



Book of Thieves

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BOOK OF THIEVES
BOOK TWO IN THE CHRONICLES OF TIRALAINN SERIES
By
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PROLOGUE

The year 1748 of the Third Age

Rhyden Fabhcun stirred from sleep at the sound of heavy, urgent knocking. His eyelids fluttered open and he blinked groggily at the ceiling above his bed. Dawn had yet to grace the horizon, and the waning moon's pale illumination cast misshapen shadows of heavy tree boughs waving in faint breeze over his head.

The rapping continued, growing louder and more insistent with each passing breath. It came from beyond his bed chamber, from the main threshold of his flat, and the noise carried through the spacious rooms, amplified between the vaulted ceilings and polished floors until it resounded like strikes against a drum.

Rhyden groaned, sitting up in bed. His blond hair fell in thick sheafs over his shoulders and draped down his back, spilling in a heavy tumble against the mattress. He tucked wayward strands behind the tapered points of his ears. He was a full-blooded Gaeilge Elf, and to his preternaturally sensitive hearing, the beating against the door sounded all the more resonant and thunderous.

He wondered why Peymus had not answered the door. Like Rhyden, Peymus Beith was Gaeilge, and his room, a modest antechamber adjoining Rhyden's, was closer to the main parlor. If the clamor had roused Rhyden from sound slumber, surely it had disturbed Peymus as well, and it was unlike the steward to let such matters go unattended.

Rhyden swung his legs from beneath folds of blankets and coverlets, letting his feet settle against the floor. He stood, taking his dressing robe in hand and slipping his arms into it as he shuffled toward his chamber door.

He opened the door and peered out across the spread of shadow and moonlight that filled his parlor. To his left, he could see Peymus' door standing partially ajar, but of the steward, there was no sign.

"Pey?" Rhyden called out in a hoarse, quiet voice. The knocking continued in unabated and persistent earnest. Tree limbs brushed against the towering windows framing the parlor, their leafy crowns whispering against the glass panes in a sudden gust of wind. Rhyden's shadow pooled beneath his feet, spreading slightly before him as he stepped toward the front door, walking across a splayed corner of moonbeam.

"Pey?" Rhyden said again. He paused in Peymus' doorway, peering beyond the threshold. He saw Peymus' bed was empty, his blankets folded to one side in a rumpled, hasty pile, as though Peymus had clambered out of bed, abandoning them. There was no sign of the Elf in the chamber, or in the parlor besides, and puzzled, Rhyden frowned.

He went to the front door. As he settled his palm against the brass handle, the heavy, resounding knocking abruptly ceased. He arched his brow and canted his cheek toward the door, listening through the wood.

"Who is there?" he said.

He heard a shuddering, hitching breath issue from the other side of the wood; a woman's fluttering voice, struggling to contain sobs.

"Rhyden?" he heard the woman say, and his heart seized suddenly within his chest, his breath tangling against the back of his throat. He recognized the voice, and he jerked the door open wide in startled, bewildered alarm.

"Qynh...?" he gasped in utter disbelief.

"Oh ... Oh, Rhyden..." the woman, Qynh, said, staring at him. She was nearly as tall as he was, her beautiful face most familiar to him. She gazed at him with enormous, tear-filled eyes the cerulean hue of a calm sea at midmorning, her long black hair spilling nearly to her waist in a cascade of glossy waves. Her pale complexion and cream-hued flesh were nearly luminescent in the moonlight and her bottom lip trembled as she tried not to weep.

"Qynh," Rhyden whispered again, reaching for her. She stepped toward him, her arms sliding beneath the edges of his robe, encircling his waist. She pressed herself against him, clutching at him, her cheek against his chest, her face turned toward his shoulder, as she burst into tears.

"Qynh," Rhyden breathed again, folding his arm about her narrow shoulders and pressing his palm against her hair. "My Queen..."

He closed the door and led her to a chair in the parlor. She sat quietly, her hands folded in her lap, her fingers twining anxiously together as he struck flints to a lamp, offering a dim, golden glow to the room. Only then did Rhyden realize that the Queen of Tiralainn somehow paid call to him in naught save her linen nightgown; she sat before him as though she herself had only just risen from her bed at the royal palace, with her hair somewhat askew, her feet bare.

Such circumstances were not possible and her presence completely baffled him. Qynh was many long, hundreds of miles hence, across the Muir Fuar sea in Belgaeran, the island of Tiralainn's royal city. Rhyden served as ambassador to the Torachan empire, on the mainland continent of the Morthir for Qynh's husband, Kierken, the King of Tiralainn, and their neighboring territory, the Abhacan realm of Tirurnua. His flat was in the bustling heart of Torach, the capital city of Cneas, and Rhyden had called this his home for thirteen years. It had been nearly five years in full since he had last been able to visit his homeland and visit with Qynh in person.

Rhyden knelt before Qynh, reaching out and drawing her hands between his own. "Qynh," he said, drawing her gaze from the nest of her lap. "How did you get here?"

"I followed the moon," Qynh said softly, closing her eyes as more tears spilled. "He ... he is going to kill Kierken, Rhyden."

"What? No, Qynh. No one is going to kill Kierken."

"I heard him," she said, opening her eyes and meeting his gaze. "He thinks I do not listen, but I do."

Her face was so filled with sorrow and fear that Rhyden's heart nearly cleaved. "Who, Qynh?" he whispered, caressing her cheek, brushing his fingertips through her dark hair.

Qynh's head jerked, her eyes darting over her shoulder and flying wide in sudden, desperate fright. Her breath caught in a quiet gasp and her hands latched against his wrist. "Oh, someone is coming...!" she whimpered.

Rhyden followed her gaze across the parlor, but found only his bookshelves, his desk with its top laden with ink vials and quills, opened tomes and strewn papers and parchments to greet his regard. "My lady, there is no one here but us—" he began, his voice soft as he tried to soothe her, to assuage her fear.

"You must go to Iarnrod," Qynh said, cutting off his proffered words of comfort. She stared at him, desperate. "You must leave, Rhyden, at once. There is not much time. They will find it soon—it stirs once more. It is awakening and it wants to be found."

"Qynh," he said, bewildered. "I cannot leave. You know this. I have my duties here, my lady, to Kierken and the Crown. I—"

"There will be no Crown if you do not," she said. Her gaze danced over her shoulder once again, and when she looked back at him, she spoke in a tremulous hush. "You must go to Iarnrod and warn them. If they find it ... when they find it ... he will know of it. You must keep it from him."

"Qynh," he said, helplessly. "I do not understand."

"Do you love your King, Rhyden?" Qynh asked.

He blinked at her, startled. "Of ... of course I do, Qynh. I serve Kierken loyally. I always have—"

"And your Queen?"

"My Queen?" he whispered. He was an Elf, and by such birthright, he could not lie, no matter how fervently he might have wished for such ability. He could not lie, yet he could not bear to admit the truth, not even to Qynh. "I ... I have never known a love that is greater, my lady," he said softly, "than that I hold for my Queen."

"Then help us, Rhyden," she whispered to him. "Please ... by that love ... help me..." Her voice faded. His fingers passed through hers as if through smoke and

then Qynh was gone. Rhyden looked up in dismay.

"Qynh!" he gasped.

He sat up in bed, the sound of his own breathless lament waking him. He blinked in absolute bewilderment, disoriented and dazed, his covers drooped about his waist. He was in his bed chamber, alone in the room save for the first dim glow of the new morrow's sunrise seeping through his window. He looked all about him, confused, as though he had roused to find himself someplace new and unfamiliar.

"Hoah," he whispered, and he pressed the heels of his palms against his eyelids, spreading his fingers through the thick crown of his hair. "It was only a dream."

He shoved aside the blankets and rose from the bed. He stumbled over to his washbasin and splashed water against his face. He closed his eyes, feeling water run in thin, cool rivulets along the contours of his forehead and temples, following the long line of his nose, the arches of his cheeks. "A dream," he murmured again to no one in particular.

Despite this quiet assertion, Rhyden could not dispell the peculiar sensation that what he had seen and felt within his mind was far more than invented fancy, some articulation of his heart's most guarded—and shameful—secret.

You must go to Iarnrod, Qynh had told him in the dream. You must leave, Rhyden, at once. There is not much time. They will find it soon—it stirs once more. It is awakening and it wants to be found.

There had been a time not so long ago when the race of Elves had been able to communicate with one another with their minds through dreams and telepathy, rappers and intuition. It was an ability called the sight, one that was gone from the Elves now, stripped from them, though whether by magic or inevitable divine purpose remained to be debated. It had been fifteen years since Rhyden had felt the presence of another within his mind, and the dream had reminded him poignantly of that delicate sensation. More so than any dream, it had felt to him as though his Queen had reached out to him, her mind finding his somehow—

I followed the moon

—and beseeching him for aid.

Rhyden walked back toward his bedside, patting his face dry with a square of linen. He drew against the bellpull to beckon Peymus and then lifted his robe from the folds of coverlets, drawing it over his shoulders.

It took Peymus a few moments to respond to the bell; it was early yet, and Rhyden had roused him from his bed. When the steward poked his head into Rhyden's room, his long, dark hair was disheveled, his countenance drawn and bleary with drowsiness. His expression shifted into befuddlement as he observed Rhyden sifting through his wardrobe, pulling out clothes and laying them aside upon his bed.

"What are you doing?" Peymus asked, running his hand through his hair, mopping it back along the cleaved planes of his widow's peak from his high forehead.

"Did you not say that Captain Liam Murtagh and his ship came to port two days ago, Pey?" Rhyden asked, glancing toward his steward as he draped a justicoat across the crook of his arm, meaning to add it to the clothes he gathered on his mattress.

Peymus scratched his scalp and regarded Rhyden curiously. "Yes, the *Urraim*," he said. "Forgive me, I did not expect you would be up so early this morrow." He turned, meaning to go to the kitchen. "Let me fetch you some tea."

"No, Pey, do not worry for it," Rhyden told him, dropping three leines atop the justicoat on his arm. "You could pen me a quick bidding, if you would not mind. Have it couriered post haste to Captain Murtagh. I need him to take me to Tiralainn—to leave this morning if it can be arranged."

Peymus blinked in surprise. "Tiralainn?"

"Yes," Rhyden said, nodding. He gazed into his wardrobe, his brows drawn thoughtfully. "Where is my traveling trunk, Pey?"

"Beneath your bed," Peymus replied. "Is your mother unwell?"

Rhyden dropped the clothes against the foot of his bed. He knelt and wrestled with the cumbersome trunk. "No, she is fine as far as I know."

"Your father? Your brother and sister?"

Rhyden looked at him, puzzled. "What? No, Pey, they are all well, the last I heard."

"Yet you would depart for Tiralainn this morrow?" Peymus asked. "Forgive my intrigue, but this marks the first mention I have heard of such plans."

"You will have to wake Calatin, too," Rhyden told him as at last, he drew the trunk out from beneath his bed, pulling it between his legs as he sat upon the floor. Calatin Nagealai was an Abhac—a Dwarf from Tirurnua—and Rhyden's ambassadorial assistant. "Tell him I am sorry—he will need offer my apologies to the emperor and Senate for leaving so abruptly."

"I will pack my bag and make ready to accompany you when I am finished rousing my Lord Nagealai, then," Peymus said, again pivoting to leave.

"No, Pey," Rhyden shook his head, staying the steward. "It is a three-week voyage by sea to Tiralainn, and I do not know how long I will remain once there. My calendar is in my desk, the top left drawer. You and Calatin will need to go through it. Whatever he cannot attend, would you offer my regrets and reschedule? Say I will be back in three months. That should be time enough, I think."

"Time enough for what, my lord?"

Rhyden met his gaze. "I do not know," he murmured, his eyes troubled.

"I will send dispatch to his Majesty, Kierken, to let him know you are coming."

"No," Rhyden shook his head, holding out his hand. "I am not going to Belgaeran, Pey ... at least not straight away. I must go to Iarnrod."

"Grave business?" Pey asked.

Rhyden looked up from the trunk and found the steward regarding him with concern apparent in his eyes. He was worrying Peymus, frightening him, and Rhyden's expression softened.

"I ... I do not know, Pey," he said. "I would tell you if I did. You know that. I cannot explain it, and it may be for naught. I will not know until I get there—and the sooner I get there, the better."

He thought of Qynh's words.

You must go to Iarnrod. You must leave, Rhyden, at once. There is not much time. They will find it soon—it stirs once more. It is awakening and it wants to be found.

Help us ... please ... by that love ... help me

He drew his legs beneath him and stood, lugging the heavy trunk with him. "Come now, Pey, send word to Captain Murtagh. I do not have much time. I only hope I am not already too late."

CHAPTER ONE

Kaevir Macleod was not having a good day.

It was not the worst day in Kaevir's memory, or the worst set of circumstances he had come to find himself in, but it was fairly well rotten nonetheless, and as he sat on a damp, mildewed bench in the Daevonshire village jail and considered matters, he realized that, as per usual, he had no one to thank or blame for this latest turn of poor fortune except himself.

He had spent the evening—not to mention his week's wages—in Daevonshire's solitary pub, the Laughing Dragon, over countless hands of *dystanuir* and pints of *portar*. This was not an unusual habit for Kaevir. Too many pints and not enough winning cards had left Kaevir involved in a drunken little push-and-shove that had eventually blossomed into a full-blown fracas, with every man and woman in the tavern exchanging blows; again, not so unusual where Kaevir was concerned. He had wound up arrested; expected and customary. What seemed odd to him in retrospect, as he nursed his aching head in the cramped confines of a jail cell he shared with at least twenty other men, was that the melee at the pub had been broken up by Ilar County soldiers. Usually such frays were handled by the village constable, Ambrose Wellabeigh and his ragtag staff of deputies. County soldiers were relative rarities in Daevonshire.

"Why were county riders in town?" he asked one of the men sitting next to him on the bench. "I thought they only came during tax season."

The man shrugged, his eyelids purple and swollen from the fight, his nose as distended and bloated as an overripe plum. "I heard tell the Baronmaster's son had them sent to these parts, delivering a prisoner or some such."

"Lord Bran, the Mianach Elf?" Kaevir raised his brow.

The man nodded. "Someone told me he had a thief creeping about his house. Lord Bran caught him squarely in the act."

"Rot the luck," Kaevir muttered. "We might have all gotten away with things if the riders had not been around."

"There is the truth," the man said. "Constable Wellabeigh would have sent us all tottering home, drunk and smacked around a bit—no worse than usual but none so for the show—if he had not been so busy trying to impress the Baronmaster's county folk."

"Muisse," Kaevir said, glancing across the cell, agreeing with the man in *Gaeilgen*, the antiquated, native tongue of the realm. *Indeed*. "Who is that?" He nodded toward a young man seated in the far corner with his shoulders against the wall, his knees drawn toward his chest. "I do not recall that I have seen him around the village

before, have you?"

"Cannot say as I have," the man replied. "Now how do you figure he walked out of that fracas without a mark on him?"

Kaevir frowned thoughtfully. The young man obviously had not been among the patrons of the Laughing Dragon brought into the jail; there was not a bruise or scrape on his face. And the lad had the sort of face one would try to pummel deliberately in a fight; the sort of striking features that men would want to purposefully mar with a well-aimed fist or two.

"I do not think he walked out at all," Kaevir said. "I think he is your thief."

"Do you?" the man said, leaning forward with sudden interest.

"I do indeed," Kaevir said.

"Rotted bastard," the man said, frowning. "Someone ought go and thank him for the troubles he has brought on us all tonight. It is his bloody fault we are penned up in here. Why, we could all be at home curled up in our own beds were it not for him and his botched thievery."

Kaevir thought of pointing out that botched thievery or not, they all still would have had to contend with bloody noses and battered faces resulting from the brawl, but in the end decided to hold his peace. Unlike the man beside him, Kaevir had no bed of his own to long for; he tended to wander from mattress to mattress, depending on the hospitality of the women who owned them, while calling none in particular his home. He was currently between lovers, having incensed the last enough to boot him from her flat, and having not yet charmed another long or well enough to coax an invitation for more than a passing night.

To Kaevir's point of view, the bench beneath him seemed as suitable and inviting a bed as any he had waiting for him outside of the jail, and he lay down against the wood, folding his arm beneath his head, closing his eyes. He heard the man beside him move, rising to his feet and walking away. Kaevir thought of lifting his head, telling him not to make mention of the thief to any of the other prisoners. Nothing would come of it but trouble—and they had all had more than their fair portion of trouble for one night. But it felt simply marvelous to rest his eyes for a moment, and in the end, Kaevir did not say a word. He let his mind grow still and quiet, wandering slowly toward sleep.

He dreamed of sitting on the floor, cradling a gilded gold coffer in his lap. The box was magnificent in its intricate design, surely the most elaborately crafted he had ever beheld, and in his dream, Kaevir struggled to open it. Surely such a marvelous coffer contained some manner of treasure beyond even his wildest and greediest of dreams, and he worked fervently and anxiously, wedging his lockpicking tools into the narrow opening that fastened the coffer securely closed.

It was frustrating work, because the box showed no inclination toward opening. Just as he had nearly given up his efforts in aggravation, he felt the lock yield beneath the persistent pressure of the picks. The tumblers snapped back, releasing their hold, and the lid of the coffer obligingly popped open on its little golden hinges.

A waft of breeze pressed against his face, ruffling his hair as though emanating from inside the box. Kaevir blinked down into the coffer, surprised by his sudden and unexpected good fortune, but found nothing but darkness inside. He stared into the box and heard a voice within his mind, a soft and purring whisper.

You are chosen.

"This is your doing—your fault—and by the Good Mother, you bloody bastard, I mean to see you answer for it!"

This declaration, followed by an uproarious din as the other men in the cell began to howl and clap, snapped Kaevir from asleep to awake in one startled moment. He sat up, blinking and bewildered, and wondered why in the bloody duchan everyone had risen to their feet, standing with their backs to him as they shouted and cheered.

He stumbled up and rose onto his toes, straining to peer around shoulders and over heads. He could see nothing for the throng, but heard the sudden, unmistakable sound of knuckles plowing forcibly into flesh and realized that the brawl had begun anew.

"Who is fighting?" he asked, hooking the nearest man by the sleeve to draw his attention. "Who is fighting?" he said again, having to shout to be heard over the cries and bellows of the others.

"Janaois Southford," the man yelled back. "You want to place a two-mark on him, boy?"

"Who is he up against?" Kaevir asked, again struggling to see. Never one to walk away from a wager without good cause—if even then—he was curious to find out who had been brave—or stupid—enough to have picked a fight with one of the largest and most ill-tempered men in Daevonshire.

"Some kid," the man replied. "A little thief Lord Bran caught stealing from his manor house and sent this way. He is why the county soldiers were in town tonight—and why the lot of us got locked up."

Kaevir blinked, startled, and then clapped his hand over his face to stifle a groan. He cursed himself mentally for not telling his benchmate to keep his bloody mouth shut. Not that Kaevir cared one way or the other for what happened to the would-be thief; he just knew that the racket the men were raising would draw the constable and his deputies, and then they would all be in it the deeper.

"You in on a wager, Macleod?" the man shouted. "I have got three-to-one on Janaois."

A new, enthusiastic surge of yelling rolled through the crowd. "Cut him, Janaois!" someone cheered. "Carve him up good!"

"Hoah, a knife," the man said, balancing on his tiptoes and trying to catch a glimpse of the fight. "Make that two-to-one on Janaois, then."

Kaevir frowned, not sharing in his cellmates' delight over this turn of advantage. "Why does he need a knife?" he asked. "He is as big as a bloody barn."

"Because this kid is a scrapper, I will give him that," the man told him, grinning broadly. "Hoah, and quick, too! Half Janaois' size at least, and he has still landed a good swing or two, to his credit."

Kaevir's frown deepened. "Then Janaois is cheating," he said. "He drew a knife—that is cheating."

"Cheating, my ass. I call it padding my purse," the man said with a laugh. "Come, Macleod, you can give me your marker, if you have no coins to wager. I—"

Kaevir shoved past him and into the crowd. He forced his way to the front of the group and saw Janaois holding the thief pinned by the throat against the far wall of the cell. The younger man pawed helplessly at Janaois' hand.

"I think I will carve your pretty face first, thief," Janaois said, and when the thief's brows furrowed and he spat against the big man's face, his cellmates howled in outraged delight.

"Cut him up!" someone cried.

"Stop it," Kaevir said, shouldering his way toward Janaois.

"Scar the bloody bastard, Janaois! Cut off his rot damn member!" someone shouted.

"I said stop it!" Kaevir yelled, drawing the circumference of men to sudden, uncertain silence. Janaois glanced over his shoulder toward Kaevir, his brows raised in surprise. "Leave him alone, Janaois," Kaevir said.

Janois blinked at him and then shook his head, snorting with laughter. "Go away, little Lord Macleod," he said, offering mocking courtesy that made his fellows laugh. "Go back to your corner and sleep it off. You have drunk yourself to madness tonight."

The men laughed all the harder, and Kaevir felt himself flush with sudden, bright, simmering rage. He closed his hands slowly into fists, feeling the tension straining in his fingers, his arms, shivering through him. "No," he said, locking gazes with Janaois. "You have had your fun. Now leave him be."

The humor in Janaois' face drained and his brows furrowed. He pivoted, swinging the knife toward Kaevir. "Are you looking to bleed, Macleod—?" he began, and then

something beyond Kaevir's shoulder gave him immediate pause.

"What in the bloody duchan is going on in here?" Ambrose Wellabeigh, the constable shouted, and there was a jangling of keys as he unlocked the cell gate and stomped into the room, accompanied by seven strapping deputies. "What is all of this yelling about?"

The crowd of prisoners scurried apart. Janaois let the knife drop to the floor and scuttled backwards, leaving the thief to slump against the wall, clutching at his throat as he gulped for breath.

"This bastard pup pulled a knife on me, Ambrose!" Janaois cried, jabbing his forefinger toward the young thief.

"That is a lie!" Kaevir shouted. "Janaois, you rot damn bastard—it is your knife!"

"You shut up, Macleod!" Janaois snapped. "Or by my breath, I will—"

"Do your worst, you rot!" Kaevir yelled, and he lunged at the big man, his fists bared and drawn back to fly. Two of the deputies caught him roughly and he struggled against them, swinging and cursing. "You lying, cheating rot!"

The constable, Ambrose stode toward the thief. He stooped and took the hilt of the fallen knife in his hand. As he stood, he shook his head slowly, clucking his tongue as he looked at the younger man. "Had you not found yourself in troubles enough without this, lad?"

The thief blinked at him, still gasping for air. He looked momentarily dismayed, his eyes round and stricken, his mouth falling open to protest, but then he seemed to resign himself to this latest accusation and kept quiet, looking down at the ground as deputies seized him by the arms.

"Take him downstairs," Ambrose said. "Chain him in the hole."

"No! That is not fair!" Kaevir shouted, struggling against his guards. Maybe the would-be thief was contented to accept undue blame, but Kaevir was not. Fair was fair. "It was not his knife! By my breath, it was not!"

"Are you not in enough trouble, as well, Kaevir?" Ambrose asked. "Be quiet and have peace. This does not concern you."

Kaevir's brows drew deeply. "It was my knife, then, you rot. Does it concern me now? It was not that boy's—it was mine! I drew it myself! I meant to cut Janaois with it!"

Ambrose frowned, shoving a warning forefinger in his direction. "Hold your tongue, Macleod, lest you find yourself in a world of troubles."

"I bet on the boy," Kaevir said. "You know me, Ambrose. I cannot pass up a lively bet. Janaois was winning. I only moved to put the odds more in my favor!"

Ambrose's frown deepened. He stepped near to Kaevir and glared at the younger man. "I do not know what you are playing at, Macleod," he said. "But since you seem so eager to heap blame on yourself, I will let you." He glanced toward his deputies. "Take him down to the hole. Chain him there."

"Are you mad?" the thief cried at Kaevir. He turned to Ambrose, straining against his guards. "Do not listen to him! He is drunk and daft! It is not his knife!"

"Yes, it is," Kaevir said, and the thief stared at him, bewildered.

"No, it is not!" he cried. "What are you doing? They want it to be mine—let it bloody well be mine!" He looked at Ambrose again. "It is mine, my knife, by my breath!"

"Take them both to the hole," Ambrose said with an exasperated sigh, throwing his hands into the air. "Mother Above, three stories, three owners and all over one bloody knife. You are all daft, I say."

"Are you drunk?"

Kaevir turned toward the sound of the thief's voice floating in the darkness. The hole had proven to be a fairly apt name for a small, cramped, windowless chamber deep beneath the jail. When the deputies left Kaevir and the thief chained to the walls, closing the heavy iron door on them, the blackness inside the chamber was utter and complete.

"At the moment, no," Kaevir said.

The thief snorted, and Kaevir heard the soft scrabble of his chains against the wall as he moved his arms against their short tethers. "Then you are mad. You are bloody mad. What kind of fool claims ownership of a knife that is not his?"

"You claimed the knife, too," Kaevir said. "What does that make you?"

"Someone well enough aware of his circumstances that this little extra helping of troubles seems rather insignificant at the moment," the thief replied. "You should have just shut your mouth."

"I was trying to help you."

"I do not need your help."

"Hoah, lad, that is obvious," Kaevir said, laughing.

"Unless you have a set of lock picks on you, you have no help I am interested in," the thief growled, rattling his chains again as he squirmed.

"You do not look like a thief," Kaevir said.

"You do not look like a nobleman, Lord Macleod," the thief snapped back, adding

the same snide inference that Janaois had used.

Kaevir frowned. "I am a nobleman," he said. "Maybe in name only, thanks to my rot bastard father, but I promise you will find Macleod listed in the Noble Registry at the archives of Belgaeran—that is if a job thief like you can read."

He had thought the young man would offer more retort at this, but to his surprise, there was only silence. "The soldiers said in I'lar County, they cut the hands off of thieves," the thief whispered at length, and Kaevir could hear the tremble of fear plainly in his voice.

He felt sorry for snapping; sorry for the thief. He sighed heavily, forcing his brows to unknit. "Listen, lad. I have been in your spot more times than I can count, half of those here in I'lar. They might make you stand awhile in the pillory and take a lash or two, but nothing more."

"Stop calling me that." Now ire had returned to the thief's voice; a tinge of aggravation.

"What?"

"Lad. I am not your bloody lad."

"Oh," Kaevir said. "What is your name, then?" When the young man made no immediate reply, he shook his head laughing. "Come on, now. If I cannot call you 'lad,' you might as well tell me your name, otherwise I will be stuck with 'bastard' or 'yob.'"

He heard the thief snicker. "Eisean," he said at last. "My name is Eisean Fabhmeir."

"It is a pleasure, Eisean Fabhmeir," Kaevir said, flapping his hand against the short length of his chain. "I would shake your hand in proper introduction, but..." The thief laughed again, louder this time, and Kaevir joined him. "My name is Kaevir Macleod."

"Why did you help me, Kaevir Macleod?" Eisean asked.

Kaevir smirked, shaking his head. "I do not rightly know," he said. "Sounded to me like you might have held your own if Janaois had not pulled that knife on you. It was not fair, and that sort of thing does not sit right with me. Never has."

"And claiming the knife?"

"Oh, that," Kaevir said. "That was only to get tossed in the hole. You think I wanted to keep in the cell with Janaois after that?"

Eisean laughed. "Well, thank you for it," he said. "Whatever your reasons, I am grateful."

Kaevir smiled again. He nodded his head once, even though Eisean couldn't see him

in the darkness. "You are welcome, Eisean."

Four days later, Eabhiros came, and Kaevir nearly wept when the deputies came to haul him out of the hole, telling him his bail had been met. He found his cousin in quiet conference with Ambrose Wellabeigh, dolling out coins to the constable to pay for Kaevir's release.

Eabhiros was dressed in an ensemble so ridiculous it defied any rational definition of good taste; a heavy, velveteen doublet with matching justicoat and breeches, all vibrant and garish green with a cravat adorned with frilly layers of lace and linen swathed snugly about his neck. He had powdered his face until his complexion was alabaster and ghastly, with twin points of rouge dusted against his cheeks as though he had suffocated. The gaudy outfit was made complete by the horrendous addition of a spectacularly wide-brimmed purple hat, crowned with a flourish of scarlet, violet and teal plumes.

Eabhiros turned at Kaevir's approach, arching his brow. "There you are," he said, affecting his most prim and nasal tone. The voice, the apparel, along with a fictitious name likely as ridiculous as his appearance were all just a ruse; one Eabhiros customarily used to avoid disgrace or embarrassment while fetching his younger cousin from various jails throughout the midrealm.

"Must you always be one for such troubles, Kaevir?" He pretended to frown and batted a light, harmless slap against Kaevir's cheek. "You are a bastard to make me fret so," he said. "Let us just for home once more. I will decide on your punishment along the way."

He spun about on his heel and marched for the door, sashaying his hips deliberately beneath the gathered, ruffled hem of his coat.

"My lord—" Kaevir exclaimed, hurrying after Eabhiros. He caught his cousin by the arm at the threshold of the jail. "Eabhiros, we cannot leave yet," he whispered.

Eabhiros cocked his brow. "I beg to differ," he said. "I am melting in this ensemble. I must insist we take our leave."

"How many pence do you have with you?" Kaevir asked.

Eabhiros frowned. "Why?"

"There is a boy down there. I cannot leave him."

"I am not bailing out some flea-ridden vagabond," Eabhiros said. "It is bad enough I have to bail you out, Kaevir." He shrugged away from Kaevir and marched outside for his coach.

Kaevir followed, squinting against the dazzling glare of midafternoon sunlight. "He's not a vagabond, Eabhiros. He's my friend."

The carriage driver, a withered and wiry old gent named Atticus Calltain, who had been in service to Eabhiros for the tenure of his days, and before that to Eabhiros' father, the late Lord Domhnall Macleod, smiled brightly at their approach. "Kaevir!" he exclaimed warmly, opening the carriage door for Eabhiros. "Nice to see you again, lad—and not dead or too badly beaten besides."

"Atticus, hullo," Kaevir said, pausing long enough to hook his arm around the older man's neck for a brief embrace. He used the opportunity to catch Eabhiros by the sleeve and give him pause as he ducked his head to clamber into the coach. "Eabhiros, please let him come with us."

"Who?" Atticus asked.

"No one," Eabhiros growled, flapping his arm, vainly trying to shake Kaevir loose.

"A friend of mine, a good lad, Atticus," Kaevir insisted. "Please, Eabhiros, he has no one to come for him, and they will leave him down there to rot if we do not help."

Eabhiros sighed, the weary exhalation of a man who has been laden with an unrighteous burden. He glowered at Kaevir and then turned, stomping back toward the jail. Kaevir grinned broadly and scampered after him.

"It seems my steward thinks I still have business with you," Eabhiros said to Ambrose as he strode toward the constable. "You have another man in your cellar. I would see him freed to my custody as well. How much is his bond?"

Ambrose blinked in surprise. "You do not want that one, my lord," he said. "He is nothing but trouble."

"Trust me," Eabhiros said, sparing a glower toward his cousin. "He cannot be anymore trouble than Kaevir. How much?"

"I ... why ... I am not allowed, my lord," Ambrose said. "Lord Bran has offered specific instruction that he is to remain here, that he would come for him eventually."

"Lord Bran?" Eabhiros raised his brow, glancing again at Kaevir. "Lord Bran is ... well, let us just say he is a dear friend of mine, Constable. He would not protest the lad's release to my care. Were he here himself, he would tell you the same."

"I would just as soon hear it from my lord's own lips, meaning no disrespect to you, sir," Ambrose said. "They boy, you see, stole from my lord, and—"

"Money is no matter to me, Constable," Eabhiros said, drawing Ambrose to silence as he pulled out a large velveteen money pouch swollen nearly to overflowing with coins. He met the constable's eyes and smiled to see he had the man's full attention. "How much?"

Ambrose returned his smile. "One thousand marks."

Eabhiros blinked. "I beg pardon?"

"One thousand marks," Ambrose said. "Give me the pence. I give you the boy."

Eabhiros spared another glower at Kaevir. "You drive a hard bargain, Constable."

"No bartering about it, my lord," Ambrose told him, holding out his hand expectantly as Eabhiros slowly, begrudgingly began to count out coins. He glanced toward his deputies. "Fetch the boy. You heard the man. We should not keep our generous lord waiting."

It was late evening, well beyond dusk, by the time they reached Eabhiros' estate, Siochanta. While Eisean bathed and shaved, and Eabhiros changed into more comfortable and less atrocious attire, Kaevir sat in the parlor, sipping on a well-filled snifter of brimague and nibbling contently from a platter of cinnamon biscuits.

"It has been far too long since I enjoyed a taste of your marvelous cooking, Giddy," he said happily, his mouth full of biscuit. Brigid Calltain was Atticus' elderly wife, and Eabhiros' housekeeper.

"Do not speak with your mouth filled," Brigid told him affectionately. She smiled. "It is so good to have you home again."

Siochanta had been his home for only less than a year following his father's death, and then the tragic, untimely passing of his mother shortly thereafter, and in the years since, for only brief weeks or months at a time. Brigid, however, was always insisting that the house was indeed his home, and sometimes—like that night—Kaevir was almost inclined to believe her.

"It is nice to be here, I must admit," he remarked. He propped his feet on a small table in front of the sofa, crossing his ankles until he noticed Brigid's disapproving gaze and sheepishly let his feet slip to the floor again.

"Tell me of this new friend of yours," Brigid said. "This guest you have brought to our home."

"Eisean? He is fine, Giddy, truly. Do you think I would bring some manner of disreputable scoundrel into this house?"

She rearranged a pile of envelopes stacked in a small basket on a nearby table. He walked toward her, taking the basket from her to deliberately draw her gaze. "He told me he has Elf in him; his father was a half-Gaeilge, his mother of the menfolk. He was orphaned as a pup and raised by his mother's kin in Nichten County, an aunt who was found to box him around. He ran away and has wandered ever since."

"He seems ... courteous enough," Brigid said, the tone of her voice suggesting that she struggled to find something toward to say. Eisean had not made much of an impression on her, or on Eabhiros, either. Like Kaevir, four days spent in the dank cellar of the Daevonshire jail had not done Eisean's appearance any favors; he was disheveled, dirty, and distinctly malodorous, his face obscured by a scragged growth of unkempt beard.

"He is a nice lad, Giddy," Kaevir said. "He just came into some bad circumstances, and I ... I guess I know what that is like."

Brigid smiled, pressing her palm sweetly against his cheek. "I suppose, then, he is lucky to have found you, Kaevir."

She walked away, crossing the room toward the fireplace. Kaevir looked down at the basket in his hand and raised his brow. He flipped through the envelopes, his brow arching all the more with each one he passed. "Giddy, what are these?"

"Just some invitations," Giddy replied, leaning down to stir the bank of coals in the fireplace with an iron poker. "Parties, tea socials, banquets and balls."

"Yes, it is that wearisome season again," Eabhiros said from the doorway, dressed and looking his customary, unadorned self once more. He walked toward the brimague decanter to pour himself a glass.

Toward the middle of the pile of invitations, Kaevir was startled breathless to discover one bearing the seal of the King and Queen of Tiralainn. He set the basket aside and pulled the invitation loose of envelope.

Your presence is formally requested by His and Her Majesty, the King and Queen of Tiralainn, Kierken and Qynhelein Mailp, to attend the annual Samhradh Masked Ball, to be held on October 29, the year 1748 of the third age, at the Royal Palace, Belgaeran.

"Bugger me," Kaevir whispered.

"What?" Eabhiros asked, leaning over his shoulder and munching a cinnamon biscuit loudly near Kaevir's ear. "Hoah, yes, the Samhradh—the culminating social event in all the realm. They celebrate for three days and nights in Belgaeran, everyone drunk and raucous in the streets, making merry and mayhem."

"Are you going?" Kaevir asked.

Eabhiros snorted, walking away. "Sweet Mother, no."

"None of these?" Kaevir asked, turning in surprise. "You ... Eabhiros, you have twenty-five invitations here, surely! You are not going to any of them?"

Eabhiros frowned, puzzled. "Since when have you given a whit for the pomp and circumstance of the season?" he asked. "Much less whether or not I participate? Of course I am not..."

His voice faded as something beyond Kaevir's shoulder attracted his attention. His eyes widened in surprise and his mouth dropped agape. "Hoah," he said.

"What?" Brigid asked, following his gaze. She shied back a step, her eyes growing round, her hand fluttering toward her bosom.

Kaevir turned and found Eisean at the threshold of the parlor, having finished his bath and shaved away the unflattering beard. The disheveled, filthy thief was gone and in his place stood a striking young nobleman. He had changed into clothes Eabhiros had found for him; the ensemble was a bit large for him, given Eabhiros' taller, brawnier stature, but in the fashionable attire, Eisean looked decidedly dashing nonetheless.

"Bugger me," Kaevir said, raising his brows, impressed.

"Hullo," Eisean said, blinking at them shyly, uncertainly. "I ... I am sorry. I did not mean to interrupt."

By the time Kaevir had finished taking his turn in the tub, he had come up with an idea. "I have a plan," he said as he entered the parlor again. He found Eabhiros and Eisean sitting and laughing together, having apparently hit it off with one another quite well.

"For what?" Eisean asked.

"Sweet Mother, I hate it when you plan," Eabhiros groaned.

"Listen to me," Kaevir said. "Eabhiros, all of those invitations you have—they are for parties leading up to the Samhradh, right?"

"Yes," Eabhiros said.

"And everyone who is anyone goes to the Samhradh Ball. They pack their best gowns and suits, their finest jewelry—no paste for the palace. Only real gems and solid silver, I would wager."

Eabhiros looked at him, visibly puzzled. "I suppose," he said.

Kaevir smiled broadly, leaning toward them. "I say they will be ripe for the picking along those southward roads to Belgaeran," he said.

"Picking?" Eabhiros asked. He was still bewildered, but Kaevir knew Eisean realized his meaning. It was obvious in the way the young man's eyes had widened; how he had settled himself carefully back in the sofa.

"Picking," Kaevir said, nodding. "For three astute highwaymen, it would be open season. All we would need to do is—"

"Highwaymen?" Eabhiros said. "You mean us? You mean rob people on their way to the Samhradh?" He laughed, reaching for Kaevir's snifter. "Give me that. No more for you. You are drunk and have lost your wits."

"I have not," Kaevir said.

"Eabhiros cannot rob people, Kaevir," Eisean said. "He is a noble. He would lose everything if we were caught, and highway robbery is not a petty grievance where

they clap you in the pillory or give you a lashing. It is a hanging offense."

"Would you listen?" Kaevir said. "I have it all planned out. We will pick who we rob. We will have a routine down. We can practice here in the midrealm, taking on coaches coming to and from these other events. And we can use these parties to pick and choose our victims. The two of you can socialize, talk with people, find out who is traveling where and by which roads. We can—"

"The two of us?" Eabhiros asked.

"You and Eisean, yes," Kaevir said. "Look at him, Eabhiros—he is to the manner born! We can say he is a disenfranchised noble son who has only just returned from a lengthy stay abroad in the Morthir. Who could refute that? We could say he has recouped his fortune and returned home again."

"Recouped his fortune how?" Eabhiros said.

Kaevir turned to Eisean. "Do you not have a talent?" he asked. "A hobby? You know, something you are good at, something that might make you wealthy?"

Eisean blinked at him. "I ... I suppose I pick locks fairly well," he said.

"Something *legal*, Eisean," Kaevir said. "A talent that could make you *legally* wealthy."

"Well, I..." Eisean blinked again, glancing at Eabhiros. "I can paint a bit, and sketch. I have done portraits before here and there for pence. Nothing to net a fortune, but I..."

"There it is, then!" Kaevir exclaimed, clapping his hands, pleased. "He has made his fortune anew overseas painting portraits for the Torachan nobility!"

"Kaevir..." Eisean began in sheepish protest.

"Every noblewoman in the midrealm is going to have her knickers in a knot to get a look at him!" Kaevir said. "They will tell him anything he wants to know, if only to stand near him. It will be perfect!"

"Perfect, yes, until they ask my name," Eisean said. "Your name might be in the Noble Registry, Kaevir, but I promise you, Fabhmeir is not."

"I know," Kaevir told him, smiling broadly. "And that is why we will give you another one."

"Hoah, that is splendid," Eabhiros said. "Making up names is fine for bailing you out of jail, Kaevir, but not for this. Backwoods constables do not know a pedigree if it bites them in the ass, but you had best bet the nobles here in the midrealm do. We cannot just make up a name for him and hope it flies."

"I know," Kaevir said.

"And we cannot just borrow one off the registry, either," Eabhiros added. "Everyone around here is kith or kin to someone or another, and sooner or later, we would meet someone who would figure us out."

"I know, Eabhiros," Kaevir said, nodding. "I told you—I have it planned."

Eabhiros sat back, folding his arms across his chest. He raised his brow. "This I have to hear."

"We will give him another name," Kaevir said. "One with real pedigree, but that no one really knows or remembers—one with a past so obscure and unknown in the circles, we can make up any story we want to explain his sudden appearance among us." His smile widened. "We will give him my name."

CHAPTER TWO

Isbaenna Gabhlan woke to the flapping rustle of fabric as a maid threw back the draperies to allow new morning light into her chamber. She groaned, reaching out and hooking a pillow, shoving it over her head to smother the sunshine with darkness.

"Eireann tu, Isbaenna," she heard Maiwen say in Gaeilgen. *Get up.* "Up with you, child. Up!"

"Leave me alone," Isbaenna said, moving the pillow just enough to glower.

"Your mother has sent me to fetch you," Maiwen said, unmoved. "Lady Fiona and Brythenia have arrived, and she would like you to join them in the garden for breakfast."

"I would as soon gouge my eye on a rusted barb," Isbaenna growled. "Fiona and Brythenia are insipid gossips and catty shrews."

"They are your mother's friends," Maiwen said. "And good company to her. She keeps rather lonely here at Orinein by herself."

"She is not here by herself. She has you and Eoghan. You are both far better friends to her than those tattling hags. Tell Maime I am sick, Maiwen, le do thoil." *Please.*

"Lady Airrenigh expects you, Isbaenna," Maiwen said. "I will do nothing of the sort. And here..." She dropped a wax-sealed envelope on the bed within tantalizing reach of Isbaenna's sheltering pillow. "This arrived by courier this morrow for you."

While Maiwen walked away, heading for the wardrobe, Isbaenna pushed the pillow back from her head. She picked up the envelope and frowned, puzzled. "This is from Iarnrod," she said. "This is King Neisrod's seal."

"What would you like to wear?" Maiwen called, standing before the opened wardrobe, peering thoughtfully inside. "You have that garden party this afternoon at the Olwynnes' estate, and it will be warm today."

"Another one?" Isbaenna asked, frowning. She sat up, tucking wayward strands of her disheveled auburn hair behind her ears. "I have not even been home a week and Maime is going to see me dead with all of these ridiculous social engagements."

She slipped her finger beneath the lip of the envelope, breaking apart the scarlet wax seal. She drew the folded slip of parchment free.

My Lady Isbaenna—

Please forgive my interruption of your interim, but I write with a heavy heart on matters of a most urgent nature. I know you mean to return to Iarnrod by the first

of November, but it is imperative that I meet with you sooner—within the fortnight, if you can make such haste. Please say nothing of this correspondence or its contents to anyone—not even your fellows in Belgaeran. Such discretion and drastic measures are regretful, but necessary, I fear, until I know more with certainty—and if we are to keep hope.

Yours—Neisrod

Isbaenna's frown deepened as she re-read the letter. Neisrod was the King of Tirurnua, and the leader of the race of Abhacan. Through bloodkin to her mother, Isbaenna was distant cousin to the Queen of Tiralainn, Qynhelein, and at Qynh's personal behest, Isbaenna had agreed to serve as the royal liaison between the neighboring realms of Tiralainn and Tirurnua. Her duties ordinarily pertained to nothing more urgent than amicable trade negotiations; she was at a loss as to what might have prompted such a tone of urgency in the note, or what might have made Neisrod believe that without appropriate discretion, hope might not prevail.

"Anything important?" Maiwen asked.

Isbaenna shook her head, hastily folding the note in half. "No," she said. Elves could not lie; it was inherent in their nature. Although Isbaenna's father, Iasal Gabhlan, had been a full-blooded Gaeilge, her mother was of the menfolk and lying had always come readily and easily to Isbaenna. "No, it ... it is only about some mining negotiations."

The gossip flying between Lady Fiona and Lady Brythenia was already well underway by the time Isbaenna joined them for breakfast.

"...the Penwyns' carriage was stopped by a roguish band of highwaymen after Lady Mustrach's party," Fiona was yammering. "Three bandits with scarves about their faces."

"Robbed at knifepoint and then stripped of their clothes, trussed to their coach wheels," Brythenia declared breathlessly, flapping a handheld fan at her face. "They spent the night in a most wretched state—a veritable fortune lost."

"Isbaenna," Airrenigh said, her face brightening at her daughter's approach. "Maidin mhaith, inion." *Good morning, daughter.*

"Maidin mhaith, Maime," Isbaenna said. She glanced at Fiona and Brythenia and forced a crooked smile as she dropped a polite curtsy. "Ladies, good morrow. I am sorry I have kept you waiting."

"Not at all," Airrenigh said as Isbaenna took a seat beside her. "Lady Fiona has graciously kept us entertained."

"Yes, so I could hear," Isbaenna said.

"Highwaymen in our midrealm!" Fiona exclaimed. "Can you believe it?"

"The Penwyns must have been terrified," Airrenigh said. "You remember them, inion?"

Isbaenna remembered them well enough; twin brothers, Tierney and Tiernan, and their sister Igraine. Their parents were dead and the siblings were left wealthy and reckless for it, insufferable in Isbaenna's opinion.

"To hear Lady Igraine tell of it, it was not so terrifying at all," Brythenia said. "She said the thieves were quite dashing and gentlemanly, in fact. One of them helped her unfetter her stomacher and stay with all of the gentle attentiveness of a lover. She found the entire experience thrilling."

"Igraine needs to get out of the house more often," Isbaenna muttered, muffling the comment with a sip of tea.

"Oh, and Isbaenna, darling," Fiona said, draping her hand lightly against Isbaenna's. "Speaking of gentlemen—only three days ago, Brythenia and I had the delightful pleasure of meeting a charming young man I think you would certainly fancy."

Isbaenna pressed her lips together to stifle a groan. There were few things worse in her opinion than enduring the inane prattle of idle gossip; having women who knew her neither well nor fondly trying to force her into the fancies of some dreadful nobleman was high among them. "I am flattered you would think of me, my lady," she said. "But I am afraid I have little time for such things as romance these days."

"Oh, yes, your little liaison duties for the palace," Fiona said, nodding as she patted Isbaenna's hand.

"Yes," Isbaenna said, smiling thinly. She turned to her mother, deciding to use this opportunity to gently break the news that her "little liaison duties" would apparently be cutting her visit home unexpectedly short. "As a matter of fact, Maime, I received a letter from Iarnrod this morning by courier. It is nothing urgent, some coal mining negotiations underway, but they have asked me to—"

"I have never understood your pursuit of politics, child," Brythenia said. "If matters of the world interest you, you should speak to men who know of such things, like that darling young Lord Macleod. He has traveled from one corner of the Bith to the other."

"Kaevir Macleod—he is the one I told you about," Fiona said. "He is charming, eloquent, well-mannered..."

"He sounds very polished, my lady," Isbaenna said. "But I will not have time to—"

"Every eligible daughter in the midrealm is practically tripping headlong over her own skirts to have the chance to meet him," Brythenia said.

"He is younger cousin to Eabhiros Macleod of Tamhnach County. You know him, do you not, Isbaenna?" Fiona asked.

"Yes, I know Eabhiros," Isbaenna said, turning toward her mother again. "But truly, I will have no time for introductions or reacquaintances, Maime. King Neisrod wrote to me, and he asked me to—"

"Both of the Macleods would make splendid husbands, I say," Fiona said.

"I say so, too," Brythenia said.

Isbaenna had endured as much melodramatic and nonsensical drivel as she could for one morning. She smiled politely as she rose from her chair. "Gabh mo leithséal, mo'ribhinnas," she said, pinching her fingertips to her thumb and tapping her forehead and chin in apology. *Excuse me, ladies.* "But I think I will retire to my room."

"So soon?" Airrenigh asked. "But you have not eaten a whit."

"I have some correspondences to tend to, Maime ... some work for my little liaison duties for the palace," Isbaenna said, leaning down to buss her mother's cheek. "I am sure I will eat my fill at this afternoon's engagement. My ladies Brythenia, Fiona, it has been a pleasure."

She turned, gathering her skirts and retreating for the manor house.

The robbery of the Penwyns was the subject of the height of fashionable and excited conversation at Lord and Lady Olwynne's brunch, and every mouth was aflutter with heated discourse and hushed whispers about the three brash highwaymen and their brazen assaults against hapless noble families.

"Crime runs rampant and beyond control throughout the realm," declared Calidore Ineadan to a cluster of noblewomen gathered near where Isbaenna stood in Lady Olwynne's formal parlor.

Isbaenna deliberately turned her body away from their conversation lest Calidore mistake her proximity for interest. He was the son of an immensely wealthy landowner in Ciarrai County. Unfortunately, his noble birthright did not entitle him to any claim on his father's lands, because Calidore stood in line behind two older brothers and a sister besides. With few other prospects, he had elected for a career in the clergy, and served as the Ciarrai County Biocaire, or vicar, appointed by the a'Pobail Creideamh, the state religion of Tiralainn.

He had only grown all the more unbearable within the last two years, as Ciarrai's royal Easpag, or bishop, Lord Urquhart Gaosta, had grown elderly, feeble, nearly blind and more than slightly addlepat, thus yielding a grand majority of his responsibilities and duties to his eager and ambitious young Biocaire. More often than not, Isbaenna found Calidore to be a pretentious and boring boor.

"Why, it was only a week ago that a thief violated the very walls of our own royal city," Calidore continued. The ladies surrounding him all uttered fluttering, astonished gasps and he nodded, his expression grimly set. "Would that it were not

so, my ladies. A thief stole past the gates of our fair Belgaeran and into the offices of the Easpag'Ard himself, Lord Llewyn Peildraigh. Fortunately, my lord's guards heard him and chased him out, but he has never been apprehended, and a shadow of fear has descended over the whole royal court because of this."

Isbaenna rolled her eyes, keeping her face turned beyond Calidore's line of sight. The offices of Llewyn Peildraigh, the Easpag'Ard, or Grand Bishop, of Tiralainn had indeed been burglarized recently. She had taken her leave of the royal city within a day of the incident, but had seen no indication of this "shadow of fear" Calidore had mentioned; in fact, by lunchtime that afternoon, the news had proven old fare, and court gossip had already moved on to more engaging topics.

"That same shadow would now seem to fall even here, in the midrealm," Calidore said. "Four times now, we have heard horrific tales of our own fellows and noble friends accosted and robbed by this audacious band of highwaymen. As acting Easpag of Ciarrai County in my lord Gaosta's stead, I mean to ride tomorrow for Belgaeran, to bend the very ear of his majesty, the King on this matter. The Crown must take action. It cannot stand idly by while its most noble citizens are victimized in such fashion. When it is no longer safe for us to leave our own homes without fear of assault, then it has surely become time to act."

While the ladies murmured in concurrence with his bold remarks, Isbaenna smirked, wondering to herself if there had ever been a time in recorded history when it had been fully "safe" to leave the confines of one's home.

"Something pleases you, my lady?" a soft voice murmured against her ear, and she felt the warm press of breath against her cheek. She jerked, startled and then aggravated to discover Calidore had abandoned his conversation to come and stand entirely too close to her for her liking.

"I dare say, I have not seen you smile as such all morrow," he remarked, lifting his brow at her. "So lovely and gracious an upturn of lips should not be kept under such strict and stern measure."

"I think I saw a familiar face in arrival just now, Calidore, that is all," she replied, politely. "An old friend, and dear besides. I would like to go and offer my greetings, if you would excuse me, please."

"I would not tarry you, my lady Isbaenna," he told her, but despite these words, he made no effort to step away from her, or out of her path past the window. "I meant only to tell you it is splendid to see you once more." He lifted her hand gently, and folded at the waist to award her knuckles a soft brush of his lips. "I had hoped you and my lady Airrenigh might be so kind as to join me at my house for dinner one evening during this, your ambassadorial interim, but I have spoken with your mother earlier, and she tells me you are embarking tomorrow for Iarnrod...?"

"Yes, I am," she said. "Some matters have come up that need my attention."

"It is not safe for a woman to travel the midrealm alone," Calidore said, his expression drawing gravely, his brows lifting in concern. "I have spoken with Lady Airrenigh on this matter, and she is in agreement with me. I plan to accompany you east. I have business that would bring me to Belgaeran and my riders and I can ensure that you pass unaccosted through the midrealm."

"You ... you are most gracious, Calidore," she said, startled and surprised—and suddenly annoyed with Airrenigh for agreeing to such a course of action without the benefit of her counsel. "But that will not be necessary. I ride on the business of the King. To trifle with me would be an offense against the Crown, and I would inform prospective thieves or roving highwaymen of such. That should duly inspire any to seek their bounty elsewhere."

"I mean no discourtesy," he said. "But I will not be dissuaded. If anything were to happen to you that might have been within my power and resources to prevent, I would never forgive myself. Your mother agrees that this is wise precaution."

"My mother does not speak for me," Isbaenna said, her aggravation edged in her voice now.

