge of the blade against Iorian's throat.

The King's face twisted, panic scrunching his features. He panted, harsh breaths coming fast and quick. "Shane, please," he pleaded. "Please, don't—"

"You will only make us stronger." Growling, Shane slid the blade across the King's skin. Iorian's eyes bulged. He gurgled, and blood seeped from his neck and poured down his throat, into his lungs. He tried to gasp, drowning. One hand rose, reaching for Shane.

Shane pressed his boot heel to the King's shoulder and shoved him. Iorian fell back, lying on the seal. As he twitched, his blood flowed outward, falling into the etched grooves. The scarlet light pulsed stronger.

Vedek's throat clenched, choking his breath. He stared, unblinking, at the High Templar. Sounds swam in his ears as the colors in the palace blurred, white marble and red blood and the copper bronze of the demon swirling together. Everything seemed to slow, to still, and the moment crystalized before him. The King's dead body, bleeding out on his own floor, and Shane, conferring with the demon as the black lines hummed and pulsed beneath the King's corpse. It all froze, as if the world itself had stopped turning.

He was moving before he knew it, hauling himself to his feet and stepping forward. "You!" he bellowed. "You're working with that thing?" He pointed to the demon as he roared.

"Vedek, don't!" Tarl shouted behind him, trying to warn him.

The demon smirked and raised his hand, almost casually. At once, Vedek's chest burned, searing hot, and he faltered in his charge.

Chuckling, Shane sauntered to Vedek, stepping over Iorian as he walked. The toe of his boot hit the King's chest, rolling him, and his lifeless eyes stared at Vedek.

Backing away didn't ease the burn, and Vedek dropped to his knees as he felt his skin begin to blister. His flesh was charring, and he smelled burnt hair and fat, but when he pawed at his tunic, his skin was smooth and whole.

Shane stopped in front of him, still smirking. "Amazing, isn't it?" He nodded to Vedek's chest. "He really is capable of providing such exquisite pain."

“What have you done?” Vedek grit his teeth and glared. “Who are you?” he bellowed, rocking forward with the force of his shout, and his voice faded into an anguished sob.

“Who am I?” Shane pressed his hand to his chest. “I am Shane, former High Templar of the Kingdom of Kina, and, as of now, the ruler of Kina.” Vedek spat, striking Shane’s boots. “More importantly,” Shane snapped, raising his eyebrow at Vedek’s display, “I am the future of the Magi. I am power incarnate. I am the force that will sweep the world. I am that which has been foretold.”

“Winds...” Tarl, behind Vedek still, exhaled. “It can’t be about you.”

“Of course it’s about me.” Shane cast a droll look toward Tarl. “I brought us to this moment.”

“You’re fucking insane,” Vedek hissed. His chest burst into flames again, at least in his mind. He clawed at his body, trying to tear out the burning. His nails broke skin, and he scratched until he was red and raw, and he grunted, writhing as his eyes rolled back in his head. “You’re who we’ve been searching for,” he gasped.

“Yes.” Shane waved to the demon. The burning stopped. Vedek slumped forward, falling to the ground. Blood trickled from his nose. “And trust me, I would have killed you long ago if I didn’t need you.” He reached for Vedek.

“I’ll never help you.” Vedek grabbed Shane’s hand and tried to swing his legs around the Templar’s, trying to bring him down. Instead, Shane twisted, grasping Vedek’s free hand in his fist and squeezing. Bones ground together, cracking beneath his grip. Vedek shrieked.

Shane dragged Vedek by his crushed hand, hauling him across the floor until he lay next to the King’s corpse. Vedek squeezed his eyes shut. He didn’t want to see Iiorian’s dead body. He didn’t want to see the King like this. He heard footsteps, then felt a rush of desert wind slam through the room. A crash, then, and he opened his eyes. Tarl had tried to run after him, but Shane had his arm out and tufts of magic curled from his fingertips, as if he’d just cast, and Tarl was flat on the ground, clenching his throat as he struggled to breathe.

Vedek met his gaze. Apologies poured from his eyes like the rushing of the river as he watched the young Mage wheeze.

Straddling Vedek, one boot on either side of his shoulders, Shane leaned down low, pressing close. His fingers snaked down his tunic, plucking at

Emen's amulet. *No!* Vedek tried to struggle, grasping at the amulet with his one good hand.

Pulling a dagger from his boot, Shane grabbed his wrist and pulled his hand free, holding it over the King's chest. He slammed the dagger through his palm, impaling him and securing him to Iorian's corpse.

Howling, Vedek's feet thrashed against the marble. He tried to pull free, but the blade grated over his bones, sliced a tendon, and his hand went weak. Trembling, Vedek watched as Shane tore the amulet from his neck, snapping the leather string. He whimpered as the Templar held the amulet up, studying the charms and the white satin circlet woven through with Vedek's cape.

Shane grinned. "So, you two wove your souls together, hmm?" He flicked at the circlet, spinning it in wild circles as it dangled from his hands. "I wondered why I couldn't track him any longer."

Vedek's heart stilled. His soul froze. Not Emen. Not him, too. Not in this. "Who?"

"I think you know." Shane wrapped the amulet around his hand, palming the circlet. The demon joined them, standing over Vedek's head. His heavy footfalls shook the floor, and Vedek's eyes darted up, staring as he tried to jerk away. Leaning down, Shane grasped his chin. "Now," Shane said slowly. "We are going to summon Ementii to us."

Panting, Emen collapsed on top of the pile of rubble, landing on his ass with a heavy grunt. Pulverized stone and dank dust clung to his skin, his cloak, his tongue. He spat, trying to rid his mouth of the taste, but coughed instead. He'd inhaled too much of the grime and the debris. His chest was tight, as if strapped. No crunching, at least. Nothing broken. Closing his eyes, Emen thanked the Winds for small favors. Continuing with broken ribs would have been difficult. Bruised... Well, he'd fought with bruised ribs before.

He had to get moving. He'd already lost too much time. Tarl had found a Mage circle in the students, which meant the demon had to be near. He'd rest near his Mage when not moving about. There had been one night of peace with no murders or mayhem. Now they were on the second night, and Emen could end this now, and save so many, before another night of slaughter. It was time to put an end to this, in a way only he could.

The Winds rustled through his mind, twirling around his soul. He tipped his head back, letting the cool wash of the Whispers stir at the base of his skull.

Gone was the rage, the pain, the black hatred and anguished misery. Had it really been Vedek that had changed him so entirely? His heart clenched and he lowered his head. It had been the hardest thing he'd done, leaving Vedek behind, but what else could he do? This demon could only be fought with magic, and Vedek would just be caught in the crossfire. Or worse, used against him. No, he couldn't let that happen. He squeezed his eyes shut, trying to block out the suddenly surfacing memory of Vedek bleeding out, dying in his arms with the demon's obsidian staff impaled through his chest.

No. Vedek had to stay safe. He had to. And even though Emen would never see him again, the memories of their kiss, of their love, stayed in his heart. It had changed his magic, healing and purifying some fundamental breach in his soul, a wound he'd never properly bled out. He had his soul back, and the entirety of his Mage-powers.

