

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



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# THE COURT OF LIGHTNING

Amy Rae Durreson

**Table of Contents**

Love's Landscapes.....	3
The Court of Lightning – Information.....	5
The Court of Lightning.....	6
Chapter One.....	7
Chapter Two.....	16
Chapter Three.....	25
Chapter Four.....	32
Chapter Five.....	40
Chapter Six.....	47
Chapter Seven.....	56
Chapter Eight.....	64
Chapter Nine.....	73
Chapter Ten.....	80
Chapter Eleven.....	86
Chapter Twelve.....	93
Chapter Thirteen.....	101
Chapter Fourteen.....	108
Chapter Fifteen.....	113
Chapter Sixteen.....	118
Author Bio.....	122

# Love's Landscapes

*An M/M Romance series*

## THE COURT OF LIGHTNING

By Amy Rae Durreson

### Introduction

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

### What Is Love's Landscapes?

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's Landscapes*.

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

### Words of Caution

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

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## Photo Description

Two soldiers stand side by side in the mist. One, with dark hair and very pale skin, looks stern. He is dressed in black. The other, in a leather vest, is leaning on a post, looking more relaxed. He has white hair and darker skin. Despite their differences, the two are clearly friends.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*I'm the one with the tattoos and white hair. I've been part of the King's army for the past 10 years and for the last few I've been commanding a unit at the border beside my frigid friend here. I want to kiss the frost off of him but I'm not sure I'd survive once his shock wore off.*

*Can you help me please author? I'm dying over here!*

*Please no ménage, cheating, BDSM, or simpering virgins... THANKS!*

*Sincerely,*

*Gwendolyn*

## Story Info

**Genre:** fantasy

**Tags:** spies/secret agents, action/suspense/adventure, magic users, friends to lovers, sweet/some sex, engineers, light violence

**Word Count:** 40,174

# **THE COURT OF LIGHTNING**

**By Amy Rae Durreson**

## Chapter One

Shan stood by the old Coast Guard station above Porthlevin and watched the last paladin of the Court of Lightning come flying back from the occupied territories.

Tirellian had, not for the first time, extended his mission to the last possible moment. The sky behind him was already dark, and the setting sun shone on his outstretched wings, making the glossy spellsilk gleam with all the colours of sunset—golden, red and violet. Then Tirellian banked in to land on the platform in the shadow of the station, and all the colour faded from his wings, until they seemed grey beneath the midnight fall of his braided hair.

Shan came forwards to pull him into the station, seeing how his friend was turning to squint at him. The flying goggles everyone in the Shadowflight wore were good for guarding against dazzle, but didn't cope well with sudden drops in the light. He'd have to do something about that soon, once he was done with all the siege weapons and folding bridges the army currently had him designing.

"It's me," he said. "Come out of the wind."

Tirellian pushed his goggles off and said, "Arashan."

He was the only one who used Shan's full name, and the sound of it in that accented, slightly guttural voice, always sent shivers up Shan's spine.

"The one and only," he said brightly. "Welcome home, Sparky."

Tirellian looked faintly irritated, although he let Shan lead him inside. "I have a name."

"I'm just a simple country boy, Sparks. Your name has too many syllables for me. Makes me bite my tongue."

"Yet you can say 'syllables' without hesitation." Inside, in the single brightly lit room, Tirellian shrugged to make his wings fold down neatly (something very few flyers bothered with, even though neglecting it tangled the silk) and cancelled the spell. The spellsilk shimmered and vanished, and he tapped the knot in the middle of his harness to make the spines of his wings fold down, the thin flexible wood which formed the stiff frame for his gliding wings telescoping into two short tubes strapped to Tirellian's back.

Shan went to help him remove the harness.

“I can do it.”

“If you mean to tell me that your hands aren't numb—”

“Not entirely,” Tirellian said, but he held his arms out and smiled faintly. Someone who didn't know him wouldn't have noticed it, but Shan knew. In the years they'd been working together, he'd learned to read those slight shifts of expression.

The other flyers called Tirellian the “Ice Knight”, although never to his face, not since Shan had explained to them exactly what Tirellian had lost to the Court of Ice and how very offensive he himself found the name. There wasn't a flyer in the Corps stupid enough to deliberately piss off their very own artificer, not when he was the one who had designed and now mended and maintained their wings, and so Tirellian was no longer subject to cruel nicknames.

The closing of his eyes and the faint curve of his mouth meant that Tirellian was very glad to be back. He had been gone a month, vanished behind enemy lines, back in the country of his birth, to seek out information, sabotage the occupiers, and carry vital messages and funds to the resistance. He was thinner than he had been, Shan noticed as he worked the buckles loose, and he tensed whenever Shan's knuckles brushed his skin. Shan wished he could tell Tirellian that he had time to rest, to mend his tattered nerves and eat heartily, but they were still at war. This quiet green headland seemed peaceful enough, but the Guersyn Peninsula, the cliff-edged moorland home of the Court of the Wind, was the last free region in the Seven Courts (last save the Isle of Time, that was, but the Isle kept its own counsel and was never touched by war). Shade, Earth, Flame, and Lightning had all fallen to Ice's army and cold magic. Fifty miles to the south, his countrymen were dying on the frontline, freezing to death although the spring solstice was long past. What they did here was less bloody, but just as vital. Without the intelligence won by the spies of the Shadowflight, the Court of Wind too would have fallen years ago.

The last buckle was stiff, the leather tightened by salt, and he wondered why Tirellian had been forced so close to the waves. He worked it free, and the straps fell into his hands. Undone like this, they were mere ribbons of leather. Shan rolled them neatly around the wooden tubes, locking the buckles against the catches designed for that purpose, and tucked them under Tirellian's belt. Fastened up like this, they were more compact than a sword, discreet enough to be carried secretly across enemy land in a pack or sheathed like a dagger.

With Tirellian's wings gone, Shan was suddenly aware of how close they were standing, his hand on his friend's hip and their bodies almost brushing.

Tirellian's eyes were closed, and his lips were parted. He was swaying slightly on his feet, and Shan thought his friend might have fallen asleep standing up.

“Wake up, Sparky.”

Tirellian's eyes opened, and Shan caught his breath, startled yet again by how lovely his friend was. Long ago, as a child on the moors, he had heard stories of the two loveliest and most accomplished women in the Seven Courts, the Duke of Asterope's twin daughters, whose father was rumoured to have created them from jet and silver and moonlight. He remembered that old tale sometimes, when Tirellian caught him off-balance.

Shan knew better, though. He, like everyone, knew how that story had ended, with the old Duke living just long enough to see his daughters married to kings and his son made the youngest, and last, paladin of the Court of Lightning, and how one daughter had died, frozen to her throne, and the other lived still, far from home, with only her older brother to remind her of the land and family they had left behind. However they looked, Tirellian and his sisters were as human as the rest of them. They had a mother once, and he knew her name, had heard it choked out once, on a night when there seemed to be no hope of surviving, out there on the line when the fire came falling out of a storm-bruised sky.

Tirellian did not have the breathtaking grace of his royal sister. He was too dangerous for that. Everything about him was stark and lean: his long black hair, his towering height, his high-boned face, and sombre disposition, but his eyes... His eyes were the same soft blue as the haze over the sea on a summer's morning, promising glorious sunshine to come.

Not for the first time, Shan considered leaning forwards that last inch and kissing him. Tirellian's pale mouth would taste like lightning, he thought, sharp and dazzling.

But Tirellian had never done anything to indicate he would welcome Shan's kiss, so he merely stepped back and said, “We should head out. Our day's not done.”

“No?”

Shan lowered his voice, although there was no one else here to overhear them. “Your sister and her husband are here. They want to meet with both of us.”

Tirellian's eyes widened slightly. “From your choice of phrasing, I assume this is not an official visit.”

“Very few people are aware they’re here.”

“We should hurry then, so they can return to safety the sooner.”

“We need to wait for the change of the watch. I’m taking a shift.”

“Fortuitous timing.”

Shan rolled his eyes. “I knew you were due back, idiot.”

Tirellian’s smile deepened, and he leant against the sill of the north window, his pose a little less stiff and proper. “It’s good to be back.”

That he would think to say it was a sign of how far he had come. The paladin Shan had first met, back on the line, ten winters ago, had been too driven and reserved to even notice the overtures the other soldiers, and later the flyers, had made towards him. He had met every comment with polite and correct formality, never unbending or showing the faintest sign of weakness or vulnerability. Over that first hard winter, the others had given up, but Shan had stayed fascinated by the grim foreigner with heartbreak in his eyes, and Tirellian had slowly started to respond to him.

“Glad to have you back safely,” Shan said and reached out to touch Tirellian’s forearm lightly, wary of startling him. Most of the flyers came back brittle after weeks pretending to be someone they weren’t and always bracing for discovery. Some of them didn’t come back at all, and he wished he dared do something more than this quick touch to show Tirellian how glad he was to see him alive. “Any damage?” he asked.

“To me or your mechanisms?”

“I’ve already checked your wings.”

“In which case, nothing significant.”

“By your definition of ‘significant’ or by mine?”

Tirellian shot him a slightly sheepish look. “Yours.”

“Good.”

Tirellian glanced out the window. “I see a light on the path.”

Shan snorted. “Lazy. Sun’s not done yet.”

“It is below the ridge. Not everyone has your highland vision.”

They both watched the hunched figure of the new watch guard come creeping up the cliff path towards them. In happier times, this station had

watched for ships in trouble on their way into Porthlevin's small but sheltered harbour. Now it served a double purpose. Its guards still scanned the channel, although now they watched for possible invasion fleets, and its elevated position made it a perfect launch station for the Shadowflight.

The duty guard was old Karel, one of Shan's ground crew. He nodded to them as he came in. "Evening, Shan. Welcome back, your grace."

Tirellian looked a little disapproving at the informality. "Good evening Corporal-Artificer. Have you come to assume the watch?"

"No, he's here for a social chat," Shan said, chuckling. "Watch is yours, Karel. There are nut biscuits in the tin under the window seat and they're fresh today. Brought them up myself."

Karel's lugubrious face brightened. "You're a gent, Shan. Get off now, before the light goes."

As they headed down the path, buffeted by the wind off the sea behind them, Tirellian commented, "You still aren't much for military protocol, are you?"

"We're all just people, Sparks."

"And you are that man's commanding officer. You shouldn't encourage his familiarity."

Shan sighed. He would never understand all the courtly scruples and proprieties that Tirellian took for granted. Wind had never been as formal a court as Lightning, and he had never even been a courtier. "Karel's from my home village. I've seen him in his cups, and helped him feed his horses when he broke his leg, and he never let on to my dad that I was skiving off my studies that time when he caught me in the hayloft with his nephew after the harvest dance the year we turned fifteen. Half the artificers in the army trained or worked up on Glasmoor. I can't be calling my own people by their rank, can I?"

Tirellian sighed and then said, "You neglected your studies for a boy?"

"Have a heart, man. I was fifteen, and Clem tempted me with cider and promised he'd suck me off."

Tirellian looked faintly scandalised. "At fifteen?"

Shan sighed. It was one of life's great injustices that somebody who looked like Tirellian was the most prim and prudish man he'd ever met. The silent

discomfort he exuded at every bawdy story or mention of sex took half the fun out of it. There were times, of course, when it also felt like a challenge, because the idea of his proper paladin finally losing control had kept him warm through many a lonely night. He tried not to let his fantasies stray that way, because it seemed obscene, but the curiosity became more of an itch with every month. One day, he would see Tirellian's guarded formality shatter into passion, and it might just be the best day of his life. He needed it, like he needed to believe that one day they would win this war.

He just didn't have the faintest idea how to get either of the things he wanted. He didn't know how to court Tirellian without scaring him away, and he was only an artificer in the end, no matter how important his inventions.

"This Clem...?" Tirellian said hesitantly, his lip curling a little on the name.

"Moved away a few years later." Shan sighed. "I heard he went down in the mud at Trevilly, poor bastard."

"I'm sorry," Tirellian said. The wind came off the sea in a sudden hard gust, whipping their hair forwards and pushing Shan a little off balance. Tirellian steadied him, and they both reached out for the guide rope. The path up from the village was a pleasant climb on a sunny day, but flights went out in all but the worst weather, and so they had put up a rope along the side of the path, hammering metal stakes into the rough-toothed rocks of the headland. Shan had been glad of it more than once: the mouth of the inlet was a long way below and edged with jagged rocks. The sea roared in on all but the mildest of days, hurling itself at the rocks in great plumes and flashes of spray. Only the luckiest of men survived a fall from these cliffs.

"What news from the front?" Tirellian asked over the wind, as if they were merely strolling along a quiet beach (at sunset, hand-in-hand, Shan thought wistfully, with the last heat of a summer day still lingering beneath their feet). He'd be damned if he ever admitted to such a sentimental fantasy, but that didn't mean he wasn't going to indulge once in a while.

"Third army held the Penrose Pass against a big incursion, but the attempt to take back the river towns failed."

Tirellian sighed. "I heard about the latter, but not the former." He shook his head, eyes distant. "Damn."

Shan nodded, not needing to say more. They'd spent the first year of the war out in the trenches to the south, fighting an impossible battle to protect the

wealthy towns on the plain around the River Ledden, which had once been their border with the Court of Earth. The armies of the Wind had been pushed back into the moors and hill country in the northern wilds of their headland, easier to defend but harder to survive in. This was goat and sheep country, except for the fishing ports along the coast, and it was hard to feed all the evacuees from the thin soil.

They had come around the side of the cliff now, and were suddenly out of the full blast of the wind. From here, Shan could glimpse the lights of the village below, and the artificers' camp stretching up the sides of the valley beyond, the tents gleaming in the last light. The river looked still and serene, its pebbles exposed at this tide. The river came down out of the moors in a steep rush here, and then dug its way out of the land in a zigzagging course which left the village itself completely sheltered and hidden from the sea. The harbour, which had once supported a profitable trade across the channel to Lightning's Zephyrport on the opposite coast, was tucked between the village and the first bend in the river.

"Are they in the camp?" Tirellian asked.

"The inn." Shan grinned at him. "If you're trying to be discreet, don't stay with a load of nosy artificers who can hear gossip floating by on the breeze."

"Wise advice."

"I'm full of it," Shan said brightly. "I'm a proper sage, I am. People used to travel from miles around to lie at my feet and await the pearls of wisdom dropping from my lips—"

"I see you have been drinking too much in my absence," Tirellian said. "Or perhaps you are eating too richly at night, to have such nonsensical dreams."

"You're the only one who could ever drive me to drink, Sparks," Shan said, clapping a hand to his heart and batting his eyelashes at Tirellian. "Just think, your brawn and beauty, my undisputed brilliance: we could take over the world!"

"Undisputed?" Tirellian repeated drily. "Clearly, it is past time I came home. Someone needs to keep you humble."

Shan took the word *home* and savoured it without comment. "You just couldn't stay away from me any longer. Admit it, you missed me."

"Certainly. I grew weary of mending my own harnesses." The sideways look meant that was a joke, though, so Shan just pouted at him.

“You only want me for my toolkit.”

Tirellian blinked. “I’m not sure I want to know where you plan to take that innuendo.”

“You don’t want to hear about the size of my—”

“*Arashan.*”

Shan took pity on his blush and let it go. “I hope your honoured brother-in-law has left us some dinner. I’m starving, and you must be worse.”

“I am hungry,” Tirellian admitted, “although not quite enough to imply that my royal brother is a glutton.”

“I did not!” Shan protested and then reconsidered his words. “Don’t even think about repeating that.”

“But I hear he likes to know the ordinary soldiers’ opinions of their leaders.”

“And if you’d like to have blankets on your bed tonight, you’ll keep quiet,” Shan said, laughing despite the threat. Neither of them meant it, and he was beginning to relax for the first time since Tirellian flew out. It was never so bad at the start of a mission, but the last few days of waiting were always hard.

They walked the rest of the way to the village in idle conversation, and Shan glanced up more than once to see Tirellian looking around and smiling. Perhaps he had meant that “home”, after all.

The inn was the biggest building in the village, a solid, whitewashed building with thick walls. A soldier stood just inside the door, his insignia removed but his eyes sharp. He saluted Tirellian as they came in and said softly, “Their majesties are in the upstairs parlour, Your Grace.”

“Thank you, Major.”

As they walked up the narrow stairs, Shan asked softly, “How could you tell his rank? He wasn’t wearing—”

“I know the name and rank of every man in Arellia’s guard.”

Of course he did. He probably also knew their personal histories, family connections, and service records as well. There wasn’t a more overprotective brother in the Seven Courts.

Another two guards stood outside the parlour door. They ushered Shan and Tirellian in, and closed the door behind them.

The King of the Wind came striding across the room towards them, his smile bright and impatient. Shan bowed, but King Lyr didn't bother greeting them.

"Finally, you're here," he said. "How long does it take you to get your wings off, Tir? No, don't waste time answering. Come in, sit down, listen. We have a problem."

Behind the king, Queen Arellia cleared her throat and said, her smile a little more obvious than her brother's, "Remember to stop and breathe, husband, and let him speak too."

King Lyr snorted. "Makes me inefficient, love. Ah, Master Shan, join us, join us. Tir, good flight? Good mission? Excellent. Now let me tell you how we are completely and utterly fucked."

\*\*\*\*\*

## Chapter Two

Tirellian wasn't listening. Instead, he crossed the room to meet his sister, cupping her face in his hands as she stood on tiptoe to meet him.

"Arellia," he said softly.

"Tirellian," she murmured back, and he pressed his forehead against hers. Neither of them spoke, though they both seemed to shine a little brighter with relief. Side by side, they took Shan's breath away. He didn't understand how two people could exist in the world with no visible flaws between them.

He had a fair idea of what their childhoods had been like to make them so pristine and gracious, from the endless parade of tutors and biting critiques of everything from their learning to the way they spoke and moved. He knew how their father had chosen near identical names for his twin daughters and dressed them alike, not because they enjoyed it but to attract the attention of potential suitors. He had watched as Tirellian regarded every extraordinary deed he had ever performed not with pride but to identify what he should have done better.

It all made him secretly glad that the Duke of Asterope was dead. Repeatedly punching your best friend's father in the face wasn't a good idea, but he wouldn't have been able to stop himself. Seeing his queen just made him want to protect Tirellian more. Tirellian seemed like the perfect knight, but Arellia looked so delicate she could break. Seeing them together forced Shan to see that fragility in his friend as well.

She was, however, as strong as steel, and he reminded himself that Tirellian was too. They had both survived their upbringing and the loss of their Court. He didn't really need to wrap them both in his arms and keep them safe from every sharp breeze and unkind word.

He wanted to, though, for Tirellian, at least. Arellia had her own protector.

"Damn," his king said softly, shaking his head. "You forget, don't you, how alike they are?"

Shan wasn't sure what to say to that. This was his king, and he still found it deeply uncomfortable to have to chat to him like a friend. Kings weren't supposed to be like ordinary people (and King Lyr wasn't ordinary at all, which made casual conversation all the harder).

"You look tired," Tirellian murmured in his own dialect and directed a narrow-eyed look at King Lyr. "She looks tired."

Queen Arellia sighed slightly and tapped his cheek with her fingertips. "Stop that."

"He's supposed to be looking after you."

"I am a grown woman. More importantly, I love him. If you damage him, I will be very cross."

"Only *cross*?" the king grumbled. "Ten years of marriage, and that's all I get?"

"More than you deserve," Tirellian stated, and then winced as his sister smacked him again, a little harder.

"Honestly," King Lyr said to Shan, in a loud whisper, his eyes bright with mirth, "you grant a man asylum, and he thinks he can threaten you for the rest of your lives."

"There is no point looking to him for sympathy," Tirellian said loftily. "Arashan is on my side."

The king rolled his eyes. "He's part of my court. He's supposed to be loyal to me."

This was why ordinary men shouldn't socialize with royals. There was too much risk of diplomatic incidents over the dinner table.

The queen rescued him by pulling away from her brother and moving towards him, saying, "Have you both eaten yet? Please, join us."

Tirellian's mouth twitched, and Shan glared at him meaningfully. The king always brought out the worst in Tirellian, and he didn't want to be caught in the middle.

"So," the king said, "now you've got the obligatory threats out of the way, let's get on with business. Have either of you seen the latest intelligence report yet?"

"I've had the summary, sire," Shan said, "but not the detail, and he's not had the chance. Is this about their new war machines?"

"Among other things. What do you know?"

"From the report and the rumours among my people, it sounds like the Court of Ice finally got a competent artificer. I've heard stories of lightning-

powered siege towers and automated flying machines. Nothing compared to what we have, but closer than anything we've seen before."

"That's not the worst of it." The king extracted a page from the papers spread across the table and passed it to Shan. "This was drawn by one of my spies in Fromebridge, who's been watching the roads between Earth and Shade. He smuggled it out at great risk. He claims it is made of metal, has been walking across the Court of Earth, and that it can summon up enough lightning to set fire to entire villages in one strike. Is that possible?"

Shan looked at the sketch. It was rough and rushed, and it took him a moment to make sense of the picture. The device looked like a skeletal insect of some kind, many-legged and with two protruding antennae at the front of its head, with a jagged light between them which the artist had labelled "lightning." It took him a moment to realize that the little squiggles by its legs were supposed to be trees and houses.

Considering it, he said slowly, "I could build the frame and fit a lightning generator on it, yes, but what's powering it? The sheer weight of it would be prohibitive. Even if I had a very good lightning mage like Tirellian, his entire strength would only drive it fifty steps or so before he was drained. Unless they've suddenly invented a new conversion engine, I don't see how—"

"We know where they're getting the power from," King Lyr said grimly, "though I'll leave that to my next guest. It's a plausible machine, though?"

"Yes, but it's a significant improvement on what we've seen of their technical prowess. I'd say they'd found a new artificer, someone more creative and technically competent."

"That's the other intelligence we have now. It's the same artificer they've been using for the last ten years, but we finally have a name for her. Daedalia Teichoma."

"Aunt Didi?" Shan said incredulously and then thought about it and felt sick. "Seven save her."

"You knew her, Master Arashan?" the queen asked, leaning forwards.

"She taught at my father's school." He could remember her, laughing raucously as she leaned back from the anvil, sweat beading on her brow from the heat of the forge and making her hair stick to her forehead in tight, dark curls. She had been maybe fifteen years Shan's senior and had first come to Glasmoor as a foreign student and then stayed to teach. He had adored her

unconditionally when he was ten and respected her as an honest and great-hearted mentor when he was fifteen. "She went back, when Ice invaded, to help defend her own court."

"The reluctant artificer," Tirellian said, surprising Shan, who hadn't realised that story had spread to the flyers. The artificers had speculated for years that whoever was designing Ice's war machines was deliberately sabotaging them. The flaws in every design were too subtle and fortuitous to be mere chance, many had argued. A non-artificer wouldn't notice it, but it had become a legend among his men as the war got worse. "Thank the reluctant artificer," they had said jokingly every time one of Ice's machines wore out quickly or jammed at a crucial moment. Had it all really been Aunt Didi?

"We don't think she's been replaced," the king said, his voice brusque with sympathy. "Something has changed, though. For some reason, she is now cooperating fully. We're afraid—"

The light in the room changed suddenly, and the king stopped mid-sentence. As Shan caught his breath, light came spilling in the windows, silver-bright and shimmering. It was like looking through a waterfall at the sun, Shan thought, dazzling in every direction, and it brought with it the sense of a cool breeze in a summer heatwave and the moment when a gathering storm finally broke and the pressure of the air lifted away.

Then all that light condensed, first to a column and then into the form of a woman, a small, white-haired girl with arching wings of light.

Shan slid off the chair onto his knees, his heart catching in his throat. Beside him, Tirellian dipped to one knee, and the king and queen knelt too. It was impossible not to, when so much light and power was pulsing in the air around them.

