

The  
**Union of**  
**Sun and Moon**



**Gus Li**

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# Love is an Open Road

*An M/M Romance series*

## THE UNION OF SUN AND MOON

**By Gus Li**

### Introduction

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

### What Is Love is an Open Road?

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

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

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

### Words of Caution

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

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

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

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

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# THE UNION OF SUN AND MOON

By Gus Li

## Photo Description

Anime-style digital painting of a silver-haired warrior/prince with weapons and armor.

## Story Letter

*Dear Author,*

*A beautiful warrior elven prince meets a shifter (also a prince or an alpha, and any kind will do).*

Please include some battle scenes, a little jealousy involving a third party, and an HEA. No BDSM. Thanks.

*Sincerely,*

*Araceli*

## Story Info

**Genre:** fantasy, paranormal

**Tags:** royalty, soldiers, shifters, magic, sorcerers, culture clash, spirits, captivity, dark

**Content Warnings:** battle violence, death of secondary characters, torture, non-MC self-harm.

**Word Count:** 49,733

# **THE UNION OF SUN AND MOON**

**By Gus Li**

## Chapter One

The strong stench of burnt wood and flesh made Jin's mount balk and step backward, the animal's front hooves tapping the ground in agitation. Jin patted the hart's neck in an attempt to soothe it as he watched the wavering columns of smoke rising up about a mile in the distance. He tasted soot, felt the grit of ash on his teeth and in his nose. When he took his helmet off, he knew the dark grime would coat his eyes and lips, anywhere not covered by the metal. The water—if they found any later—would run black as ink when he washed himself. The stink would cling to his hair and surround him as he slept in his bedroll. They had only been on the road for two weeks, and already he wondered if he would ever again take a breath without tasting bodies torched to cinders.

But he had insisted on coming on this mission, assured his mother he was ready, so he didn't dare complain. Besides, his discomfort meant nothing compared to those they would inevitably find.

Up ahead, Jin's older brother, Zura, pointed to signal that they should proceed. Jin calmed his skittish mount and followed the other soldiers down the steep slope.

The village looked the same as the last one they'd found, the same as the last seven they'd ridden into since leaving the Golden City: burned to the ground, the homes empty, smoldering shells, walls toppling, stones blackened. Ash inches thick beneath their animals' hooves. Bones burnt clean of meat and scattered through the streets.

If he hadn't known better, Jin might have thought it peaceful: a ruin in the snow.

But a rib cage sat atop a barrel, red and lacquer-shiny, the spine coiled neatly around it, and Jin choked back bile.

Carrion birds, crows and ravens, squawked their displeasure at the disturbance of their feast as the two dozen soldiers rode into the town's humble square and reined their mounts to a stop by the well. Brazen, the birds retreated only a few feet and flapped their wings, continuing to pick at what flesh they could find as Jin and the others dismounted.

Zura removed his helmet, tucked it beneath his arm, and raked his fingers through his matted black hair. Despite all they'd seen in the last weeks, he

managed an almost sincere smile for Jin. “It’s hardly worth searching through the carnage. We know what we’re going to find—”

“Right, nothing,” one of the soldiers said, shaking his head as he made his way toward the smoking remains. “Again.”

“But we have been tasked with investigating what’s plaguing the outskirts of our empire,” Zura continued, taking on the familiar tone that reminded Jin of an annoyed but indulgent tutor.

Grumbling, the men and women spread out to search the remains of what had been a small farming community, evident by the fields of blackened stalks surrounding the simple homes—corn high and probably almost ready for harvest. Jin followed suit, drawing his sword even though experience told him he’d find nothing more formidable than a wolf or perhaps a fox scavenging what little remained to be eaten. Hungry as he was, he couldn’t blame the beasts for seeking out scraps of meat. He’d never missed a meal before, and he was unused to the gnawing in his belly that took precedence over nearly everything else.

But he was very far from home.

The settlement was small, and it didn’t take more than an hour for their company to search it top to bottom. When they met by the well, no one had anything new to report. All of them looked pale, the circles beneath their eyes dark in contrast.

“One thing is clear,” Zura said, standing tall and, while clearly exhausted, still exuding the elegance and authority Jin always sought to emulate. “We can no longer deceive ourselves into thinking this is the work of bandits.”

One of the soldiers, a tall woman, snorted beneath her helmet.

Another said, “We knew that four villages ago. No bandits, no matter how organized, could do... this. Besides, there’s nothing here to steal. The most valuable thing these poor bastards had was their crops, and they’ve been burnt to nothing. I... it doesn’t even make sense.”

Others voiced their assent, loudly and at the edge of disrespect. In a kingdom as blessed with peace and prosperity as Orauri, the soldiers, while well trained, were unused to the hardships of the field. With the exception of Jin’s brother, no one here had killed anything more formidable than an animal. Before, there’d been no need. Combat was academic, and Jin was beginning to realize tournaments and competitions went only so far in preparing warriors to face what they’d seen since leaving the capital.

“We should go back to the city,” another of the men said. “We’re accomplishing nothing by roaming the countryside, starving, and freezing our asses off.”

“Besides, what will we do if we encounter whatever did this?” another asked.

“I’ll say what no one else has the balls to,” a soldier near the back of the group said. “Likely as not, it’s those damned animals to the north killing our kin. Bloody savages hate the empire and everything it stands for.”

“There’s no evidence of that.” A crease formed between Zura’s brows, marring his otherwise smooth, golden skin. “There’s certainly no love lost between our two kingdoms, but there’s been peace. There’s been peace for over five hundred years. What reason could they possibly have to do something like this?”

“What reason do they need? They’re beasts. For all we know, they’re eating these people.” The man at the back looked up the hill, toward the north and evergreens so thick Jin wondered if the sweet sunlight ever graced the ground beneath them. “And we could be next. They’ll set upon us some night while we sleep, and what will we do then? You’ve all heard the stories—the things they can do. The vile and unnatural powers they wield. We need to get out of here.”

Whispers rose like a swarm as everyone looked up the hill. Jin looked too, and beneath those ancient trees, he swore he saw shadows moving, flitting between the darkness and the patches of watery light in between. He shivered, sure he was being watched. But that was madness.

Jin feared nothing more than madness.

Several of the soldiers voiced their agreement. Clearly they were afraid, and they wanted to go home. “Another day, and we’ll be beyond the boundaries of Orauri. We’ll be in the Great Untamed—their territory. We won’t stand a chance, not surrounded by hundreds of them or more. We need to turn back.”

“What?” the tall woman said. Jin would have liked to ask her name, would have liked to know the names of all the people serving beside him, to talk with them casually and laugh next to the campfires as his brother did, but he knew he made the others uncomfortable. He knew most of them would feel better if he’d been left back at the palace. He was tolerated, and probably only because he was a son of their empress.

“Do you expect us to hide in the Golden City while the people who grow our food, who depend upon the empire’s protection, fall prey to... whatever is

doing this?” the woman continued. She had long limbs, taut with compact muscle beneath her chain mail, and close-cropped hair, dark like most of their people.

She was nice looking, if a little severe. Sharp cheekbones but full, gentle lips tinged with dark red. Older and capable. A scar above one thin eyebrow. Jin would have liked to talk to her, but he couldn't bear to imagine the way she'd recoil and try to hide it. To indulge him because of his lineage. He couldn't let the others see his mind wandering, so he turned his attention back to the debate. He wished...

It didn't matter what he wished. Wishes were for children, fools, the desperate, and those without the ability to fulfill their desires through action.

No matter the others' opinion of him, Jin had ability. He could do more than send his aspirations into an uncaring and indifferent ether. And he would. Wishes were for those deluded into thinking anyone was listening, and Jin was many things, but he was not deluded—not in that way, at least.

Jin removed his helmet, and chunks of sweaty silver hair flopped into his eyes. He brushed them back as he stepped forward. The others ceased their arguing, falling silent to hear what he would say, but not out of respect.

Never out of respect.

Still, he had something to contribute, and he spoke. “The path of these atrocities is clear. It leads towards the northwest. This village was obviously destroyed before the others we encountered, which means who or whatever did this is moving south—toward our empire. I suggest we split into two parties. One group of a dozen warriors can chase the enemy south and possibly intercept them—to gather information if they're too formidable for anything else—while the rest of us backtrack in search of the source of these attacks. Perhaps we'll find some clue as to who or what is killing innocent farmers. I, for one, say we would be cowardly to abandon these people—our countrymen.”

Whispered arguments quickly grew into shouting matches until Zura raised his hand. “My brother speaks the truth. We have a duty to those who live beneath the light of the empress's rule. We will not forsake them. Whoever this enemy is, we will roust them out and drive them beyond our borders. For the Sunlit Throne!”

“For the Sunlit Throne,” the soldiers echoed, some with less enthusiasm than others.

“Now,” Zura said, looking at Jin with something that might have been pride, might have been pity. “We’ll split up. Two riders will return to the Golden City to inform the empress of our progress. The rest of us will split into two groups. One group will come with me to track these monsters south and hopefully intercept them well before they reach the capital. The rest of you will go north in search of the source of these attacks—under the command of my brother, Jin.”

The shock of Zura’s proclamation rendered them all speechless—Jin included. Jin had fought to come on this mission—his first—but he hadn’t expected to lead it. He couldn’t let the others see his doubt, and so he acknowledged his brother with a slight dip of his head. Zura met his gaze with wide eyes and brows arched. Doubt? Fear? Could Jin dare imagine it was confidence? It didn’t matter. If this was his task, he would accomplish it. He would show the others he was more than what they imagined, more than the accident of his birth.

For a moment, he closed his eyes, took a deep breath and held it in his chest, trying to calm his stammering heart. He couldn’t let his doubts and fears show, or he’d forfeit the trust of the soldiers assigned to follow him. He could do this. No matter what the others thought or what had been prophesied, he could succeed. After pushing his unruly hair back, he replaced his helmet. Those following him needed to see confidence, and he’d make sure they did. “Follow me. We ride north, to find the source of this scourge and put an end to it.”

“Yes!” The response was less passionate than he would have liked, but the soldiers seemed willing to obey him. Jin was pleased to see the tall woman urging her hart in his direction. He mounted up, determined not to fail his brother, his empress, his people—or himself.

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## Chapter Two

The small red fox trotted into the simple camp, sniffed at the meat simmering in a pot above the campfire, and transformed into a lithe young woman with dark eyes and a wild mane of auburn hair. “Damn southerners stink of metal and dried fish,” she said as she crouched, pulled a blanket around her bony shoulders, and tucked it beneath her chin. Dried leaves fell when she shook her head. “And they make more noise than an army walking through the woods. All that steel clinking about.”

Aneirin poked at the fire with a stick, and a spray of sparks rose into the overcast sky, bright against the gray cloud cover. He chuckled. “We know this, Reyni. Anything else to report?”

The redheaded girl rubbed her hands together over the dying embers as she cocked her head in Aneirin’s direction. “Oh, sure. The southerners stink, and they shit on the ground without bothering to bury it. Foul, that is.”

“Anything else?”

“I don’t like them. They throw their refuse on the ground and leave the soil gouged and torn open where they pass. And the smell. They leave their foul reek for miles behind them.” Taking a sharpened stick, she speared a piece of venison from the pot, choked it down barely chewed, and skewered another.

“I see the stench hasn’t put you off your food,” Aneirin said with a grin. Reyni was a wild little thing, even wilder than most who followed the way of the spirit guides. He suspected it would not be long before the call of her fox grew too strong and she cast off her human form completely to follow it. For now, she was the best scout and tracker he knew, despite her youth.

“Took... this off... one of ’em,” she said as she chewed her fourth chunk of meat, grease running down her chin. She tossed Aneirin a medallion on a golden chain—a chunk of sunstone—what the northern people called amber—with a tiny white blossom suspended inside. “Like their baubles, they do.”

She was also a thief—an incorrigible thief, and too damned adept at stealing for her own good.

Aneirin slipped the necklace into a pocket near his chest. The stone thrummed with a slight warmth that he felt against his skin through his leather vest.

Reyni muffled a belch with the back of her hand. “They found another village. Burnt to the ground. Everyone dead. Rattled ’em. I smelt it. Their fear. Then they split up. Some of them headed back south, but probably twelve of the fifteen are headed our way. We should probably chase our spirits and make ourselves scarce.”

“Not all of us have that option,” said Glaw, Aneirin’s foster brother, as he entered the camp with an armload of firewood. “Not all of us have been chosen by a spirit guide and taught his or her secrets.”

“Yet,” Aneirin said as brightly as he could manage. The truth was, at twenty-three, Glaw was unlikely to be chosen by a powerful being. He would likely never learn to assume another form.

Glaw snorted as he dropped the deadfall with a clatter. After feeding the fire, he collected their dirty dishes for washing and disappeared into the trees, probably headed for the small stream about a half a mile to the east.

“Serious, love,” Reyni said. “We should get out of here. They’re coming our way fast, what with those weird horse-deer things they ride. Good chance they’ll kill us. You know how they are. Don’t know nothin’ about the spirits. For all we know, it’s them what’s doing this to the villages.”

Aneirin prodded at the coals of their fire with a stick. “I don’t trust the southerners, but they’ve never been warlike.” He shook his head, vision going fuzzy as he stared into the embers. His wolf and his cat looked on at the edges of his vision, their shadowy forms stalking the perimeter of his thoughts, but neither of them compelled him to follow. Yet. “It doesn’t make sense. They wouldn’t kill their own.”

“At least three of our settlements have also been burned,” Reyni said, though he didn’t need the reminder.

“We need to find the truth of this, my girl. And that means putting aside what we think we know. Truth is rarely what we’ve convinced ourselves is true. We have to look beyond what we want it to be. Yeah?”

“I just don’t understand them. You know? How can they live without the spirits to guide them? That just seems so... so empty. Meaningless.”

“Aye, maybe it does. I don’t understand it either. But something’s going on, and people are getting hurt. I think it’s not them, and I know it’s not us. And I know we need to stop it. We need to do whatever it takes to stop it.”

“What do you want to do?”

Reyni was wild, unpredictable, and a thief, but she was loyal, and there was no one Aneirin trusted more. No one he’d rather have at his back.

“I want to do something... rather unconventional.”

She giggled so hard she snuffled and coughed. “Sounds like a lovely time. Lead the way.”

\*\*\*\*

The setting sun stained the forest in strips of pink and pulpy orange as Jin led his party beneath the massive branches of the ancient trees, unsure what he should be looking for. Unsure of himself and everything else. The wind in the needles of the great evergreens seemed to whisper, and it unsettled him. Most of him ignored what sounded like hushed words, but part of him wanted to listen. He could not trust that part. He had to resist it, look only to the tangible. The concrete. He had to trust in what he could perceive and quantify and ignore the rest.

Resist. Resist. Resist.

He looked at the ferns and bracken crushed and bent around a narrow trail winding uphill. “Something came through here. We should see what it was.”

“Could be a trap,” one of the men said. “Might want to think twice before running off after it.”

“No,” Jin said. He had... he had a feeling they needed to follow this path. But he couldn’t say so. His people didn’t believe in *feelings*. “This is worth investigating. If it’s nothing, just an animal, at least we’ll know to look elsewhere and not continue in this direction.”

“You heard the commander,” shouted the short-haired woman. Her name was Zaundra, and she’d been with the Imperial Guard for thirteen years. Jin had worked up the nerve to speak with her while they were riding. He tried not to take it as an affront when the rest of the soldiers followed her order when they’d questioned his.

Jin dug his heels into his mount’s sides, and the animal surged forward. His soldiers followed, and they rode up a narrow and winding trail that culminated in a small clearing. A fire burned there, the smoke smelling of roasted meat and making Jin’s belly growl. He hated the way hunger could commandeer his attention, how the needs of his body could override the needs of the empire and the debts he owed.

He hated being a slave to his baser urges.

Shadows were settling in the forest, thick and dark around the tree trunks. The animals' breaths were bright white against the gloaming. The twilight lent a smeared and fuzzy quality to a world that seemed to shrink around Jin, all lavender and indigo. Soon, he couldn't see beyond the ring of trees they'd entered, and he worried. Worried he'd led the people who believed in him to their doom.

Forms appeared between the trees, three of them: two grown men and an adolescent child. Jin couldn't tell whether it was a boy or a girl. He couldn't see much beyond their silhouettes in the encroaching darkness, but their postures didn't seem aggressive. Stiff and cautious, perhaps, but not poised for attack.

"There could be more of them hiding in the trees," Zaundra whispered. "We might want to be ready."

His training dictated that Jin take a defensive position at even the possibility of danger. The empire didn't sacrifice her soldiers' lives lightly. Still, something whispered to him that defensiveness wasn't the right display here. It insisted loudly, but Jin ignored it, as he could not support it with any rational argument. Instead, he lifted his hand beside his head and closed his fist.

The soldiers quickly moved their mounts into formation, assuming a diamond shape with the archers at the center. Those at the periphery drew their blades with a soft chime, and bows creaked as their strings were pulled taut.

Instead of drawing the sword by his hip, Jin drew the two long daggers from their sheaths above his ribs. He was more than capable with a long sword—or a bow—but he was deadly with the knives he favored. His tutor had once said, proudly, that he frightened her.

The sun's dying rays glinted off their steel, and still the trio of strangers waited, not retreating, not preparing to defend themselves. It grew darker in the forest by the moment. With Jin's every breath, the shadows thickened, crowding them, boxing them in.

Perhaps giving their enemies the advantage. This was their land, after all.

"I have a shot," one of the archers said from behind him. "I can take at least two of them."

"And I've got the third," another bowman said.

"No," Jin told them.

“Sir—” Zaundra whispered.

“No.” It was not the way of the Empress of the Sun to kill first and ask questions later. “Wait.”

“For how long?” a man near the back of the group asked. “Until we’re surrounded? Until we’re set upon by so many beasts we can’t fight our way back out? Until they tear us to shreds and eat our flesh?”

Jin curled his fingers around his mount’s reins so tightly that his hands shook. He couldn’t let any enemy, or a potential enemy, see dissent in his ranks. His people doubting his leadership. “Do as I say,” he hissed between gritted teeth. “I am in command. Do nothing until I order it.”

They waited, weapons drawn. For long, agonizing moments, no one moved. The fire in the clearing sputtered as the stars appeared, one by one, above them.

Slowly, like a candle burning down, the sun’s light bled out of the sky.

They waited.

Then one of the men took a few steps toward Jin’s party, his hands held up, fingers spread. With his garments tight against his body, it was easy to see he was unarmed. As he stepped into the faltering firelight, Jin’s soldiers tensed. Jin could feel it, their compulsion to drop this heathen, like dogs salivating over meat just out of reach. And that was an uncharitable assessment of people, but their doubting his authority still rankled him.

“Sir?” Zaundra asked.

He turned to her, watching the firelight reflecting off her dark eyes. “If anything happens to me, you are in command. See that this company meets with my brother at the designated place, in two weeks’ time.”

Ignoring her hissed protests, Jin dismounted. If asked, he wouldn’t have been able to explain what compelled him, but somehow he knew he had to do this. As his feet hit the ground, he sheathed his daggers and held his hands up to mimic the stranger’s.

A soft chuckle echoed through the clearing. It was deep and throaty, without the mockery Jin expected. He felt it low in his belly, and a shiver moved up his spine.

“You hold your hands up,” the man said. He was a black cutout against a cobalt sky, his eyes flashing between ice-blue and golden. “But it’s not so

comforting when I seen you slide those sharp little knives just where you can reach them easy. And I seen how you handled them. If I want to talk, how do I know they won't be at my throat sooner than I take a step toward you?"

Jin's training dictated he never leave himself unarmed. It insisted he always had a backup weapon, a hidden blade. He had never imagined he would abandon all he had been taught, and he didn't know why he did, but he pulled his blades and held them up, letting the flames dance along their sharp edges. The other man cocked his head. Jin could see nothing of his expression except his eyes crinkling to crescents as he let his daggers fall. The dense leaf litter preventing them making a sound.

"I stand before you unarmed," Jin said.

The man snorted. "Sure, sure. Except for the sword at your hip. And the dagger hidden in your boot. Not to mention the dozen soldiers at your back."

"They will do nothing unless I command it."

"Won't they?"

"Do you call me a liar?"

"It's too soon for that." The man stepped into the light. He was tall, and his sleeveless leather vest showed well-muscled, but not bulky, arms. Similar leather pants hugged strong, slender legs. Yellow hair tumbled around his shoulders, and it reminded Jin of the sun, of home, it was so bright. It was impossible to determine the color of his eyes. They scanned the clearing, and they reflected the flames—blue, yellow, orange, and almost white.

"Do you have something to say to me?" Jin persisted.

"I might," the man said. "Too soon to tell, innit?"

"Do not toy with me," Jin said. "I'm the second son of the empress of Orauri. The commander of this regiment, and a knight of the Golden Order."

"Well, lad, I'm a man what lives here in the northern forest, and we don't discuss serious matters when we can't see each other's faces. Want to do something about that?"

"I—" Jin reached up and slid his helmet back off his head. His hair, not properly washed in weeks, fell into his face in silvery clumps. He pushed it back as he tucked the helmet beneath his elbow and met the mercurial eyes staring back at him.

“Better,” the man said. “It’s always good to see a man’s eyes when you’re talking. And I think we can talk, assuming your people can put their weapons away. We have a common enemy, after all.”

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### Chapter Three

“Tell me what you’re called,” Jin demanded as he sat on the ground in front of the small fire, now burning brightly and freshly stoked.

“Aneirin,” the man with the waves of yellow hair said.

“And?” Jin demanded. “What is your title among your... people?”

“That’s important to you, is it?”

“I would like to know who I am dealing with,” Jin said.

“Sorry, lad, but it’s just me. I don’t know what else to tell you.”

“Then tell me why you’re out here,” Jin said.

The young girl gave a shrill cry and sprung forward, her fingers digging into the ground as her long legs stretched out behind her. “This is our land, southerner. Maybe you should tell us why *you’re* here.”

Jin could play this game with the beast people. He could exploit their superstitious nature and gullibility. “I am here to investigate the destruction of several villages under protection of the empress. I’m here to find out who or what is killing my people.”

“Do you think it’s us?” she snarled.

“Is it?”

Remaining crouched, she showed her teeth, but Jin did not look away from her gemlike eyes. They stared each other down for long moments before she sat down on her heels.

A touch on his knee pulled Jin’s attention away from the girl, and he turned his gaze back to Aneirin. “So, do you think it’s us?”

Jin considered what he had to gain by sharing his findings with these strangers, if it would yield more than holding back. As a small test, he said, “Whatever laid waste to our villages is capable of immense destruction. Someone is wielding an incredible weapon, and they are organized, intelligent, and elusive. You...” Jin arched an eyebrow and waited.

Aneirin looked up at Jin through his curtain of blond fringe. Their eyes met and locked. The other man’s face held no expression until he lifted his chin and smiled, full of teeth and mischief, but not entirely unkind. “And we’re not

organized or intelligent. We're just a bunch of filthy beasts, little more than animals, scurrying about the forest at the edge of the empire's great light. That it?"

"In the Golden City, all children are taught to distrust stories and superstitions. They are taught to trust in the things they can see and hold in their hands," Jin said. "Nothing has shown me that the people in the North have made any significant innovations in weaponry or warfare. Certainly nothing of this level."

"Have a lot of experience with the ways of my people, then?" Aneirin asked, smirking.

"Personally, no, but of course we have outposts along the border between our empire and your... lands, and the soldiers who patrol this area report back to my mother at regular intervals. I have listened to them many times."

"And you believe them?" Aneirin asked.

"Of course."

"Tell me then. How is that different than putting your trust in stories?"

Jin quickly hid his shock; he hadn't expected an almost courtly level of discourse from a man in patched leather with leaves in his hair. He dipped his head slightly. "So, you mean to say you are in possession of this weapon. What is it? Some sort of fuel that makes the fire burn faster and hotter?"

The shock he expected never came. Instead, Aneirin winked. "Perhaps it's magic."

Jin blew a snort out his nose. "Magic. Of course. The last refuge of those who understand nothing of the world yet desperately yearn to control their destinies."

"And you've got it all figured out?" Aneirin asked, his voice soft but not without a hint of steel.

"We study and observe the world around us. We record what we learn. My people know why some crops grow better than others, why the rains come at the same time each year. We don't need to rely on tales of witches and spirits to explain it."

"You must be very enlightened," Aneirin said. "Surely a people so knowledgeable have already figured out what's threatening your villages. It's hard to fathom why it's taken you so long to put an end to it. But then, I

suppose I am a simple man. Surely your people are already aware of the mountain valleys and caves in this region capable of hiding thousands of men. Surely you know the trails to take, the passes to reach them. Seems you've little need of us. We might as well be on our way."

"A fine idea to my mind," the girl with the wild red hair said. "I'll be glad to be rid of the smell of dried fish."

Jin bit the inside of his cheek until he tasted blood while being careful to keep his expression neutral. Aneirin had backed him into a corner, and he sought desperately for a way to ask for the other man's help without admitting he needed it. Something in him couldn't stand to let Aneirin have the upper hand, and he told himself he didn't want to vacillate in front of his people. He didn't want the empire looking weak in comparison to these savages. "Do as you must," he said. "It will make little difference. We can easily come back here with a thousand soldiers and search every one of your settlements. We can tear them down if we are forced to."

Almost as soon as he'd said the words, Jin regretted them. His mother insisted the people of the empire were not oppressors, not the kind to take what they needed by force. Still, an apology would make him look unsure, so he lifted his chin and looked the other man in the face.

Aneirin picked up a stick and prodded at the embers, releasing a font of sparks. He sighed, his breath a white plume. "That's an option, sure. But in the time it'll take you to ride back to your capital, more people could be attacked. Many more could die, on our side the same as yours. I'd rather not see more blood spilled, and so I'm asking for your help. Come with us tomorrow. Let us see what we can learn about whoever is slaughtering our kin."

Jin couldn't help his audible intake of breath. Aneirin had yielded power to him, admitted his need freely, and yet it still felt to Jin as if Aneirin controlled the field. Jin couldn't refuse his offer without acknowledging he placed his pride above his people's lives. He tried to imagine what his brother would do. Zura would have handled these people better from the beginning. He would have maintained control of the situation.

But Zura wasn't there, and he'd entrusted Jin with this mission.

"I'll have to think on this," Jin said and stood, brushing dirt and pine needles from his legs. "We would be very grateful to be permitted to camp here tonight, but we will leave your territory if you would prefer. We are not a people who insinuate themselves where we are not wanted."

Aneirin chuckled beneath his breath.

“Is something funny?” Jin demanded.

“Only that I don’t imagine you’d have any idea if you were wanted, lad.”

Cheeks hot, Jin raised himself to his full height, straightened his spine, and pushed his shoulders back. “Where I come from, people are straightforward and say what they mean. Now if you wish us to leave, say so. I would imagine you can manage a single word. But then, I have little personal experience, as you so astutely noted.”

The man held his hands up and spread his fingers as he had when Jin had first seen him. “Stay. With the blessings of all the spirits, of the wood, the rivers, the mountains, and the sky. As our guests. We are a hospitable people. All we have, meat and water, are yours to share. Have your scouts neglected this point?”

“We are grateful for your generosity,” Jin said with a small bow. “I will take the first watch. You two men—secure the perimeter of this camp to the north. Zaundra and I will patrol to the south.”

“And me.” The young woman got to her feet and dropped the coarse blanket she’d draped around her shoulders, standing nude in the clearing, all bones and sharp angles, breasts and hipbones pointed. She bent at the waist, and before her fingers met the ground, a small red fox with a full, white-tipped brush stood in her place. The creature bounded into the forest in a flash of rust and disappeared amongst the heavy shadows.

Jin hurried to replace his helmet to hide the way his mouth hung open.

Aneirin laughed. “Guess your people neglected to report about that, too.”

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Jin and Zaundra patrolled the edge of the camp in silence for probably an hour before he organized his thoughts enough to speak. “You’re a knight of the Golden Order,” he said, stopping on a rocky slope and turning to her.

“That’s true.” Her helmet hid her lips, but her eyes narrowed with a smile.

“I am interested in your opinions. Your experience.”

“They’re at your disposal, sir.”