Given the choice, he wouldn't choose to die, not now. He'd stay with Vedek, watching him smile, listening to his laugh. But laying down his life to stop a demon was a noble, if cold, sacrifice. Folk would be safe. Vedek would be safe. He wouldn't have to face the demon, not again.

He'd loved, at least, in the end. Allowed himself the sin of happiness, the carnal delights of the flesh, and of the heart. And, during those moments with Vedek, he'd been loved in return. The simple power of it had been enough to remake his world and his soul. To love, and to be loved.

But now, it was time to die. Emen sighed and settled himself on the pile of rubble, trying to find the slightest comfort in the cold stone heap. Closing his eyes, he dropped into his final meditation, opening his soul to the Winds and their Whispers. His power charged, rising within him and running through his veins, storms of crackling energy primed for the coming battle.

Only a little while longer, and he would summon the demon to him.

He was going to die. He was going to be burned alive; his insides would melt, or sear, or he'd explode. He was going to die in this inferno, Vedek knew, even though there were no flames on his skin. Writhing, and still pinned to the King's corpse, he screamed through gritted teeth, grunting as the demon seemed to burn his bones all the way down his spine.

Shane straddled him and waved off the demon. Flames flickered in his muscles and then died. Tingles ran through his scorched body. Vedek lay still, trying not to move, and panted around his sobs.

“He truly is a master at inflicting pain.” Shane smirked. “You will feel this until you help us.”

The demon’s hand rose, twitching over Vedek.

He shivered, flinching, but glared up at Shane. He could barely see out of his right eye. His cheek, broken, was swelling. “I’ll never help you,” Vedek spat again.

Chuckling, Shane nodded to the demon. “We’ll see.”

Shrieking, Vedek’s back arched, and he reflexively tried to tear his hand free from the King’s corpse, tried to curl into a ball and let the ground swallow him whole. The fire burned down his legs, up his chest, and into his lungs. Breathing was agony. Flailing, he tried to escape, but there was nowhere to go. Blood streamed from his palm, mixing with the King’s blood and running down his arm. Even his dripping blood seemed to burn.

“You, Vedek, are incredibly special to me.” Shane spoke over Vedek’s screams. “I’ve become something of an expert in pain. And, while watching you scream as you feel yourself dying is certainly a delight, it’s not physical pain I am interested in. Not right now.” A wave, and the burning stopped, for the moment.

Tears poured down Vedek’s cheeks, hitting the marble floor. He couldn’t breathe, reduced to gasping sobs, and he rolled toward the King as he tried to hide.

Shane dug his boot heel into Vedek’s shoulder and pushed him back, flat on the ground. He leaned down, his face inches above Vedek’s. “It’s the exquisite torture that comes from your heart breaking that I am most interested in,” Shane breathed. “Do you know what it’s like to feel your whole world disappear? To feel it all vanish in a moment? Everything and everyone you ever loved, gone?” A breathy chuckle, low and deep. “You will.”

He ground his boot into Vedek’s shoulder, leaning into the joint until Vedek heard his shoulder pop. A ragged scream, then, as his arm dangled loosely out of joint. He tried to bite his lip, to keep his shrieking in, but he couldn’t stop the agonized wail when Shane stepped on his crushed hand. Part of him wanted to die. Another part of him clung to life, desperate to fight this, desperate to protect Emen as best as he could.

“I wonder what Ementii saw in you.” Slowly, Shane rolled off Vedek’s hand, striding around the fallen knight. His clipped boot heels echoed on the

marble, the only sound in the chambers. “To betray his vows after all this time.” He tsked, shaking his head. “He’ll be sorry for that.” Shane nodded down to Vedek, arching his eyebrows in a mocking laugh. “But to gift you his soul amulet and bind your power with his.” Shane stopped his circle and crouched next to Vedek, right by his head. Vedek heard the creak of his leather boots next to his ear. He flinched and squeezed his eyes closed.

“I need to find him, Vedek,” Shane said, slowly. “You see, I was tracking Ementii, watching his powers grow. I was guiding him, tapping into his soul, unleashing his deepest desires. Giving him a taste of the darkness, and of what he wanted. Showing him what he truly yearned for.” A slow grin, salacious, as he looked down at Vedek. “Apparently having you was one of those dark and twisted desires.”

His tears ran in hot tracks down his temples as Vedek shouted and shrieked in his mind, tearing through his memories. It couldn’t be true. It couldn’t be.

“But I’ve lost Ementii, Vedek, and I didn’t know why.” He dropped Emen’s broken amulet on his heaving chest. “Now, I have an idea.” Another smirk. “Perhaps I pushed him too hard toward you, seeing as he tangled your souls. But no matter.” He leaned forward, over Vedek’s bruised and tear-stained face, and whispered in his ear. “You will burn and writhe until you shriek his name for me. And he will come to you.” He pulled back, slowly.

Vedek grunted and bared his teeth. “Never,” he hissed. “I’ll die first.”

Shane laughed, his head thrown back. “Noble,” he said, standing. “But wrong.” A nod to the demon.

He couldn’t breathe, and his back arched high off the ground as the fires consumed him once again. He couldn’t hold it in, and Vedek shrieked, bellowing at the top of his lungs. He didn’t want to give Shane the satisfaction of his wails, but the pain was cresting too quickly. Ragged, his throat burned with each scream, raw and wet as he choked on his spit and his tears.

“Why are you trying to protect him?” Shane snorted and shook his head. “Don’t you understand? He’s mine. He’s done what I have given him, what I wanted him to do. Taken what he wanted. He’s become what I molded.”

“No!” Vedek slammed his crushed fist against the marble, desperate to escape. His body shuddered, jerking wildly. “No!”

“You have no idea what he’s been through. Losing your world.” Shane growled and grabbed Vedek’s neck. He squeezed down. “You fucking knights

couldn't stand up to us when we had our powers. You think you're so mighty, the Mage Slayers, but all you did was murder a people with their hands tied behind their backs."

Vedek's eyes bulged as he worked his lips, struggling for air.

"How could he ever truly love you?" Shane hissed. "You are everything he despises." He slammed Vedek's head against the marble. "I gave him what he wanted!" he bellowed. "Opened the gates to his hatred! Let his darkness run free! Threw down the chains that bound him in his heart! I," he seethed as he fisted Vedek's tunic, "let him feel the agony of losing his people and fed him darkness to fuel his rage." A beat, as Shane panted into Vedek's face, hot breaths filled with thrumming tension. "He is mine."

"No," Vedek whispered. "No, no, no." He repeated his litany, keeping up the words as he trembled, as he begged for it to be true, for Shane to be wrong.

"Say his name," Shane growled. "Say it."

"No!"

Shane's hand flew to the dagger embedded in Vedek's palm. He turned the hilt slowly, spinning the blade deep within Vedek's hand. "Say it."

"No!" Vedek threw back his head and shrieked.

Ripping the blade from Vedek's palm, Shane grabbed the back of the knight's head and pressed the tip of the dagger beneath his eye. "Say it," he breathed.

"No," Vedek whispered. "I won't."