This was the Sylph of Wind, he knew without having to be told, and had to choke back another wave of sheer panic. Ordinary men weren't supposed to set eyes on the Sylph. Only kings could call her. Shan had never anticipated that he would meet the Sylph.

"Are these the paladin and the inventor?" she asked the king now, her voice a little too high and fluting to be comfortable for human ears.

Six hundred years ago, all the lands that were now the Courts had been part of a vast and dark Empire. The Empire had enslaved seven great spirits, siphoning off their power to rule the known world, but they had not been unopposed.

Revolutionaries had freed the seven spirits, and in gratitude the Seven had formed a pact with mortal men: they would be free from any attempt at enslavement and in return each granted a measure of their power to their rescuers and their descendants, to use as if it were their own (even Shan could whistle up a wind if he had to, although he preferred to work with his hands and his ingenuity).

“They are, madam,” King Lyr said. Peering at him through the Sylph’s light, Shan suddenly noticed the ring on his hand, and how the Sylph’s light was reflected in its pale stone. The Seven had each bequeathed one of their rescuers the ability to summon them in a time of need, a ring to be passed down through the ruling bloodlines. There were seven rings for seven courts, but mortal kings rarely called upon their debt, wary of the line between requests and orders. No one wanted to be the one who broke the Great Pact and deprived the Courts of all their magic.

“Have you told them? Have you told them everything?” The distress in her voice broke through Shan’s awe, and he looked up to see she was wringing her hands. Her fingernails were bitten to the quick, and that suddenly made him look at her differently.

If you ignored the flare of light and power, she looked like girls he knew. White hair, like his own, was not uncommon up on the moors, and the folktales said it meant you were descended from the Sylph and one of her human consorts. Shan had always scoffed at that one, but he could see a hint of familiarity in the line of her brow and set of her chin too. She looked about nineteen, and he imagined his cousin Menna at the same age and suddenly saw the likeness.

It made the weight of her power in the room a fraction less terrifying, and he managed to pull together his scattered thoughts enough to listen to her.

“...partway through the telling, madam,” King Lyr was saying.

She turned towards Shan and Tirellian, stretching her hands out. “Please, please save my sister.”

Shan felt Tirellian snap to attention beside him and held back a wince, wondering if she’d deliberately chosen the one plea Tirellian would never ignore.

“We are your servants, revered lady,” Tirellian said, and it was easy for him to sound cool and collected. He’d probably been taught spirit etiquette since the age of five.

“My brothers and sisters and I have not been part of this war,” she said, “though we have wept to see our dear friends fighting each other. One by one, we have been forgotten. My sister Undine lies below the ice, and no one in the Court that was once Water recalls her. The others have been neglected too, but I have been blessed by my human friends, and until lately, people were still willing to talk to my sister, whom you would call the Sprite of Lightning. Last month, when I went to speak to her, she turned me away. I returned a week later and found her occupying that iron monstrosity.”

“*She’s* what’s powering that machine?” Shan interrupted, forgetting all his manners. The power human mages wielded was only a tiny fraction of what the Seven controlled. No wonder they could make the machine move.

“Yes!” the Sylph cried, turning to face him. “But we don’t do that! We *never* take part in war. It’s part of the Pact: you *can’t* ask us for that. She told me, when I found her, that she was there willingly, that the Pact was not broken, but why would she allow herself to be chained again? I asked her, and she would not answer, and now she is hiding herself from me, and I cannot find her to ask more. Please, help her!”

If the Pact was broken, the Seven would depart and take their magic with them. Everything which relied on magic, from the Shadowflight’s wings to the pumps and filters that drew clean water out of the Court of Fire’s sulphurous wells, would stop working. Horrified, Shan swallowed past the lump in his throat and said, “What do you want us to do?”

“Someone who is a blood relative of the King of Lightning needs to retrieve his summoning ring and call the Sprite,” King Lyr said.

“I would go,” Queen Arellia said. “Great-grandfather ties us to the royal bloodline, and it’s—it’s Aillera’s ring now, but...” She trailed off, blushing and looking uncomfortable.

“You may as well tell him,” the king said, with a chuckle. “He may be less likely to punch me in front of one of the Seven.”

The Sylph smiled at that, a little of the fear easing her face, and lifted her hand to cover a giggle. “Oh! Oh, wonderful.” It made her sound like Shan’s cousin Menna again, and he looked at her, trying to push aside his awe. She might seem like a creature of light and power, but Menna had always looked demure too, and she had been a proper hellion as a child and even now, although marriage and motherhood had sobered her a little, she never backed

down from a fight and was, of all Shan's many cousins, the most fun to get drunk with at a reunion.

Tirellian looked at his brother-in-law narrowly. "What?"

"I'm pregnant," Queen Arellia said, ducking her head shyly, and then added, with emphasis, "And I feel *wretchedly* sick all the time."

"Don't tell *him* that," the king said hurriedly, and she smiled at him fondly.

Shan tried to pretend he wasn't there. He wasn't part of this family, and it was very private news until they announced it formally. All the same, he felt a rush of relief. For the last six years or so, the royal couple's fertility had been a matter of open speculation, and he knew from what Tirellian had let slip that Arellia wanted a child with all her heart. He couldn't begin to imagine how awful the weight of expectation must have been, but he could tell she was happy now, from the shine in her eyes and the unguarded warmth of her smile.

That wouldn't necessarily be enough to stop Tirellian from punching her husband. Shan turned to face him and caught his breath again.

Tirellian was smiling, as Shan had never seen him smile before, without restraint or self-consciousness. His cheeks were rounded, his eyes creased and joyous, and he suddenly had (oh, Sky save Shan's leaping heart) dimples. He looked purely and unreservedly happy, and Shan wanted to wrap him up and take him away and find a way to keep him like that forever (with kisses. There definitely needed to be kissing involved in that process and preferably some mutual nudity as well, and maybe even a bit of rubbing and thrusting and... Actually, on reflection, he didn't want to get hard in front of his king and their Sylph, so he needed to stop this line of thought right now).

Tirellian scooped his sister up in another tight hug, murmuring something into her ear that Shan made no effort to hear. Then he frowned at her. "Why are you taking the risk of riding all that distance?"

"Because I am an adult woman capable of making my own decisions," she said tartly, "not a walking womb, whatever delusions you and my husband seem to be suffering." Then she flushed and added, looking at the Sylph. "I'm sorry. That was rude of me, and you shouldn't have to listen to our family squabbles."

"I am not offended," the Sylph said and giggled again. "Not at you, dear. You, young Lyr and your paladin friend there, need to listen more and nag less."

“Sorry, Madam. Sorry, Ara,” said the king meekly and then grinned. “It’s all Tirellian’s fault. He’s so overprotective; I just can’t help following his bad example.”

Tirellian gaped for a moment, speechless, but the Sylph said, clearly amused, “A king should have more willpower, dear. I told you that when you were five.”

The queen pulled away from her brother and shot Shan a sympathetic glance. “We’re making you uncomfortable, Master Arashan. Forgive us. We think of you as family.”

“I’m honoured,” Shan said, and lunged for a less awkward subject. “The ring?”

“Aillera’s still wearing it,” Tirellian said and came to sit down again, sinking into the seat beside Shan. He looked sad again. “We’ve had confirmation of that from numerous reports. I haven’t—haven’t been to see for myself.”

Shan pressed his hand surreptitiously against Tirellian’s leg, trying to offer some small comfort. Queen Aillera still sat by her husband’s side in the Court of Lightning, the rumours said, both of them encased in ice by their conquerors.

“I’m sorry to ask,” King Lyr said, “but—”

“You want me to retrieve it from her and summon the Sprite.”

“Yes!” the Sylph cried. “She’ll come for you. The Pact still stands, and, by its terms, she must answer your questions.”

“At the same time,” the queen said, “there is still the matter of this artificer. We know they are using the old lightning farm in the capital as a manufactory to develop their war machines. None of our spies have the technical knowledge to really explain to us what is being produced there. We need a trained artificer to go there and make accurate observations.”

“And, if possible, to find out why the reluctant artificer has started to cooperate and extract her. Or...”

Tirellian nodded, but it took Shan a moment and then he felt sick. He knew the Shadowflight carried out assassinations, of course, but he couldn’t put that together with his cheerful memories of Daedalia Teichoma.

“You want me to recommend one of my men?”

The king and queen exchanged glances. Then King Lyr said, “Not this time. I know we pulled you off the front line once we realized we needed your mind too much to risk you, but circumstances have changed.”

“We sought a future reading from the Shrouded Isle,” the queen said, “and they actually granted us speech with one of the Oracle’s acolytes. She said that you must be the one to go, Master Arashan.”

“She didn’t say whether that would be enough to make the mission succeed,” the king grumbled, “because why be useful when there’s an opportunity to be cryptic? She was, however, pretty clear that both missions will fail without you. Prepare your wings, gentlemen. You’re both crossing the channel tomorrow.”

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## Chapter Three

It wasn't quite that simple, of course, and there were hours of discussions yet to come. Shan kept quiet through all of them, holding the idea of going behind enemy lines carefully in his head.

He wasn't a coward, he reminded himself. He had been in the trenches and acquitted himself with honour, as much as anyone could. It was just that he had grown comfortable in this new role, always supporting from behind the scenes. He couldn't imagine going into that strange place, to another country where the slightest mistake could mean his death. He didn't want to go.

And that was cowardice, he knew. Brave men and women flew across the Channel every day. He'd watched them go. Tirellian did it. What made him so different? If they could all serve their country in this way, so could he.

"I have a suitable cover identity," Tirellian was saying. "A well-established one as a mid-ranking recruiting officer from a wealthy background. It allows me to travel with relative freedom, but we'll either need a reason for Arashan to be travelling with me or we'll have to separate and meet in the capital."

"How fluent is your eastern dialect?" the king asked Shan, in that tongue.

"I can speak it, sire," Shan replied in dialect, "although not like a native."

"He'll pass for a west coast fisherman, although not for an educated man," Tirellian said, irritating Shan. They hadn't all been brought up to speak six languages. "My assessment is that it would be better for us to travel together, if we can find a suitable cover story. It's not a friendly country for those who do not know it and have not been trained as the Shadowflight are."

"Agreed," the king said. "So, why would a recruiting officer be travelling with a fisherman?"

"He could be a servant," the queen suggested. "A groom or valet."

"I don't know anything about horses," Shan said apologetically.

"And we don't have time to make him into a plausible valet, do we?" the king said.

The Sylph clapped her hands together. "He could be a pleasure slave!"

Shan was taking a sip of tea, which he promptly choked on. The king thumped him on the back with a snort of laughter.

“The Lords of Ice keep them,” the Sylph said enthusiastically, “and you’d be so pretty together.”

Queen Arellia took a look at Shan’s scarlet cheeks and her brother’s suddenly poker-stiff back and bit her lip, before saying, “I think they may be too shy to make it convincing, madam. Perhaps some other sort of leisure activity might...” She trailed off, pursing her lips, and then said thoughtfully, “Your father was a toymaker, Master Arashan. The best in the Seven Courts.”

“That was his reputation, yes, highness,” Shan said.

“I remember a doll’s house,” she said, her eyes going soft, “where you turned a crank on the side and everything moved. The maids served tea, and the birds on the roof lifted their wings, and a cat pounced upon a mouse in the kitchen. It was the most beautiful thing we ever owned.”

He remembered that doll’s house, the months that had gone into making it and the princely sum his father had charged the buyer. He had assumed it had vanished into a royal court. “I know it. There was a little boy swinging off the apple tree in the garden.”

“With white hair and a half-eaten apple in his hand,” she said, and her smile suddenly brightened again. “It was supposed to be you?”

“It was,” he said and added impulsively, “My father is retired, but he still takes some special commissions. I am sure he would make another one for your child.”

She smiled at him. “Thank you. Can you make toys too?”

“Not like my father could,” he said, “but it was what I was training to do, before the war came.”

She turned to Tirellian. “I heard there will be a patronage fair in Kerauton this year. Is your recruiting officer the type to win himself the favour and attention of the powerful by sponsoring a talented unknown to get there?”

“He could be,” Tirellian said and nodded. “Certainly it provides us with a pretext for travelling.”

“What’s a patronage fair?” Shan asked, feeling stupid.

“Ice and Lightning never had academies like you do here,” she explained. “Individual members of the nobility were in the habit of offering support to the gifted in return for a contracted number of years of work. It became somewhat

formalised over the years, and there were fairs annually where people competed for the patronage of the wealthiest.”

“And the rich tried to get the brightest and the best for bargain prices,” Tirellian added dryly. “Father used to go shopping for tutors once a year.”

“And you think there is a demand for toymakers?”

“Oh, yes,” the king said. “Ice is courting the Gemell Confederacy. They want to convince the Gemmies that they are civilized, rather than mere conquerors, and they’ve been conscripting artists and composers all over the occupied territories. Any kind of gifted non-military craftsman is in demand right now.” He nodded to himself. “Maybe that’s why the Oracle named you.”

“It’s unwise to second-guess the Court of Time,” Queen Arellia reminded him firmly.

They left not long after that, after the queen pleaded tiredness and the Sylph left, making the room seem dull in her absence. Tirellian was tired too, and his steps were slow as they walked back down the riverbank to their lodgings. Echoes of distant voices came murmuring on the wind to Shan’s ears, words spoken by people in the village, but he chose not to listen. Just because you had such a gift in your bloodline, didn’t mean it was polite to use it.

Strictly, they were both Colonels, though Shan forgot it most of the time. He wasn’t exactly coming up with battle plans, and the Shadowflight all operated independently. Tirellian’s rank was as much in recognition of his unique position within the court as anything else. The rank, however, meant they were entitled to a private barracks room each. In such a small village, that was problematic, and since Tirellian was often away and Shan too often travelled to other Artificer units, they had taken pity on their harried quartermaster and allowed him to just put an extra cot in Shan’s room for the times when Tirellian was here. It was still a thousand times better than the dugouts they had shared in the trenches, and they were quite used to sharing space.

And if there were times when Shan secretly wished it was a much smaller room and they had to share that space even more closely, that wasn’t something he needed to tell anyone. Tirellian wasn’t interested, and Shan would respect that. He had tried flirting when they first met, and Tirellian had met every overture with discomfort or embarrassment. In time, Shan had given up. Tirellian’s friendship meant too much to him.

Tonight, Tirellian stumbled into his flimsy bed with very few words more, and Shan was left lying awake. In the warm inn parlour, all the talk of patronage fairs and false papers had seemed exciting and plausible. Now, lying between cold sheets with the only sound the soft sigh of Tirellian's breathing in the other bed, he felt fear creeping over him again. He knew, better than anyone, how many of the Shadowflight never came home. First missions were the worst: so many inexperienced flyers were caught and executed. Those who survived that had a better chance, but even the most canny and experienced flyers weren't immune.

And then there was the country itself. He had never been outside the peninsula, hadn't even left Glasmoor until the war began. Now he was expected to go somewhere as strange as the Lightning Realm, and not for mere trade or exploration, but to lie his way past people who would kill or capture him if they had the faintest hint who he was. The very idea made him feel sick.

He *was* a coward.

Turning in his bed, he put his back to Tirellian and knotted his fists in the pillow, trying to slow his breathing and calm the knot around his heart. It was a long time before he fell asleep.

And then, of course, he dreamed.

He was in the trenches, not far from Pira's Corner, pressed against the side as the wind roared over. He couldn't hear anything but the scream of the gale summoned by weather workers behind his own lines. The side of the trench was slick beneath his hands, still sludgy from the wave of water that had come raging across No Man's Land to destroy the last company to hold this stretch of the line. Something as hard and cold as bone was pressing at his palm through it, but he didn't look. Five months in, and he had learned never to look.

The wind went quiet, wrapping them in a silence that was so eerie and blanketing that it felt like a blow. That meant that the weather workers thought they had incapacitated the enemy, and it was the sign to move. Shan went up the side of the trench, pulling himself hand over hand through that terrible silence, aware that others were moving with him all along the line.

*Go fast, they'd been told, before the enemy can recover,* but whoever had devised that strategy could never have seen the land beyond the wire. The green fields of the Ledden Valley had become hell. Earth mages had torn the barren ground apart into cracks and craters as they lashed out to bury Wind's trenches,

and then Ice had sent freezing water to slick over the wreckage. Every step was a slide or a stagger, and when you fell, as everyone did, it was into deep, freezing mud. The few remaining trees were blackened skeletons, lightning struck and charred by fire, and the air tasted bitter. There were bodies in the murk too, and he couldn't tell which side they belonged to, not under the thick gray-brown coating of the mud, the endless, terrible mud.

They were two-thirds of the way across when the spitting cough of the Fire Court's liquid fire siphons sounded. Shan threw himself flat but the man beside him was not so lucky. Liquid fire hit him in the chest, clinging in sticky clumps as it began to burn. Shan grabbed his leg and tried to pull him down into the mud, but he was already screaming, his agony drawing more fire, rocks and grenades landing around them to send the wet earth spewing up in dark waves, and Shan dug frantically into the mud, because after the fire would come the lightning, and all the while the man beside him was staggering and screaming, his voice shrill against the thick gulp of the fire siphons and the trembling sigh of the catapults—

He woke on a choked scream, kicking the sheets away from his feet, and went to claw at the weight on his shoulder before he realized it was Tirellian's hand.

"You are in Porthlevin," Tirellian said, his voice slow and steady. "At the headquarters of the Shadowflight. You are safe. You are safe."

Shan took a fast, shuddering breath and then a second slower one. Then he managed to say, "Tirellian."

"Arashan," Tirellian replied, but didn't move his hand. They'd done this for one another before, been the anchor to reality when a nightmare hit.

"I know where I am," Shan said hoarsely, which was the sign for Tirellian to move away. Shan was hyper-sensitive enough that he could almost feel Tirellian's hand moving through the air, and so he wasn't surprised when tiny, dancing threads of lightning sparked off the ends of Tirellian's fingers, reaching out to fill the corners of the room with light.

"Trevilly," he said, and Tirellian nodded wordlessly. He had been there too. His had been the first face Shan saw when he dragged himself back through the mud to his own trench, concussed and bleeding, but a survivor where none had been expected.

"Candle?" Tirellian asked.

“Please.”

Tirellian snapped his fingers around the wick so lightning leapt out to light it. Shan had always thought it was a neat trick, but he didn't have the energy to beg his friend to repeat it now. He just shuffled across on the bed, making a little more space for Tirellian to sit beside him. The warm light of the candle was comforting in the heavy darkness, but he wouldn't be able to sleep for a while.

His shirt was sopping, wet through with nervous sweat, so he stripped it off and hurled it onto the floor. He'd pick it up in the morning, before Tirellian started stepping over it with pointed glares, but he couldn't stand the clammy thing right now.

“You added another tattoo,” Tirellian said softly and his fingers ghosted across Shan's back, tracing the new black segment.

Shan's breath caught in his throat, his body going alert for a different reason. “Yes,” he said, aware it came out husky. “I had to go south to consult on observation balloons, and I stopped for the next piece on the way back.” It was only a small segment, smaller than his little finger. He hadn't expected anyone to notice.

“Is it the start of a wing?” Tirellian asked.

“Yes.” One day, when the design was fully done, Shan would be able to lift his arms and display a diving bird marked across his back, its wings curling up around his arms. Each new tattoo was like a new tile in a mosaic floor, building towards the final image. He had first imagined it as a common soldier too poor for more than a small addition at a time. Now he could have probably afforded to finish it in one stinging session, but he chose not to. He liked to think he would live long enough to see it done at a slow pace.

Now he wondered if he should have just emptied his pockets two weeks ago.

“Your life is full of wings.”

“Naturally,” Shan said and bit back a sigh as Tirellian pulled his hand back. “I'm sure we could start you off with a little lightning bolt or two. On your shoulder, perhaps.”

“No, thank you,” Tirellian said and swung his legs onto the bed to curl up beside Shan. “Do you want the blanket?”

“I will,” Shan said, but tossed the other half across Tirellian gladly. This was another thing they did without ever discussing it. There was no better cure for nightmares than another person within touching distance. As a boy, he’d never imagined that you could share a bed chastely with someone you desired, but he’d shared close quarters with many people since, and the knowledge that Tirellian would be right there until morning eased some of the remaining tension from his body. Tirellian was already pulling the blanket up, his eyes falling closed, so Shan leaned over him to snuff the candle and then slid down against the pillows.

He fell asleep for the second time with Tirellian’s breath stirring softly against his neck and did not dream again.

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## Chapter Four

He woke up the next morning uncomfortably entangled in paladin. Tirellian's knee was screwed against Shan's back, his elbow was rammed under Shan's ear, and his fingers were curled into his armpit. His hair had clearly come out of its braid in the night, because Shan had a mouthful of silky locks. The bastard was snoring too, right against Shan's neck.

"Good morning to you too," Shan muttered and tried to extract himself.

Tirellian growled in his sleep and locked his other hand in Shan's hair.

"Wake up and let me out," Shan told him. "I need to piss."

Tirellian opened his eyes a crack, making a vaguely irritated sound and rolled away, thumping down against the mattress and clutching the blanket to his chest instead.

"It's a good thing I love you, Sparky," Shan told him and staggered out of bed.

By the time he came back, Tirellian was fast asleep again. His hair was sticking up and his cheek was creased from the pillow, and Shan stood for a while and just looked at him, letting fondness roll through him. Then, because he knew exactly how irritable Tirellian would be all day if he knew someone had seen him at less than his best, he dragged fresh clothes on, shaved, and staggered out to charm the cooks in the mess tent into letting him take breakfast away.

They lingered over breakfast, but then it was all reporting to collect supplies and papers, and taking his own wings out of storage. Tirellian eyed the well-worn tanishwood tubes with interest and said, "I have never actually seen you fly."

"I don't much, these days." The first prototype of the wings had been a journeyman project, before the war. He had envisaged them as the kind of toy that adults bought as much as children. He hadn't even thought that they could have a tactical function, not until years later, stuck with Tirellian in the middle of No Man's Land as wind and fire and hail screamed overhead, trapping them in the dubious shelter of a deep crater. He had babbled nonsense for two days, waiting for the bombardment to stop as they eked out their small share of water.

He hadn't expected Tirellian to drag him to the capital on their next leave, let alone the moment when he found himself unexpectedly standing in front of

his king and queen as Tirellian said serenely, "This is my friend. He knows how to make men fly."

The ultimate consequence of that conversation had brought them here. Men flew in the south too, weather workers gliding above the lines to dodge lightning and drop destructive spells on the enemy lines. Flight, dangerous as it was, had become their greatest advantage.

It was a long way from the fun of that first swoop into the air, though.

He dashed off a few last notes on his latest project (mass-producing spellsilk patches that imitated the structure of spiderwebs and could be used to pin back the crumbling sides of trenches in an evacuation) and wrote a note to his father asking him to consider taking a doll's house commission from the queen.

Then he changed into the clothes he had been supplied, a plain enough set of work clothes which looked like what he would wear here, except for the use of cloth laces instead of metal buttons.

"Less risk of attracting stray lightning," Tirellian explained and came to show him how to tie them. He was already dressed in the uniform of the Ice Guard, stark black and silver, and looked even more forbidding than usual.

They walked up through the village, and Shan was very aware of the curious stares they were getting. This was the only place on the peninsula where Ice Guard uniforms were regularly worn, but the wings in Shan's hands as well as Tirellian's drew comments. Up in the station, they both pulled on thin flying suits of waxed cotton to protect their disguises and put their wings on. Shan checked Tirellian's harness, as he did before every flight, and then held out his arms so Tirellian could check his. Up here, in the white, sunlit room, he was beginning to feel afraid again, and he took a deep breath and thought about the flight, only the flight.