Jin slid his helmet off. The metal was uncomfortably cold against his face and scalp, and it was starting to make his head hurt. Besides, they hadn’t seen

so much as a rabbit since leaving camp. “What’s your opinion of the beast people—the northerners? What do you think about their proposal that we go with them tomorrow?”

Her sigh came out in a white cloud. She removed her helmet and sat down on a fallen tree. “That Aneirin, their leader, struck me as disrespectful and arrogant. He was playing with you, trying to get the measure of you. I’d say...”

“Please, go on.”

“I’d say he was looking for weakness, gaps in your armor, sir.”

Jin shook his head. “I fear he outmaneuvered me.”

“You did all right. It’s your first command, sir.”

“But it cannot seem that way. I represent the empire and my mother. I need to prove—”

She took his wrist and urged him to sit down beside her. Her hand stayed splayed over his arm as she met his eyes. “You don’t, sir. You’ve been tasked with gathering information. You’re doing well. If you want my counsel, it’s this: do what you can, learn what you can, and return and report to your brother. This isn’t your last chance to make a name for yourself, Jin. You don’t have to do anything extreme. Your people trust in you—”

“Do they?”

Zaundra pursed her lips into a thin line. “Even those that are looking to find fault with you haven’t been able. For most of us, it’s gross to give any credence to a silly superstition.”

“But it’s a way for those who want to see me knocked down to accomplish it. And don’t tell me the people of the empire are altruistic and selfless. That would be nice, but I have seen it isn’t true since I’ve been able to understand such things. I don’t even need to do anything wrong. One bad decision, one misstep, and they’ll have evidence that I’m incompetent. Tell me at least some of them wouldn’t delight in seeing me unravel.”

“I can’t say that, sir, but I can tell you plenty of your people only want to see the end of citizens dying. Those that have other interests aren’t worthy of you or your mother. None of us who are loyal want to see you or the empire fail.”

“I wish the empire was as perfect as you make it sound,” Jin said.

“All we can do is strive,” Zaundra answered. “Each one of us, to do the best we can. We have a job here, and we need to decide how to proceed.”

“This Aneirin and his people... Can we trust them?”

“It’s hard to say, sir. Maybe they want to find whoever is threatening their settlements, but maybe they’d like to lead us into a trap... get our soldiers boxed in in a canyon or a cave and slaughter us. I don’t know. On one hand, we’re losing valuable information if we dismiss them, but we’re taking a big risk in trusting them.”

“What would you do?” Jin asked.

She quirked her lips up on one side. “I can’t say, sir. Tell me whose belly you want me to stick my sword in, and I’m on it. I can fight, and I can take down a man twice my size. I leave the rest to wiser heads, though. I don’t want to be in command. I don’t envy you, but you need to make the final call, and deal with whatever comes after.”

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## Chapter Four

Aneirin woke the next morning to pillowy mist and air thick with the sweetness of autumn leaves curling on the tree branches. He sat up, stretched, and took a swallow of water from the skin at his side. Standing, he wriggled his hand into his leather trousers to scratch at his balls. He needed to empty his bladder, and he thought it would be quite nice to rub one off in the woods before breakfast. After all, he'd been away from his village and the men and women who usually sated his urges, and he felt the need crawling up the insides of his thighs and into his belly. Picturing the bodies of his lovers, he swelled in his pants and stumbled past the fire and into the clearing...

...where he came face-to-face with the snotty southern prince with the silver hair, the capable woman by his side, and the rest of his dozen soldiers mounted behind him, weapons drawn.

His erection wilted and sleepy dreams departed as he stared at the steel masks looking down on him. His wolf and his cat were night creatures, and he wasn't at his best first thing in the morning, but he tried to smile, even if he felt like he exposed teeth coated in moss. He licked the dry roof of his mouth. "Is it necessary to be so formal so damned early? Spirits, can't a man have a piss and a bite of breakfast before dealing with all this posturing?"

The little prince stepped forward and removed his helmet, silver hair tumbling over his shoulders. Aneirin had never seen hair like that, the color of storm clouds and reflecting the light like spun metal. Among his people, even the spirit-guided didn't manifest such a distinct deviation. And it matched the lad's serious eyes. Aneirin wondered if Jin would feel as cold and hard as he wanted to present himself, what it would take to crack through the glassy surface and dig his fingers into the warm softness beneath the shell. He scrunched his eyes shut and drove out his fantasies about the entitled southern prince... his curiosity about whether his hair was silver everywhere...

No. This was no time for distraction, not when the people of the forest were dying. Like it or not, Aneirin's spirit blessings put him in a position of leadership. Before, when there had been no real threat, that position was symbolic, allowing Aneirin to commune with his guides and explore the possibilities they presented, but that wasn't the case anymore. People—his people—were dying, and he had a responsibility.

“Guess you’ve opted to come with us then.” Aneirin’s voice was scratchy with sleep and need of water, far from the authority he’d hoped to project.

The little prince smiled as if he knew a secret. “Not all of us. I’ll follow you, and I’ll take my most trusted soldiers. The rest of my people will remain here, ready to report back to the empress if we’re betrayed.”

Damn the boy, and damn anybody who could sound so cheery and alert while dawn still smudged the sky with pinks and grays. All Aneirin wanted was to empty his bladder, empty his nuts, and sleep a few more hours. But he held up his hands. The southerners seemed to like their shows of superiority. He’d let them labor under that delusion for the time being. “All right. Give a man time to see to his needs, get something in his stomach, and then we’ll go.”

“We’re ready,” the whelp sang out. “As soon as you can get your people out of their bedrolls, we can be off.”

“As you say.” Aneirin ran his fingers through his long hair, his fingers catching on the knots that had formed in the night.

Back beneath the pine tree where they’d slept, Reyni and Glaw sat on their bedrolls. Reyni’s hair stuck out as if she’d been struck by lightning, and she looked so murderous Aneirin didn’t dare address her. Her fox wasn’t fond of mornings either, and she had likely heard what passed between Aneirin and the southern prince. Glaw, who was under the guidance and influence of no spirit, took a small wooden comb from his pocket and ran it through his long, light-brown hair before tying it back with a leather cord. “Are we moving out?” he asked Aneirin. “What’s the plan?”

“We’re going to move northeast, check the places we planned to check.”

Reyni grunted. “We could’ve done that without these southerners. All they’re going to do is slow us down and make a racket. And stink.”

Aneirin reached down and smoothed her hair. “Maybe, but if we find ourselves in trouble, it won’t hurt to have a few more fighters at our backs. And say what you want about the southerners, but they’re well trained and well armed.”

She snorted even as she pressed the side of her head against his palm. “If we get in trouble, we can follow our spirit guides out of there. Who’s going to find a fox and a cat in the forest? Who’s going to be able to catch us?”

“And I suppose I’m to be left behind to die?” Glaw asked.

“Me and Aneirin can go on our own,” Reyni said.

Glaw stood and curled his hands into fists. “I am not useless. Just because no powerful spirit has chosen to guide me doesn’t mean I can’t contribute anything. I’m good with a bow and a dagger, and I can track. The elders wouldn’t have sent me otherwise. I’m not here just to gather firewood and cook your meals.”

Aneirin put a hand on Glaw’s shoulder. “Nobody’s saying that. I wanted you beside me. You’re my brother, and there’s no one I’d rather have at my back. Now, we’re going to have a look around with a few of these southerners. I’m curious what they know about this. We might learn something that can help us. We’ll keep our wits about us, and we’ll make ourselves scarce at the first sign of danger. We know these forests, and we won’t be found if we don’t want to be—no matter what form we’re in.”

Glaw shrugged. “I suppose I’ll break camp. Might as well make myself useful.” He turned his back to them and started rolling up his blankets.

Reyni stood and went to the meat they’d hung from a tree. She was always hungry. “I don’t know about this, Ani. I have to say, I don’t trust them.”

“That’s all right, Rey. They don’t trust us either. That’s why they’re leaving so many behind—so we can’t get them all if we’re leading them into a trap.”

“Idiots. So they send their prince and their best warriors.”

“I’d guess the prince insisted on coming. He has something to prove, that one.”

“What?”

Aneirin took the chunk of meat she handed him. “I’m not sure yet. Should be an interesting couple of days.”

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A sheer rock face dozens of feet high prevented them from going farther north, so they headed east, toward a pass about a day and a half away. The southerners had protested when Aneirin had told them their mounts wouldn’t be able to traverse the trails they’d be using, and he’d expected them to piss and moan the entire trip. They’d surprised him with their stoicism and endurance—they hadn’t slowed the group down as much as he’d anticipated.

Reyni had been itching to take her fox form, so Aneirin let her take the lead, and she scouted ahead and circled back, flicking her brush in annoyance while

waiting for the others to catch up. That left Glaw carrying her pack along with his own, but luckily Reyni traveled light.

Aneirin positioned himself at the back of the group, behind the soldiers following the prince, so he could watch them. It proved an enlightening show. The three warriors spoke comfortably together, like they had served together for a long time. The woman, Zaundra, tried to include Jin in their conversations, and he tried to participate, but it was strained. Unnatural. There was always a moment's hesitation before he responded to them, as if he was weighing his words. It was easy to see that the prince could handle himself by the way he moved, and by the way his silvery eyes missed nothing that happened around him. He seemed much less successful in his relationships with his people.

And they were... wary of him, especially the two men. They watched him almost as if he was a threat. Aneirin had heard tales of the depravity of the Oraurian aristocrats, but his gut told him Jin was not one to kill or maim for amusement or pleasure. Watching the little prince, Aneirin doubted Jin did anything for pleasure. He doubted Jin knew how. So why the distrust from his men?

Aneirin supposed there was one way to find out, but he would have to be subtle.

He caught up to Jin on the narrow trail and fell into step beside him. "Your people seem quite capable. Have you been leading them long?"

"What difference does it make?" Jin asked, his eyes flashing from the shadows of that ridiculous helmet.

"It wasn't an accusation, lad. Look, it's a long walk, and it'll pass faster if we can talk. We have a common goal here. We should trust each other."

"Trust is earned."

"And have we done anything to cause you to believe we can't be trusted?" Aneirin asked.

"You haven't done anything to show me you *can*."

"A fair point, I suppose. And your people? You trust them?"

"Of course I do."

"And they trust you?"

Jin stopped on the path and met Aneirin's gaze with eyes like a stormy sky about to be torn open by lightning. "Are you implying that they don't?"

*A sensitive subject then, Aneirin thought. Which means he knows he doesn't have the confidence of at least some of his men.* Sensing the prince was about to shut him out completely, Aneirin changed the subject. "It's beautiful country up this way. Don't you think? Have you spent much time in the North?"

"Excuse me, but are you writing a biography? Why all these questions? To what end do you want to know about me?"

The skin not covered by the prince's helmet, around his eyes and down the center of his face, was a rich golden brown, as if he never stepped out of the sunlight. It contrasted sharply with his pale hair. Even his eyelashes were white. Aneirin caught himself worrying his lower lip with his canine tooth and quickly wiped his hand over his mouth to hide it. "Maybe I just want to know. Is it such a bad thing? People getting to know each other?"

"I didn't come here to make friends. I have plenty of friends among my peers back home."

Aneirin knew people with friends, people content with their personal lives, rarely felt the need to tell others, and he felt a sliver of pity for the prince. He'd found a vulnerable spot, but he wasn't the sort to poke at it. Instead, he forced a laugh. "Very well. To the job at hand, then."

They walked together in silence for probably close to an hour. Now and then, Aneirin caught the prince glancing in his direction with a subtle shift of his eyes. Jin pursed his lips and rubbed them together, questions clearly struggling to escape. Aneirin waited. His cat had taught him patience, to hide and watch while the prey floundered, to bide his time until the moment was perfect.

Part of him hated thinking of Jin as prey, as something to worry and scamper for his amusement, but a part of him couldn't help delighting in the game. If he had his way, the contest wouldn't end in anyone being harmed. Quite the opposite.

They reached a steep slope, and everyone had to slow down to pick their way along the narrow trail hugging the edge of a sheer drop of dozens of feet. The southerners held onto the scraggly trees as gravel sprinkled and bounced into the canyon below them. Jin was surer on his feet, more confident than Aneirin expected. As he navigated the difficult terrain, he turned to Aneirin.

“So how is it done?”

“What now?” After the silence, the question surprised Aneirin.

“That girl.” Jin’s heel slipped on some loose stone, but he quickly regained his balance. “How do you make it seem like she became a fox?”

Aneirin wanted to laugh, but he held it back. The little prince had yielded some ground here, offered it up, and he didn’t want to drive the lad to retreat before discovering where all this might lead. “You saw what happened with your own eyes. By your own admission, doesn’t that mean you have to believe it?”

“Usually,” Jin said, grabbing a jutting stone to hoist himself up the steep track. Aneirin could imagine the flex and stretch of his muscles if they hadn’t been buried beneath all that metal. Even so, he moved with elegance and efficiency. Indeed, he had been trained to move and fight, and he had a natural affinity for it. “But I’m not unaware of sleight of hand, of illusion. It was a trick... Wasn’t it?”

Aneirin sighed. “I feel sorry for you and your people, cut off from the guidance of the spirits.”

“Please, don’t lose any sleep due to your concern over me. All I want is a simple answer to a simple question. How is the trick performed?”

“It’s no trick.”

“Are you telling me this is common among your people?”

“I... I’ve never had to explain it to someone who didn’t know, who didn’t take his first breath in the forest, breathing in the sweet smell of the trees, feeling the presence of the spirits all around, feeling their pull from the beginning. I’ll try to tell you what you want to know, but you’ll have to forgive me if I... simplify it. I swear, it’s no judgment against your intelligence.”

“Continue.”

“All right. I have to say, it’s hard for me to imagine people living without the direction of the spirits—”

“I’m not asking for your misplaced sympathy,” Jin hissed. “Just an explanation.”

Aneirin couldn’t help the pity. He couldn’t imagine living without the spirits—it would be like staggering blindfolded with both hands tied behind his

back. It would be an isolation he didn't even want to imagine. The idea of being so alone, with nowhere to turn... "I'll do my best to explain. What is it you want to know?"

"You claim your people can transform into beasts. How?"

The prince made it sound so vulgar, but Aneirin struggled to bite back his retort. He'd been asked this question by the children of his clan, and so he explained to Jin as he had to them. "There are many powerful beings, and they have different goals and different wishes. Some of them are willing to help the people. I can't say why. There are some things we cannot know."

"You're avoiding the question."

"No, I don't mean to. This is how it is done. When a young man or woman reaches maturity, or when he or she feels ready, we go out into the forest beyond our village. We go with no food or water, placing our fate at the feet of the spirits."

"You did this?"

"At thirteen," Aneirin said. "Too young, according to my parents. But I felt the draw, felt it itching along my skin, in my bones. I left with nothing but my clothes and walked into the oldest parts of the forest. I walked until my legs couldn't hold me anymore, and then I sat down beneath an ancient tree. I said, 'Perhaps there is a powerful spirit willing to guide me, to show the oldest ways of our people.' I sat a day and a night, and I was so hungry. I was so close to admitting failure and going home when she came."

"She?"

Aneirin couldn't help but grinning at the memory. "My cat. The panther. What your people call a mountain lion. I was delirious with need of food and water, and I was freezing. I saw her eyes, the glowing gold of them, watching me from the bracken. She sized me up, decided if I was worth her time. Luckily for me, she decided I was. I stood up, and I followed her."

"And then you could become a mountain lion?"

Aneirin chuckled. "No. It took me almost half a year. I had to follow her, understand what she valued, what she feared. I had to learn to perceive the world as she did, to hear the prey shifting the leaves, to notice the subtlest shifting of the shadows. To catch the faintest scent of blood on the wind. I had to learn to walk on silent feet, to crouch in hidden places and watch. Wait. No one can take the form of another being before he learns to understand

everything about her. The flesh follows the spirit, and once the spirit understands, changing the body is easy. But the understanding... it is not easy, young prince. It involves casting away all you thought you knew, even down to the way you see the world. You need to let the spirit rip all that away, and it can hurt. But the hardest part is relinquishing your identity, the way you see yourself. It means letting something else define you, dictate what you can be. It's a surrender, and it means being able to say you're not what you think you are. You're more, and less. I... it's hard to explain to someone who hasn't experienced it. You grow so much, but you must give up. I doubt it makes much sense to you."

"No, it doesn't," Jin whispered. "But... it's beautiful. The idea of it, whether it's real or not. It reminds me of becoming a Golden Knight. You sacrifice your individuality to become part of a whole, part of something greater. You're not a singular entity any longer, but a part of a whole. It can be comforting, but it can be diminishing too. Do you find it so?"

Aneirin had never thought of it that way before. "No. I don't feel diminished. I feel... so thankful to have been chosen by not one, but two powerful beings. It weighs on me at times, because I'd rather not mess about in intrigue, but I feel... more. I'm more because I can see through other eyes, not less."

"And do you not feel trapped by the responsibility this insight forces upon you?"

"I... can't say no to that. But what man gets to live only according to his whim? To pursue his fancies with no thought for others?"

"Is that what you would do, given the opportunity?" Jin asked.

"I might," Aneirin admitted. "I might chase my spirits and see what they could show me, what they could teach me. Spend my days sitting in the forest and communing with them. But I won't stand by while my people are killed."

Jin raised his chin and looked at the trail winding up the mountain above them. "I would like to see you as a cat."

"Why?" Aneirin asked.

Jin turned his head and met Aneirin's gaze. His eyes crinkled with his smile. "To satisfy my curiosity, of course."

"And does nothing else need satisfied, Prince of Orauri?"

“Ha. You think you—”

The small red fox skidded to a stop in front of them, her black paws kicking up leaf litter. Reyni quickly assumed her human form. “We’re not alone, Ani. We might be surrounded, and I smell blood.”

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## Chapter Five

The raven flew low, his shadow flickering across the treetops beneath him. It was easy to track the Oraurian soldiers by the midday sun glinting off their armor. They left a sparkling trail through the forest.

The southerners had split into three groups. One, the largest, had headed back toward the capital city. The raven cawed out a laugh. They wouldn't be reaching their destination. Then, that morning a few soldiers had gone off with some northerners while the rest remained at camp. The raven had made a note of that camp's location. He shifted his body to the side, caught an updraft, and made a lazy circle around this patch of woods. At the edges of the branches, the leaves had begun to color and curl. He had missed the sight of the forest casting off her green summer robe and slipping into her fiery autumnal palette.

From what he could tell, the Oraurians led by the three northerners would encounter what was left of their kin if they continued in the direction they were going. The one guiding them in fox form had possibly already detected the approach of the others, as she had doubled back and rejoined her party. The raven could see the two groups inching toward each other, crawling closer like tiny glittering insects in their shiny shells.

He found it an appropriate metaphor.

By reuniting, the group would bolster their numbers, but the raven wasn't worried. He just needed to make sure they continued east, and he didn't think it would be difficult to nudge them in that direction. Flapping his wings, he set off to arrange it.

Then he would attend to the people left at the camp.

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The stench of blood was heavy on the air, and Jin could taste the metallic tinge at the back of his throat. As he drew his daggers, Aneirin put a hand on the inside of his elbow, between the gaps in his armor. Their eyes met, and Aneirin pressed a finger to his lips. He canted his head toward the brush at the side of the trail. Understanding, Jin waved at his men, caught their attention, and pointed. All of them crouched in the brambles and hid themselves behind trees as best they could—with the exception of Reyni, who resumed her fox form and darted into a patch of ferns.

Jin wondered if Aneirin would follow her example, but Aneirin just rested an elbow on his knee and looked out through a gap in the berry fronds, his gaze steady and his expression calm. Jin struggled to mirror it even as anxiety had his skin crawling, his fingers tingling, and his heart aching with each beat. He had never been in a battle—not even a skirmish where he faced actual harm—but he couldn’t let his people see even a taint of fear.

Whatever it was that he heard coming up the other side of the precipice, he would face it, do as he’d been trained.

The wait as the sounds of feet rustling leaves and scraping through gravel was agonizing, though it couldn’t have been more than a quarter of an hour before the silhouettes of a group of people appeared, backlit by the sun streaming down the trail, details hidden in shadow. They moved slowly, even awkwardly. Squinting, Jin didn’t think he saw weapons in their hands, but that didn’t mean they were unarmed. He tightened his hands around the hilts of his knives until his fingers trembled. Sweat dampened the hair at the edges of his face, and the beads trickled into his eye, stinging.

Finally, the group came close enough for Jin to recognize the shape of their pauldrons. Though Aneirin tried to grab his arm, Jin evaded and sprung out of the brush, jogging to meet the people on the trail.

Blood spatter covered the four Oraurian soldiers, rusty smudges dulling their armor. One of them held a hand over his hip, fresh crimson oozing between the fingers of his chain mail glove. With his other arm, he gripped the waist of the man supporting him. Behind the pair, a woman dragged her foot and limped with the aid of a stick, while her companion tried to support her.

Jin pushed his helmet off and let it fall to the ground behind him, breathing hard through clenched teeth. The man leading the procession did the same, and Jin couldn’t help the strangled sob that escaped him. He sheathed his daggers as he rushed into his brother’s arms.

Zura grunted and embraced Jin, who dropped his forehead to Zura’s shoulder. For a moment, he let himself be the little boy who could trust in his big brother to solve everything, to protect him against anything in the world. But he couldn’t cling to that comfort; he was a man now, and he represented his mother and the empire. His people needed to see a leader, a confident knight, not a whimpering child, and so Jin stepped back and took a deep breath to regain his composure and let his mask slide back into place.

“What happened, Zura? Where are the rest of our people?”

Zura reached up and touched Jin's cheek with his fingers. "Thank the light you're all right. Are we safe here, Jin? Is there a place we can go to see to our wounded?"

A light touch on his shoulder made Jin startle.

Aneirin shushed him, and it shouldn't have soothed him as much as it did. "Come with me," Aneirin said. "There's a small clearing not far from here. Few know of it, but our hunters often camp there. There's a spring, so we'll have access to fresh water." He stepped forward to offer support to the man clinging to Zura, and a look of worry crossed his face. "It is not far."

They struggled for a short time up the hill and along paths Jin wouldn't have seen without Aneirin's guidance, but they came to a glade surrounded by gnarled old trees and full of springy yellow grass. A pool about the size of a bathtub stood near the western edge, fresh water tinkling over the rocks surrounding it. They spread what blankets they could and got the two wounded soldiers settled as comfortably as possible.

The woman had a broken ankle. She winced as Jin unbuckled her greave and slid her heavy leather boot off. "I have to set the bone," he said, meeting her eyes. She nodded once. Her scream pierced the woods as he aligned her foot with her bruised and swollen leg, but he was pleased with the results. With some straight sticks and torn strips of cloth, he splinted the leg as best he could. It wasn't perfect, but it would do for now, until they could get her home to a more experienced healer. For now, Jin didn't even want to imagine how they would make that journey.

Aneirin and Glaw had removed the other man's armor, and Glaw held a wet cloth to his wound. Jin knelt down beside the injured man, and when he reached to take the rag from Glaw, the soldier flinched, his eyes darting left and right. "No. No, not you."

"I have the most experience with field healing of anyone here," Jin said as gently as he could. "Please, let me take a look at that cut. What did this? A sword?"

The man grunted and went even paler as Jin inspected the swollen gash weeping dark blood. That, along with the swell of his stomach, didn't bode well. "It was a rusty knife," the soldier bit out. "Sort of jagged. I think. It happened so fast. By the time the bastard was in front of me, he'd stabbed me in the guts."

“Bring me fresh water,” Jin said, and Glaw stood to comply. “We’ll wash this out so it doesn’t get infected. Then I’ll get it wrapped up. I have some Essence of Aether in my pack. That’ll help with the pain.”

By the time Jin finished, the man was sleeping fitfully, groaning in his slumber. Reyni came up beside him and said, “He’ll die.”

Jin wiped his bloody hands on a cloth. “He’s bleeding from the inside. He needs surgery, but it can’t be done out here in the wilderness, and I don’t have the skill to do it. Damn it, I wish we were home, just... somewhere civilized.”

“You should put him out of his misery,” she said. “Why make him suffer?”

“That’s barbaric,” Jin said. “Where I come from, we don’t kill our own men! Not when there’s a chance to heal them.”

“But there’s not,” she said. “There’s not a chance. He reeks of death. Can you really not smell it?”

Jin looked down at the man. He was young—probably not much older than Jin himself, with dark-brown hair and the shadow of whiskers just framing a square jaw. He wore a locket around his neck, and Jin knelt down and opened it. Inside, he found a miniature painting of a woman and two young girls. A wife and daughters? A mother and sisters? Whoever they were, they meant enough to this man to carry their pictures close to his heart. Jin imagined him opening the locket to look at their images each night before falling asleep, and he shook his head. “I’m not giving up on him. There’s a chance. If we can get him back to the city, there’s still a chance.”

“There’s not and you know it,” she whispered. “If it was me, I wouldn’t want to go through that. I think you’re just too squeamish. I think all of you southerners are soft. I’ll do it if you can’t.”

“No! Just...” Jin pushed the filthy, sweaty hair out of his eyes and turned his back. He wanted to turn his face to the sky and scream. He wanted Zura or his mother to make this all right, make it go away. He just wanted this man to heal, but he couldn’t make that happen. He stomped to the edge of the clearing and stared into the trees. He didn’t look back when he heard the swish of grass, figuring Zura had come to check on him. He felt a warm presence inches from his back, hands smoothing down his arms... but the smell wasn’t right—leather, loam, and pine needles instead of sun, sea, and steel. Jin whipped around, ready to protest Aneirin’s daring to touch him with such familiarity, but the look of sincere concern in the man’s soft blue eyes deflated Jin’s affront. “Do you have something to report?”

“Report? No. I came to see how you’re holding up. It couldn’t have been easy, seeing your brother and the others hurt that way. I know it’s not something you’re used to. And then your soldier dying over there... Is there anything at all I can do?”

Jin stepped back, shrugging Aneirin’s hands off. “What? What can you do? Can you bring my people back from the dead? Is that something your spirit magic can do? Can that nonsense help that man?” Jin pointed, and as he did, he realized everyone in the small glade was staring as he ranted and broke. Damn it. He couldn’t lose control, not now, not even if they all thought it was inevitable. He turned to Aneirin, expecting anger, maybe even expecting to have to defend himself against the insults he’d hurled. Instead, he saw only sadness in the other man’s eyes. Shame welled up to douse his rage. “Forgive me. That was an unkind thing to say. I just... This is not what I expected when I left home. This is... so much worse than I imagined. People are dead and dying, and I don’t know why, and I don’t know how to stop it. I... I should be able to do something. I don’t want this.”

“I know,” Aneirin said in a low voice. “Believe me, I’d like to run screaming, hide in the woods. Play my pipes and drink until I fall down. Pretend this isn’t happening. Pretend nothing existed beyond the ring of trees I sat inside. But we can’t do that, can we?” He shook his head, waves of blond hair falling across tanned skin with subtle folds around the eyes and across the forehead. “I never dreamt I’d have to deal with something like this. A man’s never ready for something like this, is he? But maybe together... I mean, my people and yours, maybe we can see an end to this. We have to. It would mean a lot to me to have your support.”

Jin stared, dumbfounded at the way the other man could admit weakness and make it seem like strength. Slowly, he reached out a hand rubbed red from scrubbing, the skin cold and wrinkled and tingling. Aneirin took it and held it, his skin rough and warm against Jin’s palm.

When Zura came up, Jin dropped Aneirin’s hand as if he’d done something wrong.

“Come sit down.” Zura gestured to where the others had gathered in a circle. “We need to discuss what to do next.”

Jin followed his brother and sat in the high grass, feeling numb, still expecting someone to appear and tell him all of this was some horrible mistake, a bizarre, cruel joke. Surely someone would notice that they—that not even Zura—could deal with this...

“Tell us what happened on your way back to your city,” Aneirin said.

“It happened so fast,” Zura said. “We were riding down the trail to the south, toward the city. I sent scouts ahead, of course, but we seemed to be alone. We came to a narrow place in the trail, where we had to ride single file. It was between two patches of thick growth—old trees covered in vines, the bracken dense between them. It was quiet. I could hear the birds chirping. I think there was a raven calling from somewhere high in the branches—”

Reyni, who’d curled up next to Aneirin with her head on his thigh, lifted her head and hissed.