"No, my lady, and I am certain she would not presume to," Calidore said quietly, gently. "But she does speak out of love for you, and honest concern ... as do I, Isbaenna."

"I keep you from your salutations," he murmured, stepping aside at last to grant her room to move past him. "Forgive me if I have offended. I hold no such intentions in my heart."

"Only love and honest concern, then, Calidore?" she asked, arching her brow. She brushed past him, moving for the doorway of the parlor. "You do keep me from my salutations, mo'Biocaire. Good day to you."

"Isbaenna, please try not to look like I am forcing you to walk through a bank of coals," Airrenigh said, speaking through a bright and toothy smile as she and Isbaenna made the rounds of introductions, curtsy-dropping, and idle discourse in the crowded gardens.

"You might as well have, Maime," Isbaenna said, trailing begrudgingly in her mother's wake. "Telling Calidore Ineadan he could accompany me. You know how I feel about that man."

"And you know how I feel about you traveling unchaperoned across the midrealm," Airrenigh said, turning to look at her. "Especially now with these Gentleman Highwaymen, as they are called, out on the roads."

Isbaenna glowered, but said nothing more. She hunched her shoulders and followed Airrenigh through the throng, patiently exchanging salutations for each introduction. When they came upon Fiona and Brythenia in the crowd, Isbaenna struggled to keep

a smile plastered in place as she offered curtsies.

"Lord Eabhiros, surely you remember my lady Airrenigh?" Fiona asked, drawing a tall, strapping young man forward.

It had been a long time since Isbaenna had seen Eabhiros Macleod; they had known each other since childhood, but when Eabhiros' father had passed away from fever years earlier, he had all but retreated from the social circles of the midrealm.

"I do indeed," Eabhiros said, bowing formally before Airrenigh and kissing her hand. "It is a pleasure to see you once more, my lady." As he straightened, he caught sight of Isbaenna and his smile widened, his dark blue eyes sparkling with delight.

"And you as well," Airrenigh said. "Eabhiros, it has been far too long. Of course, you know my daughter Isbaenna...?"

"Yes," Eabhiros said with a nod as he stepped toward her. Isbaenna felt herself smile broadly, genuinely and she threw her arms about his thick neck, kissing his cheek. She did not miss the startled intakes of aghast breath from Fiona and Brythenia, both of whom were appropriately appalled by her utter lack of social discretion.

"It is wonderful to see you again," Isbaenna said, stepping back from Eabhiros. "I had hoped you would be here today."

"I heard of your appointment at the palace," he said. "I am so pleased for you, my lady." He glanced over his shoulder somewhat expectantly, and she followed his gaze. She blinked in surprise at the young man standing in nearly uncertain proximity to Eabhiros. "Ladies, please let me introduce my dear cousin, Lord Kaevir Macleod," Eabhiros said.

Isbaenna continued to blink at Kaevir as he stepped forward, offering a polite bow to her mother. For once, all of the rumors whirling about seemed true; he was an absolutely striking young man. Large dark eyes distinguished his wide, angular face; high, sharp cheeks cleaved toward his strong jaw and framed his delicate mouth.

"My lady," Kaevir said to Airrenigh. "It is a pleasure."

He straightened, and when he turned to Isbaenna, the two of them simply blinked at one another, wearing nearly identical expressions of dumbstruck wonder. "And her daughter, Lady Isbaenna Gabhlan," Eabhiros said. "Royal ambassador to Tirurnua in the name of His Majesty, the King, and I dare say the darling of Belgaeran's court society."

Isbaenna shook her head slightly to distract her gaze. What was the matter with her? She had seen men before; a few of them handsome, even. She was behaving no better than Fiona, Brythenia or any of the other noblewomen she could now clearly see fluttering about, hovering close at hand, all flocked around the Macleod cousins.

Kaevir bowed for her, drawing her hand to his face. She felt his lips brush against her knuckles, and then his breath lingered there momentarily, uncertainly, as if he had found himself at a complete and utter loss as to formal greeting. "My lady," he said at last, still cradling her hand against his—far longer than was polite or proper. "I ... I am your humble servant."

Isbaenna felt a sudden, unexpected flush bloom in her face, absolutely charmed by this simple, clumsy statement. She forced herself not to let the effect show. "Is that so?" she asked.

When he lifted his gaze, he realized he still held her hand, and he drew back, seeming sheepish. Again, Isbaenna forced herself to look away from him, to return her attention aloofly and in full toward Eabhiros. "Do say you will have time for at least one hand of dystanuir this afternoon," she said. "I have heard Lord Airgida has set up tables in an upstairs drawing room."

"I think I would be up to the challenge, my lady," Eabhiros said with a nod.

"Splendid, then," Isbaenna said. She glanced again at Kaevir, and found his attention still fixed on her. Again, she felt the heat of blush stoking in her cheeks; a man had never made her blush in her life, and she would be damned if one would that day. She turned away, gathering her skirts in her hands and hoisting the hem of her gown from the ground. "I will find you later, Eabhiros," she said, marching off, leaving Airrenigh to stammer out some semblance of farewells on her behalf.

She had nearly forgotten about Kaevir Macleod several hours later, but then she happened to glance out of the corner of her eye as she passed by Lord Airgida's library and spied him inside. He stood alone with his back to the doorway, facing a large set of bookshelves. He had found a volume to interest him, apparently; he looked down at it, holding it opened against his hands, and she paused when she heard him reading quietly aloud, his voice soft and reverent, as if he stood in the nave of a cathedral.

"Northward from Linn Dorcha, following the current of the Dubh River, we delved ever deeper among the towering peaks and summits of the Barren Mountains ... " he declaimed. There was something rhythmic and nearly mesmerizing in his recitation, his cadence, and Isbaenna lingered at the doorway, watching him, listening.

" ... crossing into heretofore uncharted terrain, passing shorelines and cliffs that had never before witnessed the presence of man."

He chuckled, as if he found this passage humorous, or at least, personally affecting. She watched him sit on the floor, folding his legs beneath him in a comfortable, casual posture. He balanced the heavy tome against his lap and leaned over, reading to himself.

"Do you always make yourself so at ease in the homes of strangers?" she asked, startling him. He jerked, looking over his shoulder, his eyes flown wide.

"I ... I do not know, my lady," he said. "I make it a habit never to meet a stranger."

"Only friends, then?" she asked, arching her brow.

Her presence seemed to visibly fluster him, just as it had outside. He lowered his eyes toward the rug, offering a feeble laugh. "I did not say that."

She crossed the threshold and walked toward him. "I did not mean to startle you. May I sit awhile?"

He blinked, utterly flabbergasted now. "I ... I would be delighted."

Isbaenna lowered herself to the floor beside him, tucking her legs beneath her. Her skirts pooled and gathered around her in graceful folds. "I am Isbaenna Gabhlan."

"I know," he said, nodding. "We were introduced outside, my lady, earlier today. I am—"

"Kaevir Macleod," she said. She smiled at him. "My humble servant."

Abashed color rose in his cheeks, and again, he lowered his gaze. "I meant no discourtesy by that."

"That is good," she said, drawing his eyes from the floor. "I did not draw any. I thought it was inventive of you, and rather charming besides."

He smiled, and Isbaenna felt something deep within her flutter helplessly, happily. He had a glass of brimague on the floor beside him, a half-filled snifter between them, and she distracted herself by picking it up and taking a sip without his permission. "You do not mind?" she asked, and his smile widened as he shook his head.

"Not at all."

"Thank you," she said, drinking again. She raised her brow at the book against his lap. "The other gentlemen are next door in the parlor. You would rather read than play cards?"

"I would rather do anything than play cards," he said, making her laugh. "Clean a fetid stable; gut a putrified fish; walk a league in this outfit—in this heat—anything."

Isbaenna laughed again. "Hold a conversation with me?"

He smiled. "That would be a pleasure, not a chore, my lady," he said.

"Some would not agree with you there," she said, canting her head back and swallowing the remaining brimague. She did not have to ask; she knew Fiona and Brythenia had drawn him among them following their introduction, undoubtedly telling him all sorts of sordid half-truths and gleeful, malicious slander about her. Fiona was fond of calling Isbaenna "a shrew" behind her back. Airrenigh did not know about such remarks, but Isbaenna did, and she spared her mother from it,

because Maiwen was right. Fiona was friend enough to Airrenigh, and regardless of whether or not Isbaenna cared for Fiona, Airrenigh needed friends near at hand.

"Then the world teems with fools," Kaevir said.

He was trying to be charming. Though it was not unpleasant, she was nearly disappointed. His clumsy earnesty in the garden had lent her fleeting hope that he might be different than any other insufferable cad. He was trying to be charming, and Isbaenna met his gaze, countering his attempts as coolly as every other man's.

"Fools but not strangers," she said, arching her brow.

He blinked at her, looking momentarily flustered again. "No," he said, managing a smile. "Never strangers."

He looked down at the book, and Isbaenna smiled. He was not accustomed to a woman who would not melt at his charms. Apparently, he was also wholly unaccustomed to feeling awkward or uncertain of himself in the company of a woman, and Isbaenna had the distinct impression that was precisely how he felt at the moment. Again, something within her softened, charmed.

"I have heard you are an artist of some esteem," Isbaenna said, drawing his gaze. "You painted a portrait for the Torachan emperor, I was told."

"The emperor?" He raised his brow. "Oh, well. No, I am afraid not. A Senator's kin or kith a time or two, mayhap, but no more than that."

"I would enjoy to see some of your work, if I could," she said.

He blinked at her, surprised and pleased. "I ... Of course, my lady," he said. "I would be glad to show you. I think I might have a sketchbook in the coach, as a matter of fact."

They walked together along the westward side of the house toward the stables and parked carriages. Kaevir had again gallantly offered his arm to Isbaenna in formal escort, and she strolled with her right elbow hooked through his, her left hand pressed lightly against the sleeve of his justicoat. They made a fetching pair, and they drew both admiring and envious gazes from guests who lingered on the lawn as they obliviously passed, absorbed their in quiet, amiable conversation.

"Do you miss your friends in the Morthir?" Isbaenna asked.

"I do," he admitted. "But I am growing to dearly enjoy the company of those new ones I have found here."

"Will you ever go back, do you think?" she asked.

"Mayhap some day," he said. He raised a musing brow. "For the moment, I am rather satisfied with where I am."

When Kaevir opened the door to Eabhiros' carriage, he startled a young man in a coachman's ensemble who had been stretched out upon one of the cushioned seats, his tricorne cap slung low over his eyes as he snoozed. The young man sat up with a sharp yelp, his hat falling askew, his eyes flown wide, and Kaevir jerked in equal surprise, drawing back from the doorway.

"Hoah—what is it—?" the coachman exclaimed, blinking blearily, momentarily disoriented.

"It is alright," Kaevir said with a laugh. "It is only me, Maor, have peace. I wanted to collect my sketchbook and slates."

The coachman, Maor, swung his legs around, his tricorne toppling to the floor. He had removed his coachman's justicoat in the smothering heat of the carriage car and rolled up the cuffs of his shirt to his elbows. Sweat glistened in a thin sheen upon his brow and he dragged his fingers through his hair, glowering at Kaevir.

"What are you doing in here?" Kaevir asked him. "I thought you would be well into your portar by now with the other valets, trying your luck at cards."

"I was sleeping, you rotted, dapper bastard," Maor growled. His eyes widened as he caught sight of Isbaenna standing just beyond the doorway behind Kaevir. "Hoah," he murmured, abashed, blinking at Kaevir. "Gabh mo leithséal, my lord ... my lady. I ... I meant no disregard." *I beg your pardon.*

"Maor, this is my lady Isbaenna Gabhlan," Kaevir said, pivoting his hips to award a less obstructed view. "Isbaenna, this is my steward, Maor Graeham."

"A pleasure, my lady," Maor said, struggling to smooth fallen strands of blond hair back behind his ears, visibly mortified.

"Beannacht, Master Graeham," Isbaenna said, her brows raised, the corner of her mouth lifted in a smile. *Greetings.*

"Do your valets always call you a rotted, dapper bastard?" Isbaenna asked Kaevir.

"Only when I deserve it," he replied with a laugh.

They had moved to the garden and sat beneath the full, leafy boughs of a cluster of mature trees, enjoying the relative reprieve from the harsh, oppressive heat of the sun. She leaned against one trunk, with her skirts and crinolines draped about her legs, cradling his book of drawings in her lap as Kaevir sat across from her, resting against another tree. She had been admiring his work with a sort of breathless, quiet, wide-eyed wonder.

"Could you draw my father for me?" she asked, her voice so quiet and uncharacteristically tremulous that he blinked in surprise, certain he had misheard her.

"He ... My father died when I was a little girl, and I have few remembrances of him," Isbaenna said. "I would dearly love to have something ... a keepsake, his visage to carry with me to Belgaeran and Iarnrod. Could you do that for me, Kaevir? I could describe him for you. I remember him clearly in my mind."

He leaned forward and slipped the sketch pad from her hands. "I would be pleased to, Isbaenna," he said.

It took only little more than an hour for him to complete the sketch. Isbaenna remembered minute details of Iasal Gabhlan's countenance with remarkable clarity, and it had taken only gentle coaxing from him to ease a description from her mouth. He sketched Iasal's eyes first, because Isbaenna shared these with her father, and then slowly, deliberately as Isbaenna sat before him, her gaze distant as she remembered, he began to trace the lines and angles of features as he imagined them in his mind, based on her words. Her eyes clouded with tears at the last, and when her voice trembled, he looked up at her, his pencil falling still.

She offered a struggling smile, a fleeting, harsh laugh. "I am sorry," she said, her hands moving toward her face, her fingers batting at tears. "I ... I did not mean to get into such a state. Let us see this sketch of yours, then. We will see if you have earned such high regard."

He offered her the sketchbook. Isbaenna gazed down at the parchment for a long time in complete and unbroken silence.

"If you do not like it, I will try again," he said at length. "I will try as often as needs be to get it right."

She looked up at him, and tears spilled down her cheeks. "I love it," she whispered. Her hand darted to her mouth and she pressed her fingers there as though to physically restrain a sob. "It is perfect, Kaevir. It ... This is my father."

She began to weep, unabated and unashamed, and he drew her against his shoulder, enfolding her in his arms. "Your father is dead, too, is he not, Kaevir?" she whispered.

"Yes," he replied, nodding. "He died in debtors' prison."

She shuddered against him, her tears seeping through the thin linen of his leine, her breath warm and fluttering against him. "Do you miss him?" she asked.

Kaevir was quiet for a long moment. "Yes," he whispered at length. "I miss him very much."

"I miss mine, too," she said. "He ... he died during the Second War, when Lahnduren tried to take the throne away from Kierken. I was only a little girl, but I remember him. I ... I remember his smile. I remember how he laughed..."

He held her until her tears subsided. "It is a marvelous sketch, truly, Kaevir. May I

keep it?" she asked at last, drawing away from him, rubbing at her cheeks with her fingertips.

"Of course. It is yours," he told her, smiling gently.

"You should sign it, le do thoil," she said, offering the sketch to him. *Please*. "No artist so exemplary should have his work remain anonymous."

He lifted his pencil from the grass and quickly jotted his initials in the bottom corner of the sketch, nearly hidden by the delicate lines and shadows of the portrait's hair. "There you go, my lady," he said, carefully tearing the parchment free from the book and presenting it to her.

"Lady Isbaenna, at last, here you are!" boomed a loud voice from behind them, startling them both, and Calidore Ineadan came striding briskly among the trees. He caught sight of Kaevir's proximity to Isbaenna and his brisk stride faltered.

"My lady, you weep...!" he exclaimed, ducking his head beneath a low-hanging branch and rushing forward. His gaze settled with sudden, blazing intensity on Kaevir and his hands closed into fists. "What have you done to her, you bloody rot?"

"My lord, I—" Kaevir said, stumbling to his feet, his eyes wide and alarmed at the Biocaire's approach.

"Calidore, have peace," Isbaenna said, puzzled and aggravated by his reaction. "What in Bith is the matter with you? How dare you speak so to Kaevir!"

Calidore stumbled to a hesitant halt. "You were crying, Isbaenna," he said.

"Is that a crime?" she demanded sharply. "I have heard of no such edict. What do you want?"

"Your mother asked me to find you," he said. "I have been looking for you for hours now. It is nearly three o'clock and fully midafternoon, Isbaenna. Tonight is the formal ball at the Edryds' estate. You have not forgotten? She would see you both changed and prepared."

Isbaenna winced, knowing her mother would be sore with her for certain, having delayed their departure. "Rot," she muttered, turning to Kaevir. "I am sorry. I have to go. Maime has no doubt by now worked her pannier into a twist."

"It is my fault," Kaevir said. "Let me speak with her. I will—"

"No, it will be fine," she told him. "Will you be at the Edryds' tonight?"

"Yes," he said, and she stepped toward him.

She cupped her palm against his cheek and kissed him gently against the corner of his mouth. "Splendid, then," she said. "I will see you there. Thank you for a lovely

day."

"I will see you there, as well, my lady," Calidore said as she brushed past him, moving toward the house once more.

"My breath is verily bated, Calidore," she assured him dryly as she left.

CHAPTER THREE

Eabhiros, Kaevir and Eisean stood side by side on the shoulder of road, looking at a notice pinned to a tree. The placard had apparently been recently posted; they had seen no such en route to the Olwynnes' party, and now it seemed at least every tenth tree along their passage had one of the printed signs nailed to its trunk.

WARNING! it declared in large, bold print. Beneath this stern admonition was a rudimentary woodcutting, which depicted the likenesses of three men in greatcoats with tricorne hats and scarves about their faces, each brandishing garishly large swords and daggers in their hands.

Notice to all travelers, by decree of Biocaire Calidore Ineadan of the a'Pobail Creideamh, acting in official stead of His Grace, Easpag Urquhart Gaosta. Beware of the GENTLEMEN HIGHWAYMEN who prey at will upon the unsuspecting within the midrealm! By edict of Her Lady, Baroness Airrenigh Gabhlan, a 50,000-MARK REWARD is offered in the APPREHENSION and prosecution of ANY OR ALL of this fiendish trio. Seek counsel AT ONCE with your parish Sagart or constable with information you might reveal.

"Mathair Maith," Eisean said.

"Calidore Ineadan takes a task swiftly to heart, does he not?" Eabhiros asked, his hands against his hips, his expression amused.

"It is official, then, I think," Kaevir said, grinning. "We have become notorious."

They returned to the inn in Fehrenglade where they kept a room overnight, and each began their preparations for that evening's banquet and ball. Kaevir took his turn before the wash basin mirror, his face and neck lathered generously as he drew the blade of a straight razor against his evening beard stubble.

"Are you done yet, Kaevir?" Eisean asked, with his back facing Kaevir in the mirror. He unfastened the waistcoat he had worn to the brunch and glanced off his shoulder, smiling wryly. "You have been at that glass for nearly an hour, surely. Why are you getting so dandied? You are only supposed to be Maor Grahaem, the steward, remember?"

"I am not getting dandied," Kaevir replied, drawing the razor along the side of his throat. "I want to look presentable, that is all. I have engagements of my own to keep this evening."

Eisean laughed. "What manner of engagements?"

"Gambling, I would say," Eabhiros said as he shrugged his way into his shirt.

"I would say a lady is in there somewhere, as well," Eisean said.

"A lady? No." Eabhiros laughed. "A willing companion of the female inclination? Most certainly!"

The two laughed together and Kaevir shook his head, smirking at them in the mirror. "You are both bloody yobs."

Eisean unfastened his shirt to change. As he tugged the hem loose from the confines of his breeches and pulled the leine off over his head, Kaevir saw scars on his shoulders, the length of his spine clearly in the mirror. There were long, thick, welt-like marks traversing the younger man's back, dozens upon dozens of them apparent and overlapping, and Kaevir's breath stilled, the razor poised without moving, pressed lightly against his skin.

Eisean had told him that after his parents had been killed in a fire, he had gone to live with his aunt and family in Edenvale. His aunt had been fond of beating him with a vicious length of harness strap; that was why Eisean had eventually fled the home.

Kaevir had never seen anything the likes of Eisean's back in all of his days. Eabhiros had noticed the scars as well, but Eisean, still turned away from them, was oblivious to their sudden, quiet attention. Eabhiros glanced toward Kaevir, his brows lifted in startled concern, and he opened his mouth, drawing breath to speak. Kaevir shook his head gently, bidding Eabhiros to stay his voice.

"I will have you both know I will not be gambling tonight," Kaevir said, trying to infuse good humor into his voice lest Eisean become aware of their scrutiny. He watched Eisean through the mirror as he took his fresh shirt in hand, slipping his arms through the sleeves, drawing the linen over his shoulders toward his neck, hiding the brutal and heartbreaking scars from view once more. "Or ... or womanizing, either."

Eisean turned, laughing. "I think my ears must fail me," he said, and he poked his finger in his ear demonstratively, wiggling it about as if to clear blockage. "Did I just hear Kaevir Macleod say he would not be gambling or womanizing?"

"You did indeed," Eabhiros said, struggling to wipe the stricken, worried expression from his face. "Mayhap he has been struck with fever, Eisean, do you think? Surely his mind is addled."

As the carriage followed the long, treelined avenue toward the Edryds' stately mansion, dusk settled across the countryside like a heavy, plum-colored shroud. Hundreds of lanterns had been strung throughout tree boughs and across the manicured expanse of the Edryds' lawn, and as they drew near to the house, it seemed the entire estate had somehow captured a wayward corner of midafternoon sunshine and bid it stay awhile, lending its glow to the affair.

Eisean canted his head out of the coach window, his eyes wide with amazement. "Eabhiros, look at this," he breathed.

Eabhiros smiled to see the enthrallment in Eisean's face as he watched the lantern-dappled landscape roll past the window. He had never been beaten in his life. Of course, as lads, he and Kaevir had been known to trade punches and jabs, but Eabhiros' father, Domhnall, had never raised his hand or a switch against him; had never treated Eabhiros with anything less than gentle, adoring regard. Eabhiros did not know who had put such cruel marks upon Eisean, but as he watched the young man gaze out the window, awestruck and marvelling, Eabhiros longed for even five minutes alone in a locked room with whoever bore such grievous accountability.

"Will Lady Isbaenna be in attendance tonight?" he asked Eisean.

Eisean smiled; not even the dim lamplight inside the carriage could disguise the color that stoked in his cheeks. "She told me she would be, yes."

Whatever had transpired in his time spent with Isbaenna that afternoon had apparently pleased Eisean tremendously. That Isbaenna had lingered so long and so willingly with Eisean, in the guise of Kaevir, made it obvious, at least to Eabhiros, that whatever winsome effect Isbaenna bore on Eisean's heart, he must have had the same on hers.

Eabhiros could have counseled Eisean against harboring such tender affections, but did not. He knew the affairs of Eisean's heart were his own to tend to, and verily, the lad was perfectly capable of such tasks. Eabhiros also knew that his own experiences deemed him a most inept a tutor in the trappings of love.

"How else to explain a so-called 'county catch' who remains yet unmarried?" he murmured, letting his gaze wander out the coach window.

"What?" Eisean asked, and Eabhiros blinked at him.

"Nothing," he said, shaking his head. "Never mind. It was naught."

As dinner was served, and all of the Edryds' guests were seated for the banquet, talk soon and inevitably turned to the Penwyns' robbery.

"I tell you, it was positively thrilling!" Tierney Pewnwyn declared. His eyes sparkled delightedly, and he held the rapt attention of everyone seated about him. "Dashing, they were, absolutely dashing! From tricorne to jackboot in elegant vestments like a gentleman's, not some paltry vagabond!"

"They are no gentlemen," said a prim older noblewoman named Darfhinn. "They are common criminals. Ignorant peasant trash. They should be strung from the gallows for this repeated and grievous disregard."

"I could not agree with you more, Lady Darfhinn," Tierney's twin brother Tiernan said, his brows narrowed, his expression sullen.

"They were not peasants," their sister Igraine said. "These were surely young gentlemen of noble birth." She glanced around the table, leaning forward as though

she meant to impart some great secret. "I would be willing to wager the three of them sit among us tonight, somewhere in this very assemblage."

"Why in the Bith would you say such a thing, my lady?" Eabhiros asked, and she turned to him, smiling.

"Their manners were impeccable, my lord," she said. "One does not come upon such genteel charms tilling acreage on a farm. No, I tell you, they are lads of culture and pedigree." Her smile widened wryly. "They were magnificent."

"Igraine, darling, were you not quaking verily with terror?" asked one of their table mates, Lady Heulwen. Her eyes were flown wide, her mouth standing partially agape, her pallor drained to a sepulchral hue.

"Quite the contrary, Heulwen," Igraine said, arching her eyebrow. "I was quaking, but not with fright. I must agree with Tierney. The entire affair was simply smashing, from the moment we heard the first cries ring out in a voice so powerful, so commanding as to cause the downy hairs upon my neck to rise in a shiver of excitement just to think of it."

"Stand and deliver," Tierney said. "That is what the Gentleman Highwaymen called out upon our halt."

"I tremble now, even in the recall," Igraine murmured. "And then, the *leannan* among them ... the lover..."

"He is the one, is he not, who undressed you?" Eisean asked innocently. He sucked in a sharp, hissing breath as Eabhiros kicked him subtly but soundly beneath the table.

"I have been touched by men in my days, but none of them ever as such," Igraine said. "The Gentleman Highwaymen wear gloves you know, leather on their hands, and when his fingertips brushed against me, as they lighted upon my skin, gently, deliberately drawing my clothing from me, I nearly swooned."

"Oh, my," Eabhiros said, his face decidedly flushed.

"He stood so close to me, I could feel the heat of his breath against my ear, rustling in my hair, and his voice, speaking so low and tender in cadence and timbre, I scarcely had any thought save to turn to him, draw him into the coach and beg him to make love to me upon the very floor."

"Yes, well..." Eabhiros remarked, glancing at Eisean and draining his wine glass dry in a long, single swallow.

"He has the most lovely mouth," Igraine whispered, her expression nearly wistful. "That was all I could see of him really. The brim of his hat hid his eyes in the shadows, but his mouth ... so softly formed against such a square and imposing jaw. I longed to touch my fingertips against his lips, even for one moment, to lean

forward and take even the most fleeting taste of him against my tongue.” She turned toward Eabhiros, looking at him somewhat studiously.

"Say, is that roasted pheasant?" Eabhiros asked loudly, turning away from her attention. "Someone, here! Pass it this way."

Igraine glanced toward Calidore and feigned a blush that would have been out of character had it been sincere. "Gabh mo leithsceal, mo'Biocaire," she murmured, brushing fingertips and thumb against her forehead and chin in apology. "Forgive my boldness and my candor. I only recount as best I am able."

"Speak freely, Lady Igraine, le do thoil," Calidore said, nodding his head respectfully and smiling. *Please*. "I would not see you hold your tongue on my account. It is the Good Mother who would see judgment for your desire, not me."

"Then I will gladly bear the meting out of her disregard," Igraine said. "Because I am quite guilty as charged."

"My sister is in love with a highwayman," Tierney said, laughing.

"They are magnificent," Igraine said again. "I would gladly offer ten thousand marks to know their names, who they are."

"They are thieves," Isbaenna said dourly, bored of the conversation, her brows drawn as she frowned. "That is who they are, Igraine—not gentlemen or nobles or lovers besides. They are highwaymen and boors, who glean pleasure from the fear and loss they bring to others. They could have easily harmed you as not, Igraine, and your brothers as well. They could have raped you."

"Can one rape the willing?" Tierney asked, laughing again.

"What do you say of the matter, Lord Macleod?" Calidore asked Eisean. The Biocaire arched his brow and regarded the younger man for a long moment. "You have been noticeably reserved during this course of conversation. What do you think of these Gentleman Highwaymen? Are they noble gentlemen, common thieves, malcontented peasants, or just abhorrent boors?"

"Mayhap they are all of these," Eisean said. "Do we not all have such capacities within us, mo'Biocaire? If we did not, I would say clergymen such as yourself would be hard-pressed for work to save our souls."

Silence settled on the table as everyone blinked at him, startled by his candor. Isbaenna drew her napkin from her lap and rose to her feet. "I think I should like to go for a walk," she said. "I hear tell my Lady Edryd's tiered gardens are simply marvelous." Calidore opened his mouth, drawing in breath to offer his company to her, but she cut him off before he even uttered a sound. "Lord Macleod, would you care to join me?"

He smiled. "I would be most pleased, my lady," he said.

"Splendid, then," Isbaenna murmured, and she could not help but meet his smile with her own.

"There is going to be a fireworks display tonight," Isbaenna told Eisean. They strolled along at a leisurely, comfortable pace, side by side as they followed shadow-draped and hedge-lined paths the Edryds' gardens.

"Really?" he asked. He had seen fireworks before at county fairs and harvest celebrations, but had never heard of a single person commissioning their own private display before.

Isbaenna nodded with a smile. "Lord Edryd's youngest daughter, Rua loves them dearly, or so I have been told, and he would spare no expense to please her, or his friends and fellows."

"That is obvious. I have certainly never seen the likes of an affair as grand as this," Eisean said.

"You have never been to a formal ball before?"

"No, my lady," he said. "Not like this."

Isbaenna reached for him, slipping her palm against his, and Eisean closed his fingers lightly, tenderly against her. "I must leave tomorrow, Kaevir," she said, softly. "Something has arisen, a matter that requires my attention and I ... I must go to Iarnrod."

"Oh," he whispered, feeling his heart tremble with sudden, poignant distress that he struggled not to reveal in his face.

"There are mining negotiations underway that I am helping to mediate," she offered in explanation, glancing at him briefly and then redirecting her gaze toward the pool. "I will probably need to return to Belgaeran after that. There will be only a week until the Samhradh ball by then, and I ... I will have to return full time to my ambassadorial affairs."

"You keep very busy, my lady," he remarked, an hollow comment that disguised his terrible disappointment.

She smiled without much humor. "Yes, I do. I could write to you...? You will be staying with Eabhiros for a time, will you not? I ... I could have letters ... correspondence sent to you there?"

"Yes," Eisean said, nodding. "I would like that, Isbaenna."

She looked wistful and sad and gazed down toward the hem of her skirt. There was a long, quiet pause between them as they stood along the shore of a reflecting pool, and then she whispered, "I have enjoyed our time together today, Kaevir."

"I have enjoyed it, as well, my lady."

She brought her hands against his cheeks and rose onto her toes, lifting her chin, turning her face toward his.

"Isbaenna, I..." Eisean whispered, and she caught his quiet voice against her mouth, letting the gentle contours of her lips settle against his. She kissed him lightly, and then he cradled her face between his hands and drew her near, kissing her deeply, drawing a soft whimper from her throat.

There was a sudden, tremendous, booming explosion from overhead, as though they had stumbled into a thunderclap, and suddenly the air around them, the sky overhead filled with brilliant, golden light. Eisean jerked away from her, yelping breathlessly, startled by the din, and Isbaenna jumped, squealing in surprise, her hands darting to her mouth again as she began to laugh.

"Oh—fireworks!" she cried, raising her voice to be heard as another resounding boom bellowed over them, sending another dazzling spray of embers spilling from one end of the horizon to the next. The sparkle of fire danced across her eyes and for a flickering moment, her face was aglow as she gazed up into the sky, laughing with delight. She reached for his hand without averting her eyes, and he felt her squeeze against his fingers in her excitement.

"Look, the fireworks display!" she exclaimed, and her eyes danced toward him for a moment. She laughed at another brilliant shower of light. "Oh, is it not perfect, Kaevir?"

"It is the most perfect moment of my life," he whispered, but another rocket exploded overhead, bathing her in a wash of sudden gold and she did not hear.

CHAPTER FOUR

Once the carriage had been parked and the horses tended to, Kaevir wove his way through the crowd of valets, stewards, and coachmen on the manor lawn. With nearly five hundred nobles in attendance for the gala affair—each with their own personal slew of servants and attendants—the grounds were fairly well crammed to capacity with vehicles and people, most of whom seemed either to be milling about, adding to the confused and boisterous atmosphere, or, like Kaevir, wandering around, jostling into one another with little apparent purpose or regard.

Someone bumped roughly into his shoulder, sending him staggering sideways. Kaevir yelped as he stumbled into a rather large and brawny man coming along behind him, his thick, muscled arms laden with two large, cumbersome wooden crates. The back of Kaevir's shoulder and neck smacked painfully into the unyielding corner of one of the crates, and then the man's heavy boots kicked against the heels of Kaevir's shoes, nearly toppling them both. The man uttered a sharp, startled cry and Kaevir pivoted, turning his face just in time to see the top crate slide away from the man's grasp, falling toward his head.

"Hoah!" Kaevir shouted, backpedalling, his knees buckling as he reached out reflexively, catching the brunt of the crate's weight against his arms and chest as it crashed against him. Whatever was in the box was quite heavy, and Kaevir stumbled, lurching into the side of a nearby coach.

"Hoah!" the burly man exclaimed, and now, without the obstruction of the top box, he and Kaevir could see one another. His face was flushed with the exertion of carrying his load, shining with a glossy sheen of perspiration. His eyes had flown wide in start and he stood before Kaevir, blinking, his moderate surprise yielding to aggravation. "Are you alright, lad?"

Kaevir shifted his weight, hoisting the box against his chest, balancing its bulk against the cradle of his forearms. "Yes, no thanks to you," he snapped, irritably. "Why do you not watch where you are going? You bloody near knocked my head from my shoulders!"

The man blinked again, surprised anew by Kaevir's fiery retort. After a long moment in which the two stood facing one another in truculent regard, each breathing heavily and somewhat loudly as they bore the heavy crates against them, the man shook his head. His mouth spread into a faint, amused smile and he chuckled.

"What is so funny?" Kaevir demanded. The box was growing uncomfortable in his grip and he debated the wisdom of simply shoving it back atop the man's cumbersome load.

"You and that crate," the man replied, nodding his round knob of a chin toward the box Kaevir carried. "Put it down before you hurt yourself, lad. It weighs nearly as

much as you do."

"It is not so heavy," Kaevir replied stubbornly, shifting his hips again to adjust the balance of the crate. "I can bear it easily enough."

The man laughed, a quiet, patronizing chortle. "Put it down," he said again, gently. "Let it fall there by that coach wheel. I will come back for it."

"I can carry it," Kaevir said, narrowing his brows. "Where are you going? Lead, and I will follow you."

"You will drop it," the man said. "Or you will swoon along the way. Just put it down. I do not have time to debate your physical merits with you."

"Ten marks says I can bear it," Kaevir said.

The man arched his brow. "Twenty marks says you cannot," he returned.

"What is your name?" the man called as Kaevir followed him through the crowd. "I prefer proper introduction to those little lads whose hard-earned pence I am about to procure."

"Graeham," Kaevir grunted, his fingers and palms growing slick with sweat and sliding against the slats of the crate. "Maor Graeham. What of yours? I, too, like to be on cordial terms with those fat plow oxes whose marks I am about to claim."

The big man threw back his head and laughed loudly. "I imagine you get that fair face of yours boxed about quite a bit on account of your mouth, do you not? My name is Tadhg, lad, Roibheart Tadhg." He turned about in mid-stride, walking backwards a few broad paces so that he could nod his head in polite greeting to Kaevir.

He was leading them beyond the long rows and clusters of parked carriages and coaches, down the length of the mansion, toward the expansive gardens to the rear. It was a long walk, and the crowds kept their progress slow, and Kaevir began to breathe laboriously, his arms trembling with fatigue, the small of his back stoking up a dim whine of protest.

"How are you doing, lad?" Roibheart said, apparently not winded or weary at all with only one crate in tow.

"Splendid," Kaevir growled. "What is in this thing, anyway? Masonry bricks?"

"Fireworks," Roibheart said.

"Fireworks?" Kaevir glanced down at the edge of the crate, which rested just beneath his chin.

"Muisse," said Roibheart. *Indeed.* "Forty premium black powder shells per box. Lord Edryd had them custom ordered and commissioned just for the occasion."

By the time they reached the back of the Edryds' gardens some fifteen minutes later, Kaevir was drenched with sweat and trembling with exhaustion. He let the heavy crate drop onto a pile of nearly twenty like boxes already collected and neatly stacked among the hedgerows and topiary and stumbled dizzily.

Roibheart folded his long, thick legs beneath him, lowering his own crate to the grass and rose once more, watching Kaevir strip off his justicoat and toss it across the boxes. Kaevir threw his tricorne atop the coat and mopped his fingers through his sweat-soaked hair.

"Here, lad," Roibheart said, offering a waterskin to him.

"Thank you," Kaevir murmured, gulping greedily.

"And here as well," Roibheart said as Kaevir returned the waterskin. He fished into a weathered belt pouch and withdrew some coins. "Twenty marks, as per our agreement." He pressed two ten-pence against Kaevir's palm, adding a third coin, a five-mark as well. "And an extra five you will need for your visit to an apothecary tomorrow to tend to the damage you have meted out on your spine, lad."

"My back is fine," Kaevir growled, tucking the money in the fob pocket of his breeches. "And stop calling me 'lad.' I dislike nicknames, and have gone to the bother of telling you my given name for good purpose."

Roibheart regarded Kaevir for a long, thoughtful moment, his arms crossed against the broad expanse of his chest. "Do you always seek fights with those significantly larger than yourself?" he asked at length, his brow raised.

"No," Kaevir said. "Not always. Historically, I have required a considerable amount of portar in me first."

Roibheart laughed, tilting his head back on his beefy neck so that his chest shook with good humor. Kaevir could have left him then, but his inquisitive nature bid him to linger a bit longer. He poked around the boxes and crates, discovering one that held shells much smaller in their fashioning than the other boxes. One of these fit easily in the bowl of Kaevir's palm, a diminutive cousin to the other fireworks to be exploded in the showcase.

"What are these for?" he asked.

Roibheart regarded the small shell in Kaevir's hand and frowned. "Those are not supposed to be here," he said dourly. "They are called blue beauties. Pretty enough when they blow—copper dust makes them burn with blue fire. I must have brought them by mistake."

"Will you use them anyway?"

Roibheart shook his head. "I do have not the proper girth of cannons to fire them. Do not worry, lad. I will bring them back to the wagon and tote them home in the

morrow."

He turned and began to walk away. Kaevir hurried after him, cradling the little blue beauty in his hand. "I could buy these from you," he offered, drawing a puzzled and wary glance from Roibheart.

"What in the Good Mother's graces would you do with a box of fireworks?" Roibheart asked him.

"I do not know," Kaevir said, shrugging.

"You could not fire them," Roibheart said. "Not without the proper gauge mortar. You could not light it and throw it. The tail fuse is too short; it does not give you enough time. And you certainly could not let one off in your hand—if you want to keep that side of your form attached, that is."

"I will find some way to use them," Kaevir said.

Roibheart regarded the younger man for a long moment and then smirked. "Take them," he said, with a nod. "You have been more help than hindrance to me today, I suppose, Maor Graeham."

Kaevir blinked at him, startled and surprised by the ease of his agreement. "Truly?" he asked. "I would pay you for them. I do not mind."

Roibheart snorted dismissively, pivoting on his broad boot soles and tromping once more toward his cannons. "You owe me nothing for them," he said, calling over his shoulder. "Nothing, that is, but this—stay a bit longer, give me some company. I will show you how to fix the fuses on those, give them a bit of extra length, and how to handle them so you hopefully do not explode the tips of your fingers off, or your fair face."

"I would appreciate that, Roibheart," Kaevir told him, gazing down at the little bound shell in his hand and smiling wryly. "Much indeed."

Later, as Eabhiros and Kaevir walked across the shadow-draped lawn of the Edryds' estate to collect their carriage, Eabhiros drew near his cousin, speaking to him in a low voice. "Any news?"

Kaevir seemed distracted; his gaze kept wandering beyond his left shoulder, back toward the house where Eisean waited for them with Isbaenna. "Lady Gurvan will be following the Soir Highway eastward," Kaevir said. "I spoke with her coachman earlier. They are leaving after breakfast when the sun has risen in full. She has a cousin in I'lar County she means to spend the night with before they turn south for Breacan once more."

"What do you think?" Eabhiros asked. "She keeps enough diamonds on her to bloody well open her own mint."

"She keeps no guard except the coachman," Kaevir said. "She travels with two attendants, both handmaids. He keeps a dagger and a crossbow on hand, the dagger at his belt, the crossbow near his bench on the coach. The maids are just girls, both of them sixteen. They would know not a ballock knife from a pie server." He looked again over his shoulder, his expression drawn and worried.

"What is the matter with you?" Eabhiros asked, turning his head to glance behind them.

"We should not have left Eisean there," Kaevir said, his brows drawing together. "Alone with Isbaenna Gabhlan, I mean. No good will come of it."

"They are exchanging their farewells. Let it be. No harm shall come of it, either."

"Really?" Kaevir arched his brow. "And should the matter come to it, Eabhiros, who between us is going to be the one to explain to him that no matter his affections, it is a course that will only lead to nothing? She is a noblewoman, Eabhiros—ambassador for the Crown and cousin to the Queen."

"And she is leaving in the morrow," Eabhiros said. "He will likely not see her anymore."

"Leaving?" Kaevir blinked, surprised.

"Yes, cousin, leaving."

"Does Eisean know this?"

"Of course he knows," Eabhiros replied.

"I do not understand. Why would he let himself get all daft over a woman if she is only to leave him?"

"It is Eisean's choice, Kaevir, his own heart and free will. Who am I to counsel him against it?"

"You are his friend, Eabhiros. We are both his friends."

"Then as his friend, I will be gracious and gentle to him as he nurses his broken heart," Eabhiros said. He caught Kaevir by the shoulder as once more, his cousin turned to look behind him. "Leave him alone, Kaevir. Let him enjoy this moment. He deserves it."

Kaevir dreamed of the gilded gold coffer again. Just as he had before, he dreamed of trying to open it, working in vain with his picking tools to coax the lock free. Again, he dreamed that he grew frustrated with his futile efforts; again, just as he was about to give up, the tumblers opened and the unlocked lid popped open wide before him.

He dreamed of a breeze wafting out from within the gilded coffer. There was nothing inside the box, and yet Kaevir again dreamed of a voice whispering to him, echoing

inside of his mind.

You are chosen.

"Kaevir," Eabhiros said.

You are chosen.

"It ... it is stirring..." Kaevir muttered. "It ... wants to be found..."

Eabhiros nudged Kaevir in the shoulder. "Kaevir, get up."

The dreamscape faded abruptly, and Kaevir squinted in the dim glow of morning. He squirmed, burrowing beneath his blankets, but Eabhiros did not give up so easily. Kaevir felt his hand close against the coverlets and then, with a startling rustle, he whipped them back from Kaevir's prone form.

"Time to rise," Eabhiros said cheerfully as Kaevir groaned.

"It is not, you bastard," Kaevir growled, tucking his head fiercely beneath his pillow.

Eabhiros laughed. "It most certainly is, and we are nearly ready to go, besides. Eisean is almost finished loading the coach. Get up."

Kaevir had momentarily forgotten where they were—an inn in the village of Fehrenglade. He sat up, his hair askew, his brows furrowed as he blinked dazedly. "Hoah..." he said, hooking his fingers against his scalp and scratching. "I had the strangest dream, Eabhiros."

You are chosen.

"Yes, well, strange minds often beget strange dreams," Eabhiros told him fondly, tousling his hair with his hand as he walked toward the door, lugging a travelling sack over his shoulder. "Up and dressed, Kaevir. We are out of here directly."

CHAPTER FIVE

The next morning, Isbaenna stood out on the patio at her mother's house, Orinein, watching the sunrise as she finished readying to leave. The balustrade of the patio was draped in lush, thick ivy, bright with dozens of large, autumnal blooms the invigorating hue of cranberries. The air upon the terrace was fragrant and heady with the flowers' sweet perfume.

A sudden, fluttering movement from the corner of her eye attracted her gaze, and when Isbaenna turned her head, she spied a small white butterfly dancing daintily through the air, tapping its tiptoes across ivy leaves as it passed.

Isbaenna smiled at the butterfly. "Good morrow, Daddy," she whispered to it. "Glacann tu mo focalan chuige a speir." *Take my words to the sky.*

Her father had taught her this simple Gaeilgen phrase on the day he had left for the Second Shadow War fifteen years earlier. She remembered he had smiled for her, and then had said something so prophetic, Isbaenna had come to believe in the years since that he had somehow known of his own impending demise, or at least, through his gift of sight, suspected it.

"It is only this vessel that leaves you," he had said, cupping his hand against her face. "For my heart, inion ... My heart will always be with you and your Maime. Always, Isbaenna. Nothing in all of the Bith—not even my own life—is more precious to me. Whenever you have need of me, my mind, my heart are yours. You have only to whisper to the butterflies and I will know.

"When you are lonely for me, inion, you can call to them: 'glacann tu mo focalan chuige a speir'—*take my words to the sky*—and they will come to you, Isbaenna. Let their wings brush your lips, and it will be as my kisses to you. Whisper your wishes to them, and they will find me, no matter where I am, and I will know of them."

The phrase had never worked because Isbaenna was unable to whisper to the butterflies. She did not have the gift of Elfin sight, as Iasal had, and without it, her father's words, his promise that the butterflies would deliver her wishes to him could never be fulfilled. She knew of no Elves now who possessed even a modicum of the sight. It seemed to her that during the Second Shadow War, the Elfin gift had seemingly vanished without a trace, as though it had been stripped from them; as though it had somehow died in the same gruesome battle that had claimed Iasal's life.

The sight was gone, and without even the faintest touch of its graces, Isbaenna could not call to the butterflies. Such realization never stopped her from trying, however, and she lifted her chin, following the butterfly's progress in the sky above her with her gaze, smiling softly as she thought of her father.

"I love you, Daddy," she whispered.

Calidore arrived shortly after Isbaenna and Airrenigh finished breakfast. The Biocaire of Ciarrai County approached the manor house in grand fashion, accompanied by ten a'Pobail guardsmen, all of them dressed in the gold-trimmed, scarlet velveteen vestments that were the earmark of the Creideamh clergy.

Isbaenna did her best to pay Calidore neither mind nor heed, busying herself with her baggage, fussing about it unnecessarily as it was loaded onto her carriage. Never one to simply mind such unspoken cues offered solely for his benefit, Calidore followed her about the front lawn of the mansion, matching her stride for stride and shadowing her like an adulating pup.

"You look tired, my lady," he observed with concern. "Are you unwell?"

"I am fine, Calidore, thank you," she replied, pretending to rearrange the draping folds of her burgundy redingote about her shoulders and the slight, graceful swell of her skirts. "I did not have much time for sleep last night, that is all. Fatigue taxes my appearance." *And my patience*, she thought, irritably.

"I had hoped for at least one dance with you last night," he said. "But you disappeared, my lady, much to my disappointment, I must say. Where did you go?"

"Not that is your concern, Calidore, but I spent much of the evening in the Edryds' garden," she replied curtly, stepping to her left and brushing past him, walking toward the house.

"Alone, my lady?" Calidore asked. "Or with Lord Macleod?"

It was inevitable that rumors would have reached Calidore by the morrow, and Isbaenna sighed wearily. "What difference does it make, Calidore?" she said. She continued her straight and steady course and began to mount the front steps of Orinein's tiered terrace, gathering her skirts in her hand.

"He took you there unchaperoned again?" Calidore asked, somewhat breathless as he jogged to match her pace. "One such occasion, I can see as innocent folly, but twice? That is no position for a proper gentleman to put a lady into, Isbaenna, and quite gauche of Macleod."

Isbaenna paused and looked at him, her brows drawn together. "His name, Calidore, is Kaevir," she told him dryly. "And it was by my insistence that we went unchaperoned. He was a perfectly proper gentleman and I had a wonderful time. Anything else is hardly your business."

She turned away, frowning as she continued up the stairs. Calidore followed, catching her by the arm and staying her in midstride. "I have never made a secret of my interest in courting you, Isbaenna, but I hope that you would hear me now as a friend, and not a hopeful consort," he said. "I do not trust Kaevir Macleod. He is no gentleman. He may wear the clothes well; he may offer the eloquent discourse and display the gracious mannerisms, but he is not as he appears. He comes from a

disreputable heritage, and I would not see you tarnish your father's good and honorable name with such seedy acquaintance."

"You speak out of turn, Calidore," she said, shrugging loose of him. "And certainly as no friend to me."

"Isbaenna, inion, is everything ready?" Airrenigh called, appearing on the terrace above them, leaning over the balustrades and smiling at her daughter.

Isbaenna pulled away from Calidore's grasp. She looked up at Airrenigh and smiled brightly, as if all was well. "Yes, Maime. I was just on my way to find you."

"Let me fetch Maiwen," Airrenigh said. "I will meet you on the lawn."

"Isbaenna, le do thoil, I mean no discourtesy," Calidore said softly. *Please*. "I would only see you spared pain, my lady, and disappointment besides."

"You can save me both then, by keeping well from my path and out of my line of sight for this journey," Isbaenna told him. "And every day that passes from here on. I bid you good morrow, Calidore." She stomped back down the stairs once more, leaving him alone on the landing.

Their traveling pace was slow and tedious; it was not without good reason that the Abhacan city of Iarnrod remained secluded and hidden for millenia among the peaks and cliffs of the Midland Mountains. Even though in the years since the First Shadow War, and the emergence of the Abhacan from their self-imposed exile, roads had been constructed to help facilitate passage, it remained a lengthy, wearisome and potentially treacherous trek from the edge of the midrealm to the borders of the city.

At last, Isbaenna's carriage drew to a halt at the Bealach'theas, a massive, fortified pass which delved deep between two immense and towering mountainsides. Iarnrod was situated comfortably betwixt formidable and imposing natural embattlements, surrounded by mountains on every side but eastward, where the Midland cliffsides plunged in a sheer, cragged shoreline at the edge of the Muir Fuar sea. There were only four points of entry into the royal city through the mountains; four narrow channels carved into the peaks. Like its sister gorges, the Bealach'theas pass was always fortified and attended. Isbaenna had always been greeted with fairly untroubled passage through the Bealach'theas, with no need to present her ambassadorial identification to sentries until she reached the city gates.

That morrow, however, Isbaenna was startled to discover the Abhacan kingdom in some manner of apparent alarm and as she leaned her head out of the carriage window and gaped in amazement, she realized there were at least four times as many soldiers posted as per usual. Even more puzzling than this intimidating and unfriendly welcome was the fact that the Abhacan sentries seemed determined that Isbaenna not be permitted to pass through the Bealach'theas at all.

"You do not understand," Isbaenna said. "His majesty, King Neisrod, is expecting my arrival."

She had disembarked from the carriage and stood in bewildered conference with one of the diminutive but imposing soldiers. He stood before her in full battle armament, the domed crest of his helm even with the underside of her bosom. "The gates are closed, my lady," he told her, politely but firmly. "By decree of my liege—no visitors in or out."

Isbaenna was exhausted from the trip and generally in no mood for inconvenient miscommunications. "It is by the summons of your liege that I am here," she said in a tight, clipped voice, struggling to maintain a modicum of grace. "I am his majesty King Kierken's royal ambassador, and I have been working very closely with both kingdoms in the—"

"Let her pass, Emer," a loud, gruff voice ordered sharply. Isbaenna raised her head and smiled to spy a familiar face; an older, brawny Abhacan soldier striding toward them.

"Frith!" she exclaimed. "Beannacht! Thank goodness you have arrived. I did not think your guard here meant to allow our passage."

"He did not, as is his duty," replied Frith Odharas, the Abhacan army commander. He folded his right hand into a fist and pressed it against his breast, lowering his chin respectfully. "Bail o Mathair Maith duit, my lady, and welcome once more to Tirurnua."

"What has happened, Frith?" Isbaenna asked once they had reached the palace deep within the heart of Iarnrod. She followed the Abhacan commander along the vaulted, marble-tiled corridors of the palace.

He offered no reply, and Isbaenna reached out, laying her hand on his shoulder. He paused politely, turning his gaze up toward her. "Please, Frith, will you not tell me what has happened?" she asked.

"I think, my lady, that matters would be best served if his majesty is the one to speak of them with you," Frith said. He began to walk once more. She followed, the trailing hem of her contouche and skirts whispering against the polished rose-colored stone beneath her feet.

"At the least, Frith, give me some idea, some inkling," she said. "I know it is urgent. Neisrod's letter imparted that clearly. I have traveled quite a distance at quite an inconvenience to be here, Frith, and my mother is rather sore at me for breaking my interim so early. The correspondence said to make haste for Iarnrod—on a most imperative task, Neisrod said. He bid me not to speak of this to anyone, not even my officials in Belgaeran, and now, upon my arrival, I am greeted by armed and armored guards at the ready as if for war." She drew to an abrupt halt, her breath stilled in sudden, horrified realization. "Is ... Is that what this is, Frith?" she whispered. "Does

Neisrod want to go to war against Kierken?"

Frith stopped again, turning to regard her for a long moment. "You do not need me to tell you this—you have been among us long enough to know that Neisrod regards Kierken as dearly and tenderly to his heart as he would a brother," he said rather gruffly, as though he drew resentful offense at her inquiry.

"Then what is it?" Isbaenna asked.

Frith began to stride down the corridor again and, confused, reluctant, and more trepidatious than her stubborn pride allowed Isbaenna to admit, she followed him.

"It is in part to do with your father," Frith told her suddenly, without pausing in his gait or looking back at her over his shoulder to address her directly.

Isbaenna blinked, startled, her footsteps faltering. "My father...?"

"I can tell you as much—there is your inkling. Your father knew at least in part of these matters, and he died to keep such circumstances as these from coming to pass. You are here in Iasal's stead, Isbaenna."