Their launch crew was waiting, with the usual package of supplies already fastened below its own arching and rigid wings. They stood by while first Tirellian, and then Shan, triggered their wingframes.

The tanishwood hissed out, catches snapping into place as the wood, paper-thin and stronger than steel, telescoped out to form two triangular skeletons on each side of their bodies. The clasps were meant to snap into place automatically, but the ground crew checked each one, a luxury they wouldn't have on the other side.

Tirellian clipped the tether of the supplies to his back harness and stepped forwards first. "We will land ten miles inland," he said. "There is a landing strip cut into the forest, just west of the town of Kerammion and beyond the River Glaukistou. From there, we ride to a safe house in the mountains and then take the road east in the morning. Follow me closely."

Then he triggered the spellsilk, lightning shimmering around his fingertips, and the silk suddenly surged out of a single thin thread to fill the framework of his wings with taut, undyed cloth that gleamed in the sunlight. A second thread expanded to swathe his body, a cradle that would support him in the air.

Tirellian grasped the forward struts of his wings, where they curled down over his shoulders, and turned towards the cliff top, pressing down on the struts to bring his stiff wings up to meet the wind. Already they were lifting him, and now he ran, striding faster and faster towards the granite ledge at the end of the cliff.

And then he was away, his body straightening and his wings rising. He swung out and up, shifting his body to cross back over the edge of the cliffs and then out to sea again, riding the upthrust of the wind against the cliffs to rise higher and higher.

Shan was waiting, counting zigzags and watching the cargo glider jerk and then rise behind Tirellian. When the sky was clear, he triggered his own silk and ran.

He had never launched over the sea before, and for a moment he was spellbound by the clear jagged tumble of the rocks and the waves leaping between them in flares of shining spray. From here, he could see the rocks below the water, brown and silver and gleaming, the fish darting between them, the seals basking in the summer heat.

Then he remembered that this was not a pleasure flight and shifted his weight to turn into the wind, rising and rising until the Coast Guard station shrunk into a small white square below him.

Tirellian was hanging in the air, waiting for him. As Shan rose closer, he nodded and then leaned forwards, pushing himself out across the sea. It was a good day for flying, with a steady wind and the sun shining down brightly. He had been wondering how far they would fly over open sea, but Tirellian steered a course which crossed over all the rocky granite outcrops in the sea. Each one sent them rising again.

Over the last, a deserted rock half a mile long and inhabited by screeching gannets, Tirellian rode the rising heat higher than Shan would have risked,

circling up and up. Shan followed, and when they pitched forwards out of the warm air, it wasn't long before he understood.

The air was growing cold, for all it was summer. Looking ahead, Shan realised that the white line ahead of them wasn't just the glare of the sun on the horizon. It was the other side of the channel.

The water below them took on an oily sheen, moving in slow, glutinous waves. The waves rolling towards the land seemed to be moving below, not across, the surface of the sea, lifting in slow heaves but never breaking. There was a little boat pushing along the coast, a fishing boat rather than a warship, and he could see the birds wheeling behind it, diving towards its decks. It was moving slowly, and he had to watch it for a few moments before he understood why.

The sea was freezing in its wake, the path it had forced through the thin surface air sealing up again slowly. He wanted to swoop down to see what they were catching. Were they fishing through the ice or were they after seals?

He stayed high, though, so he would look like nothing but the shadow of a bird to them.

The Lightning Coast was lower and less dramatic than his own cliffs, soft ridges sloping gently towards the sea. The low cliffs were chalky, but they looked yellow in comparison to the downs above, which were deeply swathed in snow.

It wasn't until he saw the first tiled roof showing barely above the surface that he realized how deep it lay, and he shuddered. It was an endless gleaming plain below him, and he watched his shadow crossing it with a superstitious shudder. What else lay beneath that pristine surface?

They were losing height badly by the time they reached the edge of the forest, and they both leaned forwards hard to increase their speed. When Tirellian banked and turned, Shan followed him with relief.

The landing ground was so far from the edge of the woods that it could only have been seen from above. Its edges weren't quite square, and it wasn't until they came down, stumbling to a halt in great plumes of dust-fine snow, that he saw why. From the ground, it looked like a natural clearing.

There was a little wooden hut set just within the edge of the trees, and Tirellian folded down his wings and strode that way. Shan followed, suddenly aware of how stiff he was, and how cold his hands were.

"Bring the cargo pack in," Tirellian said to him, in dialect. "I'll start a fire."

Shan nodded and staggered off to get it. The snow was compact beneath his feet in most places, only pressing down an inch or so, but twice he stepped forwards and went down into it to his hip and had to drag himself out again. The pack wasn't heavy, but it was awkward and took some wrestling to get it inside.

Tirellian had started a fire in the small stove and stripped off his overalls, hanging them up to dry. He was now crouched over some odd metallic apparatus in the corner.

"Here's the box," Shan said, trying to sound cheerful for the sake of his own spirits. "Where do you want it?"

Tirellian whirled on him and snapped, "Language!"

Shan blinked, and only then realized that he hadn't been speaking dialect. "There's no one to overhear."

"Always assume there is," Tirellian said, his voice steady. "From the moment your feet touched the snow, you became Arachanni of Zephyrport, a fisherman and toymaker. You must be him now, whether you think we are watched or not."

Shan was about to apologize, but then thought again. In his best dialect, he dashed off a sloppy salute and said, "Aye-aye, Captain."

"Don't cheek an officer, peasant," Tirellian said, but smiled a little, some of the tension going out of him.

The mechanism in the corner let out a sequence of short and long squeals. Tirellian tilted his head, listening, and then sighed with relief. "That's the correct countersign."

"From where?"

"There are wires leading under the ground. They convey lightning, which the device turns to sound. And, no, I don't know how it works. My apologies."

Shan closed his mouth on his question in disappointment. "So, you sent a lightning message to..."

"The local resistance, to announce our arrival. If they hadn't replied correctly within a set time, it would mean this position had been compromised."

"Now what?"

"We wait. We need to hand over our supplies, and they will advise us of any changes to safe houses. They also have horses."

Shan nodded and stripped his coveralls off to hang up beside Tirellian's. He staggered over to the stove eagerly, holding out his numb hands to thaw. "That's nice. Hard luck for you, to only get one day back in summer."

Tirellian shrugged slightly. "We do what we must. Do you know what this small box is?"

Shan craned to see without moving away from the stove. "My tools. I'll make up some samples as we go, in case anyone asks to see my wares."

By the time they heard the jingle of harnesses outside, the stove was burning well, and Shan was beginning to warm up. Tirellian rose and went to the door, his hand on his sword hilt, and peered out through the crack. He opened it quickly, and a stranger stomped in.

He was a man in his fifties, with tired eyes. He was huddled into a thick fur coat, with a hat pulled down over his ears. He waited until the door was shut and said, "Your Grace. Back so soon?"

"As duty demands," Tirellian said gravely. "We have the weapons drop. Are the roads safe?"

"There are extra patrols on the west coast road, and we lost the safe house in Iktinost. You're safe to go up to Kersmeta Tor tonight, though."

Tirellian nodded. "Do you have cold weather clothes?"

"With the horses. New lad?"

Tirellian ignored that to say, "I'll help you bring it in."

If someone had told him this time yesterday that he'd be glad to wear fur-lined trousers and two layers of coats, Shan would have thought them mad. He'd been building a nice tan running around Porthlevin this week.

The stranger saw him shivering and said, "First crossing?"

"Is it obvious?" Shan asked.

"You'll get used to the weather in a day or two." He shook his head slightly and then asked, a note of longing in his voice, "Tell me, are the flowers blooming on the other side?"

"All over the headlands," Shan said.

"My daughter's twelve and she's just too young to remember what summer looks like," the man confided and then added viciously, "Damn these bastards. Damn them all."

Shan was still trying to imagine that when they rode out. The woods were lovely, all stark lines and icicles hanging in shimmering falls, but they were deep too, and the only sound was the pad of the horse's hooves, the sigh of the wind, and the occasional crack of distant branches breaking under the weight of the snow.

Before they even left the woods, the road divided. Their contact rode off in one direction, and Tirellian led them slightly to the south, up a steeper, narrower track. It was only once they had gone that Shan realized he had never exchanged names with their helper.

"Wiser not to," Tirellian said when he mentioned that. "If you don't know a name, you can't be forced to share it."

"How do you live like that?" Shan wondered.

"Better than giving up and not fighting back."

"Yes," Shan said and shuddered again. The sun was beginning to drop and the shadows stretched out in long, gloomy spears. He couldn't quite see the beauty in this cold landscape anymore. It was too stark, too lacking in life and colour. "What do people eat?"

"The rich have glasshouses, where they can grow some fresh vegetables to trade. There are still animals in the woods, although they are leaner and vicious now. By the coast, there are seals and occasional whale hunts." Tirellian looked around and said, his voice weary, "These were beech woods once. Have you ever seen how green beech leaves are in spring?"

"They don't grow west of here," Shan replied, remembering in time to be vague, in case there was some invisible enemy lurking in the trees listening for incongruous place names.

"No," Tirellian said sadly. "No, they don't."

After being frozen for a decade, would they ever revive here? Shan didn't say it, but he saw how Tirellian's eyes lifted to the thin dead-looking branches overhead.

The safe house turned out to be a tall and chilly building on the road up to an abandoned slate mine. It stood among mounds like a sentry, its narrow windows dark and shuttered. Inside, it was mostly empty, but Tirellian led him through to a room at the back, which faced straight onto the slate heap behind.

"Our lights won't be seen if we use this room," he explained.

Shan nodded mutely. The day seemed to have been going on for longer than any day should. After the flight and the ride and stabling the horses, he was too tired to think about safety precautions. Dimly, he knew he'd have to learn and fast, but he was willing to just let Tirellian do everything right now.

"Sleep for an hour," Tirellian said, gesturing towards the wide pallet by the wall. "I'll wake you when food is ready."

"Food?" Shan said hopefully.

"In time."

He didn't quite fall asleep, but he dozed, his eyes half-closed, watching Tirellian move quietly around the dimly lit room. There was a stove here too, and Tirellian lit it and went out for more wood. There was snow in his hair when he came back in, and Shan could hear it if he tried, a slow sigh against the window, quieter than the steady roar of the stove.

"Smoke?" he murmured.

"A necessary risk," Tirellian said, "but with this wind it will go out over the mine. Go back to sleep."

Shan closed his eyes for a moment, and when he opened them there was a pan steaming slowly on the stove and the smell of oats and honey warming the air. Those had both been in their packs, and he supposed it would be hot, even if it was an odd meal for an evening. Tirellian was standing over the pan, stirring it gently. He had bundled his long hair back out of the way and was frowning down at the pan. Had he once been instructed in how to make the perfect porridge, Shan wondered idly. He had never seen the man cook before; on the rare occasions they had needed to prepare their own food, he himself had always just made them sandwiches.

It felt very domestic, and he reflected idly that he and Tirellian had been sharing living space for the best part of a decade now, in dugouts, tents, and barracks.

Sitting up and stretching, he pointed it out. "Do you realize we spend more time living together than most married couples?"

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## Chapter Five

Tirellian nearly dropped the wooden spoon, only stopping it from knocking the pan over at the last second. Colour had risen in his cheeks, and he stirred the porridge silently and vigorously for a few moments before he said, "You're awake then?"

"Afraid so," Shan said, biting back pleased laughter. He hadn't expected that kind of reaction. He went over to the stove and nudged Tirellian with his shoulder. "Smells good."

"I hope it will be to your satisfaction," Tirellian said stiffly. Oh, extra formality. Shan must have really flustered him.

Guiltily, he said, "I'm sure it will be perfect. Thanks for letting me sleep. I've obviously been getting slow and lazy in camp. You'll have to bully me back into battle-readiness."

"Your fitness seems quite adequate to me," Tirellian said and stirred hard again, not meeting Shan's eyes. "If you would be so kind, there are bowls in the cupboard."

Shan sighed, but set the table up. The chairs were old, but their backs had been painstakingly carved and polished once, flowers and lightning bolts cut out of the wood. Someone had put some love into the furnishings of this place, though it was all now scuffed and well used enough to show that many people passed through here. He wondered what had become of the people who lived here and whoever had taken the time to make a simple chair lovely as well as functional.

"Tell me something about this place," he said impulsively, as Tirellian set the bowls down. "Something you want me to know."

"Are you inquiring about this house, the local area, or the country as a whole?"

"Up to you. I don't want a schoolroom lecture. Just tell me something interesting."

Tirellian ate his porridge, obviously pondering it. Shan ate too and was mildly amused to find it was rather lumpy porridge. He was so used to Tirellian excelling at everything that he found it almost sweet that he couldn't do this

(he'd stopped trying not to be ridiculous over Tirellian years ago, so he had no shame in adding this to the ever-growing list of endearing things he treasured).

Then Tirellian said abruptly, "The miners sang."

He didn't say anything more and after waiting for a few minutes, Shan prompted, "Sang what?"

"Folk songs, hymns. It's not what they sang that mattered. It was where."

"So where did they sing?" Shan asked, propping his chin on his hand to listen.

"In the mines," Tirellian said. "Each family worked their own section of the mine, leased it from the owners for a half-share in what they brought out—"

"Ouch."

"I doubt mine owners on the peninsula are much kinder."

"Worse," Shan said. "It was a political issue, just before the war came, I remember. Get to the singing."

"All these families, working beside each other, would collect up the waste stone and build themselves a cabin, down there inside the mountain. They would all go and sit inside together for their meals and to exchange news. And they would sing over their supper. There were contests between different cabins, and the winners would represent their mines in regional competitions. It was a hard life, but they sang." He shook his head a little. "They sang."

"How do you know so much about mines?"

"My father owned one." Then his voice softened, and he added, "I wanted to be a miner once. I liked the idea of the singing."

"Can you sing?" Shan asked.

"I was taught to," Tirellian said and then grimaced faintly. "Unfortunately, I was the despair of my singing teacher. I'll never have more than a passable voice, and that took some time."

"We can't all be good at everything," Shan told him heartlessly.

Tirellian looked mildly disgruntled.

Rising to his feet, Shan said, "Before I get tired again, I want to start preparing some showpieces. I didn't want to bring in any outside materials. What can we buy or scavenge here?"

“I don't know what kind of materials you would use.”

“I'm thinking puppets and small automata. You can easily put together something that looks flashy even with simple materials. Maybe a couple of tilt mazes, although they take longer. How much capacity will we have to carry finished pieces?”

“We'll be leaving the horses once we reach Kerammion, and taking the mail coach from there. We should be able to buy extra cargo space. Not many travel long distances now.”

“I'll start with parts tonight then. I'd have them in cast tin at home, but that's beyond our resources here. Wood, some wire, scraps of cloths, maybe some bits of slate for weights and decorations. I can do a lot with that, and they'll fit into saddlebags until we have space to carry finished parts.”

“I remind you that we don't actually intend to set up business here. It merely needs to be enough to convince any observer. Do try not to make enough that we need to hire a shop.”

“Live the lie, you told me,” Shan said cheerfully. “Is that wood all needed for the fire, or can I pick through it?”

“There's a wood store in the yard,” Tirellian said, rising to his feet. “How much do you need?”

“Quality is more important than quantity,” Shan said.

He ended up spending the evening whittling cranks and gears and cams of varying sizes, imagining all the things he could do with them. There had been a little thin board leaning against the back of the store, but not enough to start making casings. Tirellian had seemed confident that they would be able to buy more and better later, so he left it until he had a good pile of puppet limbs and heads to add to his pile. By then Tirellian had gone to bed, and Shan picked up the thin board again. Laying it out, he grinned to himself. He knew what he could do with this. It might not look as pretty as the ones he'd made as a journeyman, but there was just enough wood here for a simple puzzle box.

He sketched out the shapes quickly. Cutting them took a little longer, and he took the time to smooth and sand the wood. He might not be able to paint or stain it, but he could let the wood's own beauty shine through. Putting it together was easy enough, although he remembered spending hours sweating over the first one he had ever made. It looked innocent enough when he was done, a little box with raised panels on its front, but he defied anyone who didn't know the trick to open it.

Sliding it open himself, he idly pondered putting a surprise for Tirellian in it. If they had been at home, Tirellian's door key would be entertaining, or his bootlaces, but that seemed a little foolhardy here. In the end, he stuck a few bits of slate in the corner to make a cabin and made a very simple wooden miner with a little slate headed hammer to stand beside it. He could probably have rigged the hammer to move, but he was suddenly aware of how very late it was, and he would regret it tomorrow if he became too much of a perfectionist. Tidying his tools away and packing up the parts and leftover materials into separate bags, he looked towards Tirellian.

He had spread across the whole bed again, snuffling into the pillow. Shan shook his head, amused, and put the lantern out. His family had been wealthy enough that he had a room of his own as a child, but he had gone top-to-toe with an endless stream of visiting cousins. Tirellian had clearly never needed to learn to share his space.

Crawling in, Shan muttered, "Shove over, Sparky."

Tirellian grumbled, but inched back, taking the blanket with him. Shan wrestled that out of his grasp too, and wasn't really surprised when Tirellian immediately lunged after it, almost elbowing him in the face. Awake, his paladin was so polite it hurt to watch; asleep, he was a grabby bastard. Over the years, Shan had been forced to share with him numerous times, and it was never a comfortable experience.

"Share," Shan said mildly.

Tirellian opened his eyes, and then obviously woke up. Sighing, he slumped back into his half of the bed, clutching his bit of blanket under his chin.

"You were up late," he said.

"Done now. Don't let me wake you up."

"Mmm." He went quiet, and Shan assumed he had gone back to sleep. Then Tirellian said, his voice soft and sleep-muzzy, "I'm not your husband."

"You're not my wife, either. So?"

"You said we were as good as married."

"It didn't mean anything," Shan said, sighing. Was it still bothering him? Nice to know the idea was so awful. "Mind you, if we'd been having sex all these years, we'd probably qualify as hearth-wed by now. I could divorce you and claim half your wealth."

"I don't have any wealth."

"Oh, we'd have to stay married, then." He probably shouldn't be talking about this when it was this late, especially now Tirellian had gone tense behind him. He'd thought that about hearth-marriages before, but never been stupid enough to say it. The idea was one of the little things that he tucked away behind his heart, to comfort and torture himself. If Tirellian had ever shown anything other than awkward discomfort at the subject, Shan would have seduced him years ago. A hearth-marriage might not have the formal ceremonies and contracts of a proper wedding, but it was still legally valid. He could quite happily just ease into something lasting.

"My father would be turning in his grave," Tirellian said, sounding a little more awake. "I was formally betrothed when I was four, to the ten year old daughter of the Earl of Pyrgastarin."

"An older woman. You daredevil."

"My father bought his way out of the engagement three years later, once he was more influential than the earl. After that, it was General Atreusa's granddaughter, and then he broke that in favor of..."

"How *many*?" Shan demanded, caught between horror and hilarity.

"Four, in the end. After the twins married, though, I don't think anyone but an empress would have satisfied him."

"So are you still engaged?"

Tirellian sighed. "Thalassia and Choralis are dead. Iliariane was taken back to Ice by one of the generals after the invasion. She's his fourth wife now, from all I heard. I don't know about Kleomartis. The Earl of Pyrgastarin was out of favour, and they were all on their country estate when Ice marched on the capital. She may have survived."

It had only been meant as a light-hearted question, but now Shan regretted it. Shivering, he tried to think of something to say.

Tirellian, after a moment, relinquished a little more blanket. If it was an apology, Shan would take it, but he wasn't sure he was going to sleep well now. "I'm afraid of this country," he admitted softly.

"I wish you didn't have to be," Tirellian said sadly and then added gravely, "I'll look after you, Arashan."

“Piss off,” Shan muttered. “I’ll look after myself.”

He was rewarded with a low chuckle, and then Tirellian drifted back to sleep.

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He woke with his face in Tirellian’s armpit, locked there by Tirellian’s arm around his head. Extracting himself, he forgot where he was until his feet hit the cold stone floor.

He tried to keep the resulting bout of hopping and swearing to himself, but he woke Tirellian anyway.

Shan started breakfast before Tirellian could offer, taking full advantage of standing next to the stove to get some heat into his bones. It had snowed again overnight, and the windowsill had another layer of fresh snow. Now, by daylight, he could see how the layers below had compacted into wrinkled layers of ice which refracted the bright sunshine into long shimmers across the slate floor.

Tirellian was turning the puzzle box over and over in his hands, frowning at it. “Is this a toy?”

“It’s a gift,” Shan said, biting back a grin, “if you can open it.”

The click-click of sliding panels accompanied the rest of his cooking time and most of breakfast.

“Want me to tell you the solution?”

“No,” Tirellian said, and went back to it.

“It only takes nine moves.”

Tirellian glared at him. “Then I will work out what those moves are.”

By the time they were packed and ready to go, Shan was feeling a little guilty. “There really isn’t anything much inside.”

Tirellian looked a little worried. “You can’t take back a gift, Arashan.”

“I never would,” Shan said, and didn’t even try to hide his amusement. “Good thing I *didn’t* put your bootlaces in it, though.”

Tirellian’s eyes narrowed. “A hearth marriage would require somebody to live with you for years without killing you, wouldn’t it?”

“Good thing you love me, Sparky,” Shan said lightly, “or I’d be facing an eternal bachelorhood.”

“I will never understand your sense of humour,” Tirellian muttered, but he put the puzzle box away in his pack very carefully and then swung up into the saddle. “The day awaits. Let us ride.”

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## Chapter Six

They had been riding a couple of hours before the track down from the mine joined a real road. Shan sat up a little in his saddle, bracing himself to be challenged, but there was no one in sight. The snow was churned up, and there had clearly been horses passing this way lately.

“Relax,” Tirellian said. “Remember that you are under my protection.”

“And that matters because?”

“Because people fear me,” Tirellian said coolly. His seat in the saddle had changed too, less rigid and more casually arrogant. “Don’t you know who I am?”

“Captain Asterian of the Ice Guard, sir!” Shan said and snapped a mock salute.

“That could get you lashed if you do it to the wrong sort of officer. For your information, *I’m* the wrong sort of officer.”

“So I can be confident that you will protect me and afraid of you at the same time.”

“You’re learning, Arachanni. Good boy.”

“That,” Shan said, although the sneering tone had sent a shiver down his spine, “is a bit too much. Don’t get used to this, Sparks.”

“Don’t use nicknames.”

Shan nodded vigorously and made an effort to remember that too. How did Tirellian manage to keep track of all this without being afraid all the time?

When they came round the next corner and saw a party riding towards them, Shan did his best to conceal his curiosity, but he wanted to look at the ordinary people of the Lightning Realm. He wanted to see how years of conquest had changed them.

He had expected them to look at the uniform Tirellian wore with anger and was ready to face hostility. Instead, as soon as they saw him, they all fell to one side of the road, averting their eyes. They didn’t stop, but they rode past silently. It was as if they were riding on two different roads, rather than being so close Shan could smell the damp fur of their coats. Their shoulders were all tight, and he saw how their knuckles clenched on the reins.

They were looking at him, he realized, although they dared not raise their eyes to see Tirellian.

They were looking at him, and he could read the hatred in every gaze.

He hadn't thought through all the implications of pretending to cooperate with a fake Ice Guard, but now it hit him, so hard he went cold. To them, he looked like a collaborator.

He felt it more when they arrived in Kerammion, and Tirellian escorted him around the marketplace. Shan didn't know how to talk to merchants without smiling and joking. Here, people smiled at his jokes, but they were sick, bitter smiles, and their eyes were flat and cold, watching every breath Tirellian took behind his shoulder. He found it hard not to keep looking at the centre of the market square, where three bodies were hanging from a high gallows, snow heavy on their shoulders. All three had been branded across their faces. Shan didn't know why, but he could guess. He'd read all the reports on how the Ice Guard treated resistance fighters.