“What?” Zura asked.

“Ravens and crows are ill omens among our people,” Aneirin said. “We tend to mistrust anything that feeds off carrion, creatures that sustain themselves through decay and disease.”

One of the men seated behind Zura snorted and muttered something about ignorant superstition, and Reyni growled and showed her teeth in response. Zaundra reacted with a snarl of her own, and Glaw edged closer to Aneirin, his hand on the hunting knife at his belt.

Zura held up a graceful hand, and the rays of sunlight that managed to penetrate the canopy glinted off his rings. “Now is not the time to discuss our philosophical differences. I can neither support nor dispute the ideas your people hold. I can only explain my own experience, and I would like to do so. Something profound is happening in both our lands, and acting quickly and decisively might make a difference. When this enemy is roused and defeated, we can spend a week arguing about customs while getting as drunk as the light allows and celebrating our victory, but now is the time for action.”

The men behind Zura grunted their assent, and Reyni and Glaw seemed unable to find any words to disagree with him. The fox-girl lowered her head back down on Aneirin’s leg and turned all her attention to scratching patterns in the dirt with her jagged, yellow fingernail.

Aneirin ran his fingers through her matted hair as he looked up at Zura. “You’re quite an unusual man. If you weren’t a southerner, I’d say you were guided by a very old and very wise spirit. If not a spirit, where does that wisdom come from?”

There was admiration in Aneirin’s tone, maybe something... teasing. Jin perceived a current beneath the surface, but he couldn’t decipher its meaning or locate its source.

But something about it made his stomach hurt.

Zura looked up through his black fringe and favored Aneirin with the smallest of smiles—the reserved amusement Jin knew well. “Well, my friend, I suppose if I can claim any insight at all, it comes from observation. I’ve watched people, and I have learned they want to survive. Maybe I am an idealist, but I like to think people would rather make allies than enemies. After all, the idea of a man having your back is far more pleasant than the thought of him sticking a knife there. Is it not?”

Aneirin drew in an audible breath. “My sweet, sunlit lord, I can think of no limit of the pleasures I could find at your back. Those nights of victory celebrations are sounding much more interesting.”

Even as Jin bowed his head so his hair would cover the blistering heat on his cheeks, his brother simply nodded and grinned a fraction more. His earrings jingled as he canted his head. “Well, we cannot celebrate prematurely, my northern friend. As much as pleasant company might be preferred, I’m afraid the enemy must... come first.”

“Unfortunately,” Aneirin muttered.

“As I was saying,” Zura continued, “we were riding south, and the trail seemed safe and quiet. Then, from out of nowhere, the two harts leading our group fell. Someone had strung a trip wire across the path.” He shook his head. “What I don’t understand is how anyone could have predicted our movements. We saw no one. If this enemy has spies, they’re very good. Unlike anything we have ever encountered.”

“Beasts, foxes and whatnot, could have observed our movements,” one of Zura’s soldiers said.

Reyni sat up. “Oh, good insight, fishy. And we burnt our own villages too, I suppose?”

“Maybe you did, to lure us out here,” the man responded.

“You think pretty high of yourself,” she snarled. “A couple dozen southern lackeys what never seen combat? Yeah, that’s our master plan. Spirits, take out you lot and the empire will be all ours, yeah?” She spat. “You’re a fucking jerk-off.”

“Say that to my face, you little bitch!”

Reyni moved so easily to her knuckles and the balls of her feet, coiled and ready to spring, that Jin could hardly register the movement. She was smiling,

running her tongue over the edges of her strong, white teeth. “I see your face, you soft, fat little swine. I wish I didn’t. It would be easier to kick your sorry ass if I wasn’t trying to choke back my puke, but I’ll work with what I’ve got.”

“Shh, Reyni,” Aneirin said.

Zura turned to his man. “Shut your mouth. Do you want to do the enemy’s work for them? Use your head. If we fight amongst ourselves, all we’re doing is lessening the numbers we’ll have to face our adversaries. Now, I don’t want to hear your mouth again unless you have something beneficial to contribute. You can whine about the northerners to your heart’s content when you return home to your mother. Until that time, or until I say differently, we’re on the same side.”

Jin was torn between being proud of his brother and hating Zura for the way Aneirin stared at him with such naked lust. He didn’t know why he cared—he’d seen dozens of men and women drooling over his brother. Before, he’d never envied Zura the nuisance of brushing them off. But something about all this made him hot and sweaty beneath his gorget. It made him angry, but he didn’t know who or what to direct his anger toward.

The enemy, he supposed. That insidious unknown lurking somewhere in the trees. It was easy to aim his frustration toward an absolute evil bent on tearing down the empire he loved. He channeled his pulsing violence, the strange urge he felt to do something impulsive, into the desire to find and tear apart that faceless nemesis. By the light, he could almost feel hot blood splashing against him, and he wondered if it would calm the storm inside his ribs. Was it happening? What the others had always said would happen to him? The madness? No. He wouldn’t let it. He could—he would—resist. It was only a story. His people didn’t believe in stories. Jin listened to his brother’s voice. Zura and his words held the light of reason, and they would drive back the darkness, as they always had.

“The harts fell, and we were set upon before we could blink an eye. I don’t know where the warriors came from; we detected no trace of them amongst the trees. But they were on us. I think I killed one. It was just blood and smears around me. My people screaming and dying, and I found a woman with a broken leg, and I dragged her to safety. I saw one of my men pulling an injured soldier into the woods. I tried to cover him. The enemy—they fell upon our animals and people like a storm, like a swirl of blood and chunks of meat. We retreated, clawing our way up the hill, the four of us thinking of nothing but

saving ourselves. When I looked back, I saw the skeletons of our animals, picked clean, just as they had been in the villages we investigated. I admit we were terrified, and all we could think to do was run in the opposite direction.” Zura shook his head, his jewelry clinking. “I don’t know if it was the right thing to do, but I tried to save those I could. It was all I could think of at the time, to get as many of my people as I could out of harm’s way. I fear I acted like a coward.”

“If you’d abandoned your people to save yourself, maybe that would make you a coward,” Aneirin said. “Then again, maybe instinct dictates a being saves itself. I don’t know. It doesn’t matter. We know this much: there are enemies to the south. So what do we do?”

“We have two options,” Glaw said. “We can either retreat to the north and hide, or we can press south and risk engaging the enemy again—the enemy and their traps.”

“The empress needs to know of the situation,” Zura said. “And she can provide us with reinforcements that will allow us to overcome any foe.”

“You’re very confident,” Reyni said, stretching her arms out in front of her. “Saying you can defeat any foe when you don’t even know what it is. I would wait and watch.”

“There’s no time for that,” Zaundra said. “We’ve lost a dozen men already!”

“I agree.” Jin hoped he sounded confident, authoritative. “We need to press south. We need to return to Gauldaria and tell Mother—the empress—what’s happening. There’s no shame in needing more people. We need to equal the opposition, and the knights and guards there can help us. We need to rally a large force, find this enemy, and drive it out.”

Zura nodded, and the others—northerners and southerners alike—voiced agreement. Jin looked at the man lying a dozen feet from the circle, his face white and waxy in the blotchy light. While still mostly unconscious, the soldier whimpered and coughed through lips the pale purple of an old bruise. When Jin walked over, knelt down, and took his hand, the man’s skin was oily and cold. His stomach had swelled like a pregnant woman’s, and dark blood, foul-smelling and thick, pooled around his torso. He gurgled and spat up more blackish fluid.

“He isn’t going to make it,” Aneirin said softly as he laid a hand on Jin’s shoulder.

“I know.”

“I’ll do it.”

“No.” With his razor-sharp daggers, Jin could make the quickest, cleanest cut. He wouldn’t hide behind his lineage, a knight in name only, while others did his dirty work. Not when it meant the difference between suffering and a merciful end for a man who had faithfully served the empire. Jin’s discomfort couldn’t trump that. He took his knife in his right hand and dragged it across the soldier’s throat. His skin parted like wet paper, and a fount of frothy blood shot straight up. He gasped and seized a few times, but then he went still without ever opening his eyes.

The world seemed to stop moving as Jin watched the remainder of the color drain from the man’s face, watched the blood sprinkling from the edge of his dagger, the fat drops falling to the grass in slow motion. Jin’s hands shook, and he wanted to scream and beat his fists against the ground at the senselessness of it, the waste. This wasn’t supposed to happen in the empire. They were enlightened; they’d moved beyond this savagery. Bile rose in Jin’s throat as tears rose in his eyes, but he pushed them down deep as he wiped his weapon through the ochre grass. He should stand, shake this off, lead his people. But he couldn’t. He couldn’t stop staring into the man’s face, at the sliver of cloudy iris showing through the gap in his eyelids.

The brush of Aneirin’s knuckles down Jin’s cheek freed him from his fugue, and Jin sheathed his blade and stood on shaky legs. As Jin turned to face him, Aneirin slid his hand to the back of Jin’s neck and squeezed. The northern man’s eyes were wide with concern, a soft blue that reminded Jin of old cloth, framed in thick golden lashes. His lips were full and pink, and Jin allowed himself to focus on them, because they provided at least a little bit of a distraction from what he had done, from the finality of what he had done.

Nodding tightly, Aneirin said, “You did the right thing.”

Jin huffed out a sound between a laugh and a sob. He looked down at the blood thickening on his fingers. “I killed my first man. If he had been an enemy, my mother would award me a medal, a ruby carved in the shape of a teardrop. It would go here...” He touched the seam where his pauldron met his breastplate, fouling the polished steel.

“What you did was much harder than killing an enemy would’ve been. Jin... being affected by what you had to do doesn’t mean you’re weak. No one will think any less of you if you want to take some time to yourself, deal with this in your own way.”

They would think less of him, and Jin knew it. With a deep breath, he pushed his shoulders back and schooled his features carefully. “We don’t have the luxury of time to waste on nonsense.”

Rather than the admiration Jin had expected, his reaction made Aneirin look sad. But the man didn’t argue, just pressed his lips into a tight frown and nodded.

“We must try to wrap up this man’s body and build some kind of a litter to carry him on,” Jin said, surprised at the strength of his voice. “He should be returned to his family.”

“You can’t be serious,” Reyni said.

“Why not?” Zura asked.

“No, we can’t.” Glaw looked like he might be sick. “We cannot drag a corpse along with us. It will attract foul and unclean spirits. Death attracts death. Doing this will draw misfortune to us.”

“Ridiculous,” Zaundra said. “This man served the empire, and he died in his service. The very least we owe him, and his family, is to get him home so he can rest beside his loved ones in their crypt.”

“I can’t believe what I’m hearing,” Reyni said. “You keep *dead bodies* where you *live*? Just... letting them rot and spew decay into the air? And you call us savages. I won’t go. I won’t travel anywhere near that thing.”

“Show some respect,” Zaundra warned, her hand on the hilt of her sword.

“For what?” Reyni flung her hand toward the dead soldier. “The man you knew is gone. That’s just rotting meat now. And you don’t drag decaying meat around with you unless you want very dark and very dangerous things following the scent. The things that will come in the night, called by carrion...” She shivered and scrubbed at her arms. “Ani, tell them.”

“I would not want to travel with a corpse,” he said. “Death attracts those things that thrive on death. Besides, transporting this... man will slow us down, make us clumsy if we find ourselves in a fight. We might have trouble enough taking care of the living on this journey.”

“A valid concern, unfortunately,” Zura said, coming to stand beside Aneirin. They made a striking pair, Zura with his ebony hair and dark steel armor contrasting with Aneirin’s blond locks and tawny leather. “How do your people attend to your dead?”

“We burn them, let the fire consume the decay. To us, the flesh is only a shell. Without a spirit to guide it, the flesh turns foul and becomes a beacon for evil things. We should build a small pyre for this man.”

“I have to agree,” Zura said. “We cannot take him with us. It will be cumbersome, and spirits or not, the scent might attract dangerous scavengers. Gather wood. I will explain to his family when we return to Gauldaria.”

“No.” Jin quickly crouched and seized the locket, snapping the chain. He held it tight in his fist. “I’ll speak to his family. He’s dead because of me.”

“He’s dead because of the enemy,” Zura said.

“I put him to the blade,” Jin stated, already feeling disconnected from the act, like he’d observed it rather than committing it with his own hands. “I watched him die. His family should know that it was quick and that he did not suffer, and I plan to make sure they do. I’ll do my best to explain to them why it was too inconvenient to bring him home to rest beside his ancestors. Hopefully they will understand, though I’m not sure if I would if he was my kin.”

In the empire, services for a soldier fallen in battle went on for the better part of a day, with rituals, awards, dozens of speeches and hundreds of flowers strewn, followed by at least a night of feasting and drinking. There were dancers, musicians, and poets. Hundreds of torches and candles illuminated the familial home of the deceased, as Oraurians revered nothing more than light. In the case of very distinguished men and women, troupes of performers acted out scenes from their lives. This ceremony could not have been more different. It was little more than an efficient disposal—branches were stacked, and the man was placed upon them while Aneirin lit the kindling. Everyone stood in silence while he burned, and then they kicked wet dirt over the embers.

And it was over. The man whose name Jin hadn’t learned reduced to ashes. Gone, and without a memorial for his family to sit beside and remember him. The soldiers gathered what gear they had left while Jin tried his best not to think about it.

They set off downhill, to the south. Aneirin and his people lagged behind, talking in hushed voices behind cupped hands. Jin hesitated, kneeling and pretending to fiddle with the buckles on his greaves, trying to overhear them without making it obvious. As straightforward as the forest people had seemed in their dealings with the empire so far, Jin would be a fool to trust them so easily. Too many centuries of bad blood existed between their nations, and too many things in their current situation remained unknown. His... what he could

only describe as his instinct, his gut, told him he could rely on Aneirin, if not the others. But trusting the heart over the mind was dangerous—and even more so for Jin. No, he would place his faith in what he could see and touch.

The last thing he saw as he stood to follow his brother was Reyni taking her fox form and darting into the forest in a rusty streak.

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## Chapter Six

From his perch on a blackthorn branch, the raven watched the group of northerners and southern soldiers—what was left of it—moving south. They seemed to have opted to take the quickest route back to the capital city, even if it meant risking steep trails and dangerous ravines. That told the raven they were desperate and afraid, scurrying like rodents to the safety of the nest.

He couldn't let that happen.

It wouldn't be hard to coax them toward the east. They would never see the ruse for what it was, because they were too confident that they had it all figured out. The people of the northern forest had convinced themselves that their spirits would never lead them astray, while the Oraurians were so blinded by their system of observing and reasoning that they could see nothing beyond the glare of that gaudy false jewel. It proved little challenge to misdirect people looking at their world through such a narrow tunnel.

Still, the raven couldn't leave it to chance. He took to the air. If his trail of breadcrumbs wasn't enough to lure these people, he would just have to leave them a bigger chunk—one they couldn't ignore.

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Aneirin reached out with his senses. The forest was a living thing, an entity unto herself, and if anything was wrong, he should be able to hear it, smell it, or sense it at the place where his spirit overlapped the spirit of the woods. He detected nothing unusual, just leaves crisping with the coming of autumn and creatures preparing for the winter that would follow. Squirrels hoarded nuts and deer feasted on the sweet leaves and grass that would soon wither and freeze. With the wheel of the seasons turning as it should, Aneirin let himself relax. The spirits would warn him if he faced danger; he had no doubt. Trusting in their guidance as he always had, Aneirin could enjoy the plenty and beauty around him—not least of which was the man he walked beside at the head of their little procession.

Zura bore many similarities to his younger brother: the wide, straight bridge of his nose, the defined bow of his upper lip, the almond shape of his eyes. But the differences extended far beyond the color of the brothers' hair. Where Jin was skittish, always second-guessing himself before speaking, Zura was confident. Where Jin was cold and aloof, Zura was engaging, possessed of a

captivating charm. Where Jin seemed to want to push the world away, hold it at arm's length, his brother seemed to welcome everything in... and damn it if that didn't give Aneirin ideas.

"What is the mark on your forehead, if you don't mind me asking?" Aneirin pointed to the faded brown sunburst just visible between the gap in Zura's shiny black fringe.

Zura looked over and smiled, his dark brown eyes crinkling. "This symbolizes that I'm the emissary of my mother, the empress. It means I am the light going forward to shine in her stead. The mark is applied in a ritual before each major mission."

"You have a lot of rituals in the empire, don't you? One for every little thing. A prescribed set of steps for every occurrence in your lives. Do you Oraurians ever have any fun?"

Zura laughed softly. "Yes, you might be surprised to learn we have plenty of fun. There are holidays to celebrate great emperors and empresses, generals, artists, poets, and philosophers. The people who have helped our civilization advance. We festoon the columns at the city center with flowers, and we light so many fires that it's as bright as midday. Tables are laden with food, and wine flows like water. Musicians play, and we sing and dance. We eat, drink, and fornicate—"

"You fornicate?"

"Did you imagine we didn't? We're people."

"But aren't there rules, rituals attached to the act?" Aneirin asked.

"There are some regulations attached to establishing a family and a household," Zura said. "In place to protect the interests of both partners as well as any children issued from the union. They deal more with the inheritance of property than anything else. But for the unattached, for those not looking to establish a household... Well, my people see nothing wrong with two people—or more—finding pleasure together."

Aneirin tried to hide his surprise. From what he had understood, the southerners regulated every aspect of their lives with complex contracts. He'd always imagined them prudish, performing the act of love through a set of prescribed steps with little passion, like setting up a camp. But it was hard to think about that with the image of Prince Zura, tipsy on wine, flushed, and coated in a sheen of sweat as he danced in Aneirin's imagination. Black hair

fanning out around him as he twirled... golden skin heated... falling to the grass below...

“Would it be crossing some line if I were to ask if you prefer men or women, Prince Zura?”

“Not crossing a line, but still a difficult question to answer. In general, I find myself attracted to the male body, but by the light, I have known some women who became my whole world for a time, whether it was a night, a few days, or a month. When I decide to establish a family of my own, I don’t know whether I’ll choose a man or a woman. It might be a romantic idea, but I think that one day, I’ll look into another person’s eyes and know that he or she is my other half, the person I can always depend on to stand beside me. Something empty will feel filled, and I can’t imagine anything more wonderful. The genitalia of that person doesn’t matter to me so much as, as...”

“The spirit?”

“I suppose that’s one way to express what exists beyond the plumbing,” Zura said. “It’s not hard to have sex. I like having sex very much, but when I choose my one, it won’t be based on a penis or a vagina. I can easily work with either one. It will be based on friendship, support, and trust.”

“You speak of this very freely,” Aneirin observed.

“Should I not? Is sex shameful among the northerners?”

“Not at all,” Aneirin said. “It seems our philosophy is similar. We take mates, and it’s a serious matter. It’s for life, for good or ill. But before that, er, experimentation is encouraged. We think union brings joy—unless you’re not any good at it.”

“Are you any good at it?” Zura said softly.

“Well, I’ve never had any complaints, but that’s something you’ll have to judge for yourself, Prince Zura.”

“Zura. Don’t call me by my title.”

“Very well. So, if we’re speaking honestly, I can’t help but wonder what you like. Light touches... fondling, licking... sucking...? Or something more? Burying yourself deep inside a man’s body? Or a man burying himself in you?”

“By the light.” Zura sucked in a harsh breath, but not for the reason Aneirin hoped. He drew his sword and held it out in front of him. “There’s something on the path up ahead.”

The scents of blood and steel snapped Aneirin out of his gauzy fantasies. The edges of the world became sharp and bright as he and Zura moved up the trail. The two great predators that guided Aneirin reared inside him, ready to strike, as he approached the glittering object. A southern soldier's helmet, full of blood like a bowl, waited faceup on the path before them. A trail of spatter led farther down the trail, blood pooling in the dust.

Zura, dark eyes blazing, turned to his people. "We could be under attack, but there could be survivors. Be alert!"

Jin jogged to the front of the line to take his place beside his brother, his daggers drawn. The younger prince was fast, faster than anything Aneirin had ever seen, and his strikes were precise. Aneirin hoped he'd never stand opposite Jin on a battlefield. He also hoped he'd never face Zaundra, who rushed to the aid of her commanders, brandishing a sword that looked like it should take two people to lift. Aneirin and Glaw stayed to the sidelines, Glaw with an arrow nocked and Aneirin ready to chase one of his spirits if they found themselves in trouble.

A line of blood, bits of armor, and a spattering of the gemstones the southerners liked to adorn their armor with led them away from the road they'd been following, off to the east, up a steep knoll and along a winding trail Aneirin knew culminated in a dry creek bed surrounded by gravelly slopes. It would be a bad place to find themselves in an ambush. He sprinted to catch up with the princes.

"Someone could be leading us into a trap," he told them. "There's a canyon not far from here where we could get boxed in."

"We cannot abandon our people if there's a chance even one of them is alive," Jin shouted, pointing up the path with his slender blade. "I won't. Not even if I have to go alone."

The poor man. What had happened back in that glade had wounded Jin, Aneirin knew, but he'd ignored that wound, and now it was starting to fester. It would need attending, before the corruption spread through him. In Aneirin's experience, the best way to cleanse an injury like that was with strong drink, a sloppy cry, and the support of friends who wouldn't judge. He wasn't sure Jin had anyone like that, but now was not the time to find out.

"I'll scout ahead," Jin continued.

"No, we should stay together," Zura responded. "I don't want anyone made an easy target. We won't abandon our people, but we will proceed with caution. Aneirin, you say this canyon is a mile away?"

Glaw nodded. “The hills around it are steep. The panthers know to hide themselves in the bracken at the mouth and wait for the deer to come to drink. We do the same in the winter, if we get hungry enough. The deer cannot make their way up the slopes, at least not easily. They’re easy prey.”

“And we do not want to be the same,” Zura said. “We’ll continue another half a mile, and if we find no more evidence of survivors, we’ll turn back and resume our original course.”

“With the amount of blood we’ve seen,” Zaundra added, “if we don’t find somebody alive soon, we aren’t going to.”

“Proceed slowly,” Zura said, his eyes fixed on his brother. Aneirin couldn’t miss the stain of worry, maybe of mistrust. “We’re not running a race.”

Jin, lips pressed tight and bloodless, nodded and stalked along the path, holding himself back, reminding Aneirin of a dog pulling against an invisible leash.

Over the course of the next half mile or so, they discovered bigger and bigger clues—in the form of pieces of southern soldiers. A few fingers, cut off clean at the knuckles, littered the trail, followed by a foot and ankle still in its armored boot. The smell of death and decay grew stronger and stronger. Aneirin’s gorge rose, as did his hackles, because the odor was too pervasive to be coming from the dismembered parts. In the distance, the mouth of the gorge loomed, mist rising in thick sheets off the water and obscuring most of the basin.

Finally Zura held up a hand and called the group to a stop. “I don’t think we’d be very wise to venture into that gorge.”

Jin opened his mouth to protest, but his brother halted him with a stern look that quickly softened. Zura put a hand on Jin’s shoulder. “Jin, you’ve seen the body parts and the blood. The man or woman they came from cannot be alive, and you know it. Further, someone has likely placed these things here for the purpose of leading us this way, into a trap. We won’t accomplish anything by falling for this ploy and getting everyone in our party slaughtered.”

Jin’s eyes crinkled shut as he nodded. For several moments, all of them stood in silence. The creek burred softly a ways off, and a soft breeze rattled the rushes lining the bank. But there was something else: a soft groaning, perhaps a wounded animal. Jin heard it too, and he advanced a few feet ahead, squinting into the fog and shielding his eyes with his hand. When Aneirin

looked in that direction, he saw what the younger prince must've seen: a figure standing near a tree, wearing broad pauldrons. The silhouette clearly marked a southern soldier. Jin moved to run in that direction, but Zura caught his elbow.

"It's one of our men!" Jin said. "He might need help."

Zura shook his head. "Something isn't right. If we can see him, he can see us. The mist is at his back. Why is he just standing there?"

"Maybe he's injured," Jin said.

"Or dead," Aneirin added. He couldn't be silent. "The reek of decay is heavy on the air. Can't you smell it?"

"Well, of course." Jin shifted from foot to foot, as if incapable of being still, as if barely able to stop himself from rushing toward his soldier. "There are body parts strewn all around."

"It's more than that," Aneirin said, meeting the prince's silver eyes. "Much more. Maybe dozens of bodies."

Jin pointed with his dagger. "But that man is alive. Alive, and only a few dozen more feet away. What difference is a few dozen more feet? Can you truly turn and walk away when a few dozen feet might mean saving that man's life? Because I can't. I won't."

With a resigned sigh, Zura said, "Very well. I don't think I could look at myself in a mirror, wondering if we could've helped him. We'll take a small group. Volunteers?"

Zaundra quickly stepped forward, but Zura shook his head. "If anything happens, I leave you in command. Someone needs to get our people home and get word of what we've seen to the empress. If anything happens to me and my brother, you're the person most likely to accomplish it."

"I'll make a piss poor leader, sir," she said. "I'm much better in a fight than at planning."

"Nevertheless, I have made my decision. You men." Zura pointed. "Will you come?"

"If it's one of ours over there, sir, I'd be ashamed to refuse," one man said as the other nodded.

"Good," Zura said. "The four of us, then—"

"And me," Aneirin said. He didn't know whether he expected Zura to argue or flat out refuse, but the prince simply bowed his head.

“The rest of you, get off the trail. Cover yourselves as best as you can. If we’re attacked, try to flank the enemy. Use whatever element of surprise that you can. Archers, cover us. If it comes to a fight, you know what to do. Let’s go.”

Since Zura didn’t protest, Aneirin scouted a few feet ahead, knowing his senses were sharper than those of the southerners. They crept along, weapons at the ready, all of them certainly expecting something sudden and catastrophic, but nothing stirred by the reeds and grasses by the water. Soon they stood only a few feet from the man, but he still didn’t approach them, even though by now he could surely identify his kinsmen. Aneirin caught Zura’s gaze and held up a hand, signaling they should wait while he investigated. When the prince nodded, Aneirin proceeded. The faraway call of a raven made him falter a few steps, and he fought to suppress the shiver moving up his back.

The scents of pain and terror wafted off the man, mingling with the sticky stink of blood. He appeared to be leaning his back against the tree, but when Aneirin got within arm’s length, he saw the rusty, serrated blade stuck up under the breastplate, nailing the man to the trunk. His remaining foot dangled a few inches above the ground, likely crippled due to the blade severing his backbone. All of his fingers but the thumb on his left hand had been hacked off, and blood dribbled from the stubs. But the man still lived. He groaned softly. Now and then, the rope beneath his chin—probably the only thing keeping him from slumping in half—made him gurgle and choke.

Aneirin lifted the man’s head. Glazed, unfocused eyes, dark like Zura’s, stared at him without recognition. “It’s all right,” Aneirin said. “Your people have come. Prince Zura—”

Upon hearing Zura’s name, the soldier’s eyes went wide, and he shook his head violently. When he opened his mouth to scream, Aneirin saw what remained of his tongue, the stump coated in thick and darkening blood. He tried to shush and soothe the man, but it only made the soldier yell his throat ragged.

Within a few heartbeats, Aneirin understood. The man had been trying to warn them. But it had taken them too long to realize it.

The odor of rot filled the canyon like floodwaters as warriors poured down the hillsides and appeared from the mists. Almost before Aneirin knew what was happening, they were surrounded on three sides. All of them turned and ran as hard as they could in the direction they’d come from. They had to be outnumbered four to one. Then it was five to one. Six. Ten, and then twelve.

Aneirin gave up trying to estimate. It didn't matter. As enemies crowded the path in front of them, he knew they had no way out, and he swore he'd die fighting rather than be captured and end up like that poor bastard tied to the tree.

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## Chapter Seven

The enemies emerged from the mist sooner than Aneirin had hoped. His blood froze as he got his first good look at them. Wrinkled gray skin stretched over gaunt sinew. Open sores oozing dark ichor exposed muscle and bone. Lips peeled back to reveal jagged yellow teeth, and eyes hung shriveled in their sockets—if there were eyes at all. It didn't take long for him to realize the reek of the grave emanated from these warriors. They looked and smelled like corpses, but how could that be? They were moving, shuffling their feet and gripping weapons from newly forged and gleaming to rusted solid.