Frith escorted Isbaenna out onto an expansive, private garden terrace overlooking both sunrise and sea beyond the walls of King Neisrod's library. The Abhacan King, a handsome man in his late forties, sat at an ornately wrought iron table, partaking of a light breakfast. He was dressed simply, in a sage-colored leine, tan breeches, and worn leather boots, as though he was no more in life than a contented country farmer preparing for a day spent laboring in his fields.

She was surprised to discover she was not to be alone in her conference with Neisrod. He was joined at the table by his frail and fragile father, the elderly Lord Forgall Baruch, who had long ago relinquished the helm of his mighty kingdom to his son as his eyesight and healthful vigor had abandoned him. Forgall struck a thin and delicate figure, his comfortable and informal dun-colored leine and breeches hanging in draping folds from his wasted frame. He wore his white, gossamer hair brushed back from his forehead toward the nape of his neck; his ivory mustache, which folded down over the corners of his mouth to meet the edges of his short, tapered beard was well-trimmed and meticulously tended.

A tall Gaeilge Elf stood nearby, leaning his hips against the granite balustrade of the terrace with his back to the magnificent backwash of fluorescent colors heralding the break of dawn. He wore the cerulean vestments of a Belgaeran official and had hair the color of summer-blached wheat, thick and heavy, spilling down his spine beyond his hips.

Isbaenna recognized him: Rhyden Fabhcun, and old and beloved friend to her parents whom she had known since her childhood. She was surprised and bewildered to see Rhyden that morning; it had been years since she had last seen him. He had served as one of her predecessors in ambassadorial service to Tirurnua,

but fifteen years earlier had accepted another appointment offered by Kierken, that of principal ambassador to Cneas, the capitol city of the overseas Torachan empire. She had been utterly unaware of Rhyden's return to Tiralainn, and was perplexed as to why such rumor would not have found its way, if not to her ear, then surely to her mother's.

"My lady Isbaenna," Neisrod said as she stepped out onto the terrace. He scooted his chair from the table, rising to his full and diminutive height. He bowed to her in courteous greeting. "Good morning."

"I am sorry I could not arrive sooner, my liege," she said. "I came as quickly as I could."

He smiled at her somewhat forlornly. "It was too late three days after I sent word to you at Orinein, I regret," he said; a comment that made no sense to Isbaenna and only heightened her mounting confusion and alarm. "Had you left at the very moment my letter met your hands, you could not have arrived in time."

"What has happened?" she asked.

Neisrod gave her no immediate answer. He averted his gaze to the ground, his brows lifted as though in great torment. "My lord, please, tell me," Isbaenna said. "What has happened?"

"Something terrible," Forgall whispered. "So terrible, child ... beyond any measure of reason."

Isbaenna blinked at Neisrod, frightened by the despair in the old man's quavering voice.

"We found something, Isbaenna," Neisrod told her in a quiet, measured voice. "Buried deep beneath the mountains, hidden for eons ... meant to be hidden for all of eternity."

"What?" she asked. "What did you find?"

"How do you qualify such evil?" Forgall fretted. "How does one articulate the full and dark capacities of something that seems in the appearance so fragile ... so inconsequential?"

"The Stone, Isbaenna," Rhyden said. "We found the Stone, and three nights after Neisrod sent word to you, somehow, some way ... it was stolen from us."

"What are you talking about?" she asked, wide-eyed, nearly breathless in her alarm. "Stone? What stone?"

"The Shadow Stone, my lady," Neisrod told her, reaching out and laying his hand against her sleeve. "It has lain all of this time hidden and dormant, right in our very midst, but it is found once more, and it stirs. Someone felt its discovery, sensed its

yet tentative awareness, and they have claimed it from us."

"The Shadow Stone?" Isbaenna whispered.

"An ancient talisman," Rhyden said. "A primordial force of evil older even than our own Elfin ancestors, the Na'Siogai."

"Mayhap even older than the whole of the Bith," Forgall murmured, looking stricken.

"Its might is indomitable," Neisrod told her. "And once it is awake in full and its power unleashed, then there is no one left who can stand against it." He stared at her, his eyes filled with stark and apparent fright. "When that happens, my lady," he whispered. "When that dark day comes to pass—and it is coming, Isbaenna, like a black storm upon the horizon—then I fear for our realm, the whole of our land. I fear for us all."

CHAPTER SIX

"Do'Grasta Peildraigh," Calidore called, the heels of his polished leather shoes tapping lightly against the granite floor as he hurried along the cloister. "Easpag'Ard, Your Grace, if you please, may I beseech a moment with you, sir?"

Calidore had arrived in Belgaeran shortly before the bells of the royal cathedral, Ardeaglais'Coroin had marked the tolls of midday. He had been delivered by carriage, deliberately separated in his transportation from the coach that had carried Isbaenna, the Abhacan King, Neisrod, and an unfamiliar, stern-faced Gaeilge dressed in the blue attire typical of a Crown delegate. In fact, from the moment of their arrival in Iarnrod, when Isbaenna had been escorted swiftly and without explanation from their company, he felt he had been purposely kept from speaking with her. No one had found the courtesy to explain to him or his soldiers the Abhacan's grim reception at the borders of their subterranean city, or their purpose in traveling to the royal city with such apparent urgency and haste, and such circumstances and arrangements did not suit Calidore in the least.

His first stop once in Belgaeran was the offices of the Easpag'Ard, Llewyn Peildraigh. Lord Peildraigh was far more than the highest ranking a'Pobail Creideamh clergyman in the realm; his power and authority were second only to the King's.

The Easpag'Ard's attendants had dutifully informed him that His Grace was not available. Llewyn held conference with the King that afternoon, and in the meantime, sought counsel with the Mathair Maith in the chapter house at Ardeaglais'Coroin, as was his daily habit. Calidore had thanked them kindly and then hired a hansom coach to take him post haste to the cathedral.

Here, Calidore had loitered in the tranquil gardens for the better—and frustrating—portion of an hour, awaiting Llewyn's emergence from beyond the doors of the adjacent chapter house. To interrupt His Grace's private meditation and prayer would have been unconscionable, and the pair of armed a'Pobail guardsmen who stood at the alcove's threshold dutifully tempered any such temptation Calidore may have harbored.

When at last, Llewyn had stepped forth, he had walked briskly along the cloister beyond the chapter house, following the covered walkway around the garden. His guards had fallen in step behind him as he marked their pace, the flared, draping train of his scarlet cope fluttering in his wake, brushing against the hem of his matching cassock.

Llewyn heard Calidore's rather frantic beckon and paused in his stride, turning to look over his shoulder. "Biocaire Ineadan, what a pleasant surprise," he said. "Beannacht. Bail o Mathair Maith duit." *The blessing of the Good Mother upon you.*

"Gurab amhlaidh duit, Do'Grasta," Calidore said, genuflecting before the

Easpag'Ard. *The same to you, Your Grace.* He pressed his fist against the breast of his tunic and lowered his eyes to the floor. "Saol fada chugat, mo'tiarna." *Long life to you, my lord.*

"Rise, Calidore, please," Llewyn said. "I did not expect to see you in Belgaeran until the Samhradh. Tell me, how fares Easpag Gaosta?"

"His health remains feeble at best, Your Grace," Calidore replied, rising, keeping his gaze politely lowered.

Llewyn made a thoughtful, rumbling sound in his throat. "Mayhap I should see him retired, then," he remarked. "For as you have so diligently tended to his duties, mo'Biocaire, it would seem only befitting that you bear his title, as well."

Calidore blinked at him, surprised and pleased. Llewyn smiled at his reaction. "You must forgive my brusqueness, mo'Biocaire," he said. "I am due in counsel with my liege shortly, and alas, cannot tarry. Is there something you needed, lad, or can it wait for the moment?"

"I had hoped to bend your ear, Your Grace, on the matter of a band of thieves who have been preying within the midrealm these past weeks."

"Ah, yes, the Gentlemen Highwaymen, am I correct? A loathesome lot. I will be glad to speak with you further, and at length, about them," Llewyn said. "Why do you not come to my home this evening? You could join me for a spot of supper and share your thoughts on the matter with me."

"I ... I would be most pleased, Your Grace," Calidore said, astounded by the good fortune of such invitation.

"Splendid, then," Llewyn said with a smile. "If you would excuse me, mo'Biocaire, I must take of my leave. I will see you this evening."

"Yes, my lord," Calidore said, remembering in his dazed astonishment to drop his head in a polite bow as Llewyn turned about and walked away once more.

While Calidore had gone to the Ardeaglais'Coroin cathedral upon arrival in Belgaeran, Isbaenna had been escorted by royal guardsmen to the King's private library at the palace, at the top of one of the massive towers overlooking the city. Kierken had appointed the room with numerous tall bookshelves, chairs, settees and tables. This was not the library he used for dictating Crown policy or reviewing legislation. This was a place he turned to for comfort and release, a haven he retreated to when he sought solace.

The tower chamber had once been the bedroom of Queen Lythaniele, Qynh's mother. Qynh had been born in this very room, according to lore, and in the long years of Lahnduren's rule following the murder of Qynh's parents, Lythaniele and her king, Herdranges, the tower vault had stood empty, stripped of its furniture and appointments—all except for an enormous mirror and hundreds upon hundreds of

candles.

Of this rumored mirror and candles, there now remained no sign. More peculiar than this gossip, however, was the tale that within this chamber, Kierken had nearly died. The events of the First Shadow War had culminated within the palace tower. Here, Lahnduren had fallen, and here, one of his minions, a commanding soldier in his army named Daelle Gildhalla had seen Kierken nearly murdered with a brutal broadsword stroke through his midriff.

Isbaenna had heard that Kierken's bloodstains remained on the floor of the library. The floor was now graced with numerous, expansive rugs and tapestries, and Isbaenna walked slowly toward the eastern wall of the room, where the blood was said to still be apparent. She knelt, reaching out and pinching the corner of a rug between her fingertips, lifting it from the floor to see if the grim rumors were true.

The door opened behind her, and Isbaenna uttered a sharp, startled cry, whirling about and staggering to her feet, the rug falling into place once more as she turned it loose.

"My lady Isbaenna," Rhyden offered to her in greeting as he and Neisrod were shown into the library by a guard.

"Oh, Rhyden!" Isbaenna exclaimed, laughing shrilly, anxiously as she flapped her hand against her bosom. She felt bright, mortified color blazing in her cheeks. "Oh, you gave me a start!"

"Gabhaim pardun agat, mo'ribhinn," he told her, lowering his head politely. *I beg your pardon, my lady.* "I did not mean to."

Neisrod surveyed the appointments of the library as he walked across the room, his brows somewhat drawn. "Where are the others?" he mused aloud. He turned on his heels, regarding Rhyden and Isbaenna each in turn. "Surely they are here by now."

He had explained along their ride to Belgaeran that he had sent word to Kierken, asking that he summon several others to their conference, including Airrenigh.

"I inquired at the palace gate, my lord, but they told me my mother has yet to arrive," Isbaenna said.

Rhyden glanced at her, his brow raising further. "Nor have my parents, and I would have expected them by now," he said. "Ta sin aisteach." *That is strange.*

"Stange indeed," Neisrod murmured in agreement, the cleft between his brows growing deeper as he frowned.

The door opened once more and they all turned as Kierken entered. The King of Tiralainn was extraordinarily handsome, tall and lean, with remarkable green eyes and hair the color of freshly spun honey. As he walked toward Neisrod, his arms spread in fond and familiar welcome, another stepped across the library threshold behind

him; a man in long, scarlet vestments and robes—Lleuwyn Peildraigh, the Easpag'Ard of the realm—whose appearance drew another fleeting frown from the Abhacan king.

"Neisrod, mo'cara!" Kierken greeted, leaning down to offer his friend an embrace. "Beannacht i failte!" *Greetings and welcome!* "It has been far too long. How do you fare?"

"I am well, Kierken, go raimh maith agat," Neisrod said. *Thank you.*

Kierken looked toward Rhyden as he stood once more, his brows raised in pleased surprise. "Rhyden? Hoah—I did not expect to find you here!" He stepped toward the younger Elf, drawing him against his shoulder. "It has been far too long, lad! Cen chaoi bhfuil tu, mo'cara?" *How are you, my friend?*

"I am fine, my lord," Rhyden said, stiffening somewhat, as though Kierken's embrace embarrassed him. "It is good to be home once more."

"And a blessing to have you here," Kierken said as he stepped away. His pleasure at Rhyden's appearance was as apparent as his bewilderment. He looked at Rhyden for a long, perplexed moment, holding his gaze, and then he turned toward Isbaenna.

"My lady Isbaenna," Kierken offered, pressing his hand against the lapel of his justicoat and folding briefly at the waist. "A splendid surprise as well. I know you have met the Easpag'Ard in the past..." He turned toward Lleuwyn. "But Neisrod, you have not yet had the opportunity, have you not? If it pleases you, mo'cara, this is Lleuwyn Peildraigh, Easpag'Ard of the a'Pobail Creideamh—my beloved friend and most trusted advisor."

"I have heard much of you," Neisrod told Lleuwyn, nodding his chin in polite greeting. He did not care for the a'Pobail's growing influence in Kierken's policies, or for Lleuwyn's influence in particular, and had made little secret of such opinions to Kierken in the past. "Mathair Maith duit, mo'Easpag'Ard." *The Good Mother to you.*

"Your Majesty, it is an honor and a pleasure," Lleuwyn said, bowing for the Abhacan King. "Bail o Mathair Maith duit, mo'tiarna." *The blessing of the Good Mother to you, my lord.*

"Lleuwyn, please, you remember our ambassador to Torach in the Morthir, and my long-time friend, Rhyden Fabhcun?" Kierken introduced.

"We have met in the past, muise, my liege," Lleuwyn said, turning his gaze toward Rhyden. "Though it has been many long years. This is an unexpected but welcome delight."

"Your Grace is kind to say such," Rhyden said, bowing his head to Lleuwyn. "Mathair Maith duit, mo'Easpag'Ard."

"It would seem we are all here, accounted for and introduced," Kierken said. He

turned to Neisrod. "We should begin, then, mo'cara. I must admit, your correspondence has left me rather troubled and intrigued."

Neisrod arched his brow. "We are not all accounted for," he said, puzzled. "Shall we not wait for the others?"

Kierken's expression shifted, growing somewhat sheepish and uncertain. He glanced at Llewyn. "I did not bid them come," he said at length, drawing a startled breath from Neisrod. "Your letter was ambiguous and vague, Neisrod, and frankly, I did not understand its import. They will all be here in Belgaeran within the fortnight for the Samhradh festival, and I felt it arbitrary to call them here sooner—to inconvenience them so—without due cause."

Neisrod's ire reflected neither in his tone of voice, nor his countenance. "It is due cause that brings us together today, Kierken," he said, simply.

"Then you might have made that more clear in your correspondence, old friend," Kierken said, his flare of anger also undetectable, except for a sudden flash of light in his eyes.

"The Stone has been found," Neisrod said, meeting his gaze evenly.

Kierken blinked, a soft gasp escaping from his throat. He stumbled suddenly, slightly, as though he had been slapped in the face. He glanced again at Llewyn, his eyes flown wide in shock. "What...?"

"Three weeks ago, yes," Neisrod said, nodding. "It was found just as legends promised—in a small cavern beneath the Barren foothills, sealed in a gilded coffer wrought of gold. We were blasting new tunnels to access the Airgead silver lode and came across it in our efforts."

"The Stone..." Kierken said, stunned. The strength of his legs seemed to wane, and he lowered himself into a chair.

"That is why I bid you call the others together," Neisrod said. "That is what we all agreed at the end of the Second War. Should the Stone ever be discovered, we would gather again—the ten of us who comprised the Second Council of the Comhar. My lady Isbaenna is here to serve in her father Iasal's stead."

"Why did you not tell me?" Kierken asked. "In your letter, Neisrod, you might have told me ... You might have turned the phrase that I might realize ... that I would know..."

"Gabh mo leithséal, Kierken," Neisrod told him, drawing his fingertips against his thumb and brushing them against his forehead and chin in apology. "I felt, given the circumstances, that brevity and discretion might be prudent." His expression grew grave, his mouth turning downward in a frown. "It seems my intuitions served me well."

"You have the Stone?" Kierken asked, and he sat up, straightening his spine all at once. He looked at Lleuwyn with a sudden, excited light in his eyes. "You have it with you, Neisrod? You have brought it? That is why you have come?"

"No, my lord," Neisrod said, drawing Kierken's puzzled gaze. "I have come to bid you to destroy the Book of Shadows, just as Trejaeran begged of us so long ago. Then, it seemed we had other recourse in the matter, but we do not have such luxury now."

"Destroy the Book?" Lleuwyn said, his brows arched sharply. "What do you mean, destroy it? My liege has dedicated unlimited resources and funds within the last fifteen years to see its secrets deciphered—not destroyed!"

"And if we have the Stone, then we can use it," Kierken said. He rose from his chair. "They are sister talismans, you know this. The power of the Stone unlocks the secrets of the Book. Without one, the other is useless. This is what we have been waiting for, Neisrod—what we have hoped and prayed for. You cannot expect me to destroy the Book now, just as we are presented with the opportunity to use it!"

"The Stone is gone, Kierken," Neisrod told him. "I told you I felt discretion of great import in this matter, and though we strived to keep as such, our best efforts proved in vain. Somehow, some way, the Stone was stolen from Iarnrod."

"Stolen?" Kierken asked, stunned anew.

"Lahnduren," Lleuwyn said with a grim frown.

"We think so, yes, though we do not know for certain," Neisrod said.

"What do you mean, you do not know for certain?" Kierken demanded, his brows furrowed. "Neisrod—Mathair Maith! Who else would seek to steal it except Lahnduren? Fifteen years ago, he tried to overthrow my Crown! He will stop at nothing to try again, and with the Shadow talismans, he can! How did he learn about the Stone? How did he slip into Iarnrod with you unaware?"

"I do not know how he learned of it," Neisrod told him coolly. "And I do not know how he came to enter the vault where we kept it hidden and guarded."

"Mayhap the Stone called to Lahnduren," Rhyden said. He stood quietly by the fireplace, observing all that transpired with impassive stoicism, his hands tucked against the small of his back as he leaned against the mantle. "By our legends, it is said the Stone chooses its bearer, my liege. When it stirs, it will call its bearer forth, beckon him to it."

"If Landuren has the Stone, then he will seek to claim the Book," said Neisrod. "With all that he has, all of his effort and energy. If he should take it, if he should get the Book, the dark draiocht they command would be his for the wielding. He would be insurmountable."

"He will not claim the Book," Llewyn said. "I oversee its protection myself. It is kept in a vault within my offices, locked in a steel case to which only I possess the key. No one disturbs the Book except by my permit. Even the scribes who have worked these past years to translate it do not see it except in my presence."

"He has tried to claim it already from your hands," Neisrod said, looking sternly at Llewyn. "My lady Isbaenna tells me all too recently someone stole into your offices, Easpag'Ard, in the heart of the night with thievery in mind. It was Lahnduren, I am certain of it."

"He did not succeed in his attempt," Llewyn said dryly, his brows narrowing.

"And he will not stop with the one," Neisrod returned. He looked at Kierken. "He will not stop. You understand this, do you not? Days, months, years—millenia, Kierken—Lahnduren will not stop until the Book is his again."

"He cannot read it," Kierken said. "Trejaeran stripped that knowledge from his mind. He cannot read the Book—it would serve him to no avail."

"He still bears the mark of the duchan—of Ciardha's shadow. He cannot die. He is invulnerable," Neisrod said.

"He is not invulnerable," Kierken said. "And he can be killed. A sword strike to his neck, parting his head from his form, would see it so."

"If it was as simple a task as you make it seem, we would not be having this conversation," Neisrod said. "Lahnduren can hide from our sword strikes—lie in wait. He can wait an immortal lifetime to learn the tongue of your Na'Siogai ancestors again and command the Talismans in full. If he has the Book, he will learn to read it, and when he does, all of Ciardha's secrets, her dark powers will be his. We must destroy it."

"How can you ask that of me?" Kierken exclaimed. "Neisrod, you are my friend! You know my reasons for keeping the Book, for seeking its secrets. You know better than any who draw breath I do not want this for personal gain, omnipotent power! I have kept it so long, tended to it for Qynh—you know this! You would ask me to give up my efforts—to sacrifice my lady—and I cannot do that! Le do thoil, I beg of you, do not ask this of me!"

"Qynh?" Rhyden asked, arching his brow sharply and blinking at Kierken, startled breathless. "What ... what does Qynh have to do with the Book?"

"There is no other recourse, Kierken," Neisrod said.

"There must be!" Kierken cried.

"Mayhap there is," Llewyn said, drawing every gaze in the room. "If Lahnduren has the Stone, my liege, I do not doubt King Neisrod at his word, and he will indeed try relentlessly to claim the Book as his own. Mayhap therein lies our answer, my lord."

We can use his desire for the Book against him."

He walked across the library, his gait slow and measured, the gold-trimmed hem of his scarlet cope fluttering against his heels. "What if we award him this opportunity he seeks?" he asked. "What if we make it so easy for him to enter the palace and steal the Book, in his greed and lust for power, he cannot refuse? We could capture him in the attempt, my liege—defeat him in the very act—and claim the Stone from him as our own."

"No," Neisrod said. "Lahnduren is no fool. He would see through any such simple guise."

"Ah," Llewyn murmured, nodding his chin. "But 'guise,' my lord Neisrod, would be the very point. The mhas'cor, my lords—the masked ball of the Samhradh—would prove the perfect opportunity for Lahnduren to make an attempt for the Book. We will all seem at ease, in the mood for celebration, not strife. The gates of the city and the palace will be open, thousands from across the realm passing unabated across these thresholds. Our guards would be lax, more interested in revelry than their duties, for what trouble could we expect on such a joyous occasion?"

"He would not risk it," Neisrod insisted.

"How could he not?" Llewyn said. "Lahnduren may be no fool, but he will never have so opportune a moment as the night of the mhas'cor. With a costume and mask, he could walk the streets just as anyone else. He could stroll right into the palace, if it pleased him. There will be crowds to give him cover in both his entrance and his exit. To his mind, our guards will have their hands full and their minds elsewhere with the celebration. He would risk it, indeed, my Lord Neisrod."

"And when he is caught—when the Stone is ours—what then?" Neisrod demanded. He turned to Kierken, imploring. "Kierken, le do thoil, I know your heart's despair, and I weep for you, my friend. I would give all that I have—all that is within my power to grant—to take this anguish from you, but for the love of the Good Mother, do not let it strip your good sense! We cannot keep the Shadow Talismans. They are evil, Kierken. That is all that they are, and all they will ever be. They cannot be wielded for good purpose—you know this to be true. If you claim the Stone from Lahnduren and can use it to command the Book, you would damn Qynh, not save her. You would surely damn us all."

"We do not know that the Talismans can only wield evil," Kierken said.

Neisrod blinked at him in utter astonishment. "Legends tell us this, Kierken," he said. "You know the tales of their formation, their power."

"Legends, Neisrod," Kierken told him evenly. "Nonsense and lore. These very same tell us Orlaith was born from the sky, that she fell from Tirmaithe and lit her way to the Bith by scattering stars with her bare hands. You and I both know that Orlaith

was as flesh and blood as any of us, birthed from her mother's womb and conceived as any other soul in history. Legends do not impart historical fact, and we cannot trust in them to guide our rationale, not on a matter of such import as this."

"And the inscriptions on the Cloch'suthain would seem to tell us the Stone does not command only evil sway, as well," Llewym said pointedly.

Neisrod snorted. "The Cloch'suthain stands alone in such telling," he said. "In every other recorded history, any other mention of the Stone from ancient times, there is no such reference."

"The Cloch'suthain?" Isbaenna asked, puzzled.

"It is an ancient fragment of granite, a tablet made of stone," Rhyden told her. "There are some who believe it is an article of historical record, etched and inscribed by the original Elves of Tiralainn."

"The Cloch'suthain tells us the Shadow Stone is not evil," Kierken said to Isbaenna. "The Stone is referred to as 'Shadow' only in later records because that was the purpose for which Ciardha wielded it—darkness. But the Cloch'suthain calls the Stone *a'Friteis*—the antithesis of creation. Such theories of opposing forces within the universe—good and evil, light and darkness, sacrifice and strength—they were all once integral portions of Elfin philosophies and teachings."

"The Cloch'suthain says the Stone was the power in direct opposition to the Good Mother," Llewym said. "That while her might was wielded in earth and wind, fire and water to create the Bith, the Stone's power would command these same elements to one day rend it asunder."

"Creation and destruction," Kierken said. "The most intrinsic of all opposing forces."

"According to the Cloch'suthain, the Shadow Stone did not make Ciardha evil," Neisrod said. His face was set in a disagreeable frown. "Rather, Ciardha's heart was twisted from the first."

"There are to be four bearers throughout eternity for the Stone," Kierken said. "Only four who may command it, one to each element in turn—earth, wind, fire and water. However they use the stone, however they command these elements—each will contribute to the ultimate destruction of the Bith. Ciardha was the first chosen—she wielded the element of water. That is how she was able to dissolve her spirit into the Nocturn Spring, to taint the waters and create the duchar."

"Ciardha was greedy in her lust for power, her defiance of the Good Mother," Llewym said. "She was immortal and meant to keep the Stone for herself eternally. She locked it in a golden coffer and buried it beneath the earth, that the other rightful bearers should never lay claim to its power."

"She did not anticipate her defeat at her sister, Orlaith's hands," Kierken said. "Or

eons later at the hands of Trejaeran and Qynh."

"There is no other record in the whole of the realm that has ever described this same tale," Neisrod said. "It is myth and folly; a poor translation of a Gaeilgen dialect scarcely recounted by any. Even if the Stone in itself is not evil, as you would believe, the Book of Shadows is—without question, or debate. Its pages are filled with Ciardha's dark incantations; the recitations and spells she used to wield the Stone."

"The Book, like the Stone, will prove only as dark and evil as the one who commands it," Llewyn said. "It served evil purpose in Ciardha's hands, just as it did in Lahnduren's, because both had evil intentions within them, and used the Talismans to such effect. Even Trejaeran thought to wield the Book for good purpose, but his efforts, too, yielded to that darkness that lay harbored within his heart."

"Trejaeran's heart knew no darkness," Rhyden said, his brows drawing together. "You speak out of turn, my lord, and unduly against one who gave his life that we might all be spared such indecision as we now face. Trejaeran is not here to answer to such disregard, but I will—and gladly—in his stead."

Llewyn met his gaze, and Rhyden did not avert his eyes. They stared at one another for a long moment, the tension between them immediate, as taut as a bowstring poised to fire.

"Trejaeran tasted of the duchar," Llewyn said at length.

"And he defeated it," Rhyden returned.

"But the Shadow remained with him, did it not? By the duchar, his own indomitable powers of the sight were fully unleashed."

"By the fire of the anam'cladh, not the duchar," Rhyden said. "By the blade of his ancestors, Trejaeran realized his own strength."

"But the Shadow remained," Llewyn said again, softly, nearly purring. "Is that not why Dagarron moved to Edenvale in the years following the First War? Did he not tell you this himself—that he sensed within Trejaeran some measure of darkness, an unfamiliar shadow that lingered upon his soul? Did you not see as such yourself, when you traveled to Edenvale from Iarnrod fifteen years ago? When you came to Belgaeran, you told Kierken that Trejaeran sensed the Book's discovery—that its presence plagued his mind, did you not say? Weighed upon him like iron, burdening his heart?"

Rhyden's brows narrowed further. He glared at Llewyn, his Elfin nature rendering him mute, incapable of denying the truth of the Easpag'Ard's statements.

"The Shadow remained with Trejaeran," Llewyn said. "You loved Trejaeran, Lord Fabhcun. But the Shadow remained, and its purpose was wielded through the power

of the Book—not Trejaeran's."

"We do not know what power the Talismans will command in the hands of others," Kierken said to Neisrod. "Those who would seek to use it for good. Not even this is revealed to us in the fragment of the Cloch'suthain—only that it is possible. The answers may lie within the pages of the Book—to destroy it now, when we have such opportunity to see for ourselves would be arbitrary and rash."

"Kierken," Neisrod said. "Have reason. You cannot—"

The library door swung open, smacking loudly against the wall, startling the group into silence. Qynhelein, the Queen of Tiralainn, came in, dressed in a white linen gown that billowed about her legs as she strode across the room. Her long, black hair spilled down to her waist, streaming behind her in wayward strands and tendrils. She seemed oblivious to the presence of anyone else in the chamber as she walked toward the bookshelves.

"Qynh!" Rhyden gasped. He started to move toward the Queen, but stopped uncertainly before he had even taken a step, drawing a brief but inquisitive glance from Lleuwyn.

"My lady...?" Kierken said, his face pained and bewildered.

A handmaid rushed into the room behind Qynh, her eyes flown wide with horror and shock. "Oh!" she exclaimed, distraught. "Oh, my lords, my liege, gabh mo leithséal! Forgive me! I tried to stop her, my lord, but she is in a state today!"

"It is alright, Graelle," Kierken said gently to the woman. Graelle stood rooted in place, her face twisted with dismay. She clutched at her skirt with one hand, and fumbled with anxious fingertips at the soft, narrow brim of her mob cap with the other.

"I am sorry, my lord," she said again, mortified. "She ... she darted past me ... gave me a good shove ... She was most insistent!"

Kierken walked toward Qynh, who stood before the bookshelves with her head tilted back, as though she perused the assembled titles. "It is alright, Graelle, have peace," he said again, quietly.

"No..." Qynh murmured. She had slipped a book down from the shelf and spared its spine a momentary glance. She let it tumble from her fingers, and it smacked against the floor. She took another in hand, and tossed it aside with equal dismissal. "No..."

"My lady," Kierken said softly to her, his eyes filled with sudden, profound sorrow.

"No..." Qynh said, her brows pinched as she discarded another tome.

"Qynh," Kierken breathed, resting his hand against her shoulder. She blinked and turned her face to regard him. She batted her eyelashes sleepily and the lovely

measure of her mouth unfurled in a dazed, delicate smile.

"Kierken," she murmured. "I did not hear you come in." She tossed aside another book and reached out, stroking his face between her hands. "Look ... look what I have for you." She acted as though she pinched something between her fingertips, and presented it to him. "Flowers. I picked them just this morrow. Here is *ros'mhuire*..." She moved as if pressing a delicate bloom against his palm.

"It is lovely," Kierken whispered.

"It is to remember by," she said. "And here are some *goiminas*—they are for your thoughts. I found these..." Again her fingertips tapped against his hand. "These are *creanan* ... though we all wear them differently, I should think, and some more so than others." Her expression shifted, her large eyes growing mournful. "I would bring you some *sailchuachan*, but it ... it withered, did you see? Everywhere ... it withered for Trejaeran..."

"Let me take her, my lord," the handmaid Graelle whispered, drawing Qynh away from Kierken. "I am sorry, my lord, it will not happen again."

"It is alright," Kierken whispered. Graelle led Qynh from the room, and the Queen offered no struggle or protest. She glanced briefly over her shoulder, her gaze finding Rhyden and she smiled as she crossed the threshold.

"You came..." she whispered, words so soft, they might have been mistaken in the utterance. Rhyden heard them plainly, however, and he stared at her, breathless and stunned as the door fell closed.

A pained and awkward silence fell upon them when the Queen was gone. Kierken stood with his hand over his face, his head lowered to the ground. "We will lure Lahnduren to the Book at the Samhradh mhas'cor," he said, his voice measured and stern. "We will capture him and we will take the Stone from him. By my breath, we will see the Talismans ours. Stand with me, or against me, Neisrod, but know this in truth—it does not matter to my heart now, one way or the other. I am fixed upon this and will be unmoved. The Talismans will be ours."

CHAPTER SEVEN

"I do not like this," Isbaenna said to Rhyden. The meeting had lasted throughout the rest of the afternoon, and beyond the perimeter of his guest suite at the palace, the sun set in a splash of bright, glorious color.

It had been agreed that the existence of the Shadow Stone, and their own plot to see it claimed from Lahnduren's hands, would be kept secret and privy among only those who had been in Kierken's library that day. "I do not like keeping secrets from Maime," she said. "It feels too much like lying to me."

"I do not like it, either," Rhyden said. "Would you like a brimague? Myself—I could use a deep snifter."

"Yes, le do thoil," she said. *Please.* "I do not even know why I am here, except because my father would have been, had he survived the Second War. This is the first I have ever heard of these talismans, the Book of Shadows and the Shadow Stone."

"The Book of Shadows was the reason for the Second War," Rhyden said as he stood before a table, pouring them each a drink from a filled decanter. "At the end of the First War, Lahnduren survived. He had learned about the Book from Ciardha during their reign together in Belgaeran. He spent five years hunting for it in the mines beneath the Midland Mountains. And then the Abhacan found it first."

He took a snifter in each hand and walked over to her, offering her a glass.

"Go raimh maith agat," she said, slipping it from his fingers. *Thank you.*

He lowered his chin politely. "Ta failte romhat." *You are welcome.* "You probably do not remember a time when things like draiocht were more than lore among the Elves."

Isbaenna thought of Iasal on the day he had left her.

When you are lonely for me, inion, you can call to the butterflies ... and they will find me, no matter where I am

"I remember," she told Rhyden. "The Elfin sight. Father had the gift."

Rhyden nodded. "Maith thu," he said. *Very good.* He tilted his head back, draining his snifter in a single swallow. He turned, walking back across the room to pour himself another. "Iasal's gift was greater than mine," he said. "Kierken was stronger than either of us, and Trejaeran ... He was the strongest of us all."

"Did he really strip the sight from the Elves, Rhyden?" Isbaenna asked. "Was Trejaeran really that powerful?"

Rhyden nodded. “But his character was even stronger than his power, no matter what bloated, pontificating braggarts like that bastard Peildraigh might have you to believe. There was no darkness in Trejaeran's nature, except the sort that exists in all of us. He died to keep us safe from the Shadow.” He swallowed an entire snifter of brimague again in one gulp. “Apparently, he died in vain,” he muttered.

"He killed himself?"

"He did, yes. He impaled himself upon a blade of fire—the anam'cladh."

"Why?" Isbaenna whispered.

"Because with the sight gone from the Elves ... When Trejaeran used all that was within his own power to draw it from us, it left him alone," Rhyden said. "In the whole of the Bith, only Trejaeran remained with the sight."

"When the Abhacan first found the Book of Shadows, it was given to the last of the Na'Siogai—Orlaith, the Golden Queen—to guard. She was condemned by the Mathair Maith, banished to a place of eternal penance called the Naofa'Ionad, and it was hoped she could keep the Book safe from those who would seek to use it for harm."

"Lahnduren stole the sword of the Na'Siogai ancients—the anam'cladh—from your cousin, Isbaenna, from Qynh. The anam'cladh is the only weapon that can kill a Na'Siogai. It is what Qynh used to stop Ciardha ... and what Lahnduren used to murder Orlaith and claim the Book of Shadows."

"Lahnduren tried to use the Book, to use the knowledge of the Na'Siogai language he had gleaned from Ciardha to read it, to learn from its pages where she had hidden the Shadow Stone. But Trejaeran—who had also tasted of the duchar—also sensed the presence of the Book. He followed Lahnduren into the Abhacan mines to find the Stone, and while the rest of us battled Lahnduren's forces on the plains of the Dithreabh—a place called Fargan'folá, where your father died, lass—Trejaeran and Lahnduren met underground. They grappled over the Book and Lahnduren fell, spilling into a deep chasm. Trejaeran was left alone in the mines, alone with the Book, and it tried to tempt him, to lure him to claim the Stone."

Rhyden poured himself another drink and looked at Isbaenna. “No matter the mark left on his spirit from the duchar, his heart was stronger,” he said. “Trejaeran resisted the Book's power. When he realized the Book did not need him, because it could reach out through the gift of the sight to corrupt any Elf to its sway, he realized the only way to defeat it, to protect us from the Shadow once and for all, was to take the sight from us."

"And he did it," she said.

"Though it took nearly all that was within him," Rhyden said, nodding. "And it left him alone, weakened and vulnerable to stand against the power of the Book—and

the Shadow. It turned on him with all of its might. It would have been desperate, and I cannot bear to think of what pain he must have suffered, what torment he must have endured to resist it."

Rhyden's eyes were filled with anguish, glistening in lamp light with sudden tears. "Poor bidein," he whispered. "He did what needed to be done, all that he could do. That was what existed within Trejaeran's heart, his spirit. Not shadow, not darkness, but light, and hope. Hope that his sacrifice would protect his friends, his family—his world. He resisted the Book and took his own life.

"And look at us now." Rhyden shook his head, lowering his face toward the floor. "We have made it all for nothing."

He glanced up at her after a long moment, and the corner of his mouth lifted crookedly. "There is a far different story than I am sure you have been told of the Second War, is it not?" he asked.

"Yes," Isbaenna said softly. "Maime has told me some of it, but never like that. Eoghan does not speak of it. The memories bring him such pain even still, but those are not the circumstances I learned from my tutors."

"It is the truth," he told her, meeting her gaze. "I am Gaeilge. I cannot lie. I was there and saw with my own eyes."

"Maybe it is not all for nothing," she said. "Maybe Kierken is right, and if we can get the Stone, if we can reclaim it from Lahnduren, we can wield it with good purpose. We could—"

"Kierken is not himself," Rhyden said. "Nor has he been for many long years, and at last, I know why—Qynh. He is thinking with his heart on the matter of the Talismans, not his mind. We will all be the ones to suffer for it, I fear."

"What do you mean?" she asked, frowning.

"Do you think Iasal would have left to fight in the Second War if he had known he would not survive?" Rhyden asked.

Isbaenna blinked at him. Again, her father's words came to her mind, as well as the feelings she had long harbored within her heart—that Iasal had known of his impending death; that he had sensed it somehow, and had tried to comfort her that last afternoon.

It is only this vessel that leaves you. My heart, inion ... My heart is always with you and your Maime. Always, Isbaenna.

"Yes," she whispered. "Yes, he would have gone even still ... even if he had known."

"The right course to follow is the one that leads to the greatest good for all," Rhyden

said. "And unfortunately sometimes that path does not lead to what we think is for the best. Iasal understood this, and so did Trejaeran. Sometimes we must sacrifice what we think is best for ourselves, that the greater good in the end may be served."

They stood for a long moment in mutual silence. Isbaenna stared down into her glass.

"I ... I should go, Rhyden," she said.

He set aside his snifter and walked toward his bed. "Let me fetch my coat," he said. "I will walk with you to hire a hansom."

He came to her, and as she gazed at him, Isbaenna felt sad for Rhyden in his isolation, his obvious loneliness. Born in a kingdom of Elves, he was an Elf who had spent much of his life in a land of men; a poor soul now despondent and out-of-place in both of these realms.

"It will be alright," she whispered to him, and he smiled at her softly.

"We will see, my lady," he said. "We will see."

It was dark in full by the time Isbaenna arrived home to her flat. She searched through her bags until she found her copy of the poetry volume, *Distant Murmurings Across Ancient Waters*. She had tucked the portrait of Iasal that Kaevir had made for her inside the volume's front cover, to protect it from wrinkling or tearing in her travels. She pulled it out now and unfolded it, smiling to see her father's countenance, his gentle gaze, as he seemingly peered forth from the parchment.

As she stared at Iasal's visage set to paper, she could not help but to think of her conversation with Rhyden.

The right course to follow is the one that leads to the greatest good for all ... and unfortunately sometimes that path does not lead to what we think is for the best. Iasal understood this...

Do you think Iasal would have left to fight in the Second War if he had known he would not survive?

Isbaenna blinked against the heat of tears in her eyes. She brushed her fingertips against the paper, touching his face. "I miss you," she whispered to her father's portrait. "I do not have your strength, Daddy. I wish you could tell me what to do."

Her gaze traveled along the corner of the portrait and Isbaenna blinked, startled. She rubbed her eyes to clear her tears and drew the parchment close to her face, her brows pinched, her lips pursed in a frown. "What the...?"

She remembered asking Kaevir to sign the sketch

No artist so exemplary should have his work remain anonymous.

and he had, jotting his initials in the corner, the tiny letters nearly hidden within the lines and hatchmarks of shadows about Iasal's hair and shoulder. It was this corner—these marks—that drew Isbaenna's gaze now.

E.F.

There was no mistaking the characters; the slate had not smeared or smudged. It was not a haphazard or sloppy rendition of *K.M.* for Kaevir Macleod. The letters read *E.F.*, plain and apparent.

"What in the duchar...?" Isbaenna whispered, bewildered and stunned, swinging her legs around and sitting upright.

A knock fell against her door and her head shot up, her eyes flown wide in surprise. She glanced at her mantle clock and found it nearly ten-thirty at night. "What now?" she muttered, setting aside the portrait. She glanced down once more at the unfamiliar initials

E.F.

and shivered slightly, as though a chilly draft had just passed through the room.

She frowned as she opened the door a brief measure. "Calidore," she said, sighing heavily. "It is late, and I am not much in the humor."

"My lady Isbaenna, forgive my intrusion," he said. "I must speak with you."

"Truly, Calidore, this is not a good time," she said. "It is late, and I am weary and should like to retire to my bed now, if you do not mind."

She moved to close the door and heard him stomp his boot against it, to stay it in place. She glowered at him. "Move your foot, Calidore," she said.

"Isbaenna, truly, it is urgent."

"What with you is not, Calidore?" she said, and she shoved her shoulder against the door.

He yelped in start and hooked his hand around the edge, pushing against her weight. "It is about Kaevir Macleod!" he exclaimed, and immediately, Isbaenna withdrew from the door.

Her sudden, unexpected recoil left Calidore staggering, and the door swung open wide as he stumbled across the threshold. "Forgive me, my lady," he said. "I know it is late, but I thought you should know. I thought I should speak with you straight away..."

Isbaenna thought of the portrait, of the letters signed to her father's picture—letters that should have, by rights, stood for Kaevir Macleod, but seemed instead to signify a stranger, a name unknown to her.

E.F.

"What about Kaevir Macleod?" she asked Calidore.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Kaevir stared down the length of his left arm, his gaze steady as he looked past the cuff of his thumb, beyond the line of an arrow's bodkin. He held his fingers curled lightly against the long bow's curved grip; the tips of his two right forefingers rested against the string. His sight leveled, his arm canted slightly, he drew the bowstring back toward the angle of his jaw, settling the arrow fully into the ready position.

He had made habit of rising early each morrow and practicing his target shooting, usually long before the sun had even broached the horizon. They had originally used the bow as an imperative bidding to coach drivers to halt during robberies. Most recently, the blue beauties had eliminated the need for such emphatic marksmanship, as they would set the fireworks in the direct path of oncoming coaches as a decidedly effective and dramatic means of getting their victims to stop.

However, Kaevir still wanted to find a way to ignite the explosives using arrows instead of lengthy fuse lines run from the middle of the road to nearby bushes and underbrush, as he had been. The dazzle of sparks shooting along the lines had proven plainly visible to carriage drivers on the four occasions the trio had committed robberies with them. Even though none so far had found time enough to swerve the coaches and avoid the highwaymen, Kaevir figured if he could hit one of the blue beauties just right with an arrowhead set aflame, it would eliminate any need for fuse lines, and thus keep their prospective victims unaware.

He fired the arrow, sending it snapping fiercely into a small canvas sack of dirt he had set up a modest distance from him. The sack was meant to represent the approximate size of one of their fireworks; the distance, that which he ordinarily observed along the roadway. He did not want to waste any of the blue beauties practicing until he was fully confident not only in the validity of his plan, but in his aim, as well.

Kaevir had found little rest since the Edryds' ball. His hobby of archery was a welcome distraction from his nearly constant weariness. Anymore of late, sleep brought him nothing but restless dreams filled with bizarre and confusing imagery that left him troubled and disturbed upon awakening.

He kept dreaming of the gold coffer. Sometimes he dreamed of it as he had from the first, that he held it between his hands, trying to pry the lid back. Other times, Kaevir dreamed that it had been lost and he searched for it in a state of near panic. He could hear it calling to him, its soft voice whispering in his mind

Come to me ... You must come south

South for the Samhradh

The south road to Belgaeran

I will be waiting for you there

You are chosen ... You must come

and he would sit bolt upright in bed, his eyes flown wide as he wrenched himself awake, his heart seized with terror, his body bathed in a clammy sweat.

Kaevir tromped across the meadow to reclaim his spent arrow and caught sight of Eabhiros beneath the twisted boughs of a large maple tree in the distance. Eabhiros bore hacksaw and hatchet in hand, and wore the sleeves of his leine turned back to his elbows while he chopped and cleared a tangle of fallen limbs.

"Do you need help?" Kaevir called.

Eabhiros glanced over his shoulder and smiled at his cousin, raising the hacksaw in greeting. "That would be splendid," he said, as Kaevir walked toward him.

Kaevir set aside his bow and grasped the thick end of the bough, hooking his leg around and planting his boot sole squarely against the limb to hold it fast while Eabhiros hacked at it.

"Mother loved these rotted things," Eabhiros muttered as he sawed. "Water maples and sugar trees." He shook his head. "Every time the sky even hints at rain, they drop limb and bough, like a frightened ninny girl who spies a spider in a corner. I should chop the bloody lot of them down and be rid of this hassle."

Kaevir smiled, knowing Eabhiros was as likely to hack down his mother's beloved trees as he was to deliberately sever his own thumb.

The limb cleaved beneath the saw blade, snapping in twain, and Eabhiros stumbled back a slight step, wiping his brow and uttering a satisfied huff of breath. "I will be out here the morrow through," he remarked, gazing about, surveying the trees. "There are some limbs that toppled on the roof, and more there, 'round the house."

"I will help you," Kaevir said. He turned his gaze up, frowning thoughtfully at the maple's crown of boughs. "I can climb up there and take a saw to some of those withered branches," he said, pointing. "Clear them out for you. I am younger than you, spry enough for the task, I think."

Eabhiros laughed and nodded. "Alright, then," he said. "You are kind to me in my waning years, you bloody rot." He reached up, hooking the handsaw around his forearm as he scratched at his scalp. "How is your mark? Eisean says you can draw from twenty paces in near dark."

"Eisean is a bit generous in his assessment, I think," Kaevir laughed. "You have never seen me shoot?"

"I have chores, Kaevir, matters about my home that acquire my attention. I do have not time for such sport," Eabhiros said, offering playful jest.

"If your pursestrings were not so damn tight you might hire someone capable to tend to your chores, and then you might find the time," Kaevir replied, grinning.

"Shoot the damned thing, let me see, you rot," Eabhiros said.

"What would you see me shoot?"

"Hit the tree," Eabhiros said, waving his hand. "Aim for its bloody heart and see it dead and toppled."

Kaevir laughed. "Hang your waterskin on it, there on that nub branch, do you see? I will hit it squarely center."

Eabhiros chuckled, walking over to the tree and looping the strap of his waterskin about a low-hanging branch so that it dangled in the air. "Alright, then," he said, stepping back. "Let us see, Kaevir."

"Alright, then," Kaevir said, smiling, walking away from the tree, measuring his strides.

"Twenty paces," Eabhiros reminded him.

"Eisean exaggerates," Kaevir said.

"Come now, you coward. Twenty paces. Let us see some mettle within you."

Kaevir laughed, tromping through the grass. He caught sight of someone walking around the side of the barn, coming toward them. "Here comes Eisean now," he called over his shoulder to Eabhiros. "He is younger and more spry than either of us. We ought to make him climb the bloody damn tree."

He stopped at the count of twenty paces and nocked an arrow against the bowstring, pinching the goose vane fletchings lightly with his fingertips. His arm swung before him as in the same sudden, swift movement, he drew the bowstring back toward his face. He opened his fingers, releasing the arrow. The waterskin dangling from the maple tree jerked violently against its perch as the arrow slammed into its belly, and a steady stream of water spewed out around the protruding shaft, splattering against the ground.

Eabhiros turned to Kaevir, his brow arched, impressed, and Kaevir grinned. "How was that?" he called with a laugh, wondering why Eabhiros' expression shifted as his gaze wandered past his shoulder. "What...?"

"Splendid shot, Kaevir," Isbaenna told him as she walked through the grass, drawing near.

"Hoah, bloody sweet Mother—!" Kaevir cried, stumbling away from her in surprise. It occurred to him that she had called him by name—*Kaevir*, not *Maor*—and he blinked at her, bewildered, confounded, stunned.

"Good morrow, Eabhiros," Isbaenna called, lifting her palm in greeting to Eabhiros, who stared at her, wide-eyed and flabbergasted. She could not help but laugh at them both, but had the courtesy to at least draw her hand against her mouth beforehand. "It is alright," she said. "I know who you are—who the three of you are."

Kaevir looked at Eabhiros, and his cousin's stricken, aghast expression could only mirror his own.

"I will not tell," Isbaenna added swiftly. "Your secret is safe with me."

"What are you doing here, Isbaenna?" Eabhiros asked.

She shrugged. "I came last night to talk awhile with Eisean," she said. "Mayhap run him through with my sword. My mood varied en route from Belgaeran. But we spoke at some length, and all is well." Her brows narrowed again, her lovely face becoming grim. "But there is something you need to know—all of you."

"What?" Kaevir asked.

She met his gaze gravely. "Calidore Ineadan knows who you are, too," she said. "Not that he can prove—not just yet—but I know him, Kaevir, and he will not rest until he has proof in his hands. He would see you all hanged." She looked between them, pleading with her eyes. "You must not come to Belgaeran for the Samhradh and the Gentlemen Highwaymen cannot ride—not ever again. There is no other way."

"Calidore Ineadan cannot find his backside with both hands and a week to try," Kaevir said, pacing restlessly before the hearth in Siochanta's parlor. "Suppositions and suspicions, that is all that he has. He is no threat to us."

Eisean and Isbaenna sat together on a sofa, while Eabhiros stood nearby, his arms folded across his chest, his expression dour. Isbaenna's tidings had filled Eisean and Eabhiros with apprehension and doubts. Their reluctance was now apparent on their faces, and Kaevir felt nearly frantic in his efforts to reassure them. "What is he going to find that links us to the Highwaymen robberies?" he said.

He wanted to scream at them, to shake them, throttle them, make them understand.

We have to go south! It will be waiting there for me. It is mine and I must claim it!

He looked from Eisean to Eabhiros. "He cannot do or say anything without evidence of our involvement. He will find no evidence, because none exists."

"This house is filled with evidence," Eabhiros said with a frown. "We have jewelry and coins hidden throughout Siochanta. If Calidore bends the right ear, has the house searched—"

"He cannot do that, not without a magistrate's writ of inquest," Kaevir said. "And he cannot beseech a writ with no more than suspicions. He needs evidence, Eabhiros,

tangible proof, and he will not find any."

Eabhiros looked doubtful, and Eisean blinked at him, visibly anxious. Part of Kaevir's mind realized that they were right to feel wary, to harbor such uncertainties. If it were not for his dreams, the disturbing nightmares and images of the gilded gold coffer, its dark and enigmatic contents beckoning him

Come to me ... You are chosen

he might have agreed with them, might have been willing to simply throw his hands in the air in exasperated surrender and forget it all. But Kaevir could close his eyes and still hear the whispering voices calling to him

Come to me ... You are chosen

and he could not refuse the beckon; he was helpless against its imploring.

He sighed, dragging his fingers through his hair in frustration. "This is Calidore Ineadan we are talking about," he said. "Calidore Ineadan, for the love of the Good Mother. He might bear some clout in Ciarrai County, but what presence could he command in Belgaeran—during the week of the Samhradh, no less? He is no threat to us. By my breath, he is not."

"Calidore is determined," Isbaenna said. "I know him, Kaevir. He is not the sort to let matters lie. He will keep searching until he finds what he needs. If you come to Belgaeran for the Samhradh and he has his proof, he will see you arrested."

I have to go! he wanted to shriek at her. *Do you not understand? I must go! I am chosen and it is waiting for me!*

"If he finds this proof, he will see us arrested no matter where we are," Kaevir said. "But there is no proof. None, I tell you."

"He would see you hanged if he can," Isbaenna said quietly, her pale, lucent eyes filled with fear. "All of you, Kaevir. You would take such risk?"

All of that, and more besides, he thought. *I would risk the gallows—I would risk anything and everything because I am chosen ... I am chosen and it is waiting for me...*

"No, Isbaenna," Kaevir said. "I would never take risk that might see Eabhiros and Eisean come to harm. By my breath, I would not. It is with absolute and utter confidence that I tell you—tell you all—we have nothing to worry about."

CHAPTER NINE

On the morning after his arrival in Belgaeran, Rhyden decided to abandon the palace awhile. The layout of the city, the twining routes of its thoroughfares and avenues, remained fairly clear within his mind, and he made his way toward a'Clos, an expansive, four-block long market plaza in the heart of the royal city. Within the last two decades, a'Clos had blossomed into a bustling cultural nexus for the realm, a haven for throngs of academics, artists, students, musicians, authors, philosophers, vendors, street artisans, and performers. Thousands flocked daily to the a'Clos court, and one could easily step among the crowd and become blissfully anonymous, a face without a name.

He had received summons from Kierken earlier that morning; an enigmatic and troublesome beckon that remained heavy on his mind, despite the cheery distractions offered at a'Clos.

Rhyden, mo'cara—

It is imperative that I meet with you in private counsel. A matter has come to my attention that I feel your advice and assistance would greatly benefit. If such circumstance permits, I would beseech you join me on the morrow of a'Ceathru at promptly the tenth hour that we might discuss this matter further. I know that I can depend upon your continued discretion, and your aid.