Chapter Seventeen

A hot breeze ruffled through the cool sluice of the Winds, distracting Emen from his meditation. He followed the disturbance in his mind, chasing the searing gust over and around his mindwaters until he stood before his join with the winds.

No longer black and roiling with flame, his join was a knotted storm of crackling white light and roiling darkness, of lightning and thunder and tangled Winds caught in whirlwinds of black smoke. Emen stared as the deepest part of his soul clashed, brewing chaos. He frowned and raised his hand, almost touching the chaos before him.

Vedek's face, beaten, bruised, and bloodied, with tear tracks staining his cheeks, rose in the smoke. He was writhing on the ground, shrieking and biting his lip as he shuddered. "No!" Vedek hollered. "No!" Sounds of dark laughter, braying, and then war drums rose. Howling, and then barks of rage filled his ears. In the smoke, the images shifted, and blood pooled on the floor. Then Tarl, lying face down, unmoving. Vedek, sobbing and trembling as he tried to curl up next to a bloodied body.

Fury filled him, fueled him. His breath shorted as rage flooded his soul, nasty and black and blighted. He was hot all over, burning. His muscles seared as a rush of red colored his vision. Wrath, terrible, dark wrath, and hatred, a pure hatred fixated on destruction, and then vengeance, the burning need for vengeance, rose in his body, sliding over his bones. He tried to breathe, tried to inhale against the sudden surge of darkness, of a wanton desire to lash out and destroy. *Winds!* He pressed a hand to his chest, over his heart. *Help me!*

His heart turned to ash as the image of Vedek, cold and lifeless, flashed in the smoke.

Roaring, Emen opened the floodgates of his soul, burying himself in his fury. It coiled around him, wreathing him from head to toe, and he tipped his head. "I am here," he breathed. "Find me now. Fight me now."

Shane stilled, the dagger still pressed beneath Vedek's eye. Shivering, Vedek pressed his lips together and stared up at the Templar, refusing to back down, refusing to give in, and refusing to give the bastard the satisfaction of his screams.

Rising, Shane spoke to the demon. “We’ve got him. Go!” With a nod, the demon disappeared, vanishing into the air with an earsplitting crack.

Panic rose in Vedek’s chest. His heart, already beating too fast, threatened to burst. *Not Emen! No!*

Standing on the rubble, Emen felt the rush of the Winds swirling around him. He held out his hands, his arms outstretched, and his cloak flapped in the rush of air. He breathed deep, inhaling the power brought by the Winds. A vortex rose above him, stretching down to his upturned face.

A crack, and the Winds roared, rushing toward the demon materializing on the slope of rubble. The demon stumbled, grasping at the cracked stone with his black-gloved hands.

Emen’s eyes blazed, and he felt a rush in his veins; the Winds, inside and out, pushed him forward. In one move, he drew his sword and held out his hand, beginning an incantation as the chamber filled with gusting air, circling the heap of stone.

Charging, the demon raced toward Emen, a bared-teeth grin stretching his face. Emen swung, heaving his sword at the demon’s throat.

The demon raised his hand, catching the sword in his palm. The sword clanged against metal, against hard steel, and Emen’s bones shook all the way to his toes.

The demon chuckled. “Always leading too high on the right.” His voice ground over the stones, as deep as the darkness. Emen stared at him, memories of his sword training replaying in his head from so many years ago. He’d been told that before.

The demon stepped forward, climbing the stone, and before Emen could finish his interrupted incantation, the demon’s hand closed around his neck. Snarling, Emen tried to break free, jerking to the side, but a sudden crack filled the dungeon, and his world went black.

Gasping, Emen reappeared in a white marble chamber, big and broad and with a balcony stretching out in a half circle over the city. He stumbled when the demon released him, doubling over and grabbing his throat, but he forced himself back up with his sword in his hand, heaving a ragged breath.

“Ementii!” A voice cried out, warm and delighted, from behind him. Emen turned, slowly.

On the ground, Emen saw the King’s corpse, bled out, and Vedek next to him, doubled over and battered and covered in blood, holding his hands to his stomach, but alive and watching Emen with wide, terrified eyes. Emen started, taking a step toward him as his heart seized, but he faltered. His jaw dropped.

Standing before Vedek, Emen saw a ghost. His sword fell, the tip lowering, and all the air in his body rushed from him.

“Shane?” It couldn’t be. Shane was dead. His head had been mounted on a pike. Emen had stared at his skull for hours when he’d finally ridden back to the city.

“Oh, I’ve missed you too, Ementii.” Shane crossed the room and stood before Emen, then cupped his cheeks in both hands. “It has been so long,” he whispered.

“You’re dead,” Emen breathed. “You were beheaded.”

“I beheaded the Knight Captain, actually.” Shane grinned. “It was his head that went over the balcony. The King’s plan.” He cuffed Emen’s chin and dropped his hands. “I was offered the position of High Templar if I went along with the fantasy. I saw an opportunity, and I took it.”

Nothing made sense. Emen frowned, staring into Shane’s eyes. Sounds bled in his mind, words with no meaning tumbling together. “Opportunity? For what?”

“To live,” Shane hissed. “Don’t you remember? I told you to live. That we would rise again.” He spread his hands wide. “Well, my brother, this is the day.”

Confusion clung to Emen like a shroud. He shook his head, his mouth trying to find words to speak. “The demon—”

Heavy footfalls behind him, and Emen whirled, raising his sword. The demon grabbed the blade with one hand and ripped the hilt from Emen’s grasp. He flung it behind him, and the sword clanged to the ground against the far wall. Emen backed up, breathing hard, until he bumped into Shane.

“Shh,” Shane breathed, rubbing his hands down Emen’s arms. “It’s all right. He’s one of us.”

The demon grinned.

“Ementii, you remember your best friend, don’t you?” His words tickled over Emen’s ear, and he trembled, pressed against Shane’s body. “Of course, he’s not named Kone anymore. Kone, I’m afraid, died. He was slain in the First Inquisition. But I took his body, and I brought him back. I made him more powerful than he could ever have been on his own.”

The demon nodded, turning his full attention to Emen. “It’s good to see you again, brother,” he rumbled. “You may call me Valles.”

Emen shuddered, horror running down his spine, curling in the pit of his stomach. He tried to breathe, but all he could do was pant, too little air dragging through his suddenly dry throat. “Impossible,” he whispered. “Kone would never—”

Shane grabbed his arms, whirling him around. He held him at arm’s length, squeezing his biceps in an iron grip. Emen grunted, trying to jerk free, but Shane held on with unnatural strength. He shook Emen. “Do you know what happens to a man when their world is destroyed,” he snapped. “Do you know how the quest for vengeance can build within you, until there’s nothing else, nothing but a dream to force everyone to pay for what was done? To remake the world in your recompense? Have you tasted the need to destroy the humans, those too weak for the Winds to touch their souls? To destroy everyone who took everything from you?”

“Yes,” Emen breathed. “Yes, I have.”

“Then you know why I did what I did.” Shane jerked his chin to Valles. “And why Kone agreed to come back, now incarnate in this form.” He stepped back, releasing Emen and rubbing his hands down his arms once more. He exhaled, seemingly centering himself, and took Emen’s hands in his. “We’ve been waiting for you, Ementii,” he said with a smile. “Join us.”