What in the spirits' names were they?

It didn't matter. Aneirin drew his long knife, sparing a moment to wish he had something better. His people hunted, and they fought occasionally, minor skirmishes between clans, but there hadn't been a war—or even a battle—in many generations.

One of the fetid things loosed a dry shout and raised its double-bearded ax. The horde lumbered forward. They were slow and clumsy, but with at least a hundred of them, it wouldn't matter. With a flash of silver off to Aneirin's left, Jin drew his second weapon and ran to meet the enemy. His arms moved in quick, graceful arcs to match the ducking and spinning of his body as he dodged and slashed, cutting gray flesh to ribbons, slicing off arms and legs and opening bellies and throats. Zura stood at Jin's side and used his sword to keep his brother from being flanked, and they made an effective team. But for every foul creature that fell before them, two more took its place, trampling their comrades and grinding them into the sandy soil.

Bloodlust surged in Aneirin, replacing his shock and horror as the spirit of his great cat swelled in his chest. His senses sharpened, vision crisp, bright, and missing nothing that even twitched in his vicinity. The graceless things seemed to move even slower, and when one lunged at him with a crude spear, it was almost too easy to feint to the side and avoid it. With the creature pitching forward, off balance, he quickly drove his heavy knife into the back of the skull. It fell facedown, and he crushed its head beneath his boot. Pulling it out, he swung left, stabbing another creature in the throat while kicking the one in front of him in the chest. It flew backward and knocked down two others. Aneirin leaped, caught himself on his hand, and stabbed down viciously, dispatching all three. Another swung a club at his back, but he rolled out of the

way. With a quick swipe from behind the thing, Jin cut its throat before turning to his next adversary.

Aneirin got to his feet, growling and showing his teeth, his cat delighting in ripping the things apart. In a low, wide stance, he waited for them to approach, and they converged on him in groups of two and three. Either slashing with his knife or using his fists and feet, their speed and strength enhanced by his spirit and the glee she gathered from the kills, he soon had them piling at his feet. He hurtled the corpses to meet the next batch, aided immensely by the princes fighting off to his left. The two other southern warriors struggled to keep the bulk of the hoard at bay, offering at least some protection at Aneirin's back, and soon arrows rained down into the battle. The fighters they'd left behind had heeded their commander's advice and flanked the enemy. Even though he couldn't see them yet through the wall of gray flesh, that thought encouraged Aneirin to fight harder. He grabbed a creature by the sides of its head and practically twisted it off as he snapped its neck. Then he flung the body to his right to slow down those encroaching on his least defended side. If they could just meet the rest of their group... clear a path... they could run. They could make it back into the forest, and they could hide there. Aneirin knew places where they wouldn't be found.

Rattling breath alerted him to a creature coming up behind him, and he raised his elbow and smashed it into the thing's face. It fell, but he heard more, felt the heavy presence of them closing, surrounding him from behind. Pressing down from everywhere until he swore it seemed darker. Spinning and slashing violently as he turned, he saw no trace of the two southern soldiers. He didn't know if they'd fallen or retreated, but the enemy gained ground, coming at him five and six thick. No matter how hard he fought, they surrounded him in every direction, crushing in, driving him closer to the princes until the three of them stood almost back-to-back. Aneirin cut the laces of his leather vest. His cat clawed at his insides, hungry to wet her teeth and claws. Her desire to kill, while different from anger, built and built and it felt ready to burst through his skin, her claws itching to break from his fingertips. He could let her out, but he knew it wouldn't matter. They were now holding only an area the size of a campfire, and with so many creatures reaching over each other to get at them, they couldn't even think of attacking. It was all they could do to block the most lethal blows, and cuts and bruises covered their exposed skin. With weapons hailing down on them from everywhere, their luck couldn't hold forever.

Something hit Jin in the back, sending him to his knees and his helmet bouncing. Zura barely managed to swing his sword in time to stop the ax

hacking down at his winded brother. As Zura's steel scraped along the edge of the creature's weapon, both of them grunting and struggling to get the upper hand, Aneirin grabbed Jin's arm and hauled him to his feet. The three of them stood shoulder to shoulder, trying to keep their backs together, jammed so close none of them could take a step. They could do nothing but attempt to parry and protect their faces with their weapons.

A shriveled arm stretched through the throng, and a short sword opened a gash across the globe of Aneirin's shoulder. The pain barely registered, just a sting followed by the hot spurt of blood. Steel flashed like lightning next to Aneirin's cheek as Jin stabbed the creature and pulled a clouded eye out on the point of his dagger. It shrieked, a sound like a dull blade scraping against stone, until Jin's next strike cut its throat to the spine. The head flopped back and inky fluid flowed, but the creatures were packed in so tight that the vanquished one couldn't fall. It stood upright, limbs convulsing, as the others clawed past it to get to the three men.

A rumbling in the distance drew some of the creatures' attention. Zura used their distraction to swing his sword and lop off a pair of heads. Aneirin and Jin followed his lead, attacking fast and hard, and they gained at least enough ground to spread their arms and fight more effectively.

And they were no longer alone.

A pair of brown bears, each as large as the harts the southerners rode, tore through the hoard, swatting enemies aside with paws the size of war hammers and shredding them with long black claws. From the other direction came a pack of tree cats, striped and smaller than panthers, but fast and devastating when they attacked together. A few wolves and panthers joined the fray, followed by the smaller predators: coyotes, badgers, and of course, foxes. A fleet red one led the skulk, and Aneirin thanked the spirits he'd decided to send her for help and that she'd made it back. Working together, the people and animals began to level the field, and the creatures started to disperse, breaking into smaller groups that were even easier to eliminate. With the numbers evening out, the things lost whatever advantage they'd had. Not only were they slow and clumsy, they didn't seem especially alert.

Soon the throng thinned enough that Aneirin could see Glaw perched on an outcrop with his bow and Zaundra swinging her sword to great effect. Zura ran back toward the tree and returned with one of the soldiers from their original group. The man looked pale, and his face showed cuts and a blackened eye, but

he was well enough to fight beside the prince, and the two of them mowed through the stragglers.

Jin dropped to a crouch and thrust both daggers up, into a creature's belly and out its back. As he stood, he freed them and flicked black blood from the blades. He scanned the battlefield, but there were no enemies near him and no one in need of his help. The prince looked down at the corpses stacked at his feet and visibly relaxed, lowering his weapons to hang by his hips. Aneirin knew how sore Jin's muscles must be; his own arms felt like strips of wet cloth, and he'd borrowed strength from his spirit guide. He could scarcely imagine the strain of fighting in the cumbersome armor, but he could easily envision the hardness and definition of the body beneath it. At that moment, Jin looked up and met Aneirin's eyes across the battlefield. The prince smiled, and Aneirin realized he hadn't seen Jin smile once since they'd met. He looked beautiful there with the sun glinting off his armor, his silver hair wild, golden skin shining with sweat, and blood dripping from his daggers. With the battle lust still pounding in his veins and mingling with the euphoria of victory, Aneirin could think of little beyond stepping over the fallen enemies, pulling Jin against him, and kissing him hard.

He might have done it—he'd even moved a few feet in the prince's direction—but the dead piled around Jin began to stir. The last creature he'd killed lumbered to its feet, ink and innards spilling from the twin holes his daggers had left. The others stirred, writhing and squirming around and overtop of each other until the battlefield resembled a piece of rotten meat infested with maggots.

Zura's voice rang out over the rasping and gurgling coming from the restored abominations. "Retreat! Make for the mouth of the gorge and the hills beyond! By the light, run!"

People and beasts hurried to obey, using their momentary advantage to escape. The things reached for them, grabbing at their ankles. Though the monsters had somehow regained movement, many of them were badly damaged, and the loss of limbs slowed them down. Soon most of their group had reached the edge of the canyon and began the ascent back into the woods. One of the things snagged Zura's ankle, and he landed hard on his chest. With a swift chop, Zaundra severed the arm holding the prince's leg and dragged him back to his feet. When he limped, she threw him onto her back and jogged, clearing the mass of corpses and disappearing beyond the vale's mists.

Jin was not so lucky. The creatures heaped around him grasped for him, getting hold of his greaves, his cuirass, and the tunic beneath. He sliced wildly at the dozens of arms, but they pulled him down, climbing up his legs, twisting their desiccated fingers around his pauldrons and into his hair. He called out for his brother, but the things had him pinned. A large male creature, the bottom of his jaw sliced away and his liver-colored tongue flopping down his neck, approached slowly, a massive, spiked club raised.

Another slashed Jin's face with the spiked armor covering its bony knuckles, leaving a deep cut from the top of his ear almost to the edge of his lips. Jin bit back a whimper as blood coated his face.

Aneirin's wolf rose up, stronger and more insistent than he'd ever experienced. His consciousness slammed hard against Aneirin's skull above his eyes, and his sight and senses clicked into place. Though the spirit wolf didn't communicate with human language, his message was clear: *Protect our own. Defend our pack.*

Aneirin didn't understand why his wolf considered this southern prince they'd known less than a week part of the pack, but his wolf invited no argument. Being spirit-guided meant surrender, and Aneirin let go, gave himself over to the single-minded determination of the wolf to protect the pack, the family. The wolf's mind held no room for inconvenient or uncomfortable questions. He tore his vest away and leapt. By the time he landed, his hands had become large, golden paws, and he easily slid out of the pants now loose around his legs. In the distance, he sensed people running, drawn to the prince's cries for help. He smelled coyotes and bears drawing nearer, but it didn't matter. This was for him to do. *Mine. My pack. Mine to protect.*

Just as the creature lifted the club to smash Jin's head, Aneirin launched himself into the air and closed his teeth around its throat. He clamped down, crushing the windpipe, as his weight and momentum throwing them both onto their sides. Kill. Protect. With a twist of his head, he tore the thing's throat out. Ichor flooded his mouth and ran down his throat, burning like boiling water, blistering his gums. It scorched its way toward his belly, until he was sure he was being stabbed by a dozen daggers. With a pained howl, he curled up as if he could shield himself from the agony. The pain grew too great, and the world went fuzzy and dark.

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Aneirin was on his side in a patch of damp, chilly ferns. He was naked and colder than he'd ever been. Someone was forcing something into his mouth, but

he couldn't focus his vision enough to tell who or what. He'd resumed his original form, so he couldn't tell by the scent, either. He only knew it hurt, the edges of his mouth stretching and splitting as whatever it was thrust in to prod at the back of his throat. He gagged and expelled the contents of his stomach. The creature's black blood burned as bad on the way out as it had on the way in, but he heaved until there was nothing left.

The cool rim of a metal cup touched his lips, and he drank even though the water felt like broken pottery churning in his guts. He emptied it, and it returned full. He tried to turn his head away—it hurt too much to swallow—but a hand in his hair held tight as the water poured down his throat. Rather than choke, he forced himself to drink.

“Good. Now throw up again.”

“Nnnn...” He didn't want to. His stomach muscles and ribs ached from the first time. But his mouth was pried open, something—fingers?—forced in, down his throat. The reflex triggered, and it was easier this time, the burning diluted by the water. When Aneirin finished heaving and caught his breath, he flopped onto his back and the smudges above him began to take shape.

Gold. A golden oval framed by a silver crescent. A face... a face he knew, and it was damaged, cut across one cheek, still smeared with blood. Though it took all his effort to lift his hand, he reached up and touched the warm skin of Jin's chin. “Need to... sew that. Scar...”

Jin scowled. “That's hardly our most pressing concern.”

“But... so beautiful... 's a shame.”

The prince's expression remained neutral. “You're delirious. And you need to drink more water. And throw up again.”

Aneirin groaned. “No... please. It hurts.” He turned his head away from the cup, but Jin took a handful of his hair and pulled. His face turned hard and cold, though his gray eyes seemed lit from within.

“Listen to me. A few of your people bit those things and got their blood into their mouths. They're all dead now. Every one. Except for you. Because I made you throw it up as soon as you became human again. It's poison, and we need to get as much of it out of you as we can. Drink.”

Twice more, Aneirin drank his fill of water and puked his guts up around Jin's fingers. By the time he finished, he trembled all over, too weak to do

anything but lie in the ferns while Jin covered him with whatever scraps and garments he could scare up and built a fire. He must've drifted off, because when he opened his eyes again, it was twilight, and he heard hushed voices nearby.

"...sick. He needs help. The kind of help he can only get in Gauldaria." Jin.

"He can't move on his own. Someone will have to take him. It's... a long way." Zura.

"I'll go," Jin said. "He's dy—he's hurt because he saved my life."

"We should take him to the nearest village," Glaw said. "To a healer, a wise woman. He needs the aid of the spirits."

"No!" Jin's voice rose. "No magic, no superstition. I kept him alive, not your spirits. He's alive because I learned how to treat poisoning. I *learned*. Methods that have been tested and proven, not made up based on stories. There are medicines in the capital, all kinds of antidotes, and there are people who know how to use them. I am taking him there, and no one is going to stop me."

"No," Zura said weakly. "I'll go. My ankle is broken, and the soldiers need a leader. You must find out what those things are and where they're coming from. Light, can you imagine what would happen if they got into the city? Jin, you must do this for our people, for the empire and the northern folk alike. We need information so we can devise a plan to eradicate those... monstrosities."

"But neither of you can walk," Jin protested. "How in the light will you make it?"

"I can help," Glaw said.

Aneirin heard the soft sound of hooves on grass and turned toward it. Two pale deer, a buck and doe, waited at the edge of the firelight. Though not as big as what the southerners called harts, each of them could carry a man, and they were nimble and fast.

Jin stood and bowed his head to them, as if sensing they weren't simple animals. He did not fondle or stroke either of them anymore than he would a man or woman he'd just met. Instead he said, "Thank you. The fate of both Aneirin and my brother are with you. You should leave tonight, if you can travel in the dark."

The buck pawed the ground. "Good," Jin said. "I cannot express my gratitude, but if I ever have the opportunity to repay you or your people, I swear I'll do it." He turned to his people. "Water and rations. Enough for a week."

“It won’t take that long,” Glaw offered gently. “Kele and Kelyn don’t have to stay to the trails. They know shortcuts through the forest. Trust them, and they’ll get Ani and your brother to your city in two or three days.”

“We’ll need something for Ani”—Jin coughed into his fist—“for Aneirin to wear. The nights are cold, and the days aren’t much better. Light, I can’t wait to be home. But I suppose we’ll return to the creek bed, try to find out where the army of those things came from and if there are more. We’ll return to Gauldaria as soon as we learn all we can.” He clasped his brother’s arm. “Go in sunlight, and be careful, Zura. Take care of Aneirin. I... owe him much. Now, you should go. The sooner both of you get to a skilled healer and to medicine, the better.”

Aneirin wondered if Jin would offer him a farewell, say anything before they departed. It surprised him how much it stung when the younger prince walked past him to organize the burning of the bodies and the schedule of a watch. He was almost glad he was too drained—literally—to ponder his own reaction. Now, he needed to will himself to keep living for a few more days. The way he felt right now, it might prove the challenge of a lifetime. Aneirin closed his eyes and offered a silent prayer to his spirits, imploring them to give him strength and for Jin’s medicines and healers to be as miraculous as they were in Jin’s mind.

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## Chapter Eight

It took most of the night to burn the dead, gather firewood and water, and set up enough of a camp for the weary to rest and the injured to heal. The blush of morning dusted the horizon by the time the southerners, save those on watch, went to sleep in their makeshift tents. Though tired to his bones, Glaw resisted the call of his own bedroll and went instead into the forest, wandering as far from the others as he thought he could while remaining safe.

When he could no longer hear the sounds of the people snoring or see the glow of the fires, he found a circle of birch trees, sat on the spongy moss and fallen leaves between them, and took out a small, rabbit fur pouch. It contained items the wise woman of his clan claimed would please the spirits: rowan berries, a bundle of dried herbs, smooth river stones, an eagle's feather, and a string of beads made from the teeth of a great bear. Holding it between his palms, Glaw closed his eyes and took slow, deep breaths to clear his mind.

"I call upon the blessings of all the spirits, of the wood, the rivers, the mountains, and the sky. Perhaps there is a powerful being willing to guide and teach me."

He reached out with his senses, trying to locate the stream of energy running through the forest and the trees, fumbling for the seams where his spirit attached to those of the wind, the air, the water, and the creatures sharing them. Aneirin and the other spirit-guided had told him this was where he would encounter a possible mentor, and he did think he felt presences beyond the air and light—intelligence and intent waiting just beyond the bounds of his consciousness. He knew he had to be patient, to let the spirits see that his heart and mind were open and receptive. Some of the guides were proud; others were skittish and easily frightened. After all this time, all his effort, he didn't want anything to drive them away.

All he wanted was to be chosen, for one of the spirits—any one—to find him worthy. Finally.

In his mind's eye, he saw them materializing in a loose circle, diaphanous forms only vaguely shaped like animals... transparent greenish shadows full of glittering lights like a sky full of stars.

His people said every spirit was the world in miniature. Every spirit contained all of the universe.

As the rounded shapes edged slowly closer, Glaw's heartbeat sped and excitement coursed through his veins, making his extremities tingle. He tried to remain calm and serene, but he had waited so long for his chance. He had watched so many others chosen while he was passed over again and again.

The spirit creatures paced around Glaw, and one by one, they departed, dissolving into the forest shadows as they wandered into the trees. Soon, he sat alone. He lifted the rabbit fur bag to his lips and blinked against the sting in his eyes. He wouldn't give up. He must have done something wrong, allowed his focus to falter. He would try again, and he'd keep trying until he succeeded.

"Perhaps there is a powerful being nearby, one willing to walk with me on my journey. Please. Please give me a chance. Just consider me. Please. My people need me, now more than ever."

Again he waited, watched the spirits manifest on the edges of his perception. Again they walked away from him as if he wasn't even there, as if he was no one deserving of their notice.

He tried a third time with the same result.

By the time he opened his eyes, bright shafts of sunlight poked through the gaps in the tree branches, illuminating golden pools around where he sat. Birds chirped around him, but otherwise, the forest was still, and he was alone. He tossed the rabbit fur purse into a patch of briars. "What?" His bitter cry disturbed a flock of birds, and they fluttered away. "What's wrong with me? Why aren't I good enough? What do you want?"

The flap of wings drew his attention, and he turned to see a large raven perch on a branch only a few feet away. Instinctively, he picked up a rock, took aim, and prepared to drive the cursed bird off. At the last moment, he lowered his arm and dropped the rock. He knit his fingers together and dropped his hands into his lap. The bird flicked its tail feathers and focused its small, bright eyes on him. For the first time, he noticed the beauty of its streamlined form, the iridescence in its dark plumage.

Maybe the things his people said about ravens were wrong.

Maybe many of things his people said were wrong. After all, an open heart and pure intentions had failed to earn him a spirit guide. Aneirin, who squandered his time drinking and fucking pretty much anything that didn't run away, had two. Two! And Reyni had met her fox at eleven while picking berries. She hadn't even needed to try. Where was the justice in it? If the spirits were so wise, why couldn't they see Glaw's dedication?

As if answering his question, the raven bobbed its head. It hopped to the end of its branch, only an arm's length from Glaw. His arm twitched with the desire to reach out and let it rest on his wrist, but he kept his hands down and folded. The raven opened its crooked beak and cawed. Glaw jumped, but he still made no move to scare the bird off. Instead, they continued to regard each other as the sun rose higher into the sky. He sat watching it until it flew off, a dark splotch against the cold, cloud-strewn blue.

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The sight of the southern soldiers' camp pleased the raven as his spindly black toes touched down on the rocky ground. He folded his wings against his body as he surveyed the dead lined up in a neat row. The armored and trained southern fighters would make a nice addition to his forces. A shiver moved along his back as he resumed his human form, and one of his mortal allies hurried forward to throw a cloak over his shoulders.

The raven, Brennan now, held up a hand, and the rag-draped man with the knotted hair paused. Brennan had learned a great deal from pain over the years. Pain and struggle stripped away all extraneous concerns, and standing bare before them, a man learned who he truly was. Brennan stood bare in the northern cold, his skin tingling and his fingers and toes going numb. But he could take it; his will was greater than the will of the elements to destroy him. The raven who had guided him told him he had a great destiny, but that his path would be soaked in blood and studded with hardship. Long ago, he had embraced that fate when he had forsaken both the wooded lands of his people and the luxurious cities of the South. Enduring the bite of the north wind was merely training. Pain, he reminded himself, meant he was alive. It was something to embrace, to shape into a tool, not something to avoid.

"Well done," he said to his people. If the poor simpletons wanted to believe him a god, who was he to argue? "Bring me my satchel."

A woman with gnarled ropes of hair and twisted teeth fetched the leather bag and thrust it into his hands. Brennan removed the few items he needed, and then he turned his attention back to the stiff corpses, their eyes milky and their lips blue. He poured a powder of ground bones and crystals into his left palm and fanned the dust over the bodies with a black feather. He gave it a moment to settle in a shimmering sheath over the graying skin, and then he drew his dagger for the most important part of the ritual. To draw blood, he had to cut through the thick scar tissue that crisscrossed the inside of his right forearm. He pressed the blade deep, and soon a line of crimson droplets welled through the

mottled, discolored skin. Going down the line, he let a few drops of his blood fall into the open eyes of the southern warriors. The eyes were important; he'd learned that in the fetid marshes far to the east of Orauri where he had discovered magics long forgotten by the northern and southern nations alike. They were how his will got in, what let him control the corpses when they shuddered back to something like life.

Brennan turned away as the deceased howled in agony and confusion as they struggled to their feet. He addressed his human servants—might as well call them what they were. “Take these to the mountain pass. Destroy any settlement you find along the way. Every person killed bolsters our ranks. Very soon, we’ll be ready to take the capital city of Gauldaria, and after we do, we’ll have dead enough that no one, North or South, will be able to stand against us. Go!”

The humans hurried off, and the newly risen dead shambled after them. Now, Brennan just needed to see to the upstart southern prince with the frost-colored hair. The young man wanted to find the army threatening his mother’s empire, and Brennan intended to ensure that he succeeded. It would be the last thing the boy would ever see.

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## Chapter Nine

Aneirin flitted in and out of consciousness as the fleet little deer leapt down the steep rocks of the mountain, abandoning the trails to reach the city by the quickest possible route, just as the man called Glaw had promised. Zura had been terrified at first—he could admit that—as the deer had jumped from the edges of cliffs and plummeted off sheer drops of a dozen feet or more. But the creatures had proven as sure of foot as they were fast, and after a day of travel, he had started to relax. Now he only worried about Aneirin slipping off, but the man held tight to the neck of the doe even when he slipped into slumber.

Zura couldn't believe how far they'd come by the time they stopped after dark. He recognized the gently sloping foothills where he'd played and camped with his brother as a young boy, and then later trained with the soldiers. The leaves here hadn't started to change, and the air was warm enough that he perspired a little beneath his armor. They were probably only about thirty miles from the outskirts of Gauldaria. With luck, they'd reach the wall surrounding the city and the northern gate sometime tomorrow. Soon, they would encounter Oraurian soldiers patrolling the outskirts.

Zura carefully dismounted the buck, lowering his good leg to the ground and carefully swinging his injured foot over the animal's back. The splint Jin had used was helping, but his ankle was so swollen he couldn't get his boot or his armor over it, and it hurt. Still, he fared better than his companion. When Zura limped over to help Aneirin off the doe's back, the man collapsed into his arms like a sack of rocks, sending them both sprawling on the ground. Zura screamed as his ankle twisted and pain shot up his leg. He took a few deep breaths and waited for the stars shooting across his vision to clear, and then he carefully rolled Aneirin off of him and sat up. Aneirin's eyelids drooped, his mouth hung slack, and his skin was pale and greasy like tallow. Zura pressed a hand to his forehead, expecting fever, but Aneirin felt cold.

"We're close enough to the city that it should be safe to build a fire." Zura tried to get to his feet, but his leg wouldn't cooperate. He looked around for something to help him up, but nothing surrounded them but high grass and some late summer flowers. The buck nudged his shoulder, and Zura muttered his thanks as he took hold of his antler and let the deer drag him up. As soon as he got his balance, both deer transformed into slender youths with short, tawny hair and big brown eyes. They were clearly twins, and while one was male and

the other female, only the most basic differences indicated it. Clothed, they would have been identical.

“I’m sorry we couldn’t keep going,” the boy, Kelyn, said so softly Zura had to strain to hear him. “We’ll return in the morning to carry you the rest of the way.”

“We should—”

Before Zura could tell them they should all stay together, the two naked young people had sprinted into the forest and disappeared. Zura sighed. It was much easier when the people he led waited for his orders and followed them.

“They’re shy... the deer,” Aneirin said in a hoarse voice.

“I didn’t know you were awake.”

Aneirin coughed. “Wish... kind of wish I wasn’t. Feel like I got kicked in the gut by a mountain goat, and its freezing. Thought... it was supposed to be warmer in the south.”

“I’ll get a fire going.” When he had, Zura gingerly sat down next to Aneirin. “I have some dried apples and a few strips of fish jerky left in my pack. I’m happy to share.”

“I’ll never keep it down.”

“You should drink some water, at least. Jin said the more you drink, the better.” Zura looked to the north, where the crystalline blue sky showed above the trees. He imagined where his brother was and what he might be doing—settling in for the night, most likely. He wondered if Jin had discovered anything and hoped he hadn’t been hurt. It hadn’t been easy to leave his brother, and Zura hoped he had made the right decision.

Aneirin laid a hand that felt as cool and light as a leaf across Zura’s knee. “You’re worried about him. Your brother.”

“Of course. It’s only natural.”

“He seems quite capable.” A hard shiver punctuated Aneirin’s words, and Zura pulled out the one blanket they’d managed to salvage after the battle and tucked it around him. “Thank you, and try to have faith in Jin. He fights well, and he can heal.”

“Shh. Get some rest. You shouldn’t waste your strength trying to comfort me.”

“Nah, let’s talk a bit,” Aneirin said. “Keeps my mind off feeling like a dead coyote’s asshole.” He trembled. “And a frozen one at that.”

“I’m sorry we couldn’t scare up anymore blankets,” Zura said.

“We’d both be warmer if you got in here with me.”

“All right. That’s a good idea.” Zura removed his armor and piled it neatly a few feet away, and then he climbed under the blanket, his chest to Aneirin’s back, and draped his arm over Aneirin’s ribs. “Just mind my foot. The slightest touch is extremely painful.”

Aneirin chuckled. “Yes sir, Commander. Hmm. I hoped I might get you into my bed under much better circumstances.”

Zura smiled into Aneirin’s wild mane of blond hair. It smelled like pine sap. Through the thin shirt Aneirin wore, Zura could feel the bumps and cords of muscle on his stomach. “Maybe when all of this is over. I certainly wouldn’t be opposed.”

“Do all your people do that?”

“Do what?”

“You say ‘I wouldn’t be opposed’ instead of ‘I’d like that’ or ‘Spirits, yes. Let’s fuck.’ It’s like... I’m not quite sure how to explain. It’s like you’re saying you don’t see it as negative, but you don’t see it as positive. A weird little flip of words that makes even an agreement taste sour.”

Now Zura chuckled. “I suppose I never thought about it. I did grow up at court, so I likely picked up a certain formality to my speech. My brother is probably the same.”

“No,” Aneirin said, his tone wistful, tinged with something sad. “No, because he does think about it. He never speaks without pausing first, without weighing his words and predicting how others will react. He watches very carefully to gauge how the other soldiers are judging him. You don’t need to do that. You know you have their loyalty and confidence.”

“Jin is young. He has little experience outside of his training. It will take time.”

“But it’s more than that. Isn’t it? There’s wariness, both from him and the soldiers. They aren’t sure of each other, and I can tell it runs deeper than lack of experience.”

For a moment, Zura considered some platitude. “I guess there’s no reason for me not to tell you. It’s not like everyone else doesn’t know already. After I was born, my mother and father tried very hard to have another child. Each time she became pregnant, she lost the baby within a month or two. I was only five or six at the time, so I cannot claim to understand the strain it put on their union, but my father drifted. He turned to whores and drinking, and he flaunted it in front of my mother. The marriage continued, because it would have been a scandal of epic proportions if it dissolved, but I knew my parents despised each other. They barely spoke, let alone shared a bed.”