Do'cara—Kierken

Rhyden wondered what new developments had arisen to inspire such urgency within the king. He felt certain it related to the matter of the Shadow Stone, but had heard no rumor from Neisrod of new developments, no deviations from the plan they had all agreed on. He had issued a reply to Kierken—*Of course, my lord. I ever serve at your command and discretion*—and wondered if mayhap such peculiar tidings had to do with the Book of Shadows.

He had been thinking a great deal about the Book and the circumstances by which it had come to be in Kierken's possession since his arrival in Tiralainn. Such thoughts inevitably turned his mind and heart toward Trejaeran. Sometimes it seemed impossible to Rhyden that so long a measure of time had passed without his beloved friend, and a part of him still remained fifteen years in the past, a distant corner of his mind in the dark rubble of Abhacan mines as he had helplessly watched Trejaeran die for the Book of Shadows.

While the others had waged battle at Fargan'fola, standing in Kierken's defense against Lahnduren's army, Rhyden had followed Trejaeran into the ancient, decrepit Abhacan mines beneath the Barren Mountain foothills. He had stumbled along the dark, twisted confines, trying to bear a torch to light his way, with his head ducked, crouched toward the ground. Trejaeran had at least a twenty minute lead on him,

pursuing Lahnduren into the depths of the Bith with relentless determination, the anam'cladh poised and ablaze in his hand.

Trejaeran and Lahnduren had fought, each of them wielding the full power of their minds—their sight—against one another. Though Rhyden had not seen the battle firsthand, its effects could be felt throughout the dilapidated mine shafts. He could hear rumbling, like distant thunder, from somewhere ahead of him. The ground beneath his boots trembled and quaked, staggering him. He cracked his head and shoulders repeatedly against the unyielding stone and earth and struggled for breath as silt and gravel rained down on his head in a choking, strangling cloud.

All at once, something flew through the tunnels, rushing toward him like the leading edge of a hurricane's winds. He felt it coming within his mind and realized

it is Trejaeran

he has unleashed his sight in full

the power of his mind unabated

and Rhyden recoiled in alarm. The force slammed into him, battering him like a discarded child's toy into the nearest wall, knocking the breath from his lungs, the senses from his skull. He could feel it within his mind, searing through his eyes, and he had cried out, dropping his torch and clutching at his face.

"Trejaeran!" he had wailed. "Trejaeran, please—no! What are you doing?"

The ceiling overhead yielded with a loud groan and a roar of crashing stone. Rhyden leapt forward, spilling headlong against the ground, throwing his arms protectively over his head as he cried out. He felt rock and debris slam against his legs, his spine, and he scrambled forward, trying to escape. A heavy, cragged boulder smashed against his right ankle and there was bright, searing pain as the slender bones shattered. Rhyden threw back his head and screamed, and his fallen torch went dark, suffocated beneath debris. Another large fall of earth struck him squarely against the base of his skull, and he collapsed, knocked unconscious by the blow.

He had come to only moments later, hurting and dazed. He blinked against the impenetrable darkness, tasting blood in his mouth, feeling it against his chin and cheeks in a thick, tacky smear. He realized immediately what had happened, and his hands fluttered toward his face, his temples.

His sight was gone.

The gift had never been strong within him, but its presence, its guidance, had been something Rhyden was aware of in his mind. That soft whisper of familiar energy within him, the gentle murmur of his Elfin intuition, the glow of the sight in his mind like a dim but ever-present candle flame was gone. There was nothing in his mind except for darkness and silence, as though some part of him had died.

"What have you done, bidein?" he whimpered. His thoughts felt unfamiliar and new, empty and heavy somehow, trapped within the confines of his skull. "Trejaeran ... le ... le do thoil ... What have you done?"

He heard a sharp, piercing scream from somewhere ahead of him along the corridor and he forced himself to crawl toward the sound, hooking his fingers into claws and cleaving deep troughs into the rubble earth as he struggled forward.

He had crawled through the darkness on his belly for what had seemed to him surely an eternity. His mind kept fading as he pulled himself along; any time he moved his right leg, or his injured ankle struck fallen rocks, he would swoon. Finally, he caught a glimpse of dim blue light from somewhere ahead of him, faint and waning, and he reached for it, mustering strength from deep within him as he made his poor, hurting body move.

"Trejaeran!" he called.

When at last Rhyden reached his friend, it was too late. Trejaeran lay facedown on the ground, the anam'cladh still gripped limply in his fingertips, offering faint and feeble glow. The flame of the blade faded and grew dim as Trejaeran's life waned. The tunnel had partially collapsed between them, leaving only a narrow corner of space in the mound of rubble against which Rhyden could press his face and glimpse Trejaeran's prone, motionless form. He could see that the back of Trejaeran's shirt and doublet were torn and scorched, that a pool of blood spread out in circumference beneath his chest, and Rhyden realized what had happened, what Trejaeran had done.

"Bidein!" he whimpered helplessly, clawing at the debris, tearing at the rubble with his hands. He managed to clear enough space through which he could wedge his arm into the chamber beyond, and he reached for Trejaeran, his bloody, torn fingertips grasping desperately, trembling. "Trejaeran!"

Trejaeran's eyelids fluttered and opened, and he moved his head, blinking at Rhyden. He whispered his name and moved his hand feebly, his fingertips fumbling against Rhyden's.

"I am here, bidein," Rhyden whispered, closing his fingers about Trejaeran's. "I am right here. Ta ... ta me libh..." *I am with you.*

"The ... the Book..." Trejaeran gasped, struggling to raise his chin from the dirt. His hand clamped against Rhyden's with desperate urgency, and as he spoke, blood spurted from his lips, splattering against his chin. "Rhyden, the Book...!"

Rhyden could see the Book of Shadows, laying spilled against the ground at the very edge of the anam'cladh's proscenium of faint light. It was heavily bound in glittering plates of gold, and rested with its spine turned upwards, its parchment pages crumpled beneath it.

"Do not ... do not let them keep it..." Trejaeran said. "Take it, please ... You must see it destroyed. It cannot reach us now. I ... I am the last with the gift, and I saw to that with ... the anam'cladh, but you ... you must end it, Rhyden. Destroy it ... For it ... it will try yet. It is patient, it will wait..." His voice faded, his eyes fell closed.

"Trejaeran—no, do not leave me," Rhyden pleaded, weeping. "No, bidein, please ... please..."

Trejaeran opened his eyes one last time, fixing his gaze upon Rhyden's through the debris, holding him fast. "The true measure ... of a man..." he breathed. "Lies in his heart, not ... not his deeds."

"Bidein," Rhyden whispered.

"Tell him, Rhyden," Trejaeran said, staring at Rhyden, holding his hand. "He ... he can still choose. He ... he is not ... chosen. It is he ... who can choose..."

"Who?" Rhyden asked. "Tell me, who, Trejaeran?"

Trejaeran's eyelids drooped, his fingers relaxing against Rhyden's hand. His breath fluttered and fell still. The blade of the anam'cladh, which had dimmed to near extinction, faded abruptly and in full without Trejaeran's soul, his life force, to illuminate it, and Rhyden found himself plunged into darkness once more. He cried out, anguished, stricken.

"Trejaeran!" he screamed, clutching at his friend's hand. "Trejaeran—no! No—le do thoil—no!"

He tore frantically at the rubble, wanting desperately to crawl to Trejaeran's side. His fingertips brushed against the gilded cover of the Book of Shadows and he drew it against his belly, wrapping his arms around it, minding Trejaeran's words

Take it, please ... You must see it destroyed

He had curled alongside Trejaeran with the book clutched to his midriff, his broken heart and mind fading. He slept for hours, delirious with pain and grief. He dreamed that he heard something scratching in the darkness, a faint and feeble scrabbling, like fingertips against stone. He stirred when the sounds grew closer to his ear; something or someone crawled along the ground behind him, shuffling in loose dirt and fallen gravel. He could hear its breath, fervent and ragged, and his eyes flew wide. He listened to faint, muffled patting sounds, like hands slapping lightly against the dirt, searching for something, and he drew the Book closer to him, realizing.

it is Lahnduren

not dead after all ... alive somehow

he is looking for the Book

"It cannot be..." Rhyden heard Lahnduren's voice hiss in the darkness. "Must be

here ... it must..."

He felt fingertips brush against his hair, fumbling against his shoulder, and Rhyden recoiled, scooting away from the touch. He hurried back through his hole, wriggling once more into the collapsed tunnels beyond the cramped chamber, dragging the book with him. He cracked his head mightily against tumbled stone as he went, and the effort caused his ankle to flare with crippling pain. Rhyden cowered in the darkness, his breath fluttering in his throat in soft, agonized mewls.

"Who is there?" he heard Lahnduren call out. His voice caused Rhyden to press himself further back against the wall, dragging his injured leg through the dirt. He pressed his lips together tightly to stifle a whimper of pain.

"The little prince is dead," Lahnduren purred. "He is dead ... so who are you?" He had apparently knelt on the cavern floor and peered through the small opening Rhyden had dug. Rhyden could hear his hand scuttling about in the gravel as he thrust his arm through, groping blindly, eagerly, for Rhyden and the Book.

Rhyden's hand slipped from the Book, sliding slowly against his hip, reaching for the hilt of his sword. He pressed his shoulders against the wall and used his uninjured leg to brace himself as he raised his hips from the ground. He held his breath caught fast in his throat, his eyes wide as he tried to stare through the darkness toward the sounds of Lahnduren's hand moving about.

"Are you a little mouse, mayhap?" Lahnduren hissed.

Rhyden curled his fingers against the sword hilt and began to slide the blade slowly, deliberately from its sheath.

"I heard you weeping for him," Lahnduren said. "Such sweet, piteous sounds. Your grief nearly moved me, little mouse." His fingers scrabbled in the loose dirt and stones near Rhyden. "Give me the Book. I know you have it. Give it to me."

Rhyden eased his sword from its scabbard without a sound and shifted the hilt against his palm, gripping it lightly.

"Why do you not speak, little mouse?" Lahnduren called gently to him. "I will not hurt you—by my breath, I will not. Give me the Book, and I ... why, I shall leave you rightly be."

Rhyden clasped the hilt of his sword between his hands and raised it over his head.

"Give me the Book, rot you!" Lahnduren shrieked. "Give it to me, you bastard Elf, or I will break you slowly, measure by measure, just to hear you scream for my mercy!"

Rhyden heard Lahnduren's hand fumbling, slapping against the dirt before him.

"Give me the Book!" Lahnduren cried again.

"Come and claim it, you bastard," Rhyden hissed, and he swung the blade down in a swift, sudden blow.

The sword strike had found its mark, severing Lahnduren's hand and wrist from his arm, sending him screeching, recoiling beyond the wall of rubble back into the darkness. His shrieks had ripped through the tight confines of the crumbling tunnels, reverberating for miles beneath the earth.

Rhyden's ankle had healed, though he had walked with a pronounced limp for many long years. His mind had also healed, and within the last fifteen years, his nightmares of Lahnduren reaching for him, whispering to him in the darkness, had faded into relative infrequency. His heart, however, still bore scars from that day, and it still grieved him immensely to think of Trejaeran, to remember his words.

Take it, please ... You must see it destroyed

Rhyden had begged his father to see his promise to Trejaeran fulfilled, and Eisos had offered Rhyden his solemn word that it would be. The Book of Shadows had been entrusted to Kierken, and for the better part of the next ten years, Rhyden had believed that Eisos and the King had done as he had asked of them, as Trejaeran had begged: they had seen the Book destroyed. He had learned of the Book's presence at Belgaeran—whole and unscathed—quite by accident, and had left the royal city feeling bewildered and deeply wounded by this seeming betrayal.

He blamed himself. Trejaeran had asked him to destroy the book, and he had taken Kierken and Eisos at their words when they had promised to see it burned. Rhyden had never forgiven Eisos for this cruel and hurtful deceit, and to that day, he maintained a measure of cool regard and a distance in his heart toward Eisos that far surpassed any expanse of land or sea that might have come between them.

"By my boot heels, it is you," he heard a voice exclaim in bold proximity to his ear. He felt a hand settle against his hair, caught in a thick, lengthy tail fastened at the nape of his neck, and Rhyden jerked, startled from his thoughts, as the hand gave the sheaf a quick, playful tug. "I would recognize the measure of this mangy horse mane sprouting from your head anywhere!"

Rhyden turned, shrugging his shoulder to dislodge the offending fingers from his hair and blinked in surprise at the young Gaeilge standing behind him. The Elf was tall and strikingly handsome, with short-cropped russett hair and the dapper vestments of a wealthy nobleman. He grinned broadly at Rhyden, his brown eyes flown wide with apparent delight.

"Beannacht, Taemir," Rhyden said to him, trying his best not to look aggravated as he swatted lengths of hair back over his shoulder.

The young nobleman blinked at Rhyden. "Beannacht?" he asked, laughing. "That is all you have for me? I do not see you for five years—only an occasional letter lets me know you still draw breath—and just this very morrow, my lady Ceison of the

royal court asks me how I have enjoyed seeing my brother once more during his visit! You are a rotted, bloody yob, Rhyden Fabhcun, that you would be a week in Belgaeran and not let me know!"

With this declared, Taemir Fabhcun, Rhyden's younger brother, clasped his arms about Rhyden's shoulders, embracing him fiercely.

Rhyden stiffened reflexively. "I have not been here a week," he said as Taemir pulled away, beaming. When Taemir tried to cup his hands against Rhyden's cheeks, he ducked his head. "I have only been here two days—scarcely time to unpack, Taemir, much less pay any sort of cordial call." Taemir tried again to touch his face and Rhyden ducked, frowning. "Must you insist on laying your hands on me? Stop, Taemir, you know I dislike that."

"I must insist, indeed, Rhyden, if only to prove you are real!" Taemir exclaimed. He turned to a cluster of several young noblemen and ladies beyond his shoulder, obviously a group of his friends. "I told you, it is him! My long-lost brother! You owe me a pint, Daemus, you bastard rot!"

"I am not so lost," Rhyden said, feeling distinctly uncomfortable beneath the scrutiny of the young courtiers. They knew him, of course—by name, if not by face—from their history lessons, the legends and lore of the First and Second Shadow Wars, and they stared at him in collective awe.

Taemir seemed oblivious to their gawking and looked back at Rhyden, still grinning to rive his cheeks. He adored Rhyden; he had always held his older brother in adulating regard, a fact which remained puzzling and somewhat disconcerting to Rhyden. They were separated by sixteen years in age—far too much time for Rhyden to have ever felt much in common with Taemir. He loved his brother dearly, but Taemir remained now much as he ever had: a fond but unfamiliar stranger to Rhyden.

"No, you are found once more," Taemir said, and he embraced Rhyden again, despite Rhyden's best efforts to shy away.

Twenty-year old Taemir was in residency with the dramatic laureate's program at the Royal Arts Conservatory. He had penned many plays, eleven of which had been produced at summer stocks within Belgaeran in the past years. He wrote novels, songs, and poetry, served as frequent guest lecturer on literature and writing at the Belgaeran University, was an accomplished violinist, harpischordist, and flutist, dabbled in stained glass, and painted landscapes in his leisure time. He was talented, wealthy, free-spirited, and enthusiastically liberated. He was as outgoing as Rhyden was withdrawn; as eagerly extroverted as Rhyden was reserved.

"Oh, it is good to see you," Taemir exclaimed. "Where are you staying? It does not matter. My coach is just 'round the way, parked on Cognall Street. Come with me, let us go fetch your things. I have a marvelous rooftop flat on Yorque, overlooking the lake vista—plenty of space, a diligent steward, a splendid cook, and enough

brimague to pickle a prized sow."

"Taemir, go raimh maith agat, that is gracious, but I am plenty comfortable at the palace—"

"I will not take no for an answer," Taemir declared.

As the two walked along, Taemir chattered happily at him, tidings of their mother, father, and ten-year old sister, Reinnean. "You are staying for the Samhradh, are you not?" he asked.

"Yes, I have just arrived early," Rhyden replied, not wishing to discuss at any length or measure his business in Tiralainn with his brother.

"Splendid, then! Mother, Father, and Reinnean will be here tomorrow for next week's Samhradh festivities," Taemir said.

"Splendid indeed," Rhyden muttered, his eyes rolling.

"Mother will so pleased to see you. She will likely keel over with surprise and delight," Taemir said. "And Reinnean ... In her regard, Rhyden, you have nearly fashioned the moon. She will not likely turn you loose from her grasp once she has caught hold of you—you may be stuck here in Tiralainn yet."

"Reinnean does not even know me," Rhyden said.

"Of course she knows you," Taemir said, blinking in surprise. "You are her brother. Her favorite brother, may I add, or so she is quick to point out to me." He reached out, meaning to jab Rhyden playfully in the shoulder, and looked wounded when Rhyden deliberately recoiled. "Why do you keep doing that?"

"Doing what?"

"Pulling away as though you cannot bear for someone to touch you."

"I do not know," Rhyden said. "I just do."

He had long since stopped trying to understand—much less explain—his idiosyncrasies about the relatively simple matter of personal contact. He could not even remember when they had come into being within his nature, precisely, save that it was sometime shortly after the end of the Second War. He imagined it had something to do with what had happened in the cave, Lahnduren reaching for him in the darkness, groping through the narrow opening in the crumbled wall. He tolerated necessary physical protocol on business matters, but away from his ambassadorial duties, Rhyden tended to his isolation in physical proximity every bit as diligently as within his heart and mind. He could help it not; Rhyden simply did not like for anyone to touch him.

"Please do not do that. Do not recoil from Mother," Taemir said. "It would break her if you did, Rhyden." He looked at Rhyden and raised a thoughtful brow. "Here,

before we collect your things, let me take you to my barber and have him cut loose that mangy shank of wool from your pate."

"What is wrong with my hair?" Rhyden asked, glancing at him.

Taemir laughed. "Nothing, except it hangs down to your buttocks," he said. "No one wears their hair that long anymore, not even the Donnag'crann. We could order a wig for you, something powdered and—"

"Why in the Bith would I cleave off my hair only to clap a wig on my head?" Rhyden asked. "I like my hair, Taemir. I do not wish to cut it."

"Just a bit of trim, then," Taemir murmured, laying his hand against Rhyden's sheaf of hair, gripping it lightly at the point where it fell against his shoulders, as though visualizing such a difference in the length.

"No, Taemir," Rhyden growled, swatting at his hand, shrugging away from his grasp. He shook his head and glowered sullenly. "I am remaining at the palace. This was a dreadful idea."

"No, you are not. You are staying with me," Taemir told him, beaming. "It will be splendid, Rhyden, truly. Wait, you will see."

"I am going to live to rue this," Rhyden muttered.

"Likely, yes, but not with certainty," Taemir replied, laughing once more.

Rhyden managed to rouse himself before sunrise the next morning, dressing by lamplight and stealing from Taemir's flat like an errant lover leaving his mistress. He felt somewhat ashamed of his surreptitiousness, because his parents arrived in Belgaeran that morning, and he felt fairly certain that Taemir, in his overzealous aspirations to see ill-will put to rest, would have forced some manner of social niceties for them all. Taemir meant no harm, but Rhyden did not feel like humoring him, nor did he particularly relish the idea of seeing his parents again—particularly his father, Eisos.

No longer a guest of Kierken, Rhyden presented his delegatory identification to the guards at the palace's main gate. They let him pass, and he made his way across the grand foyer. The palace was astir; the Samhradh festival's opening events were only three days away, and it seemed every servant, valet, and handmaid scurried about, decorating and cleaning in anticipation of the throngs of royal guests.

Qynh's chamber was guarded by a solitary soldier, a man named Eudav who recognized Rhyden from his previous attempts over the preceding days to beg audience with the Queen.

"You are up early this morrow, my lord," Eudav said, with a cordial nod of greeting to Rhyden.

"May I knock?" Rhyden asked.

"As you wish," Eudav said with a shrug as he stepped aside.

Rhyden rapped against Qynh's door, which opened a crack. "Good morrow, my Lady Graelle," Rhyden said, pressing his fist against the lapel of his justicoat and lowering his head politely to the handmaid. "I was hoping to see the Queen."

Graelle's brows lifted and she canted her head at a slight, sympathetic angle. "Good morrow, Lord Fabhcun," she said. "I am sorry, but that is not possible."

"Le do thoil, I beg, my lady," Rhyden said again. "Please, just a moment. Surely Qynh would not mind such a brief interruption."

"I am sorry, Lord Fabhcun," Graelle said again, stepping back and beginning to close the door, her expression sheepish and remorseful. "I ... I cannot grant you entry. I have my instructions. She has not been well of late. She takes audience with no one save His Majesty the King or His Grace, Lord Peildraigh."

She closed the door and Rhyden stood there, staring at the wood, dismayed.

"Good effort, my lord," Eudav commended affably.

Rhyden sighed, pressing his palm lightly against the door, as though he hoped to somehow reach through the wood and touch Qynh.

"If it were mine to decide, you could see her, my lord," Eudav said.

Rhyden glanced at him and smiled slightly and without cheer. "Many thanks for that, Eudav."

He had anticipated private counsel with Kierken that morrow. He was surprised to find the king waiting for him in the company of the Easpag'Ard, Lleuwyn Peildraigh.

"Maidin mhaith, Rhyden," Kierken said. *Good morning*. He cradled a cup of tea in one hand and stepped forward, approaching the younger Elf, his free hand extended in polite greeting.

Rhyden accepted the customary grip by force of habit, not preference. "Good morrow, my lords," he said. "Will Neisrod and Lady Isbaenna be joining us?"

"Neisrod has left us for Iarnrod once more," Lleuwyn said, and Rhyden blinked at him, startled.

"What?" he asked, turning to Kierken. "When was this?"

"Yesterday, my lord," Lleuwyn said. "It seems some matters of import within his territory required his return. He left his assurances he would be back for the mhas'cor."

Rhyden did not look at Lleuwyn, keeping his gaze fixed on Kierken. Neisrod had not

left for other important matters in Iarnrod. He had left because he was angry with Kierken; angry and disappointed at his decision to try and claim the Shadow Talismans.

"He will be back, Rhyden," Kierken said. "He stands with us. Do not worry over that. He gave me his solemn word before he took his leave."

Neisrod offered words to spare your friendship, Rhyden thought with a frown. He does not agree with your plans, and would not partake in them if he did not love you so dearly.

"I would have sought this opportunity to speak with you in private, anyway, Rhyden," Kierken said. "Even if Neisrod were here, I would beseech a manner of aid only you can provide us, mo'cara."

Rhyden glanced uncertainly toward Llewyn, holding his tongue against the observation that if the king sought private counsel, mayhap his Easpag'Ard ought to take leave. He felt distinctly uncomfortable about Neisrod's absence. Rhyden had been born to Tiralainn, a Gaeilge Elf just as Kierken, but in his capacities as delegate and ambassador, he served both kings, Kierken and Neisrod, in equal regard. Neisrod might not have taken such abrupt leave of Belgaeran had Kierken not apparently kept this meeting from the Abhacan king's knowledge. This troubled Rhyden, because he realized that by deliberately excluding Neisrod, Kierken might test the boundaries of their friendship by asking something of him that would betray the Abhacan liege.

"I will do my best, my lord," Rhyden told Kierken, looking at him warily. "Whatever you bid of me, I would see done, if I am able."

"Splendid, then," Kierken said with a smile. "Please make yourself comfortable. Would you care for a spot of tea?"

"No, *go raimh maith agat*," Rhyden replied, watching as Kierken walked over to a comfortable leather-upholstered seat before his fireplace and took a seat. *Thank you.* Three such chairs had been gathered about the hearth; as Kierken settled into one, Llewyn sat in another across from him, clearly leaving the chair in the middle open for Rhyden in unspoken invitation.

Rhyden did not immediately move for the seat. He had entered enough negotiation sessions within his lifetime to realize that measures meant to offer comfort and ease in such circumstances were generally misleading.

"Llewyn has come into some grim tidings within the last day," Kierken said. "News pertaining to the Shadow Stone's theft and the Book of Shadow. Have you heard of this band of thieves in the midrealm, the Gentlemen Highwaymen?"

"Yes, my lord," Rhyden replied, caught momentarily off guard by this seeming change in conversational course. "I have heard somewhat of them since my arrival."

"Lleuwyn has been given reason to believe that this trio of highwaymen are in league with Lahnduren," Kierken said. "That their exploits are efforts to fund an army for his fell endeavors, and that they are responsible for the theft of the Stone from Iarnrod."

Rhyden blinked at him, arching his brow. He spared a glance at Lleuwyn and then met Kierken's gaze. "My lord," he said. "It seems unlikely to me that these fellows, these Highwaymen, might keep allegiances to Lahnduren. They have shown little violent disregard during their robberies. Just the opposite, my lord."

"Rhyden, Lleuwyn had occasion to meet with one of his biocaires named Calidore Ineadan, who expressed his suspicions as to the identities of the Highwaymen," Kierken said. "Biocaire Ineadan believes that they are of noble descent, at least two among their numbers—Lords Eabhiros and Kaevir Macleod. He hopes to gather sufficient enough evidence to see them arrested when they attend the Samhradh mhas'cor, which, by our invitations, they intend to do. Lleuwyn is concerned that should they prove allies to Lahnduren, aiding in his efforts to claim the Book and raise an army against my rule, Lahnduren will not come as we had hoped to the ball."

"Such risk on Lahnduren's part would be unwarranted if his minions are here to steal the Book in his stead," Lleuwyn said.

"We need some other means of assurance that Lahnduren will come himself," Kierken said. "It is the only hope we have of catching him—stopping him, Rhyden—and of claiming the Stone from his possession."

Rhyden was quiet for a long moment. "Such concerns would seem fairly due, my lord," he admitted at length.

"If Lahnduren realizes that you are in Tiralainn once more, Lord Fabhcun," Lleuwyn said. "That you will be in attendance at the Samhradh mhas'cor, surely this will be the enticement we need to guarantee his presence."

Rhyden raised his brow at Kierken, and found the king had lowered his gaze toward the bowl of his tea cup.

"Lahnduren's hatred of Kierken is surely rivalled only by that he harbors toward you, Lord Fabhcun," Lleuwyn said. "You kept the Book from his possession when Trejaeran died. You relinquished it to his sworn enemy, our liege. You severed his hand."

"I do not doubt any fair sentiment lost for me in Lahnduren's regard," Rhyden said, turning now to look at Lleuwyn. "But I fail to see how my presence could be known to him, much less appreciated, as it were."

"We can see to that," Kierken said. "Lleuwyn and I have discussed a plan to see your presence in the realm publicly announced and promoted. If I were to establish a new honorary appointment, and proclaim during the opening night's events this

coming a'Seachtu that such award would be bestowed upon you during official ceremony at the mhas'cor, Lahnduren would learn of it. There would not be one within the whole of the realm who would not."

"A new appointment, my lord?" Rhyden asked.

"Pomp and circumstance, of course," Llewyn said. "Your titles and responsibilities to the realm would remain the same. Such ceremony would serve only to ensure Lahnduren is made aware of your presence and your attendance at the ball."

Rhyden met Kierken's gaze and held it fast, his brows drawn slightly.

"No harm would come to you for this, Rhyden," Kierken told him, looking somewhat sheepish, as though the entire arrangement displeased him on some level. "By my breath, it would only be a ruse; a lure to promise Lahnduren will come. I am not asking this of you for myself, but for Qynh. Le do thoil, we must be certain he will come if we are to have any hope of claiming the Stone, of helping her. This is our only chance, Rhyden. We cannot take any risk of failure."

Rhyden stared at him. He did not trust Llewyn Peildraigh; he had always harbored mistrust for the Easpag'Ard and the close counsel he kept with Kierken. He had lived without the burden of such worries in Cneas, however; Llewyn's influence of Tiralainn policy seldom affected his affairs or regard. He felt uncertain all at once, as his mind pulled him in one direction—that of doubting the sincerity of Llewyn's motives and intentions—and his heart dragged him relentlessly in another—that of trusting in Kierken's, and in wanting—*needing*—to help Qynh.

"Please, mo'cara," Kierken whispered.

"Of course, my lord," Rhyden said, nodding once in concession. "I will always help you, however I am able."

CHAPTER TEN

Come to me...

Claim me...

Kaevir slept lying on his back against the floor of Eabhiros' carriage. They had traveled the day through, leaving Siochanta before the first light of the new morrow. It was the opening night of the Samhradh festivities in Belgaeran; the masked ball was only days away and their final robbery, their assault against Lady Gurvan, the wealthiest woman in the midrealm, would be underway in only hours.

I am waiting for you

He dreamed the gold coffer sat before him, its gilded lid open. Kaevir realized now what it contained; the mysterious treasure that beckoned him with such urgency. He knew, because he cradled it in his hands, or rather, he cradled the open air surrounding it against the cups of his palms.

It was a stone, a beautiful, flawless, spherical stone as black as midnight in midwinter, as glossy and polished as a well-tended mirror. No bigger than an autumn baking apple in circumference, this black orb, this enigmatic, breathtaking stone hovered in midair, suspended between his hands, spinning slowly before his heart. Moonlight winked off of its lustrous surface as over and over again the sphere rotated through the air, mesmerizing him.

"Hoah..." Kaevir breathed again as he watched the black stone dance between his hands. He felt the wind whip suddenly, violently through his hair, and as he watched in helpless wonder, thick clouds swirled across the sky. They moved as smoke stirred by restless, imperative fingertips, blown by the wind from one corner of the horizon to the other, engulfing the moon, swallowing it whole.

"Kaevir?"

I give you the wind, the voice beckoned. Come to me. You are chosen.

"Kaevir," Eabhiros said, and when he reached down, wrapping his hand against Kaevir's sleeve, Kaevir jerked, sucking in a hissing, startled gasp for breath as his eyes flew open and he awoke.

"What—?" he croaked. He sat upright, disoriented and bewildered, blinking in the darkness, surprised and somewhat dismayed to find himself in the carriage. He blinked up at his cousin, who leaned through the coach doorway, his eyebrow arched, his mouth hooked in a wry smile.

"Eabhiros?" Kaevir asked, his voice tremulous with confusion.

"No, it is Kierken, the King," Eabhiros said. "Time to rise, Kaevir. The sun has

already set."

"What?" Kaevir asked, looking all about him, utterly confounded. It was twilight, nearly nightfall. He frowned, shoving past Eabhiros as he crawled from the coach. "Why did you not wake me? Now I have to set the beauty in the dark."

The stretch of Tullynessle highway they waited along was framed in pine forests; in the distance to his right, silhouetted in the shadows of tree boughs, Kaevir could make out the dim shape of a building, a small, vacant church.

"What are you talking about?" Eisean asked, frowning. He followed Kaevir, tugging at his waistcoat, settling the hem into place over his breeches. "All is ready. You said so yourself before you went to stretch out. You had the fuseline finished an hour ago at least."

Kaevir knelt in the middle of the road, staring down at a readied blue beauty. He had indeed run a length of fuse out from the road's shoulder, from behind a cluster of brambled bushes toward the shell. The line had been twisted and fastened into place against the blue beauty's tail fuse, and Kaevir blinked at it, bewildered by his lack of recall in completing such a task.

"I am tired, that is all," he whispered, brushing his fingertips against the shell's outer paper wrapping. He had apparently gone to some trouble to camouflage the blue beauty in the roadway by scooping dirt, dried leaves and brown pine needles about it, likely in fear that the dusk's shadows and fading glow would not keep it hidden from the view of an encroaching carriage. "I ... I am just tired, and it has addled me."

All at once, Kaevir felt a sharp, icy breeze shiver through him, rustling his hair, and his head snapped up, his eyes flying wide. As the wind sliced through his clothes, his flesh, delving into his very heart, he heard the voice within his mind

the voice of the stone ... my stone

whispering to him, beckoning

claim me

"Hoofbeats!" Eabhiros hissed, freezing in place, his face turned northward along the road. Kaevir could hear it now; the wind was gone—if it had ever been there at all, and not just in his mind—and he could hear the distant, distinctive clapping of approaching hooves.

"Lady Gurvan is coming," Eisean whispered, his boots already in motion as he backpedaled toward the shoulder of the road. His gloved hand fell against the hilt of his dagger, his fingers curling against it.

The stone is coming, Kaevir thought, his heart racing in sudden, eager anxiety.

my stone

"Kaevir, get off of the bloody road!" Eabhiros whispered, following Eisean, his feet scrambling in the soft dirt of the highway. He jerked the folds of silk draped about his neck toward his mouth, his nose. "For the Good Mother's sake, put your damned scarf on!"

His voice, imperative and somewhat frantic, galvanized Kaevir, and he scuttled back, moving to the opposite side of the road, following the line of fuse he had laid out. As he moved, he dipped his hand into his justicoat pocket, finding his flints. He made no effort to tug his scarf into place; his mind was elsewhere, and the discovery of his identity did not trouble him all at once.

Come to me

Claim me

You are chosen

Kaevir hunkered among the bushes, his breath stilled, the flints pinched between his fingers. He squinted across the roadway, but could not see Eabhiros or Eisean; they both crouched among the brambles, silhouettes cloaked in shadows.

The sound of the hooves grew louder and he could hear the carriage rattling on its struts, its wheels clattering as it bounced along at a brisk and urgent clip. The hammering measure of his own pulse throbbing in his ears grew louder, as well; he could feel its anxious rhythm thundering within the confines of his skull, and the voice of the stone in his mind clamored more persistently.

Come to me! Claim me—you are chosen! Claim what it yours!

"I will," Kaevir said. He struck the flints together; pinpoint of embers danced in the air, and again he struck them, drawing fire against the fuse.

The flames raced along the line toward the center of the road, toward the blue beauty, and above the hissing of smoldering black powder, Kaevir heard the carriage come upon them. There was a fleeting moment—no more than a breath in full—when he heard the hoofbeats falter, the leather straps jangle against iron harness riggings, as the driver, alarmed by the sight of fire in the road, drew back against the reins. The joists of the carriage wheels groaned loudly as it slowed, and then the shell exploded, sending a resounding, thunderous boom echoing from one corner of the forest-lined horizon to the other. The blast of blue light was brilliant and dazzling, and a tremendous, pelting cloud of dirt and rocks sprayed in all directions.

Kaevir threw his arm toward his head, ducking as the debris showered him, stinging against his skin, slapping against his coat. The horse screamed and reared onto its hind legs, pawing desperately at the open air with its front hooves.

My stone! Kaevir wanted to shriek, and he bolted heedlessly from his hiding place out onto the road, his boot soles scrabbling for purchase in the loose dirt and gravel, nearly spilling out from beneath him. Over the horse's shrill whinnies, and the

coachman's loud, startled commands of "Whoa!" to the nag, Kaevir could hear the rapid patter of Eabhiros' and Eisean's heels against the highway as they, too, sprang into action.

"Stand and deliver!" Eabhiros roared as he sprinted into the smoke. As the form of the coach loomed into his view, he nearly staggered—it was small, broad enough in capacity for two people, mayhap—and only if one of them skipped meals aplenty. It listed on dilapidated struts as though in a state of gross and impoverished disrepair, and he realized to his horror that this could not possibly be Lady Haude Gurvan's carriage. They had made a mistake.

He wrenched his dagger from his belt, seizing hold of the seat iron and planting his foot against the coachman's step. He pulled himself up to meet the driver, his mouth ajar, breath drawn to utter another sharp command of "Stand and deliver!" He saw a shadow of movement, something large coming toward his face, and Eabhiros opened his hand, turning loose of the coach railing as he recoiled. The heavy-soled boot, meant to strike him squarely and mightily in the nose, plowed instead into his chin, knocking him backwards from the carriage. Eabhiros whooped loudly, slamming onto the ground, his knife spilling from his fingers.

"Hyah!" the driver of the coach snapped loudly as he jerked on the reins, trying to get the frightened horse to attempt forward motion. As the straps of the reins slapped against the nag, she moved, bolting forward, dragging the carriage in tow, and Eabhiros panicked, scrambling to his feet.

"Hoah, no, you do not—!" he cried out, tasting blood in his mouth; the punt to his face had sheared open his bottom lip and bloodied his nose. He rushed forward, leaping into the air, seizing hold of the seat iron again, wrapping both fists about the rail. He thrust his boot heel down against the step and hauled himself up as the carriage lurched along. Eabhiros threw himself at the driver, knocking headlong into his torso, pummeling him sideways. The two of them fell from the coach, toppling in a tangle of thrashing arms and flailing fists. They landed hard against the highway, with Eabhiros atop, his fingers closed against his palms and swinging wildly.

"Damn ... rotted ... bastard!" Eabhiros yelled, sending his knuckles careening into the man's face. He felt the driver's nose splinter with the force of the blow. Another punch jarred teeth loose of their moorings. The man thrashed beneath him, yowling in pain and fury, throwing punches of his own. He drew his knee up, slamming into Eabhiros' groin, sending him sprawling sideways, crying out in pain.

The coach, meanwhile, did not get far without the benefit of its driver. The nag was terrified, panicked by the explosion and smoke, and she ran toward the trees. The left side wheels of the carriage jumped from the road, bouncing over the shoulder, and then the entire coach flipped onto its side, slamming with a resounding crash against young, spindly trees and dense underbrush. From within the coach came a high, frantic shriek as the vehicle overturned, the frightened and hoarse cry of a panicked old man.

Eisean beat Kaevir to the toppled carriage first, unaware of Eabhiros' plight behind him. He had raced after the coach as the horse had fled, and he leaped up, letting his boots settle against the side of the carriage now facing skyward. He reached down, wrenching open the door.

"Get out of the coach!" he shouted. Like Eabhiros, Eisean had realized to his dismay and nearly at once that this tattered old carriage was not that of Lady Gurvan. He did not know what to do, save continue, however; what precious little choice remained, with the robbery proper already underway in full?

He could not see inside the coach; it was too dark within, too filled with shadows, but he could hear soft, snuffling snorts for breath, as though someone inside was injured or weeping.

"Eisean—no—!" Kaevir cried out from behind him.

"I said, get out of the bloody damn coach!" Eisean bellowed, bending his knees and squatting, leaning his shoulders and head through the doorway. "Move your bloody ass right now!"

He heard a voice hiss sharply, venomously at him. "Bastard!" it spat, and then he caught a confusing wink of dim moonlight against steel. He felt a fluttering wind brush against his face as the passenger of the coach rushed at him; Eisean saw a bright purple justicoat and starched, ruffled ascot with a monstrous, hideous, mummified head floating above it, only scraps of thin flesh covering bulbous eyes and the gaping, horrible, toothless maw of its mouth. He shrieked in bright terror, trying to scrabble back in frightened recoil.

The thing in the coach had a knife; that was the glittering hint of moonlight that had attracted Eisean's gaze. The blade of the dagger punched into the right side of his chest, spearing through his clothing, sinking deep between his ribs. Eisean lost his footing on the side of the coach, his boot soles skittering beneath him, and he toppled backwards, slamming against the ground.

The creature in the dapper vestments leaped to the ground behind him; Eisean opened his eyes, gasping for breath, and saw the moon glazed in the polished black leather of its shoes, aglow against the stark, pale silk of its stockings. It cradled something against its belly as it began to run, scurrying for the cover of the trees.

"No!" Kaevir roared, throwing himself at the monster, plowing into it, and knocking its legs out from beneath it. He had seen Eisean fall gracelessly from the coach, smacking hard against the shoulder of the road, but in the darkness did not realize that he had been stabbed. He had also raced past Eabhiros as he fought with the driver, and though Kaevir had entertained the fleeting, frantic thought to rush to his cousin's aid, he could not quiet the shrill, shrieking voice of the black stone within him

Free me! Claim me! Take me from him—free me!

The monstrosity fought mightily against Kaevir, spitting and shrieking in a wild, frantic voice, kicking its spindly, crooked legs and hooking its fingers into vicious claws that groped for Kaevir's eyes.

"Get away from me!" the creature screeched, its knees striking blindly, wildly for Kaevir's crotch. "Get away! Tressach! Tressach—help me!"

"Give it to me," Kaevir seethed, spit flying from between his clenched teeth. He bared his fist and sent his knuckles sailing into the ruin of the thing's mouth, battering it.

"Give it to me!" Kaevir screamed, punching it again and again. Its voice ripped up shrill, soprano octaves and it shrieked like a terrified owl, trying vainly, desperately to ward off Kaevir's blows. "Give it to me!" Kaevir roared, pummeling mercilessly, wrenching his fists back along the fulcrums of his shoulders and letting each fly in rapid succession. "Give it to me, you rot bastard! It is mine!"

He seized hold of the creature's sleeve, meaning to tear the coffer loose from its grasp, and it howled, struggling against him. "No!" it wailed. "No—by my eyes, you bastard! No, no!"

The creature managed to fold its leg toward its chest somehow, planting the sole of its heeled shoe solidly against Kaevir's belly. It heaved mightily, screaming and cursing all the while, and Kaevir floundered backwards, falling away from it. He did not release his vise-like grip upon the creature's sleeve, and as he spilled, he jerked against its arm. The gold box flew from the creature's grasp, pitching into the air in the fracas, and they both scrambled for it on their hands and knees, their faces twisted in frantic, desperate sneers.

"It is mine!" the creature cried, its hand flapping, grasping for the box, its fingertips fumbling against the gold.

"By my breath, it is not!" Kaevir hissed, and he punched it one last time, pistoning his legs beneath him and putting his full weight and momentum behind the blow as he thrust himself forward. The creature's head cracked back upon the axis of its neck with the force of the punch and it crumpled.

Kaevir snatched the gold box between his palms and suddenly, abruptly, everything in the Bith disappeared. He stared, mesmerized by the coffer as he brought it toward his face; the gilded gold seemed infused with unearthly illumination and glowed between his hands.

"Sweet Mother..." he breathed, transfixed by the coffer.

It is mine. At last ... at long last, it is mine.

"No!" the creature shrieked, springing at Kaevir, its hand outstretched for the box, its gruesome face wrenched in an expression of abject and helpless horror. "No—you cannot! It is mine—!"

The box flew open in Kaevir's hands. Just as in his dreams, Kaevir felt a sudden gust of frigid air blast forth from within the coffer's confines, buffeting his hair, his face, and he felt as though he had rested his hands against something alive—something wriggling and squirming and throbbing. His eyes rolled back into his skull and fluttered closed; his head snapped back on his neck and he opened his mouth, moaning softly as he felt it within him, cold and surging, filling him, consuming him.

I give you the wind, the voice from within the box said; the voice of the stone. *You are chosen*.

"I am chosen," Kaevir whispered.

"No!" the creature shrieked, seizing Kaevir by the throat, mashing its palm against the young man's windpipe, meaning to throttle him. Kaevir's eyes flew open, and he glared at the creature, his brows pinching.

"I am chosen," he hissed, and suddenly winds whipped around him, furious and mighty, slamming into it. The creature flew backwards, hurtled with massive, insurmountable force, as though it were no more than a linen rag doll cast aside by a malcontent child. It shrieked as it sailed through the air; it slammed into a tree trunk more than fifteen feet away, its scream cut abruptly short. It crumpled to the ground, landing in a limp, motionless heap.

"I am chosen," Kaevir said again, staring down into the box. He could see the stone resting within on a padded basin of black velveteen. The stone levitated as though by his unspoken invitation, rising from the confines of the coffer and floating in the air before him, spinning slowly, gleaming in the moonlight.

I give you the wind, said the Stone.

"Yes," Kaevir murmured.

Wind gusted through the forest, as though heralding the approach of an unexpected and horrific storm. The ground stirred along the forward edge of the wind and as it blasted past Kaevir, ripping at his hair and clothes, it kicked up a massive and thick cloud of dirt, leaves, pine needles, sticks and gravel. The debris filled the air, swirling about as though a cyclone had settled in the middle of the highway, and though Kaevir could not see anything, and squinted to shield his eyes from the flying silt, he could hear Eabhiros behind him somewhere, crying out in startled fright. He could hear the coachman, Tressach, shouting in panicked dismay, and he could hear the stone within his mind

My stone, he thought. *My destiny*.

Yes, the stone whispered. *Your destiny*. *You are chosen*.

He must have blacked out.

The next thing Kaevir clearly recalled was sitting up slowly, groaning in pain. His

entire body ached; he tasted blood and dirt in his mouth and he grimaced, his mouth twisting as he spat.

It had only been brief moments; the cloud of dust and debris stirred by the storm-force winds had not even fully settled yet. Kaevir realized he held the black orb clutched against his palm, clasped between his fingers. What had only scarce breaths before been a force screeching in command within his mind now lay hushed and dormant in his hand; a polished sphere of rock, a lovely, but inoffensive bauble.

The peculiar creature, the malformed and monstrous old man, was gone. Even through the haze and shadows, Kaevir could plainly see the tree it had smashed into. It had fallen here, but now it was gone, vanished into the very night itself.

As his senses returned to him, Kaevir realized he could hear Eabhiros calling out, his voice hoarse and frightened, trembling with a panicked anguish Kaevir had never heard tinged within its timbre before.

"Kaevir ... help me...!" Eabhiros begged piteously. Kaevir could see him moving about in the moonlight, crawling on his hands and knees toward the toppled coach. Of the carriage's driver, Tressach, there was no sign; he had apparently fled with his master into the darkness. Eabhiros moved as though in great pain, and Kaevir realized he was bleeding; his mouth and nose had been bloodied, his clothes were torn.

"Eisean!" Eabhiros cried, reaching Eisean's crumpled form. Eisean lay face-down on the highway; when Eabhiros moved him, gathering him in his arms and rolling him over, Eisean twisted, moving his legs as though convulsing against terrible agony, and his voice fluttered from his throat in a sharp, sudden cry.

"Oh ... oh, Sweet Mother..." Eabhiros whimpered, shuddering as he cradled Eisean against him. He flapped his hand helplessly against Eisean's chest, shoving aside the lapels of his justicoat. He looked toward Kaevir, his eyes enormous and round with shock. "He is bleeding!" he cried. "Oh, Mother Above, Kaevir ... They stabbed him! Help me!"

"What?" Kaevir gasped, shocked and stunned nearly beyond breath. Eabhiros folded himself over Eisean, clutching at him, weeping, his entire, burly form shaking.

"No..." Eabhiros pleaded. "No, no ... Please ... Please, Eisean, stay with me..."

"What?" Kaevir whispered again, staggering to his feet. He stumbled about as his mind and legs took their time in reacquainting with one another. He brought his hand to his face; his tricorne had fallen from his pate early in the scuffle with the creature, and he mopped his fingers through his filthy, tangled hair as he shambled toward Eabhiros.

"No," he said, shaking his head. He slipped his hand into the pocket of his justicoat, letting the round stone fall within the lined, woolen folds. "No, he ... he is alright..."

he whispered. "Eisean is alright, he ... he just knocked the breath from himself ... when he fell off the carriage..."

"He is bleeding!" Eabhiros cried, his voice shrill. He thrust his hand forward demonstratively, and Kaevir staggered to see blood, stark and glistening, nearly black in the moonlight, all over his cousin's palm and fingers.

"He is bleeding!" Eabhiros cried again. "There ... there is so much blood, Kaevir ... We have to do something!"

Kaevir fell to his knees before Eabhiros. Eisean lay limply with his head tucked against the nook of Eabhiros's shoulder. Blood dribbled in a thin, shimmering stream from his lips, trailing in a line from his nose.

"Eisean..." Kaevir whimpered, reaching for him, brushing his knuckles against Eisean's cheek. "Eisean, wake up. Please. Please ... Sweet Mother, please..."

Eabhiros and Kaevir wrenched at the front of Eisean's waistcoat and leine, tearing buttons loose from their threads, sending them spilling against the ground. Kaevir shoved open the sides of Eisean's shirt, and Eabhiros whimpered in dismay to see the long, gruesome wound that rived Eisean's chest. The blade had pierced deeply, just below his nipple, and blood poured from the gaping slash in a grisly torrent. Kaevir jerked the scarf from about his neck, folding it swiftly into a bundle and shoving it against the wound. He pressed his palm against the cloth and drew himself onto his knees, putting all of his weight behind his shoulders. The sudden, fierce pressure hurt Eisean, and he moved feebly, lifting his chin and moaning softly, drawing a strangled, grief-stricken cry from Eabhiros.

Eisean was dying, Kaevir realized, feeling his own heart seize with frantic terror. No one could lose blood at such a rate and hope to survive. He stared up into Eabhiros' tear-filled eyes and felt in full his cousin's anguish and pain. "We have to get him to Belgaeran—to the palace," Kaevir said, choked with his own tears. "We ... They have healers there, surgeons ... It is only some ten miles away. We have to get him there."

"He is dying," Eabhiros whispered.

"No," Kaevir said, his brows drawing together, his arms trembling with the force of the pressure as he shoved against Eisean's chest. "No, damn it—do not say that, Eabhiros, you bloody damn rot! He is not dying! We have to get him to Belgaeran!"

He shifted his weight, crouching above Eisean. "Give him to me," he said. "I will carry him to the coach, and you keep your hands over the wound, just like this—just like I am, do you see? You are the stronger of us. Press with all of your might—break his ribs if you have to—we have to stop the bleeding somehow."

"There is not time," Eabhiros said, stricken. "There is not time to get him to Belgaeran."

"He is Elfin!" Kaevir snapped, his voice sharp and shrill. "His father's family was of Gaeilge descent—he told me so himself! There is Elf blood in him somewhere, and it can save him—heal him—if we get him to Belgaeran and let them treat him! Stop your rotted blithering, Eabhiros—get your big, leaden feet beneath your ass, stand up and help me, you rot!"

Eabhiros' tears did not wane, but he offered no protest as Kaevir reached for Eisean, drawing him from Eabhiros' arms into his own. As Kaevir's hands slipped from the silk swaddling across Eisean's wound, Eabhiros' palms took their place, and they stood together, Kaevir stumbling unsteadily with Eisean's limp weight between his arms, Eabhiros shoving with his hands to stave the loss of blood.

"Go to the coach," Kaevir said, gritting his teeth and struggling to keep his footing.

"Can you carry him?" Eabhiros asked.

"Yes, damn it, I will bear him to Belgaeran in my arms if need be—now get to the coach!"

Eisean stirred as they rushed through the woods, heading toward the small abandoned church. The jostling motions of their frenzied pace hurt him and he moaned softly.

"What ... what are you doing...?" he gasped, blood peppering from his mouth against Kaevir's lapel.

"We are going to Belgaeran. Hush, now," Kaevir said, turning his face toward Eisean's.

They made their way through an ill-tended cemetery, stumbling and weaving among grave markers and overgrown stones. When they reached the carriage, Eabhiros seized the door handle and shoved the door wide.

"Kaevir..." Eisean croaked as Kaevir hefted him into the coach and laid him against one of the upholstered seats. He flapped his hand toward his face, catching another choked, blood-thickened spew of coughs against the cuff of his knuckles.

"I am here, Eisean," Kaevir whispered. He kept one hand shoved against the blood-soaked bundle of silk atop Eisean's breast, and stroked Eisean's hair gently with the other. "I am right here. It is going to be alright, I promise you. Do not be frightened."

"Please..." Eisean moaned softly, lifting his chin, his brows twisted. "It ... it hurts, Kaevir..."

"I know," Kaevir said. "I know it hurts and I am sorry." He leaned over and began to weep helplessly, quietly, his tears dropping against Eisean's cheek as he pressed his lips against his forehead. "I will unfetter the horses," he said to Eabhiros. "Step in here—come on now. Keep your hands on him. Keep him talking if you can—"

make him stay awake and with us."

He moved out of the way as Eabhiros clambered into the coach, the two cousins jostling for space in the narrow margin between the seats. "We will have to ride fast and hard," he said, glancing over his shoulder as he ducked, stepping out of the coach. "Keep your hands against that wound as much as you are able."

"You drive the coach," Eabhiros said grimly as he pressed his hands against Eisean's chest, catching his friend's blood against his palms. "Do not worry for anything except that—we will make it." He gazed down at Eisean, blinking against new tears. "By my breath, we ... we will make it."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

The evening's opening events for the weeklong celebration of the Samhradh were magnificent. The royal city had opened its gates and its heart broadly, and nary a home, storefront, pub, street lamp, or iron railing was left unfettered with ribbons and banners, strings of gaily painted wooden beads, streamers of brilliantly colored fabric. More than three-quarters of a million people crammed along Belgaeran's streets and squares, residents, visitors and honored guests alike, and the air was thick and boisterous with the sounds of enthusiastic celebration and music, heady with the rich aromas of portars and wines, carnival foods and spiced ciders.

An immense crowd had gathered beyond the walls of the palace, and as Kierken addressed them from an upper storey terrace, his rich, resonant voice carried across the evening air as though heralded by capable breezes. The King introduced his forthcoming appointment for Rhyden and read from a lengthy and admirable list of all of the young Gaeilge's significant accomplishments, both during the Wars and in the long years since. As he recited these each in turn—pausing for special emphasis as he recounted the now legendary tale of Rhyden severing Lahnduren's hand—the throngs below erupted in raucous and enthusiastic applause, waving colored flags in their hands.

When Llewyn Peildraigh stepped forward, standing between Rhyden and the King and brandishing aloft the hand of Lahnduren, encased in glass and swimming in discolored brine, the crowd howled and cheered all the more. The shriveled, soggy limb was to be publicly displayed in the palace entrance for the duration of the Samhradh, Kierken announced.