Emen’s eyes darted over the room. Vedek was still, lying on his side as tears melted from his eyes and watching Emen with a helpless, pleading expression twisted over his bloodied face. Tarl and Shila lay on the cold marble, face down, not moving.

His breaths came faster, hot and heavy. “Join you in what?”

“Our new world,” Shane breathed. “We’re cracking the seals tonight. Already, one portal has been opened. My witless servant, doing her best work.” Shane grinned. “She thought she was a Mage. But now, the true Magi will rise again, starting tonight. We will be the powerful. We will be the rulers. No more

humans, no more of their threats or their jealousy. They'll never touch us, not ever again. We'll kill them all. And," he sighed, long and happy, "there will be no war. Not any more. The darkness, the Abyss, is ours."

"Ours?" Emen turned, facing Shane. He felt Vedek's eyes crawling over him, burning into his back.

"Where do you think I got this power from?" Shane raised a clenched fist, gestured to Valles. "The Winds are too weak, too pitiful, to break free of their restraints. But the Abyss knows all about fighting for freedom. They've been doing it for centuries. It was only natural to join together. Shackles and slavery breed an understanding."

Emen stared at Shane, seeing him for the first time as he truly was, and not as the father he'd been for so many years in his heart. Up until that very moment, in fact. Disquiet gave way to despair, and his soul plunged, falling to the depths of his darkness. "You're mad," he breathed. "You're behind everything. Everything."

"Yes." Shane's eyes burned, turning scarlet. "I've been planning this for twenty-six years. Ever since that day, Ementii." He held out his hand. "I've been watching you," he whispered. "Nurturing you. I gave you my darkness. Gave you the keys to your soul, let you touch that which you had forgotten." His other hand rose, tracing down Emen's cheek, over his lips. "I let you feel it again." Emen heard Vedek's moan, despairing, and then a hiccupped sob, but it sounded so far away, so far removed from the immediacy of Shane's touch and his searing eyes.

"Why?" Emen grunted through clenched teeth. His jaw ached.

"So that you would remember," Shane growled. "So that you would join us."

Emen closed his eyes, and all of the darkness, all of the terrible, soul-sucking rage that he'd worked so hard against reappeared, suffusing his bones with their tortured memories. The screams of his people. The choking of his power. Finding nothing but death and madness when he tried to search for his friends. His teeth ground together as his hands fisted at his sides. He'd lost everything. Everything.

"Yes," Shane breathed. "Yes. I made my choice in this room, right here. Join me, my brother. We can be whole again." His hand stroked Emen's cheek. "I have missed you, Ementii."

Dare he even think it? Dare he wonder? Dare the thought enter his heart? He exhaled, frozen, and hovered before Shane, his lips quivering as he struggled to speak. He was stuck, trapped between what he'd survived and everything he'd done since that moment, and the future. What he could do. Oh, what he could do. His eyes burned, prickling at the edges, but he forced the tears away.

"We will make them pay," Shane whispered, and it echoed inside Emen's mind.

Vedek hung in his heart, the curve of his smile, the loud roll of his laughter, and the warm taste of his lips—hard steel, foggy nights, and a bone-deep determination—filling his soul with breaths of warmth, and of a contentment that he'd never expected to feel, not ever, in his tortured life. It was as close to peace as he'd ever come, in Vedek's arms. As close to happy as he'd ever be.

He exhaled.

Memories tumbled through his mind. Meeting Vedek, his drunken come on eighteen years ago. Meeting again, awkward in the streets the next time he was in the capital. Years of friendship built on lunches shared at the docks, over flagons of ale, over swordplay and investigations, and sharing stories, belly-aching laughs, and gentle smiles.

How his heart would lighten in the presence of Vedek, even years ago.

How he'd ridden across the kingdom in a blind rush to save Vedek, naked fear driving him mad and chasing at his heels.

How his soul had settled as he drew Vedek to him, touching their lips together in their first kiss.

In his memories, Vedek reclined against the blankets in the meditation rotunda, smiling and winding his arms around Emen's neck. He was glowing, brilliance streaming from his skin, and his smile nearly blinded Emen. Perfection, gazing at him with a crooked nose and battle scars carved into his body. Love that he didn't deserve.

He'd lost something on that day twenty-six years ago, something he had thought irreplaceable. His soul had caved in around the loss as his heart had shuddered to stillness, lost in darkness and rage.

Moments had changed that, had slowly repaired his soul. Moments with Vedek, with his love.

Emen opened his eyes. Met Shane's gaze. His fingers twitched, but he forced himself to still.

"I," Emen vowed, hissing, "will kill you for everything that you've done." He slapped Shane's hand away with a growl.

Vengeance burned white-hot inside Emen, the purity of hate, but not against the world. Against Shane, and all that he'd become. Against Valles—Kone—his best friend, for the murders he'd committed, the wanton destruction he'd wrought throughout the kingdom. Against them both, for aligning with the Abyss, and for turning their backs on the Winds. He could feel his wrath spilling out, seizing hold of his heart. Shane would pay. He would pay for everything, but most especially, for what he'd done to Vedek. He'd pay in blood and in scorching pain. Emen could almost taste it.

Snarling, Shane shoved Emen, his unnatural strength knocking him down and sending him sprawling to the floor. Valles snorted and backed away, out of Emen's sight, and he crawled back as Shane advanced on him, stalking him across the room.

"You dare to turn on me," Shane growled. "I raised you, boy!"

"The man who raised me is dead." Backing up more, Emen spotted his sword. He tried to rise, to run across the room, but Shane grabbed his ankle and threw him down. A swift kick, and Shane's boot slammed into Emen's face, knocking him back. He felt a tooth loosen, and blood filled his mouth.

Vedek shouted suddenly, grunting as Valles grabbed him around the neck and hefted him into the air. Emen whirled, his hands held out, and he froze. "No!" he shouted. "Please!"

Shane kicked him in the back and stabbed a sword through his shoulder, pinning him to the floor. The tip of the sword clinked as it hit the marble, and Emen shouted, struggling against the cold steel impaling him. Shane's boot pressed against the edge of the wound, digging in. Emen's hands scrabbled against the marble, and he futilely tried to call the Winds to his aid. His mind was silent, no Whispers, and he slammed his fists against the stone.

"Watch," Shane growled, grabbing his hair and holding his head up, "the price of your betrayal. Your lover's death."

Emen roared as Valles's hand squeezed down, choking Vedek and beginning to crush his throat and spine. Vedek's eyes bulged, but he found Emen's gaze and mouthed, "I love you."

Movement on Emen's right flashed in his eyes, but he didn't look. He was fixed on Vedek, watching his love's struggles fade as he screamed, bellowing and hollering and thrashing beneath Shane's hold. A flash of steel, though, caught his eyes, and he held his breath as his sword swung, then crashed into the side of Valles's head.

Valles bellowed, and he dropped Vedek as he reached for his neck. Blood poured from his wound, and he turned, facing Shila wielding Emen's sword as she bounced on the balls of her feet.