“So your mother took a lover to sire Jin?”

“No, of course not. She loved my father, even if she hated him for abandoning her when she needed him the most. Once, when she’d had too much wine, she asked me why he could replace her so easily when she would never be able to replace him. She was a romantic, and I guess she passed that on to me. She believed each person got one great love in his or her life. I don’t think she’ll ever recover from her great love betraying her. It’s the reason I want to be absolutely certain before I start a family... Forgive me. This isn’t something I speak of often.”

“It takes bravery for a man to expose his heart,” Aneirin said. “Among my people, it’s a sign of strength, not weakness.”

“Yes, well...” Zura swallowed hard. No matter what Aneirin said, he was embarrassed about flashing his personal pain. But he’d never had anyone to talk with about what had happened, about how he couldn’t stop loving his father even though he thought he should, about how he feared when he chose his partner, he would eventually be betrayed. Most men his age had formed households, and he’d had ample opportunity, but there’d always been something about each prospective partner, some indefinable quality that made Zura think at some point, when he needed support the most, he’d find himself tossed aside.

“Not all people are like that, you know,” Aneirin said. “There are people who take their oaths seriously and honor them.”

“But how can you tell which people those are?” Zura asked, more of himself. “How do you know that the person you trust to have your back won’t be the one to put the knife in it?”

“You just trust,” Aneirin said. “There aren’t any guarantees, and isn’t it better to give it a go than pass up any chance at happiness?”

“I’m honestly not sure,” Zura said. Thinking about this, tearing the scab off that old wound, had left him angry and miserable. He wanted to rail against someone, but he didn’t know who to blame. As a youth, Jin, that quiet, serious boy who shadowed him everywhere, had been the only thing to pacify him some days. “My brother means everything to me.”

“Tell me about him.”

“I don’t know what brought my mother and father back together for a night, or however long it took for her to conceive my brother. My father never saw him born. He impregnated one of his whores, and that was more than my mother could stand. She ordered him out of the city. He didn’t say good-bye to me...

“Jin was born when I was seven years old. He was born during a solar eclipse, when the moon blotted out the sun. To many, that event symbolized the influence of the wilds and the spirits exerting dominance over the golden light of wisdom. They said the wilds would hold sway over my brother, that they would corrupt his higher nature. All of that might have been forgotten, but then Jin was born with that silver hair and those eyes. Most people took it as proof. They said it would only be a matter of time before the pull of the moon overcame Jin and he went mad. A person born under the influence of the moon could not be trusted. But when I first saw Jin, lying next to my mother in her bed, I was so in love... so instantly in love. I swore that whether my brother went mad or not, I would not betray him. Especially not when he needed me most. I vowed to stand at his back and help him succeed no matter what. I’m afraid others don’t share my commitment. They’re waiting for the first sign of his descent into madness. They believe it’s inevitable. It scares them.”

“It’s strange,” Aneirin said, “for a people so opposed to what you call superstition to give credit to such a story.”

“I agree,” Zura said. “But my people pride themselves on their freedom from relying on the spirits. Jin represents a threat to their guiding philosophy. But he’s my brother. I’m sure you understand. You have a younger brother yourself—Glaw.”

“Yes, though he isn’t my brother by blood. My family took him in after his parents were killed in a hunting accident. But I worry for him. He wants so badly to find a spirit guide. Not all of my people do, and we don’t think less of them, but I know he feels inadequate.”

“And all you want is to see him happy.”

“Yes.”

“I understand. I’m glad we had this chance to speak,” Zura said. “It’s done much to ease my mind.”

“Glad to be of service, Commander.”

Zura snorted. “If you weren’t hurt, I’d poke you in the ribs for mocking me.”

“If I wasn’t hurt, you could find a better place to poke me.”

Zura shifted, acutely aware of the swell of Aneirin’s ass pressed against his groin. “We should get some sleep.”

“Agreed. Help me out of my clothes?”

“I don’t think either of us is in any condition...”

Laughing, Aneirin sat up and looked over his shoulder at Zura. Firelight danced in his pale eyes. “Relax, Your Highness. I just want to slip into my cat’s skin.” He pulled his shirt over his head and started on the lacings of his trousers.

“Do you think you should strain yourself?” The flashes of Aneirin’s naked skin, those lean muscles dusted with golden hair, made it hard for Zura to speak coherently. He reached out and ran his hand down the other man’s smooth back, and the chill of Aneirin’s skin reminded him how sick Aneirin was.

“Nonsense. I’m freezing, and I want to get into my fur. Besides, cats are tough bastards. Hardest damned things to kill under the moon.”

Zura didn’t know enough about it to argue, so he waited while Aneirin changed forms. The golden panther he became was equal to Zura’s length when he flopped down on his side. The great cat curled up next to Zura, his body warm and his fur softer than Zura expected. At first it was unsettling to lie next to such a lethal predator, but the cat rested calmly, rumbling deep in his chest, and so Zura draped an arm over him, soothed by his purring. He realized he felt safe, and he drifted off to sleep.

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“Have you ever seen the Golden City?”

Aneirin startled awake at the sound of Zura’s voice. The two deer had stopped on a ridge overlooking a wide valley. Aneirin thought the sight before him must be the result of his illness. Gold and blue filled the basin, towers like

stacks of coins glimmering in the strong sun. Sand-colored streets wound between the impossibly tall buildings, and light reflected off the many pools of water and fountains scattered between them. Patches of brilliant emerald—gardens and parks—dotted the landscape, as did riots of bright orange, shocking pink, and scarlet: flowers. Aneirin could smell their perfume drifting on the warm breeze. The city stretched to the limits of his vision, and he knew only from tales that it reached to the edge of the sea. A wall of beige stone, studded with watchtowers with blue-tiled roofs, surrounded everything. “It’s beautiful.”

Zura removed his helmet and turned his face toward the sun. It lit the smooth planes of his face and made his black hair glisten. Aneirin’s whiskers had grown thick over the past few days, but only a fine line of stubble showed above the prince’s lip. “It’s home, and I am very glad to be back.”

The deer’s small hooves clicked on the wide, cobblestone road as they carefully picked their way down the hill toward the gilded gate in the distance. Aneirin sensed Kele and Kelyn’s anxiousness; they grew skittish enough around their own people, let alone a city of thousands of strangers. He was relieved when they reached the gate and Zura helped him dismount. Not only could the deer retreat to the cool shadows of the forest, he could let off feigning strength. He didn’t have much left, and he couldn’t pretend much longer. Without Zura to hold him up, he would have fallen, and he couldn’t bring himself to care. Lying down, even on hard rocks in the baking sun, sounded better than anything, but he knew if he succumbed to the urge, he wouldn’t be getting back up. So instead, he let the prince drag him through that gate into a city that, if not full of enemies, at least full of people far from sympathetic to his kind.

A cart drawn by two harts, their harness adorned with jewels, stopped just inside the gate. Zura helped Aneirin up and sat next to him. Soldiers in shiny armor marched beside them, six on each side. Aneirin watched as they disintegrated into streaks of gold... smears against the impossibly blue sky...

Zura caught him when he fell and helped him lie down. Aneirin closed his eyes. He just wanted to sleep, and though it would have seemed impossible a week ago, he trusted this southern prince to look after him. Zura didn’t turn from people—from friends—when they needed him most. Aneirin didn’t know if he would survive, but if he died, he knew it wouldn’t be because Prince Zura had given up on him.

## Chapter Ten

Brennan watched the small group of soldiers, led by the silver-haired prince, crawl along the ridge, high above the gorge where the bulk of his forces waited. The dead made up most of it, augmented by the poor simpletons who had followed him from either the fetid marshes to the east or the grassy plains to the west, beyond the canyon that marked Orauri's border. He'd gone west first in search of allies to topple the greedy southern empire and the northern clans who valued only those chosen by the fickle spirits, but he'd found only savages living in straw huts. A few of them could shoot a bow, so he'd taken them along. He hadn't found much better in the swamps, but he had found the old magic, sealed in tombs ancient long before the idea of the empire. Now, those people who thought him a god because he could change his form waited above the prince and his party, ready to bury them in a cascade of loose rocks.

He had planned to kill the prince and his companions before they could report on the location of his army, and it would be a simple thing to do so now. But might they serve his purposes better alive? Yes, he had new plans for them, and he cast off his cloak and took his raven form so he could fly to his people on the mountainside and inform them that he'd changed his mind.

It was a god's prerogative, after all.

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Aneirin woke to a cool metal goblet pressed to his lips. He gratefully swallowed the chilled water it contained. It took a moment before he realized doing so didn't make him feel like he'd ingested a handful of rusty nails. Opening his eyes, he saw nothing but squares of glowing color at first: cobalt, emerald, and deep purple. The tones soothed him, reminding him of the forest at twilight. But he had left the forest, come to the gates of the Golden City...

He sat up in a massive bed clothed in the smoothest fabric he'd ever felt. He was in a room made of golden stone, flanked with columns adorned with gold leaf and inset with gemstones. The colors came from the sun shining through a stained glass window, and in front of it, in an upholstered chair, sat Prince Jin. He looked softer out of his armor, wearing a loose marigold tunic with intricate beadwork around the plunging neckline. His steel-colored hair hung loose around his shoulders, and a choker of gems circled his slender neck. The sunburst mark had been painted at the center of his forehead, and a brilliant,

faceted red stone stood at the center. He... sparkled. From the top of his head to the toes of his embroidered slippers. And when he smiled, eyes crinkling to crescents and teeth flashing white, it was like the heavens opened and the sun shone on him alone.

And then Aneirin noticed the scar on his cheek—a satiny pink ribbon now.

“How long?” Aneirin’s voice sounded foreign to him, dry and croaking.

“Over a week,” Jin said. “You’ve been muttering for the last few hours, asking for water. How do you feel?”

Aneirin considered. “I think I’m going to live.”

“Good. Our healers did their work, then. They had to pump your stomach three times, and it took them many attempts before they found an antidote to the poison you ingested.”

“I owe my life to you and your brother,” Aneirin said. “Thank you for bothering to save me.”

“Do you imagine we would let you die?” That beautiful smile dropped from Jin’s face as if he’d been slapped and the icy mask slipped effortlessly into place. “Is that the kind of people you think we are? Is that what you think I am?”

Aneirin shook his head. It still felt packed full of wool, even if his body had been healed by the strange southern methods. He lifted his hand, testing his strength. When his muscles didn’t collapse on him, he touched the mending wound on Jin’s cheek. “I think you’re an icicle. Delicate and beautiful and cold. Reflecting the light until it hurts to look at you, but so fragile. How does an icicle survive in the city of the sun?”

Jin pulled away, and Aneirin wished he could recall his delirious words. What had he been thinking? All of this felt like a strange dream. This temple of crystalline glass, color, and jewels felt so alien.

The silence between them stretched into awkwardness. Aneirin scavenged through his drowsy brain for something to say. He didn’t want to leave his last words hanging between them, and he finally settled on something he knew Jin could relate to: business. “Did you discover anything about our enemies while I was... ill?”

A cloud must have passed in front of the sun, because shadow filled the room, and only the dozens of candles in their elaborate stands burned through

it. Darkness deepened around Jin's eyes, making his irises and the jewel on his face gleam in comparison. "I only returned to the city yesterday. We learned a great deal about those threatening us, and none of it good. My mother, the empress, has requested a detailed report. I will fill you in then. I have no wish to repeat myself. When you hear what I have to say, I'm sure you'll understand."

"I'm sure."

"The empress wishes for you to attend her council," Jin continued. "She has arranged for clothing for you. Do you feel up to taking a bath?"

"Spirits, yes." Aneirin could smell the stale sweat on his skin, the acrid poison that had oozed from his pores.

Jin stood. "I will arrange for the servants to assist you."

"Servants aren't the way of my people, Jin. Where I come from, a man does things for himself or not at all. Just point me in the direction of the wash basin, and I'll make do."

"Wash basin?" Jin's eyes went wide, and Aneirin suspected he might have laughed if he hadn't been so surprised.

"What? How else am I to clean up?"

"Well, if you would allow our servants to aid you, they would be happy to show you to the bathtub."

Aneirin shook his head. "I don't expect another person to wait on me. I'm not that far above anyone, and I don't want to be." He swung his legs over the edge of the bed and felt the cool stone, as smooth as still water, beneath his bare feet. He closed his eyes for a few moments until his head stopped spinning, and then he tried to stand, but a week in bed had left his muscles like wet rope, and his legs trembled until he had to sit back down.

Jin looked down at him with an expression like a carved statue. "In your home, if you have no servants, what happens when a man finds himself in need of help?"

Aneirin chuckled, but more out of pity than amusement. "If a man needs help where I come from, he extends a hand to a friend."

For what felt like forever, they watched each other, Aneirin too weak to rise from the bed, Jin standing with his arms crossed over his chest, eyes locked. The prince's face took on the faraway expression Aneirin associated with Jin

weighing his words, considering the pros and cons before speaking. But he didn't speak. Instead, he reached out his hand, and now Aneirin hesitated to ponder—but not for long. His wolf urged him to clasp Jin's hand, to make that tenuous connection, and when he did, he had never felt his spirit guide so satisfied.

Jin's hand was warm and solid. Strong. Palms covered in calluses earned around the hilts of his daggers. Aneirin's wolf told him this man could be part of his pack, someone he could trust to stand beside him. It made little sense, and Aneirin suspected his wolf responded to the moon in this silvery prince. Wolves, more than any other spirit, understood and revered the Lady of Changing Faces.

If it was more than that, now was not the time to think about it, let alone act. But there was one thing Aneirin needed to know. "Are you saying we're friends?"

Jin hesitated.

Aneirin gripped his hand tighter and drew on the prince's energy to stand. Inches separated his bare chest from Jin's. "Don't think about it. Say what's in your spirit."

Jin's posture stiffened, but he didn't pull away. "I do not believe in spirits. I believe what I see with my own eyes. What I have seen is a man who risked his life, who languished in this bed on the edge of death, in order to save me. Therefore, if I can help you to the bath, I'm happy to do it."

It was better than nothing. "Lead the way," Aneirin said. He took hold of Jin's elbow and let the prince guide him beneath an archway and into an octagonal room where a huge pool stood on a dais, surrounded by spear-shaped windows. Lemon-tinted light fell across the water, gilding the ripples that formed around a swan-shaped spout. Heavy red rugs covered the steps leading up to it, thick towels sat in baskets, bottles of soap and oils lined the rim, and incense burned in censers. Combined with the steam wafting from the water, it lent the room a hazy quality, a smear of earthy tones blending at the edges.

"Your people take bathing seriously," Aneirin observed.

"We do," Jin agreed as he helped Aneirin up the steps to the tub. Little red flowers Aneirin couldn't identify sprouted from faceted amber vases, emitting a cinnamon scent. "It's a harmless pleasure, after all. Besides, the city is densely populated. We consider it only polite not to offend others with our... odors."

“You’re not subtle,” Aneirin said. “Don’t worry; I’m getting in.”

“I will leave you now, if you can manage on your own.”

Aneirin slipped out of the billowy beige trousers the southerners had apparently put on him and left them on the steps. The water felt warm and strangely oily when he dipped his foot. “How’s it so warm?”

Jin focused his attention on one of the slender windows. “Sometimes we pipe it in from natural hot springs. Here, though, it’s heated by a furnace far below this level and pumped into the tub. I’ve asked the staff to add herbs and tinctures known to soothe stiff and sore muscles.”

“That was kind of you,” Aneirin said as he stepped cautiously into the pool. Just the sensation of submerging his calves eased the strain in his legs. “Ah. That’s... really nice.”

“I’ll leave you to it.”

“You don’t have to go,” Aneirin said as he sat down in the water and let it carry his tension away. Spirits, maybe there was something to the southern fancies about observing and quantifying, if this was an example... “We can talk while I wash. I’d like that.”

“I do not know if that’s a good idea.”

“Why?” Aneirin asked. “It’s not like I have anything you haven’t seen before. Surely a man’s cock doesn’t make you uncomfortable.” Spirits, he wanted Jin to see him, to look at him. He was just a man, nothing spectacular, but he wanted Jin’s eyes on his body, taking in everything, seeing all of Aneirin without gauze or illusion. He didn’t even know why, but he wanted to be bare before the prince’s scrutiny.

But Jin turned away, his back to Aneirin as Aneirin sank farther into the water. “I am not uncomfortable, but we cannot linger here. The empress is expecting us.”

Aneirin picked up a cloth and lathered it with soap before scrubbing at his underarms. “You ever been with anyone?”

“Excuse me?”

“Fucking,” Aneirin said as twisted the excessive water out of his rag and let it drip onto his face. “Do you like it?”

“I... don’t know. What difference does it make?”

“So you haven’t been with anyone.”

“I have much more important matters to occupy my time,” Jin snapped.

Aneirin twisted in the water and leaned his forearms on the pool’s edge so he could face Jin’s back. “Course you do. It’s no judgment. You’ll fuck someone when you’re ready, and when you want to. It’s no big accomplishment, really.”

“Then why ask?”

“Just making conversation. I’ve found it’s something men enjoy discussing.”

The prince spun to face him, hair swirling and eyes burning. “Are you saying I’m no man?”

Aneirin held up his hands, the washcloth still clutched in one. “No! Spirits. Just forget it. I know you’re used to being judged by others, but I judge men and women on how I have been treated by them. You have treated me well. You fought by my side. You took care of me when I couldn’t take care of myself. I trust you, and I just thought we could talk. My ways, my people’s ways, are probably coarse to you. I apologize. I did not mean to upset you.”

Jin’s nostrils flared and his lips pressed together. “I honestly wish people wouldn’t be so afraid of upsetting me. What do you think I am going to do? Wave my hand and have the ground swallow you up? Summon a pack of beasts to devour my critics? Light, I’m so sick of this.”

“I don’t want to upset you because I don’t want to see you upset,” Aneirin said. “I would much prefer we enjoy the time we spend together.”

Jin shook his head. “Forgive my overreaction.”

“There’s no need to ask forgiveness for an honest response,” Aneirin said. “I.. I can be the person you don’t have to think before speaking to. I can be the one you don’t have to worry will judge you.”

“Why?”

“So we can be friends.”

“Why?”

“Because I want to be your friend,” Aneirin said. “Does it need to be more than that?”

“I.. No. I would also like to be your friend.”

Aneirin smiled. He'd gained a few feet of ground and more, the young prince needed a confidant, someone who would consider the man and not the accident of his birth. "Toss me one of those towels, will you? And do you have a sharp blade? Should I shave my whiskers?"

The slightest hint of pink stained Jin's high cheekbones. "I wish you wouldn't. I... kind of like them."

Decision made, Aneirin said, "I suppose I should get dressed then." He waited to see if Jin would protest, say he liked Aneirin naked, but it was too much to hope for. The prince threw him a towel, followed by a set of flame-colored clothes.

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Aneirin followed Jin across a manicured courtyard, up a steep spiral of steps, and into a hall the size of the village square where Aneirin had grown up. Tanned people in shimmery gold garments lined the deep-green carpet they walked along as they approached the platform at the center of the space.

A man in tight red trousers struck a gong, and the subdued chatter in the hall fell to silence. The sound echoed through the room, and as if summoned, sunlight flooded the chamber. It burned through the round windows set high on the walls and down from the huge skylight in the dome of the ceiling. The shafts intersected and condensed on the golden chair sat atop the platform. A woman appeared beside it, wearing a headdress of dozens of twisted golden tines, studded with jewels and fanning out around her face like the rays of the sun. Six women carried the train of her metallic gown, and when she perched on the edge of her throne, they arranged the luminous fabric so it covered the steps leading up to her roost. The light reflecting off her dress and crown made Aneirin squint at its brilliance.

His people weren't much for pomp and ceremony, but Aneirin had to admit the vision of the golden empress cloaked in sunlight made an impression. He wondered if the southerners would bow, drop to their knees, or prostrate themselves on their bellies, but everyone stood stiff and still, waiting. Aneirin expected a servant to announce this great queen, and it surprised him when she spoke for herself.

"I am Empress Oro. Welcome to my city and my home."

Jin elbowed Aneirin, and he stepped forward. "Uh, thank you, your... Your Radiance. I'm called Aneirin, a simple man of the forest. I am grateful for the hospitality you have shown me and my people."

“It is our pleasure.” The empress had a pleasing voice, soft and melodious, but tinged with sadness and restraint. Aneirin couldn’t help but think she sounded more like her younger son than her older. “We should be thanking you. We understand that you are the reason our beloved sons were able to return to us. We can think of no greater gift you could have given us.”

Though Aneirin felt uncomfortable with so many eyes on him, so many ready to judge the words he would say, he needed to be heard. “Empress, your sons and all your people fought with great bravery and honor. I like to think we did the same. I mean no disrespect, but it was no gift. Rather people standing together against a common enemy, for all of our survival. On that battlefield, there was no North and South—only people watching each other’s backs and trying to stay alive.”

Silence stretched, and Aneirin feared he’d been too blunt for the southern sensibilities. Beads of sweat formed above his lips. The empress dipped her head, the gems hanging from the spokes of her crown rattling. “It is well said, Aneirin of the forest.”

“Thank you, Queen—Empress! Thank you, Empress.”

The door at the back of the hall opening distracted the audience from Aneirin’s embarrassment, and Aneirin could’ve kissed Prince Zura when he limped up the aisle aided by a crutch. Like his brother, Zura wore a gem at the center of his forehead. Dozens of people—southern soldiers and northerners alike—followed him. Aneirin noticed many of his countrymen had taken advantage of the fine clothing and quality armor the empire offered. Reyni stood out as a stark exception, her feet bare, red hair sticking out, leather leggings patched, and nothing but dirty cloth wrapped around her chest. She stood with one hip thrust up, gnawing at her pinky nail and looking supremely unimpressed as she regarded Empress Oro.

“Now that our council is complete, let us retire to somewhere more comfortable,” the empress said. Her ladies hurried to pick up the train of her garment, and Jin took Aneirin’s elbow and led him past the dais and through an unassuming wooden door at the back of the hall. They entered a room much smaller than the throne room but still large enough to have Aneirin gaping in wonder at the columns, windows, and gilded rafters. Before sitting down at the head of a long table carved from cloudy amber, the empress unbuttoned her golden gown, pushed it off her slender shoulders, and passed it off to her women, who worked together to fold it into a neat square. Beneath, the empress wore a simple white blouse gathered at her ribs to expose her stomach and

matching trousers. The fabric contrasted with her dark-golden skin, and a jewel glimmered from her belly button. When two of her servants lifted the heavy crown from her head, she shook out her long black tresses.

Aneirin didn't think he'd ever seen a more beautiful woman, or one with more confidence and intelligence in her dark eyes. Her sons had inherited her full lips and the delicate structure of her high cheeks and rounded chin. Thinking back to Zura's story, Aneirin wondered what kind of man could cast her aside in favor of whores. Clearly, she'd weathered the ordeal with strength and dignity, but the stain of pain remained, like a crack in a golden vase.

"Please sit." The empress indicated the upholstered chairs around the table, and Aneirin took his place between Jin and Zura. High-ranking knights filled the rest of the seats, along with some of the northern leaders, while everyone else found places to stand along the walls. Reyni sat in a bay window and wrapped her arms around her knees.

"I regret that we cannot spend more time getting acquainted and forging friendships between our nations," the empress said. "But the problem at hand is urgent. We cannot allow people from either of our countries to suffer at the hands of these monsters. Jin, please report on what you discovered."

"We located the bulk of the enemy forces in a canyon to the northeast. They seemed to have been there for some time... though it was hard to be certain. Most of the ranks are of the dead—animated corpses that need no tents, fires, or food. They simply stand in place... waiting. We estimated they number about two thousand, but we were unable to determine who leads them or what might motivate their attacks on our lands." Jin shuddered and pressed a fist to his lips. "We were unable to determine by what means the dead could be made to walk again, but we know from the battle at the creek that they are formidable adversaries."

"But not invincible ones," Zaundra said from farther down the table. "They might be able to survive wounds a mortal soldier couldn't, but chopping off their heads stops them. As does fire."

"Two thousand," the empress repeated. "A significant force, but hardly an impossible obstacle. We can send double that number of Oraurian soldiers to deal with them."

"Empress, I beg you to reconsider," Glaw said. "I have seen these creatures firsthand, fought them, and each one of them is worth three or more flesh and blood soldiers. Send enough fighters to outnumber them four to one, five to

one, or more. I'm sure my people will offer what assistance we can, but the only hope we have for any of us coming back is to overwhelm these things, destroy them fast, before they can take too many of our people with them."

Oro drummed nailed lacquered in gold and studded with diamonds on the tabletop. "Gauldaria could spare ten thousand soldiers, but it would leave the city woefully unprotected."

"How much protection does the city really need?" Zura asked. "Our walls are high and strong. Even five thousand of these monsters couldn't breach them if we seal the gates."

Jin lifted his head as if he had something to add, but then he pressed his lips together and focused his attention on his clasped hands.

"Besides," Zura continued, "I cannot trek into the mountains with my broken ankle, but I can lead our people here."

"I would also like to stay," Glaw said. "I have faced these creatures before, and I might be able to lend some insight. I would be honored to fight next to your brave warriors."

"Mother, I ask that you let me lead our people against this enemy," Jin said.

A few soft gasps could be heard in the ensuing silence.

"I'll come with you," Aneirin offered, both of spirits compelling him to speak before his mind weighed the consequences. His wolf and his cat told him he belonged beside Jin, helping the prince to end the threat to both their lands. His cat anticipated the fun of killing, while his wolf thought only of protecting the pack, and for whatever reason, the pack included the chilly southern prince. Part of being spirit-guided meant surrendering one's will, acknowledging that the spirit knew better, and so Aneirin deferred to his mentors.

"Empress, I'm happy to go and defend our kingdom," Zandra said. "But something to give us an advantage won't be unwelcome. We need fire—some way to bring the righteous light down on the heads of these rotted bastards."

The empress sat stone still, her palms flat on the table. Not even the twitch of her manicured eyebrows belied her emotions. After several moments passed, she looked up, looked at each person in the room and slowly met his or her eyes. "We will feast and celebrate tonight. Tomorrow, Prince Jin will ride out with ten thousand soldiers. He will take with him anything our inventors can provide to burn these abominations from the surface of the world. Prince Zura will coordinate the city's defenses, aided by this honorable man of the North."

She indicated Glaw, and Aneirin swelled with pride. He'd always known his brother would rise to greatness, spirit-guided or not. It pleased him that Glaw would finally see what he could accomplish. Perhaps some spirit had guided them here, so that Glaw would learn that even without spirit guides, the southerners made capable warriors... and honorable people. A victory would do Glaw good.

"I want the strike against these creatures decisive and final," Empress Oro continued. "I want their foul presence obliterated from this land. Leave no survivors."

"It will be done," Jin said. "I swear it."

The empress nodded once. "Let us plan and prepare until evening. Then we'll share a meal and drink together as allies." She smiled and met Aneirin's gaze. Spirits, was there no one in this family who couldn't stir his loins? "When this threat is eliminated, we'll have to pursue... diplomatic relations."

The empress stood and left, followed by her attendants. Slowly the meeting room emptied, until only Aneirin, Jin, Zura, Zandra, Glaw, and Reyni remained.

"It'll be a good thing to see an end to this," Zura said.

"Yes, it will," Glaw agreed.

"Bollocks," Reyni spat. "We should go home and forget about this shite."

"Our home is also threatened," Aneirin gently offered, "but if you wish to leave, I won't hold it against you."

Reyni looked up at him, grinning and showing her teeth. "You'd be fucked without me, Ani. Besides, my fox is damned keen on slaying these reeking fucks. If there's one thing a fox hates, it's stupidity. If there's a second thing a fox hates, it's being told what to do, but for now, we'll just consider it a suggestion. Did somebody say something about a feast?"