Once he'd seen that, he kept noticing more. He saw how hungry people looked and how little food there was on sale. He noticed the child with missing, frostbitten fingertips, and the people who moved through the crowd with cocky, brittle arrogance, wearing Ice's colours pinned to their sleeves or collars.

There was a beheaded statue over the frozen fountain, its head smashed into jagged fragments. The etched lightning up its arms told him it must have been of the Sprite of Lightning.

Everywhere in the crowd, he could hear coughing, the slow rattle of diseased lungs, and the wet hack of infection.

Tirellian paid a boy extra to pack up the chest he purchased and carry it to the coaching inn.

"You shouldn't flash your cash," Shan said. "You'll get robbed."

Tirellian sneered, and it was so unlike his normal expression, so empty of the subtle humour that usually lit his face, that Shan shuddered. "Who would dare? There would be retaliation."

The coach, when it came, was a rickety, rattly thing. By silent arrangement, the four other passengers left the padded part of its bench to him and Tirellian. Nobody spoke to them, or to each other.

After a few jouncing miles, Shan had had enough. Resting his cheek against

his palm, he propped himself against the window and asked Tirellian, "Any reason I shouldn't sleep, Captain?"

"Do as you wish," Tirellian said coolly. "No one will trouble you."

That made the atmosphere in the coach even worse, and Shan closed his eyes and willed himself to sleep.

He wasn't quite tired enough, and he kept jolting back awake as the coach jerked along the icy roads, catching new glimpses of the countryside: cascades of flaking slate scattered across snowy slopes, little villages where the snow piled up behind the houses. The road was dug deep into the drifts, with sullied flat walls gleaming dully on either side of the coach.

After a while, it took on a nightmarish quality: the bluish-tone to the light, Tirellian's expressionless face, the silent loathing of the other passengers. When the coach finally drew up outside another inn, Shan stumbled out gladly.

This was a bigger town, on flatter ground, and the inn was a sizeable place. They were given a room without demur, and the porters carried their luggage up silently. As soon as the door closed behind them, Shan sank down on the bed.

"We overnight here," Tirellian said. "The coach leaves again two hours after dawn. We stop again in Daschion and then Rhodiosson the night before we reach the capital."

"Right."

"I'll order food," Tirellian said, and there was a little hesitancy in his voice now. "Arachanni?"

The false name stung, although he knew the necessity. "Don't."

Tirellian sat down beside him, the mattress dipping beneath his weight. After a moment, he put his hand on Shan's knee. He was warm, which seemed impossible in this cold country, and Shan leaned towards him slightly, craving comfort. To his surprise, Tirellian wrapped an arm around his shoulder, letting him lean.

Shan wanted to ask how he coped with this. How could he stand to be hated when he was really a hero? How could he keep coming back to let people believe the worst of him?

It wasn't a safe question, though, so he just turned his face against Tirellian's shoulder and pretended it was another bad night, and that this was a nightmare he had woken from now.

He clung to that idea all evening, after eating the meal Tirellian insisted on ordering (more gristle than meat, and the broth bulked out with pale and clammy root vegetables). Shan finished it all, and then set to work on his demonstration pieces, putting together parts with slow care. He didn't bother with painting the models, not when they had no time to let his work dry, but he carved them, making full use of the natural grain and variations in the wood.

Tirellian left him to it at first. He disappeared down to the bar, and did not come back until long after dark, smelling faintly of beer. He closed the shutters and then sat down on the bed, loosening his collar and watching Shan.

"It's artistry," he said at last.

"It's mechanics," Shan replied, coaxing the last cog into place. Reaching out to test it, he turned the handle on the side of the box, and on the top, five dancers began to turn and bob at different speeds, their wooden hands almost but not quite brushing. Satisfied with the workings, he set to fitting side panels over the machinery. Next would be simple costumes for the dancers, made from scraps of old dancing dresses that had come from a rag stall in Kerammion. Nothing he used was unaffordable for a village lad with a moderately wealthy sponsor, but that meant he had to display his skills in the craftsmanship.

He had let Tirellian move them both through the day, trusting in him to protect them both from this unknown country. Now, he was tense with the need to do something, even if was a small thing. He was good at making and inventing, not spying and scheming, so he could at least pour himself into this. It was only a tiny part of the mask they were hiding behind on this cold journey, but it was something he could do that Tirellian could not. It pulled at him now, the need to prove that he could be a part of this, that he was a help in this mission rather than a mere piece to be moved across Tirellian's board.

"Art," Tirellian repeated, and after a moment Shan heard the slide and click of the puzzle box again.

He finished two more pieces that evening: another wind-up toy, this one full of soldiers fighting wolves with snapping jaws and a tilting maze set into a round tray, with tiny bells fitted between the layers that rang when the ball passed certain points in the maze.

In here, focussed almost entirely on his work, he was starting to forget where he was and what they were doing. This was what he had imagined his life would be, crafting things that gave joy. Even Tirellian's presence didn't

quite shatter the illusion. Tirellian was an essential part of his life, even this quiet fantasy. Let Shan be just a toymaker, albeit one who took commissions from royalty, and Tirellian could be an ambassador or a royal guest. Shan couldn't imagine any alternate history where he and Tirellian wouldn't be friends.

Inside the room, seeing only the slow fall of snow outside, he could imagine that they were in the capital at home, in the kind of lodgings a respected craftsman might be able to afford in that cramped, steep little city.

It was only when Tirellian tensed at the sound of steps in the hall outside that Shan remembered where they were. He paused in his work, and pursed his lips in case he needed to whistle up a sudden wind.

But the footsteps passed, and Tirellian relaxed again. Shan was left tenser than before, though, second-guessing every sound. He had to remind himself that their job was to reach the capital safely, without doing anything which would make them noticeable. He wasn't hiding in here, no matter what it felt like. It wasn't cowardice which kept him at this table, merely necessary caution.

He wondered, though, what Tirellian had learned tonight, just by listening quietly in a place where no one looked for spies.

The click of Tirellian trying to solve the puzzle box slowed and eventually stopped. Shan glanced over to see if he had solved it.

He hadn't, merely put it down beside the bed. Now he was stretched out along the bed, his cheek propped on his hand. He was watching Shan, his eyes soft and tired.

"Given up?" Shan asked, smiling at him.

"I am merely stopping to think," Tirellian said. Then his mouth curved slightly, and he added, "until morning."

"Sure you don't want me to tell you how to open it?"

"Utterly."

Shan turned back to his work. It was several minutes later when Tirellian said softly, "You shouldn't be a soldier."

"We're at war. I have no choice."

"But you should be doing this," Tirellian said, sounding almost angry. "You should be able to make beautiful things."

Shan turned round to face him again, nonplussed. "They're just toys."

"Exactly."

Shan looked at him, at the weariness in his eyes and the uncharacteristic slump of his body. "You're tired. It's making you sentimental. You should sleep."

"So should you."

"Soon," Shan promised. "I just need to finish the costumes on this."

Tirellian huffed irritably, but Shan heard him stripping off some of his clothes and settling into bed.

He was asleep by the time Shan slid the cover over the lamp where trapped lightning danced brightly along a coil of wire. Shan toed his own shoes off and stripped down to his shirt and drawers, shivering a little. He was too cold to think about it as he slid into bed beside Tirellian. It wasn't until he reached up to close the lamp above the bed and then huddle against his warmth that it hit him how intimate this was. If they were lovers, they would sleep like this, curling against each other to share warmth.

Tirellian stirred slightly, his breath sighing warmly against Shan's neck. Shan wasn't quite tired enough to slump straight into sleep, and he wasn't shaking from the aftereffects of nightmares, either. This time, breathing in the familiar scent of Tirellian's body and feeling the warm brush of his skin where their legs brushed, he couldn't stop himself from imagining what it would be like to be Tirellian's lover.

How many kisses would it take before Tirellian's stern posture softened? Would his snow-pale body flush as Shan pressed against him? Would he gasp or cry out when Shan slid down the bed to suck his cock? Would he be controlling, shoving Shan down to fuck him hard, or would he surrender everything?

Shan was getting hard, warm shudders sliding through him, and he had to stop. He couldn't do this while Tirellian slept obliviously beside him. It was crass, and he knew Tirellian well enough to be sure he would find it invasive and humiliating. That meant that Shan couldn't reach down and touch himself, not now. He had to simply clench his fists in the blanket and lie still, hoping Tirellian would not wake until his lust had subsided.

He eventually slid into sleep like that, arousal still washing through him, and he dreamed of sex, of the hot press of body against body, sweat-slick skin

sliding against skin, of how it felt to move inside someone, feeling them shudder and groan beneath him, and in his dreams he fisted his hands in long black hair and fucked Tirellian until the dream faded and restarted, a tissue of forbidden, impossible moments.

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When he woke the next morning, he had turned onto his front, and Tirellian was slumped across his back, chewing the shirt over Shan's shoulder. By the extent of the damp patch on Shan's shirt, he had obviously been drooling for some time.

Was he a paladin or a puppy?

Shan committed that useful taunt to memory for when they got home, wriggling round enough that he could breathe. Tirellian snorted indignantly in his sleep and clutched him tight again the moment they were settled, his arms locking across Shan's back. It wasn't personal, Shan knew. Over the years, he had watched Tirellian sleep countless times, and he always clung to something, a blanket or a pillow or the person nearest to him. It was, however, close enough to Shan's fantasies that he curled a little closer, letting his eyes fall shut again, and allowed himself to sink back into dreams.

When he woke properly, Tirellian was gone. Shan stumbled out of bed, swearing at the cold, and pulled his outer clothes back on. He noticed that the toys on the table weren't in quite the same alignment as they had been and chuckled. Even fierce paladins couldn't resist turning a lever when no one was watching.

He packed his work back into the chest carefully, and went out to look for Tirellian.

He was in the inn yard, his arms folded as he watched the movement of people along the street outside. In the dull daylight, Shan could see that the town had a bleak prettiness, sloping roofs white with snow and black, iron streetlamps dancing with flickering lightning. The houses were all decorated with metal railings and carved shutters, painted with cheerful patterns: lightning bolts, sunbursts, flowers, girls dancing in flaring skirts. The paint was peeling and faded, though, and long icicles reached down from every roof edge and gutter. In places, the edges of the roofs were ragged, and Shan wondered how many had collapsed below a weight of snow they had not been designed to carry.

“Shall I send the boy up for the chest?” Tirellian asked.

“It’s all packed,” Shan said. “And good morning to you, too. Any chance of breakfast?”

“I would avoid it, if I were you. It would merely be the leftovers from last night’s dinner, freshly fried.”

Shan’s stomach lurched a little. “At least they have oil.”

“Yes,” Tirellian said slowly. “Although—”

“No more,” Shan said hurriedly. He wasn’t a fussy eater, not after years in the army, but he had also learned to listen to veterans’ advice when it came to food.

Tirellian flicked a tiny smile his way and then went off to sort out their baggage, leaving Shan alone. It was a strange feeling, unnerving and exhilarating, to stand here and breathe in the air of another country, watching people who seemed both perfectly ordinary and entirely strange to him. He wanted to talk to them, to find out how they lived and what they loved, to listen to their stories and become part of them.

It wasn’t a time for honest travellers, though, so he just stood and watched. Eventually Tirellian came back, carrying two steaming mugs. Shan took one, nodding thanks, and clutched it carefully, only now realizing how cold his hands were.

It was some kind of tisane, faintly sweet, and it warmed him nicely. Even after he was done, he kept the mug in his hands, letting the warmth sink into his fingers. Tirellian drank more slowly, his eyes distant. Then he said, so quietly that no one else could have heard them, “I remember stopping here once, as a boy. There are fields and orchards, or there were, outside the town, and the factories here made jam and bread and sweets. I remember that the streets smelt warm and sweet. There was a girl in the kitchen who gave us little cherry pies shaped like stars while we were waiting for the horses to be changed. Ailerra got jam all down her skirt, and Arellia and I had to stand in front of her so that father wouldn’t notice.”

Shan looked at the grey and white landscape again and reached out to touch Tirellian’s exposed wrist with his warm fingers. Tirellian shuddered a little and turned his head to smile at Shan, a little of the sadness fading from his eyes.

Then the coachman came out of the inn, the passengers began to move forwards, and everything else was put aside in the bustle of loading up. Soon

they were on their way again, heading along a steadily busier road towards the city of Daschion.

The inn in Daschion was full to bursting with a contingent of real Ice Guard troops stopping overnight on their way to the southern border. They were all Fire soldiers, from the Ash Mountains that lay between the Court of Lightning and the delta, and Shan peeped at them with fascination as Tirellian argued with the innkeeper. They were handsome, men and women alike, with dark complexions and long, curling, black hair. Most of them wore little pieces of jasper and carnelian, as piercings in their ears or lips or dangling from pendants, and tiny flames danced within the rock. They were all dressed in a pared-down version of the uniform Tirellian wore, sleeveless black leather vests and leggings, thick-soled sandals that laced up their legs, and heavy belts that jangled with multiple weapons.

Shan had heard stories about the Court of Fire all his life, how they were the greatest metalworkers in the seven courts, and how their warrior caste were not just fighters but acrobats, fire dancers who did not feel the cold.

For a moment, looking at all those lithe, leather-clad bodies, that was a very interesting thought indeed. Just how flexible was the average soldier, and how willing would they be to provide him with data for comparison by, say, stretching all over his naked body and...

One of the women caught him looking and winked at him cheerfully, nudging her friend. They all glanced his way on a wave of laughter, and Shan looked away hurriedly. There was trouble he didn't need. How did people who burned so brightly go about serving Ice?

Tirellian appeared at his shoulder, looking distant and forbidding again. "They can't even put us up in the stables, but there's one bed left in the dormitory in the attic. I don't like it, but the next nearest accommodation is a long walk away. It's late, and this city isn't safe after dark."

"We can take turns to sleep," Shan offered.

"We may need to," Tirellian said grimly.

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## Chapter Seven

The dormitory was a dim and draughty space. The bed they had managed to claim was just a narrow pallet on the floor, one of forty. The other men in the room watched them make their way across the floor with bitter, suspicious eyes.

It didn't feel safe. Fear of reprisals might stop anyone from attacking them in the open, but here where they were outnumbered and vulnerable, things could be different. Settling down at the end of the bed, Shan eyed their escape routes carefully. They were beside a wall, which was both a blessing and a potential hindrance, and there was a window three pallets away.

Many men were already sleeping, but others had clearly come up here to get away from the troops in the main inn. They sat in small groups, talking quietly, their shoulders hunched and their voices soft.

"You sleep first," Tirellian said softly.

"Not well, I suspect," Shan said. He managed to lie down, though, very aware of Tirellian sitting beside him. He did detach his dagger from its place on his belt and grip the hilt in his hand. If someone came at them, he would be able to lash out dangerously.

"You don't need that," Tirellian murmured.

"It'll help me sleep."

It didn't, though. Instead, he just lay there, eyes closed, and listened to the sounds around him. Tirellian's breathing was steady above him, but the murmured conversations were hard to understand. He could speak and understand the dialect well enough, but he had to concentrate to do it. Like this, every word sounded alien, and he was very aware that he was far from home.

Tirellian's hand fell warmly on his shoulder. Shan breathed in and, eventually, slept.

He dreamed of the trenches again, of earth rising up and spilling down, dry grit covering his arms and mouth as lightning crackled. He came awake whimpering, and it only helped a little to hear Tirellian speaking, his voice soft, urgent and incomprehensible.

Someone else was there, voice aggressive and challenging, and Shan took in a sharp breath and did his best to listen.

“Your opinion is not needed,” Tirellian was saying, in dialect.

“What the fuck are you doing to him, traitor?”

Shan dragged himself upright, using Tirellian's knees, and turned to look at the stranger. He was still too shaken to tell whether this man wanted to hurt or help him, but he managed to spit the right language out of his mouth. “I am awake. I know where I am.”

“Daschion,” Tirellian said warningly.

“Daschion,” Shan agreed. “Not on the line. You are with me, and I am safe.” Then he looked at the stranger and made himself smile, a stiff teeth-baring grimace. “Thank you for your concern, but I am in no danger. It was only a memory.”

He could see the man's face now, lit by a faint shimmer of lightning. He was an older man, and there was genuine concern in his eyes as well as mistrust.

“Thank you,” Shan said again, and made it more natural now. The cover story they had worked on was coming back to him now, and this was a moment to display it, if ever there was one. He turned to Tirellian and said, “Sir, I don't think I'll sleep again. You rest.”

Tirellian continued to glare at the stranger. Then he nodded shortly and lay down, resting his cheek on Shan's thigh.

The stranger was still lingering, watching them with a note of confusion. Shan wanted him gone, and he wanted someone to look at them as if they weren't scum, so he wove a lot of truth into a small lie and said, “Whatever you think of him, he made sure I got home unbroken. Not every officer would.”

“You have a name, soldier?”

“Arachanni,” Shan said flatly. “You?”

“Geronthor.”

“Like the eagle-bearer in the old poem,” Tirellian said quietly. “I had a pet bird, as a child, that I called Aeta.”

Shan, who knew perfectly well that Tirellian had never been allowed pets, had to hold his face still at that extraordinary statement. It took him a moment to notice the same careful non-expression on Geronthor's face.

“I will always remember,” Geronthor said, “the scene where the eagle flew too close to the sun.”

“Burn,” Tirellian said, “oh, wings of fire, for the man who knew me is gone, gone to dust and I must become ash before we meet again.”

Geronthor nodded slowly and then said, his voice perfectly polite, “I hope your nerves do not trouble you further, Arachanni. Goodnight.”

He disappeared back into the murk of the dark room, and Shan's eyebrows rose. Tirellian sat up a little and breathed into his ear, so softly Shan could barely hear him, “I believe we just made contact with the local resistance. Our sleep will be untroubled now.”

Shan rolled his eyes and murmured, “Lucky for you. Go to sleep.”

The next morning, while they were waiting for the carriage, Geronthor appeared beside them again. He was dressed in rough plain clothes, ready for a day's work. He leaned on the wall, ostensibly waiting for the line of soldiers to march out of the inn yard, and said very softly, “Where do you fly?”

“Heartward,” Tirellian said, angling his head so it looked like he was talking to Shan. “News of the road?”

“Extra patrols in readiness for the patronage fair. Heard they even have some real Ice Knights out there.”

“Troubling, if true,” Tirellian said, and his frown did not fade even after Geronthor left and the coach drew in.

There were less people on the coach today, only three others, and there was space for Shan to stretch his legs out. He was beginning to adjust to the travel, and he took a little more interest in their surroundings today. The mountains were far behind them now, and they were in flat country. The towns were closer together, and buildings clustered along the roads in between. He could see the big square blocks of manufactories from miles away, and spearlike lightning towers rose in clusters from the plain. He didn't have the affinity to work with lightning, but he had heard that its harvested power could be turned to all manner of fascinating ends. If any genius ever invented a way to harness it for ordinary artificers to use, he would be one of the first to start experimenting.

“You're drooling,” Tirellian commented. He had acquired an official newspaper that morning and was reading it with a mildly sceptical air.

Shan was supposed to be an impoverished artificer, so he had no qualms about answering. “Of course I am. Have you any idea what I could make if I had a proper manufactory?”

"I dread to think," Tirellian said and retreated behind his newspaper again.

Shan pressed his nose back to the window and went back to daydreaming. If he had a reliable power source and the manufacturing base to make proper engine parts, he could build more than just gliding wings. Powered flight, in heavier than air machines, could change the whole course of the war. Beyond that, it would be *glorious*.

They drew nearer and nearer the lightning farm, until the towers cast long shadows over the snowy fields on either side of the road. Then the coach stopped.

They sat there for a while, not moving. At last Tirellian folded his newspaper and asked mildly, "Should I speak to the driver?"

"What, don't you know about this?" One of the other passengers said bitterly. "Your lot came up with the rule."

"Enlighten me."

"No one passes within a mile of a lightning farm without having their papers checked." The man grimaced. "Between the army and the resistance calling lightning down on things, it's getting impossible to make an honest living."

"Is it?" Tirellian said with such excruciating politeness that the man went quiet again.

Shan was trying not to look worried. They had fake papers, but were they convincing enough for a proper examination? Tirellian looked unworried, so he tried to keep the same level of calm, and just asked hopefully, "Do you think they'll let us near enough to see the mechanisms?"

"No," Tirellian said. "Don't try to get a closer look, please."

Shan was about to retort when the driver knocked on the door and told them they had to line up with their papers ready. At first it was a relief to scramble out and stretch his legs a little.

Then the air began to grow even colder. His breath went from merely steaming to a cloud, and his fingers began to hurt, not merely a sting of cold air but a bone-deep ache that felt like all the blood in his veins was growing cold and slow. He began to shudder, cold rolling through him with slow malice.

"Ice Knight!" Tirellian breathed, and he and all their fellow passengers blanched.

Shan looked up at the group of soldiers approaching them. One of them walked apart from the others, who flanked him at a distance. Even from here, Shan could feel the cold rolling off the lone soldier.

He wore the black uniform of the Ice Guard, but his colouring was different from anything Shan had seen before, sallow-skinned with a blue sheen to his black hair. As he got closer Shan saw the colour of his eyes, a too-bright shade of verdigris, empty of all feeling. By then, they were all shivering, teeth chattering, and shoulders jerking.

The Ice Knight pointed to the coach and said, "Search the luggage first. Travellers, have your papers in hand."

His voice sent shudders down Shan's spine, like nails on slate or the wind keening along icy windows.

They had to wait until the soldiers went through all the luggage, opening every case and rifling through the contents. They seemed particularly interested by Shan's toys and brought them over for the Ice Knight to examine. He did not seem in the least amused by them, although he turned the handles with his fingertips. Watching him, Shan saw that his fingers were webbed. At last, he looked up and asked, "Which of you is the artificer?"

Shan stepped forwards, aware of Tirellian going still behind him. "I am, sir."

"These are your designs?"

"Yes, sir." The knight was the most terrifying thing he had ever seen, cold in a way that went far beyond mere winter. Shan had to remind himself that he was the best artificer in the seven courts and had supped with kings. He had no reason to feel small and afraid.

"You are not in uniform. You do not work for the army?"

"No, sir. I am travelling to the capital to seek a patron."

"You have funds for the journey?"

"He has a sponsor," Tirellian said, stepping forwards. He didn't touch Shan, but he was close enough that Shan could feel his body heat.

"You, Captain...?"

"Asterian, of the Forty-Third. And yes, sir. His talents were being wasted as a fisherman."

"I commend your investment. Bypass the fair. You should both report directly to General Haimursu in Kerauton. You should arrive in two days, correct?"

"Barring accidents," Tirellian said.

"I shall inform him of your existence. He will be expecting you. If you know of any other neglected artificers, Captain Asterian, you should arrange to have them transported to the capital immediately. Now, papers."

It was not until he tried to step forwards to present his papers that Shan realized that the ground beneath his feet had changed. The previously soft top of the snow had become ice, slick and hard. He slid, and barely recovered. Once his papers had been examined and returned to him, he retreated gingerly, scanning the ground.

An ever-widening circle of ice was still spreading outward from the Ice Knight's feet.

It was a relief to them all when they were finally allowed to return to the carriage. By then, Shan felt so sick and drained he could barely shiver. Back in the coach, he didn't even have the energy to look out the window. Instead, he leaned against Tirellian. Once they were well away from the checkpoint, he managed to ask, "What *was* that?"

"A knight of the Ice Court," Tirellian replied. His gaze flickered upward, and Shan realized that the lightning lamps fitted to the ceiling of the coach had gone out. Tirellian reached towards them, lightning shimmering from his fingertips to fill the glass lamp cases and light the interior of the coach again. The other passengers all looked relieved, but it didn't help Shan much, and there was no way he could call a wind to comfort himself, not without sacrificing the whole mission.