"C'mere, bitch," Shila hissed. "Pick on someone your own size." She rushed Valles, screaming, and slashed with Emen's sword. Behind Valles, Vedek struggled to his feet, and he ran at the demon, throwing his shoulder into the hulking back, wrestling with him as Shila fought with the blade. Valles stumbled, snarling, and tried to summon obsidian in his hands. Shila shattered the smoke before it could form.

"This ends now!" Shane pulled back, dragging his sword from Emen's shoulder. Emen screamed, but tried to roll, intent on fighting Shane. The Templar thrust his hand out, and Emen's throat closed, choked by a spell. He fell to his knees, clawing at this neck. Shane snarled and then waved his hand, sending Emen sliding across the floor until he bumped into the King's cold body. The spell around his throat vanished. Emen gasped, rolling over as he drew in a ragged breath.

His eyes caught on the empty marble where Tarl had been lying motionless.

Shane appeared above him, and he forced Emen down on his back, pinning him with his mind and laying him out over the center of the seal. A black whirlwind framed Emen's body, pulsing crimson, and he tried to struggle against Shane's spelled bonds.

Across the room, Shila speared Valles's thigh. Vedek was on the demon's back, one arm wrapped around his neck and hanging on with all of his strength as Valles roared and tried to grab him.

Over Emen, Shane's eyes were flame red as he breathed hard. One hand began to glow, first red, then white, and it burst into flame, all the way to his elbow. He leaned down, and Emen tried to get away. He was stuck, though, and he grit his teeth as Shane's burning hand pressed against his armor. He melted his way through, and the searing pain made Emen's back arch and his blood curdle.

His tunic singed, but didn't catch fire. The spelled flame was melting his way through to Emen's body, but not burning it.

Shane's hand pressed against Emen's skin, on his abs. White-hot, blinding agony thundered through Emen. He clenched his teeth, and a tidal wave of pain tore through him. His skin gave way, and blood poured from his belly, burbling over his stomach and falling to the seal beneath him. He felt the seal react, pulsing stronger, thrumming with energy that built as more of his blood flooded out.

Emen heard Vedek scream, heard his bellow of shock and anguish, and then Valles's crazed laugh.

The flaming hand grasped something deep inside Emen and tugged. His eyes rolled back in his head as he struggled for air.

"What you don't understand," Shane hissed, "is that you made yourself weak. You gave yourself to that fucking knight, and you let a piece of power go into him." Shane slowly pulled back, dragging Emen's insides with him in a long, bloody trail. "I always knew that you'd be weak." He dropped the seared, torn entrails onto the seal, filling more of the whirling grooves.

Beneath Emen, the palace began to shake. The King's seal fell from above the door and webbed cracks appeared in the marble. One of the columns on the balcony groaned.

"Do you remember Uwe?" Shane asked. "That little boy that followed you everywhere? He was madly in love with you." Snorting, Shane's fingers dug deep, and Emen felt his insides quiver, felt his blood flow out from within. Roaring filled his ears, the roll of never-ending thunder. Not enough to drown out Shane, though. "He must have known you were a degenerate as well. We knew we had to watch him, and Jakkur was already talking about quietly releasing him from the order." Shane grinned, mad. "You saw him recently, you know. He ended up on the Walker's Mile, like we all knew he would."

The young man's face dusted in amethyst powder, cold and dead on the slab in the knights' morgue flashed before Emen's eyes. *Uwe!* He'd wondered why the prostitute had looked familiar. Emen's eyes burned, tears building behind his clenched lids. He heard Vedek, somewhere far away, screaming his name, raw panic and terror coloring his voice. He tried to breathe, but there was only fire in his lungs, and he gasped around nothing as he felt Shane's firehand close around his ribs. Bones cracking filled the air, one after the other.

Blinding light made him cringe, but in the next moment, he gasped, suddenly able to draw breath. His eyes flew open.

He saw Tarl, wreathed in white light and floating, hovering behind Shane.

Shane was oblivious. He saw nothing.

Shane grit his teeth and grasped another chunk of Emen's body, tugging. Tears bathed Emen's eyes, but he blinked them away, staring instead at the ethereal form of Tarl watching him.

"Are you dead?" Emen breathed.

"No." Tarl smiled, and his hand reached down, around Shane—still unable to see Tarl's glowing soul—and cupped Emen's cheek. Emen gasped, bathed in cool waters from Tarl's touch, and shivered. Another drop of organs and blood hit the seal next to his head, and the palace's shaking grew more violent.

"Emen," Tarl breathed. His gleaming soul leaned down, hovering over his face. "You've been strong for so long." He stroked Emen's face, his touch gentle. Emen tried to chase the feeling. Distantly, he heard Vedek's cries, shouting his name, pleading and cursing. "You don't need to hold back any longer." One of his thumbs brushed under Emen's eyes. "Let it go."

A tear dropped from Emen's lashes, hitting his cheek. The water was hot, nearly scalding, burning Emen with weakness. He squeezed his eyes closed and shuddered. He hadn't cried, not once, not ever, not even with everything he'd lost.

"Shh," Tarl brushed the tear away. "You cry, Emen, not because you're weak. It's because you've been strong for too long. Let go, Emen." His thumb stroked over his cheek again, and tears fell into his glow. "Let me in," Tarl breathed, lowering his face until he was sharing breaths with Emen.

Nodding, Emen inhaled, and Tarl disappeared into Emen's body.

Shane reached deep, grasping for Emen's heart.

Emen's eyes opened, staring up at Shane as he felt the man he'd once considered a father close his fist around the beat of his heart.

Shards of glowing, brilliant light shot out, bursting from Emen's skin. His eyes rolled back and his mouth filled with the white light as he screamed. A glow wrapped around his body, covering his gaping stomach. Inside his mind, Emen heard Tarl's voice whispering all around, chanting. "I give my soul to this man, that he may draw from mine that which he needs. I give my soul to this man, so that he may live." Words of an old Cleric's spell, an ancient spell, one only found in legend, or in the deep archives of the Paladin's Cathedrals.

Trembling, Emen felt his wound began to close, his body renewing, regenerating as Tarl's words repeated in his head.

Shane flew back, his eyes wide. He snarled. Raising his hand, Emen saw him draw shadows into his palm, swirling in a vortex. Emen inhaled deep, closed his eyes, and led Tarl's soul to join his. Cool waters flooded his mind. Emen smiled.

The spell binding him snapped as he rose. Winds roared over the balcony, slamming into the King's solarium and swirling in the air. The Winds circled, steadily building, as Emen felt their power charge his soul. Tarl's soul still tangled with his, and he felt their powers mixing, blending together, their magics joining as one.

"You cannot stop me!" Shane bellowed. Shadows coiled, flames hidden in their depths, ready to strike. "I am more powerful than you will ever be!" His rage seemed to explode, and spit flew from his lips as he shouted. "I will remake this world as my own!"

Emen searched for Vedek as the Winds continued to spin, rushing in faster eddies around the room. Shane stumbled, almost knocked off balance, and growled. On the balcony, Shila was swinging Emen's sword furiously down on Valles, pinned against the bannister. He had his arm up, blocking her blows, but he was shaking at the force of her swings.