Zura offered Reyni his arm. "My lady, permit me to lead you to your quarters. You can rest and... freshen up. If you'd permit me further, I would be honored to have a dress made to your specifications. What do you think? Green velvet, to match your beautiful eyes? An amber pendant, and heeled shoes with jewels at the toes?"

Aneirin winced.

Reyni clasped Zura's elbow and rubbed her hip against his, smiling sweetly. "And how about I claw your balls off, Prince All-Golden-And-Perfect? Where I

come from, you wear what helps you move fast and quiet, what protects you from an enemy's blade. You sure as shite don't wear something that makes you slow and clumsy. So thank you very much, but you can cram your velvet dress up your pretty little ass."

Zura paled as he guided Reyni from the room. "I... I am sure you'll enjoy the food. It's... meat. Plenty of meat..."

Jin shook his head. "Light bless my brother. He does try."

"He's a good man," Aneirin agreed. He sat down at the table and waited for the others to leave. Soon he was alone with Jin, and he could ask the question that had been bothering him. "You don't agree with your mother's decision, do you?"

Jin flopped into the empress's seat and hooked a knee over the arm of the chair. If Aneirin hadn't known how much pressure weighed upon the prince, he'd have thought Jin looked wanton, debauched with his legs spread like that and his hair falling into his eyes...

"Her reasoning is sound." Jin shielded his eyes with his hand. "I have no doubt we'll be able to eliminate the threat with the number of soldiers she's providing, but..."

"But?"

"We need to take out the leader. Or what's to stop them from trying again? Enlisting more dead to come after us. If there's one thing there's never any shortage of, it's dead."

"Why didn't you say so?"

Jin shook his head. "Because my mother's plan makes sense. Questioning it would be ridiculous. We have the numbers to eliminate this enemy. I... I cannot argue against a sound plan just because something in my gut tells me there's more to it. I have to trust in the concrete, the logical."

"I trust in the spirits," Aneirin said. "Maybe your spirit—"

"No! I am not swayed by such nonsense. My mother's plan is solid, and I will see it through to success."

"All right," Aneirin said. "All right. I'm with you. We'll see an end to these disgusting things. We should eat and rest. After tomorrow, full bellies and soft beds will be hard to come by."

## Chapter Eleven

The southern army stretched for miles along the road leading to the canyon where Brennan's forces waited. Brennan was happy to see so many of them had quit the city and now stood only ten miles or less from his legions. Everything was progressing just the way he had hoped. It was almost too easy to manipulate people as secure in their superiority as the southern fighters and the spirit-guided of the forests. He only regretted that he had to leave his plans in the hands of someone so inferior to himself.

Brennan turned to the woman from the eastern swamps. "You know what to do?"

"Aye, master. Keep the southern army from returning to the city at any cost."

Her hair hung in greasy tangles, her teeth were yellow and twisted, and her breath stank.

"That's right," Brennan said. "At *any* cost. Do you understand?"

"Yes. Yes, of course, black-feathered lord."

He shook his head and let his black cloak fall around his feet in a dark pool. The swamp woman licked her cracked lips as she regarded his naked form. He knew he was beautiful—it had been the one thing everyone agreed upon when he'd lived in the North and then in the South. Being born of a faithless southern lord and a mountain slut had granted him the creamy pale skin of the North and the straight black hair common to the people of Orauri. Physically, he represented the best of both worlds, though his lineage had earned him only disdain and sometimes outright contempt. But all of that would change soon enough. He let his arms stretch into strong wings and his legs twist into spindly black claws. Flapping his wings and catching an updraft, he was glad to be rid of the simple vassals who stared at him with such bare lust, blushing through the grime on their faces. He was certainly relieved to be rid of the smell.

As soon as he took control of the two nations, he would teach these people how to see to their hygiene. He would teach them to read, to make art, and to play instruments. Everyone would have an important role to play in his new world. Everyone would have worth—not only those who could take an animal's form or those born to wealthy and aristocratic southern families.

In the kingdom he planned to build and lead, no one would ever have to know the pain of being useless and ignored, even if that pain had made him strong.

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For the third time that evening, Jin checked the position of the archers, the trails from which the infantry would be deployed, and the placement of the six large catapults that would hurl buckets of flammable pitch into the gorge below. He shivered. It got dark fast here in the mountains; instead of the slow bleed and swirls of colors he could watch from his balcony in the city, the sunset here was as instant as snuffing a candle. One moment it was light, and then the sun fell behind some cliff or craggy peak, and that fast, it was dark. And it was freezing.

They didn't dare risk lighting fires and alerting their enemies to their presence. Even moving a tenth of his forces into position for the initial ambush had been almost impossible. Not only was it hard for a thousand men to march quietly—while carrying weapons and equipment—but there was no flat place where more than twenty-five to fifty people could gather. Some of the archers had climbed steep rocks and waited in groups of six. Jin would have preferred to spring his trap with at least half of his soldiers, but there wasn't anywhere else around the canyon to station them. The bulk of his forces waited on the roads and in the fields and flat woodlands surrounding them. It would take hours of hard riding for the closest to reach the gorge. Jin had a system in place, but he still worried.

It couldn't hurt to check the eastern catapults one more time. They'd be essential to the coming battle. He wandered through a patch of stunted conifers and up the steep gravel path that had been a nightmare to haul the siege equipment up. Even on foot, Jin slid a few times and had to grab for branches. When he finally hauled himself onto the small plateau, he found eight people leaning against the two catapults, the ceramic urns of pitch stacked neatly between them... just as they'd been when he'd checked an hour ago.

Jin sighed out a frozen puff of air and pressed the heels of his hands against his eyes in a vain attempt to still the throbbing in his head. This needed to succeed, and they had only one chance. There should be something he could do to prepare... but he'd done everything he could do.

The soldiers watched him, probably wondering why he'd returned. Would they find it a show of weakness, of insecurity, of... of the ill portents of birth hour beginning to manifest?

Jin wanted to be alone. He noticed a thin trail winding almost vertically between the mountain stones—probably something used only by wild goats. Picking his way slowly, feeling for handholds and footholds in the lengthening shadows, he made his way to a ledge. He wiped the sweat from his face on the inside of his elbow. The ridge was deeper than he'd expected, and toward the back was a cleft in the rocks that formed a natural cave. Above it, a gnarled old tree bent in an arch, its willowy limbs hanging down like a curtain in front of the niche, dropping crisp golden leaves to carpet the rocky ground.

It was as intricate and beautiful as anything made by the artisans in Gaudaria.

Jin wandered to the edge and sat down, drained to his bones from the climb and the stress of the last few weeks. The canyon below was as still and silent as tomb, and it was wrong, so wrong. There should be fires, people moving, preparing weapons, getting drunk...

A full, silvery moon ringed with crystalline mauve, lavender, and cerulean rose and seemed to balance on the peak of a mountain. It turned the leaves and brush metallic and made the frost sparkle.

“Beautiful, isn't it?”

Jin hadn't heard Aneirin scrambling up the trail or wading through the fallen leaves. Even more surprisingly, he felt no urge to snap at the other man for interrupting his solitude. He didn't even complain when Aneirin sat next to him, so close their shoulders touched.

“It has a certain subtle, cold appeal,” Jin admitted. He watched the way the lilac light moved across the rocks. “It shows patches of things, but I'm not sure if that doesn't make those that remain hidden even more disconcerting.” He looked up at the craters on the moon's surface. “I can look at it without it hurting my eyes.”

“When the Lady turns the fullness of her face on the mountains, the children of the forest dance long into the night,” Aneirin said.

“So this is the best night of the month for your people?”

Aneirin chuckled softly. “We revere all aspects of the Lady of Changing Faces. They're just good for different things. Some are for hunting, others for seeking various spirits. The fullness of her face is the best night for a mated couple to try for a baby.”

Jin almost snorted. That made no sense. A woman's fertility varied between individuals; it had nothing to do with the phases of the moon. A couple hoping to conceive would do better to visit a midwife, make a record of the cycles...

"You don't believe me."

"It doesn't agree with what I have been taught," Jin said.

Aneirin looked up, and the ethereal light washed over his face. "Some things can't be taught. They can only be felt. Can you truly sit here and watch the Lady's light on the forest and feel nothing? Ah, it's like a distant song echoing in my blood, pulling at me. My wolf especially is impatient to serenade the Lady, to run beneath her silvery fingers."

"Why don't you?"

"Now is not the time," Aneirin said. "Don't your people have any love, any celebrations of the Lady?"

"My people don't think much about the moon one way or another," Jin said. "It's just something that's there, like the ground or the clouds. They go on about their lives while it moves around them. Personally, I... Never mind."

"What?"

Jin shook his head. "I have never told anyone. I don't wish for you to mock me."

"I won't."

For whatever reason, Jin believed him. "Fine. I hate it. I'm afraid of it. Ever since I found out about the circumstances of my birth, I have tried to avoid it, as if sitting in its light will speed its influence over me. Like it can soak into me and sway me, like drinking too much wine. Like it can infect me and make me lose control... sooner."

He expected Aneirin to tell him how ridiculous that all sounded, but when he looked over, he found Aneirin watching him with a steady gaze. "The Lady's influence isn't all madness, Jin. She has many gifts to impart—intuition, creativity, emotion, prophecy, and dreams."

"I don't want any of those things. I just want to be strong and steady—a good leader to my people. Trusted and respected."

"Why are they mutually exclusive?"

"Because dreams and emotions can't be trusted. They're the antitheses of wisdom and reason. Shadows that flit around at the edges of the light."

“I suppose we’ll have to disagree,” Aneirin said.

Jin felt a twitch of annoyance at his conciliatory tone, as if he wouldn’t waste breath arguing with a crazy person. “If you’re so keen to imbibe of all these wonderful things, then why don’t you heed the call of your beast, go out and frolic around in your wonderful moonlight?”

The retaliation Jin expected never came. Aneirin’s voice was soft, edged with regret. “It’s a fine thing to be chosen by a spirit, a fine thing to understand one until you can walk in his skin, hear with his ears, and see through his eyes. To know the world as he does. There’s nothing like it. It’s like seeing a whole different world and understanding it in a different way. But it isn’t without risks. The will of the spirits is strong, and if a man or woman isn’t equally strong, the spirit can crowd him out. Even for the most willful of us, the influence of the spirit grows over time, and if we aren’t careful, we can slip away piece by piece as the spirit flows in to fill up the cracks. We can lose ourselves. Spending too much time in your spirit’s form can give the spirit a bigger crack to sneak through. I am guided by two spirits, and both of them are deadly hunters. If one of them overtakes me, I’ll have to leave my people. I won’t be safe to live among them. If that tether slips through my hands... So you see, you aren’t the only man who must walk on a thin rope, always fearing what you think is inevitable, always fighting to keep it at bay a little longer. I... want a family. To be an old man and hold my children’s children.”

Jin watched the way Aneirin’s long fingers knit together on his thigh, the way the fine hair on his forearms looked downy and translucent in the moonlight, the way his leather vest bunched and rippled where he bent his waist to lean forward. “Is that why you waited so long to change your form when we faced the dead that first time?”

“I try to save it for when I need it most. It’s a weapon like any other—useful if you’re careful and know how to handle it, dangerous if you act like a damned fool. Most spirit-guided live full and happy lives. It’s a balancing act.”

“And what made you change your mind?”

Anerin turned to face him, his jaw set and his eyes spilling heat Jin could practically feel on his skin. If it wouldn’t have sounded insane, he would have sworn he saw the beast looking out through Aneirin’s eyes. It made him shiver. Aneirin reached up and wrapped his fingers around Jin’s chin, his thumb caressing the mostly healed scar across Jin’s cheek. When he spoke, his breath was warm and moist against Jin’s lips.

“There was a moment, when those things were dragging you down, and I knew you would be gone. Gone from the world, the light gone out of your eyes. Something in me... No, *everything* in me rose up and screamed, ‘No.’ I let my spirits have their way, because the only thing that mattered to me was not losing you.”

Jin’s heart floundered and his fingers, balled to fists in his leather gloves, tingled. He wondered how it was possible to feel like he’d been stabbed through the heart and at the same time be happier than he ever remembered. His eyes stung and his mouth went dry. He couldn’t manage more than a whisper. “I don’t know what to say.”

“Don’t say anything.”

Aneirin leaned in slowly, giving Jin time to retreat, but Jin didn’t want to. He closed the distance, lifting his hand to the back of Aneirin’s neck. At first their lips brushed together, as soft as a breeze, but Jin wanted more. He wanted to feel and taste, give himself over to his instincts no matter how dangerous it might be. He pulled Aneirin closer, and their mouths, hot and wet, opened to each other. Jin felt the smoothness of Aneirin’s teeth against his tongue, then the slick swell of Aneirin’s tongue meeting his. Aneirin nibbled along his lower lip, then across his jaw and down his neck. As he did, Jin tore at his gloves to get them off, to get his hands on Aneirin’s skin. When he did, when he closed his fingers around the lithe muscles of Aneirin’s arms and felt the pulse and life surging beneath his palms, something deep inside Jin broke, and everything he’d fought so hard to hold inside all his life flooded free.

Jin grabbed hold of Aneirin’s hair and pulled his head back to expose his throat. Pressing his face against the length of skin, he swallowed the scents of sweat and pine, and he dragged his lip over the other man’s Adam’s apple. He darted his tongue out to taste salt and feel the rough texture of emerging stubble. Then he moved lower and rubbed his cheek against the patch of blond hair poking out at the V of Aneirin’s vest. He’d thought about that swath of hair often since he’d stolen glimpses of Aneirin bathing, wondered how it would feel. It was coarse and wiry, saturated with Aneirin’s scent—better than Jin could have imagined. He tugged at the vest, eager to open it and get at the gilded trail at the center of the man’s belly, the thicker, darker hair between his legs, groaning with frustration when the material refused to cooperate.

Before Jin could tear the man’s clothes off—and he felt sure he would have—Aneirin took hold of his shoulders and stilled Jin’s frantic movements. Their gazes met and locked. With melting gentleness, Aneirin leaned in and

pressed a soft, lingering, but almost chaste kiss to Jin's lips. He pulled back and smiled a lazy smile, his lids heavy over his pale eyes. "If you want me naked, all you have to do is ask, Your Highness."

Jin raked his fingernails through that tantalizing chest hair. "Don't call me that. Call me by my name."

"Jin."

Jin closed his eyes and shuddered at the sound of his name on Aneirin's lips—that first hard sound with the rest drawn out like a hopeful moan until the N dropped off into a rattle in Aneirin's throat.

Jin lifted one of Aneirin's hands and explored it with his mouth: the new scratches and old scars over his knuckles, the glass-hard calluses on the pads of his fingers. "Again."

"Jin."

"Light." Jin ran his hands down Aneirin's chest, his taut muscles and erect nipples prominent even through the rough leather. As he moved to touch Aneirin's thighs, his hands skimming over sharp hipbones toward the pure, compact strength of Aneirin's legs, Jin leaned in for another soft kiss.

"Jin, do you want me naked?"

"Yes."

Aneirin circled Jin's swollen lips with his thumb. "You too."

"I... my armor?"

Aneirin chuckled. "Yes. I can't feel anything of you through that shell, and it's driving me out of my mind."

"But... take off my armor when we're surrounded by enemies?"

"You have a hundred men on watch, and there's at least twenty of mine roaming the forests. You can take the armor off for a few moments. Please, take off the armor and put the masks away, and let me see you."

Throat tight, Jin could only nod and start on the buckles of his breastplate. By the time he removed his plate and the leather and chain mail underneath, Aneirin stood nude in the moonlight, waiting. He reached out a hand to Jin, and Jin let his final undergarment fall, standing more exposed than he'd ever been, more really himself, for good or ill, with nothing to hide behind. Then he took

Aneirin's hand and pulled him close, their skin warm where it met, the night air nipping at their bare bodies.

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They lay on the ground with only their rumpled clothing between them and the sharp rocks. It was cold, but Jin didn't want to relinquish the moist seam where their bodies joined, Aneirin's chest hair against his cheek, or the stickiness they'd spilled into each other's hands and against each other's bellies.

Aneirin grazed his fingers down Jin's arm, raising gooseflesh. "You ever seen an icicle in the moonlight? It's beautiful."

Jin rolled his eyes. "I'm not an icicle."

Swirling his thumb through the drying spend in the sparse hair at Jin's groin, Aneirin said, "I guess you have melted some."

"Light." Jin poked Aneirin's waist, making the other man squeal. "You should stick to hunting in the forest. I don't think your poesy will impress the imperial court anytime soon."

"Well, my talents have impressed at least one member of the imperial family," Aneirin said, stroking Jin's inner thigh.

Desire stirred anew at the root of Jin's body, and he took Aneirin's wrist to move his hand away. "You have, but I need you to stop now. I'm... too sensitive."

After a disappointed growl against the top of Jin's head, Aneirin breathed, "When?"

Jin combed his fingers through the hair on Aneirin's lower stomach. He couldn't get enough of that golden trail, especially as it was now, smeared with Jin's drying seed. "It's funny. I thought you were interested in my brother."

"I was." Aneirin cleared his throat. "Let me state it in the southern fashion: I was not *uninterested* in your brother."

"Stop." Jin wondered if he had made a mistake, if what had been so profound to him hadn't meant the same to Aneirin.

"Sorry." Aneirin pinched Jin's chin and inclined his head so they could look each other in the eye. "Spirits, you're beautiful. I *was* interested in Zura. Past tense. I was interested in a lot of people."

“And now you’re not?”

“I want to see where this goes, Icicle... Jin. Do you? I’ve never been with someone and thought, ‘I need this for the rest of my life. I just need this.’ Have you?”

“I’ve never been with anyone. But... more of this... well, as we say in the South, more of this wouldn’t be completely disagreeable.”

Aneirin rolled Jin so they lay chest to chest. He kissed Jin hard, and Jin felt Aneirin’s toothy smile against his lips. “That’s something. Can we build on not completely disagreeable? I can possibly improve my technique. Maybe even to somewhat agreeable. Will you let me try?”

Jin exhaled against Aneirin’s mouth. “For now, let’s just see if we live through tomorrow. I should get back to my soldiers.”

“A few more moments. If I might die tomorrow, I want to remember how you feel next to me. But if we don’t die...?”

“Persistent, aren’t you?” They kissed languidly for a few moments. “If we don’t die... I won’t dismiss the possibility. Did you like that?”

“Not really,” Aneirin said, tickling Jin’s ribs.

“All right. If we don’t die, we should see each other. We should make love. We should lie around and talk like this and see if we really want to make it something permanent. I wouldn’t be opposed... Oh, fuck it. I want that. To see where it will go. I want to be reasonable about it, and I don’t want to rush in to something that will affect the rest of my life, but I also don’t want to regret not giving it a chance.”

“Jin?”

“Hmm?”

“Please don’t die.”

“You too,” Jin said, reality pressing in on the tiny sanctuary he’d carved out. “In the morning it’ll end, one way or the other.”

“Or it’ll begin,” Aneirin said, his optimistic tone clearly forced. “Remember that.”

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## Chapter Twelve

Zura leaned against the wall of the watchtower, and the pained expression on his face told Glaw his broken ankle bothered him. It was no surprise; the man had been on his feet since morning inspecting troops and scrutinizing the soldiers manning the stations along the wall, traveling from post to post as if he hadn't been dependent on the crutch.

"You should go to bed for the night, sir," Glaw suggested. "You are still healing."

"I need to keep an eye on things here," Zura argued tiredly, the strain pulling him down.

Glaw crossed the small space and put a hand on Zura's shoulder. He looked into the southern prince's dark eyes, the skin around them wrinkled and bruised with fatigue. "Forgive me for being blunt, sir. It's our way in the forest. Every tower along this wall has been checked, and the people on watch are dependable. We haven't seen a sign of anything in over twelve hours. There's nothing coming—not anytime soon. You said it yourself: nothing can get into this city when it's locked down. You should go to bed. You'll be of far more benefit to your soldiers if you're hale and healthy. I've led men before, sir. I can certainly handle overseeing a quiet watchtower for a few hours while you rest."

Zura closed his eyes and rubbed his thumb and finger across them. "You're a good man, Glaw. All of your people have performed so admirably. If you're sure you'll be all right, I might lie down for an hour or so. I'll take a cot here in the barracks, so you can wake me if there's any sign of trouble. You'll do that?"

"Of course I will. I'll roust you out at the first hint of anything, sir."

"I can't thank you enough." Zura's stiff posture relaxed, and he turned and headed for the stairs. "Wake me in a few hours."

"If you insist," Glaw said, smiling.

He waited until Zura had probably been asleep for at least an hour, and then he descended the tower stairs to the ground below. The two guards stationed at the door nodded to him, and he proceeded without questions. In fact, every southern guard he passed offered nothing more than a tired smile. Glaw easily

made his way to the tiny door tucked at a corner of the wall near the northwest. Zura, proud to explain and display the history of his city, had mentioned that this unassuming wooden door had once been used to allow sheep from outlying farms into Gauldaria. Since then, it had been mostly forgotten.

Glaw slid the rusty deadbolt open and cracked the old door. Dark eyes met his through the cleft. Glaw tried to contain his repulsion and fear. He wasn't at all sure he was doing the right thing.

"Do you intend to keep our agreement?" asked the pale man in the dark cloak.

"You... you're going to make sure everyone's equal?" Glaw asked.

"I told you as much."

"And it won't matter if a person can take an animal's form?"

"As I said." The man sounded bored. "Everyone will have worth. It will not matter if they can take another form or if they are born to a wealthy and influential family. Everyone will have a place. I just need you to let me in."

Glaw's hand shook on the tarnished doorknob. "And if I do, you'll teach me how to take the form of a raven?"

"If that is what you want," the too-pretty man said. "It will not matter in the world I intend to build, but I will still show you the magic if that is what you desire. You'll be able to pass it on to all of your descendants."

Glaw opened the door, and the man in the cloak entered the city of Gauldaria. "Show me the way to the catacombs."

"Yes," Glaw said, visions of sprouting wings, of the awe and respect others would finally show him clear in his mind. He took a torch from the wall and led Brennan through the silent streets of the city, to the center, where centuries of Oraurian dead rested inside miles of tunnels and tombs. At the sight of the entrance, Brennan licked his lips as if he'd happened upon a feast spread out just for him. Together, he and Glaw descended the old steps into the catacombs.

A mile or so in, at an intersection where no living person had probably stood in decades, Brennan stopped and cast off his cloak, revealing a lanky body covered in crisscrossing scars. He wore only snug gray trousers, simple boots, and a belt from which several pouches hung. He lifted his hands to his sides, palms pointing to the vaulted ceiling high above them, and a sigh shuddered through the tunnel. Cool, stale air washed over Glaw, and he

retreated until his back met the eroded statue of a southern warrior woman. He wanted to run, but he had to see this through. Things needed to change.

Brennan moved his fingers in delicate, swirling gestures, and one by one, stubs of candles, lanterns, braziers, and torches placed around the graves sprang alight with blue flame. Glaw gasped at the magnitude of the necropolises. Niches set into the wall rose until they disappeared into the darkness, dozens and dozens high. They stood in blocks separated by statues or stone coffins on platforms, possibly divided into family units. From where they stood, eight tunnels branched out like the spokes of a wheel, and down each one, Glaw could see hundreds and hundreds of tombs, and he knew this was only one small section of the warrens beneath the city.

Brennan sat down on his heels and arranged the things from his pouches around him. If he remembered Glaw still stood behind him, he didn't seem to care. Glaw knew he could leave—he had kept his bargain by getting Brennan into the city—but morbid curiosity kept him rooted in place. This was magic his people had never even considered.

With a plain dagger, Brennan made a deep cut between his wrist and elbow, slicing down into the fat and muscle beneath the skin. Glaw winced at the sorcerer's sharp inhale, because it struck him more as a sound of pleasure than pain. Brennan held his arm out straight in front of him, letting the blood pour in a thick stream to form a pool on the floor. Then he reached into one of his pouches and sprinkled some glittering dust into the fluid. It boiled, big bubbles forming and popping on the surface, releasing a dense red steam.

Brennan dropped the dagger and reached out with his uninjured arm. His soft groan grew to an ear-splitting scream as his bones elongated and twisted, his skin blackening and his fingers curling into talons. He gnashed his teeth, head thrashing from side to side as long ebony feathers sprouted from the outside of his arm and along his back, following the curve of his shoulder blade. He panted hard, whimpering, as a dewclaw tore through his wrist with an eruption of blood, and then he dropped his head, his long hair curtaining his face. When he lifted his head, one of his eyes, the one on his right, the same side as the hideous mockery of a wing his arm had become, glowed red. Blood dripped from the corner of that eye, and from the sorcerer's nostrils. After taking a few moments to recover, Brennan used his newly born feathers to fan the roiling pool of blood.

The blood began to flow in little channels between the stones of the crypt floor. It moved farther and farther from the source, filling every crack. As it

did, the mist it produced flooded the tunnels, thick, hot, and metallic. It formed tendrils that snaked and curlicued into the niches holding the southern dead, beneath the lids of the stone coffins. The sounds of scratches and moans echoed off the old stone walls, followed the scrape of stone against stone as the lids of the sepulchers slid open.

The dead dragged themselves from their resting places. Those higher up fell in piles of bones before shambling to their feet. By the hundreds, and then the thousands, they emerged to fill the tunnels, some fresh, pallid, and bloated, others mere skeletons in bits of rusted armor. They massed around the sorcerer, who stood shakily, his winged appendage hanging almost to the floor. Looking out over them, Glaw saw thousands of red eyes, as if the catacombs were filled with sparks from a campfire. He slapped a hand over his mouth to keep from crying out. Brennan, though, smiled wide and twirled around, like a child dancing in the spring rain. He giggled softly before tossing his head back and laughing until he had to stop to catch his breath and wrap his arm around his ribs.

After he calmed down, Brennan turned to his waiting army. “Well, go on then.”

The creatures obeyed, moving toward the exits to the catacombs, passing by Glaw and Brennan as if they weren’t even there.

“What will happen now?” Glaw asked, shouldering his way through the corpses to stand next to their master.

Brennan, his pale face streaked with dried blood, turned to Glaw and winked. “Now, we just stand back and let them do what they do best.”

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Jin stood in a field of bleached bones, the sun a blood-red smear above the mountains. He felt like he’d been walking for days, but neither the light nor the landscape changed. He stopped and scanned the battlefield. Bits of black began to flutter down from the sky, like the bits of paper confetti thrown at parties, but translucent—scraps of shadow that gathered and swirled around him, thicker and thicker until he stood inside a column of darkness. That darkness had weight and form, and it pressed in on Jin, making his arms feel heavy and driving the breath from his chest. Suffocating him. Squeezing until his insides hurt and his bones felt ready to snap. He couldn’t draw in enough air to scream as the shadow wrapped him tighter and tighter. No matter how hard he twisted and thrashed, he couldn’t move an inch. He wanted to cry out for help but he

couldn't. In the distance, he heard the cry of a bird, the rattle of old bones, and the heavy and hollow scrape of stone. He could see nothing but a red eye looking down on him from where the sun had been.

Jin startled awake and sat up in his bedroll. Zaundra stood over him, backlit by the fuzzy pink of dawn. "It's time, sir."

He nodded. "Please tell everyone to prepare. You know what to do. I'll be along in a moment."

"Yes, sir."

As if to assure himself he could, Jin swallowed great gulps of air. He looked at the lightening sky and then down at his shaking hands. He had almost convinced himself that this wasn't going to happen, that he could escape the curse of his birth. Why now, when his people needed him the most? How could he lead them when he couldn't be sure what was real? How could they be expected to follow a man slipping into insanity? Even now, Jin could see those scraps of shadow fluttering at the edges of his vision. He felt the pressure on his chest, against his belly.

Why now? He wished he believed in the spirits as Aneirin did, so he could bargain with them, implore them to give him just a few more days, just long enough to see his people through this battle and purge this threat from their land. It hurt to watch his plans with Aneirin, those future moments he'd allowed himself to imagine before falling asleep, wiped away, buried beneath that black deluge. Jin decided if he survived the day, he would part ways with Aneirin. Better that than let Aneirin watch him become a madman, muttering nonsense, cowering from shadows, and frothing at the mouth.

But that was to worry over later. Jin motioned one of the young squires over to help him into his armor. Then he drank some water and made his way to his post.