"I feel so cold," he said, aware it sounded pathetic.

"You're not the only one," the woman opposite him said. The presence of a real Ice Knight seemed to have pushed aside most of their hostility, and she smiled at him weakly. Tirellian probably didn't seem all that hateful in comparison.

"Feels like I've got ice in my veins," Shan told her, pressing his hands into his armpits more tightly. "Never felt anything like that before."

"I have," the man who had grumbled before said abruptly. "There was one

of them stationed up in Statishon last winter, after the resistance started hitting supply trains up there.”

Shan didn't meet Tirellian's eyes. They'd lost three of the Shadowflight and a whole resistance cell in Statishon, and no explanation had ever reached them of why. Now they knew.

“What you feel,” Tirellian said slowly, “is their frozen hearts.”

“What does that mean?” Shan said.

“You know the stories of the blight.”

“Lo,” the woman said, “in the fourth century after the Pact, a blight came upon the Court of Water, and they turned their backs upon the sea, their home, and drew up their ships upon the sand, and ever after became not water, but ice.” She caught the looks everyone was sending her and said, with a note of defiance, “That's how my gran told it, and she was alive at the time.”

“Blight is an impolitic term, perhaps,” Tirellian observed, a note of warning in his voice. “Nonetheless, the story is correct in essence. Something terrible happened to the Court of Water. The marshes and the rivers are all long lost below the ice. I have heard that the only humans who survive in the delta are those who descend directly from the Undine, and the water in their souls has become ice. What you feel when they draw near is that coldness within them, reaching out to spread that ice further. Ice follows them, freezes the ground below their feet and washes over anything they touch too long. The oldest of them even wear it, until it closes in too close around them and traps them within the heart of their own power.”

“But lightning can't freeze,” Shan said quietly. “Your souls are safe.”

Shan knew the rest of this story. With their land frozen, the surviving Ice Knights had been starving, until they began to march on other courts.

“You must be used to it, though,” the man said to Tirellian, a little belligerently, “working with them as you do.”

“They work through agents, for the most part,” Tirellian said. “I have rarely seen a Knight face-to-face. They cannot live among ordinary men without freezing them to death.”

“So our souls are safe, but our extremities aren't,” the man quipped, laughing a little nervously.

“I have seen an Ice Knight freeze the fingers from a woman’s hand by touching her,” Tirellian said, picking his newspaper up again. “I would not jest about them, if I were you.”

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## Chapter Eight

By the time they disembarked in Rhodiosson, Shan had managed to coax their fellow passengers into actual conversation. He had been careful with his own backstory, and Tirellian's silent presence had stopped them from pressing him, but he felt like he knew them a little, and it buoyed his spirits. He needed people around him, and just hearing about their lives and families had energized him again. He suspected he might regret it in future, when he started putting faces to the nameless dead in the Shadowflight's reports, but he would deal with that day when it came. When the others disappeared into town, he was sorry to see them go.

They got a room without any problems at this inn, and it was a good one, tucked over the kitchens with a roaring fire of its own. For the first time since they had crossed the channel, Shan was actually looking forwards to getting undressed.

"The innkeeper said they could bring bathwater up," Tirellian informed him. He looked tired and drained.

A bath sounded tempting, but it wasn't what Shan needed most. "What's the risk of going down to the taproom for a meal? I could do with some company."

"More people?" Tirellian asked with a shudder. "Well, you managed well in the coach today. Drink cautiously and be careful not to relax too much, and you should be safe."

"I wasn't planning to drink at all."

"Teetotalism is just as suspicious," Tirellian said. "Maybe I should come with you."

"Stay here and have your bath," Shan told him. "I'll be fine."

It was a sign of how tired Tirellian was that he didn't argue any further. Shan understood. The encounter with the Ice Knight had left him feeling more exhausted than three days under heavy fire. He needed people to restore him. Tirellian needed quiet.

Downstairs, the taproom was busy, murmurous with conversation. Shan pressed his thumb against his purse and made his way through the crowd to the bar, listening to hear what the locals were ordering (a trick that Karel had taught him years ago, not for subterfuge, but to avoid crap beer).

Drink ordered, he asked about food.

“Certainly, sir, but you’ll be troubled to find a table,” the barmaid said. “There’s the parlour for guests, but we’ve got foreign folks in there already, and you might not be wanting to—”

“What kind of foreign?” Shan asked, his stomach clenching at the thought of more Ice Knights.

She sniffed. “Fire. Strutting around half-naked.”

“Ah, but is it a pretty kind of half-naked?” Shan asked, winking at her. “Or the type to put me off my appetite?”

She laughed at that. “No trial to the eye, to be fair. If you’re willing to sit with outlanders, that is.”

“For a seat and a comfortable meal, I’ll sit with anyone,” Shan said lightly, but he was more interested than he let her see. He’d never met anyone from Fire, and the image of those confident, hearty soldiers from the night before returned to him. He was curious.

“Curiosity,” his father had told him once, on one of the many occasions he had been called upon to extract his small son from the artificers’ workshop, “is only a virtue if well-directed.”

Well, this was an *interesting* direction, at least.

The parlour was only a small room, with one big round table and seats along the walls. A man and a woman were sitting there, partway through their meal, and they looked up as Shan came in, falling silent.

They were both around his age, with a hint of life well-lived to their faces. They were good-looking too, in the same warm, dark way as yesterday’s soldiers. Was everyone in the Court of Fire beautiful, or was it just a requirement for their soldiers?

“Sorry to disturb you,” Shan said. “I’m staying upstairs, and there’s not a table to be had in the bar.”

“Join us, do,” the woman said. “More the merrier.” She had a soft, lilting accent, with slow vowels.

“Thank you,” Shan said and slid in beside them. “Is the food good?”

“Surprisingly so, for a roadside inn,” the man said.

“We were rather impressed by how warm the rooms were too,” Shan commented and eyed their bare arms. “Though I doubt that’s a factor for you.”

“Not so much, no,” the man agreed with a chuckle. “Though I do miss the floors at home. In Etnarra, we build straight onto the rocks, where the heat rises through them.”

“Etnarra,” Shan said, trying to remember his geography. “That’s to the far east, right?”

“Almost snug with the border. You’re well-informed.”

“Oh, I always wanted to travel,” Shan said lightly.

“Man after our own hearts,” the woman said. “Where are you from? I don’t recognize your accent.”

Damn. “I’m a west coast boy. You know Zephyrport?”

“Been there once,” the man said. “Small place.”

“And I’m not even from Zeph’port itself. As you go up the coast, there are coves—”

“And each one has its own village, and beware the man who mistakes one for another!” the man said, laughing. “You *are* far from home, my friend. What in the world brings you inland?”

“Looking for work which doesn’t involve freezing my hands off on a fishing boat.”

“We’re trade factors,” the woman said, “setting up supply chains for the garrisons around the capital. I’m Sofia, and my brother here is Markus.”

“Arachanni.”

They glanced at each other, so fast he wouldn’t have noticed if he hadn’t already been on edge. Then his food arrived, and they went back to the inconsequential chatter of chance-met travellers. Shan was very careful now, and he was relieved when he looked up to see Tirellian standing just the other side of the doorway into the taproom, leaning against the bar casually enough that it could have been coincidence.

Markus had been taking the lead in the conversation as they finished the meal, leaning forwards to smile at Shan. His flirting wasn’t subtle, and Shan returned it with a distant amusement. It was a fun game to play, but he had no intention of being charmed into letting any secrets slip. These two might seem

friendly, but they were in the service of an enemy army, and he wasn't going to forget it.

When their food was cleared away, Markus ordered them all another drink. Then he leaned back and asked, "So what's your trade, friend Arachanni? No fishing to be done inland."

"And that's reason enough to move," Shan said, chuckling. "No, I have talented hands."

He managed to say it with a straight face, but Markus spluttered a little over his drink and Sofia rolled her eyes. When Markus had recovered his breath, he leaned forwards, his eyes hot and intent, and murmured, "Oh, really?"

Well, that was nice. Shan wasn't going to follow through, but there was no harm in a bit of mischievous flirting. "I do like to get my hands on a nice bit of wood." Then he grinned, deliberately making it a little mean. "And then I carve little chunks out of it. I make toys, and there's not enough cash to spare for that to be a profitable trade along the coast."

"You're an artificer?" Markus said, and the flirtatious note had gone from his voice. Again, he and Sofia exchanged a quick look.

"That's a grand title for what I do," Shan said lightly. "I make puppets and spinning tops, not war machines."

"Don't do yourself down," Markus murmured, but his flirtation had become mechanical now. Then he pulled himself together and leaned forwards again, the warmth back in his voice, "So, Arachanni, do you have a sponsor?"

"Yes," Tirellian said coldly, "he does." Then he was there at Shan's back, his hands sliding down over Shan's shoulders in a way that pushed the meaning of "sponsor" to its absolute limit. His hair, still damp from his bath, swung forwards to brush Shan's cheek like a cold kiss, and the air crackled a little around him, as if a storm was about to break.

"So I see," Markus said.

Shan flushed, part with embarrassment and part with surprise.

"If you have eaten, Arachanni," Tirellian said, and even his voice was softer than usual, "we should return to our room. We leave early tomorrow."

"Er," Shan said, "yes, of course. Ah, it was nice to meet you both. Safe journey." Tirellian was pressed against his back, a line of warmth that was far more appealing than Markus' bared muscles.

“Why, the pleasure was all ours,” Sofia said, shooting an amused look at her brother. “Good luck on the road.”

“Same to you,” Shan said, and let Tirellian pull him out of his chair. “Good night.”

Tirellian steered him up through the inn with a hand on his back and a glare which sent people scuttling out of their way. It was quite flattering, or would have been if it hadn't all been part of an act, and Shan let himself enjoy it.

As soon as they were back in their room, he pulled away, remarking, “I didn't think you had it in you, Sparks—”

“Don't use nicknames!”

“Sorry. There was something a little off about those two. I don't think they were just setting up supply chains, whatever they claimed.”

“You were flirting with him.”

“I flirt with everybody,” Shan pointed out, laughing as he toed his shoes off. He tossed his jacket down on the back of the chair and turned to grin at Tirellian. “I even flirt with you, and that's a long road to nowhere. It's not like I...”

He trailed off, realizing with a sudden shock that Tirellian looked genuinely upset.

“You shouldn't,” Tirellian bit off. His fists were clenched against his sides, and his back and shoulders were so stiff Shan could have used them as a ruler.

“Flirt with you or flirt with anyone?”

Tirellian didn't answer, but Shan had caught his tension. His own body was tightening, his breath coming fast, because this couldn't possibly be what it looked like.

“Or is it just that you don't want me to flirt with anyone else?”

Tirellian looked away. He swallowed hard and then said, his voice stiff, “Certain behaviours are inherently risky in a situation such as—”

“Tirellian,” Shan said softly and went forwards towards him. It felt like he had been waiting for this since the beginning of time, and he was both terrified and exultant. “Look at me.”

“Don't use my name.”

“Don't change the subject.”

“You need to stay safe.”

“I have you to protect me.” Shan reached out and laid his hand along Tirellian’s jaw. “Look at me.”

Tirellian turned his head stiffly, and Shan saw the truth in his eyes. Tirellian was finally looking at him as if he was the best and most terrifying thing in the world.

Shan kissed him.

It was a very simple kiss, just the lightest touch of lips to lips, but Tirellian startled in his arms as if he’d been stung. His mouth opened uncertainly under Shan’s, and then he pulled back, his whole body clenching tight.

He didn’t go far, though, just back far enough that Shan could see the panic in his eyes.

“Easy,” Shan said, and ran his hand through Tirellian’s hair to stroke his shoulder. “It’s just me.”

“Exactly,” Tirellian retorted, and his voice was actually shaking. Seven save them, but nobody had reacted to Shan like this since he was a teenager, and that had probably been more about the fact that they were teenagers rather than anything else.

Shan wasn’t feeling much less shaken himself, but Tirellian was almost frightening him. Gently, he said, “May I kiss you again?”

Tirellian closed his eyes, lashes sweeping across his cheeks, and nodded sharply.

Shan kissed him as gently as he knew how, spreading his hand across the back of Tirellian’s neck and keeping his lips as feather-light as he could. Tirellian still shook against him and then, suddenly and gracelessly, kissed him back.

By the time their lips parted again, Shan had a pretty good suspicion of why he felt like a teenager again. It was absurd, and heartbreaking if he was right, but he had to know, before he pushed this any further.

“Don’t be angry, if I’m wrong,” he said, “but have you ever been kissed before?”

Tirellian opened his eyes, looking indignant. “Of course!”

Shan waited, because he knew that tone. It was exactly the same one Tirellian used when faced with any new challenge.

Tirellian closed his eyes again and admitted softly, "A stable boy when I was sixteen. My father caught us and fired him the next day. My fencing master, when I was twenty... He kissed me goodbye, the night before I left to take Arellia across the channel to her wedding."

"What happened to him?"

"He was killed defending Aillera."

"I'm sorry," Shan said, rubbing circles on Tirellian's shoulders. "I'm so sorry."

"He was a good man. I liked him."

"I'm sure he was a very good man, then." Shan cleared his throat and asked delicately, "Since you came to our court?"

Tirellian leaned forwards, hiding his face against Shan's neck. Then he shook his head quickly.

"Why not?" Shan demanded. He knew that Tirellian didn't make friends easily, but surely he couldn't be that fussy.

Tirellian sighed, the most forlorn sound Shan had ever heard from him, and said very quietly, "Nobody likes me."

"Of course they do," Shan protested, and then wondered. He'd heard the jokes about Tirellian, about the knight so perfect he had dispensed with all human feelings. No one he knew actively disliked Tirellian, but he wasn't sure any of them got to see his human side.

"I am respected," Tirellian said. "In places, feared. Not liked."

"I like you."

Tirellian looked up then and smiled at him, a little uncertainly. "Yes. Yes, you do."

"With the obvious exception of my aged parents, there is no one in the world who matters to me more than you."

Tirellian stared at him, his eyes widening. Then he shook his head a little, doubt shadowing his eyes.

"No," Shan said. "Don't do that. It's true."

"You're being kind."

"I'm being honest."

“You’ve had other lovers.”

“Because it relieves the time,” Shan said with a shrug. “I never thought you’d look my way. You didn’t seem interested.”

Tirellian’s frown deepened. “You never asked.”

“Didn’t want to scare you off. I like being your friend.” Shan leaned forwards and kissed him again, before he could take that the wrong way. “I would rather be your best friend than the ex-lover you cannot stand, but I would also rather be your lover than your friend. Does that clarify things?”

“Not in the least,” Tirellian complained, but he was relaxing a little.

“If you’re not interested, tell me,” Shan said. “I will always be your friend.”

Tirellian considered that. Then he wet his lips and leaned forwards, pressing his mouth to Shan’s. It was an awkward kiss, but its intention was clear.

“Thank fuck for that,” Shan breathed when they parted, and Tirellian smiled, rolling his eyes a little.

“So crude.”

“You haven’t seen anything yet,” Shan promised, leering with relief.

Tirellian smiled again, but he was blushing, a flush of pink across those pale cheeks. Well, that was the next awkward question, wasn’t it? A mere two kisses implied the answer, but...

“Anything more than kisses?” Shan asked softly. “Even with girls.”

Tirellian’s expression went a little more distant. “My father considered bastards to be even worse than catamites.”

“Lovely,” Shan said. “So, you’ve not...”

“Hilarion, my tutor... we had that one night.” Tirellian ducked his head again, and Shan suddenly wondered what would have happened if he’d started reading every bit of distance or discomfort as shyness years ago. He should have done. He knew Queen Arellia was shy: you only had to speak to her in person to recognize it. Why hadn’t he applied that knowledge to her brother?

“I am aware that you are looking for more experience in a—” Tirellian began, his voice stiff.

Shan pulled his face up and cut him off with a kiss. Then he said, “What I’ve been looking for in a lover, for the last ten years, is the ability to distract me from you.”

He'd never seen Tirellian come so close to gawping. "Ten years?"

"Yes."

"You are just saying this to—"

"How is it that you are the only person in the court who doesn't know this? My engineers have a book open on us."

"That we'll become lovers?" Tirellian demanded, looking scandalized.

Shan snorted. "No. The odds are currently six-to-one in favour of us having been secretly married for the last three years."

"What?" Tirellian said blankly. "Married?"

"Married," Shan said, laughing a little at his expression. "Oh, your face." He dropped a kiss on the end of Tirellian's nose, which just made him look more bewildered, and carried on, "Everyone knows what a fool I am for you. My mother always includes extra cakes in her food packages just for you. Your brother-in-law invites me to family meals, which I could do without, to be honest, because I find his company nerve-wracking. Even complete strangers ask me about you. The only person in the whole court who doesn't know that I'm stupidly in love with you is *you*."

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## Chapter Nine

Then he realized what he'd said and swallowed hard, waiting for Tirellian's reaction.

It came slowly, a widening of Tirellian's eyes, his face twisting in a way that suggested first pain and then astonishment, and then a slow shudder as he released his breath and his mouth curled up in joy.

And then, so suddenly he didn't see it coming, Shan found himself tackled to the bed. Pressed down under Tirellian's long body, he just had time to see how bright his friend's—his lover's—eyes were before Tirellian was kissing him eagerly. Shan rose up into it gladly, wrapping his arms around Tirellian.

By the time the kiss gentled, they were both breathless. Shan's heart was racing, and his whole body was alert to Tirellian's presence. He was so hard it was getting in the way of thinking clearly. He needed more than fully-clothed kisses, and he had to bite his lip to hold onto his restraint. Rather than tear both their clothes off, he lifted his hand to slip under Tirellian's hair, tracing a line down the side of his throat.

Tirellian shuddered. Ten years since someone last touched him with longing, and even then it had only been brief. No wonder he clung to Shan in his sleep. How had he coped? How overwhelmed must he be now?

Shan forced himself to stay tender rather than ravenous, trailing kisses across Tirellian's jaw and down his neck.

"I'm not going to break if you touch me," Tirellian said.

"I might," Shan admitted and dropped his head back so he could see Tirellian's face. This was what he had dreamed of for so long: his Tirellian with flushed cheeks and swollen lips, his blue eyes wide and pleased.

He panicked for a moment there. What if this was a dream? "Pinch me?"

"Really?" Tirellian asked, a note of distaste in his voice.

"No, no, just tell me I'm awake."

"You are awake," Tirellian said and leaned forwards to kiss him again. The kiss felt real, in the way only kisses could, damp and rough-lipped, catching a little on the corner of Shan's smile. Not a dream, then.

Then Tirellian sat back and peeled his shirt over his head.

“What are you doing?” Shan squeaked.

“I am certain you have seen a man undress before,” Tirellian said from behind his shirt, his tone entirely matter-of-fact. He emerged, tossing it aside, and looked down at Shan with a faint smirk. “I’m also certain you have seen me without my shirt more than once.”

“The context was different,” Shan managed, locking his hands flat against the mattress so he didn’t just reach out and grab. Tirellian, kneeling over his hips, was breathtaking. Out of his clothes, he no longer looked like a perfect monochrome doll. He had a soldier’s body, muscled and scarred, and every mark and flush showed starkly on his pale skin. His hair tumbled loosely over his shoulders, the ends brushing raggedly against his nipples, which were flushed and peaked.

Shan wanted to put other marks on him, with his lips and teeth and nails, and the thought was shaming and arousing in equal measure because Tirellian, his beautiful paladin, was so close to being a virgin that Shan couldn’t even imagine all the things he had never felt. Ten years since someone had run their hands up that broad chest and maybe closed their teeth gently around those pink nipples. Had that one lover ever traced his tongue down that thin dark line of hair that led down Tirellian’s belly? Had he ever gently pushed the flaps of his breeches and drawers aside to pull his cock out and swallow it down? Perhaps he had done little more than kiss Tirellian’s pale mouth.

It was a fucking tragedy, and it was terrifying. Shan had never considered sex as a responsibility before, but suddenly every touch seemed heavy with significance. Tirellian deserved for this to be beautiful, and that was making Shan feel as awkward and clumsy as if he was almost untouched too.

Tirellian’s smile was beginning to fade, so Shan swallowed hard and confessed, “I don’t know where to start.”

Tirellian considered it, while Shan gazed up at him, arousal prickling under his own skin. Then he said, shaking his hair forwards a little, “You could take your shirt off too?”

Shan sat up, reaching out to push Tirellian’s hair back. “I could do that, yes.” He pulled his own shirt off and held his arms out, grinning when Tirellian breathed in sharply. “I’m all yours, lover.”

He wasn't expecting Tirellian just to wrap his arms around him and pull him in close. Shan held him back, and the noise of pure satisfaction Tirellian made was a reward in itself. It wasn't the quick fun writhe of body against body that Shan was used to, but it was strangely satisfying, skin against skin, feeling Tirellian's heart thundering against his, their breath rough against each other's necks. Slowly, as they held each other, his desire changed, sinking deeper within him until he wasn't just desperate to touch and suck and fuck, but he needed Tirellian, needed him in his bones and gut and heart.

When Tirellian pressed his lips to Shan's throat, careful and hesitant, it was Shan who threw his head back and tightened his grip on Tirellian's hips, need sparking through him. When he slid his hand up Tirellian's spine and Tirellian arched his back, Shan felt it too. He knew why Tirellian was reacting like this to every touch, but he couldn't explain why he was shaking and shuddering too. When Tirellian touched him, it felt better than anyone else ever had, not because his hands were more skilled, but because this was Tirellian, whom he had known better than anyone for all these years, Tirellian, whom he had yearned for, Tirellian, whom he loved.

Even so, he was startled when Tirellian reached down to undo his breeches, the side of his hand brushing Shan's erection through the cloth.

"You're sure?" he breathed and took a deep breath so he could add, "You don't have to."

"I've touched a cock before," Tirellian said and then added, at Shan's raised eyebrow, "I'm inexperienced, not a eunuch. I have touched myself frequently."

"There is that," Shan said, imagining that too vividly for comfort. "Oh, yes, I'm sure. Yes, um."

Tirellian's hand pushing down his breeches brought him back to the present, and he caught Tirellian's wrist. "It's not the same when it's someone else's."

"I know that. I have done this before. Once."

That calm tone really wasn't helping. Shan had a nasty feeling he was going to get flustered every time Tirellian used it from now on. Releasing Tirellian's wrist, he said, "You too. Both of us."

Tirellian nodded and they both scrabbled the rest of their clothes off. Shan managed to get naked first (at least there was some benefit to experience), and he sank back against the pillows happily to admire Tirellian as he turned around.

Nobody had ever looked at him with such an expression of wonder, and that sent another pulse of need throbbing through his balls. He spread his legs a little to relieve some of the pressure, and Tirellian wet his lips again, reaching out to trace his finger up Shan's cock, so slow and teasing that it made Shan groan in frustration.

To show Tirellian what he wanted, he reached out himself, closing his hand around Tirellian's cock. It was as long and lean as the rest of him, damp and flushed at the head. Shan wanted to taste it, too, wanted to feel it pressed against, and inside, him. For now, though, he just wanted to touch, so he smoothed his hand down slowly and then up to squeeze around the head, feeling it nudge slickly against the bend of his palm.

Tirellian had been shaking under his hands for so long that Shan wasn't expecting him to suddenly snap his hips forwards, choking on a cry. Then his cock was spilling warmly into Shan's palm as Tirellian gasped and shook and then curled forwards, throwing his arm across his eyes.

He stayed face down for a few moments. Just as Shan was beginning to shift from smug delight to worry, he turned over and said, "I am sorry."