Tarl's body sat against the far wall, his eyes closed, the picture of meditation. A smile curved his lips.

And Vedek was walking toward Emen, fighting the forming vortex. His arm was raised, shielding his eyes, and he staggered against the Winds. "Emen!" Vedek shouted. "Destroy the seal!"

Emen looked down. He'd seen that seal before. It was like all the others scattered around the kingdom, the seals that had choked the Winds. Knotted grooves arrayed in a whirlwind, the symbols of the Winds, but traced in black, to choke their power. There was one seal, and only one, that controlled them all, binding their powers together. It was in the palace, controlled by the King. His eyes slid to Iiorian's corpse.

He looked back at the seal. The grooves were nearly full of blood. His blood, Vedek's blood, the King's blood. Beneath him, the palace was coming apart, and outside, in the city, Emen could hear screams, wild howls, and the bray of dark, bloodthirsty laughter.

He could break the seal. Only a bit more blood and the sacrifice would be complete. He pictured a hundred other seals scattered across the kingdom, filled with blood just like this and ready to crack. All those murders, scattered

everywhere, all to fill the seals with blood and shatter their hold. Shane and Valles had been busy.

He could break the seal, return the Winds to the world. The Abyss would roar, and darkness would return as well, but magic would flow. Desire burned through him, a yearning in his soul.

Not this way, he heard in his heart. *Not like this*. Tarl's voice, speaking within him.

Emen stepped back, off the blood-filled seal, and stretched out his hand. He drew his powers, building a shard of light in his palm.

"No!" Shane, bellowing, charged Emen, blasting a shot of fiery shadows that went wide. He leapt at the same moment Emen cast.

Shane's body slammed into Emen's spell just before it reached the seal, and singed flesh and burnt silk filled the air as blood fell from his skin, landing in the seal's grooves. Shane collapsed onto the cracked seal with a grunt, and he pressed his hand to his side. Beneath him, the seal shuddered, and the scarlet glow built, no longer throbbing, but a steady, growing glow, bubbling higher. Emen stumbled back, burned by the crimson light, and shielded his eyes.

Mad, Shane turned a savage grin to Emen. "It's here," he snapped. "It's back!" The palace creaked, and marble began to fall from the ceiling as stronger quakes rocked them on their feet. "You've failed!" He shot a bolt of flame at Emen's chest. Emen dodged, rolling to the floor. He grimaced, clinging to the marble as pain coiled around his stomach. He was alive, yes, but only just.

Shane spotted Valles on the balcony, nearly falling against Shila. He raised his hand, and black shadows shot from his palm, slamming into Shila's side. She screamed and fell to her knees. Valles stood slowly, rising above her, barring his teeth.

"No time for that!" Shane shouted, jogging past fallen marble and onto the shuddering balcony. The floor started to fall in patches, leaving open sky and a long fall beneath their feet. "Let's go!" He grabbed Valles's shoulder.

Grunting, Valles wrapped his arm around Shane's waist. He growled at Shila, still down on her knees, and disappeared with a crack.

Emen slowly pushed himself up. The Winds continued to howl, swirling faster in the King's crumbling chambers, and the scarlet light growing from the blood-filled seal was burning everything in its path. It was heading for him, almost pinning him to the wall.

“Emen!” Vedek, on the other side of the burning glow, frantically shouting his name. “Get out of there!”

He could run for the balcony. He felt Tarl inside of him, in his bones, helping him to stand. “Your body,” Emen muttered. “Have to get your body.”

No time, he heard. Just go.

“Can’t leave you!”

Tarl moved him, sending him running against the wall, skirting the edges of the burning crimson before he was incinerated. He fell onto the balcony, narrowly missing a widening hole, and stumbled into Vedek.

Vedek’s arms wound around him, grasping tight. Blood seeped from one palm, and he held his other in a loose fist, but still, he ran his hands over Emen’s head, his face, and down his body. His lips followed, pressing hot, needy kisses to his tear-stained face. “You fucking idiot!” Vedek shouted. “What were you thinking?”

“We have to go!” Shila hollered from the balcony’s edge. “The palace is collapsing!” They could barely hear her over the raging winds and the quakes rocking the palace.

“Where?” Vedek guided Emen across the balcony to the edge, with Shila. “We’re cut off!”

Emen looked over the edge. He saw the city burning, flames raging into the sky. He saw demons racing across rooftops and vumphyre holding down folk as they drank their blood. Poppy-caped knights fought in the streets, trying to hold back hordes of the undead, of ghouls and demons and cackling skeletons.

And, forming below the balcony, a dark whirlwind, swirling in the night. “We jump!”

Vedek frowned. “Are you crazy?”

“I’ve made this choice before,” Emen shouted. “We jump!” He took Vedek’s hand. “Do you trust me?”

Exhaling, Vedek looked into his eyes. “Yes.”

“Good.” Emen grabbed him around the waist and fell backward over the balcony’s railing. Shila leaped after them, her blonde hair streaking behind her. Vedek’s bloody hand clenched hard against Emen’s shoulder as they plunged down, into the center of the whirlwind.

Emen opened his eyes and saw white. A wash of white, white everywhere, all around him. He couldn't see walls, or floors, or a ceiling. He was simply in white, a pure space.

He looked right. Looked left. Nothing.

"Am I dead?"

A chuckle, and he spun. He knew that laugh.

Tarl stood before him, no longer glowing. "No, you're not dead, Emen. Though, with how often you ask, I wonder if you wish to be." Tarl's head tilted just so.

Emen swallowed. "No," he grunted. "Not anymore." Vedek's face played in his mind, the curve of his smile. "What happened? What did you do?"

Tarl held up a hand. "I am not Tarl," he said. He chuckled again at Emen's confused frown. "You see me as Tarl because that's who you've associated me with." Another smile, this one tinged with indulgence. "Though, we did use Tarl to get to you. He was our oracle in the fight for your soul. Now, though, his purpose has been fulfilled."

Blanching, Emen frowned. He didn't want the kid to die. He was too young, too good, too everything.

"Not to worry. Tarl is within you right now." The apparition, not-Tarl, gestured to Emen's chest, to his heart. "He gave his soul to you so that you could fight the Augur."

"The Augur?"

"The Herald. The Harbinger of the Abyss. Your friend."

"Shane is not my friend," Emen growled. "He's a murderer. An Abyss Mage."

Not-Tarl started to circle Emen, moving with slow steps. "The Augur will have a role to play in the future, Ementii. Do not discount him entirely."

"I will kill him." Emen's hands closed to fists. "I swear it."

Not-Tarl's harsh eyes pierced him.

He swallowed.

"You have your work cut out for you, Ementii. A long road lies before you, one that only you can endure."

Emen frowned. "I don't know what you're talking about."

“You are the world’s hope. Everyone will look to you, now. Trust your heart, but know that this is a path you must walk.” Not-Tarl’s voice hardened, turned to iron. “You broke your celibate vows, Ementii. This wasn’t foreseen.”