From the position of the eastern catapults, Jin could see almost the entire field. Below, the dead still filled the canyon like so much rotted gray meat. He could see his archers and more of the catapults positioned on the other side of the gorge, and he could see the roads leading to the gorge that would bring his riders at the appointed time. Though his chest still felt tight and his throat swollen, he could do this. They had the chasm surrounded. They had the enemy outnumbered. They would prevail.

Aneirin came up to stand beside Jin, wearing a new mail shirt and the simple plate armor issued to the foot soldiers. It was nowhere near as fancy as

Jin's, but it would protect him, and that pleased Jin. When Aneirin smiled, Jin had to turn away. There would be no more lovemaking in the moonlight, no grandchildren sitting in their laps...

"My people are ready," Aneirin said. "I'll fight next to you."

"Very well, but do not distract me," Jin said. Aneirin flinched and frowned, but Jin turned his back on Aneirin and went to stand between the catapults. He lifted his hand above his head and brought it down. The catapults fired, as did those positioned farther down the ridge and those on the other side of the gorge. The dead below barely stirred as soldiers turned flywheels to re-aim the weapons, their goal to coat as much of the ravine with the flammable mixture as possible. Jin lifted his hand and brought it down. They discharged the catapults three more times, and then he signaled to the archers on the ledge above him. Their attack served as a signal to the rest of the archers, and soon flaming arrows rained down on the gulch.

Pinpoints of flame filled the gorge, and Jin had a vision of being surrounded by thousands of red eyes. He shook his head to clear it away and pointed to the archers. "Again!"

With the next attack, the pitch caught, and waves of flames moved over the creatures. Billows of black smoke rose into the sky, and bits of debris swirled around. Choking and coughing, Jin fought to focus, to concentrate only on what was happening in front of him.

"They're not doing anything," Aneirin said. "They're not trying to fight. They're not even running away."

"We've got them, sir!" a woman shouted. "We'll be camped and drunk by sunset!"

Many of the other soldiers cheered, but Jin stood staring down at the inferno in disbelief. Had they really done it?

Aneirin clapped him on the shoulder. "You did well here today. The plan was solid, and the careful preparation really paid off. You should be proud of this victory."

Should he? Maybe he needed to let go of his doubt and take pride in what he had accomplished. "All right. Good job, everyone!"

In response, the soldiers hollered, hooted, and banged their swords against their shields. Jin smiled and let some of the tension slip from his neck and back.

Slowly, he lowered his dagger and looked back at the burning chasm. By now, nothing down there could've survived.

When Jin heard a commotion above and off to the sides, he assumed the soldiers were moving, packing up equipment, eager to rejoin their comrades down the road and commence with their victory celebrations. It took a moment before he realized his people weren't cheering anymore—they were screaming. Jin drew his daggers and looked at Aneirin. Together, followed by the people who'd manned the catapults, they ran down the ledge, in the direction of the screams. Along the way, they gathered up soldiers, squires, and archers until they formed a group of about thirty.

Up ahead, another group their size battled a force of probably twice as many corpses. Jin didn't have time to wonder where they'd come from. He pointed with his dagger. "Those are our people, and they need our help!"

The others shouted their assent, and everyone ran. They'd made it about halfway down the path when the ground to their right exploded, showering them with rocks and soil, knocking many of them down. Fifty or sixty corpses crawled from the hole, climbing over each other to get to the living people.

"Fuck me, they buried them!" Aneirin shouted as he swung his new sword and lobbed the head off one of the monsters. "They knew we were coming! This whole damn thing was a trap."

"And we fucked ourselves by splitting into small groups and scattering," another soldier yelled. "They'll pick us off one by one."

Jin took a deep breath, trying to ignore the way the smoke resembled the smothering darkness from his dream. He swung with his daggers, severing one creature's throat while stabbing another through the eye. Crazy or not, he had to lead. These people would be looking to him, and he'd save as many as he could. "Fight through them, soldiers! We've done it before. Aim for the head. We have to get to the rest of our people and regroup!"

With a fierce battle cry, the soldiers dug in. They fought hard, but it wasn't enough. In the forest and on the slopes around them, pockets of earth erupted, spewing out more dead until they were hopelessly surrounded. Heaving, his muscles trembling with exertion, Jin lifted his blades. He could do nothing now but die well and take as many of the hideous things with him as he could.

"Wait." Aneirin stretched an arm across Jin's chest. "Everyone, stop for a moment."

The soldiers, clearly confused, slowly lowered their weapons. Jin expected their enemies to dive on the advantage and finish them off, but as soon as they were no longer threatened, the dead just stood, waiting. For a long time, the two groups stood staring at each other. If they hadn't been pinned down in the cluster of so many creatures, Jin would have given the order to press their own advantage.

Eventually the horde parted, and a new group came through. Though human, they were almost as filthy and smelly as their dead allies. Numbering fifty or so, they wore rags and scraps of fur, and they carried crude weapons: stone clubs and sticks sharpened to spears.

Jin stepped around Aneirin and stood at the head of his group. After sheathing his daggers, removing his helmet, and tucking it under his arm, he addressed the apparent leader of the newcomers: a big woman holding a glass phial on a chain. It appeared to be filled with blood.

"I am Prince Jin Kota, second son of Empress Oro Kota. If we could discuss terms—"

Ignoring him, the woman turned to her companions and barked out orders in a guttural language Jin couldn't understand. Men and women came forward to disarm Jin's people and tie their hands behind their backs with coarse rope. At any sign of resistance, their leader waved the ampoule and commanded the dead to assist. The necklace seemed to give her control over them. When all of Jin's soldiers were bound, their primitive captors looped rope around their waists and tethered them to each other in a line. A man in what looked like a bearskin cape gave the rope a tug, and Jin and the others stumbled forward.

"It seems we are prisoners," Jin said to Aneirin, who was tied in front of him.

"Better than dead," Aneirin replied.

"That remains to be seen."

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## Chapter Thirteen

The dead drew the ravens—not just the dead ransacking the city, but the dead citizens lying piled in the streets. By now, the only people left alive in Gauldaria were those who'd made it behind locked doors in fortified locations. The simple people who mended dresses and sold fruit hadn't stood a chance if they'd stayed in their homes when the dead poured out of the catacombs by the thousands. They'd been slaughtered, and the birds had come to feast.

Even now, unkindnesses of them pranced brazenly through the streets, perched on the eaves of roofs, or circled lazily above, awaiting their next meal.

Zura stepped away from the window in one of the towers of the palace. He hadn't known until a few days ago that a group of ravens was called an unkindness, but it seemed frighteningly appropriate. A group of crows, he had learned, was called a murder. There were plenty of those picking apart the bodies of his people too—scraps of black descending from everywhere.

“What do you see?” Zura's mother asked. She'd changed her gown for a suit of gold-toned armor with an amber sunburst on the breastplate, and she held the gilded, double-bearded ax that had belonged to Oraurian rulers since the founding of the empire.

“The same,” Zura said. “Dead littering the streets. Those damned monsters milling around, even though there's no one left to kill. Carrion birds picking at bones.”

“What in the name of the light do they want?” his mother said.

“I wish I knew. Maybe they don't want anything. Maybe they're just evil.”

“Well, we need to put a stop to them.”

“How? The city is overrun, and we're hopelessly outnumbered. Everyone who didn't make it behind a sturdy wall within the first few hours is dead. If we step foot outside the palace, we'll be dead too. Even if we don't, we'll be dead before long. We might have access to water, but the food will run out eventually, especially with so many taking shelter here.”

She laid her head against his shoulder, and Zura folded her in his arms. “I cannot accept that this city is lost. Zura, will you stand beside me?”

“Of course.”

She kissed his cheek. “Good, then let’s go to the throne room where the others are gathered. Perhaps someone will have a solution that hasn’t occurred to us. If I’m going to die, it’ll be out there, fighting those things, not cowering here and waiting to starve.”

“If it comes to that, I will be right next to you,” Zura said. Together, they left the tower room and descended the stairs.

The throne room had become home to anyone who’d been able to run for the palace doors when the dead attacked. Along with knights, soldiers, and courtiers, common people slept on the floors and leaned against the walls. The food and water were stretching so far, but no one was able to wash, and it was apparent as soon as Zura and his mother stepped into the chamber. People had stacked tables and chairs to look out the round windows at the front of the buildings.

“What’s going on?” Zura’s mother asked, her voice carrying and silencing everyone.

One of the knights turned to face them. “We don’t know, Your Majesty, but something is strange.”

“Strange how?” Zura asked, pushing his way through the crowd. “I want to see this for myself.” It wasn’t easy with his injured leg, but he climbed atop a table and a chair to peer out the portal. Hundreds of dead warriors had gathered in the plaza in front of the palace, and they stood in a crescent around a man in a black cloak with a single long sleeve. They seemed to be waiting. Even the birds were still.

Zura looked over his shoulder at his mother. “The corpses have gathered. They’re still, and there’s what looks like a human man leading them.”

“A man I can speak with,” the empress said. “Open the doors.”

“Your Majesty, is that a good idea?” one of the guards asked.

She strode forward and the crowd parted around her. “I said, open the doors.”

Zura climbed down to stand beside his mother. The guards opened the doors, and together, they stepped out into the strong midmorning sun. Zura took his mother’s arm as they descended the palace steps and stopped on the third one from the bottom.

The man in the dark cape stepped forward. His garment hid his right side, and a network of scars covered his pale left arm. Only his mouth and chin

showed from beneath his hood. He smiled so amicably that it had to be fake, and he folded his arm over his bare midsection and bowed. “I am called Brennan. I’m afraid I have no surname. Being the issue of an adulterous southern lord and a northern whore. It seems my beginnings haven’t determined my ability, though. It can hardly be argued that the city is under my control. I do not wish to see any further loss of life. After all, these are the people I intend to elevate beyond the accidents of their births. I think the world should belong to everyone, not just the rich or those squirted out into families with respectable names. I’m not alone in my philosophy.”

He lifted his left arm, and the throng of corpses parted to reveal a group of citizens—hundreds of them.

“Many of the people here in Gauldaria would like to see a change,” Brennan continued. “And I am that change. Under me, people will be judged according to their skills and not their names. Not the southern privilege of aristocracy nor the northern benefit of spirit guidance. Merit alone. Can you imagine? Can you imagine the society that could be forged if the best were elevated without judgment? So, you will understand that I have to ask you to step down.”

Zura’s mother broke free of his arm and strode to meet the usurper. “I will not hand my city or my empire over to a man who uses the dead to inspire fear. I will not abandon my people to live beneath the fear of magic forsaken for a very good reason.”

“A bad decision, Empress,” Brennan said. “You seem to have misunderstood my words as a request. They were not. It will not take us much longer to starve you out of that glimmering tower, and when we do, the people will remember whose side you were on—your own. You cannot fight change. Just remember that I gave you an opportunity to see it through without bloodshed, and that you denied it.” Brennan lifted his hand, and his archers loosed their arrows.

Zura ran to protect his mother, and the loyal guards converged around them, lifting their shield and deflecting the arrows meant for the empress. They made it through the palace doors while Brennan stood smirking outside, his hand on his hip. He turned to walk away, and his followers—living and dead—closed the gap behind him.

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Jin had finally fallen asleep, and spirits knew he needed it. Aneirin held him as best he could with his hands bound. There were evil things moving inside the

silver prince, his sharp and delicate icicle, Aneirin knew. Love and support were the only things he had to counter them. But he had always believed love and support were enough to vanquish any enemy.

Jin startled awake. He waved a hand in front of his face, and his breath sounded labored. As soon as he sat up, he flinched away from Aneirin. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“Trying to make you more comfortable?”

“I don’t need you coddling me.”

The sudden shift surprised Aneirin, but he decided against saying anything. If Jin regretted what had happened between them Aneirin would be disappointed—crushed, even—but it couldn’t be a priority right now. He looked around at the iron bars of the cage that held them and tried for the hundredth time to think of some way to get out of it. For some reason, their captors had grouped all the northerners, and Jin, together in this enclosure. Dozens of others held the rest of the soldiers. Spirits, whoever was behind all of this was no brigand acting on impulse. Whoever they were, they had been planning and preparing a long time, probably for years. What could they possibly want? The people of the North were happy; the people of the South seemed happy enough. Spirits knew they were rich. The northerners kept to themselves, and the southerners didn’t bother with them—an arrangement that had suited everyone for hundreds of years. To the east were marshes where no one ever went. If anyone lived there, Aneirin doubted they were organized to plan something like this. To the west was a vast canyon, and he had no idea what—if anything—waited on the other side. He’d never had reason to concern himself.

Some dirt paths wound between the cages, and a group of the crude people, their attire much improved by the armor they’d stolen from the southern knights, moved along them, flanked by their corpse allies. Aneirin groaned, suspecting they’d come to bring them a few more handfuls of rotten meat and a bucket of dirty water. But they stopped in front of the cell across from his, and he moved to have a better look through the bars. Jin, too, sat up straighter to watch.

The woman with the blood pendant took a ring of keys from her belt. Aneirin didn’t think she was the true leader of this band. The others deferred to her, but she didn’t have the spirit of a true leader. It was something his wolf sensed, scented, an indefinable quality that made others want to follow a

person, a fierceness, a confidence, and maybe a recklessness this woman didn't possess. But it didn't matter, because she had the numbers to back her up, at least for now.

Her followers rounded up the captives and forced them to stand in a line. A man holding a sickle like one might use to mow grass went down the line and cut their throats one by one, leaving them to gurgle and fall. As Aneirin stared in horror and someone behind him started to sob, his cat leaped up and infused him with a desire to kill, to rip through flesh, so strong it washed everything else he felt or thought away in a pounding, red rush. He clenched shaking hands into fists as he fought the razor sharp claws that demanded so vehemently to break free. Jin came to stand next to him, and it helped him regain some control, because a small part of him worried his cat wouldn't discriminate.

Their captors took the fresh dead by the ankles and dragged them to a wooden platform beyond the cages. There, they laid them out in a line as neat as they'd been forced to stand in while their throats were cut. And they weren't alone. Dozens of others had been piled there; Aneirin just hadn't noticed until now because the area was usually surrounded by guards, blocking his vision. But now he could see probably a hundred dead southern soldiers stacked like firewood while crows and ravens stood sentinel.

"Light." Jin sounded like he might be sick. "What are they doing?"

Aneirin looked up and met Jin's worried eyes. He considered holding back, but while Jin might be fragile in some ways, he was a brave and loyal man, a true leader, and Aneirin wouldn't insult him. "They're saving them up. The bodies. They'll turn them... into those things. Grow their army."

"We have to do something!"

"What?" Aneirin wasn't being an ass; he truly hoped Jin had some idea. Jin was far better at the leadership thing than Aneirin—he wanted to lead and Aneirin never had. "They've taken our weapons and armor. None of my people can change into an animal small enough to get between these bars. We respect all creatures"—he paused to sneer at the ravens and crows—"well, mostly. But each of them has its place. And the place for rabbits, mice, and songbirds is not a battlefield. It's too bad, really. One of them could get the keys, return to human form, and let us all out of here."

"Or they could find the rest of our army," Jin said. "We're not important. There are only a few hundred of us held here, at most. We need someone to

find the others so we can regroup. We've left Gauldaria in a vulnerable position, and it's home to tens of thousands of people. They are what we need to be worried about."

Aneirin's wolf disagreed; he told Aneirin to protect his pack and the man the wolf had already decided would be his life's mate, even if Jin hadn't yet agreed. But Aneirin, the man, saw the selfishness in that. Besides... "It's irrelevant. None of us can do it." He sank down in the muck, his back against the cage bars and his knees pulled up to his chest. He dropped his face into his hand and closed his eyes. Jin might scoff at it, call it an act of desperation—and at the moment it felt like one—but Aneirin could think of nothing to do but pray.

*Blessings of the spirits of the woods, the rivers, the mountains, and the sky. I need your help. I need it badly. Please. Perhaps there is a powerful being willing to... to do something. Anything. Someone guide me. Tell me what to do. I don't want to lose him. I don't want him gone from the world, and I'm sorry if that's selfish. Just help me figure out how to keep him alive, even if it means I'm not.*

He let his mind go blank and slack, opened himself up and laid himself bare, submitting to the spirits. It didn't surprise him when none appeared. He had already been blessed with two guides, and that was practically unheard of. Around him, people shifted in their prisons and carrion birds cried out. Everything smelled of rot and human waste. What spirit would set foot in this place?

Aneirin didn't look up when he felt pressure against his hand. He didn't have to; he already recognized the feel of the dagger-roughened palms. As he knit his fingers with Jin's, he remembered how they'd felt on his body: right. Right as the spring wind in his hair or the moonlight on his wolf's back. He let himself forget about everything but golden-brown skin and silver hair, that rare smile on those full lips, those icy eyes finally unshuttered and revealing the spirit behind them...

He was back in the mountains, on a narrow rocky ledge. It was cold, and fat flakes of snow drifted lazily down. Though the sun hadn't completely set, a full moon hung large and white among the red and orange smears of the sky. A small bird landed on a stone formation about a dozen feet from him—a raptor with a curved beak, shining bronze feathers, and intelligent yellow eyes. She must have been a rare breed, because Aneirin couldn't identify her, and he

knew all the creatures of the northern mountains. But he knew she was female, possessed of the unyielding protectiveness of a mother, the will to defend the nest at any cost.

He opened his arms to her. *Will you help me?*

*I will guide you, though I have not chosen to teach a human in many, many years. But times have become strange, and I sense in you hope for all the children of the forest. We do not have much time. The teaching will be harsh and painful. You must give yourself over to me completely.*

*Do what you want with me, with my thanks, great spirit.*

With a screech, the hawk spread her wings and lifted off the rocks. Then she tucked her wings tight to her body and dove straight at Aneirin's chest. He screamed as they collided, his ribs ripping apart as his limbs contorted. As his spirit overlapped with the hawk's, he felt his back slamming against the iron bars of the cage and the rocky ground of the mountain at the same time. His muscles contracted, growing smaller, shorter, but more powerful. Strength coursed through him, and he beat his fledgling wings.

The hand he'd been using to hold Jin's had become a talon, and he roosted on Jin's fist. Jin reached out to stroke his sleek feathers, his silver eyes wide with amazement—with hope. Though the hawk spirit balked at this human's touch, Aneirin allowed it. He leaned down to playfully nip at Jin's sleeve with his beak.

“Aneirin, I know you are still in there, and I must trust that you can hear me and understand my words,” Jin said. “Find my people and assemble my forces. Go to Gauldaria. It's the best chance for both of our nations. Please don't worry about me until that is done. Now go. Go quickly, before these savages notice.”

With a cry, Aneirin lifted off Jin's hand and flew through the gap in the iron bars. Flight took some getting used to, and he fumbled as he rose higher and higher. It felt strange to be so light, and stranger still to have no ground beneath his feet, nothing to anchor him. Seeing the ground fall farther and farther away frightened him, but his spirit guide whispered her assurances, and he ascended, starting to get a sense of the way the air moved around him and how he could use those currents. He also sensed the two large ravens behind him, coming up fast, and he tried to dive to avoid their sharp beaks, but this body was still too new to him, and one of them caught hold of his tail feathers.

The other raven circled around, coming toward Aneirin's eyes with its black claws. With its partner holding on to him, he couldn't get away. Just before the

raven's talons pierced his face, something knocked it out of the sky. Aneirin twisted his neck to see Jin holding a rock far below him. Jin drew his arm back, and another small stone struck the raven clutching at Aneirin's tail. It somersaulted down, and Aneirin didn't hesitate. He winged his way into the open sky, pushing hard to get away from the enemy camp. He was the only hope Jin and the others had, and he couldn't fail them. He had to find the soldiers and convince them to join forces. If he couldn't, both the North and the South would be lost to the dead and the vile magicians commanding them.

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## Chapter Fourteen

Jin feared sleeping. Sleep brought the dark scraps fluttering around him, the red eye. The suffocation and helplessness. Aneirin had been gone three days, and Jin found it harder and harder to hold out hope that he'd come back. Most of the cages were empty now, his people dead and stacked up to await the foul magic that would turn them into walking corpses. He was hardly surprised when the woman leading his enemies came to open the door to his enclosure, and her followers grabbed the arms of the people inside and dragged them to their feet. But he had no intention of going without a fight. If nothing else, he would make them work for it, and hopefully take a few of them with him.

Two men seized Jin by the arms and hauled him to his feet. He broke free with his right hand, drew back, and drove his elbow into the nose of a man behind him. It broke with a sickening crunch. Turning, Jin kicked his right foot into the other man's shin so hard the jagged edge of the bone pierced the skin. Jin ran for the open gate, shouldering another man and woman out of his way. He made it a few feet beyond the enclosure before a dozen enemy soldiers surrounded him. Punching and kicking, he took a few of them down. He could see a break in their lines, the frozen, muddy path beyond them. If he could make it there, he felt confident he could outrun them. He'd trained in combat and athleticism since he'd been a boy, and these people were unused to the heavy armor they'd scavenged. He hadn't seen them use bows or any ranged weaponry. He struck a tall woman in the throat with the side of his hand and dove toward the open space. He'd almost made it when dozens of hands clutched at his long hair, pulling him backward, tilting his face toward the overcast sky. Someone hit him three times in the diaphragm, driving the wind from his chest and making him spit up bile. Before he could recover, they wrenched his arms behind his back and bound them with coarse rope.

They dragged Jin and the others beyond the cells, to the platform where, by now, probably over a hundred bodies were stacked, maggots crawling over their greenish-gray, bloated flesh. Ravens and crows hopped from body to body, pausing to rip up strips of skin and meat with their sharp beaks. Others circled overhead, and flies buzzed despite the cold. The stench struck Jin like a blow to the face, making him gag even though his stomach held nothing else to come up. Among the corpses, a set of stakes had been erected, and Jin's back was forced against one of them before his clothing was torn off. Cold air bit his skin as the enemies forced his back against the pole and wrapped him tightly in cutting rope.

The throng parted as the leader approached. She stopped in front of Jin and pulled a jagged knife from her belt. “There is power in the blood. It holds magic, a very old and very powerful form of magic. The people of both the South and the North have forgotten this, but our people have recently remembered. Your blood is too special to waste.” She used her dagger to make a deep cut across Jin’s chest, from his right shoulder to the base of his left rib. He screamed as the blood poured out, brilliant crimson against the subdued light, hot as the southern sun against the chill.

As she moved to the next bound prisoner, the birds began to stir. One by one, they abandoned the rancid corpses in favor of fresh meat, drawing nearer cautiously, step by step. The enemies moved to the sides of the platform to clear a path for them, and Jin screamed and strained against his restraints as he realized what they had planned.

Some of the ravens and crows took to the air, flapping around Jin, forming a column of shadow just like in his nightmares. He screamed his throat raw as the world became scraps of darkness and the weak light shining between them grew smaller and smaller. He felt the familiar pressure on his chest, the swell of his throat... searing, white-hot pain when the first bird landed on his shoulder and curled black talons into his flesh. It leaned down and pressed its beak into the gash on his chest, tearing away a strip of muscle. Jin had never imagined such agony, and the birds were still coming: landing on his head and arms, clawing their way up his legs, cawing at each other as they fought to get his exposed meat.

Did the one on his shoulder have a single red eye? Or was that his madness showing him what wasn’t there? Jin thrashed his head to try to dislodge it, but he was already growing weak, his energy bleeding out, the pain eclipsing everything until he couldn’t find the seam where he ended and it began.

Thunder in the distance... loud enough to drown the increasing screams around Jin and growing louder and... closer.

Or was his mind grasping, reaching for anything to distract it from the agony being inflicted on his body?

He forced himself to focus his vision, ignore the pain long enough to get an idea of what was happening around him. Something was happening. The enemies drew weapons and turned toward the road, but Jin couldn’t move his head enough to see what had roused them. The thundering rose in volume, and it had a rhythm too regular to be a storm... a constant drumming...

The big raven on Jin's shoulder seemed spurred to devour him. It plunged its beak inside him, ripping away chunks of meat, trying to burrow between the bones of his ribs. Jin knew if it reached his heart or his lungs, it could kill him. The others seemed content to nibble along the edge of the gash, and while it hurt, it wouldn't end his life. He had to stop the big bird, and he could think of only one way to do it. Turning his head, he opened his mouth and bit down, sinking his teeth through the bird's feathers and into the flesh of its back. Tasting blood, he lifted his head and shook it hard, like a dog with its prey, trying to break the bird's bones, snap its neck and kill it. It squawked and beat its wings against his face, its claws tearing at his throat.

And then it was gone, torn out of his mouth, leaving him sputtering out feathers, the others driven away. Gold burned through the black scraps and gloom, forcing the pain back. Jin struggled to focus on the hazy circle of light in front of him until recognition dawned. He'd never felt such profound relief; it was like waking from a nightmare to find himself safe in his mother's arms, or lying next to his brother—that old, forgotten feeling that the person who could make everything all right had come. “A-Aneirin?”

Aneirin looked pained, but he said nothing as he drew a knife and cut Jin's bonds. Jin tried to step forward, but his legs turned to water and gave out. Aneirin caught him and held him, his hand cradling the back of Jin's head. Around them, steel met steel as southern soldiers clashed with the enemy, but Jin knew it wouldn't last long. His forces outnumbered the enemy by thousands. By the time he lifted his face from Aneirin's chest, it was over, and the enemy lay scattered on the ground, surrounded by soldiers and harts.

Jin pulled away from Aneirin and looked out over his people— thousands mounted, thousands more on foot. He drew a deep breath and hoped his voice would be strong when he addressed them. “Burn them. Burn the bodies, all of them. Burn this whole place to the ground.”

Soldiers sprinted to obey as Aneirin draped Jin's arm over his shoulder and led him off the platform. They walked to the edge of the stunted trees around the camp, where a massive golden hart with branching antlers stood waiting. Jin dropped to sit on the ground while Aneirin rifled through the packs on the majestic animal. He tossed Jin some clothing— the padded garments the soldiers wore beneath their armor. Jin pulled on the trousers and stiff leather boots, then grasped the trunk of a slender tree to help him stand. “You found my people.”

“Found a lot of things.” Aneirin seemed changed, older somehow, and tired. He wore his southern armor confidently and gracefully, but lines and darkened skin circled his eyes, and his plump lips seemed unlikely to turn up into an easy smile as they had before.

“Tell me.”

Aneirin didn't insult Jin by holding back. “I found your forces, I gathered them, and then I flew to your capital city of Gauldaria. It... the place is overrun with corpses. I watched it for an entire day. There's no one on the streets but the dead, and there are thousands of them. I can't imagine where they came from or how they got through the gates, but they've taken over. If, and I do mean if, anyone is still alive, they're hiding, hunkering down.”

“What?” Jin stepped forward until his blood-smeared chest nearly touched Aneirin's breastplate. “You saw that, and yet you led my soldiers back here? Why? Why would you do that?”

Aneirin cupped Jin's chin. “You have to ask?”

“Yes, I have to ask! I gave you explicit instructions to see to the city and her people. Why didn't you?”

Aneirin stepped back, slid his hands down to grasp both of Jin's arms below Jin's shoulders. Their eyes met, and Aneirin smiled, a feral, hungry grin full of teeth. “I'm not yours to command, Your Highness. I am yours, and I'll do anything you ask of me, with one exception. Don't ever ask me to turn my back on you, not for anything. Because fuck that. I won't. Never. Now, what's done is done. We have a sizable force, and we have you to command it. Are we going back to kick those rotted pricks out of your city, or are we going to stand here talking?”

As Jin looked at Aneirin, he realized he could trust this man with anything. If he ever stumbled. Aneirin would pick him up. In the worst situations, Aneirin would give him hope and make him smile, and together, they could face anything. And he was beautiful, perfect when his lips twisted with that cocky smirk. Jin thought and felt a hundred things in that moment, but he only knew one way to express them. “I think I might love you.”

Aneirin kissed him hard, pulling their bodies close. When he drew back, he brushed a strand of hair out of Jin's eye and regarded him with the most tender expression Jin had ever seen. “I know I love you, Icicle. Now, we've got work to do.”