"Congratulations, Rhyden," Isbaenna said, after the ceremony had ended. Of them all, the one whom Isbaenna would have expected to be the most thrilled by such an honor and reception seemed instead the least so. Rhyden looked grand in a well-fitted, exquisitely embroidered ensemble of tailored vestments, and he wore his amazing sheaf of heavy blond hair unfettered and loose down the length of his spine. He had dressed for the occasion—and well—but his heart did not seem in it, even before Kierken had offered his introductions. He had spent much of the evening keeping to himself, standing with his parents, Eisos and Treines Fabhcun, who had journeyed eastward from Insch County for the occasion and his brother, Taemir—the realm's most favored and celebrated novelist and playwright—and offering murmured greetings and measured smiles with the taxed expression of one who performed such formalities more from convention than conviction.

"Such a splendid honor," Isbaenna told him. "You must be so pleased."

The corner of his mouth lifted crookedly in a peculiar little smile. "Muisse," he murmured. *Indeed*. His glanced her shoulder as a sudden movement distracted him and his expression softened, growing pained. Isbaenna turned, following his gaze,

and saw Qynh behind them near the doorway of the terrace, surrounded by a gaggle of attendants and handmaids.

"Qynh!" Isbaenna gasped, surprised and pleased. The Queen seldom left the confines of her chamber for any sort of occasion, formal or otherwise.

"Excuse me, please," Rhyden murmured, brushing past Isbaenna, walking directly toward the Queen. Isbaenna followed, curious to see how Qynh fared. She could not help but notice that Qynh's bevy of attendants fluttered anxiously at their approach, but Rhyden shouldered his way past them and reached for Qynh's hand.

"My lady," he said, bowing for her, drawing her hand to his mouth to offer her a buss. Qynh blinked at him sleepily, as impassive as a porcelain doll. He looked up at her, stricken. "Qynh," he whispered, still holding her hand. "Qynh, it is me—Rhyden."

After a long moment, the corners of Qynh's mouth fluttered slightly, drawing upward into a soft smile. "You are alone," she said.

He struggled to smile for her. "How can I be lonely in such fond company?"

"Not lonely," Qynh murmured, her voice scarcely more than a hush. "Alone. I ... I can see it in your eyes."

"Beannacht, Qynh," Isbaenna said. "It is Isbaenna Gabhlan, my lady—Airrenigh's daughter. Do you recall?"

Qynh's eyelids fluttered, drooping sleepily. "Yes," she said, nodding once. "Of course. How nice..."

Isbaenna glanced uncertainly toward Rhyden. He wore an agonized expression, as though seeing Qynh in such a state rived his very heart, and he cupped his hand against her cheek, leaning forward to kiss the corner of her mouth. "Ta me anseo, mo'ribhinn," he whispered. *I am here, my lady.* "Ta me libh." *I am with you.*

They stepped away from the Queen as soldiers approached, helping the attendants enfold Qynh among their ranks, hustling her across the threshold and into the palace again.

"She knew you, Rhyden," Isbaenna. "Truly, she did. She seldom speaks to anyone anymore from what I understand."

Rhyden turned to her, and she had no accounting for the aghast confusion in his face. "I do not understand," he said. "How long has she been like that? I have exchanged letters with her for some time now—regular and frequent letters—and she has never seemed addled or strange."

It was Isbaenna's turn for bewilderment. "I do not know how that could be possible, Rhyden," she said. "Qynh has been like that for years now, since Trejaeran died."

They say she went mad with grief."

Rhyden turned to look over his shoulder toward the terrace doors. "My lady, would you ... would you walk with me awhile?" he asked.

Isbaenna caught a glimpse of scarlet out of the corner of her gaze; Calidore walking purposefully toward her. She cringed, stifling a groan. "I would be delighted, Rhyden," she said.

Isbaenna and Rhyden made their way outside, into a secluded and quiet garden. They walked slowly, following a cobbled pathway. Rose bushes had been neatly clipped and trimmed for the season; hedges and sculpted shrubberies were kept shaped and well tended. Surprisingly, the sudden turn of cold weather in the evenings had not yet dampened the mettle of all of the garden's blooms, and all along the rows and pathways, large white blossoms still appeared, stark and phantom-like in the moonlight, nodding heavily on their stalks.

Rhyden did not offer his arm in genteel fashion to Isbaenna as they walked, even though it was by his invitation that she joined him. This was a peculiar but anticipated habit for him, as Rhyden seldom offered his hand or arm in informal gesture to anyone, not even his own family. She was grateful for his company nonetheless; she suspected that Calidore had been awed and intimidated to spy her in quiet conversation with Rhyden, and by that grace alone, had elected not to follow them as they had left the terrace.

Rhyden kept shooting furtive glances over his shoulder, she noticed, and she turned her head, curious. She was surprised to find two royal guardsmen, little more than silhouettes and shadows, lingering near the entrance to the garden behind them. The soldiers made neither move nor effort to follow them, but seemed nonetheless to be observing them, if only from a distance.

"They are here for me," Rhyden murmured to her, his voice so soft, it was nearly inaudible.

Isbaenna blinked at him, and then she realized. Belgaeran—indeed, the whole of the southrealm and midrealm proper—had been plastered seemingly overnight with placards and notices heralding his new appointment. Rhyden had wielded the sword that had cleaved Lahnduren's hand; if Lahnduren knew of Rhyden's presence in the royal city, he would likely seek enthusiastic vengeance for such offense.

"They are to protect you," she whispered. "From Lahnduren. They think he will try to get to you, Rhyden?"

Rhyden smirked. "That would seem as good a reason as any," he remarked, a comment that made no sense to Isbaenna. When he stopped all at once and took her unexpectedly by the hand, Isbaenna gasped, startled.

"Let me kiss you," he whispered to her.

"What?" Isbaenna blinked, taken aback.

He looked desperate and frightened, and his apparent distress alarmed her. "Please," he breathed and again, his eyes danced anxiously toward the soldiers. "Let me kiss you, Isbaenna."

He cupped his hands against the angles of her jaw as she tried to stammer some semblance of astonished, flabbergasted reply. He stepped toward her, drawing so near to her, his clothing brushed against hers, and then he tilted her chin toward him and kissed her softly on the mouth.

"What ... what are you doing...?" she gasped, trying to turn her face away. "I ... Rhyden, please stop. Do not, I ... I am in love with another."

"As am I," he whispered, sorrowfully. "Listen to me, please, Isbaenna. Act as though nothing is wrong. I am sorry to do this. I know of no other way."

"What are you talking about?"

He kissed her again, deeply, drawing her voice from her throat in a startled, breathless whimper of protest. "They will hear us," he breathed, cutting his gaze briefly toward the guards. "Put your hands on my shoulders and stand against me that I might speak to you."

Isbaenna draped her hands against his coat as he bid her, pressing her bosom squarely against his chest. He tilted his head as if he meant to nuzzle her ear and then whispered to her. "Qynh is not mad. Someone is doing this to her—drugging her somehow."

"What?" Isbaenna gasped. "Who—?"

"I do not know. Not yet—not with certainty. But I have seen enough, learned enough to have my suspects, and they would seem to be keeping a close eye on me lest I discover any more."

"The guards," Isbaenna whispered.

Rhyden nodded.

"Does Kierken know of this?" she said. She blinked in sudden dismay. "Rhyden, is ... is Kierken responsible for this? Is he doing that to Qynh—drugging her?"

"No." Rhyden shook his head. "He has no idea. I think somehow this is being done against him. They are using Qynh against Kierken."

"Who? Lahnduren?"

He shook his head again. "I do not believe so, my lady."

"Then who?" Isbaenna asked.

Rhyden took her face between his hands and met her gaze. "I think it is Llewyn Peildreigh."

Isbaenna blinked, startled. "The Easpag'Ard?" she whispered. "Rhyden, but he ... he is Kierken's...!"

"I know," Rhyden said, nodding. "I know how it sounds—I know what you would say, but I cannot think of anyone else who could be so capable, command such sway within the palace to see this done. My mother is a Banaltra, and I know much from her of medicinal wiles. Llewyn Peildreigh knows this. I have been deliberately kept from seeing Qynh, speaking with her—and now I think I know why. He is afraid that I will realize what has happened; what is wrong with her. He is afraid that I will learn the truth."

"If Llewyn is drugging Qynh, he has been doing so for years," Isbaenna breathed, horrified.

"If what you told me is true—if she has been like this since the end of the Second War, then fifteen years, yes," Rhyden whispered, his expression anguished.

"But ... but why?"

"I do not know," Rhyden said. "You have access unabated to the palace, whereas I..." He glanced toward the soldiers. "I am no longer at my discretion to roam freely within these walls. Would you try to find some reason Llewyn would be part of this? I know he is—I am certain of it in my heart, but I cannot reconcile it within my mind, not without some motivation, some reason. I would not put you in such a position, but I do not know what else to do. I cannot bring this before Kierken without proof, but I cannot find proof on my own." He glanced again at the guards. "He will not let me."

"Alright," Isbaenna whispered, and then he stepped away from her. He genuflected along the pathway, reaching down and snapping the stalk of one of the large white blooms. He lifted the flower in hand and stood, presenting it as though he courted her.

"It ... it is lovely," Isbaenna said, baffled by the token. "A crom'lus. They grow wild in the Midlands, in Tirurnua."

He smirked. "I know," he said. "Hold it for me, carry it inside. They will be suspicious if they see it in my hand."

"Has it something to do with what is happening to Qynh?" Isbaenna whispered, blinking down at the broad, fragrant blossom. She remembered all at once that the Abhacan had many purposes for the crom'lusan besides decoration; the plants produced small seed pods and fruits, and these capsules, when harvested before ripened in full, yielded strong medicinal alkaloids and derivatives. Abhacan physicians and surgeons frequently used an infusion of afeem—the most common

of these—to assuage pain or sedate patients.

Rhyden obviously harbored the same sudden thoughts as she did, and he closed her hands about the flower, as though bidding her wordlessly to guard it well. “I do not know,” he murmured. “But I mean to find out.”

They entered the palace together once more, and the two soldiers kindly stood aside to grant them passage from the garden. “Good evening, my lord, my lady,” one of them said.

“Did they hear us, do you think?” Isbaenna asked softly. She handed the crom'lus blossom to Rhyden and he tucked the flower into the deep pocket of his justicoat, pressing his hand against the fabric to flatten the petals beneath.

“No. I could hear them,” Rhyden said. He was full-blooded Gaeilge to her own only partial descent, and his hearing was far more acute. He smirked, glancing at her. “They were too concerned with wagering ten-marks on whether or not you would let me lay my hand against your breast to concern themselves with the triflings of our conversation.”

They rounded a corner and ran nearly headlong into Wyndetta Atreile. “Here you both are!” she exclaimed, somewhat out of breath. “I have been looking for you. Your mothers bid me to search. Do either of you know a Lord Kaevir Macleod?”

Rhyden blinked; he knew the name Kaevir Macleod—that was the young nobleman Kierken had told him was a principle suspect in the Gentleman Highwaymen robberies. Isbaenna gasped, her breath seizing in her throat—she knew of the name as well, and happened to be in love with the young man who pretended to bear it.

“Yes, Wyndetta, I know Kaevir,” she said, her voice tremulous. “Has ... has something happened?”

“Eamon sent word to Kierken that their carriage has arrived at the palace—Lord Kaevir Macleod, and his cousin, Eabhiros,” Wyndetta said. “They met with bandits along their way to Belgaeran this evening—that band from the midrealm, the Gentlemen Highwaymen. Airrenigh thought you should know of it straight away, Isbaenna, and your mother, Rhyden, has gone to their chamber to help tend to him.”

“Tend to him?” Isbaenna said breathlessly, stricken, her eyes flown wide. “What do you mean, ‘tend to him’? He is alright, is he not, Wyndetta? Kaevir is alright?”

“He was stabbed, Isbaenna,” Wyndetta told her gently. “They tried to resist the thieves, to fight them, it would seem and Kaevir ... One of them struck him with a dagger.”

Isbaenna's eyes filled with sudden tears and she stumbled in place, feeling the strength in her knees wane. “Where ... oh, please, Wyndetta ... Where is he?” she whispered.

"They have brought him to a guest suite on the second floor," Wyndetta said. "Treines is with him, and Ollamh Leigheas, the Abhacan physician from the university has been summoned. They have—"

"Sweet Mother...!" Isbaenna gasped, seizing her skirts between her fists and rushing past Wyndetta. She ran down the corridor, her shoes clattering against the polished stone floors as she began to weep, to choke for breath. "Eisean!"

By the time they had reached the city gates, Eisean had lapsed into a deep and unrousable state of unconsciousness, his pallor drained to the unnatural, ghastly tone of one hovering near death. Kaevir had screamed at the gate sentries as they had approached. "Let us pass! My lord has been stabbed by robbers! We must get him to a surgeon! Let us pass!"

They had rushed into the palace in the company of more than a dozen armed guards, generating a spectacle that had soon set the entire palace—indeed the entire city—in a frightened and frantic stir. From that moment onward, Kaevir and Eabhiros had been surrounded by jostling, clamoring throngs of people—guards, constables, clergy members, curious palace guests. Eisean had been whisked abruptly from them, trundled and hurried into a room, and though Eabhiros and Kaevir had followed, they had only been allowed to see him briefly.

The world surged around them at a dizzying, deafening and terrifying pace. A Gaeilge woman introduced in harried passing as Lady Treines Fabhcun, and a diminutive man whose pate crested only above Kaevir's midriff, an Abhacan named Ollamh Leighaos, came racing into the chamber to tend to Eisean's injury. Kaevir listened, frightened, stunned, and uncomprehending as he was told that Lady Treines was of the ancient Elfin Banaltra sect of healers, while Ollamh, who carried a heavy, leather knapsack filled with unfamiliar surgical implements and supplies, was the King's personal physician. At the sight of Ollamh's tools, his peculiar and ominous collection of scalpels, forceps, knives, and needles, Kaevir had staggered against Eabhiros, nearly swooning in bright, new dismay.

"It ... it is my fault..." Kaevir kept whimpering. "It ... Hoah, Eabhiros ... This is all my fault."

"Do not say that. Hush now," Eabhiros breathed against his ear, holding him.

The soldiers had tried to escort them from the room and Kaevir had fought, shrugging his shoulders, wrenching free of their grasps, screaming at them defiantly. He had not wanted to leave; he had wanted to throw himself headlong into the bed with Eisean and cling to him, weep against his friend, somehow force Eisean's life to remain within his form with his bare hands if need be.

They had been forced into the corridor, and the chamber door had been slammed shut behind them. For the better part of the next hour, the constabulatory guards had questioned them in separate parlors, each behind closed doors.

"My apologies for such inconvenience, Master Graeham," said Eamon Cathaoir, the commander of the royal Constabulatory, offering him a kind, sympathetic smile. "I will see that your injuries are tended, and that you are allowed the opportunity to bathe and change your vestments as soon as we are finished. I know how upset you surely must feel."

Kaevir paced restlessly before an expansive hearth, alone in the chamber except for the Commander and one of his guards, who sat with a plume and parchment in hand.

"Upset?" Kaevir asked, uttering a sharp bark of laughter. "I do not feel upset, sir. I bloody well feel helpless and angry—helpless for my circumstance, helpless to comfort my lord, and angry with all of your rot damn questions." He thrust his hand toward Eamon, splaying his fingers wide, his arm trembling, his shoulders shuddering. "This is his blood on my hands, my shirt! He is laying there suffering, and you would harrass me, sir—repeatedly and without cause—when he needs me, and I should be at his side!"

"How long have you been employed in the Macleods' service, Master Graeham?" Eamon asked, unbothered by Kaevir's outburst. When Kaevir glanced somewhat suspiciously toward the guard with the plume, Eamon offered him another gentle smile. "Braonir is here only in Crown capacity, sir. He is one of my constabulatory scribes, and would set your account to parchment in deposition. I mean to have you recount for official record, that you might sign your initials to it."

Kaevir reached into the pocket of his justicoat, meaning to fish out his toitins, and his fingertips brushed against something cool and smooth, a curve of polished stone. He blinked in surprise; he did not remember trading the black orb

the Shadow Stone

from the pocket of his Highwayman's jacket to this one. Kaevir curled his hand against the stone, cradling it against his palm within the confines of his pocket.

"What is your full name, sir?"

Kaevir glanced at Eamon, his brow lifted slightly. "Maor Fineus Graeham," he lied easily.

"When were you born?"

"What in the bloody duchar has this to do with what happened to my Lord Kaevir? Why are you bothering me with this?"

"It is for the record, Master Graeham," Eamon said. "It is no more than standard protocol."

"1731," Kaevir told him. "I was born in the year 1731 of the third age."

"Where?"

"Leodmeir, in the westrealm. Morangie County, Kemnay parish."

"Your parents' names?"

Kaevir laughed without humor. "Why do you want to know?"

"It is for the record," Eamon said again. "I want to know so I can search the birth records for Kemnay parish in Morangie County and prove you are who you say you are."

"Who else would I be?" Kaevir asked with a frown.

"I do not know," Eamon said, with a nonchalant shrug and a smile. He lifted his brow and gazed intently at Kaevir. "Why do you not tell me?"

"My name is Maor Graeham. My parents were Fineus Graeham and Miredeth Peire. I was born in 1731, the fourth and last child—the only son. I was born with a caul on my head and a birthmark upon my right buttock. Would you care to see it for your record?"

"No, thank you." Eamon smiled.

When they were finished, they brought Kaevir to a nearby guest suite. He crossed the threshold just as Eabhiros emerged from the room, in the company of two of Eamon's guards. Kaevir met his cousin's gaze, locking his eyes desperately with Eabhiros' and turning his head to watch as they brushed past him.

They know! he wanted to cry out in warning. *Hold your tongue, Eabhiros—tell them nothing! They know!*

When the soldiers returned less than an hour later, Kaevir felt his heart seize in dismay, certain they had come to arrest him. "Come with us, please, sir," said one of the guards. They each bore swords against their hips, and though they made no move to lay their hands upon the weapons, Kaevir blinked at the silver hilts, frightened.

"Where ... where would you take me?" he asked. His hand fluttered against the lip of his pocket, the pocket in which he had tucked the Stone.

"Lord Leigheas has bid us fetch you," the guard told him. At first, the name did not register with Kaevir, and he stared at them in bewilderment. "My liege's physician, sir," the guard offered in polite elaboration. "He has sent for you."

Kaevir's breath drew to a strangled, anguished halt in his throat. "Is it my lord?" he whispered. Tears burned in his eyes, and he blinked. *Eisean ... !* he thought in dismay. *He ... oh, Mother Above, he is dead...*

"Please come with us, sir," the soldier said again, beckoning with his hand.

They led him to Eisean's chamber. When he stepped across the doorway, Kaevir

found Eabhiros already in the room, standing by the hearth in quiet counsel with the Abhacan, Ollamh Leigheas. Eisean remained in bed, his chest swaddled in heavy bandages. Eabhiros turned his head as Kaevir entered; at the sight of tears glistening in golden lamplight against his cousin's eyes, Kaevir uttered a soft, plaintive moan. Isbaenna was somehow there, as well. kneeling on the floor by the bed, holding Eisean's hand. She, too, struggled against tears as she looked over her shoulder toward Kaevir.

"No," he pleaded, shaking his head, feeling his legs falter beneath him.

"Maor..." Eabhiros began, his voice gentle, his brows lifted. He stepped away from Ollamh and walked toward his cousin, holding out his hand. "Maor, it is alright. It—"

"No!" Kaevir cried out, agonized. He staggered, his eyes round and wide with horrified shock. He rushed toward the bed, falling upon his knees. "No, please— Sweet Mother, no, no!"

Isbaenna could not stave her tears at his piteous cries, as he clutched at Eisean, lowering his face and sobbing against the mattress. "I ... I will never forgive myself...!" Kaevir wept. "What have I done? I will never forgive myself...!"

"Stop ... y'bloody ... wailing..."

Eisean's fingers closed slowly, weakly against his, and Kaevir's head snapped up from the bed, his eyes enormous with shock. Eisean blinked at him with dazed, weary eyes, the corner of his mouth fluttering in a feeble, fleeting smile. "Could ... could rouse ... the dead ... you ... rotted yob..." he whispered.

"Eisean...?" Kaevir whimpered, rising onto his knees, his mouth unfolding in a broad, joyous grin. He fell against Eisean, clutching at him fiercely. "Sweet Mother Above, I thought you were dead, you bastard! I thought you had left me!"

"Not ... not a chance..." Eisean murmured, letting his eyes close once more.

"He is very weak," Isbaenna said. "But they ... Ollamh thinks the Gaeilge in him ... however distant, it saved his life."

"You live," Kaevir whispered, pressing his lips against Eisean's temple. Eisean whimpered softly, his lips moving as though he meant to speak, but his voice faded, fragile and incoherent.

"They gave him something," Eabhiros said as Ollamh left them, leaving the door opened behind him. Three guards remained posted within the chamber, standing attentively near the threshold. "Something for his pain, to help him rest. That is why he sleeps so." He drew his arm around Kaevir's shoulders in a fierce embrace. "Hoah, Sweet Mother, let us finish this measure and see ourselves home," he breathed, turning his face toward Kaevir's head and kissing his hair.

"Muise," Kaevir nodded, closing his eyes, squeezing Eisean's hand gently. *Indeed.*

"Kaevir..." Eisean breathed, his eyes closed, his brows lifting. "Kaevir ... please..."

"I am here, Eisean," Kaevir whispered, stroking Eisean's hair. "Rest now. It is alright. I am right here. I am not going anywhere."

"He has been calling for you," Eabhiros said. "Ollamh told me ... calling out his own name, he said."

Kaevir glanced at him, startled and alarmed. "I do not think he will say anything of it to Eamon," Eabhiros said softly, cutting his eyes sharply toward the soldiers. "But he found it odd and I was at a loss to explain it. I stammered something out but could not tell if he believed me."

"Eamon suspects something?" Isbaenna whispered, blinking at them, startled.

Eabhiros nodded his head once, briefly. "I think Calidore must have told him," he said, his voice hushed. "I do not know how, but he must have figured us out."

"What will you do?" Isbaenna asked, frightened and breathless.

"We ... we will bloody well run." Eisean whispered. His brows furrowed as he tried to lift his head and shoulders from the pillows. "Help ... help me stand ... dammit..."

"Eisean, lie back," Kaevir said. "We cannot run—you cannot be moved. You are hurt."

"We ... we cannot ... stay here..." Eisean breathed, clutching at his hand, imploring.

"Eisean is right," Eabhiros said softly, gravely. "We cannot. They will arrest us—see us hanged. We have to get out of here."

"It could kill Eisean to move him. You saw how much blood he lost," Kaevir said. "And how would we get him past those guards? They are watching us like hawks."

"I could distract them somehow," Isbaenna whispered. "Kaevir, you could go to the stables, fetch the coach, and I will think of some pretense to draw the guards away. The corridor beyond is practically empty now, and once around the next corner, you could pretend Eisean is a party guest—a drunken party guest. You could help him to walk, or carry him, Eabhiros—you are strong enough."

Kaevir looked doubtful and worried as he gazed down at Eisean.

"Calidore and Eamon will never suspect that you would flee now," Isbaenna said softly. "Just like you said—they think you would risk it not with Eisean in such a state. They think they have you pinched, Kaevir. You could be out of the city before they even realize you have left."

"Kaevir could not reach the stables," Eabhiros whispered. "The guards would never

let him pass."

"I could reach them," Kaevir said. "I could climb down from the balcony there—jump, if needs be."

"Kaevir, do not be a yob. It is a two-storey drop," Eabhiros told him with a frown. "You would break both your legs and your bloody neck besides."

Kaevir arched his brow. "I have leapt from taller windows than this running from constables plenty of times," he said, adding swiftly, "Do not ask."

"Do not worry for that," Eabhiros assured him dourly.

"I can make it, Eabhiros. Give me ten minutes from the moment I step out onto the balcony, and then you distract the guards, Isbaenna—draw them away."

"There is a servants' corridor just around the corner," Isbaenna whispered to Eabhiros. "Turn to your left as you leave the chamber, take it to the first level. There is a service entrance there, just off to the right."

"Can you find it from outside?" Eabhiros asked Kaevir.

"Just before the courtyard garden," Isbaenna told him.

"I can find it," Kaevir said, nodding.

"Then let us do this," Eabhiros said grimly. "Hoah, pox and rot, let us just get out of this, and by my breath, I will live out the remains of my days as primly and properly as a priest."

He dipped his fingers into the fob pocket of his breeches and withdrew his gold watch. "Ten minutes, then?" he asked, glancing anxiously at Kaevir. "We are doing this?"

"Ten minutes, then," Kaevir whispered, and he rose to his feet. "We are doing this."

Kaevir stepped out onto the balcony of Eisean's chamber, standing in the crisp, cool night air. He looked out over the grounds of the palace, watching the lights of Belgaeran twinkling all about him like low-hanging stars. The moon was aloft, swollen and full, spilling a wash of pale, bright light against the ground, mottling the earth in shadows.

He glanced over his shoulder as he stepped into this cloak of darkness at the patio's edge. He could see Eabhiros and Isbaenna on their knees beside the bed, watching him. The guards still stood by the doorway, laughing and grinning as they exchanged tales and rumors.

He slipped his hand into his pocket absently as he gazed down over the balustrade toward the moon-draped lawn below. His fingertips brushed against the stone; it seemed to tremble against him, and he stroked his thumb against its glossy surface,

drawing strength and comfort from its simple presence in his hand.

"I can do this," he whispered, pivoting on his heels, propping his hips against the granite balustrade. As he gazed out across the grounds, making certain one last time that all was clear, he caught sight of a shadowed figure moving swiftly, shambling through the darkness alongside of the defensive wall of the palace, scurrying toward the corner of the castle. His breath caught in a startled tangle in his throat as he recognized the figure's limping, clumsy gait

It was the creature from the forests; the misshapen, deformed old man. *The bloody bastard must have followed us to Belgaeran*, Kaevir thought. *He has found us!*

Found the stone ... !

He moved, reacting more from instinct than from reason. He swung his right leg over the ballustrade and then drew his left around in turn, letting his hips slip over the edge of granite as he fell. It happened so quickly, so reflexively, Kaevir scarcely had time to realize what he had done, much less reconsider. He felt a sudden, swift wind against his face, flapping at his hair, and when he landed against the ground, his balance unwavering, his feet as light and certain in the grass as a cat's, he blinked, stunned and startled.

"Hoah...!" he whispered, looking up briefly and gawking at the significant and impressive height he had just dropped without seeming effort or worry.

How in the duchan did I do that?

He heard the soft rustling of shuffling footsteps as the old man rounded the corner and was gone, oblivious to Kaevir's descent, and he turned toward the sound, his brows drawing together. "What are you playing at, you rot?" he hissed.

He followed the sounds of the old man's feet, ducking into swaths of shadow as giddy, giggling, gossiping palace guests strolled past him, unaware of his presence in the darkness. A pair of soldiers strode him by along his route, and Kaevir stumbled, shying against the wall, his eyes flown wide, his frightened breath caught and still in his throat. No one paid him any heed and when at last he came to a place on the grounds where he could either continue forward toward the stables and the carriage, or turn to his right, passing through an unguarded service gate in the perimeter wall and out into the city proper, his stride wavered to an uncertain halt.

He heard a scuffle of heeled shoes against loose gravel and cobblestones, and saw a staggering shadow drape long across a building façade through the gateway; the old man shambling about by the light of street lamps, scampering for the cover of alleyways.

"Dammit," Kaevir muttered. He reached into the fob pocket of his pants and slipped out his watch. Seven minutes. He only had seven minutes to reach the coach.

The old man's shadow splayed around the corner of the building and disappeared

from view, the sounds of his footsteps fading.

"Dammit!" Kaevir seethed, and he darted through the gate, running down the street, following the shadow. He rounded the side of the building and caught sight of the old man, hunkered and enfolded in a dark traveling cloak as he ducked from between two distant buildings and scurried further down the street.

"Pox and bloody rot," Kaevir breathed, running after him. He followed the old man for another three blocks, and hid between a closed and darkened apothecary shop and a haberdashery, watching as the man scampered through a doorway across the street, disappearing inside an exterior room on the ground floor of a cozy little creekstone inn, the Palace Antechamber & Breakfast.

What in the duchan was the old bastard up to? Kaevir wondered. He crept across the street, ducking and scampering until he crouched by the door to the inn room. He leaned his ear against the wood and could hear muted voices, sharp and arguing from within.

"...I told you to keep put!" a man snapped.

"They are at the palace, Tressach. They have my stone!" the old man cawed. "We can go and get it back from them. We can—"

"You keep your bloody ass in this room unless I tell you otherwise, do you understand, Lahnduren?" Tressach said, and there was a clattering sound, a startled yelp from Lahnduren.

Kaevir shrank back from the door, his eyes widened in stunned surprise. *Lahnduren*. There was not a person in Tiralainn who would not recognize that name. Lahnduren had been king once, before Kaevir had even been born; he had murdered the rightful liege and stolen his throne in a violent uprising that had brought sixteen years of misery and suffering to Tiralainn. He had proven an incompetent, ruthless ruler who had enslaved his own people; the current King, Kierken, and his Queen, Qynhelein, had secured their Crowns by helping to overthrow Lahnduren's rule.

Lahnduren had tried to stage a rebellion against Kierken fifteen years ago during what was called the Second Shadow War. He had been defeated and killed during the War, according to the legends Kaevir had always heard.

"Maybe not," he whispered to himself. If his ears had not deceived him, then Lahnduren was alive and well and letting a room at the Palace Antechamber & Breakfast. He was in Belgaeran.

"And he wants my stone," Kaevir breathed, his hand stealing into his pocket, his fingers curling about the black orb. He scurried away from the inn, pausing near a streetlamp to look at his watch. Three minutes. Whatever Lahnduren was playing at, it would need to wait. Kaevir turned on his heel and ran back along the street, making

his way back toward the palace, his gait long and brisk as he rushed to meet Eabhiros and Eisean.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Kaevir scampered back along the shadow-draped streets of Belgaeran, retracing his steps to the palace. To his surprise, the service gate along the defensive wall, opened and unguarded when he had left, was now anything but; four armed guards had been stationed outside of the perimeter, and the iron gate had been closed fast. Kaevir scuttled back, crouching in the shadows of a nearby alley, his eyes flown wide, his breath caught in his throat in a sudden, panicked breath.

Where in the duchan did they come from? he thought. He had no time left now; his ten-minute deadline had passed, and he knew Eabhiros and Eisean were on their way to meet him, if they were not already waiting for him.

"Rot," he muttered. He would never make it past the guards, much less through the thick iron gate. He did not know what the presence of the soldiers meant; mayhap he had simply come upon the gate earlier in between the changing of sentries.

Or maybe something is wrong, he thought grimly to himself. *Maybe Eamon has arrested Eabhiros and Eisean before they had time to flee. Maybe he has noticed my escape and ordered the palace sealed to keep me trapped inside.*

"Pox and damn," Kaevir whispered. He rose from his hunkered position and darted down the street. He kept to the shadows, following the avenue in a parallel course to the palace walls. At last he came to a place where a long, narrow alley between two buildings opened out before the defensive wall. At the far end of the alley, he poked his head out and looked around. The service gate and the guards were far off to his left now, a good two blocks away and gone from his view. There were no breaks in the perimeter wall here, no gates—but no soldiers, either, and Kaevir tiptoed out, creeping to the wall and standing before it.

He had hoped to find a tree sprouting somewhere close at hand, but realized to his dismay that someone with forethought had apparently considered such a potential avenue of surreptitious entry to the palace grounds. There were no trees, no bushes or shrubberies. There was nothing except save the cold white granite towering above him.

"Dammit," he said. There were no suitable handholds or toe nooks he could see; no means to climb it without the benefit of tools. He frowned, hunching his shoulders and shoving his hands into his coat pockets. If they were not already apprehended, surely Eabhiros and Eisean had reached the servants' entrance of the palace by now. They were likely concerned by his tardiness and frantic, besides.

"I have to get over that wall somehow," he muttered, his fingertips brushing against the black stone tucked inside his pocket. He felt the wind flutter against his hair, flapping lightly against the tails of his justicoat as he looked up at the wall.

"Damn," he said, and then the wind whipped upward, seemingly from the ground itself, rushing between his legs and buffeting him in the face. A stinging spray of loose dirt and dried grass slapped against him, and he staggered, squeezing his eyes shut and uttering a quiet yelp of start. The wind slapped against his arms, his legs, and his coat tails snapped up toward his neck. Kaevir cried out again and the wind snatched the breath from him. He choked, whooping in a mouthful of dust, and then the wind abruptly died, the air falling suddenly and unexpectedly still.

"What in the duchar...?" he gasped, stumbling. He felt his boot heels slip against some sort of edge, like the lip of a sidewalk or precipice, and his eyes flew open.

"Hoah—!" he cried out in bright, breathless panic. He had somehow come to be atop the wall and stood perched precariously on the narrow ledge of stone, staring not up at the towering granite, but down its steep, opposing side toward the palace grounds below.

"Hoah, damn!" Kaevir yelled, reeling in sudden, unsteady terror. His arms pinwheeled frantically in the air as his heels again skittered against the brim of stone, and he nearly toppled backwards, plunging headlong back into the street below.

The wind pelted him again, rushing out of nowhere and against his shoulders, shoving him forward. Kaevir cried out and then pitched over the wall, staggering and flailing, plummeting toward the palace grounds. "Hoah, Sweet Mother, damn—!" he shrieked in wild terror, shutting his eyes as another powerful burst of wind smacked against his face, his chest. He felt it jerk his legs beneath him, and then his boots met the ground, settling deliberately in the grass as though he had been plucked by the scruff of his coat by the Good Mother herself and deposited thus. The wind fluttered through his hair, waning, and when it died, he opened his eyes, blinking in stupefied astonishment.

"Sweet Mother..." he whimpered, his eyes flown wide with shock. He trembled, shuddering violently, his knees buckling. He stumbled about, dazed and stunned, his footsteps shambling as though he were drunk. "Sweet Mother ... Mother Above ... What in the duchar was that?"

He limped about in a clumsy half-circle and gawked at the wall behind him. The wind had blown him like a dried leaf caught on the edge of gale, shoving him up one side of the wall and back down the other. "Mother Above...!" he whispered.

"You there, halt where you stand! Halt right now!" he heard a sharp voice shout out, and he whirled, staggering again, his heart's already frightened rhythm quickening ten-fold as a party of four guards appeared to his right, marching briskly and purposefully toward him. They bore their swords in their hands, and Kaevir whimpered, backpedaling.

"Bugger me," he hissed.

"I said halt where you stand!" one of the guards bellowed, moonlight flashing against

the silver dome of his helm, infused along the length of his brandished sword. They were nearly upon him, their strides broad, their heavy footfalls shivering in the ground beneath his feet.

"I ... I am halted...!" Kaevir called out, holding his hands aloft, his palms raised. "I ... I am unarmed. Please do not...!"

A sudden, mighty gust of wind rushed from behind him, sweeping his hair forward and into his face, shoving into his shoulders and sending him stumbling. Kaevir threw his hands up, ducking his head as more dirt, pebbles, sticks and grass pelted him, filling the air in a thick cloud. He could hear the guards crying out in startled, bewildered fright and he risked a peep around the vertex of his arms.

A violent burst of wind seemed to catch two of the soldiers with seeming purpose by the chest, knocking them off of their feet and sending them careening into the nearby wall of the palace. They struck hard enough to rattle window panes, their metal helmets ringing like muffled bells as they struck against the stone. They crumpled as the wind turned them loose, and they spilled face-down upon the ground, as limp and lifeless as discarded rag dolls.

Another gust wrenched the third soldier's legs from beneath him and slammed him back into his remaining fellow. The two of them flew, smashing into the perimeter wall, the breath and senses knocked from their skulls by the force of the impact. As swiftly as it had come upon them, the wind died, and the guards pitched into the grass, unconscious.

Kaevir lowered his arms from his face slowly, shuddering anew. His breath escaped from his throat in quiet, mewling little hiccups as he stared at the soldiers, his eyes enormous with shock. "Hoah..." he whimpered, staggering. "What is happening...?"

"Halt right there!" he heard a voice bellow from behind him. Kaevir wheeled about and saw Eamon rushing toward him in the company of at least a dozen soldiers. "Kaevir Macleod, stand fast right there!" he roared, and Kaevir moaned aloud, shrinking back as he realized Eamon knew; he knew who he was, and that could only mean one horrific thing.

"We have your friends!" Eamon shouted. "There is no place you can go, no one who will help you. Stand fast! You are under arrest!"

"Please!" Kaevir cried, holding out his hands in blind terror, certain they would run him through with their blades. "No, please, I am unarmed—!"

The wind seemed to spew from his fingertips, launching itself at Eamon and the soldiers like some violent, untethered beast. It plowed into them with tornadic, furious force; Kaevir saw Eamon's eyes fly wide and then he was jerked from his feet, ripped at least twenty feet skyward, his voice ripping up into shrill, panicked shrieks. He sailed as though he had been fired from a cannon, shoved across the plateau of the air and sent crashing with brutal, jarring force through a second storey

window of the palace. The soldiers behind him scattered like dried sage brush in a sand storm, whipped about, flung through the air, slammed into walls, smashed through windows, pummelled against the ground.

When they had all fallen, when none stood left before Kaevir, the winds receded, falling still as if a heavy door had snapped shut on them, stifling them. Kaevir blinked in breathless horror, shaking like a feeble old man. He could hear muffled shrieks coming from within the palace; Eamon and the others hurled through windows had flown into the rooms of guests, into quiet parlors where small receptions had gathered. All around him, Kaevir could hear the hurting, woeful sounds of soldiers whimpering and groaning, stirring weakly as they lay sprawled in the grass.

"Hoah ... Sweet Mother..." Kaevir whispered, agape and stunned anew. He stared in stunned, astounded wonder at his palms, his fingers. He jerked his head, gasping in fear at the sudden thunder of more approaching footsteps—plenty of them and in quite a hurry from the sounds of things. He could hear more voices shouting out in alarm and concern—more soldiers on the way—and he stumbled, terrified.

"Oh, no!" he gasped. He felt a sharp breeze smack against the back of his knees and he yelped, falling backwards. He cowered, expecting the grass and ground to slam painfully against his shoulders, but that impact never came, and he screamed in fright as the wind bore him swiftly upwards, a mighty draft thrusting him abruptly into the air. He flipped ass over elbows, pate over heels, and he shrieked to watch sky and ground swap places over and over again in his line of sight. He saw the crest of the defensive wall whip by beneath him as the wind blew him over, and then it brought him to the ground, settling him in a nearly gentle, delicate fashion on his rump in the dirt, outside of the palace barricades once again.

The soldiers were hollering from the other side, their voices muffled through the stone as they barked and shouted orders to open the gates, to throw wide the gates. Kaevir scrambled to his feet, reeling about in a breathless, shocked state, his hair blown all askew, sticking out all about his face in a disheveled corona. His justicoat hung lopsided on him, the flaps tangled about his legs, and he limped about in wide, clumsy circles, his knees seeming unwilling to support his weight in full. He had nearly soaked his breeches; somehow, by the graces of the Good Mother, his bladder had not flooded his trousers in fright as he had flown through the air.

He heard the distant, distinctive sqawl of metal against metal as the service gate several long blocks to his left began to swing open to release the royal guards. Kaevir staggered, his breath and voice caught in a frightened, shrill hiss beneath his breast, and then he turned, stumbling along the nearest alleyway. He began to run, his arms pistoning at his sides, driving his fists toward his chin. He ran until he felt his lungs sear with frantic effort, racing down alleyways, along thoroughfares, in and out of passing groups of celebrating pedestrians. At last, he darted between two neighboring pubs and crouched against the floor of the alley. He huddled here, safe in the shadows, and tucked his temple against the cold creekstone wall.

What was that? his mind screeched. *What was that? What in the bloody damn duchan just happened to me?*

He could feel the stone in the pocket of his justicoat and he reached for it, letting his fingers slide slowly beneath the flap of wool. He caught the stone in the crook of his fingers and drew it forth. He watched lamplight dart fleetingly against its surface, the glow of the moon like a dim haze against the polished black stone.

Whatever had happened to him, whatever had caused the winds to blow like that, to seemingly rise to his defense and aid, he realized all at once, it was on account of the stone.

I give you the wind, it had whispered to him in the forest. It had not spoken to him since; these enigmatic words had been among the last the stone had offered, but as they came now to Kaevir's mind, as he gazed at the orb, transfixed and somehow soothed by the fluttering play of light against it, he felt the gossamer hairs along the nape of his neck prickle and he shivered.

I give you the wind.

"What are you?" Kaevir whispered to the stone. The stone offered no reply, remaining as mute against his hand as it had nearly from the first moment he had touched it. Kaevir felt frustrated tears well in his eyes and he closed his fingers about the stone, clutching it, drawing it against his heart. "What in the bloody duchan are you?"

All at once, his eyes flew open in startled realization. He jerked as though a cold, lifeless hand had just brushed against the back of his neck. "Lahnduren...!" he gasped.

Lahnduren had kept the gilded box containing the stone; he had fought Kaevir like a rabid dog to see it remain in his possession. There was power within it, power Kaevir somehow had harnessed through the wind—power Lahnduren had obviously wanted and had been desperate to keep for his own. Eisean had been stabbed out of that fervent desperation; now, he and Eabhiros had been arrested.

Kaevir stood, drawing his legs beneath him, stumbling and leaning heavily against the wall. He let the stone fall into his pocket and limped toward the mouth of the alley. He had followed Lahnduren to a place called the Palace Antechamber, an inn that he thought he might be able to find once more.

Lahnduren knew. He knew what the stone was; he surely knew what was happening to Kaevir. *And by the Good Mother's graces*, Kaevir thought grimly. *And the merits of my fists—by my breath, he is going to tell me.*

Kaevir arrived outside of the Palace Antechamber just in time to see a tall, cloaked figure duck out of Lahnduren's room. The man moved too swiftly and gracefully to be of Lahnduren's misshapen build; Tressach was going somewhere, and in a hurry

from Kaevir's observation.

While this might have presented a good opportunity for Kaevir to question Lahnduren, he decided instead to follow Tressach. Whatever Lahnduren knew about the stone, Tressach likely knew as well, and something had obviously come about to set such a brisk and urgent pace in the man's strides. Kaevir crept in his wake, his footfalls light and cautious against the cobbled street. He hugged building walls and ducked into alleyways, in case Tressach suspected pursuit and turned to glance behind him. Tressach made no such effort; he seemed occupied with his own thoughts, too much so to notice Kaevir.

He was leading Kaevir back toward the palace, a realization that disturbed Kaevir immensely. He had only just fled from those walls and grounds, and that was the last place he wanted or needed to be at the moment.

What bloody choice do I have? he told himself angrily. Something is going on here and I am apparently a part of it, whether I want to be or not. I have to follow him. It may be the only way I can help Eabhiros and Eisean.

As the spires and turrets of the palace loomed into view among buildings and rooftops to Kaevir's left, Tressach changed his course, moving to the right, cutting between shops. When Kaevir followed him, he realized where Tressach was going; like the palace itself, this destination surpassed any structure around it, its imposing towers rising in regal, commanding splendor above Belgaeran's chimneys and eaves.

What in the ducharan ... ? he thought. Why would Tressach be going to church?

The bells of the Ardeaglais'Coroin cathedral tolled forth the eleventh hour, their resonant, melodic tones shuddering through the night, each trembling in the air and nearly deafening given Kaevir's proximity. The cathedral and grounds sprawled across the expanse of five city blocks; it was larger in width and breadth than most small townships proper in the midrealm Kaevir had visited. The Ardeaglais'Coroin campus included the Cung ecclesiastic academy and dormitories; the a'Pobail Creideamh's library archives and treasury vaults; the offices for courtier clergy members; seven diminutive chapels in addition to the main nave; more than fourteen square miles of roofed cloisters and winding walkways; and an immense, sprawling network of subterranean crypts that honeycombed the earth beneath the massive cathedral.

Kaevir had never drawn so near to anything so immense and magnificent in all of his days. Even in the middle of the night, with only the moon to offer illumination, Ardeaglais'Coroin was staggering in its sheer proportion, breathtaking in its grandeur.

The a'Pobail maintained its own infantry of armed soldiers, but Kaevir saw no sign of any sentries posted or guards on patrol as he followed Tressach. He mounted the cathedral stairs at the southwestern transept entrance two at a stride, his boot soles soft and silent against the granite. Tressach had not seemed the least bit surprised to

discover this entrance unlocked, and he had not hesitated even a faltering breath before ducking inside. Kaevir, however, was more cautious. After all that had happened in the span of that one brief day, he was taking no chances. He drew the door open a brief measure and poked his head inside.

The threshold opened upon a modest foyer, adorned only with a marble statue of the Good Mother Creator peering forth from a shallow alcove along the right wall in silent, unblinking regard. Beyond this room, through a distant doorway, lay the crossing threshold between the nave and the quire, and Kaevir caught a fleeting glimpse of Tressach's shadow as he strode quickly out of view. Kaevir slipped through the door, letting it ease quietly shut behind him.

Tressach had exited the cathedral through a door across the nave and Kaevir followed him out into a garden ringed by a wide cloister. By the time Kaevir had followed Tressach around to the chapter house door, Tressach had already ducked inside. Kaevir hesitated for a moment before following further, cracking the door a brief margin and poking his head through cautiously.

The doorway opened into a small foyer, with vaulted ceilings fashioned from a series of archways. The arches descended downward, and the floor followed suit, yielding to a broad granite stair case that led visitors into the alcoved, tranquil main chamber.

Kaevir stood motionless in the foyer, watching soft torchlight play against the high, curved walls and tumble down the stairs in wayward shadows. He could hear people talking from the chamber below; their voices carried easily—Tressach's and another unknown to Kaevir.

"What happened to your face?" asked this unfamiliar voice.

"As though you do not know, Lleuwyn," Tressach replied. "One of your fellows saw it nearly battered to a pulp with his fists."

"One of my fellows?" asked the other man, Lleuwyn. "My dear Lord an'Clare, I believe you must be mistaken."

Kaevir crept slowly, cautiously down the stairs, taking each with deliberate and silent care. He came to the pier of a broad archway, a place where the stairs canted to his left and descended further down. He pressed himself into the nook between the column and the wall, hidden by the archway, and he leaned forward slightly, peering down the stairs.

"Spare your breath, Your Grace," Tressach snapped angrily. "I know you were behind our little unpleasant encounter this evening."

"I am assuming you mean the robbery by the Gentlemen Highwaymen? Yes, I have heard mention at the palace."

"I am sure you have," Tressach said, uttering a sharp bark of laughter. "Look at my face! Look at my rot damn teeth! By my breath, Peildraigh, I should draw my blade

and see it through your flabby middle, you rotted bastard!"

Kaevir recoiled in surprise, rapping the back of his head smartly against the wall. The man in the scarlet cassock was Llewyn Peildreigh, the Easpag'Ard of Tiralainn, the leader of the a'Pobail Creideamh, who answered only to Kierken in terms of influence and authority in the realm. "Bugger me," he whispered.

"After so many years, Tressach, do you really think me capable of orchestrating so clumsy and juvenile an attack as that which was perpetrated against you?" Llewyn asked. "You are not without the benefit of your good senses. You know that if I meant to see the Stone stolen from you, you would not live to tell—you or Lahnduren."

He knows, Kaevir realized, stunned anew. He knows Tressach is helping Lahnduren. He knows Lahnduren is in Belgaeran! He did not understand; the Easpag'Ard was supposed to be the King's most trusted advisor. Why would he instead help the King's most bitter enemy?

"They ... the bastards broke my teeth...!" Tressach cried out hoarsely, his voice choked. He reached toward his mouth and wrenched a denture plate from his top palate. He thrust it out against his palm, holding it aloft for Llewyn to see.

"They broke my damn teeth!" he cried again, lisping through the considerable gap left without the dentures. "I cannot afford to see these replaced! Do you know how many marks I spent for these? Where is a man's dignity to be found if not within his palate?"

"Here, now, my lord," Llewyn said, gently. He clapped his hand against Tressach's shoulder, drawing him near, offering him comfort.

Tressach blinked against his frustrated tears, shrugging away Llewyn's hand. "I thought you should know—they have stolen the Stone," he said. "Lahnduren begged me not to tell you. He could not bear to lose his chance for vengeance against Kierken and that whelp, Fabhcun."

The corner of Llewyn's lips lifted wryly. "The little lambs fled to Belgaeran. Lahnduren dealt one of them a grievous blow with his dagger. I would wager that lad to be dead come the new morrow. The other two have already been arrested and sent to Gaol. One of my more ruthless young Biocaires, eager for a foothold in my good graces, had suspected before now that these three were to blame for the Gentlemen Highwaymen affairs. A rather fortuitous happenstance, this revelation of his, one that has served us far better than I ever anticipated. I have ordered their carriage searched, their belongings scoured. If the coffer is yet in their possession, we will find it."

"You misunderstand," Tressach said. "Find the box to your heart's content. It does not matter. He did not just steal the Stone, Llewyn—the boy claimed it. The coffer opened in his hands and then the winds came—from out of nowhere, by my breath,

and like nothing I have ever seen."

"Wind," Llewelyn said. He turned and walked toward the stairs, his expression troubled and pensive. Kaevir shrank back at his approach, shoving himself against the wall, his heart seized with sudden alarm.

"Wind, indeed," Tressach said. "With force enough to plow Lahnduren a good twenty feet away, batter him into a tree. It nearly knocked me into the next county proper. He has claimed the Stone, Llewelyn. He commands the wind. It has chosen him."

"It does not matter," Llewelyn said.

"It cannot bode well," Tressach told him. "Surely, we must—"

Llewelyn turned to him. "It does not matter," he said again. "The boy only has the Stone. He needs the Book to wield it, and that he will not claim."

"What will you do?"

Llewelyn smiled at him, his brows narrowed. "That which has always served me best, Lord an'Clare," he said. "I will bide my time and wait to see how events unfold. The Highwaymen are at the palace. By the morrow at the latest, they will be in Gaol. The boy has only solved the problem of seeing the coffer opened for me."

"Then you will possess both Talismans—the Book and the Stone," Tressach said.

"Muisse," Llewelyn replied, smiling thinly. *Indeed.*

"But not the notes with which to read the Book," Tressach remarked, raising his brow. "The notes with which to wield the Stone."

"No," Llewelyn mused. "They were not stolen, were they, lost in the fray?"

"No, Your Grace. Lahnduren has them secreted away on his person, I am fairly certain. I have asked him already, and he grew rather petulant." Tressach smiled at Llewelyn. "But I will get them for you, do not worry. You will have them in your hand the night of the masked ball before Kierken's life has even fully waned from his corpse."

"I will see you rewarded for this loyalty," Llewelyn said. He reached beneath the folds of his chasuble, producing a large, swollen velveteen money pouch. He offered it to Tressach, pressing the sack between Tressach's palms. "Here is fifteen hundred marks. There is more aplenty where this came from should your allegiance prove unwavering."

Tressach gawked at the money pouch much as Kaevir would have had he cradled it in his hands—with the wide-eyed astonishment of one who has seldom seen such quantity of pence presented for his benefit. Tressach blinked up at Llewelyn, smiling broadly. "Hoah, Your Grace, it will."

"Go and see a Master Elath Deneman with the dawn's first light," Llewyn said. "His shop is on Bochastle, near the a'Clos. He will tend to the matter of your teeth for you. Tell him I sent you and that he will answer to me for any dissatisfaction."

Llewyn and Tressach parted company at the threshold of the Ardeaglais'Coroin chapter house. They had lingered here for awhile longer in murmured conversation, discourse that had been muffled and indistinct through the heavy wood of the door. Kaevir had not dared to move until their voices had faded.

Sweet Mother Above, he thought. They have taken Eabhiros and Eisean to Gaol.

Gaol was the royal prison; the most infamous and feared in Tiralainn. Kaevir had never been inside, but he had heard tell of it through his various and numerous tenures in jails throughout the midrealm.

"They call it the Screaming Tower," one of his fellow inmates in a small Corgue County jail had told him once. "It is a place where men beg for death. You walk through the gates of Gaol, and they say you abandon all hope. They make a man forget the Good Mother there, and they break you, lad—body, mind, spirit—they keep you there and they devour you, until you stumble toward Pionos weeping, grateful for the blessings of the gallows."

Gaol was a den of torment and despair and Eabhiros and Eisean were there, alone against such brutal and horrifying circumstance. Calidore wanted to prove they were the Gentlemen Highwaymen and Llewyn apparently wanted the Stone. They would torture Eabhiros and Eisean to prove their culpability, to try and force from them knowledge they did not have—where Kaevir had taken the Stone.

"Sweet Mother," Kaevir whispered. "What have I done?"

He followed Llewyn Peildraigh as he made his way from the chapter house of Ardeaglais'Coroin back toward the nave. He could find Tressach again; the man undoubtedly was making his way back to the inn, and it had become apparent to Kaevir that neither Tressach nor Lahnduren would be of much use to him. Lahnduren sought the Stone while Tressach seemed concerned with betraying Lahnduren for whatever unspoken purpose he and Llewyn had devised. Llewyn was powerful, second only to the King, and Kaevir realized the Easpag'Ard likely had methods and means to tell him where in Gaol Eabhiros and Eisean had been imprisoned.

And he will tell me, Kaevir thought, his lips pressed together in a thin, dogged line. By my breath, he will tell me or, man of the cloth or not, I will beat it out of him.