“I love him,” Emen growled. “I don’t regret it.”

“If you stray from your road, you will be alone.” Not-Tarl stopped before Emen, completing his circle.

Emen’s shoulders rose and fell. He breathed deep, remembering Vedek’s touch, the taste of his lips. The peace he’d found in his arms. “I won’t give him up,” he grunted. “I love him.”

Not-Tarl blinked and raised his chin. “Upon you, the entire world shall be weighed. Choose wisely.” Not-Tarl’s eyes closed, and before Emen could speak, he felt a tug beneath his belly button, a pull in his soul and a smear in his mind. He tipped back, and everything went white.

Epilogue

Three Weeks Later

Emen rubbed his hands over his face and sighed. He leaned down against the midcity battlements' crenels, watching over the city from the curtain walls' fortifications.

He was waiting, but he felt like a fool for doing so. Three weeks, and Vedek had yet to speak to him. He'd woken in Vedek's bed after their leap from the palace balcony, the scent of the knight all around him, but no sign of the Knight Captain. As elusive as the rains, Vedek seemed to be avoiding him.

He couldn't blame him, not really. So much had changed, and all for the worst. The city lay in ruins. When the seals had cracked, hordes of demons had flooded the kingdom and the capital. It had been a night of slaughter, and the rise of the sun had only revealed how much blood had been spilled.

The knights fought on, shepherding folk to their battlements and fortifying their posts. Now, the battlements stood as refugee centers in the midst of the destroyed city, the only safe place in the entire capital. Ruins surrounded them, from the crumbling docks to the shattered, fallen palace, to the burned remnants of Daisytown. The worst was Tizzy Town. Only ghosts remained, howling in their misery. Bones filled the streets, picked clean by the scavengers.

Out of a city of fourteen thousand, only six thousand remained. Vedek had lost almost a hundred knights. Six thousand folk, and two hundred knights, crammed into two weary battlements and the city's catacombs.

Tensions were high. Magic had returned, and folk were finding out each day that their neighbors, or even themselves, were touched by the Winds. Some shrieked, clawing at their heads, desperate to silence the Whispers. Others sobbed, not wanting to be a part of those that had seemingly destroyed the world. Some were curious, coming to Emen with halting questions on their lips.

Some flung themselves from the battlements into the wilds of the city.

"Waiting?" Tarl's breathy voice came over Emen's shoulder.

He saw the glow before he turned. He tried to smile at his friend, his soul glowing as he hovered behind Emen. "You're getting good at your form."

Tarl smiled. He bowed his head. Emen remembered when that move used to jingle the bells in his locks. Now, only light shone. "My strength is returning. I don't have to shelter inside your body all the time anymore."

Without Tarl's body, his soul had nowhere to go. Weakened, barely hanging on, Tarl had been ready to cross over, to join the Winds, but Emen had resisted. He'd clung to Tarl's soul, giving him space in his body, and Tarl rested in his bones while his soul recovered. It had been odd, sharing minds with the kid. No secrets, there. Tarl had giggled when he first replayed the memories of his night with Vedek, an unhealthy snort that echoed in Emen's mind and scared him right out of his bunk.

He knew things about Tarl, too. His childhood. His loneliness. His fierceness. And his memories. Emen saw what Shane had done to Vedek, and his blood had boiled over again. He wanted to find Vedek, to confront him, reassure him, to shake him and comfort him and make love to him.

More than anything, he just wanted to see him again.

Vedek had been running patrols for the past three weeks, and when he wasn't running patrols, he was studiously in the battlements that Emen was not. If Emen waited at the docks, Vedek came to midcity. If Emen stayed at midcity, Vedek went to the docks. Emen had tried waiting for him in his quarters, once, but gave up after a day and a night. Emen slept on his mat in the great hall, lined up and squeezed in with the rest of the refugees.

"I spent the day in the canteen," Tarl said, leaning against the wall with Emen. "I think folk are a little less frightened of me now."

When Tarl had first appeared, a gleaming white soul, the folk had shrieked and tried to run. Convinced he was a ghost, they shied from him, no matter what Emen or Tarl said.

"Good." Emen smirked. "'Cause I'm hoping that you'll teach the new Magi." He arched his eyebrows high. "Can't teach if the students are too frightened."

Tarl smiled wide. "I thought the point was to scare them straight?" Emen chuckled, and Tarl pressed on. "I'd be honored to teach them, Emen. Do you think they're ready?"

He sighed. "Not yet. Not for another few weeks. Folk need to settle some more. It's all still too new."

Tarl nodded and silence fell over the pair. "So," Tarl said, nudging Emen with his shoulder. The glow passed into Emen, and he felt a shiver run down his spine. "How are the patrols going?"

Shila, at least, spoke to Emen, when he could find her. He sighed. "The knights have set up a perimeter from the south edge of Daisytown to the river,

and then south to the Walker's Mile. They are trying to clear the Merchant Quarter and bridge the space between the battlements."

"At least the Walker's Mile is clean. The folk need the water."

Emen hummed, nodding. The city was dry, barren, and fire swept. The depths of winter had only been three weeks ago, but the whole world seemed to have shifted. It was hot, hotter than the dog days of summer, and painfully dry. The river had already dropped over a foot, and the tributary more than that. Water was vanishing, plants were dying, and the world was turning to a barren wasteland. "They need food, too. The knights have to go further outside the gates to hunt." They came back with variable success. Each time a hunting party left, Emen felt his chest clench. Too far afield, too many risks, and too far from help if they were beset by demons.

"Why don't you go out?" Tarl nodded to the city. "I know you want to. Investigate, see for yourself what's out there."

Sighing, Emen shook his head. "Only the knights leave the battlements. That's the rule."

Tarl arched his eyebrows high.

"Everyone is upset enough. I don't want to go demanding special privileges. That sets a precedent, and I'm not willing to do that. What if some new Mage decides to go out there because I have?" He shook his head. "I'd help them gladly, but—" He looked down.

"But Vedek hasn't asked for your help." Tarl leaned into Emen again, and this time, cool water flowed through his mind.

Emen smiled at Tarl, but it didn't reach his eyes. He turned back to watching the city. "It's been an hour," he whispered. "They should have been back by now."

"They probably went to the docks."

Nodding, Emen looked down, staring at his clasped hands. "Yes," he said. "I know." Swallowing, Emen closed his eyes. "I should give up, shouldn't I?"

Tarl was silent.

"I should listen to what he's telling me. He's got a thousand other things to take care of. He doesn't need to worry about whether I am stalking him." Emen shook his head, snorting. "I'm just making it worse."

"You're the only thing I worry about."

Emen whirled, leaping upright, and stared at Vedek. The knight had appeared behind him, coming out from the hall, worn, weary, and haggard. Bags hung under his eyes, dark and full, and his armor was dented and tarnished. Blood spattered across his legs and one arm. Both hands were wrapped in thick bandages, but one was useable and the other was covered with a circle of leather and tied with a string. "Vedek," Emen breathed. He stopped.

Vedek's eyes were shining, even through the exhaustion, filled with some kind of burning fear. He pressed his lips together, trying to hold back the most forlorn expression Emen had ever seen. Hope, a fleeting, fickle emotion, wavered in Emen's heart.