Jin stepped back and looked at the gash on his chest. “This needs to be cauterized—burned shut—to stop the bleeding and prevent it getting infected, and the others will need similar treatment. It’s not going to be pretty.”

“I’m here for the pretty and the ugly.”

Jin nodded. He knew. “Let’s see to it, and then let’s get on the road. I want to save my people if there are any of them left to be saved.”

“If there aren’t?” Aneirin asked.

“Then I’ll avenge them, down to the last person. I won’t rest until every enemy is dead.” He met Aneirin’s gaze again. He would understand if the other man couldn’t agree to take part in his vengeance. The North hadn’t been hit as hard, but the people there would need the guidance of their leaders. Jin knew Aneirin had every reason to walk away.

Instead, he clapped Jin on the shoulder. “I’m with you. Until the end, and believe me, I understand how soon it might come. Let’s get it done.”

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## Chapter Fifteen

“Sir! Sir!”

Zura, sitting on the steps leading to his mother’s throne, looked up at the young squire running toward him. “Yes?”

She skidded to a stop at the base of the staircase, panting, her hand on the hilt of the sword at her hip. “There’s something you need to see.”

He followed her through the western branch of the palace and to the northern wing. This building was intended for residence, ceremony, and luxury; it was no fortress, though the walls were sturdy. His people had never needed a citadel, and so the palace had no lookout towers or ramparts, but it did have balconies, balconies that had stood over elaborate gardens and manicured lawns. When Zura stepped out onto the one looking over the northern grounds, his breath caught on its way out. “Light preserve us.”

Beyond the northern gate, mounted soldiers and foot soldiers surrounded the wall, standing so thick they blurred at the limits of Zura’s vision. Thousands. Thousands of southern soldiers—enough to give them a chance against the dead. Enough to reclaim the city. For the first time in over a week, Zura felt he could do something other than cower in the throne room and wait to die.

“Help me, please.” The young girl hurried to wrap her hand around Zura’s waist, and together they made their way back to the throne room. Zura limped to the foot of the staircase, still letting the squire support his weight. His broken ankle had been slow to mend. “Our army has returned—thousands of soldiers.”

His mother stood from her throne. “Jin?”

“Maybe,” Zura said, the thought of seeing his brother again bolstering his resolve more than anything else. “We need to get the gate open, let them into the city. Then we’ll have a chance. I’m going. I’ll accept volunteers. The streets are still overrun out there. It’s not far to the gate, but it’ll be a hard fight.”

“But we can win!” the young squire beside him shouted.

Answering shouts filled the hall, and people, knights, soldiers, and commoners alike, came to stand behind Zura. “Open the doors,” he ordered.

Hordes of corpses met them at the foot of the stairs, filling the courtyard. The living clashed against the dead, and Zura raised his sword to assist them,

but his squire grabbed his elbow and pointed off to the right. “The best thing we can do, sir, is to get those gates open. We shouldn’t waste our chance.”

Zura couldn’t argue, and he laid a hand on her shoulder for support. “What’s your name, soldier?”

She looked up at him and smiled. Her face was still round with youth, and her dark hair had a reddish glint in the sunlight. “Vai, sir.”

“Vai. It’s you and me. No matter what, we need to get that gate open. I’m not at my best, so I’ll have to depend on you.”

“You can do that, sir. Now, let’s not waste time overanalyzing it. We need to open a gate. It’s that simple, yeah?”

“Yeah.”

Together, they jogged through the abandoned streets, weaving around buildings and through alleyways, the sounds of the battle fading behind them. Zura’s leg throbbed in pain with the rhythm of his pulse, but he pushed forward. He had to do this; if he failed, his people had no chance. Up ahead, a few hundred yards in the distance, the great northern gate to Gauldaria glimmered in the sun, the gems set into the gold leaf sparkling. The path leading up to it was clear. He let go of Vai’s shoulder and stumbled forward. The gate was close; all he needed to do was lift the deadbolt...

Enemies streamed from the side streets, dead and living. They ran to block the gate. Vai drew a short sword from her belt. “Go! I’ve got your back!”

Zura ran as best he could, swinging his sword to cut down the adversaries in his path. Behind him, he heard the grunts and screams of the young girl as she met her enemies. The gate was close. Only a half a dozen corpses between him and the lever that would throw it open. He swung his blade and lopped the head off a skeleton dressed in antiquated armor. An arrow pierced the thigh of his injured leg, sending him to his knees. He lashed out at the enemies converging on him, thinking to take advantage of his weakness. The gate was so close... He’d crawl if he had to.

Zura struggled to his feet and lunged, cutting the legs from beneath a corpse. He spun and drove the point of his sword through the throat of a woman holding a hammer. Turning again, he sliced off the top of another dead enemy’s skull, and the brains oozed out. Close now, he threw himself toward the gate. Just as his hand closed on the lever, a spear pierced his back, sundering his armor and poking through his chest plate. His body seized with the pain, and he

coughed up blood, but he yanked down on that lever, even as the world darkened and blurred. Zura just wanted to be done; he was so tired, so hurt. He kicked at the junction of the doors, and they flew open. Harts galloped through the opening, and Zura moved aside. Metallic blood flooded his mouth, and his body hurt so much. He just wanted to sit down. He staggered to the wall and tried to lean against it, but the spear poking through him prevented it. Unable to do anything else, he dropped on his side in the dust as the harts thundered through the gate. A rider reached down and hoisted Vai into the saddle. That was good. She was brave and steady... had a good future in the army...

Jin breached the gate on a white hart with silver eyes, a dagger in each hand. Zura tried to call out to his brother, the person he loved most in the world, but nothing came out of his mouth but blood. Zura would've liked Jin to know how proud he was of the man Jin had grown into, but he knew he'd never be able to say those words. He laid his head in the sandy soil of Orauri. Jin was alive. The gate was open. Zura closed his eyes and let go of his pain, confident he'd done his duty.

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Corpses flooded the streets. Someone had managed to open the gate, but Jin knew it wouldn't be enough unless he could get his people through quickly. The enemies' forces impeded them, though, preventing more than ten soldiers at a time getting inside. From the back of his animal, Jin stabbed down with his daggers, splitting skulls, shattering foreheads, and poking out eyes. The dead piled up around him, and he urged his hart to leap over them. "Get the other gates open!" he shouted to his people, pointing with his dripping blade.

His people might not have seen much actual combat, but they performed according to their training: archers covering those who ran to open the gates, warriors with shields protecting them as they worked the latches. Soon his army poured in. Jin looked around, hoping to spot his brother. He'd made it this far, but he wanted Zura to take command. He was starting to feel... strange.

The strong sun he'd missed so much seemed to sputter out, leaving the world in shadow, the colors subdued, the edges of things smeared and indistinct. Black scraps fluttered down like snow—or were they black feathers? Jin gnashed his teeth and shook his head, trying to banish the false vision. His people needed him. Despite their numbers, the combined force of southern soldiers and spirit-guided northerners struggled against the deluge of corpses. There would be no easy victory here today, and these people needed a strong leader.

But Jin had slipped into a nightmare, and he couldn't drive it back. Everything was black and gray, the red blood so bright it hurt his eyes. He couldn't exorcise the foul things commandeering his thoughts or dispel the blur from his vision. All around him, the living clashed with the dead. Jin retained the presence of mind to dispatch the corpses that came near his hart. A golden panther, sleek and vibrant against the gloom, tore through enemies with large paws and sharp claws. Bears, wolves, coyotes, lynx, and even birds of prey joined the battle, all of them careful to keep the toxic ichor away from their mouths. The tide of the fight swelled and receded. Jin couldn't be sure who had the upper hand. His people struck down corpse after corpse, destroying the heads as he'd instructed them, but the dead claimed triumphs, too. As they did, a fetid red mist curling over the ground shrouded them, bringing them back to their feet to fight for the wrong side. Through some forbidden magic, the enemy augmented their number every time a soldier fell.

Jin didn't know what he could do; he barely trusted himself to fight. He didn't know if anything he saw was real. He feared striking at what looked like a corpse to his fevered brain, only to find out he'd killed a friend, a... lover or family member. Where was his brother? Why hadn't one of the more experienced knights come to take command? It grew darker and darker, the light leaching out of the world. The red mist flowed thicker and thicker, winding around the ankles of the corpses, making their eyes glow brightly.

Red eyes. Everywhere. Like the sparks from a hundred campfires. A thousand. Numbers to rival the stars in the night sky. They spiraled around Jin, making him dizzy. He grasped his hart's neck to stay in the saddle. With the addition of the risen dead, his people were being overwhelmed, and he couldn't help—couldn't turn the tide. He heeled his mount's ribs and urged the animal to the crest of a hill. He just needed a few moments to gather his thoughts, to determine what he needed to do next. From here, the battle below looked like nothing more than a churning mass of black and gray spilling over the streets. He couldn't tell enemy from ally, but one thing stood out in stark clarity.

A black shape waited at the edge of the fray, the color so dark and concentrated it seemed like a hole burned into reality. It looked like a man, but a jagged form rose up from its shoulder like a wing... and in the center, a red circle burned...

A red eye.

Jin didn't know if that red eye really existed or if it only lived in his addled mind. He knew he should care enough to parse reality from his twisted

fantasies, but he couldn't. Everything in him told him he had to destroy that eye, and the reason didn't matter.

Jin swung his leg over his hart's haunches and hit the ground running. He cut and slashed with his daggers, letting his hands move according to his instincts and his training, and he mowed through anyone standing between him and the shadow. Chunks of flesh flew around him and black blood coated his face and hands. Sweat and ichor soaked his hair and ripped from the ends. He barely noticed how hard he panted or how his muscles trembled with fatigue as he fought his way to the edge of the horde.

He'd almost reached the shape when the man turned and ran. Jin pushed himself hard to follow, pursuing as the man twisted through alleyways and darted behind buildings. The man headed west, past some of Gauldaria's finest residential estates, before stopping in a large park near one of the entrances to the catacombs. It was a sparse area of fountains, statuary, and paths covered in white gravel, a place people came to light candles and incense and remember loved ones. Good, Jin thought. It would give the bastard nowhere to hide.

They stood facing each other, the distance between them too great for Jin to see much more than a dark silhouette. He approached slowly, in a low stance, daggers at the ready. The man just waited, hands at his sides, not even reaching for a weapon. Soon Jin came close enough to see his features. Certain things were grotesque: the single red eye, the layers of scar tissues lumped over the arm and chest, the twisted limb beneath the single, billowing sleeve. But there was beauty, too, a familiarity to the bone structure of the face, the shape of the eyes, the pout of the lower lip. It reminded Jin of his brother. His mind must really be slipping. But what if it wasn't? What if it was Zura, and Jin's sickness had twisted the details? It would explain why the man hadn't run, why he stood smiling with his bare arm outstretched. Jin's resolve faltered, and as the frantic determination left him, his arms dropped beneath the weight of his weapons.

The hesitation cost him. The man tore off his half cloak, revealing a blackened arm studded with long, spiny feathers. When he raised it and used it to churn up an eddy of dust and more of that red mist, dozens of corpses poured up from the necropolis. The wave broke around the winged man, like water around a stone in a river. They headed straight for Jin. On his own, without backup, he had no chance. As the first enemy nicked his arm with a rusty ax, part of the illusion dissolved. Jin might be surrounded by scraps of shadow, but he knew the man conjuring them was not his brother. He might not know reality from madness, but he knew one thing beyond any doubt: Zura would never hurt him or stand by while he was hurt.

Jin would never defeat the corpses surrounding him, but he didn't have to. He didn't know how he knew, but he *knew*. That red eye drew him like a beacon. He focused on it as he cut past anything standing in his way, muscles screaming with exertion as he slashed and kicked again and again. He managed to clear a path. His enemy was within reach, still standing there smirking. Jin roared, raised his blade, and threw himself at the man with everything he had.

The man raised his deformed wing to shield his face from Jin's attack, but Jin's knife, and all the weight he put behind it, pierced through the oily black feathers and drew a fount of blood. The man screeched, and Jin wrenched his weapon free. Before he could strike again, the man swatted him aside with his wing, and Jin flew through the air and landed on his back a dozen yards away. Arching his back, Jin sprang to his feet and ran. He plunged both daggers down, and his enemy's wing only stopped one of them. The other sank deep into the globe of the man's shoulder. Jin twisted the knife as he pulled it out, trying for maximum damage. Then he kicked the man in the torso, sending him sprawling. Even amidst the din of the corpses, Jin heard his head smack the ground. He didn't get up, and Jin prepared to finish the job.

Before he could, corpses surrounded him, grabbing him by the ankles, the arms, and the hair. Pulling him down. His chest hit the rocky path, and the dead piled on top of him. They didn't even use the weapons they held, just heaped over him, thicker and thicker, until soft, oozing flesh blotted out what little light remained to Jin. He thrashed, twisting his body from side to side to throw them off, but more joined the stack, burying him beneath a mountain of reeking decay. It was dark, and he couldn't breathe. Weight pressed down on his chest, smashing him between the ground and the bulk of the bodies on top of him. He panicked, tried to scream. Couldn't. Sparkling gray spilled in at the edges of his vision, and the strength to move ebbed out of his limbs. No matter how hard he fought, how strong his will, the darkness, heat, and stench was swallowing him up, and there was nothing he could do. He couldn't even wiggle his fingers.

Just as Jin was about to lose consciousness, the weight on him decreased. Patches of bright silver sky appeared. Sweet, fresh southern air, tasting of sunlight, reached his face. He breathed deep, his energy renewing. Above him, a huge panther batted the corpses away, growling and snarling, but not using its lethal jaws. Its claws shredded through the gray flesh as Jin grasped the two daggers he'd dropped and windmilled his arms to liberate himself from the heap. As soon as he could stand, he focused on his enemy.

The man sat up slowly, wincing. A few dozen feet separated them, and Jin ran to cross it, smacking away the dead that approached from the sides. Behind

him, Aneirin and some other northerners in the forms of wolves and bears, as well as a few Oraurian soldiers, fought against impossible odds. Soon they'd be buried beneath the deluge just as Jin had been. He had to make their sacrifice count.

Jin jumped and drove his blade into the winged man's left breast. He fell, Jin on top of him, and tried to use his wing to bat Jin away. With his other dagger, Jin stabbed down, through the feathers and fetid flesh, pinning the wing to the ground. He released the hilt, drew back, and punched the man in the face again and again, bloodying his lips and splitting his skin. Finally his eyes rolled back and he went still.

Silence fell over the memorial park. Jin, his fist throbbing and his knuckles torn, stood up to look around.

The corpses fell, crumbling to piles of rotting meat or stacks of dry bones, as if they'd never been anything else. The spirit-guided northerners and the southern soldiers scanned the area, as shocked as Jin. Slowly, they lowered their weapons and regrouped in the center of the square.

A rustling made Jin turn just in time to see a large raven with a single red eye rising up from the pool of blood where his enemy had been. It staggered, clearly injured, and took its time to get into the air. Jin hurried to retrieve the dagger he'd stuck through the man's wing, but by the time he did, the raven had made it nearly to the wall. Jin focused, aimed carefully, and threw. His knife struck the bird's back, between its wings. With a shrill cry, it fell and plummeted down on the outside of the city's barrier.

The dead did not rise again.

Men and women questioned the possible victory in hushed voices. As the moments passed, their cheers grew louder and louder. Some embraced and others wept. Sunlight broke through the clouds, dissolving the slivers of shadow around Jin. The scene was gruesome—stacks of corpses littering the pristine lanes—but it was normal. Quiet. Even the ravens and crows had gone.

Except for a group of southern soldiers near the wall, boxed in by two statues while a snarling cat threatened them. A few of them held their weapons, but they looked unsure. Jin hurried to get between them and the golden panther. The animal bared its large fangs, and Jin saw nothing of the gentle man he knew in its fierce eyes.

He dropped to his knees and tossed his weapons aside, ignoring his people's pleas to dissuade him. The cat crouched and flattened its ears against its head,

rumbling low in its throat. Jin opened his arms. “Aneirin. I know you’re in there, and I know you don’t want to hurt me. I don’t know much after everything that’s happened, but of that I have no doubt.”

The cat was scared, hurt. An arrow protruded from its haunches and cuts covered its body, matting the yellow fur with drying and fresh blood. As a cornered beast tended to do, it lashed out at anything that came near, but Jin wouldn’t retreat. “Aneirin... I’m not afraid of you. I can’t be. You promised to never turn your back on me, and I believed that promise. I still do. I know you have the will to fight your way back... to fight your way back to me. I know you would not leave me to face all of this alone.”

Jin reached out. The cat snapped its jaws at his hand, but he didn’t pull back, and it allowed him to cradle its face, caress the back of its neck. Their eyes met, and Jin walked forward on his knees to wrap his arms around the majestic creature’s shoulders. The panther lowered its head and pressed it against Jin’s chest. Soon, Jin felt not fur but smooth, chilled skin beneath his fingers. Aneirin’s blue eyes looked up at him.

“Jin?”

Jin choked back a sob and squinted against the tears stinging his eyes. He pressed his forehead against Aneirin’s and wrapped his arms around Aneirin’s head. “I don’t know what I would have done if you... if you hadn’t... Light. But you’re hurt.” Jin looked at the arrow in Aneirin’s hip, the cuts all over his body. “We have to—”

“Shh, Icicle. I’m going to be fine. I’ll live, and that means I get to spend a few more days with you. I wasn’t sure I was going to get that when I saw you run off by yourself, right into the middle of those things. We won, yeah?”

Jin was close to breaking down and making a complete fool of himself. He wanted to bury his face against Aneirin and cry until his voice was gone. Instead, he took a breath and sat up straighter. “Yeah. Somehow, we did it.”

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## Chapter Sixteen

Despite the wine, food, and flowers, a somber mood filled the throne room. It hardly surprised Aneirin. The southerners had lost many people, and they'd spent the last few weeks gathering and burning the bodies of their dead and their ancestors. The empress had decreed every corpse be destroyed, with one exception.

Prince Zura Kota's bones had been laid to rest in a solid gold box, beneath an amber statue carved in his likeness, beside the northern gate he'd given his life to open. He'd been awarded the posthumous title of Zura Kota Borealis.

Now, the empress sat on her throne in a deep-blue gown edged with gold trim and dotted with tiny jeweled stars—a mourning dress. Instead of her pronged crown, she wore a downturned orange crescent on her head: the symbol of the setting sun and her loss. She lifted her hand, and the hall fell silent.

“The first order of business here is to honor a person who deserves more than we can possibly repay, a person without whom none of us would be alive. Squire Vai Orallis, please step forward.”

The crown parted as the young woman made her way toward the stairs in a suit of gleaming golden mail. Aneirin couldn't miss the way Reyni watched the squire's movements or the blush on her freckled cheeks. His little fox had even put on an emerald velvet blouse with ruffled sleeves and a plunging neckline, though she still wore her patched leather trousers and old boots. He shook his head at the amount of jewelry around Reyni's neck, wrists, and fingers. She'd probably stolen it. But when Vai looked over her shoulder, met Reyni's eyes, and grinned, Aneirin had to do the same. It was about time someone tamed his wild little vixen.

Empress Oro descended to the foot of the steps, and one of her ladies came forward with a small golden dish. The empress dipped her finger and drew a sienna circle on Vai's forehead. “Vai Orallis, I hereby name you Golden Knight. Do you swear to do everything in your power to serve the light, the empire, and her people?”

“Yes, Empress. With all my heart.”

“Then rise.”

Vai stood, turned, and bowed to thunderous applause. No one seemed to mind the enthusiastic kisses she exchanged with Reyni, but why should they? Those kisses symbolized life going on, people taking hold of the good the world still held. After everything that had happened, they needed the reminder.

The empress slowly ascended the stair, the train of her gown trailing behind her. When she sat on the edge of the Sunlit Throne, everyone's attention focused on her. "Now I would like to tell a story. It's one many of us have heard as children, but it bears repeating today.

"Many hundreds of years ago, a sister and brother ruled over all the people. They disagreed on how to go forward, however. The sister, Izana, followed the rays of the sun to a land rich in gold, jewels, and metals. There, she established an empire where people would not need to be dependent on the spirits. Her subjects watched the world, recorded their findings, and learned many things: how to build, how to heal their sick, how to craft wondrous things from their resources.

"Her brother, Izaki, chose to accept the guidance of the spirits. A wolf, a great cat, and a bird of prey appeared before Izaki, and they showed him the place where he should found his nation. Izaki's subjects used the wisdom the spirits imparted, and they learned many things: the magic of the moon, the winds, and the forests. They learned to live in harmony with the creatures around them.

"Both nations grew in power and prosperity, though they remained separate, each following their own doctrines, dismissing the customs of the other. Both thrived. A golden land bathed in sunlight to the south, and a land of magic and mystery beneath the northern moon.

"Now must begin a new chapter in this ancient tale. We know the story of how the South and the North broke apart, but together, we will write the story of how they reunited. None of us can deny that our knowledge of the world is incomplete, and that the threats beyond our borders are greater than we could have imagined. Our only hope is to face those threats together, combining the wisdom of our people. Here in the South, we have made great strides in the fields of industry, weaponry, medicine, and many others. But we have ignored the knowledge of the spirits, thinking ourselves above it. This cannot continue. We have seen the power of magic, and we can no longer deny our inability to counter its effects. We hope the things we have learned through reason and observation can benefit our northern kin... I say kin, for we are all descended from the same people. Our similarities are much more than our differences, and

we want the same things: life for our people. Life without fear. Life free to pursue higher callings like art, music, literature, and science. Security to find love, start families, and raise children. Hope that those children, and their children's children, will continue to live in peace and prosperity. For this to happen, for both of our societies to advance, we need people fed, healthy, sheltered, and beyond the danger of attack.

“Izani and Izaki parted ways. Under each of them, societies flourished. We are not Izani and Izaki, but we are their descendants, and we can join hands in their names. I have to think they would be proud.”

The empress concluded to wild applause, though Aneirin couldn't believe it would be that simple. More than stories divided their people, but he held out hope.

Empress Oro smiled. “And now, in the spirit of reunification, my son, Prince Jin Kota, has requested to speak.”

Aneirin hadn't expected this; he hadn't seen Jin in days. He knew Jin mourned his brother, and he'd tried to respect Jin's wish to be alone. In truth, he worried Jin had been avoiding him, trying to figure out a way to break off their association, and he couldn't blame Jin if the heat of battle had made things seem more intense, more immediate. Jin had a lot on his shoulders now, and Aneirin hoped he'd be able to help carry the burden, but he didn't expect to be asked. It wasn't Jin's way. Still, he wished he had Jin to lean on while he worked through his own loss. Though no body had been found, Glaw had disappeared, and after so much time had passed, Aneirin didn't expect him to return.

Jin appeared beside his mother's throne, wearing a long silver tunic with a high collar and a jeweled belt overtop. Aneirin still didn't understand the pathways that let someone appear as if by magic, but it didn't matter, because Jin's hair fluttered behind him, his lips turned up, and his eyes sparkled in the light streaming through the many windows. He looked like some spirit, something supernatural, as he descended the stairs in a shaft of light.

Aneirin hardly noticed the crowd parting and backing away from him as Jin approached. At the edge of his mind, he knew everyone was watching him, but he couldn't think about anything but Jin: the light on his hair, his golden-brown skin perfect save for the scar on his cheek, his eyelashes the color of a snowy sky, the hundreds of beads glimmering on his clothing. He wore the empire's mark on his forehead, but instead of the sunburst, it was half sun, half crescent

moon. Fire-colored gems lined the right side, and opalescent stones accented the left. Jin took both of Aneirin's hands in his, and they turned to face each other.

When Jin spoke, it was without hesitation, his voice clear and sure. "Aneirin, I would like to ask you here, in front of your people and mine, to partake of a very old custom with me. It isn't one that's often practiced anymore."

Aneirin waited. At the edges of his spirit, his wolf, his cat, and his hawk were quiet. Content.

"Long ago, when a man or woman became interested in another man or woman, custom dictated he or she declare his or her intentions formally. That is what I would like to do now: declare my intentions to court you formally."

Aneirin exhaled and grinned. He opened his mouth to agree, but Jin, looking serious now, shook his head.

"Before you give your answer, I need you to hear what I have to say. I am a man who comes with strings. I do not know how long my curse will spare me, or what you'll be left with if it doesn't. I need you to understand that you might be accepting something damaged, something possibly beyond repair. Also, there are things about me that I'm only beginning to understand. I don't know where they come from or if they'll end up being good or ill. I am only asking to court you so we can get to know each other. Even considering starting a household is far down the road. But these are things I need you to know before you set foot on that road with me."

Jin's eyes darted from side to side, and Aneirin wondered if he was nervous, if he actually doubted the answer he'd receive. Aneirin squeezed Jin's fingers, partly to reassure Jin, partly to still the trembling of his own hands. "Icicle, I would set foot on that road with you even if it led straight off the edge of a cliff." He wanted to say more, much more, but he decided it would be better said in private. He didn't know much about Oraurian customs, but he hoped this formal courtship arrangement wouldn't last long. Spending time together would be nice, but Aneirin wanted to make this man his, for life, in front of all the spirits and the whole world.

Aneirin turned to the empress. "Your Majesty, will it be a breach of etiquette if I kiss your son?"

She smiled, looking happier than Aneirin had ever seen her. "It certainly won't."

He took Jin's face in his hands. People filled the hall with applause, but it sounded faraway to Aneirin as he felt the softness of Jin's lips against his, heard Jin's sharp intake of breath. When they broke apart, Aneirin noticed dampness against his cheek. Luckily, the empress announced that the day's festivities should commence, and servants appeared with trays laden with food. It gave him the chance to take Jin's hand, lead Jin to a secluded corner, and wipe away Jin's tears with his thumb.

"I wish my brother could have been here to see this." Jin shook his head. "It's all so unfair. All Zura wanted was a partner he could trust, but he never found one. And then me, the one everyone always tiptoed around, fearing I'd snap and go mad at any moment... I end up with someone like you. Someone I knew from the beginning would never betray me."

"Certain of that, are you?"

Jin sniffled a little, looking young and vulnerable. But when he looked up at Aneirin, his eyes burned with surety. "I am."

Aneirin grinned. "Good, because you're right. And just because Zura didn't get the ending he should have, that doesn't mean you don't deserve happiness. Your brother would want you to live a good life."

"I know. He'd be glad I have someone to turn to since I cannot turn to him. We have a great deal to do. That man... the raven... whatever he was... My people didn't find his body."

"And you think he's still alive?"

"I know he is."

Aneirin didn't doubt it. Wherever they had come from, Jin possessed abilities Aneirin had never heard of. He'd explained some of the dreams he'd had to Aneirin, but Aneirin knew they had much more to understand. It could wait. "Today is for celebrating, though. This will be a story that'll be told for hundreds of years—the day the North and South reunited. The land of the sun and the land of the moon. Do you think our names will be remembered?"

Jin smiled. "We are the perfect symbolic characters, you with your sun-colored hair and me with mine the color of the moon. One day, some overzealous poet or storyteller will surely overstate the significance of that. I would rather be remembered for being a good leader. For the deeds I accomplished."

“I just want to be remembered for living a long life with the man I love. That reminds me. Does this formal courtship arrangement allow for...” Aneirin looked around to make sure no one was listening in.

Jin leaned close to his ear. “For fucking?”

“Spirits.” A shudder moved down Aneirin’s spine, and he came closer to embarrassing himself than he had since before he could grow a proper beard. He was grateful for his long tunic. “Does it?”

Jin nipped his earlobe, and it almost finished Aneirin. “Of course it does.”

“Well, let’s do that, then!”

Jin chuckled and stepped away. “We will, but not until later. First, we have feasting and dancing to do. All of the important families in the city will want to congratulate us. We have to show courtesy and interest to everyone who wants to speak with us. And that’s not even thinking about the diplomats, advisors, and wealthy merchants.”

Aneirin groaned.

“Not changing your mind about walking off that cliff, are you?”

“Walking off a cliff sounds more pleasant. You never said anything about hours of inane chatter. Greasing backsides.”

“It’s court.” Jin shrugged. “You’re going to have to get used to it. Come along. Everyone will be looking forward to our first dance. It’s going to mark the beginning of something wonderful.”

**The End**

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