The wind had begun to stir, rustling through nearby treetops with sudden, mounting urgency. Dried autumn leaves fluttered about in this breeze, and the hems of Llewyn's cassock and chasuble flapped at its insistent tug. He entered a large building with two guards in the scarlet velveteen vestments of the a'Pobail cadre posted at the threshold. Kaevir hid among nearby bushes, watching from a distance

as Llewyn paused in his approach, offering a moment or two of friendly discourse to his soldiers.

When Llewyn had disappeared inside, Kaevir emerged from the hedges. He walked toward the doorway, his hands closed into fists, his brows drawn. The wind whipped about him as though it shared in his anger and fear, and leaves scattered in the air like a murder of panicked crows.

"Good evening, sir," one of the guards called to him in greeting.

"Good evening," Kaevir replied. The wind swept his voice from his mouth and bore it aloft on a sudden gust that sent his coat tails flapping out in a nearly perpendicular plane from his hips.

"May we help you, sir?" the other guard, asked, raising his voice nearly to a shout to be heard over the rising wind.

"Yes," Kaevir said, drawing to a halt and staring at them. The wind whipped around him, and his justicoat billowed, his hair flying wildly. "You can get out of my bloody way."

He thrust his hand out, and the winds careened at his beckon, seizing the guards and hurtling them both in unison against the building walls. The force of the blows knocked both of the men unconscious, and they crumpled to the ground.

Kaevir stared at the door. A mighty gust of wind smacked against the wood, blowing the door inward, wrenching it from its hinges and sending it clattering across the foyer beyond. Kaevir mounted the stairs leading to the threshold, and stepped inside. The wind heralded his entrance with a swirling cloud of leaves that danced about him.

The foyer branched into three broad corridors, each of which led along a different direction. Llewyn had long since vanished from view along one of the hallways, and he had no way to determine which one of the three the Easpag'Ard had followed.

"Where are you?" Kaevir hissed softly, shoving his hands into his pockets and clasping the Stone lightly against his palm. "Where did you go?"

The wind rushed down the corridor to Kaevir's far left, sending a stream of loose leaves and debris scattering along the length of the polished stone floor. Kaevir watched as the leaves fell from the wind, spreading out in a deliberate line, as though directing him down the hallway.

Kaevir drew the Stone from his pocket and smiled at it, cradling it in his hand. "Go raimh maith agat, mo'cara," he said to it, the corner of his mouth hooked wryly. *Thank you, my friend.*

He followed the wind, the path of leaves, and the breeze somehow found him, no matter how deeply within the building he delved, no matter how far from the main

doorway he ventured. Windows flew open as he walked past them, in chambers he passed lining the corridor. They burst open so forcefully against their iron hinges that they slammed into surrounding walls, shattering panes of glass and spilling shards through the air, across the floor. The wind found Kaevir and it offered leaves for his regard, a trail of debris, brambles and glittering, moon-infused glass fragments to guide him.

The wind led him to a closed door at the end of a corridor, and with only a passing glance from Kaevir, it slammed with brutal force into the wood. The door flew inward, shattering in a spray of shards and broken pieces, and Kaevir heard Llewyn shriek from within. He saw the Easpag'Ard cowering back against a large bookshelf, a dagger in his hand, his arms thrown up to protect his face as jagged fragments of the door hurled at him. Thousands of leaves burst into the chamber, whirling about in a cyclone-force wind, whipping into his face. Debris pelted him in a fine, stinging spray, and he crumpled face-first onto the floor, hunkering in terror.

All at once, the wind abruptly died. One moment, it surged as though heralding a gale, and the next, it was gone; the air was still, and the only sounds were Llewyn's choked, strangled efforts for breath and leaves flapping and fluttering as they spiraled toward the ground.

Llewyn spat, trying to clear silt from his mouth, shuddering with panic and alarm. He struggled to catch his breath, whooping in great, greedy mouthfuls of air, and he sat up slowly, still clutching the dagger in his hand.

"They took my friends to Gaol, did they not?" Kaevir asked.

Llewyn blinked blearily, his eyes widening in horror as he clearly realized who paid him call. "You..." he gasped hoarsely, sputtering and spitting once more. His hands were shaking uncontrollably, and the tip of his dagger waggled in the air. "Y-you..."

"You do not need that," Kaevir said, frowning at the dagger. He thrust his hand toward Llewyn, his fingers outstretched as though he grasped for the blade. A darting burst of wind slapped against Llewyn's hand, forceful enough to whip him about on his hips and slam his arm mightily against the bookshelf behind him. He cried out in pain, his fingers opening reflexively against the dagger hilt, and then another gust snatched the dagger in midair and bore it toward Kaevir's awaiting palm.

Llewyn stared at Kaevir. "You ... you are Kaevir Macleod..." he whispered.

"I am indeed," Kaevir replied, nodding his head.

"It ... it is true, then," Llewyn breathed. "You ... you have the Stone. It ... it has chosen you."

"It is mine," Kaevir told him, his brows furrowing all the more deeply. He reached with his free hand into the pocket of his tattered, filthy justicoat and held the Stone out for Llewyn's regard. Llewyn's breath drew still, and Kaevir did not miss the

mixture of wonder, amazement, and covetous longing that crossed his face. "You know what it is, do you not?" Kaevir asked.

Lleuwyn blinked at him, startled by the question.

"You know what it is," Kaevir said again, offering the Stone a small, demonstrative nudge by canting his hand. "You know what it can do."

"Yes," Lleuwyn whispered, nodding, meeting the boy's gaze. "Yes, I know what it is, Kaevir. And I know what it can do."

"They ... Did they take my friends to Gaol?" Kaevir asked again. There was a wavering note in his voice, a helpless expression in his face that dissolved quickly, twisting all the more tightly with rage. "Eabhiros Macleod and Eisean Fabhmeir. They arrested them tonight at the palace and I heard you at the cathedral, speaking with Tressach. You said they would take them there ... to Gaol."

Lleuwyn blinked, visibly startled to learn Kaevir had eavesdropped on his meeting with Tressach. "Yes, lad," he said quietly, gently. "I have only just now, as I arrived here to my office, received word in confirmation. They have been arrested, taken to Gaol."

Again, Kaevir's expression shifted in only the batting of eyelashes, filling with anguish and despair, and then wrenching again with fury. "See them freed," he said.

"I cannot do that, Kaevir," Lleuwyn said.

A breeze fluttered through the room. "You can do that," Kaevir said. "You can and you will. Right this very moment."

"Kaevir, I cannot do that," Lleuwyn said again, his voice gentle and soothing. "I do not have that authority. Only the King does."

Kaevir blinked at him, bewildered and distressed. He had not expected this; not at all. Lleuwyn did not even look frightened of him anymore; he gazed at Kaevir as if he took pity on him. "You ... but you are second to the King," he said. "You can do that. You are second only to the King in ... in power ... authority. You ... you are the Easpag..."

"Easpag'Ard," Lleuwyn said, nodding his head. "Yes, lad, I am. My name is Lleuwyn Peildraigh. And though I have great authority, yes, Kaevir, and power besides, like anyone in the realm, I still answer to Kierken. He is the one who has seen to your friends' imprisonment, not me." He sat back, resting his weight against his hips. "It is a blessing that you are here. A blessing from the Mother Divine herself."

Again, he looked at Kaevir with that damnable, gentle sympathy, and Kaevir flushed, his brows furrowing. "Why?" he snapped. "So that you can try to take the Stone? You cannot take it from me. I will not let you."

Lleuwyn looked hurt and surprised. "What? No, Kaevir. It is a blessing because you have come. Surely the Mathair Maith has answered my beseechments and brought you here to me, that I might help you, lad—keep you safe. Protect you and the Stone."

Kaevir blinked at him, startled and confused. "Protect me?" he whispered.

"Yes," Lleuwyn said. "Protect you—and the Stone, lad—from Lahnduren ... and Kierken."

Kaevir's brows narrowed. "You ... you told Tressach that you meant to claim it from me," he said, drawing the Stone against his breast.

"I did, yes," Lleuwyn said, nodding. He held out his hands to Kaevir. "But that was because I did not realize you would escape capture. I thought you would be taken, as well as your friends. I only meant that I would claim the Stone if Kierken's soldiers had seized you, arrested you, lest it fall into his hands." His brows lifted sorrowfully. "The King has many dark ambitions harbored within his heart. He does not care about your friends' crimes or offenses. He has used them, lad, because he was hoping to seize you, and the Stone."

"You ... you are lying," Kaevir said.

"No, lad, I am not," Lleuwyn said. He rose to his feet; when he stepped toward Kaevir, Kaevir shied in the doorway, the wind stirring in a sudden flutter.

"Do not come near me," Kaevir said.

"I am second to the King, lad," Lleuwyn said gently, his brows lifting in implore. "And the King is your enemy, I promise you that. I have been trying for years to stop his madness. You have seen for yourself the lengths I would go to; I would even associate with that foul pair, Lahnduren and Tressach, in my desperation."

He stepped forward again, and this time Kaevir did not recoil. Too much had happened in too short a time, and he did not understand any of it. He was exhausted and frightened and frazzled, his poor mind aw whirl with confusion.

"I can help you," Lleuwyn said. "You are in trouble. Your friends are in trouble. You do not need me to tell you this. You know it, Kaevir. Please, lad. Let me help you."

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Rhyden woke with the dawn, blinking dazedly at the new morrow's sunlight as it streamed through his bedroom window. He crawled out of bed and stumbled about clumsily for a few moments, splashing water against his face at the washbasin to clear the last groggy clouds of sleep from his mind. He drew his robe over his shoulders as he left the room, heading for the parlor.

He yawned, scratching absently at his scalp and tucking his long, disheveled hair behind his tapered ears. He blinked in somewhat bewildered surprise to find his brother out on the balcony, sitting with his back to the doorway in a wrought iron chair, his feet propped on the nearby breakfast table. He cradled a book in his palm, reading; the other hand draped over the arm of the chair, his fingertips toying idly against the rim of a teacup.

"You are risen early," Rhyden remarked, standing on the threshold between parlor and patio. Taemir turned to look over his shoulder. He smiled broadly at Rhyden.

"Maidin mhaith," he greeted. *Good morning*. "It is not difficult to rise early when one never settles for the night to begin with. Where did you go last night? You missed all of the adventure!"

"I came home," Rhyden replied, walking over to the table. "I was tired." He lifted a porcelain pot of tea in his hand, raising the little cap and taking an experimental sniff.

"Wehnroot," Taemir supplied. "It is fresh yet. Does it suit you? I can have Ceare make another sort. He keeps a fair assortment back there somewhere." He flapped his hand absently over his shoulder, meaning to indicate the kitchen.

"Wehnroot is fine," Rhyden said. "Have you another cup?"

"Here, have mine. I have had plenty," Taemir said. "So why did you leave—truly now? It is quite rude, you know, to leave a party early and without benefit of fare-thee-wells, particularly when said party is for your benefit."

"It was hardly early, and as I told you, I was tired," Rhyden said. He scooted a second chair back from the table and sat down facing Taemir. "I tried to tell you I was leaving, but you were too absorbed in inane chatter to be distracted."

"It is not inane chatter," Taemir said. "It is called gossip, Rhyden. It is what noble young gentlemen and ladies partake of in good cheer whilst at social engagements." He poked Rhyden in the leg with the toe of his slipper.

"Stop, Taemir," Rhyden told him, frowning.

"What? It bothers you?" Taemir blinked at him innocently, tapping Rhyden lightly again.

"Stop, I said," Rhyden said, his frown deepening, as he canted his knee inward, away from Taemir.

"You did not mind so much to be touched last night, from what I have heard," Taemir said, the corner of his mouth hooking wryly. "Tired, my ass, you yob. I know why you left early. I heard about you in the Queen's garden."

Rhyden blinked at him, startled. "What?"

Taemir arched his brow. "Do not play coy with me. I know of all the choice details. Until the storm came, it was quite the choice topic of conversation. You, the Queen's garden, a fair but yet anonymous redheaded lass in a blue gown, the light of the moon and a few lingering, tender exchanges..."

"What in the duchan are you talking about, Taemir?" Rhyden asked, alarmed that his meeting with Isbaenna might have become fodder for gossip. If Llewelyn Peildreigh heard tell of it, he would likely know all too well who this fair but anonymous redheaded lass was—and realize Rhyden's true intentions in drawing Isbaenna into such private counsel.

Taemir chuckled, mistaking Rhyden's alarm for abash. "I am talking about you snogging in the garden," he said. "Who is she? I will not tell. Is she here, still in your bed, recovering from your wiles?"

Rhyden blinked at him. "I ... I was not snogging in the garden. Sweet Mother Above! And no, she is not yet here, recovering from my ... what did you call them? You are being ridiculous, Taemir."

"There is a she, then, is there not?" Taemir said, still grinning. He dropped a wink and prodded Rhyden's knee with his toes again. "No wonder you seem so well rested."

"Stop poking me," Rhyden told him, frowning as he stood. "That is it. You are incorrigible, Taemir. I am going back to the palace."

"Hoah, you cannot!" Taemir cried, laughing. "They are filled with guests now for the Samhradh. They have no more room!"

"Then I will go back to Cneas," Rhyden growled, walking over to the balustrade, folding his arms across his chest. He looked out over the waterfront district and noticed the streets below were littered with leaves and debris. Rhyden leaned forward, canting his head to gaze along the length of the nearest thoroughfare. All along the cobbled road, leaves and brambles were strewn, along with limbs and garbage, broken tiles like roof shingles and shimmering trails of broken glass.

"What happened?" he asked. "You said a storm blew through last night?"

Taemir looked at him as though he had been struck daft. "Did I say a storm? I meant cyclone." Rhyden's eyes widened in surprise, and Taemir nodded. "They think a

tornado settled nearby, mayhap two. It blew the roofs off of at least a dozen homes, shattered every window pane in the a'Pobail administrative building at Ardeaglais'Coroin, damaged the palace, knocked people off their very boot heels. How could you have missed it?"

"When did this happen?" Rhyden asked.

"Last night, shortly after they arrested the Gentlemen Highwaymen."

Rhyden spun about in full, startled. "What?"

"Well, two of their number, anyway. You did not know about that, either? You did miss all of the adventure, then! The royal guards caught two of them trying to steal out of the palace, but could not find their third, the one they called a steward. Here is the oddest of all, Rhyden: they say Kaevir Macleod is not Kaevir at all, but a peasant—a petty criminal and thief in disguise. Their purported steward is, in fact, no servant—he is the true Kaevir Macleod, and the three of them have orchestrated such a ruse to infiltrate the noble class, to predetermine victims for their Highwaymen robberies."

Rhyden was silent and stricken, thinking of poor Isbaenna, of how she had told him she loved Kaevir Macleod.

"So there is that lot of excitement, and along comes the cyclone shortly thereafter," Taemir said, and he laughed. "It was a mad affair, Rhyden. I cannot believe you left for home and missed it all!"

Rhyden looked down at the street again, his expression troubled. Taemir stood and came to stand beside him. "What is it?" he asked.

They think a tornado settled nearby, mayhap two, Taemir had said. It blew the roofs off of at least a dozen homes, shattered every window pane in the a'Pobail administrative building at Ardeaglais'Coroin, damaged the palace, knocked people off their very boot heels.

The Shadow Stone was said to grant its bearer sway over one of the four fundamental elements: earth, fire, water, or wind. Lahnduren had by all accounts stolen the Shadow Stone, which meant the Stone could have chosen him, and he could readily command its power. Kierken and Llewyn believed the Gentleman Highwaymen were in league with Lahnduren to help him overthrow Kierken's rule; they had feared Lahnduren would send them in his stead to Belgaeran to attempt to steal the Book of Shadows. The Gentlemen Highwaymen had been arrested within the very confines of the palace itself, and then

along comes the cyclone shortly thereafter

"What is it, Rhyden?" Taemir asked him softly, startling him. He turned and found Taemir looking at him, the good humor in his face faded, replaced by anxious worry. "What is wrong?"

Rhyden felt something soften in his heart and he reached for Taemir, startling the breath from his brother by brushing the cuff of his knuckles briefly, swiftly against his cheek. It was the first such tender gesture Rhyden had offered Taemir in many long years.

"It is nothing, Taemir," Rhyden said. "Do not worry for it."

"My Lord Fabhcun?" Illtud said from the doorway behind him.

"Yes?" Rhyden and Taemir said in unison. They glanced at one another; Taemir laughed and Rhyden smirked.

"It is my bloody house," Taemir said.

"It was my bloody name first," Rhyden said.

"Begging your pardon, my lords, but Lord Rhyden, sir, a visitor pays you call," Illtud said. He had been standing on the threshold between the parlor and balcony, and stepped aside now as a young woman came forward from behind him.

"Isbaenna?" Rhyden said, blinking in surprise. Taemir glanced at him, raising a speculative brow as Isbaenna walked out onto the patio, making such obvious note of her auburn hair that Rhyden felt mortified color rise in his cheeks.

"Maidin mhaith, Rhyden," Isbaenna said. *Good morning.* She looked as though she had enjoyed precious little rest; her face was pale and drawn, with dim shadows draped beneath her lucent blue eyes. She glanced at Taemir and managed a fleeting, courteous smile. "And to you, Lord Taemir."

"My Lady Gabhlan, what a lovely surprise," Taemir said.

"Gabh ... gabh mo leithséal, my lords," Isbaenna said, and she turned to Rhyden, her eyes round and pleading. "I am sorry to call at so early an hour, but I must speak with you, Rhyden, please. In private, if I may?"

Rhyden opened his mouth, but Taemir spoke first, smiling at Isbaenna. "Of course, my lady." He walked inside the parlor, leaving the door partially ajar in his wake.

Rhyden and Isbaenna stood facing one another. "Are you alright?" he asked.

Her shoulders trembled as though she felt chilled. "No," she whispered. "No, I ... I am not alright."

He went to her, drawing her into his arms and holding her. She shuddered against him, but did not weep aloud. "They have arrested him," she said.

Rhyden pressed his cheek against her ear. "I know," he said. "For the Gentlemen Highwaymen robberies. Taemir told me just now."

"They have brought him to Gaol," Isbaenna said, and though she still did not weep,

she uttered a tremulous gasp for breath. She pulled away from Rhyden and stared at him, her face twisted with despair. "To Gaol, Rhyden. He and Eabhiros will be hanged, I know it."

"Isbaenna, are they the Gentlemen Highwaymen?" Rhyden asked her gently.

She blinked at him with large, sorrowful eyes. "Yes," she whispered, nodding. "Eisean told me right after I returned from Iarnrod."

He blinked at her, startled by her frank admittance. "Eisean," he murmured. *They say Kaevir Macleod is not Kaevir at all, but that he is a peasan—a petty criminal and thief in disguise, Taemir had mentioned. Their purported steward is in fact, no servant—he is the true Kaevir Macleod.*

"Eisean Fabhmeir," Isbaenna said. "He is the one who was stabbed." She reached out, grasping Rhyden by the hand. "He is a Highwayman, yes, but no scoundrel or monster. None of them are, Rhyden. They are close as kin—Eisean, Kaevir, and Eabhiros—they love each other like brothers. They do not deserve to die, Rhyden. Please." She stared at him, imploring, her voice trembling. "Please, help me, Rhyden. I cannot let them die."

"If they are the Highwaymen, I do not understand," he said. "How did the boy, Eisean wind up stabbed? A botched robbery?"

Isbaenna nodded. "Eabhiros told me there was a small, dilapidated carriage with an old man inside, all hunched over and crooked, and another at the driver's seat. The old man stabbed Eisean. Kaevir grappled with him, but he got away somehow. A terrible wind swept upon them, Eabhiros said, and the old man shambled off into the woods. Eabhiros fought with the driver. He told me he thought he had broken the man's nose, mayhap some teeth with his fists."

Rhyden jerked as though someone had just slapped him, his eyes flowing wide in sudden, startled realization. "Mother Above," he whispered.

"What?" Isbaenna said. He had gone ashen before her, as aghast and wide-eyed as though he had just seen a ghost. "Rhyden, what is it?"

Lahnduren walked with a limp, his gait shambling and shuffling. His body had survived the duchar, but had been left twisted and deformed in its wake and in his movements, his stride, he appeared as an old man would—labored and limping, clumsy and slow. Lahnduren likely still kept company with Tressach an'Clare, his ally from the Second War, a man whose loyalties were tied only by the serving of his own ambitions should Lahnduren ever seize the Crown from Kierken.

Kaevir grappled with him, but he got away somehow. A terrible wind swept upon them, Eabhiros said, and he shambled off into the woods.

Powerful winds had stirred in the woods outside of Belgaeran, just as they had later ripped through the royal city itself. Rhyden had feared Lahnduren the suspect cause

for the sudden appearance of violent winds and had been willing to entertain the possibility that Kierken was right, and the Gentlemen Highwaymen served Lahndurens cause.

But what if they are not Lahnduren's allies? he thought, his breath drawing still in his throat. *What is Isbaenna speaks truly, and here is the account of what occurred in the woods? They are not allies at all to Lahnduren. They robbed him. Kaevir grappled with him, and if Lahnduren had the Shadow Stone with him...*

"Kaevir," Rhyden breathed, stricken. He grasped Isbaenna by the shoulders, startling her. "Where is Kaevir Macleod? Do you know? They did not apprehend him—where is he now?"

"I ... I do not know," she said. "He slipped from the palace somehow. He going to get the carriage and I do not know what became of him, except they did not find him."

"He has the Stone," Rhyden whispered.

"What?" Isbaenna gasped.

Rhyden walked toward the balustrade, his eyes following the windswept piles of debris along the streets. "He must have taken the coffer from Lahnduren in the forest," he murmured. "It chose him. Kaevir is chosen. It opened for him. Sweet Mother, it gave him the wind."

"What do you mean, he has the Stone?" Isbaenna asked. "The Shadow Stone? That is ridiculous, Rhyden. How in the Bith would Kaevir come to have the Stone?"

"Because the old man in the woods was no man at all, but an Elf," Rhyden told her. "It was Lahnduren, Isbaenna—it must have been. He had the Stone with him, but was not chosen to bear it. He would have been unable to open the gold coffer containing it, but he would have tried—would have hoarded it greedily, clutched against his breast, if I know him. Kaevir must have taken it from them when they fought. If Kaevir was chosen to bear the Stone, the coffer would have opened for him, and he would have been granted one of the remaining three elements: earth, fire, or wind. Wind, Isbaenna, like the sort Eabhiros said blew through the woods—the sort that ripped through Belgaeran last night."

Isbaenna blinked, stunned. "Sweet Mother," she whispered. "But I thought the Stone could not be wielded without the Book of Shadows. That is what you said, you and Kierken, Neisrod, Lleuwyn—you said the Talismans must be wielded together."

"That is what legends told us," he said. "But they could be wrong. No one but Ciardha has ever borne the Stone in hand, and our legends are based on her accounts, her deeds." He turned his gaze toward the streets, staring in aghast at the damage he witnessed below him, the wrath of the wind. "What if we were wrong?"

he whispered. "What if all of this time, we have been misled, and Kaevir does not need the Book at all? Sweet Mother have mercy on us all, he will use it to unleash the Shadow once more."

"No, he will not," Isbaenna said, her brows drawn. "Kaevir is not evil. I know him. If he does possess the Stone, if he used it to call the winds last night, he did not do so to attack the palace, or the city. I am certain he did it because he is frightened! Surely he has learned what happened to Eabhiros and Eisean. He is likely frantic to help them. Kaevir would not leave Belgaeran, I know he would not, not as long as Eabhiros and Eisean are here. He would never abandon them. He is here in the city somewhere, I am sure of it, and if we can find him, he can use the Stone's power, Rhyden—we can free Eisean and Eabhiros."

"Isbaenna, no. That is madness," Rhyden said. "We have to go to the palace. Kierken must learn of what has happened. We must tell him of Kaevir and the Stone."

Isbaenna reached out and grasped him firmly by the crook of his elbow, her fingers pressing fiercely into his flesh. "No, you cannot!" she exclaimed, and he turned to her, startled. "We cannot tell Kierken. He is fixed on claiming the Stone. If he knows—if you tell him Kaevir has it, he will try to use Eabhiros and Eisean to trick Kaevir, to lure him out. He will surely see them all dead to claim the Stone. Please, Rhyden, you cannot. Please."

"What are you saying?" Rhyden asked, shocked, shrugging his arm away from her. "You would have me betray my King?"

"I would have you do what is right, Rhyden," Isbaenna said. "I did not come here so that you could turn against me. I came because I thought after last night, surely I could trust you, that you would understand and help me! You told me in the garden that you, too, love another. Would you abandon her to the gallows, Rhyden, this love of yours? Could you leave her to such a fate?"

Rhyden blinked; her words struck him to the core, nearly staggering him. "Isbaenna, please," he said helplessly. "My first loyalty must be to Kierken, no matter what my heart would bid. He is my King. Please, you cannot ask this of me."

Her eyes flashed hotly, her mouth set in a thin, angry line. "I ask nothing of you, Rhyden," she said. "I have wasted your time, and my own. Forgive me. I thought you of better mettle." She gathered her skirt in her hand to go.

"Isbaenna..." he began, reaching for her. "Please do not be angry. Try to understand —"

She felt his fingertips brush against her arm and she shrugged him away. "What?" she asked. "You are doing what you feel is for the greater good for all? Fine, Rhyden. That is your philosophy. You have explained it to me well. Mayhap my father would not change his choice; mayhap he yet would have gone into the Second

War had he known of his own demise, but do you know something, Rhyden? His death was enough loss for me. I will not stand idly by and let Eisean die—not when I can prevent it. That may not be the path leading to the greatest good for all, but by my breath, I do not give a rot damn."

She marched toward the patio doors. He caught her half-way across the parlor, hooking his hand against her elbow.

"Get your hand off me," she said, wrenching her arm away. He could see tears in her eyes again; at her recoil, one slipped down each cheek, and she sucked in a shuddering, defiant breath. "Listen to me," he said. "Gaol was designed to be a stronghold. That is what makes it such a perfect prison. Even if we make it past the guards at the main level, we will have to get downstairs to the holding cells to free Eisean and Eabhiros. When more soldiers are summoned to secure the stairwell, we could be trapped down there. And that is not even taking into consideration opening the cell doors or releasing their chains. We would never make it. We would both end up dead, and in bloody swift measure, too."

"I have a plan," Isbaenna said.

"You know where we can find a cannon?" he asked. When she opened her mouth to protest, he sighed. "Isbaenna..."

"We have to try," she pleaded. "Please, Rhyden. We can get them out of Gaol."

"And if we do?" he asked. "Kierken has ordered the city sealed until they find Kaevir. We will never get them out of Belgaeran, and where would we go? Here? That would prove more than Taemir is likely to bear with any courtesy, I think."

"You could bring them to the Crown Theatre," said a voice from behind them.

"Taemir!" Rhyden exclaimed as he turned, his eyes flown wide, his expression twisted with aghast.

Rhyden's brother stood at the patio doorway. "You could bring them to the Crown Theatre," he said again. "It is closed now for the autumn interim; no one will be there for another three weeks. It is kept locked soundly, but I have a key. No one would think to look for them there."

"Taemir, what ... what in the bloody duchan are you...?" Rhyden stammered. His brows furrowed, and his mouth turned in an angry line. "You were bloody spying on me!"

"I was not spying on you, Rhyden," Taemir said, meeting his gaze. "I am Gaeilge. I cannot help the benefit of my ears. I did not mean to overhear, but I did. I want to help you."

"No," Rhyden said. He walked toward the doorway, meaning to shove his brother unceremoniously inside and slam the door on him. "No, absolutely not, Taemir. You

will be no part of this. You will damn well forget you even know of it."

"I will not," Taemir said. "I may not understand all that is happening, but I am not stupid, Rhyden. I heard you make mention of Lahnduren. It does not take a scholar to realize this is about more than the Gentlemen Highwaymen. Lahnduren is planning some sort of attack, is he not? He would try to seize the throne from Kierken again."

Rhyden halted in mid-stride, stricken. "Taemir..." he began.

"Is that why you really returned from the Morthir?" Taemir asked. "I know it was not for the Samhradh or any presentation from the King. What does Lahnduren have to do with the Highwaymen?"

"They stole something from him," Isbaenna said, stepping forward. "Something powerful that he meant to—"

"Isbaenna, ciunas, le do thoil," Rhyden said, whirling about to glare at her. *Hush, please.* "This is none of Taemir's affair, and I—"

"This Stone you spoke of? The Shadow Stone?" Taemir asked, nearly staggering Rhyden. "I have heard of it. I am not illiterate, Rhyden. Far from it. It is real then, this Stone of Ciardha's? It is real and Lahnduren had it?"

"Yes, but Kaevir stole it," Isbaenna said. "He does not realize what it is—what it means, Taemir, and Kierken ... He ... he would hang Eisean and Eabhiros to try and claim it from him."

"Isbaenna!" Rhyden said helplessly, throwing up his hands. "Le do thoil, do not!"

"What?" she cried at him. "Do not tell him? He already knows, Rhyden! There will be no undoing it. What harm could come of it now? He could help us!"

"He is my brother!" Rhyden cried back, angry and frightened. "I will not see him involved in this! It is too dangerous!"

"I am your brother, yes, but not a child, Rhyden," Taemir said. "You cannot keep me from it. I am helping you."

Isbaenna blinked against tears and then stepped against Taemir, hugging him fiercely. "Thank you, Taemir," she said.

"No," Rhyden said. "Why are neither of you listening to me? I am not speaking for my own benefit! You are not—"

"I am curious to hear this plan of yours, my lady," Taemir said to Isbaenna. "As I have some ideas of my own." He offered a mysterious smile and dropped her a wink. "I figure men cannot very well stand convicted and condemned as the Gentlemen Highwaymen if they are rescued from such plight by the Highwaymen, now can they?"

"I remember when Eisos first gave this sword to me," Rhyden said, his voice soft and somewhat breathless. Taemir had opened a recessed safe he kept hidden behind a painting and pulled out their father's silver Flaitheas sword. Rhyden held its familiar heft in his hand, smiling despite himself as he drew the blade from its sheath and admired the play of golden lamplight along its polished, finely hewn length.

"I was sixteen," he murmured, his eyes distant as he spoke. "During the First War. We were about to leave Orinein and strike northward for Dorchadas, to rescue Trejaeran's father."

"Why did you give it back?" Taemir asked. "Father gave to me after your last visit five years ago, but he would tell me not why you had returned it to him. That ... that was when the two of you fought?"

"Muise," Rhyden said. *Indeed*. He had not given the sword back to Eisos so much as he had hurled it across the parlor at him. Rhyden had been so hurt, so bewildered and betrayed when he had learned of the Book of Shadows' survival, he had reacted in blind rage toward his father.

Take it! he had shouted at Eisos, wrenching the scabbard from his belt and flinging it the breadth of the chamber. *I do not want it! There is no honor in this blade—no heart, no mettle! There is nothing but lies forged in its measure, and by my breath, I will hold neither it nor you dear to me any longer!*

"Why did you fight with Father?" Taemir asked. "What could he have done that was so unforgiveable, Rhyden, that you would still see him judged for it?"

There was no point in keeping the truth from Taemir. Isbaenna had explained to him at length all that was transpiring about them—the Stone, the Book, Lahnduren's threats, the Gentlemen Highwaymen's robbery, Lleuwyn's seeming treachery in the whole of the matter. Rhyden had sat mute and unhappy as she had spoken, helpless to keep Isbaenna from speaking, and powerless to keep Taemir from learning. Finding discretion now seemed moot effort in Rhyden's regard.

"Because he lied to me," Rhyden said to his brother, glancing at him. "At the end of the Second War, I was with Trejaeran when he died, and he begged a promise of me. I swore I would see the Book of Shadows destroyed. I was hurt; the caves collapsed and I broke my ribs, my ankle, battered my head..."

"I remember," Taemir said, nodding.

"I begged Eisos to see the Book destroyed in my stead, and he promised that he would," Rhyden said. "He gave me his word—on this rotted blade, he swore to me. He promised me and then turned right around and delivered it to Belgaeran, to Kierken. The two of them decided to keep it, and so they did—and they kept it a secret from me. I only learned of the Book's true fate five years ago. Until that point, Eisos lied to me, Taemir. He let me believe he had fulfilled his word to me; his sworn, impassioned word."

Taemir blinked at him, startled into silence.

Rhyden, you are so young yet, Eisos had told him five years ago in the palace. Le do thoil, a'mac, there is too much we yet do not know of the Book, and so much we might do with it someday. It was not without heavy hearts that Kierken and I decided this was for the best—but it is, a'mac. When you are older, you might better understand that we sought only—"

I am not a child! Rhyden had shouted, balling his hands into fists. Look at me! I stand before you in broad daylight, but you refuse to see me! I am not a child anymore! You can find any measure of logic or reason which twists the matter to suit your heart, but it still remains—you lied to me. You gave me your word—the one thing in the whole of the Bith I have always held faith in, always thought impervious and true. You gave me your word, and you saw it stand for nothing, you bastard! You saw it stand for nothing!

"I am not angry with Eisos over the Book," Rhyden said to Taemir. "I might have been once, but that has long since ceased to matter in my mind or heart. I am angry with him—and I will likely never forgive him—because he broke his word to me."

He broke my heart, he thought without admitting this aloud. He shoved Eisos' sword into the sheath. He tossed it to Taemir, who caught it between his hands, staring at Rhyden in surprise. "Keep it," Rhyden said. "It is a good sword and you will have need of it. I will buy another for myself."

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Taemir and Isbaenna left together that afternoon. They had sent word to the palace to meet with some of the Samhradh guests, a woman named Igraine Penwyn and her brothers, Tierney and Tiernan. Rhyden was not wholly convinced that the Penwyns would be needed or willing in their plans to raid Gaol, but Isbaenna had been determined.

"They adore the Gentlemen Highwaymen," she had argued. "Well, at least Igraine and Tierney do. It is all they bloody talk about. They will help us."

While she and Taemir were gone, Rhyden had visited a nearby pawn shop. He had bought only a pair of balkstaves for himself, no sword or dagger. He expected this decision would likely dismay Taemir and Isbaenna, who had expected Rhyden to purchase a veritable arsenal with which to take on the soldiers of Gaol. It would take some measure of breath to convince them otherwise, but Rhyden did not care. He had not liked the idea of approaching the prison with blades from the first; the soldiers were doing their duties, and he had not relished the thought of harming them with objects of such lethal capabilities. A blow from a balkstaff could shatter one's skull; a thrust could rive open a gut, or it could be hurled as a spear, skewering through flesh and bone. But its force could also be tempered, unlike a sword, and its uses could see a man battered unconscious, but not dying, by an astute blow.

Upon his return to Taemir's flat, Rhyden carried the staves to his room. Here, he practiced striking at one of his bed posts, listening to the sharp, crisp crack of the staff against the bed frame and smiling. He heard a knock against his door and paused, letting the staff fall still in his hand. "Yes?"

Taemir's steward, Iltud, opened the door. He wore an odd expression on his face, somewhat bewildered and trepidatious, and Rhyden smiled at him sheepishly, figuring he had exhausted the steward's store of patience by whacking on the bed posts. "I am sorry, Iltud," he offered with a feeble shrug. "I will stop now."

"My lord, you have guests who pay call," Iltud said, still looking anxious.

Rhyden blinked at him, puzzled. "Guests?"

Iltud stepped aside and Rhyden saw two women standing behind him in the shadows of the corridor. They both wore long cloaks and neither had removed their deep hoods to reveal their faces. They huddled together as though seeking sanctuary from cold weather against one another, and when they entered his chamber, crossing the threshold, one practically led the other, easing her slow, shuffling footsteps in line. Rhyden could not see their faces for their hoods; he had no idea who they were. "My ladies...?" he said, confused.

One of them reached up, taking her cowl in her hand. As she lowered her hood, he

drew back, stunned, his eyes flying wide. "Graelle?" he gasped, breathless with shock to see the Queen's handmaid. The stave dropped from his fingers, clattering against the floor.

The second woman looked up at his voice, and he caught a glimpse of striking blue eyes, a tangle of dark hair draped across her forehead, and his shock only mounted. "Qynh!" he breathed, staggering.

Graelle stared at him, pleading, her eyes filled with tears. "Help us," she said, her voice tremulous and frightened. "Oh ... oh, please, Rhyden. You must help us!"

Igraine Penwyn may have been an insipid gossip and catty shrew, a woman as fond of gambling and drink as she was of making her bed with fellows and seeming strangers alike, but at least she had impeccably instilled social graces and arrived in prompt fashion for her meeting with Isbaenna at Lismore Plaza.

Taemir had escorted Isbaenna to the park while Rhyden had gone shopping for weapons. The brothers had seemed to reach some tentative semblance of peace between them, and that eased Isbaenna's heart. She did not know what was more apparent: Rhyden's love for his younger brother; Taemir's adulation for Rhyden; both of the Fabhcuns' desperate desire to see the other kept from hardship or trouble; or their mutual, stubborn inability to admit any and all of these to the other.

Despite Rhyden's misgivings and fears, Isbaenna was profoundly touched and grateful for the enthusiastic ease with which Taemir offered his help. He had several tomes in his library documenting the history of the royal city. These had contained detailed illustrations and maps of Gaol and its grounds, and through these, it had not taken them long to decide on a logical, simple and, at least in the telling, seemingly effective plan of action.

Of course, it would all hinge upon whether or not Igraine Penwyn proved willing to help. Isbaenna had tried her best to assure Taemir and Rhyden that she would, but despite this, she remained anxious and unconvinced. She and Taemir sat on an iron bench beneath the warm, flame-lit glow of a nearby streetlamp in Lismore Plaza, waiting to see if Igraine would come or not. When Isbaenna caught sight of the young woman strolling slowly along the winding, paved walkways toward them, she drew in a measured breath of relief.

Igraine wore the deep hood of her cloak pulled over her face, shrouding her face in heavy shadows. She walked in the company of one of her brothers; of the other twin, there was no sign.

Taemir stood politely at the Penwyns' approach. Isbaenna stood beside him. Igraine and her brother stopped a brief measure before them, and there was a long moment of silence all around as the four blinked at one another. At last, Igraine reached up, easing her hood back from her face and letting it fall in a tumble of folds about her neck and shoulders. She met Isbaenna's gaze.

"Good evening, my Lady Isbaenna," she said.

"Good evening, Lady Igraine," Isbaenna said quietly. She cleared her throat, mustering some mettle. "Thank you for coming to meet with me. Please, allow me to introduce Lord Taemir Fabhcun. He is friend to me. My Lord Fabhcun, Lady Igraine Penwyn."

"The playwright and novelist? Yes," Igraine nodded, her eyes darting toward Taemir. She uncurled her mouth in a thin semblance of smile. "I know your name, my lord, and have read some of your works. How delightful."

She offered her hand and Taemir bowed in genteel fashion, bussing her knuckles lightly. "Lady Penwyn," he said. "Truly a pleasure."

"My brother, Tierney, if you please," Igraine said, flapping her hand toward her brother. "Or bother, as the case should be."

"My sister must be pardoned," Tierney said, smiling in good enough humor as he clasped hands with Taemir. "She is seldom in better than petulant spirit, and today would see even these gracious merits taxed. I was admittedly surprised she would agree to take leave or company, as I have been unable to lure her forth from her chamber at all this afternoon."

"Tiernan will not be joining us," Igraine said. "As we did not inform him of your invitation. He has drunk himself into quite the gleeful stupor today to know the Highwaymen are locked away in Gaol. Tierney and I do not share his sentiments."

"Now, we will be hard-pressed to find anything to talk about socially," Tierney said, looking glum.

"I appreciate you both coming," Isbaenna said. "Please accept my apologies for the imposition."

Igraine hooked her brow at Isbaenna. "Let us cut the cordialities, shall we?" she asked. "You and I have never been what I would consider endeared to one another, and we have always at least had the courtesy not to pretend otherwise in each other's company. What do you want, Isbaenna?"

"Your help, Igraine," Isbaenna said. "Please, I need your help."

The corner of Igraine's mouth unfurled slightly. "You mean to free them," she said.

Isbaenna met her gaze. "Yes, I do."

"I knew it," Igraine said. "I knew it from the moment I read your letter. You will free our Highwaymen."

"I will try to, yes," Isbaenna said.

"You truly love that little peasant lamb, Eisean Fabhmeir." Igraine remarked. Her

tone was not disdainful, as Isbaenna might have expected. Instead, it was rather tender, and her face softened as her smile grew wider.

"I do, yes," Isbaenna said. "Will you help us?"

"I do not see how I can."

"You were robbed by the Highwaymen, my lady," Taemir told her. "By law, you are entitled to stand before your offenders. You could walk into Gaol tonight, stand in their cells, and there is nothing anyone can say to stop you."

Igraine blinked at Taemir and then turned to Tierney, apparently startled by this revelation. She looked toward Isbaenna once more, her brow arched. "And what, then?" she asked.

"Will you help us?" Isbaenna asked her once more.

"Of course," Igraine replied. "We will both help, will we not, Tierney?"

"Of course, sister," he said, smiling at her fondly. "Whatever we can do that might lift this unflattering shroud of sorrow from you."

"It will be dangerous, you should know," Isbaenna said. "We will likely all be hanged if we are caught."

Igraine smirked. "Then we had best endeavor not to be caught," she said.

A light drizzle began to fall as Isbaenna and Taemir returned to his flat. They heard the distant bells of Ardeaglais'Coroin toll the midnight hour as they walked beneath the dim glow of lit street lamps.

"Can we trust Igraine and Tierney to help us?" Taemir asked.

"Have we any other choice?" Isbaenna said.

They reached his flat, ascending the stairs together. Taemir opened the door and stood politely aside to allow Isbaenna first entry. "Let us tell Rhyden how the meeting went and then I will have Iltud summon a hansom for you, see you duly home," he said.

Isbaenna felt genuine hope that Taemir's idea would work. The meeting with Igraine and Tierney had cemented in her mind that they would be able to see Eisean and Eabhiros freed. She trembled with excitement and did not even notice Taemir's steward, Iltud, at first, as he stood in the parlor regarding them with an anxious expression.

"My Lord Fabhcun—" Iltud began.

"Iltud, beannacht!" Taemir said, raising his hand. "Where is my brother? Exhausted from his shopping, collapsed on his bed?" He caught Isbaenna by the arm, leading

her along the corridor toward Rhyden's chamber. "Never mind! We will find him, rouse him if needs be!"

"My lord, le do thoil, but you should—" Iltud said, scurrying along behind them.

"Put on a pot of tea, if you would be so kind," Taemir said, glancing over his shoulder. "Something strong, please. I will be up awhile yet. I have much to do. See if Ceare cannot put together some supper while you are at it. Mathair Maith, my stomach is squalling!"

"Truly, Lord Fabhcun, I must speak with you—" Iltud said.

Taemir grinned at him, seizing hold of the handle to Rhyden's door. "Food now, speak later, Iltud," he said. "I am starved and withered." He threw open the door to Rhyden's chamber. "Get out of bed, you bloody yob! We must—"

He drew to an abrupt halt, his voice and breath stilling in his throat. Isbaenna froze beside him, her enthusiastic grin faltering and fading.

Rhyden knelt beside his bed, his back to the door. A woman sat nearby, cradling a cup of tea between trembling hands, her eyes sorrowful and haunted. Another woman lay in the bed before Rhyden, her long, dark hair spilled about her head, her eyes closed. Isbaenna recognized her; there was no mistaking that pale, beauteous countenance or tumble of black curls, and she gasped, stunned.

"Qynh!" she breathed, staring in aghast confusion at Rhyden.

Rhyden stood, turning to face them. His eyes were grief-stricken, but his brows were furrowed, his mouth downcast in an angry set. He curled his hands into slow fists. "Lleuwyn Peildraigh plans to murder the King on the night of the mhas'cor," he told them grimly. "By my breath—by my honor and my life—I mean to stop him."

Isbaenna and Taemir listened in stunned, horrified silence as the Queen's handmaid, Graelle, told them everything she knew of Lleuwyn Peildraigh. Fifteen years ago, she had been hired into the Queen's service by the Easpag'Ard himself. At the time, Lleuwyn had struck her as a kind and gracious man. Qynh had been devastated by her brother Trejaeran's death at the end of the War; she had taken to her bed in stunned grief, and Lleuwyn had seemed to share in Kierken's genuine and anguished concern for her mental and emotional well-being. Graelle's responsibilities had included seeing to the Queen's daily needs; that she bathed and dressed, ate her meals, and made some effort to emerge from her chamber. Lleuwyn had bid Graelle to administer some manner of elixir to the Queen twice daily.

"He ... he called it medicine, Elfin medicine," she said, staring down into her teacup, visibly stricken. "Twice each day, morrow and evening, he said, in my lady's tea. He said it would help her, that it would soothe her heartache."

But the elixir only seemed to make Qynh more lethargic and addled. When, after six months of its dispensation, Graelle wanted to stop giving the potion to the Queen,

she said Llewwyn had been furious, and she had learned then of his true nature.

"That ... that was the first time that he ... he beat me," she whispered. "He was careful to hit me where no one would know of it, where the bruises would be hidden by my clothing."

Llewwyn had threatened Graelle, promising her that if she disobeyed him again, he would see her hanged. He would demonstrate that she willingly administered afeem derivative to the Queen in surreptitious assault, and that she would swing from Pionos for such grievous offense. For the next decade and a half, Llewwyn forced Graelle into his continued service, keeping the Queen sedated and befuddled, beating Graelle for any seeming disregard in her loyalty to him.

"But why?" Isbaenna whispered. She had knelt beside the bed, curling her fingers against Qynh's hand, watching her cousin sleep. She blinked against tears and turned to Graelle. "Why would he do something so horrible to Qynh, and to Kierken?"

"Because if something should happen, some harm should befall Kierken, Qynh would assume the throne," Rhyden said. He paced about the room, his expression drawn, his hands clenched in fists. "If Llewwyn could prove her mad—unfit to rule—and there is no heir to take her place, then he could convince Kierken to sign a royal decree entitling the throne to the Easpag'Ard in such circumstance. Which, it would seem, the bastard has done." He whirled about, meeting Isbaenna's gaze. "There is his reason. He means to have the throne. He has been waiting for this for years, I am certain—he must have! The bastard already has the Book of Shadows. He means to claim the Stone and the Crown, and see Kierken murdered."

"How?" Isbaenna whispered.

"By getting Lahnduren to do it for him," Rhyden said, his frown deepening. "The bloody rot has struck a bargain with Lahnduren to see him delivered to the mhas'cor, to have his chance to strike Kierken down. Llewwyn really means to see Lahnduren kill Kierken, and Lahnduren slain for the offense on the spot. Llewwyn would claim the Stone from Lahnduren and keep the Talismans for himself—ascending to the throne in good faith and seeming honor, the bastard!"

"How do you know it will be the mhas'cor?" Taemir asked.

"Because my lady told me," Graelle said softly, tears spilling down her cheeks. "She ... she only told me tonight ... He has forced his way upon her for years now when I am not there. She cannot fight him. She ... she cannot keep coherent thought enough to tell of it, and he knows she is helpless...!"

Isbaenna gasped, shocked anew. She watched Rhyden lower his head, his brows drawn furiously as he drew in a fluttering, anguished breath.

"He told Qynh of his plans, the bastard," Rhyden hissed. "For he thought she could never tell of them ... that no one would believe her if she did ... would think her

mad." He stood, trembling with rage. "I will kill him," he said. "Mark it—I will draw him out measure by measure and mete forth a thousand fold what he has brought upon my lady and my King. He will have the Talismans and the Crown over my bloody rotted pate—by my breath, I will kill him for this offense!"

As she watched his wrath, his despair, Isbaenna realized.

Please do not, she had told him in the garden when he had kissed her. *I am in love with another.*

As am I, he had replied, his eyes filled with desperation and sorrow.

Qynh, she thought, stunned breathless and to tears. *Mother Above—Rhyden is in love with Qynh!*

Rhyden stormed toward the door, leaving them, his long hair streaming behind him.

"Rhyden—" Taemir began, stricken.

"Rhyden!" Isbaenna cried, springing to her feet. She rushed after him, heedless of his fury. "Oh, Rhyden, wait!"

"Leave me, Isbaenna," he said, not turning as she ran behind him. She reached for him, laying her hands against his arm, and he wrenched himself loose forcefully enough to stagger them both. "Do not touch me!" he cried, and as he whirled about, she saw that he wept freely. "Do not touch me! I cannot bear it. I cannot!"

"Rhyden," she said, reaching for him again. He recoiled sharply, stumbling into the wall of the corridor.

"Do not touch me," he said, batting her hands away. "Please, just ... just leave me alone, Isbaenna, I beg of you ... leave me..."

"Rhyden..." Isbaenna whispered, touching his face. When he tried to flinch, to shy from her hand, she pressed her other palm to his cheek, cradling his face.

"Do not touch me..." he pleaded, shaking his head. His voice dissolved into sobs, and Isbaenna wept with him, drawing him to her shoulder. His legs abandoned him, and she knelt with him, holding him against her as he slumped to the floor. "Qynh!" he gasped, agonized. "Oh ... oh, my lady...!"

"It is alright," Isbaenna whispered, kissing his hair. She saw Taemir emerge from the bed chamber, his expression stricken, and she met his helpless gaze. "It is alright, Rhyden."

"I ... I have failed her," he wept. "I ... All of these years ... If only I had been here! If only I had seen it! I have failed her!"

"No, Rhyden," she breathed. "No, that is not true."

"I ... I love her..." he whispered, shuddering against her.

She stroked her hand against his hair, kissed his ear. "I know," she said. "It is alright, Rhyden."

She held him until his tears waned, until his trembling subsided into stillness against her and he grew quiet. When he pulled away from her, leaning back against the wall and dislodging her hands, Isbaenna made no further effort to reach for him. He did not want her to; he did not need her to, and though her heart ached for him in poignant measure, she respected his wishes.

"Kaevir has the Shadow Stone, and Llewyn surely knows of it," Rhyden said. He drew in a long breath and exhaled slowly, his brows furrowed as he composed himself. "He is searching for it—for Kaevir. He will try to convince Kierken to see Eisean and Eabhiros hanged in swift measure, I am certain, to draw Kaevir out of hiding."

"I know," Isbaenna said. "I thought as much myself."

Rhyden rose to his feet, curling his fingers toward his palms. He turned to his brother. "We will take Graelle and the Queen to the Crown Theatre," he said. "They will not be safe here. When Kierken and Llewyn realize Qynh is missing, they will tear this city apart to find her."

"Alright, Rhyden," Taemir said, nodding.

"We should leave straight away," Rhyden said. He glanced at Isbaenna. "You should be for home, my lady. I will tend to the Queen, stay with her and Graelle at the Theatre, keep them safe. You and Taemir can meet once more in the morrow, and finalize our plans. Whatever you would agree upon, I will abide by, so long as it does not see me killed. I would live until the mhas'cor, if possible. I have plans for that night."

While Isbaenna took a hansom homeward, Rhyden and Taemir smuggled Graelle and the Queen into the Crown Theatre. The catacombs beneath the theatre had had once served as part a network of storm drainage sewers that twisted and wound beneath the Belgaeran. They had long ago been sealed off, and were now accessible only through trapdoors behind the stage. Taemir spoke of using the rest of the sewer tunnels in their escape route from Gaol as he led them through the darkened theatre and mainstage arena, toward one of the trapdoor entrances.

"There is an entrance to the storm drains within a block of the prison," he told Rhyden. "Behind a tavern called the Hangman's Hood. My mates and I have used it before during ghost walks. They lead within four blocks of the Theatre, into Gartcosh Park. I can still find the way, I believe. If any guards give chase, we can lose them in the tunnels."

The floors of the Theatre's catacombs were earthen, the walls steep arches fortified

with brickfacing. The air was cold and somewhat damp; Rhyden stood with Graelle beside him, carrying Qynh in his arms as Taemir floundered about with a small, handheld lantern, lighting torches set into the walls.

"It is not much," he offered sheepishly, as the torchlight cast broad swaths of illumination about the chamber. His voice echoed softly against the vaulted scoop of the ceiling some thirty feet overhead. Rhyden and Graelle looked around. The tunnel was filled with stacks of crates and boxes, overflowing racks of costumes and clothing, barrels of hats and wigs, boots and shoes, haphazard piles of dismantled props, furniture and draperies.

"We keep props and costumes from past performances here," Taemir said. "We reuse many of them, but some linger here to mold—hoah, here we are." He had stepped behind a large, towering pile of crates, but poked his head out, waving his hand at Rhyden. "Bring her here, Rhyden. I thought we kept a bed down here, some mattresses from 'My Lady Takes A Lover.'"

Rhyden carried Qynh to the bed. Taemir shoved crates and discarded costumes and shoes from the mattresses. They sat on an uncertain bedframe, with a listing headboard painted a bright, bawdish shade of red. The mattresses were faded and torn, smelling distinctly of mildew and faded rot, and Rhyden handed Qynh to Taemir long enough to shrug out of his justicoat and spread it out that she might lie upon it.

"There are blankets down here somewhere," Taemir said. Rhyden unfastened his waistcoat and folded it between his hands. He lifted Qynh's head gently and tucked it beneath her to cushion her cheek.

"It is cold and she might grow chilled," Taemir said. "I will find them for you."

He returned with the blankets only to disappear again, bearing his lantern in hand. "I think I can find all we will need here for tomorrow night," he told Rhyden.

"Gentlemen's vestments and boots, some hats and scarves. And I want to find wherever they have hidden our flashpots. I have some ideas in mind for those."