Vedek turned away, his eyes roving over Tarl's soul. "I've heard that you can walk around now," he grunted. "Pretty impressive." He tried to smile.

Tarl sent Emen a long look. "I'll leave you two be." Without a sound, he glided away, through the walls, and into the battlements.

"Someone will be screaming soon," Vedek muttered. He snorted, trying to laugh, but it died on his tongue.

Emen swallowed. Vedek stood before him, and he didn't know what to say. His palms were slick, and he rubbed them against his tunic. He felt his heart pounding, racing in his chest. Was this the end? Suddenly, he wanted to go back to waiting and wondering. At least then he'd have hope.

"Your hands," Emen muttered.

Grimacing, Vedek held them out. "One crushed and the other cut. I can barely grip my sword." He let them fall, sighing. "Your Shane did it."

Fury bloomed within Emen. "He's not 'my Shane'," he growled.

Vedek looked away. He walked to the wall's edge, apart from Emen, and looked down. "He said things." Vedek finally spoke. "Things about you."

"I know. Tarl told me."

"Does he... live inside of you, now?" Vedek's face twisted. He chewed his lip.

"I allow him shelter in my bones." Emen watched Vedek, trying to divine answers from the clench of his jaw. "He is his own person, still. He just has no body."

Closing his eyes, Vedek shook his head. "Gods, what kind of world do we live in? Souls with no bodies, bodies with no souls." He blinked hard.

“What’s happening out there, Vedek,” Emen breathed. “Why won’t you let me help?”

Silence. Emen watched Vedek fight with himself, trying to find words to speak. “It’s,” he finally began. He stopped. “It’s horrible. It’s the end of the world.”

“It’s not.” Emen stepped toward Vedek, trying to close the distance between them. “It’s not the end, Vedek. We can stop this. We can fix it.”

“How?” Vedek whirled on him, snapping as his eyes blazed. “How can we fix this?”

“Together,” he said. “There must be other survivors in the kingdom. I’ve been scrying for other Magi. I think I made contact today. We’re not alone. We can work together. Fight this darkness.”

“Emen,” Vedek breathed. “It’s too much. This is too much. Too much death, too much horror. There’s nothing we can do to fight this.”

“There is.” Stepping forward, Emen grasped Vedek’s hands in his. He ran his thumbs over the leather and the bandages. “I can heal you, you know.” Some of Tarl’s power had rubbed off, it seemed, transferring to Emen, and he was a stronger healer than he’d ever been. “May I?”

He waited while Vedek considered, and he didn’t realize he was holding his breath until he exhaled at Vedek’s short nod. Slowly, he undid the leather tie covering Vedek’s crushed hand. He let it fall, cupping the swollen, bruised fist in his palm. *Infection*, his mind whispered. *Sick blood*.

“Oh, Vedek.” He cupped his other hand around Vedek’s fist and closed his eyes. Vedek jerked, trying to pull back when his fist began to glow, and then he cried out, grunting through clenched teeth as the bones moved, reassembling and rearranging beneath his skin. Finally, Emen let go, and Vedek jerked his hand free.

His unblemished, healed, smooth hand. Vedek stared, his mouth open, and flexed his fingers.

“Let me do the other one and then we never have to speak again.” Swallowing, Emen’s heart cried out as he spoke, but he forced his face to stillness. He’d give this to Vedek, at least. And then he’d leave.

It was Vedek’s face that fell, and he reached for Emen with his healed hand, grasping his tunic. “That’s not what I want,” Vedek grunted. He was fighting back a sob, his jaw clenching hard. “Gods, Emen, I just want it not to be true.”

Emen cupped Vedek's face, stroking his thumbs over his cheeks. His swollen cheek had finally gone down, the bones falling back into place and healing. "Want what not to be true?"

Vedek fought for control. "Was it all Shane?" he finally choked out. "Was everything we had because of him?"

Exhaling, Emen closed his eyes. When Tarl had shared his memories with Emen, he'd been filled with raw fury, a black wrath that nearly consumed him. Then, later, confusion. Was it true? He'd had to search his soul, scraping away the remnants of darkness and hatred that Shane had stirred up. And, there, in the very center of him, Vedek lay, wrapped up with all that was special, all that was lightness and hope and happiness in Emen's life.

He wasn't the outcome of the darkness Shane had brought into the world. Vedek, instead, was the antidote, the answer to the darkness, and Emen's eternal hope. He'd loved Vedek long before he acknowledged it, before he knew the depths of his own heart, or had sounded the need in his soul for this man, this knight.

"No," Emen breathed. "Not at all. You, and everything you are, are the reason I stayed sane. I was filled with darkness, yes. Shane unfurled things I had long ago buried. He got inside my mind and played with my emotions." Vedek's eyes closed, and he exhaled hard, his breath hot and ragged over Emen's skin. "But my love for you is my anchor in this world. My compass. Loving you brings me hope and strength and courage. You are my beloved, and you have been for longer than I even knew." He stroked his thumb across Vedek's cheek, slowly. "My love for you existed far before Shane messed with my mind, and it was the one thing he couldn't touch. Loving you, Vedek, saved me."

Vedek crumpled into Emen's arms, falling forward against his chest. He buried his face against Emen's neck, his jaw clenched tight as his arms wound around Emen's back. Emen held him close, whispering words of love into his ear.

Finally, Vedek pushed back, and he pressed his forehead to Emen's. "I've been too afraid to ask," he whispered. "Facing demons was easier than that."

"I'm sorry," Emen breathed. He tucked Vedek's shaggy hair, grown long, behind his ears. "For everything."

"You should be." Vedek shuddered in Emen's arms, and he closed his eyes with a sigh. "What are we going to do, Emen?"

“We’re going to live.” Emen’s hands cupped his face again. He drew Vedek’s lips to his, pressing a delicate kiss to his mouth. “We’re going to survive.” Another kiss. “And we’re going to fight, until our world is free.”

Vedek frowned. “Our world?”

“Human and Magi together.” He wound his fingers through Vedek’s healed hand, holding it up. “No more secrets. No more divisions. No more hiding.”

Slowly, Vedek nodded. A tiny grin stretched his mouth. “I think the humans need your help, Paladin, more than you need ours.”

Emen wound his arms around Vedek, drawing him close. “We need each other,” he whispered. Holding Vedek’s gaze, he dropped his mouth to Vedek’s, melding their lips. Vedek moaned, and one hand rose to the back of Emen’s neck.

When they broke apart, Emen pressed their foreheads together, nuzzling Vedek’s cheek and his nose. Vedek sighed, warm air ghosting over Emen’s skin. “We’re going to make it,” Vedek whispered. “We will.”

The End

Author Bio

Bailey Queen is the pseudo name of a romance and erotica author. She has been writing since 2001 and moved into the e-publications market in 2015. She has written action/adventure, mystery, drama, suspense, horror, romance, erotica, military, sci-fi, and fantasy.

She loves to write long, plotty stories, and enjoys a healthy dose of realism in her writing. (Despite this being a fantasy novel!)

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