"Nothing to apologize for," Shan said, leaning over to kiss him. Tirellian rose into the kiss, much more confidently than he had before, and Shan was amused to feel how fast he was learning to excel at this, his kisses already less clumsy and more demanding.

"I was too fast," he said when Shan finally pulled back.

"You were stunning," Shan said, and nudged him across on the bed. "Felt good, though?"

"Yes," Tirellian breathed, so ardently that Shan's own cock twinged, demanding his attention. He reached down to touch himself, still watching Tirellian's face.

"Never been that good," he murmured, aware that his voice was softer and rougher than usual. "Never seen anything like you, so beautiful, Sparks, so lovely, best thing I've ever seen..."

Tirellian was leaning over him now, watching raptly. As Shan's breath caught, he reached down and pushed Shan's hand away. "Let me."

Shan did, pushing his hips up to meet Tirellian's hand. "Oh, yes, like that."

Tirellian leaned forwards to kiss him, his hair falling around Shan's face in dark waves, stroking his cheek as Tirellian kissed him and touched him.

They were still kissing when Shan came, sinking back into the mattress as he spilled across Tirellian's hand.

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The next morning he woke, as usual, grasped tightly in Tirellian's arms. For once, it wasn't uncomfortable. Oh, admittedly Tirellian had a firm grip on his bare ass, but the body part prodding Shan this morning wasn't all that unwelcome.

Chuckling, he murmured, "You awake yet, Sparks?"

"No," Tirellian groaned and then he obviously woke up because he went stiff in Shan's arms.

"Easy," Shan murmured. "The world hasn't ended."

"But we're... Did we... Oh, we *did*."

"We did," Shan agreed. "It went rather well, I thought."

"Yes," Tirellian said uncertainly and went quiet.

Shan bit back a huge sigh of disappointment and wriggled out of bed. Shit. There went all his stupid daydreams. "Don't worry about it. Never happened, right? I'll get us some breakfast and you can..."

"Stop it," Tirellian said irritably. "I'm trying to think."

"Think?"

"Exactly." He peered out at Shan from beneath unusually tangled hair. "No more, no less. Don't run away."

"I'm not," Shan said, pulling his clothes on. "I'm just getting breakfast. I'll check the coach times too. Then you've got plenty of *thinking* time."

"That wasn't how I meant it," Tirellian said, but Shan was heading for the door. This wasn't going to be something he could debate in Tirellian's rational way, weighing up advantages and disadvantages, and he didn't want Tirellian to see he was upset.

What had he imagined, he thought bitterly as he stomped downstairs. That a few hours of tame but heartfelt sex would win Tirellian's adoration forever? As if his paladin was that simple a man.

Or maybe Tirellian wasn't even his paladin anymore. Maybe he wasn't even Shan's friend.

He ordered breakfast and headed out to the courtyard. There were regular coaches from here into the capital, he was told, one every couple of hours. He memorized the times and then turned to head back inside, his steps slowing.

"Arachanni!"

It was Markus, from dinner the night before. It seemed a long time ago, but Shan paused long enough to nod good morning.

"Can you spare a moment?" Markus said. "I'd like to speak to you in private."

Shan sighed, but let the man pull him around the side of the table. He had been flirting shamelessly before Tirellian dragged him away, and he probably did owe an apology.

Markus beat him to it, his voice sincere. "I'm sorry. Last night, I didn't realize that you were already spoken for."

"That's one way of putting it," Shan muttered. "I should be the one apologizing. I should have made it clear that I wasn't serious."

Markus looked uncomfortable. "Far be it from me to pass comment on someone else's relationship, but there are sponsors who won't demand that kind of relationship from you."

"It's not like that," Shan said furiously.

"If he's forcing you, you can—"

"Markus, we're in a rush. Hurry up." It was Sofia, and she had appeared behind Shan. By daylight, she looked far too dangerous to be a mere trade factor, and Shan's suspicions flared. He went for his knife.

Behind him, Markus said quietly, "I wouldn't do that if I were you, Arachanni," and he felt cold steel press at his neck.

"I don't know if you're a collaborator or a good man with terrible taste in lovers," Sofia said, "but you're too valuable for us to let you ride off alone. I'm sorry."

And she came at him, reaching out to cover his mouth before he could shout for help. As she did, Markus shifted behind him, his arm coming around Shan's

throat and squeezing tightly. Shan fought back, but he wasn't fast enough, and soon his vision blurred, and his chest began to burn.

As he slipped into unconsciousness, he wondered how this was going to affect Tirellian's "thinking".

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## Chapter Ten

He woke up in a hard bed, with light slanting into his eyes. As he sat up, his head throbbed, and he bit back a groan, blinking shadows away. He was in a little wooden cabin, like the one he and Tirellian had used when they first landed. He wasn't bound or chained, but his feet were bare, and there was no sign of his shoes. Wincing, he staggered to the window.

Snow-heavy trees stretched as far as he could see.

Opening the door, he found his cabin was one of five, loosely circled around the edges of a clearing. There was a big fire burning in the centre of the clearing, with a sloped canopy over it. Stumps surrounded the fire, obviously makeshift seats, and there was a haunch of meat cooking over it, the scents drifting towards Shan.

There was no sign of Tirellian, and he obviously wasn't in the city any more.

One of the figures sitting by the fire turned at the sight of him, and then rose to walk towards him, hands outstretched. It was Markus.

"How are you feeling?" he asked. "Sorry for the rough treatment. If I give you shoes, will you promise not to run?"

"Where the fuck am I?" Shan demanded hoarsely. "Where's—" He stopped himself before he blurted out the wrong name, struggling to remember Tirellian's false identity past his aching head.

"Your Ice Guard watch dog? Still in Rhodiosson, I hope. Sofia was laying a false trail for him. You can relax now, Arachanni. You're out of danger."

"You're out of your mind," Shan snapped.

Markus looked worried. "Did you not even realise...? Come and sit by the fire. We'll explain."

Shan put on the shoes Markus offered him and followed him to sit on one of the stumps, wincing. His whole body ached. Markus sat down beside him, smiling hopefully, and waved at the man on Shan's other side. "This is Eagle. He's in charge here."

"Eagle?" Shan repeated sceptically.

The man glared at him. He had bristling brows and a long fierce face, and he didn't look particularly happy to have Shan there. "What, you thought we used our legal names in the resistance?"

"In the..." Shan rubbed his aching head. "Somebody tell me what is happening here. Please."

"You were heading for the patronage fair, weren't you?" Markus said. "What you won't have realized is that it was all a trap. They're hunting artificers."

"In which case, what a good thing we weren't actually going there," Shan muttered.

"What?" Markus said.

"We know that," Eagle said. "We intercepted a message from that Ice Knight you encountered on the road. The general he was sending you to is the one in charge of the artificers in Kerauton. You would have been chained in the manufactory before dusk."

"Wasn't actually going there, either." Shan looked up, wincing as he eyed the sky. It was late afternoon already. Tirellian had probably started leaving little trails of electrocuted collaborators behind him by now. "Do you people not talk to one another?"

"You people?" Eagle repeated coldly.

"The resistance," Shan said. "We made contact with Geronthor in Daschion. Didn't he send word? Oh, I'm supposed to say something cryptic about an eagle in a poem here, right?"

"Never heard of him," Eagle said brusquely.

"Wait, what?" Markus said. "You're not collaborators?"

"No," Shan said shortly. His aching head made him sensitive to every murmur of the wind, and he thought he'd heard something. "Shut up for a moment."

Eagle scowled, but Shan was listening to the wind. He didn't usually reach for this magic, not when he could make things that worked more reliably, but it was part of his birthright, and the wind was bringing him interesting news: a soft footfall, a creak of a branch underfoot, a sentry gasping, and the faint sizzle of lightning.

“You have company in the woods,” he said, still listening intently. “Not sure it’s friendly.”

Eagle made quick hand gestures to some of the other men and women around the fire, and they rose to their feet. Shan kept listening, and then relaxed at the sound of a voice.

“Take me to your camp,” Tirellian whispered dangerously a mile away, “and I may not kill you.”

Shan sighed. “Not much of a false trail, clearly.” Then he summoned a breath of wind to dance by his lips and said into it, very clearly, “Do not kill them. They are the resistance. I am safe.”

Then he scooped his hand behind the air that had received his words and flung it out in Tirellian’s direction.

“What was that?” Markus demanded.

Eagle was staring at him. In response to Markus, he said shortly, “Wind magic. He’s Shadowflight.”

“Really?” Markus said, staring. “Damn.”

“Yes,” Shan said shortly. “And we had essential business in the capital.”

“Wouldn’t risk it now,” Eagle said and smacked Markus around the back of the head. “Fucked up, Firebird.”

“Piss off,” Markus said, still staring at Shan. “Well, that explains the accent, I suppose. Who’s your friend? West Coast Republicans or Slate Guard?”

They were both the names of resistance groups, but Shan hadn’t quite realized until now just how independently they all operated. No wonder the Shadowflight muttered about the resistance so much.

“How about we wait?” he said. “And he can tell you himself.”

“What’s your target in the capital?” Eagle asked. “Manufactory?”

“That’s one of them. What’s all this about them collecting artificers?”

“The one they’ve been using has suddenly started cooperating. From what we’ve heard, they don’t trust her. They’re collecting students to extract as much as they can before they kill her.”

Poor Aunt Didi.

“Any idea why she’s turned at last?”

“Nope,” Eagle said and looked up at the sound of steps in the snow.

Tirellian emerged from the tree line, escorting five men in front of a web of sparking lightning. He looked grubby, bruised, and extremely bad-tempered. It wasn't until he saw Shan and Markus that he cast his lightning away and came stamping towards them.

“Now slow down,” Markus said, rising to intercept him. “We want to know exactly who—”

Tirellian hit him, hard enough to send him crashing backwards over the nearest log, and then advanced on Shan.

Shan rose to meet him, but still wasn't ready for Tirellian to drag him forwards and kiss him so hard it left his lips stinging when Tirellian drew back and turned to face Eagle, his face still drawn with rage.

“Now may I kill someone?” he asked Shan, his voice so perfectly polite that Eagle went still, and Shan shuddered happily.

“No,” he said, and then added, just to be a bastard. “Feel free to hit Markus again, though. That was fun.”

“Fun?” both Markus and Tirellian repeated incredulously. Then Tirellian turned to glare, and Markus shuffled a little further away.

“Definitely,” Shan said. His throat still hurt, after all. “I don't think Eagle is to blame for this, Sparks. Come and sit down and see if we can salvage this thing. If nothing else, we can get some intelligence from these folks. I never knew there was much of a resistance movement in Fire, for instance.”

“We haven't been able to establish a reliable contact,” Tirellian said, but he stood back, some of the ire fading from his face.

Shan sat down on one of the logs again and patted the one next to him. Tirellian sat, and Shan reached out to touch his leg, feeling the fury still quivering through him.

“You are?” Tirellian said to Eagle.

“Eagle, of the Free Lightning Brigade.”

“You have a contact in the Shadowflight?”

“Codename Wyvern, but only since a month ago.”

Wyvern was Flight Lieutenant Zennor. Shan recalled flight schedules and nodded. “He was due in a day after we left. You're a new organization, then?”

“Some of us were in the Kerau Brigade.”

“Ice Guard smashed them up in the spring,” Tirellian said to Shan. “Hung half of them and burnt two villages to the ground in retaliation.” He shot Eagle a long scowl. “We had disengaged by then. They had no regard for security protocols.”

“We’ve learned better,” Eagle said bitterly.

“I would hope so.”

“Be nice,” Shan said quietly. He looked to Markus. “What’s your involvement?”

“Similar to your own, I should think. Like the Shadowflight, we’re trying to establish a relationship with other resistance groups. We’re well connected with the Root Network in Earth and the Dark Brotherhood in Shade, but things aren’t so clearly organized here in Lightning. We’ve been having trouble establishing useful contacts.”

“We have that in common, at least.”

“What I want to know,” Markus said, “is who you are? You don’t speak like a local resistance fighter, but you use lightning. Halfblood?”

“No,” Tirellian said flatly. “Codename Paladin.”

“Subtle,” Shan muttered at him.

Tirellian narrowed his eyes. “And this is Ragdoll.”

“I am?” Shan said. He hadn’t realized he had a codename. “Who comes up with these?”

“My sister.”

“Oh. In which case, I love it, clearly, and you don’t need to hit me.”

“Better,” Tirellian said, and a tiny smile ghosted across his mouth.

“You’re Paladin?” Markus said, a note of excitement in his voice. “Even in Fire, we’ve heard of you. They say you flew the length of the Aster Canal and blasted every lock gate open until it drained into the sea, and that you were personally responsible for depriving Governor Lauluvi of six successive shipments of his favourite brandy until he went mad and froze himself into a pillar of ice.” He eyed Tirellian skeptically. “Mind, I did hear that you were so handsome that all of General Tanssimur’s dancing girls tried to run away with you—”

“No,” Tirellian said flatly, as Shan leaned heavily on his thigh and snickered.

“Well, you’re not invisible or ten feet tall, either, so not all the stories are true. Are you really married to the Master Artificer of the Court of Wind?”

“Told you so,” Shan said sweetly and then went back to laughing.

“Though if Arachanni here is... Oh, *fuck*.” Markus looked round frantically. “I’ll shut up now. I trust Eagle here, but not all of his men are so canny, and... What is the King of Wind *thinking*, sending you here?”

“King Lyr,” Tirellian started sharply, but Eagle cut in.

“In this, all my men will be loyal to the death.”

They all turned to look at him. He was staring at Tirellian, his eyes wide. He looked much younger with such an expression. Slowly, he said, “Paladin, I have never seen your face before, but I have looked upon the frozen queen where she sits in Kerauton. You can only be the lost paladin.”

“The what?” Markus asked.

“They say,” Eagle began, his voice slow and reverent, “that there was one paladin of the Court of Lightning who did not die when Ice came. Brother of the queen, last living descendant of the house of Levin, great-grandson of King Brontellian.” He slid off his stool, dropping to his knees as he drew his sword and planted it in the snow in front of Tirellian. “My king.”

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## Chapter Eleven

"I am not a king," Tirellian said. He didn't sound surprised, although he did look more than a little annoyed. "I am a knight. Take your seat again."

"And when you come to your throne, sire, we will know you fought beside us for our freedom."

"Get up," Tirellian said irritably and sent Shan a pleading look.

Shan took pity on him. "He is glad of your service, friend Eagle, but we are far from the day where we can think seriously about retaking the throne."

"*Arashan!* Do *not* encourage him!"

Shan grinned at him unrepentantly. "Now, to return to our original mission, we need to get into the city, to the palace and the manufactory. How far out are we and have we any chance of getting there before the gates are shut?"

"They were going to seize you at the gates," Eagle said. "We can take you in the back way, though."

"There's a back way into Kerauton?" Tirellian asked.

"Yes, sire. Well, more of a low way."

Tirellian sighed. "Sewers?"

"I'm afraid so, sire."

"When can we be there?"

"We can bring you up into the palace courtyard sometime around midnight, if we leave soon."

After that it was all bustle, apart from a few minutes when Tirellian crowded Shan back into the hut where he had woken up. "Are you well enough to ride?"

"I've been better, but I've been a lot worse. I can do this."

"If we had even a slight hill, I would suggest we fly in. I have our wings."

"Good. The rest of our stuff?"

"I left everything save your tools." He looked guilty. "Even your toys."

"They were only for decoy. I can make more."

“I kept the puzzle box.”

Shan had to laugh. “I assume that means you haven’t solved it yet.”

“No, but that wasn’t why I—”

He looked so put out that Shan kissed him. Tirellian sighed against his mouth and gathered him in.

They were interrupted by someone clearing his throat. Markus was leaning in the doorway. “Paladin, Eagle wants to talk to you about routes.”

He waited until Tirellian was gone and shook his head wryly at Shan. “My original apology still stands. I really shouldn’t have flirted with you.”

“Forget about it.”

“Not until my nose stops aching,” Markus grumbled. “He hits hard.”

“On which subject, where’s your sister?”

“I don’t know,” Markus said, looking worried. “She should be back here by now.”

By the time they were ready to leave, though, Sofia had still not appeared, and so Markus joined their party.

“We have a safehouse in the city,” he explained. “That’s our rendezvous.”

It was a long ride, through dark woods, though Shan was glad there was no moon when they came out in the farmland around the city. From here, Kerauton looked like a dark blot on the landscape, dense and shadowy.

It was small enough to still have walls, although the manufacturing district spilled out beyond the east gate. Eagle took them in through a culvert outside the west wall. Their pathway was over frozen sewage, which creaked greasily below their feet as they slid in carefully. After what seemed like hours, the pipes grew warmer and wider, and Eagle led them up onto narrow side platforms over stinking water.

Markus left them not long after that, padding off into the sulphurous darkness with only a tiny floating flame to light his way.

They continued onward, until Eagle signalled a halt. “Are you sure you don’t want me to come with you, sire?”

“I am certain,” Tirellian said. “Get back to your people and take no foolish risks.”

Eagle nodded and pointed upwards, sending a flash of lightning to light the bottom rung of the metal ladder. "You'll come up within the palace walls, behind the old kitchens. There are patrols that pass through the palace at night, but they also cover the square outside and are infrequent. You should be able to avoid them."

"Thank you," Tirellian said and, at Shan's subtle prod, added, "You have been of great service."

Then, with Eagle gone, they climbed up. The grate at the top of the sewer took some loosening, but they came out at last into a snowy courtyard. They both moved instinctively for the shelter of a doorway, and Tirellian looked around for a few moments before he nodded. "This way."

Shan followed him, keeping his steps soft and trying not to peer around too curiously. Tirellian had grown up here, he knew, during the seasons he and his sisters did not spend on their estate in Asterope. Was it bringing back hard memories?

A patrol drew near, their lamps glinting in the window glass. Tirellian pulled them both into a side room, listening intently, but the patrol did not even try the door.

After they had passed, Tirellian led on with more confidence. Shan soon lost track of where they were. This palace was nothing like the royal castle at King's Isle, which was ancient and poky and barely large enough to house the royal family and some key advisers. Lightning's palace felt like a small village in itself by comparison.

They came at last to a large antechamber, surrounded by windows. Shan could glimpse the lights of the city outside, a spread of dim lights reaching towards the horizon.

Tirellian drew in a sudden, furious breath. Shan looked to see what had upset him and saw a signboard propped against the wall. It announced opening times and prices.

It took a moment for Shan to understand. Then he asked softly, "Is this the throne room?"

"Yes. My sister is not an exhibition for public display."

Shan touched his shoulder. "They're stupid to make her one. Your people are proud, and they don't forgive an insult. If Ice have forgotten that, they will regret it."

Tirellian nodded and strode forwards. As he got closer to the great doors, though, his steps slowed. He came to a halt an arm's length away.

Then he said, his voice uncertain, "I don't want to go in."

"Of course you don't," Shan said. "Do you want me to go alone?"

"No," Tirellian said, squaring his shoulders. "I have to see."

It was Shan who opened the doors though, and Shan who stepped in first.

He caught his breath. The moon had come out, and pale light spilled in through the glass dome in the ceiling. It washed across the marble floor and gleamed on the great crag of ice that stood at the end of the throne room.

Within the ice, the king and queen of Lightning still sat enthroned.

They wore their robes of state and all their regalia. The king was in the process of rising to his feet, his hand pressing down on the golden arm of his throne. The queen had one hand outstretched, a ring shining around her finger, within the ice.

She didn't look exactly like her sister, to Shan's surprise.

She looked younger, a mere lovely child beside Queen Arellia's beauty. No wonder, really. She had only been eighteen. She had the same dark, curling hair, though, and even through the dulling of frost, he could see her eyes must have been the same blue as Tirellian's once.

She didn't look afraid. Her face was bright with defiance, even after all these years.

Tirellian moved forwards past him to collapse at the foot of the ice. He covered his face with his hands.

Shan went to him, kneeling beside him to embrace him awkwardly. He could feel Tirellian shaking against him, his breath rasping out suddenly.

"Tirellian," Shan said, not sure what to say. Was his proud lover weeping? "Sparks. I'm sorry, I'm sorry." Then, because Tirellian was still shaking, he added their old promise. "You're safe. You're with me."

Tirellian let out a single sharp gasp, and dropped his hands, pressing his face against Shan's shoulder. His fists locked into Shan's shirt, and his breath broke again, around a word.

"Aillera," he was saying, "Aillera. I promised. I promised."

"Promised what?" Shan asked, stroking his hair, his shoulder, any part of his lover he could reach.

"To protect them."

"You couldn't be in two places at once, love."

"I *promised*."

"You were there for Arellia. You didn't break your word."

"Aillera needed me more."

"You couldn't know that."

"I should have done," Tirellian said bleakly, but his grip on Shan was loosening, and he pulled back to stand up slowly.

For a long time, he just stared at his sister's face, barely blinking. Then he reached out towards the ice, touching his fingertips to it, a mere impossible inch separating him from his sister's hand.

"Aila," he said softly and looked across at Shan. He was still weeping, tears sliding down his face and making his voice crumple and crack. "She was always brave, you know. People thought she and Arellia were the same in character as well as in looks. Even father couldn't tell them apart, but they were so different. Aillera was always the boldest of us all. She dared us to live for ourselves as well as the family. Whenever we broke a rule, it was her idea, and she could laugh, Arashan. She had the brightest, loudest laugh I've ever heard."

"I'm sorry," Shan said. "I'm so sorry."

"I miss her."

"I know."

"How can Arellia and I be in a world without her?"

"I don't know," Shan said and closed his eyes. This next task would be the more awful the more he imagined her as Tirellian's beloved little sister. "Sparks, I have to cut into the ice."

Tirellian nodded.

"I may have to cut her."

"Don't tell me."

"I won't," Shan said and kissed his cheek. "Don't watch."

He had an ice saw and a small blowtorch, and he set to work doggedly. He was determined not to touch her flesh unless he had to, which meant shearing off layer after layer of ice while Tirellian kept watch. At last he got close enough to her hand that he switched to the torch, melting the ice around her.

When icy water began to drip off her fingertip, he swallowed hard and kept at it, even more carefully. At last, her middle fingers were free of the ice, although they still stood up stiffly.

“Tirellian,” he said softly. “Can you manage to touch her hand?”

“I want to,” Tirellian said and came across the room swiftly. It took a little coaxing to ease the ring off her finger but then Tirellian grasped her cold fingers with his warm hand, bowing over it.

“If the ice could all be thawed...” Shan said hesitantly. He’d heard stories about people trapped in snowdrifts who came back from seeming death.

“She’s been frozen for a decade,” Tirellian said bleakly. “Her heart no longer beats. There is no breath in her lungs. She is dead.” Gently, he kissed his sister’s hand and then stepped back. “Give me the ring.”

Shan handed it over and Tirellian shoved it on his own finger with a shudder. Then he turned and stalked out of the room without looking back.

Shan had to run to keep up, grabbing his tools but leaving the mess of shorn ice behind. Tirellian stalked through the palace at full speed, not hesitating in his path.

“Where are we going?” Shan gasped.

“Somewhere the patrols can’t enter,” Tirellian said shortly and swerved up a spiralling flight of stairs, taking them two at a time.

They ended up outside an elaborate door. It had no handle and no obvious keyhole, but the entire front was covered with an ornate and complex enamelled design, a huge shield with a crest of starred lightning. Shan knew that crest. He had seen it on some of Tirellian’s belongings, the few scraps he had brought with him on what had been intended as a short trip away from home.

It was the crest of the Duke of Asterope.

Tirellian lifted his hands, calling lightning, and threw it out with quick, almost heedless grace. It hit point after point on the crest and wherever it hit it lingered and sent out lines, until a second inverted crest had formed.

After the seventh strike, there was the distinct sound of locks clicking, and the door swung open.