Graelle drew a blanket about her shoulders and sat hunched and huddled at the foot of the bed, shivering. She watched Rhyden unfold several quilts and drape them over Qynh. She regarded him with a soft, sorrowful expression as he genuflected beside the bed once more, brushing his fingers through Qynh's hair. "She is exhausted," she said. "She has been so frightened. We both have been. Surely it must do her good to know she can rest without fear, that she is safe with you."

"He will never hurt her again," Rhyden said softly, slipping his hand against Qynh's. The Queen murmured softly in her sleep, closing her fingers against his. "By my breath, Graelle, Lleuwyn will never hurt either of you again."

"She is so blessed for you," Graelle told him.

"As I am for her," he said. "I do not know what I would have done without her these last years in Cneas. Her letters have brought me so much company and hope." He was quiet for a long moment. At last, he looked toward Graelle, meeting her gaze, his expression pained. "Only they are not her letters, are they, Graelle?" he asked. "They are yours."

Graelle blinked at him, her breath drawing still. "I ... I do not know what you mean," she said softly.

"Qynh could not have written those letters," he said. "She has been drugged on afeem. For fifteen years, she has been in a state like this. She cannot hold her eyes open, much less set plume to paper in coherent thought."

"Rhyden," Graelle said, her eyes enormous. "I ... I do not..."

He stared at her, wounded, sorrowful and bewildered. "All of this time, so many years ... Was it you, Graelle?"

She stared down at the folds of blanket swathed about her lap, her shoulders trembling.

"Please," he said. "Please, Graelle, tell me."

She nodded her head once in mute, stricken reply. Her eyes filled with tears, and her hands darted to her mouth.

"Why?" he whispered, his anguished voice drawing her gaze. "Why would you do such a thing? How could you...?"

"Because you were lonely," she said. "I ... I read your letters aloud for her, and I could see that so plainly, so apparent. You were so lonely..."

He stared at her. "Graelle..."

"I was lonely, too," she whispered. "I knew you cared for her, that you loved her. I was lonely, too. I felt trapped and alone, and when I would read your letters, I could not help myself. I would pretend you were writing them for me. I meant no harm."

"No harm?" Rhyden blinked, rising to his feet. "Do you know what you have done? Have you any idea, Graelle?"

"Look what I have found!" Taemir cried, sounding pleased with himself as he approached. He carried a huge, laden knapsack over the crook of his elbow, his mouth spread in a broad grin. "Everything we need and some flashpots, as well!" He set the satchel down by his feet. "I should be on my way. There are still some things I need to work out before tomorrow. I will be back in the morning; bring you some food and water. You will be alright for now?"

"Yes," Rhyden nodded. "We will be fine."

"Alright, then." Taemir nodded. He grunted softly as he hefted the heavy back over his shoulder. "Oiche mhaith, Rhyden." He canted his head to peer around his brother's shoulder toward Graelle. "Oiche mhaith, my ladies."

When Taemir had gone, a heavy silence fell upon the catacombs.

"Please do not hate me," Graelle whispered at length.

"I do not hate you, Graelle," Rhyden said softly, not turning around to look at her. "Why do you not lie down? I will be nearby. Call to me if you should have need, and I will come."

She was crying; one did not need keen Elfin ears to hear the soft, plaintive sounds of her tears. He walked away from her. "Oiche mhaith," he said. *Good night.*

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Rhyden awoke to the sound of someone retching. He had fallen asleep only a few hours earlier, sitting against the wall of the tunnel, his head canted back against the cold bricks, his knees drawn toward his chest. At the sound of the first, strangled heave, his eyes flew open and he sprang to his feet. He heard a soft, shuddering cry and then another spasm of vomiting, and his heart seized, his breath stilling in his throat. "Qynh!" he gasped, rushing toward the bed.

He found the Queen leaning over the side of the mattress, trembling and moaning miserably as she spat into a puddle of thin fluid pooled on the ground. Graelle sat beside her on the bed, holding the thick sheaf of Qynh's dark hair in one hand, stroking the other against Qynh's shoulder as she murmured to her in comfort.

Graelle looked up, startled by Rhyden's approach. "It is alright, Rhyden," she said.

Qynh looked up at him, pale and bleary-eyed. "I ... I am ... alright," she whispered hoarsely. She spat again, uttering a quiet, miserable sound, and then she glanced at Graelle. "I ... think ... I think I ... am done."

Rhyden stood before them, helpless and stricken. Without looking at him, Graelle said, "Rhyden, would you please rinse a scrap of fabric or a linen in some water? I would wash my lady's face. It will soothe her."

"Of course," he said, stumbling backwards clumsily. He turned about, still somewhat dazed from his slumber, stricken by the sight of Qynh's sickness. They had brought a waterskin with them into the tunnels, and he moved to fetch it, drawing the hem of his shirt out from beneath the waistband of his breeches. He drew the leine over his head, pulling it off and wadded it between his hands into a bundle. He doused it with water and brought it back to Graelle.

"Is she alright?" he asked. Qynh seemed to have lapsed back into sleep; her eyes were closed, her expression peaceful, her hands draped delicately against the slope of her bosom. She stirred a bit as Graelle gently brushed the wet cloth against her cheeks, her lips, and Graelle murmured to her, soft, nonsensical sounds that seemed to bring her comfort.

"Yes," Graelle whispered, nodding her head. "I am sorry to have frightened you."

"It is the afeem, I think," he said. "It has considerable addictive affects. There is discomfort and malaise in the withdrawal, but nothing life-threatening."

"She has been like this for several weeks now," Graelle said.

"Qynh is sick as that often?" he asked, visibly surprised and puzzled. "But you ... you said you only stopped giving the afeem to her a few days ago. Has she been ill? Feverish? Chills?"

"It ... it is nothing," Graelle said. "I should not have made mention of it."

"Graelle, Qynh is not fully Elfin," Rhyden told her. "Her father was a man. She can come down with illness; be stricken with blight, and I—"

"It is not a blight," Graelle said.

He was aggravated by Graelle's deliberate attempts to avoid his gaze, and he canted his face at an angle, hooking his fingertips beneath her chin to draw her attention.

"Graelle, if she has been vomiting for weeks now, it could very well be—"

"It is not a blight, Rhyden," Graelle said again, ducking free from his hand.

"How do you know that?"

"I ... I just do."

He arched his brow. "Graelle, that is hardly—"

"She is not sick," Graelle told him in a hush. "She is pregnant."

He sat back from her, his eyes enormous with shock, his breath halted. "Wh ... what...?" he whispered.

Graelle looked at him, teary-eyed and unhappy. "I have suspected it for some time now, though surely she is not far along, mayhap three months at most. She retches nearly every mornning. She does not eat much ... When she does, it sees her ill and she has been weary of late, drained and fatigued, more so than just by the afeem's effect. I was not certain, though, because His Majesty ... Kierken and my lady have not made a bed together in many long years. I could not fathom how she could be with child until yesterday, when she told me about Llewyn..."

Rhyden uttered a soft, hurting sound. "It is Llewyn's child?" he whispered.

Graelle nodded. "That is why I brought her to you," she said. "I knew it would break Kierken to know, and my lady ... She has begged me to secrecy, but Llewyn would see her dead to learn of it. I know he would. He would kill her."

Rhyden shoved the heels of his hands against his eyes and lowered his head, aghast. "Mathair Maith, le do thoil, no ... please..."

"I am sorry," she whispered. "I wanted to tell you last night so badly, but I could not seem to muster the words. You were so hurt to learn of his assaulting her, and I could not bear to bring more pain upon you."

"It cannot, it cannot," Rhyden said. He staggered to his feet, stumbling away from Graelle. He began to pace in broad, brisk circles, his brows furrowed deeply, his hands closing into murderous fists. "I will kill him! I ... I will take my father's sword in hand and I will damn well rive him neck to navel with its measure!"

"Rhyden, please..." Graelle began, and he whirled, seizing hold of a rack of costumes, wrenching at it, sending it crashing to the ground. She cried out in fright, drawing back, her eyes flown wide.

"I will see him dead!" Rhyden shouted, laying his hands against a pile of crates and jerking against them, toppling them in a cacophonous din.

"Rhyden! Are you alright?" Taemir rushed headlong down the tunnel toward them, his lantern swinging in one hand, Eisos' blade clutched in the other. Isbaenna hurried after him, her blue eyes round with alarm.

"We heard a clatter," Taemir exclaimed, drawing near. He spied the toppled boxes, the fallen costume rack, and looked toward his brother in alarm. "What happened?"

"I ... I knocked over some crates," Rhyden said, glancing at Graelle. He could tell from the frantic, anxious look on her face that she did not want Taemir or Isbaenna to know about Qynh's pregnancy. "That is all," he said, and when she realized he meant to keep silent, Graelle blinked at him in abject, wide-eyed relief. "Do not worry for it."

"He is late," Taemir said to Isbaenna. Night had fallen and they waited for Rhyden by dim lantern light in the dank, clammy tunnels beneath Prestwick Thoroughfare, both of them shivering in the cold. Taemir was wrapping a length of scarf about his neck, the rest of his Highwayman guise in place, while Isbaenna shrugged her way into her justicoat.

She fished a watch out of her pocket, peering at the reflection of soft illumination off the filigreed gold hands. "It is only now five-thirty," she said. Their voices echoed with quiet, distant resonance in the tunnel shaft, drifting over the sounds of trickling, flowing water. "He is not late, Taemir. He will be here."

They heard the distinctive squall of metal against metal overhead; the iron grate above their heads that granted access into the drain tunnels being pried out of place, and they both started. Taemir's hand darted to his hip, his fingers curling about the hilt of his sword.

"It is me," they heard Rhyden call softly, his voice reverberating in undulating measure along the length of the shaft. Taemir and Isbaenna relaxed simultaneously, their shoulders relaxing, their stilled breaths issuing forth in soft, overlapping sighs.

Rhyden hooked his toes against the first in a series of iron rungs set into the masonry of the walls to serve as a ladder and lowered himself from the alley above. He climbed halfway down the ladder and then dropped gracefully, softly to the floor. His tricorne hat, too large for his head, drooped over his brow and he frowned, shoving it back into place with his thumb.

"You are late," Taemir told him.

Rhyden blinked at him. "What? I am not."

"You are, too—we said five-thirty, and here, it has come and passed."

"It has not—it is only now that by my watch," Rhyden said.

"Then you should see your watch to a shop for repairs—lest it mark you late for something important to you." Taemir snapped.

"Bugger off, Taemir," Rhyden said, his brows drawn. "I am not late."

"You bugger off—you are, too," Taemir muttered. He knelt, gathering the last of his supplies together; three small metal cannisters, each no larger than could easily fit against the cup of his palms. They were flashpots, he had explained to Isbaenna, used sometimes in theatrical productions for pyrotechnic effect. The Gentlemen Highwaymen were known for using the blue beauty fireworks; while they did not have any such explosives, Taemir counted on the smoke and sparks produced by the flashpots to suffice.

"We should go," Taemir said. He reached beneath the flap of his lapel and produced a map, stooping long enough to take the lantern in hand. "I will lead. Follow me."

Rhyden blinked at his brother as Taemir brushed past him, tromping along the tunnel, his boots sloshing noisily in the water. Rhyden turned to Isbaenna. "What is with him? I am not bloody late."

They followed the tunnels in relative silence, their boots splashing in the water, their breath drifting from their mouths in delicate tendrils of haze. Taemir seldom paused. When they reached a fork or intersection in the tunnels, his gait would scarcely falter as he unfolded the map in his hand, glancing at it briefly to gather his bearings.

At last, he led them down a narrow measure of tunnel that ended in a towering, expanse of brick wall. Another series of iron rungs bolted into the wall led to the street above, and as they drew near to the ladder, Taemir lowered the lantern flame, dimming the swath of light into a small, confined circumference. "This is it," he whispered, leaning over, setting the lamp against the muddy ground. He peered up at the ceiling, listening to the muted sounds of passing laughter and conversation. "We are just beyond Netherby Street, outside of the Hangman's Hood." He pulled out his watch. "It is ten after six," he said softly, glancing toward Rhyden and Isbaenna. His eyes were round and anxious, shining in the faint firelight. "Igraine and Tierney should have arrived by six. There will be guards at the gates..."

Rhyden smiled at him gently, clapping his hand against his brother's shoulder. "I will handle the guards. Do not worry. They will not delay us any. Keep your sword sheathed and stay behind me—both of you. Do not engage the guards until you have reached the cellblock. Let me tend to them."

"But Rhyden—" Taemir began in protest, his voice falling silent as Rhyden met his gaze.

"Let me tend to them, Taemir," he said firmly.

"Alright," Taemir whispered, nodding his head.

"If anything should happen—anything goes wrong—I want you both to run like mad, do you understand?" Rhyden said. "Whether we free them or not, whether guards try to stop us—flee. I will handle the guards. Run back to the Crown Theatre and I will follow if I am able."

"Rhyden, no," Isbaenna said with a frown. "You cannot—"

"Do not argue with me, Isbaenna," Rhyden said. "I can get us into Gaol and I can see you both out once more if something goes wrong. I will not see either of you caught for this."

They climbed up the ladder toward Netherby Street above, leaving the lantern lit with dim flame abandoned on the floor beneath them to await their return. Rhyden moved in the lead, with Isbaenna next and Taemir bringing up the rear. The grate at the top of the ceiling was rusted and heavy, clogged and covered from overhead with leaves, gravel and debris. Rhyden shoved his shoulder mightily against it, gritting his teeth and pushing with all of his might. He clambered out of the narrow opening and turned to help Isbaenna and Taemir follow.

They heard loud, sudden laughter near the mouth of the alley. Taemir and Isbaenna froze in fright, their eyes flying wide. Rhyden sprang to his feet, drawing one of balkstaves from across his back as he moved. He stood protectively between Taemir and Isbaenna and the alley's opening, gripping the stave at the ready in his right hand. They watched in motionless silence as a man and a woman walked by the alley, laughing together, drunk and in good spirits. Neither took the slightest bit of notice of the three dark figures crouched in the shadows, and they were soon gone, their footsteps and soft mirth floating behind them as they passed.

"Wait here," Rhyden breathed to Isbaenna and Taemir. He crept forward, pausing at the threshold of the alley to peer forth, surveying their circumstances. He could see the walls of the Gaol grounds across the street, and the manned guard post that blocked their advance. Three guards stood together in a small cluster; Rhyden's keen Elfin ears caught the faint hint of their amicable discourse. There was no other foot or carriage traffic about and satisfied of some semblance of security and discretion, Rhyden returned to Isbaenna and Taemir.

"Come to the mouth of the alley," he told them. "Wait in the shadows. I will cross the street first. Do not follow me until I have dispatched the guards, then move swiftly and do not stop. If something happens to me, get back down into the tunnels. Do not worry for me. Do not wait for me."

Rhyden left the alleyway. He strode boldly toward the gates of Gaol, drawing the balkstaff between his hands, carrying it cocked at an angle to keep it somewhat camouflaged from the guards' immediate view.

"Good evening, sir," one of the guards offered to him in greeting.

Rhyden did not grant them time to react further, or to even draw breath to cry out in alarm. He stepped forward, swinging the left end of the stave around in a sharp, hooking swing. The staff slammed into the guard to his left, landing squarely against the side of his head, knocking the senses from him. He staggered, his feet floundering from beneath him as he collapsed, unconscious, to the ground.

"Hoah, you—" said the guard in the middle and then Rhyden drew his right hand up and around toward his left shoulder, whipping the right end of the balkstaff into the soldier's head. The guard was knocked off his feet by the force of the blow, and he crumpled, blood spraying from his nose.

The third was upon him from the right; Rhyden heard the whisper of steel as he began to draw his blade from its sheath, and he shifted the stave against his right palm, swinging it about in a broad arc, whacking the guard in the temple, staggering him. Rhyden pistoned his left leg up and out, driving the wedge heel of his boot squarely into the soldier's nose. The guard offered a soft squawk; there was a moist, crunching sound as his nose shattered, and then he toppled to the ground, motionless and still.

Rhyden glanced over his shoulder as he spun the stave against his palm. He saw Isbaenna and Taemir scamper forth from the shadows of the alleyway, running toward him, both of them wide-eyed and incredulous.

They ran across the grounds and found the doors to Gaol stood open wide at the top of a broad set of granite stairs. Taemir reached into his pocket, drawing out one of the flashpots as they mounted the steps. He depressed the release lever with the pad of his thumb, and gave the cannister a swift, hearty shake. As he reached the crest of the staircase, he let the flashpot fly, hooking his arm wide, sending it careening into the foyer beyond, sailing through the air.

"Watch your eyes—" Rhyden hissed, and then the flashpot exploded, spraying a shower of fire and sparks in a wide, dazzling circumference. They heard startled, frightened cries from within the foyer, and the can smacked against the polished stone floor, spewing a sudden, thick cloud of dense, stinking black smoke. The smoke rose swiftly, billowing in the expansive foyer like a heavy fog as the three raced through the doorway.

"Go for the stairs! Go!" Rhyden said to Taemir and Isbaenna. He saw five soldiers staggering toward them, yanking their swords from their sheaths before the smoke engulfed them, obscuring them from view. While Taemir and Isbaenna bolted for the stairs, Rhyden darted into the smoke, spinning the balkstaff in his hand, his brows drawing as he squinted, trying to peer through the haze.

He caught sight of sudden movement from the corner of his eye; one of the guards charged at him, blind in the smoke. He swung his sword above his head, driving it down toward Rhyden in a wild, broad stroke. Rhyden took the stave between both hands, drawing it up, parallel to the floor just as the heavy length of steel slammed

against the shaft, staggering him. The guard blinked at him, stumbling, startled, and Rhyden kicked his right foot up, punting the soldier in the gut. He whooped, his breath abandoning him as he sprawled backwards, knocked off his boot heels by the blow.

More shadows stirred in the smoke as other guards closed in upon him; the fog was lifting, the cloud dissipating, but they still floundered about, bewildered and choking for breath. Rhyden spied a fleeting gleam of torchlight against drawn steel as a sword struck for his belly. He danced away from the thrust, swinging the stave around, slamming the ash shaft into the soldier's skull. Rhyden heard bones splinter in the man's cheek and brow at the blow as he crumpled to the floor.

Another rushed him from the left and Rhyden planted the right end of the balkstaff against the ground. He used it as a fulcrum point, springing into the air. He kicked at the guard's sword, knocking it aside with his left foot while smashing the heel of his right into the soldier's face, battering teeth loose and sending blood spraying.

Rhyden landed nimbly on his feet, drawing the stave toward his midriff, slipping his hands close together. He drew the balkstaff above his head, offering it a quick, sharp turn as he pivoted on his feet and peered through the waning smoke, watching the other guards converge warily upon him. Five more appeared, bolting down staircases and through doorways, racing headlong into the foyer with their swords in hand. They stared, wide-eyed and aghast as their eyes danced between Rhyden and their fallen, bleeding fellows.

"Drop your weapon, sir," one of them said, shifting his sword hilt between his palms, leveling the blade toward Rhyden.

"No," Rhyden replied.

"You are under arrest! Drop your weapon!"

"Come and take it from me," Rhyden said, letting the balkstaff fall still and at the ready between his hands. He shifted his feet into comfortable fighting stance. "If you can. Any or all of you—you are welcome to try."

In the sublevel of Gaol, Eabhiros and Eisean had no way to know the time; hours and minutes seemed to pass in successive, prolonged measure, as though they spent an eternity in the cold darkness. When he heard the sound of a key turning within the lock of their cell door, Eabhiros lifted his head with a terrified start, his eyes flown wide, his breath strangled in his throat.

He heard the sharp intake of Eisean's breath across the cell, the frantic scrabbling of his chains against the stone wall as the young man came to, equally alarmed and dismayed by the sound. "No..." Eisean whimpered.

There was a loud groan and then the door began to swing out toward the corridor. Torchlight became visible in the broadening margin of space between the iron and

the doorframe. They could see silhouetted figures in the doorway, and then a guard stepped inside, bearing a torch in hand. The glare of such sudden fire nearly saw them blinded, and they shrank from the light, drawing their hands toward their faces.

"Good evening, little lambs," said a voice from the threshold, that of Dochau Druery, the warden of Gaol. At his words, his voice, Eisean covered all the more, and Eabhiros struggled to step toward the sound, shambling in his manacles.

"Whatever you have brought ... Whatever you would do, do it to me, you ... you sick rot," he hissed at Druery.

"Still not broken?" Druery remarked, hooking his eyebrow. "Mathair Maith, Master Macleod, but you are an extraordinary specimen. Your mettle is far more inherent than I ever would have granted, I must admit."

"If you ... touch Eisean again..." Eabhiros said, his brows furrowing. "I will rip my hands from my wrists, my feet from my ankles to rid myself of these chains and I will kill you, you bastard. By my breath, I will."

"You wound me, sir," Druery told him, feigning an innocent expression. He draped his hand against his cravat. "I bring you a guest, and you greet me with such threatening tidings."

A second figure walked through the doorway; a woman. As she passed into the proscenium of torchlight, he could see her face, and Eabhiros' breath faltered. He stumbled, shocked and confused. "Igraine?" he whispered and he heard Eisean gasp softly in startled, confounded recognition as well.

"A guest, yes," Druery told them, smiling broadly. "An old friend whom you may recall—Lady Igraine Penwyn? You robbed her once, and her brothers besides, left them fettered to their wagon wheels on a backcountry highway." He mistook Eabhiros' stricken expression for aghast, and chuckled. "I assure you, she has every legal right to be here as one of your victims, lads. As for what she will do to you when I step out into the corridor once more ... Well, that is beyond my control, I should think."

Druery turned around, motioning to his guard. The soldier settled the torch into an iron stand in the wall, and the pair took their leave together. They left the door to the cell standing open and from out in the hallway, Eabhiros heard one of the Penwyn brothers offering friendly discourse to them as they approached.

Igraine regarded Eabhiros for a long moment. As she had stood in Druery's company, her face had been set in a hardened, grave mask. When he left, her expression softened, growing nearly plaintive.

"Igraine..." Eabhiros said again, flabbergasted, thinking surely he was dreaming, hallucinating, maddened by his pain.

"You are a bastard and a scoundrel," Igraine said, walking toward him. She held his

gaze fast, lifting her index finger toward her mouth in a fleeting, hushing gesture. She cut her eyes over her shoulder, and Eabhiros followed with his gaze. He could still see shadows on the corridor wall beyond the cell threshold; though her brother entertained Druery and his guard in conversation, they remained near enough to easily overhear. "You do not know how I will enjoy watching you hang," Igraine said. She drew very near to him now, and though her voice remained sharp and callous, her eyes were filled with sorrow, glistening with sudden tears. She brought her hands toward him, her fingertips lighting against his bruised, broken ribs, his chest, throat, his cheeks.

"They are coming to free you," she said in a hush. "When I take my leave of this chamber, take mark. They are coming."

She turned away and moved toward Eisean, leaving Eabhiros breathless and shocked. She raised her voice once more for Druery's benefit. "Look for me in the crowds, you bastard rots, as you strangle from your tethers. I will be there, brimague in hand, with a toast for every offense you have brought to me."

She cradled Eisean's face between her hands and smiled softly at him. She leaned toward him, kissing him deeply. He whimpered and then froze, his eyes flying wide. He felt Igraine's tongue brush against his, and then something else, something slender and solid, like a pair of thick hat pins or...

Igraine drew away, caressing his face with her hands. He blinked at her, realizing it was not hat pins she had slipped from her tongue, her mouth to his—it was a set of lock picks.

"Tell me, lamb, did you fancy my kiss?" she asked, hooking the corner of her mouth at him wryly.

"I ... I dare say, my lady, I have seldom known sweeter," he said, making Igraine smile all the more.

She left him, moving back toward Eabhiros. She draped her palm against his nose, as though imagining him with silk wrapped about his face, and her smile widened. "Mo'leannan," she breathed to him. "I thought it was you, even from the first."

He did not know what to say to her; he blinked against tears as she cradled his battered cheek against her palm. "Why are you doing this, Igraine?" he whispered.

"Come now, Eabhiros," she said, smiling. "Did you really believe I would let them hang my Highwaymen?"

"Igraine, they will see you to Pionos if they—"

"They will not," she breathed to him, and she leaned forward, kissing him softly, gently on the mouth. Her lips lingered, the tip of her tongue dancing lightly, sweetly against his. There was unexpected tenderness in her touch, surprising passion in her kiss, and when she pulled away a brief margin, her breath fluttered in her throat and

she trembled, as though it had been something she had longed for, something she savored.

She smiled at him and turned about, striding briskly toward the cell door. "Tierney, draw to a close this pathetic, adulating discourse of yours and let us for the palace once more," she declared, calling out to her brother. "The stench of this place would see my stomach surely roil."

Druery poked his head through the doorway in her wake as the guard retrieved the torch from the wall. "So sorry, lads," Druery said, with a shrug and a smile. "I thought at the least she would give one of you a last suckle and swallow."

The cell door slammed closed, and they were alone in the darkness again.

Isbaenna and Taemir rushed down the narrow staircase toward the lower cellblock, nearly plowing headlong into two sentries who barrelled toward them, alarmed by the sounds of explosion and scuffle from above. Isbaenna greeted one by driving her knee brutally into his groin. Taemir punched the other, throwing his entire weight behind the blow and nearly stumbling down the remaining stairs. The guard's head snapped back on the axis of his neck as Taemir's knuckles plowed into his chin, and he toppled backwards, tumbling down pate over heels down the steps.

Isbaenna and Taemir blinked at one another, frozen in place. Taemir's eyes looked as enormous as hers felt, and she was willing to wager his mouth beneath the bands of silk was as agape as hers.

"That was a great punch," she told him, breathlessly, trembling.

Taemir glanced toward the fallen soldier, who lay in a heap at the bottom of the stairs. "Hoah," he said. "The occasional pub brawl in my youth ... it would seem to have paid off, though do not tell my mother. She would be appalled."

Isbaenna saw Igraine and Tierney at the end of the corridor standing wide-eyed and gawking in the company of a short, plump man. Isbaenna realized he was likely Dochau Druery, the reputedly sadistic warden of Gaol.

"Here we go," Taemir whispered to her, taking a hedging step backwards and adjusting his grip on his father's sword.

"Splendid, then," Isbaenna breathed, her brows drawing narrow, her lips pressing into a thin line.

They strode down the corridor side by side, watching Igraine and Tierney press themselves against the wall as they approached, their expressions appropriately twisted with horror. Dochau Druery began to stumble away from them, his eyes enormous and gleaming with fright in the torchlight. There was no place for him to flee, and he apparently bore no weapons; he uttered a soft, horrified moan as they drew near.

Taemir reached out, seizing the iron ring set into Eisean and Eabhiros' cell door. He gave a mighty tug, and when this yielded no measure, he glanced at Isbaenna. "Locked."

Isbaenna motioned with her sword. "Open it," she said to Druery.

"I ... I cannot..." he whimpered, holding up his palms. "Please ... You ... you think this is any place of mine? I am just a doorman, a simple coachman ... Here ... here is my master here..." He flapped his hand desperately at Tierney and Igraine.

"Oh, I assure you, he is not ours," Tierney offered, staring at the sword. "And we have no money. Surely you remember my sister and me, my lords Highwaymen; You robbed us a month ago, mayhap. Surely you recall. You took it all then."

"Open the door, Dochau Druery," Taemir said, leveling his sword at the man's paunch. "Or the next shrieks resounding from the Screaming Tower will be yours, by my breath."

There was a soft pattering sound, and a small puddle began to form beneath Druery's right shoe heel; he had wet himself in his fright. "The ... the keys are in my pocket..." he whimpered, shuddering with fear. "Please do not kill me ... please..."

There were hundreds of keys on the warden's thick iron ring, and Taemir wagged them at Druery. "Which one?"

Druery reached up, his fingers shaking as he picked through the keys. "Here ... here you go, sir. Yes, this one ... this one right here..."

"Good," Taemir said. He jerked a dagger loose from his belt and thrust it beneath Druery's nose. The knife was little more than a fancy, oversized letter opener he had bought for himself several years ago, but Druery was panic-stricken and terrified, and did not realize the difference. "Open it."

"Yes ... yes, sir, straight away ... Of ... of course, sir..." Druery whimpered. He walked ahead of Taemir, returning to the cell. He glanced between Isbaenna's sword and the Penwyns, who still cowered against the wall, their hands raised. He stood for a brief, uncertain moment before the cell door, the key poised in his hand.

"Open it," Taemir hissed, shoving the flat of the letter opener beneath the shelf of Druery's chin, knocking him against the cell door. "Now, Druery, or I shall see you bleed."

"Of ... of course..." Druery said.

As Taemir stepped into the cell, he saw them, and his footsteps faltered. He did not know who was whom—Eisean or Eabhiros. The young men huddled together toward the center of the room, neither able to stand with much strength or balance. They had both been brutally beaten, their poor bodies marked with heavy bruises and drying blood, and they stood together, leaning clumsily against one another for

support. Taemir stared at them, stricken by their state, and they stared at him, their eyes enormous and haunted, glittering with tears in the firelight.

"Kaevir..." one of them whimpered, the slighter of the two, likely Eisean. He stumbled toward Taemir, drawing his friend, Eabhiros, limping and shambling in tow. Eisean's breath hitched, and tears spilled from his eyes.

Isbaenna rushed toward them, and as she moved, Taemir drove his elbow against the back of Druery's head, sending him staggering forward, falling onto his knees by the wall. "Please do not kill me!" he shrieked, cowering, drawing his hands toward his head.

Taemir shoved the letter opener beneath his belt and crouched beside the Mianach, grasping him firmly by the wrists. Druery struggled against him, crying out as Taemir forced his arms down, locking them into the manacles that had bound either Eabhiros or Eisean to the wall.

"What are you doing?" Druery wailed, thrashing and wriggling. "What are you doing?"

"Giving you a taste of your own rotted accommodations," Taemir told him, standing. He reached down and tousled Druery's hair, and then turned, hurrying to help Isbaenna. She had wrapped her arm about Eisean's waist that he might lean heavily against her as she led him, stumbling and dazed from the cell. Taemir caught Eabhiros by the hand, draping his arm over his shoulders and supporting his weight.

"You ... you are not Kaevir..." Eabhiros whispered. He blinked at Taemir, bleary eyed and confused, his face battered and beaten.

"No, but I am friend to you yet the same," Taemir told him softly, gently. He cut his eyes toward Druery, who still flailed about against the confines of his chains, yowling and screeching like a tomcat tossed in a rain barrel. "Do those chains stretch far?"

Eabhiros' brows drew together. "No," he said.

Taemir smiled, unseen beneath his mask. "Splendid, then," he murmured. He looked at Druery, holding aloft the warden's keys, dangling them clearly within his view. "Have a pleasant evening, sir," he said, letting the keyring drop. It fell with a heavy thud against the dirt floor in the center of the cell, well beyond Druery's limited reach, and as Taemir led Eabhiros out into the corridor, Druery shrieked behind them.

"You bastards!" he screamed. "You will be back! They will catch you and you will all be back! I will spare you no mercy! I will rip your flesh from your fetid hides inch by inch until you are hoarse with screaming, mindless from the pain!"

When they reached the top of the stairs at the prison's main foyer, they stumbled to an awed halt, watching Rhyden thrash the guards of Gaol. More than twenty soldiers

lay sprawled and heaped on the floor around him, either motionless or writhing weakly, moaning and bleeding. At least another twenty attacked him from all sides, and he fended them off, spinning about, driving the shaft of his stave again and again into stomachs and skulls, battering them aside, knocking them asunder.

"Mathair Maith...!" Taemir gasped in breathless wonder, watching his brother. He nearly forgot that he had removed the second flashpot from his pocket and cradled it against his palm. He remembered all at once that he had offered it a brisk shaking, depressing the lever only seconds before they reached the foyer, and he yelped in startled realization, hurling the cannister toward the swarm of guards.

"Hoah—!" he cried, and Rhyden jerked his head, spying them.

The flashpot ignited in a burst of bright, searing flame, and another cloud of smoke swallowed Rhyden from view. They could hear the guards stumbling about, reeling and sputtering, choking and gagging, and then Rhyden emerged from the cloud, sprinting toward them, his arm drawn to his face to cover his mouth and nose.

"Come on!" he shouted, his voice hoarse as he choked for breath. He waved the balkstaff at them, galvanizing them into motion as they bolted for the threshold.

Four guards staggered toward the doorway, trying to block their avenue of escape. Rhyden hooked the left end of the stave in a high arc, slamming the shaft of ash into one's head, sending him to the ground. He pistoned his right arm out, driving the iron cap of the staff mightily into the next soldier's skull. He pivoted on his heels, swinging the stave sharply forward, catching a third beneath the jaw and knocking him backwards, wrenching a strangled, garbled cry from his throat. The fourth began swinging his sword and Rhyden danced around the blows, not sparing Taemir or Isbaenna a glance.

"Go!" he yelled. "Do not wait for me, dammit! Go!"

Isbaenna dragged Eisean out of the doorway. Taemir ran behind her with Eabhiros, and they scaled down the stairs abreast of one another. They could hear the sharp, resounding reports of Rhyden's balkstaff battering against steel behind them as they fled.

Taemir wrenched the last flashpot from his pocket, shoving against the lever with his thumb, shaking the can furiously in his hand. As they reached the mouth of the alleyway, he hurled it over his shoulder. There was a sudden, bright flare of light, and his shadow spilled before him in the radiant glow. Smoke bloomed from the cannister, flooding the streets in a swift haze.

Isbaenna squatted at the narrow opening leading into the tunnels. "Eisean, can you climb down that ladder there—do you see it?"

Eisean blinked dazedly down the hole, swaying unsteadily. "I ... I can make it," he breathed.

Tameir and Isbaenna exchanged uncertain glances. "What choice do we have?" Taemir said. "Let me go first. I will only climb halfway down and you can help them one at a time. I will see them to the bottom."

"Alright," Isbaenna whispered, nodding. "What about Rhyden? I thought he was right behind us. Surely, he..."

"I do not know," Taemir said, meeting her gaze. He had already started down into the tunnels, lowering his hips through the drain opening and hooking his toes against the iron ladder rungs. "But he told us not to wait for him. He will make it—I know he will."

As if on cue, Rhyden stumbled down into the alley, emerging from the cloud of streetlight-infused smoke. He choked for breath, his balkstaff in one hand, his other drawn against his mouth as he gasped for air. Breathing in three rounds of the flashpots' noxious fumes had at last taken its effect on him, and he staggered, doubling at the waist. He ripped aside his scarf, freeing his face, and he began to gag.

"Rhyden!" Isbaenna cried out.

He looked up at her, his eyes swollen and heavily lidded from the smoke. "Go," he said, his voice hoarse and ragged. He spat, grimacing as he retched anew. "Go, dammit! They are right behind me."

They made it down into the catacombs. Rhyden came last, sputtering and coughing, grunting with effort as he dragged the heavy iron grate back into place above them. He hooked his hand against a ladder rung and tossed his justicoat to Taemir. "Cover the light!" he hissed. "Cover the bloody damn light!"

Taemir swept the heavy woolen folds over the lantern, and darkness swept down upon the tunnels. He and Isbaenna stood together, shoulder to shoulder, holding Eisean and Eabhiros against them. Rhyden fell still on the ladder, poised on the rungs, the balkstaff clutched in his hand, ready to thrust above his head. They all froze in the darkness, none of them daring to utter a breath.

They could hear soldiers above them, their boot soles thudding heavily against the ground as they ran in and out of the alleyway. The guards cried out to one another, choking against the smoke, barking orders to one another. They stomped back and forth upon the iron grating, sending rocks and leaves smacking down against Rhyden's face. The weight of the grate, the thick and heavy measure of its iron gridwork, had seemed an obstacle at first, but proved a boon. Whenever bootsoles struck against it, it was sturdy enough in design, caked enough in mud and debris, that it did not offer hollow resonance, and the guards passed them countless times, oblivious to its presence.

At last the footfalls and voices faded, as the soldiers, satisfied that the little alley was vacant, moved onward with their search. Rhyden climbed slowly down the ladder.

"Keep the light covered," he breathed to Taemir. "At least until we reach the next shaft. Can you lead us in the dark?"

"Yes," Taemir whispered.

"Here, let me take him." Rhyden pawed in the darkness, his hands groping against Eabhiros.

They sloshed through the water, picking their way at a tedious pace along the tunnel. When at last they reached a point where they felt safe for the moment from pursuit, they paused. Taemir drew the justicoat away from the lantern, and dim light spilled about them.

"Please," Eisean whispered. "Please, Isbaenna, where is Kaevir? Is ... is he safe? Please ... please tell me he is safe..."

"Hush, now," she murmured. Her voice warbled with fresh tears. "It is alright, Eisean."

"You are Rhyden Fabhcun..." Eabhiros said softly.

"I am, yes," Rhyden said, glancing at him and nodding.

Eabhiros moved his hand clumsily, offering it to Rhyden in greeting. "Eabhiros Macleod," he whispered hoarsely.

Rhyden blinked at him, caught off guard by the gesture. He smiled after a moment, clasping his hand against Eabhiros' wrist, feeling Eabhiros' fingers press lightly against his own. "Pleased to meet you, sir," Rhyden told him quietly.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

"Kaevir?"

Kaevir moaned softly at the sound of Lleuwyn Peildreigh's voice. His body felt incredibly heavy, as though someone had pressed slabs of stone against him. His mind was filled with thick clouds; he tried to remember where he was or what might have happened, without success.

"Kaevir?"

He felt gentle hands on his shoulders and realized he was lying on his stomach, his face pressed against soft pillows, his neck craned at an awkward, aching angle. He moaned again, struggling to open his eyes. His eyelids felt swollen; his mouth was a parched and ruined wasteland, his tongue as tacky as a wad of linen, his throat scraped and sore as though he had screamed himself hoarse.

"Kaevir, please wake for me..." Lleuwyn sounded frightened and he moved his hands against Kaevir, offering him a jostle. The despair in his voice alarmed Kaevir and he stirred, moving slowly, feeble as an arthritic old man as he drew his hand toward his face, moved his legs a faltering measure.

"Lleuwyn..." he croaked, forcing his eyes open. The room was filled with waning sunlight, and the sudden glare hurt him. Kaevir shrank against the pillows, drawing his left arm to cover his head. His right arm was trapped beneath him, folded against his stomach, and it felt leaden and cold from lack of circulation.

"Kaevir?" Lleuwyn gasped in breathless relief. Kaevir felt his hands move to his face, brushing against his cheek, his hair. "Kaevir, open your eyes. Come, lad, please. Wake for me."

Kaevir groaned, his eyelids fluttering open again. The world seemed draped in gossamer to his bleary gaze, everything reduced to hazy silhouettes of color against a backdrop of bright, golden light. He blinked, watching Lleuwyn's face come into focus, as though emerging from the depths of murky water. Lleuwyn's eyes were wide and filled with worry, his brows lifted in anxious regard.

"What ... what happened...?" Kaevir asked, his voice hoarse. "Where am I?"

"You are in one of the towers at Ardeaglais'Coroin," Lleuwyn said, stroking his hand against Kaevir's hair. Kaevir stirred, moving slowly, his muscles and joints groaning in protest as he unfurled his legs and dragged his limp, numb arm from beneath his belly. "You collapsed shortly after you came to my office. You were exhausted, lad, and fell into my arms. Thank the Good Mother I was at hand, lest you had struck your head against the floor. Do you not remember?"

"No." Kaevir blinked at him and shook his head. He sat somewhat, his shoulders

propped against the headboard. The motion did not suit him; he felt the horizon sway before him, as though he stood upon the bow of a ship upon turbulent waters, and he moaned softly, closing his eyes, pressing the heel of his hand against his brow. "I ... I have ... no memory of that," he whispered.

He remembered the Stone, however; all at once, his eyes flew wide, and he gasped in start, looking frantically for it. *My Stone ... !* he thought, and then he saw it tucked against him, as if he had been sleeping curled protectively about it, holding it against him. He nearly whimpered aloud in relief as he took it in hand, closing his fingers about its smooth, polished surface.

"Are you alright?" Llewyn asked.

"I ... I am fine now," Kaevir said. "Just thirsty..."

"Of course," Llewyn said. "Of course you are. Here, lad."

He turned away from Kaevir, reaching behind him for a bedside table. A stone pitcher rested here, along with a small cup. Kaevir watched him pour water from the pitcher into the tumbler. He did not know what surprised or confused him more; the apparent worry for him in the Easpag'Ard's voice and face, or the fact that Llewyn had not made any effort to take the Stone away from Kaevir while he had slept.

"Here, Kaevir," Llewyn said, turning to offer him the cup.

Kaevir gulped at the water, draining it all in three fervent swallows. Llewyn took the cup from him and poured him some more; Kaevir guzzled this down as well. He looked about the room. It was a small chamber with a narrow window overlooking the cathedral grounds. The only sparse furnishings were the cot on which Kaevir had slept, a solitary chair, and a small desk tucked in a far corner.

"It is not much," Llewyn said, sounding sheepish, as if the spartan accommodations shamed him. "But you will be safe here. No one will find you. No one can enter the cathedral towers without a key."

"It is fine," Kaevir said. He smirked, thinking of some of the fetid jail cells he had risen to find in his past. "I have stayed in worse places."

"Are you hungry?" Llewyn asked, rising to his feet. "Surely you must be. I will send for some supper."

"Supper?" Kaevir asked, bewildered anew. He swung his legs from beneath the blankets and stumbled to his feet. He forked his fingers through his tangled hair and limped across the room to peer out the window. "What time is it?"

"It is nearly five o'clock in the afternoon on a'Triu."

"A'Triu?" Kaevir gasped, turning to Llewyn. "You said a'Triu? But I ... That is not possible." Nearly two days had passed in full since the robbery outside of

Belgaeran. He moaned, shoving his hands against his face. “Bloody rot,” he said. “My friends—they took my friends to Gaol. They have been there for two days! I have to go. I have to help them somehow. I have to—”

Lleuwyn looked away from him, his expression suddenly and inexplicably stricken. At this, Kaevir's voice faltered into silence, and he blinked at the Easpag'Ard, swaying unsteadily on his feet. “What?” he asked. “What ... what is it? What is wrong?”

When Lleuwyn did not immediately answer, Kaevir stumbled toward him. “Has something happened?”

Lleuwyn looked at him, his eyes filled with anguished remorse. “After I brought you here, I went straight away to Kierken,” he whispered. “I knew I had little hope of seeing your friends freed. The king is mad, I have told you this, and he is fixed on the claiming your Stone. I thought I could protect them, though, that I could convince him to leave them unharmed. I was too late. While I was with you, Kaevir, an Elf named Rhyden Fabhcun met in counsel with Kierken to convince him otherwise.”

“Rhyden Fabhcun?” Kaevir whispered, his eyes widening. He knew the name; Rhyden Fabhcun was as much an integral part of the legends and lore of Tiralainn as Lahnduren, or Kierken himself.

“I should have known,” Lleuwyn said with a frown. “Rhyden Fabhcun knows nothing in his nature but deceit and treachery. His greed and ambitions are every match those of Kierken's, and I should have suspected at least that they would conspire against me so, betray me so...”

“What?” Kaevir whispered, but he knew. Somewhere deep within him, he knew, and he felt his heart seize. “What are you saying? Where are Eabhiros and Eisean?”

Lleuwyn stepped toward him, pressing his hand against Kaevir's shoulder. “They were hanged this morning at dawn,” he said softly, gently. “From the gallows of Pionos. Rhyden and Kierken saw to that.”

Kaevir could not draw breath; he stumbled back as if the Easpag'Ard had just slammed his fist into his gut. His hands began to tremble, his shoulders to quake. How the strength remained enough in his legs to bear him upright was beyond his comprehension. “No,” he whimpered, uttering a low, agonized moan as tears burned his eyes.

The wind stirred outside of the tower, fluttering sharply against the window panes, sending leaves smacking against the glass. “Eabhiros ... Eisean...!” he gasped, and the wind mounted outside, groaning against the roof eaves, shuddering against the windows. “Oh ... oh, no, no, please...”

“I have only just returned from the palace,” Lleuwyn said. “Rhyden had set in the

King's mind that they should be taken from Pionos, strung in hanging cages on the prison grounds that they might be displayed, but I convinced Kierken to tender them to me. I have seen their bodies myself, Kaevir. I had them brought to Ardeaglais'Coroin for safe measure until I can arrange for the burials."

"I want to see them," Kaevir said, his voice strangled, as though he spoke around the throttling hold of a noose. His eyes were enormous, shimmering with tears, and outside of the house, the wind wailed like a new widow. "Please, I want to see them."

Lleuwyn gazed at Kaevir kindly. "They have already been shrouded, lad," he said. He walked slowly toward Kaevir. "And it is only their vessels. Their spirits have moved onward, Kaevir, to the eternal place."

"I know," Kaevir said. He felt the heat of tears in his eyes, their strangled choke in his voice. "But I ... I would like to see them. I ... I need to..." He looked up at Lleuwyn, his eyes pleading. "Please, Lleuwyn."

Lleuwyn cupped his palm against Kaevir's cheek. "Of course," he said.

Kaevir followed Lleuwyn down the steep, winding course of the tower stairs. They crossed the expansive quire together, their soft footfalls echoing as they passed. Warm candlelight flickered and glowed, golden light infused and dancing through towering stained glass window panels lining the broad chamber. Lleuwyn led him along a narrow corridor north of the quire, and took a lantern in hand as they descended another flight of steps leading into a dark, chilled sublevel of the cathedral.

"The chapel treasury is here," he told Kaevir, as they followed another length of corridor. Their shadows splayed along the earthen floor of the tunnel and the stone walls of the passage in the dim lamplight. "A small vault for weekly offerings, before they are collected in full and brought to the main offices for tally. I knew it would prove safe enough to hold them a time, to keep away the curious."

When Lleuwyn brought him to a gate fashioned of heavy iron, with an imposing lock holding it fast, he watched mutely as the Easpag'Ard produced a keyring from beneath his cloak and unlocked it. As the circumference of his lantern light spilled across the threshold and into the cramped chamber beyond, Kaevir's breath drew still, choking softly against the back of his throat.

The room was very small; large enough only to accommodate two wooden pallets, biers that stood side by side, with slim passage between them. Two bodies lay upon the biers, each draped and wrapped in sheets of heavy linen. The panels of fabric had been stitched together above and beneath each of the forms, enclosing them in full, leaving only the fragile outline of features and figure to view.

He could not tell who was who. In life, Eabhiros had stood taller than Eisean by at least a half-head's measure; his shoulders broader, his build stockier. Beneath the

shrouds of linen, such differences in height and form were indistinguishable.

Lleuwyn realized his hesitation and stepped toward Kaevir, his eyes plaintive and kind. "Oh, lad," he whispered. "You do not have to do this, Kaevir. Let us go. You are trembling. Let me bring you back to the tower, bring you some tea—"

"No," Kaevir said, shaking his head. His eyes swam with tears and he met Lleuwyn's gaze. "No, I ... I must do this. I must..."

"Alright," Lleuwyn said.

Kaevir walked between the biers. He came to a faltering, breathless halt at their shoulders and gazed between them, the bodies of his cousin and his friend. His voice escaped his throat in a quiet, hurting whimper. "Can I see their faces?" he whispered, tears spilling down his cheeks.

"We should not unfetter the shrouds," Lleuwyn told him softly, gently. "There is lime within the sheets, to keep them until after the mhas'cor."

Kaevir nodded. "Who ... who is...?" he whispered.

"Your left, lad," Lleuwyn said. "There is Eabhiros." At this, Kaevir moaned softly, his heart rending in twain. "The other ... that is Eisean."

Kaevir draped his hand against Eabhiros' shroud, his fingertips trembling uncontrollably, his breath fluttering in his throat. Eabhiros' hands had been folded atop his breast beneath the linen, and Kaevir could feel the contours of his knuckles, his fingers through the fabric. He closed his palm against Eabhiros' hand, letting his fingers settle between his cousin's, separated by the shroud.

Kaevir folded himself over Eabhiros' form. "Eabhiros!" he gasped, shuddering as he wept in full. He kissed the outline of Eabhiros' face, the slight indentations in linen over his eyes, the curves of his cheeks. "Oh, I ... I love you ... Please forgive me. I am sorry! I am so sorry!"

He turned, staggering, his body wracked with sobs. He stared helplessly at Lleuwyn and then reached for Eisean's form, finding his friend's hands beneath the cloth. He kissed Eisean's face, his cheeks, his nose. "You were loved, Eisean," he whispered. "You ... you were loved ... We loved you ... I love you yet. Forgive me, it is all on my account. I ... I have brought this on us all..."

Lleuwyn led him from the vault, keeping his arm about Kaevir, letting him stumble in step with him as he wept. "They will answer for this," Kaevir gasped, his face flushed with grief and rage, his hands balled into fists. "Kierken and Rhyden—they will answer for this. By my breath—all that I have, I will make them."

They returned to the tower chamber. Lleuwyn offered some supper to Kaevir, a snifter of brimague, a pot of tea, but Kaevir refused each and all. He did not want to eat. He did not want to sleep. He felt numb all over, his body as leaden and heavy as

his heart and mind; even the simple act of drawing breath seemed to him excruciating labor.

"I should never have brought you here," Llewyn said. He shook his head. "I have to get you out of the city tonight. There are smaller parishes nearby, with Easpagan I can trust. I will send you to one of them until I can—"

Kaevir blinked at him, startled. "What?" he asked. "No, Llewyn. Why? I cannot leave now. Not after this."

"It is too dangerous now," Llewyn said. "Kierken and Rhyden will be expecting you to seek vengeance for Eabhiros and Eisean. It is why they have done this, what they are counting on that they might claim the Stone from you. I will not see you know such risk."

"The risk would be theirs," Kaevir snapped, his eyes flashing, his hands closing into fists. "They want the Stone's power? Fair enough—I will give it to them."

At this, the wind outside the tower stirred, rattling the window panes, drawing Llewyn's gaze. "You cannot keep me here," Kaevir said. He stared at Llewyn with desperate, pleading eyes. "Please, Llewyn. Please, I cannot bear it. They must answer for what they have done. Please."

"They will answer for what they have done," Llewyn said. "I have told you of my plans for the masked ball. Lahnduren will—"

"Lahnduren cannot tend to this, not with certainty," Kaevir said. "Not like I can. He could not even keep hold of the Stone when he had it in his possession, Llewyn. Have you seen him? I have—twisted and hunchbacked, like a feeble old man. You would count on him to kill Kierken? To stand his own against Rhyden Fabhcun? If Rhyden does not see him run through, Kierken and his soldiers will."

He walked toward Llewyn, his eyes large and earnest, filled with rage and implore. "I do not need steel to see it done. You can depend on me. Please do not keep me from it. I want this. I want to help you. I need this. By my breath, I will go mad if I cannot see them answer for what they have done to Eabhiros and Eisean."

As he spoke, as he drew near, the wind began to whistle outside, rising to match Kaevir's fervency, his distress. Kaevir jerked his head toward the windows, his brows drawing together in a deep furrow. "Stop it," he said, and the wind quieted and fell still. He looked at Llewyn, desperate. "Please. I could not keep Eabhiros and Eisean from this. I could not protect them. Please, let me have this for them, Llewyn. Please, I am begging you."

Llewyn smiled at him. "As I took my leave of the palace today, I overheard Rhyden Fabhcun in private counsel with a married noblewoman of some significant affluence—a guest of the King's for the Samhradh. He would meet her tonight at nine o'clock at a small wooded glen mayhap three miles outside of the city—the Pitlochry

Overlook."

"Then there is our chance," Kaevir exclaimed, his eyes widening eagerly. "Take me there, Lleuwyn. Why wait until the masked ball? He would never suspect an attack tonight. It would be your chance, Lleuwyn—and mine."

Lleuwyn looked at him, musing over the idea. "What of the woman?" he asked.

"You are the Easpag'Ard," Kaevir said. "Send her a note. Let her know you are aware of her indiscretions and tell her to keep her bloody ass in her own bed—with her husband—tonight." Please Lleuwyn. Give me this chance. I will not fail you—by my breath, I will not."

"Oh, lad," Lleuwyn said softly, the corner of his mouth hooking in a smile. "I have never believed that you would."

It was five minutes after nine o'clock by Kaevir's watch hands when Rhyden rode by horseback up the crest of foothills marking the pinnacle of Pitlochry Overlook. The vista itself was to the left of the road; one could walk by foot or draw a slim coach among the trees a brief measure and stumble upon its outcropping. Kaevir heard the horse's hooves draw to a halt; after another moment, he heard the rustle of footsteps in fallen leaves and pine needles approaching him from behind as Rhyden drew near.

The Elf was heedless, anticipating meeting a lover in the dark, and made no effort to move stealthily among the trees. Kaevir trembled with fury, staring down at the Stone as it floated above his hands, spinning and turning before his heart. He could feel the wind stirring around him, tugging at his hair, the flaps of his justicoat. It wanted to surge; it wanted to respond to his hammering heartbeat, his tremulous rage. "Not yet," he whispered. "Not yet ... Let him get closer ... Not yet..."

Rhyden called out softly. Kaevir frowned, keeping his back to the Elf. It might have been a trick of the mounting, restless wind, but it had sounded like Rhyden said, "Your Majesty?"

A hand fell against Kaevir's shoulder, startling him. "I did not see you at first," Rhyden said, his voice friendly and unalarmed. "I thought something had happened. I am sorry if I have kept you waiting."

"You have not," Kaevir said, turning around. Rhyden blinked, drawing his hand away, his footsteps scuttling, his eyes flying wide.

"Kaevir—!" he gasped, stunned and startled.