“Your father didn’t care for visitors, did he?” Shan commented, following Tirellian in.

“He quite enjoyed making people wait.” Tirellian pushed the door shut behind them, and Shan heard the locks engage again.

The room they were in was dark, and Shan only got a dim sense of heavy furnishings and thick curtains. Tirellian walked across it without hesitation, though, throwing open one of the curtains to let the moonlight in. “This one only overlooks my father’s courtyard garden. No one can see into it from anywhere else in the palace.”

“What about light?”

“A risk, but a small one. Not much escapes, and it would be near impossible to find the source from outside.”

“Well, then,” Shan said, trying to make it sound casual. “Shall we call the Sprite?”

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## Chapter Twelve

Tirellian lifted his hand, where the ring gleamed dully in the moonlight. Then he knelt, still holding his hand aloft, and said gravely, "Lady of Thorned Fire, your servant begs an audience."

Shan knelt too, pressed back against the wall.

For a minute nothing happened, and Shan wondered if that had been enough of a summoning. Then he realized that the sky was clouding over.

When the first bolt of lightning hit the skylight, he jumped, even as thunder ripped the sky apart above them. Another strike and another and another went rushing over the glass, each one making the hair on his arms stand up on end and his heart leap.

The fifth strike came through the glass, not shattering it but passing through it as if it was insignificant. It hit the floor in front of Tirellian, and he jolted back even as the light splintered up to form a shape.

The Sprite of Lightning was a thinner, fiercer creature than Wind's Sylph. She was as dark-haired as Tirellian and his sisters, and Shan could see a little of them in her, but her hair was cut raggedly short, and her eyes were fierce. Lightning danced in a crown around her head, and wreathed her arms like bracelets of shining wire.

"Tirellian of Asterope," she said, sounding surprised, and her voice was deep and thunder-rough. "I never thought to be called by any of Levin's bloodline again."

"Yet I have the right to call, madam," Tirellian said, and Shan wasn't sure how he had the nerve to sound so calm.

The Sprite nodded sharply. "More than any other. Your living sister, does she remember me?"

"Always, madam. As do I."

"At least someone does," the Sprite said. "You all left me, Tirellian. Everyone who calls my name now is merely human, and so Ice can hurt them." She clasped her hands together tightly. "They're hurting our people, my paladin."

"We fight back," Tirellian said.

She shrugged irritably and glanced around. When she spotted Shan, her eyebrow rose, and she said sharply, "A child of Wind? Is that why you've come at last, Tirellian? Because my sister came crying to your royal brother?"

"It is not the first time I have come home. It is the first time one of the Seven partook in an act of war. Madam, do you need saving?"

"No!" the Sprite snapped, so fiercely that Shan winced. Then she continued, "Not *me*. I'm not the one."

"Who does need help, then?" Shan asked. He didn't think the Sylph would be happy with her sister if he got turned into a scorched patch of floor tile, and he wanted to be part of this conversation.

"Daedalia!" the Sprite cried. "My Daedalia!"

Aunt Didi? Exchanging a puzzled glance with Tirellian, he asked, "The reluctant artificer? *That* Daedalia?"

"She fought them so long," the Sprite said, light rising from her hair in flowering sparks. "She was so very brave, my Daedalia. And now they have locked her away, and they're *hurting* her. I cannot bear it."

The Sylph had taken human lovers, Shan knew, and the Ice Knight he had seen was clearly a descendant of the Undine. Why shouldn't the Sprite?

"You love her," he said, and Tirellian looked startled.

"Yes," the Sprite cried, and then she lowered her head. "But I was such a fool. I visited her too often, and they found out and now..." She was weeping sparks now, each one glittering in her eyes before it tumbled down her cheeks.

"That's why you're powering their war machine," Tirellian said. "Because they're holding her hostage?"

She nodded, "I hate it! It burns me. What they'll do to her, though..." She shuddered, light flashing all around her.

"But why is she cooperating suddenly?" Shan wondered aloud.

"They show her pictures, false pictures, of what they're doing to me!"

"Can't you tell her they're lies?" Shan asked.

"Do your stories say I'm stupid, Wind Boy? I cannot reach her. They have sealed her within a room of ice, and I cannot pass through it. I can see her, but I can't reach her. Their ice is too thick and cold for my power to pass it! Every time I try to melt my way through, they just forge more ice between us."

"We have been sent to try rescuing her," Shan said. "Will you help?"

The Sprite went quiet. Then, very slowly, she shook her head. "Two human men against the Knights with Frozen Hearts? You have no hope of success. If I am seen with you, they will punish her so badly. I can't. I can't!"

"Madam, the people of the Seven Courts—"

"Why should I care for them?" she demanded. "My pact was with your kin, and you are all dead or have abandoned me. Only Daedalia still speaks to me like Levin did. She was the only one who didn't demand I save them when they had no right to even speak to me! I won't let them hurt her!"

And then, with another dazzling flare, she was gone, arcing back through the roof.

Shan blinked afterimages out of his eyes and said, because sarcasm seemed like the only answer, "So, that went well."

Tirellian ignored him to stalk out of the room. Shan groaned and followed him. He couldn't see a thing, and he kept stumbling over furniture and walking into walls. Eventually Tirellian must have reached back in annoyance, because his hand closed around Shan's wrist and he snapped, "Just walk with me."

They ended up in another dimly lit room, this one a bedchamber. Shan couldn't see enough of the furnishings to guess any more about it, but Tirellian released him to go straight to the bed. He threw himself down on it, rolling over to face the wall, his back to Shan.

Shan sighed and climbed in after him, throwing an arm over his waist. Tirellian shrugged irritably, but Shan wasn't going to let go.

"So, saving Aunt Didi just became our more important mission," he said. "Any ideas on how we get her out of a room made of ice? I don't think my blowtorch is up for that much of a challenge."

"Not now," Tirellian said. He sounded so miserable that Shan dropped the subject and just kissed his neck.

"Don't."

"Why not?"

"Because there's no point," Tirellian said bitterly. "Sex is just a way of filling the time, and love doesn't do anything."

"It's a very pleasant way of filling the time," Shan said, trying to jolly him out of his misery.

“Don’t bother, Arashan.”

“I hate to see you despair,” Shan said. “You may scorn love, but it’s what I feel for you, and I don’t want to see you suffer.”

“And what good did that do the Sprite and the artificer? They’re both so afraid of seeing the other one hurt that they’re willing to drag the whole world down with them.” Then, more softly, he added, “What good did it do Aillera? I’ve heard enough to know she had time to escape. She chose to stay with her husband. Love killed her.”

“Ice killed her,” Shan said. “Love stood beside her and fought back.”

“And *lost*. If that is all love can do for us, what is the point? We shouldn’t waste our time on it or suffer for it.”

Shan could have argued further, but he didn’t think Tirellian would listen. Instead, he just curled up behind his lover’s back, sharing his warmth, and asked, “What do we do now?”

“It’s almost dawn. The palace is open during the day, and I expect there will be a furore over our theft of the ring. No one will check in here, though.”

“So do we move now or hide out?”

“Hide out. We don’t have time to get inside the manufactory tonight.”

“Have we got food and water in here?”

“Eagle left some in the packs he gave us.”

“He’s not a bad sort, for a revolutionary,” Shan remarked cheerfully. “Tell me, did you know that you were that close to the throne? You didn’t seem surprised.”

“I’ve heard the notion before. It’s ridiculous.”

Shan hummed slightly and then asked cautiously, “Does anyone at home know? Your sister? King Lyr?”

“No, and I’d appreciate it if they didn’t.”

“Markus did have a point, you know. If you are the rightful king of—”

“I’m not.”

“But if you were, then we *are* both too valuable to be here.”

“Hence Lyr does not know.”

“Thought so,” Shan said smugly.

“Will you hush and let me sleep?”

“Oh, are we sleeping now?”

“Yes.”

“Only if you let me under the blankets too. It’s freezing in here.”

“It’s freezing everywhere,” Tirellian said, but he shifted enough to let Shan shrug off his outer layers and squirm under the covers before he did the same. Almost immediately, despite his angry words, his hands shot out to latch onto Shan, gripping him tightly.

Shan sighed and pulled him close, sharing warmth. Tirellian didn’t touch him beyond the grip on his shoulders, but he did let out a long, sighing breath. When he slept, Shan stayed awake a little longer, thinking of fierce women, both the ones in ice and the one made of lightning. Then, wearily, he lay his head against Tirellian’s hair and went to sleep.

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The next morning he was woken by sunlight and the sound of banging from elsewhere in the palace.

“Are you absolutely certain they can’t get in here?” he asked sleepily.

“Absolutely,” Tirellian said and then put an arm around him, a little uncertainly. “We’re safe, and I’m sorry. I was very rude last night.”

“Sparks, did no one ever tell you that it’s unhealthy to be too polite?”

“No, but it explains a great deal about you.”

Shan opened his eyes a little more to glare, and was met by Tirellian’s cautious smile. He leaned forwards to seek a kiss, but Tirellian pulled back, looking troubled.

“Still thinking?” Shan asked lightly, though his heart clenched. “That’s almost as bad for you as good manners.”

“I’m just not certain...” Tirellian began and then trailed off, frowning. “Love, it’s like lightning.”

“Not for everyone, though it can strike that fast. For some of us it grows over time.”

“It was not intended as a romantic simile.”

“Sorry,” Shan said and propped his chin on his fist, trying to look studious. “I’m listening.”

“It has claws. It can blaze through you and be gone, or it can burn you. Or stop your heart.”

“Are we animal, vegetable or mineral in this metaphor, because the effects vary significantly?”

Tirellian narrowed his eyes at Shan.

Shan grinned back, and then said softly, “Or it can be a bright light in a jar to comfort you. Or it can be the thing that fills you with strength and power.”

“You’re stretching the metaphor.”

“So were you,” Shan said amicably. “Me, I think love is its own thing, and it has countless faces. If it makes us happier and stronger and more glad to be alive, it’s a good thing.”

“But people die for love, all the time.”

“On the whole, they don’t,” Shan pointed out. “You just live the kind of life people write epic poems about. Most of us just live for those we love instead. And even if they do, that’s not the entirety of the thing.”

Tirellian frowned again. “Your definitions are very vague.”

“They’re meant to be,” Shan said and sighed. “So, I take it we’re not going to spend the day we’re locked in here hiding out in bed.”

Tirellian blushed.

“You said it yourself. It fills the time.” Shan reached out to run his knuckle down the side of Tirellian’s neck.

“That hardly seems meaningful,” Tirellian said, looking disapproving. That didn’t stop him from shuddering slightly, though.

“Not everything’s meaningful, Sparks. Sometimes we’re allowed to just have fun.”

“Fun?” Tirellian repeated, as if he’d never heard the word before, but he was already moving to push Shan down against the pillows.

“Fun,” Shan agreed, throwing his arm up around Tirellian’s neck. “Come here, you.”

And then, just to be obnoxious, he reached under Tirellian's outstretched arm and tickled him.

Tirellian yelped surprise, flailed, and almost fell off the bed. Shan grabbed him in time, rolling him back onto the bed and capturing his wrists above his head.

"Why, Paladin," he said, not even trying to hide his glee, "are you ticklish?"

"No," Tirellian said unconvincingly, and Shan went for his belly. Tirellian tried to squirm away and failed, batting helplessly at Shan's hands as he writhed and hiccuped protests. Then, in a spluttering rush, he began to laugh, his face creasing as the giggles fell out of him in snorting bursts.

"Stop it," he said weakly. "Ar-Arashan. I..." And then the laughter overwhelmed his voice, and he collapsed back against the pillows, tears running down his flushed cheeks.

Shan kept feathering his fingers across Tirellian's taut belly, but with the other hand he worked Tirellian's clothes open. The first stroke to Tirellian's cock made his giggles turn into gulps, and Shan chuckled.

"See," he said, stroking Tirellian. "It can be fun. It can be happy."

"This," Tirellian gasped, "isn't a—*oh*—recognized rhetorical—*Arashan!*"

Shan had to kiss him, needing to catch some of that surprised pleasure against his own lips. He was taken by surprise when Tirellian suddenly surged up to grab him and wrestle him down, trapping him in a tangle of half-clothed limbs.

"I find myself wondering," Tirellian said with admirable calm for someone who was rutting slowly against Shan's belly, "if I am the only one with this particular vulnerability?"

"What?" Shan asked, entirely distracted by Tirellian's warm weight and the loveliness of him smiling in the morning sunlight.

Tirellian's smile curved into a smirk. "Are you ticklish too, Arashan?"

"Me?" Shan said, widening his eyes innocently. "Of course not."

"Liar," Tirellian said and pounced, his eyes bright with delight.

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Much later, lying naked in the sunshine, Shan finally took notice of their

surroundings. It was only the laziest of observations, because Tirellian was currently using his tongue to trace over every bit of ink on Shan's back.

All the same, he finally took in the swords mounted on the wall, the shelf of military textbooks, and the little wooden soldier tucked behind a framed sketch of Arellia and Aillera. It was a very plain room, but there were little hints of personality here, in the choice of colours and fabrics around the room. Everything was functional, but made to be beautiful too.

"This was your room?"

Tirellian's lips stilled against Shan's spine. Then he murmured, "Yes."

"Good," Shan said vaguely. "Good. You should come home with me next time we get leave. My mother was asking after you last time she wrote."

For a long moment, Tirellian neither moved nor spoke. Then he pressed a long kiss to the back of Shan's neck and said, his voice a little rough, "Yes, of course. *Arashan*."

"Tirellian," Shan murmured back, because nothing more was needed.

Later still, they finally staggered out of bed, weak-kneed and thirsty. Tirellian revealed an entire kitchen to him, its hanging pans dusty and dry, unidentifiable food crusting in the cupboards. The big table was clear, though, and they sat there to eat the rations Eagle had left them, Tirellian looking more uncomfortable to be there than Shan was.

"What now?" Shan said. "How do we get out of here?"

"That should be obvious," Tirellian said. "There are towers in this palace, higher by far than any other building in the city."

"We can fly to the manufactory?"

"Of course," Tirellian said loftily. Then, as Shan rolled his eyes, he unbent enough to admit. "I am not sure how to go about our mission once we arrive, of course, but we have the rest of the afternoon. If you have had enough of this fun of yours, perhaps we could strategise?"

"As if you didn't enjoy it just as much," Shan said, and Tirellian went pink again.

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## Chapter Thirteen

There were more patrols tonight, but the vastness of the palace seemed to swallow them up, and Shan and Tirellian made their way to the tower unchallenged. Standing up there, with the wind buffeting his face, Shan was reminded again how strange it was to be in a flat country. The lights of Kerauton stretched below them in long lines, never curving to rise over or around a hill. The brightest spot in the city was the manufactory. Its windows were shining with the white glow of harnessed lightning.

“When do they stop for the night?” he asked.

“They don’t,” Tirellian said, “but I’m told their secretarial staff go home at dusk. Eagle showed me the plans. The offices are on an upper level, and we can move through them to access remote parts of the manufactory.”

“That seems like an overly obvious flaw in their security.”

“It was built before the invasion, and they know our wings won’t carry us this far inland.”

“I love it when the other side are certain of something I can prove wrong.”

“Don’t fall into the trap of arrogance yourself,” Tirellian warned, pulling his harness on. “There are at least three Ice Knights in there, along with a large contingent of the Guard.”

Shan sighed and began to strap on his own wings. “Do we have a realistic chance of getting her out tonight?”

“If we can, we will,” Tirellian said, “but not at the cost of our own lives. If we merely learn what we need to return in force later, that is enough.”

They checked each other’s wings, and Tirellian lifted his hand to the wind. “Can you whistle it round? It is to our advantage to spend as little time in the air as possible.”

Shan nodded and reached out to the wind. Pursing his lips to whistle for its attention, he raised his hand to indicate the change of direction. He put his willpower into the spell, as well as his need, and it responded to the Sylph’s blood within him and began to shift, blowing steadily out of the east.

Tirellian spread his wings, activating the spellsilk, and stepped back to the far edge of the tower. As Shan stepped aside to call his own silk into place, Tirellian ran into the wind.

Shan followed him, more closely than he would usually, and took the higher air. In tight formation, they coasted down across the rooftops of Kerauton, their moonshadows flashing across the snow-covered roofs.

There were patrols in the streets below, knocking on doors and searching gardens and sheds, but each set flickered out of sight as they crossed the next line of roofs, and none of them looked up. Their actions had obviously stirred up a nest of hornets, though, and Shan hoped their escape plan would be enough. Wings would only get them over the city walls, and it was going to be a long run back to the coast.

The roofs of the factory were long and gently sloping. They were dark and runnelled with water. Whatever was happening in there was producing enough heat to keep the roof clear of snow.

There were a succession of low platforms, each with a sloped door leading down and a stack of brooms lashed to their surrounding rails. Tirellian directed himself towards the centremost, shifting his body to land on bent knees.

Shan's landing wasn't quite so elegant, but he was soon folding his wings again.

Looking across the roof, Shan glimpsed movement on the next platform.

"Tirellian!"

Tirellian swung, lifting his hand to call lightning, but the man on the other platform suddenly darted forwards, lighting a flame before his face.

It was Markus.

Tirellian lowered his hand, and Markus pointed at the door and then to the roof between them. He slipped away then, and Shan turned his attention to picking the lock.

It was barely worth the effort, and soon he and Tirellian were slipping down a spiralled wood and metal staircase. The first doorway that led off it took them into dark offices.

No one was there, though floor level windows glowed. Creeping nearer, Shan glanced down into the heart of the factory. Lightning hung in spitting webs, and there was machinery moving in every corner. Workers in thick goggles and heavy overalls were crawling between steel ribs and serrated jaws to piece together huge, warlike creatures of steel and wire.

Up here, the rooms were empty, all the light jars covered. The rooms were cramped, and as they moved, piles of papers stirred on the desks in their wake.

They met Markus in the third room, all three of them fading back from the window side of the room to meet.

“Seen anyone up here?” Markus asked.

“Not a soul,” Shan said. “Why are you here?”

“Sofia’s here,” Markus said grimly. “I followed her trail all the way from Rhodiosson. They took her on the road, from what my sources say.”

“Any idea where she’s being held?”

“One of my informants overheard them taunt her about a cage of ice. That’s what I’m looking for.”

“Unless they have more than one,” Shan said, “that’s where they’re holding their artificer too.”

“There’s space enough in here,” Tirellian said doubtfully.

Shan wasn’t so sure. “They’re cramped down there. I wouldn’t want to operate that many devices in such close proximity. Suggests they’re tight for space.”

“Better to share the hunt than interfere with each other,” Markus said, and Tirellian nodded.

“Further in,” he said, and they moved off again, creeping through the offices and peering cautiously down at the manufactory floor at every opportunity.

Soon the air grew cold, and fewer and fewer of the offices looked like they were used. Ice coated the windows, concealing the floor below, and hung in thick stalactites from the ceilings. Their breath began to rise in pale clouds, and even Markus started to shiver.

There were patterns in the ice, strange geometric shapes with jagged joins. The light from below caught in them, making them shine brightly against the dirty glass.

“That is how they write in the Court of Ice,” Markus breathed. “He has marked his territory.”

“Who has?” Shan asked.

“The General. They get like that, as they grow old. They grow possessive and obsessed by strange rituals.”

At last they reached a room that was nothing but ice. There was a doorway at the end, to another stairway, but a thin pane of ice sealed it. The windows were completely covered.

“We have to go down,” Tirellian said, frowning. “You, Fire Knight, can you break through that?”

“Easily,” Markus murmured, “but I’d rather see what we’re getting into first. Anyone got a coin on them?”

“I have,” Shan said and dug it out of his pocket. He tossed it to Markus who caught it and clenched his fist around it. Then he crossed to the window and pressed the coin against the glass.

“That might work on a frosty day,” Tirellian said. “I hardly think—”

Markus pulled the coin away from the window, revealing a neat hole slanting down through the ice. “I have a little more heat at my disposal than you do, Paladin.” He gestured Shan forwards and went to press the coin to the glass twice more.

Peering down through the narrow peephole, Shan couldn’t make sense of what he saw. For a moment, he thought Markus hadn’t broken all the way through the coating over the window. Then he realized the floor below was coated in ice. It curled across the floor in stiff waves, full of glittering reflections of caged lightning.

It wasn’t until he saw movement within the ice that he realized what he was looking at. There were bubbles in the ice, bubbles large enough to form sealed rooms. He could see people within them, though the ice blurred their forms enough that he couldn’t tell from here whether he was looking at Sofia, Daedalia, or Ice Knights.

“How long can people survive in there?” he asked. “If that’s them, we may need to abort and come back with a greater heat source.”

“You think we’ll get this close again?” Markus hissed.

“Our first priority,” Tirellian reminded them both, “is to confirm where our targets are being held. That confirmation has not yet been made.”

“So do we go down there or try to find a better viewpoint from up here,” Shan asked, rubbing his arms. The air in here seemed to be getting steadily

colder, biting at his exposed cheeks and wrist. Tirellian was shivering too, and even Markus' bare arms were goose-pimpled.

"We should move anyway," he said. "We can't stay still if it carries on getting colder like this."

"Colder," a fey, eerie voice sighed behind them. "Colder and colder and colder."

They all startled away from the window, turning around. They weren't fast enough. The Ice Knight behind them was already stretching out his webbed hand, his too bright eyes gleaming. Ice curled out of the walls at his gesture, looping around Tirellian's wrists and coating Markus' hands. It came up Shan's legs, encasing him in ice from toes to waist.

"Colder," the Ice Knight sighed again.

He looked like the older brother of the Knight they had met on the road, with the same blue-green coloring, but this Knight wasn't just freezing the ground below his feet. Ice covered him, in thin, crackly layers that flaked when he moved. His hands were covered in ragged layers of it, peeling like burnt skin, and it crept across his cheek, digging into the skin so hard it was edged with bloody scabs.

He reached out towards Markus with that cold hand, stroking his bare skin with a hint of yearning in his too bright eyes. "Colder, but not cold enough."

"Strike him, Paladin!" Markus yelled, flinching.

Tirellian tried, but the lightning he called merely hit the Ice Knight's frozen armour and flashed against it. The ice melted a little, but the lightning did not touch the knight within it.

Shan whistled for a wind, with all the urgency he could summon.

It took time for the wind to rise, though, and already the Ice Knight was lifting his hands again.

And the ice rose too, piling up on every side of them into high walls. It closed over their heads and then they were sinking through ice, their bubble moving in reaction to every shift of the Ice Knight's hands, ice creaking and sliding around them.

They were descending towards the factory floor when the wind Shan had summoned hit the roof. It punctured through the thin sheeting, peeling it back

and smacked into the upper levels of the factory. Chunks of ice and wall and metal stairway suddenly came collapsing down towards them, smashing around their bubble of ice, battering it until they stopped descending smoothly and began to roll and tumble.

When the crashing and rolling stopped, they were lying in a pile of debris, their bubble smashed open. Shan was still trapped in the ice, though Tirellian had one wrist free. Markus was crawling away from them, looking dazed and bloodied.

The Ice Knight was crumpled against the ground, his patina of ice cobwebbed with cracks. For a moment, Shan hoped they'd finished one of the bastards off at least, but then he stirred, rising to his hands and knees and grabbing for Markus as he crawled past.

Markus kicked him in the face, hard, and the Knight murmured, "Not hot enough, but too, too cold."

Shan could see what Markus was aiming for now. On the other side of the debris pile, a thin sheet of ice, as clear as a window, separated Sofia from them. She was shouting something, her face tight with alarm, but the ice muffled her. Beyond her, deeper into the ice, there was another room and another woman.

It took a moment to recognize her. The Daedalia he had known had been tough and energetic, bright-eyed and young. This woman looked old, her cheeks thin, her face haggard, and her hair shot through with gray.

She was watching what was happening with sharp fury though, that intent focus unmistakable.

A great spar of white ice stood between them and the cells, and Markus lunged out of the Ice Knight's reach to start crawling around it.

"Stop!" Tirellian shouted suddenly, and Shan's breath caught too, seeing what he saw.

That spar of ice was moving, turning towards them slowly. It spun smoothly around, as if it were mounted on wheels, but there was only glassy ice below it, shifting and reforming so fast it looked as flowing as water. As it turned, it became obvious that it was no mere spar.

It was a throne, rising out of the ice in flat panels. A man sat in it, but unlike the King and Queen of Lightning, this frozen throne was not his tomb. Ice covered him, not in flaking layers, but formed into thick armour. It contained

him utterly, guarding every piece of his skin, but he lived inside it, his verdigris eyes bright and dangerous.

A sword and a sceptre of gleaming metal speared into the ice beside his feet. Ice curled and grew beneath his hands where they gripped the sides of his throne, cascading down to add to the spar below him. Shan wondered whether the throne had once been level with the ground.

“Paladin,” the Ice Knight who had brought them said, his voice sad. “Colder and colder.”

“Gramercy, Sir Hullu,” the enthroned man said, his voice booming through a thin grille in the ice over his mouth. “You have done well. Stand guard now.”

“Colder and colder,” the Ice Knight said, but limped off to stand behind them, his arms stiff at his sides. He did not seem to realize there was blood seeping slowly into the ice over his forehead.

“I am General Haimursu. I have been wondering how long it would take the resistance to pay me a visit.”

“Do forgive our tardiness,” Tirellian said. “I hope we didn’t keep you waiting too long.”

“Not at all. I wasn’t expecting any serious attempts for another day or two, Sir... Paladin, is it?”

Tirellian did not answer.

The General smiled, his mouth barely moving against the ice. “Not a Paladin of Wind, despite your arrival from the air. Can it be that the Last Paladin of the Court of Lightning has finally arrived before me?”

Tirellian inclined his head politely. “Unfortunately, you have the advantage over me. Your name and reputation have not travelled so widely that I ever heard your name.”

“You should know me, Paladin,” the General said. “I was the one who froze your sister into her throne.” He lifted his hand to stroke the arm of his own seat. “I do not think she finds it as comfortable as I do my own.”

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## Chapter Fourteen

Tirellian's posture stiffened even further. He said nothing, but Shan felt the air tighten around them.

Markus was moving again, shuffling away from the foot of the Ice General's throne. He still looked stunned and mazy, but his eyes were clearer than they had been. He glanced at Tirellian and then at Shan, before looking back at his sister. Then he flicked his hand towards each of them in turn. Shan saw the point of heat roiling through the air towards him, but he didn't feel it strike. He could barely feel his lower body now, encased as it was in ice.

"Since you are here," the General said to Tirellian, "I assume you are the one who stole the Sprite's ring from your sister's hand." He held out his own hand, in its gauntlet of ice. "Give it to me."

"No," Tirellian said, his voice sharp with disdain. The ice that bound his left wrist was wet now, losing its shape and shimmer.

"Do you think you can defend yourself against me?"

"I think it is of no use to you," Tirellian said. "You have none of the Sprite's blood in you."

Seeing that wet gleam made Shan test his own bonds. The ice moved around him and he started to squirm, trying to work himself free. As he moved, he looked around, trying to spot some way to escape. The General certainly didn't look particularly fast or manoeuvrable, wrapped in that much ice, so they could quite possibly evade him if they got into the maze of machinery.

There was debris everywhere, broken spars of wood and metal, and artificers' equipment caught amongst it, wirecutters and saw blades and even a great sledgehammer wedged in the slurry not far away. Above them, the roof gaped open, a metal beam hanging from the end of the office level, its ends twisted where the falling roof had hit the ice-heavy chains that still held one end in place.

"I need none," the General said. "If I defeat you and break you to my purpose, you will breed me enough spawn of royal blood to make the ring worth keeping."

Tirellian sneered and said, very precisely, "If."

Then he swung his free hand round, slamming his fist down on the ice that bound his other wrist. It splintered, and Tirellian drew his sword, leaping not towards the general, but towards the Ice Knight behind him, who was watching them through his vague eyes.

The Knight pulled ice up in a wave, raising it between himself and Tirellian, but he wasn't fast enough. Tirellian's sword flashed down, biting through the thin ice the Knight wore and slashing down through his shoulder and into his chest. The Knight cried out, a thin, shrill sound that stung Shan's ears, and then slumped forwards, ice spilling from his open palms in sudden blooms and curls.

When Tirellian dragged his blade free, it was red with blood and steaming in the chill air. The blood darkened fast, falling off his blade in red shards as he swung to face the General.

The General was moving now, rising slowly to his feet and reaching out to seize the sword that stood beside him. Tirellian's eyes narrowed, and lightning flared out from the end of his sword, rooting itself at the top of the General's greatsword until the hilt slumped and melted and the edge of the sword softened into a molten slide.

Tirellian still lunged forwards to meet the general, but his sword did nothing but strike a spray of ice out of his armour. The General lunged forwards, ice rising around Tirellian's feet to trap him, but he danced sideways, striking again.

He wasn't running, though he could have done, and Shan realised why too late. Struggling out of the now-weak cage that held him in place, he grabbed for the sledgehammer and sent it sliding across the ice towards Tirellian. "Sparks! Break him!"

Then he had to duck himself, as a shower of ice shards came shooting towards him, spitting out of the ends of the General's gauntlet.

Crouched behind rubble, he didn't see what Tirellian did with the sledgehammer, but he heard the crackle and ring of ice breaking. Looking around frantically for a weapon of his own, he was reaching for a length of broken pipe before he thought again.

He was a soldier, but he was also an artificer. In fact, he was a much better artificer than he was a soldier.

He forced himself to look at his surroundings differently, not people and panic and Tirellian, his Tirellian, fighting for his life. No, Shan forced that aside, although it wrenched his heart to do it.

Fire Knights, two, Ice General, one, Lightning Paladin, Artificers (one trapped), ice, rubble, metal beams, tools: here were the things he could put to use.

“Get your sister out!” he snapped at Markus, grabbing the metal cutters from the pile. “Then break the reluctant artificer free.”

Then he began to climb, scrambling up the heaped rubble towards the hanging beam. As he struggled upwards, he caught glimpses of the rest of the manufactory, more frost-wrapped figures moving slowly towards them, and black-uniformed soldiers running. It made him hurry, grabbing at handholds recklessly.

Below him, Tirellian was pounding at the Ice General, using the ice beneath his feet to slide around him. The General had created a weapon of his own now, a thick staff of ice that he swung at Tirellian. His frozen armour was cobwebbed with cracks but not yet broken.

The rubble slipped below Shan's feet, cascading down towards the fight. It struck Tirellian a glancing blow on the shoulder, and he slipped, skidding clumsily across the ice. The General laughed and went after him, but Tirellian closed his hands on the shaft of the sledgehammer again and swung it up, grunting with the effort.

It smashed into the General's gauntlet, hard enough to make him snatch his hand back.

Shan could almost reach the end of the beam now, and he leapt for it, reaching out.

It was ice-cold, and he couldn't close his fingers over it fast enough. For a moment, he teetered atop the rubble, poised to fall, like the debris, into the fight below.

Then he threw himself forwards, as if he was leaping for the wind, and pulled himself up onto the beam.

He scrambled along it, leaving skin behind, and it swayed and lunged under his weight. It was still linked to the chains at the far end, though, and it did not fall.

When he reached the chains, he realized he could not cut them unless he straddled the beam itself. He gulped, imagining the weight of ice and metal crashing onto him if they fell together.

Tirellian cried out harshly, a sound of shocked pain, and that was it. There were some things, some people, who were worth death or agony. Shan set to with the metal cutters, sawing his way through the icy chains.

When the last one parted, he lunged for the ends, waiting for the beam to fall.

It didn't and he looked along it to see that new ice had come curling up from the battleground below, closing around the far end.

Shan took a firmer grip on the chains, wrapping his whole body in them, and yelled, "Markus!"

Down below, away from Tirellian's fight, Markus and his sister stood on either side of a wall of ice, their glowing hands pressed against it. At Shan's cry, Markus looked up.

Then he raised his hands, leaving Sofia alone, and the metal beam began to heat, first dripping icemelt and then glowing a brighter and brighter red.

It was hot enough to sting Shan's cold legs where he dangled above it, but he was watching the end.

When it finally began to shift, heaving out of the ice, he yelled, "Tirellian! Back!"

From there, he could only watch as it tipped and plummeted. Tirellian was already racing back towards Markus, his sledgehammer abandoned.

The General couldn't move so fast, and he was still right below Shan when the glowing beam hit the ice below with a sharp sizzle. Then it crashed down, breaking across the General's ice staff and shearing within a hair's breadth of his face. The ice that masked him hissed and then went dripping down his cheeks, but the beam did not hit the General himself, not quite.

He fell back though, frowning as he raised his icy hands to smooth across his bare skin, trying to patch his melting armour.

"You cannot, and will not, coerce the Sprite," Tirellian said, gesturing to Markus sharply.

He went crashing back to Sofia, even as she reached through the ice, breaking the wall open. Markus leapt into the cell beside her, pulling her to the back wall where Daedalia was watching through the ice, her face flushed as she shouted something none of them could hear.

The General barely seemed to notice, glaring as he was at Tirellian. “I will break all Seven to my will.”

“You are willing to be the one who breaks the Pact?” Tirellian said. He was breathing hard and weaponless, and Shan, clinging to the chains with all his might, could only watch the Fire Knights melting their way through to Daedalia and hope that Tirellian understood what he was doing.

“Willing?” The General said. “I would welcome it!”

“Welcome the end of all our magic, even though it sustains you? The Undine’s blood runs in your veins too.”

“And so I am cursed,” the General said. “Let the pact be broken, so that this curse may be ripped out of me. End it, and let the Ice melt.”

Sofia cried out in triumph, slamming her hand into the ice. It shuddered and then bowed, breaking the wall that held Daedalia Teichoma imprisoned and separated from her immortal lover.

“Call her!” Shan yelled, but Tirellian was already raising his hand, the ring glinting as he retreated into the shelter of the ice cells.

“Lightning!” he roared, his voice echoing. “Great Sprite, I summon you!”

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## Chapter Fifteen

The first lightning bolt seared past Shan so closely that he braced himself to be caught in its side-flares. From above, he saw the moment when it hit the metal beam below, lighting it up in one great flash that danced along it.

Then it was not just the beam that was shining, but the ground around it. Where the Ice General's armour had melted, lightning blazed through the water, flashing and burning as the air around them roared and broke, over and over until Shan couldn't hear anything at all.

The lightning kept flashing down, and he hung in the air, surrounded by silent light and fire until he had to close his eyes lest it burnt them from his skull.

When he opened his eyes again, the lightning had slowed but not stopped. Now it clustered below him, dancing around the Sprite of Lightning like a deadly snowflake. She was directing it at the Ice General, lashing strike after strike into him until his body jerked and shuddered against the wet ground.

The ice below her was melting too, filling the floor with a spreading deadly pool of roiling water.

In the ice caves, Daedalia Teichoma took a slow stumbling step forwards. She was moving slowly, her steps weak and hesitant, but she looked determined. As she came forwards, Markus offered her his arm and he and Sofia helped her to the edge of the cave, just above the water.

She spoke, but Shan was still too deaf to hear what she said. It drew the Sprite's attention, though, and she turned her face away from the dead general, leaving him to float in the shallow water, his hair spilling through it like seaweed, and his webbed hands spread wide upon the surface of the water.

Daedalia held her arms open.

The Sprite let her lightning fade and then went flashing through the air towards her lover. Shan winced, certain he was about to see Daedalia burnt up like the general.

By the time she reached her lover, though, the Sprite was back in her human form, and she looked like a skinny girl as she wrapped her arms around Daedalia's neck and kissed her fiercely.

Well, that was sweet enough to warm his heart, but his whole body was feeling singed and achy and he wasn't sure how much longer he could hang onto these chains.

"Tirellian," he said, and it was strange to feel his mouth shape the word when he couldn't hear his voice.

Tirellian was already looking up at him, though, his face worried as he spoke urgently.

"Help," Shan said optimistically. "I don't know how I'm going to get down. Am I being loud enough for you to hear me?"

He did hear a sudden low giggle, and then the wind bounced around him lightly, making the chains sway. Shan shut his eyes as the manufactory spun below him.

This time when he opened them, he was looking at the Sylph of Wind.

"You're a puppet!" she said, giggling again as she floated in the air beside him. "Like the ones you used to make!"

"Madam," Shan said. "I don't suppose..."

She held out her arms to him, smiling. "Come here, dear. I'll take you down to your paladin. Look at his sweet face, Arashan. He's fretting, bless him."

Shan slowly disentangled himself from the chains, first his legs and then his left arm. When he was only hanging by one arm, he looked back at the Sylph to be sure she was ready.

"Quick, quick," she said, and he let go of the chains.

She scooped him up in her slender arms, and skimmed down towards the floor as if they were simply gliding on a summer's day. She almost landed in the water, but then she dipped her toe down into it with a grimace, stirring up blue flashes, and said, "Maybe not."

Another quick swoop brought them to the ice cave, and she let go of him with a chuckle.

There was no ground beneath his feet, and he almost fell back into the water.

But Tirellian was there, his arms closing around Shan so tightly it almost squeezed all the breath out of him. He could hardly complain, though, not when he was holding Tirellian just as tightly, pressing his hands against his lover's hair as Tirellian clutched at him, gasping into his neck.

"I can't hear," Shan said, but Tirellian kissed him then, his mouth hot and urgent, shaking with sobs as he pressed his lips to Shan's.

The Sylph came flitting back after a few moments, still laughing as brightly as a summer's day. She turned over in midair, hanging upside down, so she could drop a quick kiss on Shan's forehead.

Sound came back to him with a low boom: crackling air and rushing water, excited voices, shouting deeper in the factory, and Tirellian, gasping over and over, "I love you. I love you."

"I love you too," Shan said, and this time he dragged Tirellian into a kiss.

It was Sofia who interrupted them.

"Sweet as this is," she said. "We're still not out of trouble. As soon as those guardsmen cross the water or find an archer—"

The Sylph blew a raspberry. "They can *try* to shoot at me. No, no, you're right. Time to go. Sister, put your pretty artificer down and take my hand. Arashan, here."

She stretched out an imperious hand towards him, and he took it uncertainly.

"Join up!" she cried, and Tirellian grasped his other hand, reaching out towards Sofia. Within moments, they had formed a loose ring. Across from him, Daedalia looked up and said, finally looking at him, "Shan? Is that you, boy?"

"Later!" the Sylph cried, the wind lifting her white hair. "See, sister, I told you that you'd be glad I came to help!"

"Get on with it," the Sprite said, rolling her eyes.

The Sylph laughed again, bright and bold and loud, and suddenly they were rising through the air, floating up towards the gaping hole in the roof.

"This," she said to Shan conversationally, as they rose up over the city, "is proper flying, isn't it? Though I do think your wings are charming, dear."

"Thank you," Shan said and caught a little of her excitement. "My next project is powered flight."

"I have some thoughts on that," Daedalia said, her voice a little rusty from disuse. Some of the old life was coming back into her face. "I've been designing things in my head for years, things I could never put on paper."

“Come home with us,” Shan said. “Your old rooms are waiting in Glasmoor, and we have work for you, when you feel ready.”

“She doesn’t have to work!” the Sprite said fiercely. “I will look after her!”

“I like working,” Daedalia said firmly. “At least when it’s for the right people.”

The Sprite pouted.

Soon they were descending into the clearing where Eagle and his resistance fighters camped, everyone running to meet them with shouts of joy and shock.

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It took two weeks to get home, even with the help of two of the Seven. None of them had come out of the fight in the manufactory unscathed, and Ice Guard patrols were scouring the countryside for them. Eagle’s brigade dispersed fast, vanishing back into the woods and fields, and Shan, Tirellian, Daedalia, Markus and Sofia spent an uncomfortable week sharing a rather damp hidden cellar just outside Rhodiosson. It gave Shan time to talk to his old teacher, and he watched happily as she began to look healthier.

Tirellian spent the days in deep conversation with Markus and Sofia, and Shan was certain that the Shadowflight would be flying further south in future, into the Court of Fire.

The Sprite spent the time fussing over Daedalia, showering her with affection and strange gifts that glowed brightly and smelt like ozone and fresh rain.

“Never thought I’d see worse than old Salamander in one of his flaps,” Sofia commented idly. “Think it comes with immortality, the temperament?”

“I think that’s not a conversation I’m going to have while I know my Sylph is listening,” Shan said, and was unsurprised at the soft giggle that sounded by his ear.

Then, at last, things calmed down again, and they left the Fire Knights and the resistance to head for high ground. The Sylph had offered to carry Daedalia, but both Shan and Tirellian wanted to fly.

When they did open out their wings, it was to a perfect wind, one that would carry them all the way home without hesitation. The snow was crisp beneath their feet, but the wind was coming out of the west, warm and soft.

Tirellian began to run, lifting his shoulders to meet the wind, and Shan followed him, throwing himself into the welcome embrace of the air, and rising, rising beside his own paladin, to fly west, out of the frozen Court of Lightning and back towards summer.

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## Chapter Sixteen

It took Shan a few days to adjust back to the heat of summer. Every time he looked out of a window, he caught his breath, fascinated by the green rise of the Isle of Kings and the bright sea curling against the foot of the cliffs.

They were still in the capital, where everything they had done and discovered needed to be reported to and discussed by what seemed like an ever-increasing group of generals and councillors. There had been a medal ceremony, which was merely awkward, and much discussion of future projects.

The Sylph had flitted off to the west after a day. Daedalia was on her way back to Glasmoor, with the Sprite as her fierce protector. Shan had entrusted them with bulky letters to his parents. He wanted to visit them soon, not least so that they could make Tirellian feel part of the family.

Other tasks were harder. After the medal ceremony, Tirellian had gone to talk with his now visibly pregnant sister. King Lyr and Shan had left them to speak alone, but Shan had glanced back to see the tears shining on her cheeks.

It was dusk, a warm summer's evening that stretched out softly into the night. He went wandering across the Isle of Kings, out of the castle and out to the rocky, windswept end of the isle. No one lived here now, not when the main castle had a well and was hit less often by storms, but there were the soft remains of ancient houses under the turf, and he picked his way through them idly, listening to the birds sing passionately in the grass and the surf sigh comfortably far below.

At the furthest point of the isle, there was a simple watchpoint, just a low wall and a simple shelter. No one was there, although he could glance down the coast to see flags flying in the Coast Guard stations on the neighbouring headlands.

From here, on a clear evening like this, he could see the distant rise of the Lightning Coast, faraway and pale. What was happening there now, he wondered, in the quiet grey towns and deep in the snowy forests? It was strange to be back home, and to let that other country, the cold quiet place where he had witnessed wonders, fade into just another piece of the past.

He stayed out there as the evening faded, even when the air cooled enough that he regretted wearing a sleeveless vest (and that made him think of Fire

Knights, blazing among ice, and wonder what names Markus and Sofia were using now). At last, he sighed and straightened up, rolling his shoulders out and preparing to turn in.

“You look like you’re enjoying the view,” Tirellian said, right behind him.

Shan jumped, yelping. “Shit, Sparky, warn a man that you’re there.”

“I’m always here,” Tirellian intoned and then smiled, very slightly.

“You are very lucky that I love you,” Shan told him sternly and that smile widened.

“I had to tell Arellia where we’d been,” Tirellian said abruptly. “I had to tell her that Aillera is still trapped.”

“I’m sorry,” Shan said, and turned around to put his arms around Tirellian. “It must be hard for her.”

“She feels it more, I think, because...” Tirellian made a vague curving gesture and then just folded his arms around Shan.

“That makes sense,” Shan said. Aillera would never have a child. She was caught in time, whereas her twin had kept living and changing. He couldn’t imagine how strange and sad that must be.

Tirellian hummed agreement and leaned on Shan a little. After a few minutes, he inquired, “Are you intending to let go at any point?”

“No,” Shan said as cheerfully as he could. “This is part of it. I get to comfort you.”

“And if we fall off the side of the island trying to walk back in the dark, where is the comfort? I would rather go to bed.”

Shan laughed and looked up to waggle his eyebrows at Tirellian. “Whatever you want.”

Tirellian, to his disappointment, didn’t blush. Instead, he merely said gravely, “I want you. Naked.”

Shan let out an exaggerated sigh. “Oh, Sparky, I’ve corrupted you. I feel guilty.”

Tirellian looked vaguely irritated. “Inside now, Arashan, before night falls.”

So Shan let his lover take his hand and lead him back across the green and flowering cliffs, their hands warm against each other.

The next morning he was woken by a familiar *click-click-click*.

“Not solved it yet?” he murmured, laughing against Tirellian’s side.

“I will find a puzzle you cannot solve one day, Arashan.”

“Good luck,” Shan murmured and nuzzled a kiss against Tirellian’s belly.  
“Mmm.”

“You’re distracting me.”

“It’s more fun that way.”

“You don’t want me to solve this, do you?”

“I’d rather you concentrated on something more press—”

“Oh,” Tirellian said, his voice so honestly startled that Shan sat up, pushing the sheets off his head.

The puzzle box sat open on Tirellian’s palm, displaying the rather scrappy little miner and his hut. In the clear light of morning, it looked like pretty rushed work and Shan grimaced.

“You made me a miner,” Tirellian said.

“You’d been talking about them. I did warn you it wasn’t anything special.”

“You listened to my story.”

“Yes,” Shan said, biting back his apologies to press his cheek against Tirellian’s. Perhaps it wasn’t such bad work, after all. “Always.”

Tirellian looked down at it silently. At last, he said, “Can you show me how to close it?”

“You want to try again? Was it just a fluke of luck or did you work it out?”

“I want to put something in there. For safekeeping.”

“Oh?”

Tirellian slid the Sprite’s ring off his finger and tucked it into the box, behind the miner. “There.”

“You have the right to wear it. No one more so.”

“I don’t want it,” Tirellian said softly.

“But you want to keep it safe?”

“Yes.” He studied it, tilting the box in his hand. “One day, perhaps, if this war ever ends, I may take it out, for myself or one of Arellia’s descendants. Not now, though. They don’t need a king now.”

“They’ve got something better,” Shan said. “The Court of Lightning has a paladin. I can’t think of anything better.”

Tirellian tipped his head, a little abashed, but then said, “I am going to have to put up with endless flattery, I see.”

“Endless and sincere flattery,” Shan corrected and took the box from him. A few quick clicks had it sealed again. It looked unremarkable, in his hand.

Tirellian took it from him and put it down on the bedside table. “We can take it home with us to Porthlevin.”

“Home,” Shan murmured. It was time now. Surely the king had heard everything they could say. It was time to go home and get back to work. There were devices to build and flying machines to design, and the Shadowflight still needed to go soaring out from the high cliffs.

“Yes,” Tirellian said, and then turned to press him down against the pillows. “Now that is solved, I think we should concentrate on other things.”

“Oh, really?” Shan said, grinning, and reached up to pull his paladin down into a slow and easy kiss.

**The End**

## Author Bio

*Amy Rae Durreson has a degree in early English literature, which she blames for her somewhat medieval approach to spelling, and at various times has been fluent in Latin, Old English, Ancient Greek, and Old Icelandic, though these days she mostly uses this knowledge to bore her students when they foolishly ask why English spelling is so confusing. Amy started her first novel nineteen years ago and has been scribbling away ever since. Despite these long years of experience, she has yet to master the arcane art of the semicolon. Her first full-length novel, epic fantasy, Reawakening, was released by Dreamspinner Press in January 2014.*

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