Wind slammed into him with all of the force of a boulder hurtled from a catapult, pummelling the breath from his lungs and sending him flying off his feet. He flew backwards, his hair whipping into his face, and then he slammed into the broad trunk of a pine tree, the back of his shoulders, his head bearing the brunt of the blow.

It knocked the senses from him, and when the winds faded, he collapsed facedown

on the ground, sprawled beneath the tree, moaning weakly. He moved slowly, shoving his palms against the ground, trying to raise his head.

Kaevir walked toward him slowly, deliberately. "You bastard," he whispered.

Rhyden drew his legs beneath him and stumbled to his feet. He had not come unarmed to the overlook; a quarterstaff had fallen among the leaves beside him. He took it hand and staggered dazedly backwards, alarmed by Kaevir's approach. His wide eyes settled upon the Shadow Stone, and he recoiled, floundering, his breath tangling in an audible gasp.

"K-Kaevir..." he said, holding out his hand. "Wait ... please ... What are you...?"

"You bastard," Kaevir said again, and then the wind rushed past him once more, sending the skirts of his justicoat flapping about him like wings.

The wind plowed into Rhyden, rocking his head back on the axis of his neck as though he had taken a stunning punch to the jaw. He felt his feet wrench out from beneath him, and he cried out, his voice torn from his throat by the rush of air. He slammed into another tree, battered against its trunk like a discarded rag doll.

The balkstaff fell from his hand and he crumpled into the leaves. He tried to sit up; his head was spinning, filled with searing pain, and he struggled for breath. He reached for the stave, but the winds pelted him again, snatching the balkstaff beyond his grasp, sending his hair buffeting about his face in a tangled mess. Rhyden cried out hoarsely, breathlessly, shoving his hair aside in time to watch the wind wield the stave as well as any living, breathing opponent. The right end of the staff whipped toward him, slamming into his jaw, sending him sprawling sideways.

"Nuh-no...!" Rhyden gasped, but when he tried to draw himself upright again, the left end of the balkstaff careened into his jaw, cracking his head toward his shoulder, sending him toppling once more. He huddled against the ground, bleeding, reeling and frightened.

"You killed my friends," Kaevir seethed. Rhyden looked over his shoulder, his eyes enormous as he watched the balkstaff spinning about in sharp circles in the air above Kaevir's head.

"Kaevir, no..." he pleaded. "Please ... You ... you do not understand..."

"Shut up," Kaevir hissed, holding his hand over Rhyden's head, curling his fingers toward his palm. The wind closed obligingly in Rhyden's hair, wrenching his head backwards, drawing a hoarse cry from him. It whipped dirt and debris into his face, smothering him, gagging him as it forced his head further back, canting his neck at an excruciating angle. "Kaevir, please—!" he cried.

"Shut your lying, rotted, bastard mouth," Kaevir said, and as he thrust his hand forward, the wind slammed Rhyden's head brutally against the ground. "Get up. Get on your feet."

"Please..." Rhyden whimpered, turning his face and trying weakly to spit as blood flooded his nose, his mouth.

"I said get up!" Kaevir shouted, and wind blasted from beneath Rhyden, seeming to come from the very ground itself. It shoved Rhyden into the air and held him there, his feet dangling a good two feet above the ground, his hair whipping about his face, blinding him.

"How does it feel, you rot?" Kaevir hissed at him. The winds shifted, slapping against Rhyden's face, whipping his hair about his throat. He tried to move his hands, to fight, but the force of the wind was like a pair of heavy irons, pinning his arms to his sides. His hair wrapped tautly about his neck, and the wind pulled the heavy sheaf all the tighter, snuffing his airflow immediately and in full, strangling him. Rhyden thrashed in midair, struggling against the wind, gagging for breath.

"How does it feel, Rhyden?" Kaevir asked. "To do the Pionos jig?"

He moved his hand, and the wind abruptly shifted; Rhyden's hair whipped back behind his head and he was brutally tossed into another tree. The back of his head cracked against the trunk, and he crashed to the ground. He moaned weakly, scarcely conscious, dragging his hands slowly through the leaves.

He heard Kaevir's approach, his boot soles against the ground, and he whimpered, lifting his head, trying to raise his palm, pleading. "Please..." he gasped. "Please ... They ... they are not..."

Kaevir sent Rhyden's own balkstaff against him again, snapping the shaft on a swift, sharp wind and sending it careening against Rhyden's head, plowing his face into the dirt, knocking what precious little remained of his wits from his skull.

"How does it feel?" Kaevir whispered, shuddering.

"Do not kill him, Kaevir," Llewyn said, stepping out from the shadows among the trees. "Not yet. We have use for him."

Llewyn genuflected beside Rhyden's fallen form. He reached down, brushing Rhyden's long, tangled hair back from his face to ensure the Elf was unconscious. He shook his head. "You should have stayed in the Morthir, lad," he said.

"He knew me," Kaevir whispered, watching as Llewyn began to bind the young Gaeilge's hands against the small of his spine with a length of rope. Now that the attack was finished, the moment passed, he found himself trembling. His fury—blinding only moments ago—had abruptly drained, leaving him uncertain and anxious. "Llewyn, Rhyden knew me."

"You are wielding the Shadow Stone, lad," Llewyn said, not looking up as he worked. "He knew you by that."

Rhyden's balkstaff had fallen into the dried pine needles and leaves nearby and

Kaevir stooped, lifting it in hand. "Why did he carry a weapon?" he asked. "He thought he met a lover. Why would he have a weapon with him?"

Lleuwyn paused, looking up to meet Kaevir's gaze. "Because when a man's very nature is deceitful and treacherous, lad, he never feels so fully at ease to travel unarmed," he said. "Rhyden saw your friends hanged. It was by his word alone that Kierken committed in full to such a course. Do not find mercy in your heart for him, for I assure you, he would hold no such dear regard for you."

They brought Rhyden back to Ardeaglais'Coroin. While Lleuwyn escorted Kaevir up to his tower chamber, Kaevir watched a cluster of armed a'Pobail soldiers hustle Rhyden Fabhcun, still bound and unconscious, away across the nave.

"Will you be alright alone here for a time?" Lleuwyn asked. "I hate to leave you, lad, but I have some business I must see to before the morning."

He needed to tend to Rhyden; to make sure wherever they stowed the Elf would remain someplace secreted and safe from Kierken. Kaevir nodded, sitting against the edge of the cot. "I think I will rest awhile," he said. It was a lie; he had been sleeping for two bloody days. He did not think he would need rest again for some time to come, but it seemed to ease some of the anxiety in Lleuwyn's face.

"Here, lad," Lleuwyn said. He went to the small table, where a decanter of brimague had been set. He poured a cup and brought it to Kaevir. "Drink this. It will help."

Kaevir took the glass, drawing it toward his mouth. As he moved to drink, as the distinct, bittersweet fragrance of the liquor met his nose, he blinked, remembering something fragmentary and fleeting. *The night I followed him to his office, he offered me a cup of brimague. Just like this—he pressed it in my hands and told me to drink it. It would settle my nerves.*

He glanced at Lleuwyn and found the Easpag'Ard watching him. He tilted his head back and swallowed the brimague, draining the cup empty. "Good lad," Lleuwyn said, smiling as he took the glass from Kaevir's hand. "I will see you in the morning. I have summoned my tailor to the cathedral. He will take your measurements and see you fitted for a proper costume."

"A costume?" Kaevir asked.

Lleuwyn nodded. "If you are to help me on the night of the masked ball, you should be dressed for the occasion, I think."

Kaevir smiled. "Then I can go?" he asked. "You will let me help you?"

"Yes, lad," Lleuwyn said, nodding again, visibly pleased by Kaevir's excitement. "You have proven yourself a thousandfold to me tonight. I would have you no place but my side."

He had not meant to fall asleep. When Lleuwyn had left him, Kaevir had stretched

out against the cot momentarily. He had felt vaguely dizzy and somewhat lightheaded; likely ill effects from drinking brimague atop an empty stomach. He had rested his head, and his eyelids had suddenly felt so heavy, he could not resist letting them droop closed. It was not until voices from the cathedral crossing traveling up the tower staircase and through his door drew him awake that he realized he had inadvertently nodded off.

He sat up, dazed and puzzled. The voices were muffled and indistinct, and he rose to his feet, groaning as his balance wavered. He shook his head, rubbing his eyes. *What is the matter with me?* he thought, limping toward the door.

He pressed his ear against the wood, but still could not make out any clear words from below. He tried to turn the handle, meaning to go investigate, and frowned to find it locked. "What in the duchar...?" he whispered, frowning. It took him a few bewildered moments before he rationalized that Llewyn had probably not locked him inside as much as he had locked anyone else out. He had promised to help Kaevir; to keep him safe, and though Kaevir did not know much of the Easpag'Ard given their brief association, he trusted him nonetheless.

He could have taken the Stone from me, he thought. *He had two days—he could have taken it at his leisure, given me over to be hanged like Eabhiros and Eisean and kept it for himself—but he did not.*

Kaevir leaned over, peering at the keyhole. He still felt befuddled and sleepy and rubbed his eyes again, slapping himself upside the head for good measure. "Keep your wits about you," he muttered to himself. He did not have any lockpicks on hand, but realized he might not need any.

He reached into his coat pocket, slipping the orb of the Shadow Stone against his hand. "Open it," he whispered, and as his spoke, he felt a huff of breeze through the keyhole against his face. He heard the tumblers fall back as the wind pushed past them, and when he tried the handle again, the door opened freely.

Kaevir grinned, darting across the threshold and stealing down the stairs. Sound carried with extraordinary clarity throughout the vaulted expanse of the cathedral, wafting upwards into the bell towers, and all at once, Kaevir heard Llewyn speak as though he stood right before him.

"Where are the vestments I sent to you? The Sagart's cassock and alb I sent for you wear?"

Kaevir froze on the stairs, his eyes wide, his breath stilled.

"Right where I left them—in a heap upon the floor," snapped another voice, lisping and raspy, hoarse and familiar to Kaevir.

Lahnduren! he thought, and he crept forward once more, stealing slowly, silently down the staircase. He reached the bottom, the base of the tower. The steps opened

into a narrow chamber leading to the crossing beyond, and he hugged the shadow-draped wall of the threshold. He had seen their shadows as he had reached the ground floor. They stood just beyond the doorway, and when Kaevir canted his shoulders and peered quickly out, he could see them together—Lleuwyn, Lahnduren, and Tressach an'Clare.

"I am sorry if my proffered disguise displeased you, Lahnduren," Lleuwyn said, drawing Lahnduren into step with him and draping his arm about his shoulders as they walked away. "I hope you will allow me to offer you a token of my esteem and fellowship."

"What manner of token?" Lahnduren asked. Tressach followed them, and they disappeared from Kaevir's view. He leaned further across the threshold, watching them approach a gated archway across the cathedral crossing.

Lahnduren's voice resounded in sudden, bright eagerness, echoing against the vaulted ceiling. "You ... you have him? Rhyden Fabhcun—he is here?"

Lleuwyn chuckled. "I do indeed, mo'cara," he said, calling Lahnduren *my friend*. "And yes, he is."

The three descended down a flight of stairs beyond the gated threshold, disappearing into the sublevels beneath the tower. "You cannot have him ... Not quite yet..." Kaevir heard Lleuwyn say, his voice fading. "Let me rouse him first that you might enjoy a brief but pleasant reintroduction..."

Kaevir followed them through the gateway and down the stairs. He heard the sounds of muffled, strangled cries from below, and saw faint, yellow glow of lantern light against the wall. Kaevir held his breath, his brows drawn as he peered through the shadows, approaching the lamplight.

He heard more stifled cries, Rhyden's voice, and the sound of Lleuwyn murmuring, his words unintelligible but soothing in the tone as they drifted up the staircase. He heard Lahnduren's shuffling footsteps scabble clumsily against the floor and then he said, "Why Lord Fabhcun, you do not sound at all pleased to see me ... and oh, little mouse, I cannot begin to express how pleased I am to see you."

Kaevir reached the bottom of the stairs. The lantern's illumination had waned; Lleuwyn had brought it with him into the vault where he kept Rhyden captive. The heavy iron door of this crypt stood open, canted outward into the corridor, and Kaevir could see a golden glow from beyond the threshold, and shadows moving within the room. The three of them had stepped inside, and Rhyden's voice came again, garbled but defiant and angry as he railed at them, struggling to shout around the gag Lleuwyn had fettered against his mouth.

Kaevir stole toward the door, easing himself into the narrow, shadowed space between it and the wall. He curled his fingers against the edge of the steel and leaned forward, peering around the corner of the threshold, into the crypt beyond.

Lleuwyn and Tressach stood nearest to him, with their backs to the door. They stood at such an angle that Kaevir could plainly see Rhyden past them; the Elf had been trussed in a slat-backed chair with his hands behind him, a noose drawn about his throat and down beneath the seat, the end lashing his ankles together. He struggled against the ropes; every time he moved his feet, the garrotte around his neck drew taut, throttling him. This did not seem to dissuade him in the least, and the chair shuddered as he thrashed his shoulders and shook his head.

Lahnduren hobbled toward him, chuckling, as giddy as a child approaching a tantalizingly wrapped birthday gift, and Rhyden's brows furrowed deeply as he watched him approach. His teeth bared against the wad of cloth shoved in his mouth, tied about his face and he uttered a stream of garbled, stifled sounds at Lahnduren as he tugged angrily against his bonds.

"I have seen this face so many times in paintings and statuaries," Lahnduren murmured, cupping his withered palm against Rhyden's cheek. Rhyden tried to jerk his face away, his eyes widening in alarm, his voice fluttering beneath the confines of his gag, and Lahnduren slipped the shriveled stump of his other arm against Rhyden's face, cradling him in nearly tender fashion. "It has come to me in dreams ... Nearly ever night these past fifteen years without fail, I have imagined this visage, this beautiful, pristine face, and here, at last, here you are..."

Lahnduren closed his eyes, sniffing again at Rhyden's hair as though savoring the fragrance of a rose bloom. "Oh, you do not know how I have waited for this ... longed for it," he said, his lips dancing against Rhyden's ear. "The things I will do to you, my sweet, lovely little mouse ... oh, the things I have planned for you..."

Rhyden opened his eyes as he tried to turn his head away and his gaze met Kaevir's. Kaevir froze, startled, and then he jerked himself backwards, shoving himself against the wall behind the crypt door. He risked another peek around the edge of the door and realized Rhyden had seen him, and still looked toward him. Rhyden's eyes were wide and desperate with implore, his breath gasping in soft mewls from his throat as Lahnduren snuffled him, stroking the stump of his severed arm against Rhyden's face and hair.

"Vtheeth..." Rhyden whimpered to Kaevir, a muffled sound that might have been *please*, but his voice cut short as Lahnduren snatched the line of his noose and jerked against it sharply, throttling him, wrenching his head backwards.

"I have dreamed of your visage," Lahnduren hissed. "Every contour and measure of your figure and form, and every sweet and excruciating injury I will see meted forth to each. Abandon any pretense of hope you might harbor, lovely mouse ... for it is gone, I promise you." He jerked against the garrotte once more, drawing a strangled cry from Rhyden. "You are mine, and I will spend the remainder of my days breaking you ... hurting you. You did this to me..." He shoved the flat of his stump against Rhyden's cheek, and Rhyden whimpered. "You did this and you will answer for it. By my breath, you will shriek yourself hoarse answering for it."

Rhyden's brows narrowed and he reared his head back against Lahnduren's grip. He thrust himself forward, rocking the chair onto its front legs as he slammed his forehead mightily against Lahnduren's. Lahnduren staggered backwards, yowling in startled, dazed pain, and he fell backwards onto his rump, his spindly legs sprawling skyward, his hand and stump pinwheeling helplessly.

"Thutha uteth—ahthat oth—!" Rhyden railed at Lahnduren, shrugging his shoulders fiercely, as though he meant to lunge in further attack. Kaevir could not be certain, but it sounded like Rhyden had snapped, *Bugger yourself, bastard rot!*

Lahnduren bellowed with rage, scrambling gracelessly to his feet, leaping at Rhyden. "You bastard!" he shrieked, spittle spraying from his lips. Tressach sprang forward, seizing Lahnduren by his bony shoulders as he thrashed at Rhyden, pummeling his face with fist and stump alike. "I will see you bleed for that! I will rend your flesh from thew, you rot bastard whelp—!" His voice dissolved into garbled, furious, slobbering sounds as Tressach hauled him backwards, kicking and flailing.

"Get him out of here!" Llewyn snapped at Tressach, jabbing his finger toward the doorway. At this, Kaevir scuttled back and wheeled about, bolting for the adjacent crypt. There was no door here, no gate to bar his passage, and he ducked inside, scampering, just as Tressach stepped into the corridor behind him, dragging Lahnduren in tow.

Kaevir crouched with his legs folded beneath him, cowering in the dark doorway of the tomb, pressing his shoulder against the wall. He listened to Lahnduren's feet scuttling and drumming against the floor as he spat and cursed.

"Take your hands from me!" he screeched. "Take your damn hands from me, Tressach an'Clare! I will see him punished! Bastard whelp! He will bleed by my hand!"

"Lahnduren, le do thoil, have peace," Tressach said, his voice soothing, gentle. He kept repeating this over and over until the sounds of Lahnduren's struggles faded into silence. "Have peace. Ta se maith, mo'cara. Ta se maith." *It is alright.*

"I ... I will see him bleed..." Lahnduren gasped hoarsely.

"I know," Tressach murmured. "But not now, mo'cara. Not now. He is yours, Lahnduren. He is helpless and he is yours. You can take him at your leisure. Do not waste that chance for rage."

"You ... you are right..." Lahnduren whispered. "You are right, Tressach ... You are right."

"One more night, Lahnduren," Tressach murmured. "You have waited fifteen years for this. What is one night, when you have all of the time in the Bith left to follow?"

"Are you alright, Lahnduren?" Llewyn asked. Kaevir listened to the heavy, grinding sound of the steel door swinging shut, slamming into place.

"I ... I am fine," Lahnduren said. "Forgive me, Llewyn, I lost my senses for the moment. The bastard would see me addled with fury."

Kaevir heard their footsteps as they moved toward the stairs. He ventured a tentative peek into the hallway and watched Llewyn clap his hand against Lahnduren's shoulder. "Put Rhyden Fabhcun from your mind awhile, le do thoil. Your vengeance against him will come soon enough—and we have plans to finish, the three of us together."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

"Eabhiros, look at this," Eisean said, glancing over his shoulder. He had made his way to the end of the catacomb tunnels beneath the Crown Theatre, a place where the shaft had been filled in with a seemingly impenetrable pile of dirt, loose bricks, and debris. He had wriggled and climbed to the crest of this steep, sloping rubble, and now perched thirty feet above the floor with a lantern in his hand, his shoulders and the back of his head hunkered nearly against the dome of the ceiling.

"Eisean, for the last—come down from there," Eabhiros said from below. He stood with Graelle, both of them having observed Eisean's clumsy progress up the slope. "You are going to fall and break your bloody neck."

"I am not," Eisean said. He reached up, hooking his fingertips into a narrow opening between the ceiling and debris. He could just barely wedge his fingers through the slim margin of space, but it was enough to feel the draft of air moving from the chamber beyond against his skin. He looked down at Eabhiros and Graelle again, grinning. "It goes through. I can feel air. The tunnel goes through beyond this wall."

"Eisean, you promised Isbaenna and Taemir you would keep put," Eabhiros said.

"No, I promised I would not leave the catacombs," Eisean said, and he began to scratch at the opening, loosening dirt and gravel with his hand. "Which technically, I am not."

Rhyden had received a peculiar note from Kierken the night before, bidding him to meet with the King outside of the city at nine o'clock. Isbaenna and Taemir had suspected a trick and had tried desperately to dissuade him from going, but Rhyden had been insistent. By that morning's first light, he still had not returned, a fact that had disturbed and worried them all, and had driven Taemir nearly to a panic.

"That bloody note was not from Kierken! I knew it was not!" Taemir had cried, reaching into his justicoat pocket, producing a folded page of parchment. He had flapped it at the others as they gathered around him. "This note is from the King. It arrived at my flat just this morrow, not even an hour ago." He had read from it aloud:

"Rhyden, mo'cara—

Forgive me for not contacting you sooner. I have not wished to interrupt what I am certain must be precious time enjoyed in your family's dear company. Qynh has disappeared. I do not know if she has but wandered—as is a fond and common habit for her—or if some grim circumstance has befallen her, but I have dispatched every guard at my disposal—every soldier in my command—to search this city and find her, deliver her safely and unharmed to us once more. I should have told you before this morrow and I am sorry for the alarm and distress I know these tidings must surely bring to you. Despite this, I am resolved that we must see our plans

through for the masked ball. What other choice do I have, except to yield to my despair, crumple beneath the weight of such sorrow and fear? Please come this morrow, if I might beg you from your family's keeping. We should discuss the matter of your presentation so that all will be in place for this evening, that Lahnduren has no opportunity for escape. If he has the Queen, by my breath—tonight he will tell me where he has brought her, and I will run my own blade beneath the bastard's chin—rive his skull from his neck and end his foul measure once and for all.

Do'cara—Kierken"

Taemir had stared at Isbaenna, wagging the parchment at her. "Do these sound to you the words of a man who met with Rhyden only last night? They do not to me. It was a trick. Some manner of bloody trick by Lleuwyn Peildreigh to lure him from us. Surely something has happened to him, Isbaenna. If it was anything less, he would have returned by now."

They had decided to try and find Rhyden, to follow the course he must have taken beyond the city to a place called the Pitlochry Overlook. Rhyden had mentioned that the King had bid him come to this secluded and wooded overlook, and they meant to see if any evidence remained of Rhyden's presence there, of any attack he might have fended off.

Eisean and Eabhiros had insisted on going with them. Rhyden had risked his own life and honor to see them freed from Gaol, and they were both restless with worry—for Kaevir, of whom there seemed no sign or hope, and now for Rhyden. Neither had intention of playing the role of docile, injured lamb, cowering in the safe haven of the catacombs whilst others rallied to action around them.

"Hoah, no," Taemir had said, shaking his head. "Neither of you is leaving this tunnel. That is the last thing we need—one or both of you to be recognized on the streets and captured once more. You both keep put and see to my Lady Graelle and the Queen." He turned to Graelle. "If they try to leave once we are gone, hit them in the head with something."

The three had been gone for more than an hour, and Eisean had wandered the length and breadth of the catacombs over and over, disconcerted and tense. He found himself returning time and again to the crumbled pile of dirt and rocks Taemir had told them had been put in place to seal the Crown Theatre's tunnels from the rest of the city's underground drains and shafts.

"These tunnels extend throughout the entire city," Eisean said, digging his toes securely into his perch footing and scraping away at the opening above him, hoping to enlarge it. "Even nearly to Gaol, remember, Eabhiros?"

"He should not be up there," Graelle murmured, fretful. "He is weak yet, and unsteady. He might fall."

"If we can get through this wall, we can get to the tunnels," Eisean said. He turned and looked at Eabhiros. "Taemir's maps and guides are still here. He left them behind and I have been reading them. I figure if Llewyn Peildraigh has taken Rhyden, there are only two logical places he might keep him—Gaol, or the cathedral, Ardeaglais'Coroin. Mayhap these tunnels lead near enough that we might learn something, see if Rhyden is there. What could it hurt?"

He glanced up at the narrow opening near the ceiling in the earthen mound and then turned once more, meeting Eabhiros' gaze. "I have been thinking besides," he said. "No one can find Kaevir and yet no one seems to believe he has left the city. They are searching the streets for him, Taemir said; armored battalions hunting for him without any luck. There is a fifty-thousand mark reward for his arrest. Where could he hide? What inn or tavern would harbor him with that sort of price on him? If he has not left the city, but cannot be found within the city..."

Eabhiros blinked at him. "You think he found his way into the tunnels?" he whispered.

Eisean nodded, his eyes hopeful and eager. "I think mayhap he is hurt, or lost," he said. "But somewhere, yes. I think he might be. It seems like something Kaevir would do, do you not think?"

Eabhrios grinned at him. It hurt his battered lip, his torn and beaten brow, and he winced for the effort. "I think you will never clear a hole big enough to crawl through with just your hands," he said. He turned to Graelle. "Come on. Let us see if we cannot find some shovels."

It took well over an hour, with Eisean, Eabhiros, and Graelle all scooping heaping spadefuls of dirt and rock from the mound before they cleared enough space for Eisean to wriggle his head and shoulders through. They had roused Qynh from her bed and brought her with them into the tunnel for safekeeping. Every day that passed brought some semblance of coherence back to her, but she suffered terribly with malaise brought on by her pregnancy, and her withdrawal from the afeem. She sat on the floor, pale and shivering as though febrile, her eyes ringed in heavy, dark shadows.

"The tunnels run beneath the palace," she whispered to Eabhiros. "The laundering chamber ... where the maids dump the wash water into the drains." She met his eyes, reaching out and coiling her hand against his wrist. "We could use them," she breathed. "We ... we could get inside the palace tonight for the mhas'cor. I ... I could warn Kierken. He would believe me..."

"Eisean! Oh, Eabhiros—he fell! Help!" Graelle cried suddenly, and Eabhiros leapt to his feet, alarmed. Graelle crouched at the top of the rubble and looked over her shoulder, her eyes enormous and frightened. "He was trying to wriggle through, and the other side gave way!" she cried. "He fell!"

"Eisean!" Eabhiros yelled, clambering up the slope. He tried to shove his way

through the narrow opening, peering into the darkness. "Eisean, can you hear me?"

"I can hear you," Eisean called back. "Be careful! The wall over here is not stable!"

"Eisean, are you hurt?" Graelle called from over Eabhiros' shoulder.

"No, I do not think so," Eisean said. He managed a shaky laugh. "No worse than I was to start with, at least."

"I am coming to get you," Eabhiros called, squirming and forcing his way through the hole. "Stay where you are."

"You will not fit," Eisean said. "Eabhiros, I could scarcely make it through!"

Eabhiros inched his way down the wall, holding fast to a rope with both hands as he descended. He had found a fairly sturdy steel beam protruding among the rocks and debris in the catacombs, and tied the end of the rope to this to support his weight as he climbed. Eisean came and stood beneath him, his arms outstretched, as if he had a hope in the Bith of staying Eabhiros from a painful fall should the rope or his grasp yield. Eabhiros kept a wary eye over his shoulder, glancing down at Eisean's worried, upturned face until at last his feet brushed against a slip of sloping, sodden ground.

"Come on," he said, heaving a sigh of relief. "Let us get out of here."

"What?" Eisean blinked at him. "We cannot leave—not yet. We have made it already. We should follow the tunnel."

"No, we should not," Eabhiros said. "We should both climb back up this bloody damn rope and keep to the other room, like we promised we would. Sweet Mother, have we not found enough trouble between the two of us already at Gaol? We—" Eisean caught his arm, and stared at him with imploring eyes.

"Eabhiros, we made it down," he pleaded. "What if Kaevir is down here somewhere? What if he is hurt? He needs us, Eabhiros—Rhyden and Kaevir both need us. We must try. Please, can we not...?"

Eabhiros sighed heavily, and grimaced as his broken ribs pained him.

"Please, Eabhiros," Eisean said.

Eabhiros frowned at him and sighed again. "Only until the next shaft," he said, and Eisean grinned. "The next shaft, Eisean—only that and not a footstep farther." Eisean kept beaming at him, and Eabhiros frowned all the more. "I mean it, Eisean. Stop smiling at me, rot you. Mother Above, you are as incorrigible as Kaevir."

"Rhyden!"

Taemir was on his feet, springing up from his seat before the coach had even drawn to a full stop at the Pitlochry Overlook. He threw open the coach door and rushed

outside, his footsteps stumbling for purchase in the leaves and pine needles in his haste.

"Rhyden!" he shouted again, his eyes wide and frantic, his hand cupped near his mouth. He ran through the trees, heedless of Isbaenna crying out to him as she stepped down from the carriage.

"Taemir, wait!"

He did not listen to her; did not even seem to hear her voice as he bounded into the woods, his stride swift and broad as he turned about, staring desperately in all directions, calling for his brother.

"Rhyden, can you hear me?"

He came to a staggering, skittering halt when he found Rhyden's gelding lashed to a tree. The horse pawed the ground anxiously at his approach, its ears flattened against its skull, its lips pulled back to reveal its teeth, bared against the plate of its bit. It whinnied softly at Taemir, and he could see the fright upon it was nothing new; the reins which looped around the tree showed signs of fervent gnawing, as though something had terrorized the animal so badly, it had tried to chew through the restraining straps to escape.

"It is Rhyden's horse," Taemir said, turning to Isbaenna, stricken. "He was here, then. He was here."

"Taemir," Isbaenna said, her expression plaintive and kind as she reached for him. "Le do thoil, let us—"

Taemir backpedaled from her, and his brows drew together. "He was here!" he snapped, and he whirled about, running again through the trees, approaching the edge of the overlook. "Rhyden!" he screamed. "Rhyden, where are you? Answer me!"

Taemir was frightened and panicked, and in his frenzied state, he did not take immediate notice of the landscape around them. Isbaenna walked slowly, her eyes trained on the ground, the trees.

All about them, leaves and pine needles had been swept aside as though plowed through by furious wind gusts. They had been buffeted so hard, the ground in their wake lay barren and exposed; leaves had been piled around tree bases in deep, sloping drifts. Young trees had snapped in twain, their spindly trunks broken and crumpled. Low-hanging boughs in more mature trees had cracked like brittle kindling, and listed toward the ground, dangling like limp and shattered fingertips grazing the dirt.

"What caused this?" Isbaenna whispered, feeling a terrible, icy dread steal upon her heart. She realized what might have wreaked such damage even as the words escaped her mouth, and she felt her breath and voice tangle in the back of her throat

with dismay.

She heard Taemir utter a strangled, anguished cry from ahead of them, and she ran toward the sound. Taemir had fallen on his knees before a large pine tree. He reached out with his hands, his fingertips trembling as he touched the trunk. "There is blood here," he gasped, breathless with horror. He looked over his shoulder at Isbaenna, his eyes swimming with tears. "And ... and in the leaves here ... soaked into the ground ... There is so much blood..."

"Taemir..." Isbaenna said.

Taemir stumbled to his feet. "But where is he?" he whispered. "What have they done to him? Where is he?" He staggered over something hidden among the leaves, and he danced clumsily to regain his footing. He stooped down, and moaned anew, his tears spilling as he cradled Rhyden's balkstaff between his hands. "Oh, no ... le do thoil..." he gasped.

There was blood smeared on either end of the balkstaff, staining the iron tips, a tangle of unmistakable blonde hair caught at one end; long, fluttering strands twisted and knotted as though wrenched from the scalp as the stave had battered against someone's head.

"Oh, no..." Isbaenna whispered.

Taemir turned and ran to the edge of the overlook. "Rhyden!" he shrieked, clutching the stave between his hands. "Rhyden—answer me! Rhyden!" He tossed aside the balkstaff and scrambled over the side of the sloping foothill. The overlook dropped in a cascade of cragged granite tiers toward the forests below and the lake beyond, and Taemir slid down to the first of the plummeting levels, searching for any sign of Rhyden. When he found none, he turned and stared up at Isbaenna, helpless and distraught. "What have they done with him?" he cried out. "They must have taken him somewhere if they did not throw him from the ledge! Where could he be?"

He began to scale the rockface, climbing up to the overlook once more, and Isbaenna offered her hand, helping him. "I ... I do not understand this," Taemir said to her. His tears had waned, and his brows were drawn in anger now. "We watched Rhyden dispatch more than twenty armed guards at Gaol on his own. There must have been at least that many—and more besides—to take him down, to hurt him. How can there be no sign of it? Nothing but some broken limbs and windswept leaves..." His voice faded, as the realization that had already come to Isbaenna occurred to him, too. "Wind..." he whispered.

"It cannot be, Taemir," Isbaenna said. "No, I do not believe it. Kaevir would never hurt Rhyden. Why would he attack him?"

"Because the Stone is evil," Taemir said, meeting Isbaenna's gaze. "Rhyden tried to tell you that. It makes whoever bears it fall under a dark sway—the Shadow."

"I cannot believe that," Isbaenna said, closing her hands into defiant fists. "I know Kaevir. Listen to me—it must be Lleuwyn somehow. What if he has Kaevir? What if he has kept him hidden all this while? Lleuwyn could tell him whatever he wanted to, convince Kaevir of anything—even that Rhyden is somehow his enemy."

"Lleuwyn wants the Stone for himself—you heard Qynh," Taemir said to her. "He would see the Crown and both of the Shadow Talismans as his own. Why would he bother to trick Kaevir—deceive him into wielding the Stone—when he could claim it for himself?"

"Mayhap he has tried to claim it already and cannot," Isbaenna said. "The Stone chooses its bearer and it has chosen Kaevir. Maybe no one else but Kaevir can wield the Stone's power and that is why Lleuwyn would trick Kaevir, deceive him. He wants the Stone, and he is not chosen; he cannot command it. Why not command the one who does?"

They made it back to the grounds of the Crown Theatre within the hour. "We should go to the King," Taemir said to Isbaenna as they walked toward the theatre building. The two had already had this argument, and Isbaenna frowned at him. "We should," he insisted. "Kierken will listen to us. He must! Surely he would—"

"He would throw us in Gaol, Taemir," Isbaenna said. "How would you propose we explain how we came to know such things? Everything we have done—freeing Eisean and Eabhiros, harboring Graelle and the Queen—it can be misconstrued as treason against the Crown. We need proof of our claims, and the only way we shall have it is to stop Lleuwyn."

"And how would you propose we do that?" Taemir asked, arching his brow sharply.

"I do not know. Just let me..." Isbaenna began. Her voice faded as she glanced down at the ground.

"What?" Taemir asked, and when he looked down his eyes flew wide, his breath drawing to a startled standstill in his throat.

The dirt of the narrow stable yard behind the theatre was freshly trodden, cleaved and furrowed by numerous hooves and boot heels; grim signs of passage which had not been there that morrow as they had left. "Mother Above," Isbaenna gasped.

Taemir bore his father's sword against his hip, beneath the flap of his justicoat. He slipped his hand against the hilt and drew it from its scabbard. "You keep here," he said to Isbaenna. "I will go inside and have a look around."

"Rot that, Taemir," Isbaenna said. "I am not keeping anywhere."

They crept inside together. "They must have followed one or both of us this morning," Isbaenna whispered. "Do you think they are still here?"

"I do not know," Tameir whispered back. "I saw no horses in the stable, or on the

grounds."

The Crown Theatre was a circular, tiered building to allow for optimum seating. Sunlight seeped in pale, diffused swaths from the vaulted ceilings, where narrow openings between roof eaves served as windows for ventilation. These offered dim light, of precious little use in the dark alcoves beyond the perimeter of the stage. Taemir and Isbaenna moved slowly, cautiously along, nearly blind, their eyes and ears straining for any outward signs of intrusion.

"Someone—*ow, dammit!*—has been blundering about in here for certain," Taemir said, uttering a quiet yelp and hopping as he ran foot-first into an unexpected, overturned crate. "We have props stored back here from the final performance. It has all been knocked about—have a care."

They reached one of the trapdoors leading into the tunnels and Taemir knelt, fumbling in the dark until he curled his hand about the iron ring and hoisted it open. "You hold it for me," Isbaenna said. "I will go down first."

"Isbaenna..." Taemir began, and then they heard a sudden clamor from behind them, the thunder of numerous, sudden footsteps. The floor shuddered beneath them with encroaching boot heels, and heavy hands suddenly fell firmly against their shoulders and arms.

"Well, now, what have we here?" a voice boomed, filled with malicious good cheer.

"No!" Isbaenna cried, whirling about, shrugging her arm violently to dislodge the offending hands. She caught sight of a crowd of silhouettes behind them—a Pobail soldiers—and she struggled wildly.

"Hoah, no, you do not—!" A guard caught her from behind, his fist closing painfully against her wrist, crushing. She felt his arm clamp about her middle, and she was hoisted backwards off of her feet.

"Taemir!" she screamed, kicking and fighting with her captor. She caught a gleam of sunlight off steel as Taemir shouted out angrily, battering at the soldiers with his sword. One of the guards reared back his gauntlet, closed in a broad fist, and before Isbaenna could wail out to Taemir in warning, the soldier drove his fist squarely into the back of the young Elf's head. Taemir crumpled to the ground, and the soldiers drove their sabatons brutally, repeatedly into his gut, punting his groin.

"Stop, you bastards—no—!" Isbaenna cried, thrashing. The guards grabbed Taemir roughly, hauling him to his feet. "You rot bastards! The King will hear of this! You will all answer for this, by my breath—!"

Her voice cut abruptly short as a heavy palm clapped atop her mouth. She could hear horrible, heartwrenching sounds as the other soldiers continued to beat Taemir. She screamed for him around the stifling hand, and fought wildly, vainly as the soldiers dragged her away.

Eisean shimmied up the length of a narrow chimney in the sewer tunnels, his back shoved painfully against one side of the stone shaft, his feet against the other. He could see dim light filtering through the iron grating above him. He pressed his hands against the wall and moved his feet, inching further up the shaft, moving slowly, deliberately.

"What is up there?" he heard Eabhiros call. Eisean glanced over his shoulder and could see him standing about ten feet below, beneath the opening of the chimney, his face upturned, his eyes round with worry. This was at least the eleventh such shaft Eisean had wriggled up, and Eabhiros was firmly convinced at some point either his stamina or good fortune would fail and he would fall.

"I do not know," Eisean said. Whatever lay above was someplace warm and moist; steam wafted through the rungs in a hazy, wandering cloud. Eisean frowned curiously as he scooted again toward the top of the shaft. "I cannot see yet."

"Be careful," Eabhiros said. "Those stones look unstable. Do not fall."

"I will not bloody fall," Eisean said, shaking his head and chuckling. "You are like a nagging mother, do you know, Eabhiros?" He lifted his hand, drew his fingertips to his thumb and then opened and closed them, mimicking a mouth yammering. "Yap, yap, yap."

They had been exploring the tunnels for nearly three hours, following Taemir's maps to guide them through the winding maze of sewers beneath Belgaeran. They had come to a point in the tunnel system little more than an hour ago that did not appear on any map; where such discrepancy had alarmed Eabhiros, Eisean had been intrigued. The fact that this portion of catacombs was blocked from the rest by a heavy iron gate had only served to stoke his curiosity all the more.

"It is as though someone does not wish people to go any further," Eisean had remarked.

"Mayhap we should heed them, then," Eabhiros said. "The map shows a wall here."

"My eyes show a gate here," Eisean said. "And tunnels beyond."

He managed to coax Eabhiros beyond the gate and the two of them ventured onward. Eabhiros had been limping for awhile now, and Eisean knew he was hurting, though he offered no complaint. Eisean felt bad, but at the same time, he was loathe to turn around, to return to the Crown Theatre just yet. He was desperate to find Kaevir; certain that his friend was down there somewhere.

He heard voices drifting softly, faintly through the grating above, and he froze, his eyes wide, his body crouched and poised in the shaft.

"What is it?" Eabhiros asked.

A shadow passed across the dim light through the grate, and Eisean raised his eyes

as a woman's voice, loud and plain, resounded suddenly. "...so I tell her if she does not find the bloody thing, my lady is going to see me flayed..."

Eisean had drawn near enough to the grating to reach up and hook his fingers about the iron rods. He pulled himself up, wincing as a flare of pain lanced through his injured side for the effort. He pressed his face against the grate and struggled to peer beyond the opening. The steam was more apparent now, and he could hear the sound of water sloshing nearby. The air from the chamber above him had a distinctive, nearly pungent aroma, like lye. He could not see much; the steam was thick beyond the grating, but he could make out shallow trenches cleaving the floor about the grate. He glimpsed large, looming shapes in the haze, and could hear women chattering to one another.

It was a wash room, he realized. Some sort of laundering chamber. The steam came from large vats of hot water in which linens soaked; the sloshing sounds were the gossiping laundresses stirring soap into the vats with wooden paddles.

"Eisean...?" Eabhiros called quietly, looking up the shaft.

Eisean paid him no mind. The Queen had mentioned to Eabhiros that the sewers ran beneath the palace, that drains in the laundering chamber led into the catacombs. Eisean wondered if that was what they had inadvertantly discovered. He drew himself up against the grate once more, shoving mightily with his heels against the wall to support himself as he strained to wedge his face through the bars for a better glimpse.

"She will never make it through her bloody chamber door," he heard one of the laundresses laugh. "Her damn pannier is broader than her arm span. She will be stuck fast and squalling—mark it, lasses, I tell you. Caterwauling like a toddler, her wig smacking into the top of the doorframe."

Eisean heard a peculiar groaning sound, metal scraping against metal from somewhere in the laundry room, and he frowned, curious.

"Step back now, Gyrtle," he heard a woman say. "'Tis hot—have a care."

The grinding sound grew louder, and he heard water slosh noisily. All at once, Eisean realized what the trenches in the floor were for, and what the metallic creaking meant. The vats were made of thick, heavy copper, each set upon cumbersome hinges; a lever could be lowered, and the vats would rotate onto their sides, spilling the scalding water within them into the troughs on the floor. The troughs directed the water toward the grate, draining it into the sewers below.

He heard a loud slap of water, and a boom as the lip of the copper vat smacked against the floor within the chamber; he could feel the iron bars of the grate vibrate at the forceful impact.

"Bugger me...!" Eisean gasped, his eyes flying wide in sudden horror. He heard the

roaring rush of water as it swept along the trough toward the grate, and he reacted instinctively, opening his hands and jerking his feet away from the wall. "Eabhiros—get back—!" he cried out as he fell, toppling toward the floor.

Eabhiros responded out of instinct as well, buckling his knees and opening his arms to catch Eisean, anticipating his sudden weight against his chest. As Eisean landed in his arms, slamming heavily against his chest, Eabhiros screamed breathlessly, feeling pain sear through his shoulder, his broken ribs. He staggered back, cradling Eisean, and his feet stumbled from beneath him. He fell, taking Eisean with him. His ass had barely met the ground before Eisean scrambled to his feet, clamped his arms about Eabhiros, and dragged him backwards.

"Eabhiros—move—!" Eisean gasped, frightened. Water spewed down from the grate, thunderous as it smashed into the floor before them. Eisean scuttled back, hauling Eabhiros in his arms, as a tremendous cloud of sudden steam surrounded them, obscuring everything from view.

"Eabhiros...!" Eisean cried. "Eabhiros ... Oh, Sweet Mother! Are you alright?"

"I told you ... you would bloody fall..." Eabhiros growled, grimacing as he sat up. He sucked in a whimpering, hurting breath. "Here, help me rise. Get my feet under me. What was that? Where did that water come from?"

"A laundering room," Eisean said. "I think we must have found the laundering room the Queen told you of. That is why all of these tunnels were gated off and not marked on the maps—they lead underneath the palace." He drew his legs beneath him, keeping his arm behind Eabhiros, letting his friend lean heavily against him as they stood together. "I will bring you back to the theatre. I want to keep searching the tunnels ... try a bit more to find Kaevir."

"No," Eabhiros said. "No, Eisean, it is not safe."

"I have to try, Eabhiros," Eisean said.

"Eisean..." Eabhiros said quietly, gently. "I want to believe Kaevir is still alive, too. With all of my heart—all that I have. When you said he might be in these tunnels, I ... I had hope, Eisean, but now I..."

"Eabhiros, please..." Eisean said.

"We have been down here for hours, Eisean," Eabhiros told him.

"We have not covered even a quarter of the catacombs," Eisean insisted. "They go for miles, in all directions—you have seen the maps. He could be anywhere among them. He ... he could..."

"Eisean," Eabhiros said, closing his hand against the younger man's.

"I cannot leave him," Eisean whispered, stricken. He lowered his head toward the

ground. "He did not leave me in Daevonshire, and he could have. He could have left me to rot. Please, I cannot leave him."

They trudged along together, following the catacombs, sloshing through water as high as their knees in places. They made it nearly to the theatre. Their progress was slow; Eabhiros limped clumsily, and Eisean nearly dragged him the latter part of their trek. He paused frequently under the pretense of consulting a map, but Eabhiros was no fool. He knew Eisean stopped for him, to allow him to rest. Eisean knew his strength waned, sapped by the cold and pain.

"We are nearly there," Eisean told him quietly during the last such pause. He folded the damp and tattered map he had been looking at and tucked it into the pocket of his breeches. He stepped near to Eabhiros, who stood slumped against the wall, and tried to smile. "Fifteen minutes at the most," Eisean told him. "Even at your creeping pace, you crippled yob, we will make it. There is a fire waiting for us, dry clothes, blankets."

They plodded onward a few stumbling paces, and then Eisean drew to an unexpected halt. He had been staring down at the ground, watching Eabhiros' clumsy footsteps, but all at once, his chin shot up, his brows narrowing, his breath drawing still. He carried the lantern in the hand about Eabhiros' waist, and he moved it now, dimming the wick in full and snuffing the small flame.

"What is it?" Eabhiros breathed, following his gaze. They were in a narrow secondary shaft, approaching a juncture to a broader tunnel. The water was shallow here, only to their ankles, but moving with a relatively swift current.

Suddenly, Eabhiros heard what had stopped Eisean. From ahead of them, from somewhere along the wider tunnel, came a soft but distinctive sound—footsteps tromping briskly through the water. Eabhiros caught the flickering glow of torchlight upon the wall of the shaft ahead, as though someone approached, bearing a flame in tow, and he gasped in alarm.

"Back," Eisean whispered, tugging at Eabhiros with his arm. "Back, back, Eabhiros—!"

He tried to lead Eabhiros away from the intersection, but Eabhiros stumbled, his feet splashing in the water. Eisean did not waste a measure; keeping Eabhiros' arm draped across his back, his hand grasped firmly, Eisean pivoted, folding his knees and tucking his shoulder against Eabhiros' gut.

"What are you—?" Eabhiros whispered.

"Ciunas," Eisean hissed. *Hush*. He hoisted Eabhiros into the air, over his shoulders. He shuffled his feet, trying to find his balance beneath Eabhiros' considerable weight without disturbing the water too noisily.

The splashing of footsteps grew louder now, the swath of torchlight upon the bricks

of the tunnel juncture broader and brighter. Eisean carried Eabhiros back in the direction they had just come. They had passed a slim drain pipe only moments earlier; without the lantern's light to guide him, Eisean tried to count his footsteps in his mind, estimating its distance from them. He bumped into the wall and prodded with his foot until he came upon the pipe against the floor.

He bent his knees and lowered Eabhiros onto his feet. "There is a pipe here," he whispered, hooking his fingers against Eabhiros' sleeve in the dark. He knelt, pulling Eabhiros with him, and then caught Eabhiros' hand blindly between his own, pressing his palm against the edge of the pipe opening. "Here—do you feel it? Someone is coming—get inside quickly—go feet first."

"What if it is Graelle?" Eabhiros asked softly. "Isbaenna and Taemir, returned from the foothills, searching for us?"

"I do not think it so," Eisean whispered. He had heard muffled voices before, and he heard them again now, louder and more clear—men's voices, unfamiliar to him. "Go. I am right behind you."

The pipe was just wide enough to accommodate them both only if they lay smashed against one another, as close as endeared lovers. Whatever flowed in the pipe was stagnant and fetid; it was thick and tacky like heavy mud beneath them. Eisean lay on his stomach, with Eabhiros nearly atop him in the end as he struggled to peer beyond the edge of the narrow tunnel.

"Two of you—check that tunnel there," Eisean heard a loud voice command. More footsteps in water, at an alarming proximity now, and a broad circumference of lamplight suddenly spilled in the shaft before them, dancing on the dark current.

"Duck your head," Eisean gasped to Eabhiros, and as he felt Eabhiros tuck his forehead against his shoulder, he lowered his own face against the cradle of his forearms, feeling his nose sink into the slimy, stinking mud beneath him. Neither of them drew breath until the rushing footsteps had passed them by, and when Eisean lifted his head warily, he realized the light had faded again.

He inched forward and peeped out, catching sight of two soldiers moving briskly along the tunnel away from them. He saw the darting gleam of light against polished silver plate armor, and a flash of bright red uniforms beneath.

"Soldiers," he whispered to Eabhiros, stricken. "A'Pobail soldiers. I can see their scarlet uniforms in their lamp light."

"Mother Above..." Eabhiros said. "How many?"

"Two that just passed us. I think two more—mayhap four by the sounds—moving down the other shaft, away from the theatre."

"Armed?"

Eisean nodded. "And armored," he said grimly. "How in the duchar did they get here?"

"Mayhap they followed Taemir," Eabhiros said. "If Lleuwyn is suspicious of Rhyden, surely he would harbor his doubts for his brother. Or his friends..."

"Isbaenna—!" Eisean gasped, struggling beneath Eabhiros all at once, trying to squirm out from the pipe. "Mathair Maith—they have found the theatre catacombs!"

They hurried to the steep wall of rubble separating the sewers from the catacombs beneath the Crown Theatre. Though they met with no other a'Pobail soldiers, voices and splashing footsteps echoed along the tunnels behind them, keeping Eabhiros and Eisean on their guard and anxious. Their scrap of rope had been replaced by several sturdy lengths which draped down the wall. At the sight of this, Eisean moaned softly in despair, his brows drawing together.

"They have been here," he hissed. He looked up at Eabhiros. "If they have hurt Isbaenna or Taemir, by my breath, I will—"

"Peace, Eisean," Eabhiros murmured. He lifted his chin, following the lines of rope upward with his eyes toward the ceiling. "Let us see what has happened."

They climbed up to the opening and made their way carefully down the steep slope on the other side. They stood together in the catacombs once more, shivering in the fluttering light of torches along the walls, looking about cautiously.

"I do not hear anything," Eisean whispered.

"Mayhap they are all in the sewers," Eabhiros whispered and Eisean nodded, his eyes large and round, darting this way and that, watching for any signs of movement.

They moved along the tunnel, hugging the brick wall, trying to keep in the shadows whenever they could. The catacombs appeared empty. There was no sign of any a'Pobail soldiers lurking in wait for them, but nor was there any glimpse of Graelle or Qynh, or the others who had gone to search for Rhyden. The tunnels were deserted and quiet, and Eabhiros and Eisean made their way to one of the trap doors and stood beneath it.

They heard a sudden rattle from above them, and they jerked their heads toward the trap door, listening as the heavy metal ring which served as its handle on the other side was lifted. The hinges groaned as someone began to pry the door back, opening it.

"Quickly—!" Eabhiros hissed, and he caught Eisean by the arm, shoving him backwards. The two of them staggered behind a tumble of fallen crates and spilled costumes, and they fell to the ground, crouching and hiding among the debris. They had only just ducked their heads, wriggling down beneath piles of clothing behind the corners of two toppled boxes, when they heard footsteps descending the ladder from the theatre above.

"...if they are in the tunnels, they could be bloody anywhere by now," they heard a voice say. Eisean risked a peep and saw a dozen a'Pobail soldiers climbing down the ladder, standing together in a cluster.

"The sewers run all beneath the city—miles upon miles," said one of the guards, his expression grim. "A man could live the measure of his days down here and never be found."

As the soldiers began to move, appropriately galvanized, one paused and turned his head toward where Eabhiros and Eisean were hiding. Alarmed, Eisean drew back, tucking his head against Eabhiros' shoulder, his breath halting in his throat.

"What in the duchar is that stench?" the guard said, wrinkling his nose and frowning. "Do you smell that, Avien?"

"Likely a dead rat. This rotted place is crawling with vermin," said another, Avien. He clapped his hand against his friend's helm. "Come on. You will see us docked for dawdling."

"Where would the guards have taken them??" Eisean whispered to Eabhiros. When the guards had left, the two had scuttled further behind the dilapidated props and stacked boxes for cover. "Gaol? The cathedral? Where would they be?"

"I do not know," Eabhiros replied. "Not Gaol, I am certain. The King might learn of it. No, they have taken them somewhere secret and safe. I think Ardeaglais Coroin is as good a guess as any."

Eisean shifted his weight, as though he meant to stand. "Surely the soldiers know where they are. We can creep up on some unawares, club them, get them to tell us what they know. If we can reach them in time, we can still—"

"Eisean, we have no time," Eabhiros told him, interjecting softly. "We have to go to the mhas'cor—you and I—and we have to leave soon. You heard Rhyden—the Queen told him Llewyn Peildreigh had planned an assassination attempt against the King tonight. We have to go into the tunnels again and make our way back to the palace. We must stop Kierken's murder."

"What?" Eisean blinked at him, stricken. "No, Eabhiros, we cannot do that. We cannot leave Isbaenna, and Taemir, Graelle, the Queen. We cannot. Llewyn would claim the Crown and see them killed. We have to help them."

Eabhiros placed his hand against Eisean's shoulder. "The only way we can help them is to stop Llewyn," he said. "To keep him from claiming the Crown—killing the King."

Eisean looked unconvinced and uncertain. He stared down at his lap, torn and troubled. "How will we get close enough to the King to protect him?" he asked. "We cannot, Eabhiros. We will be recognized."

"It is a mhas'cor," Eabhiros said. "A masked ball, Eisean. We will be in disguise—in costume."

Eisean glanced at him. "We have no pence," he said. "And we cannot go into the city to buy anything. Where are we going to find masks and costumes, Eabhiros?"

Eabhiros arched his brow and smiled. He reached down and plucked the hem of a rumpled shirt from among the spilled theatrical costumes. He wagged it at Eisean. "Hullo," he said.

Eisean caught the shirt with his fingertips. "Hullo," he said, blushing brightly. He met Eabhiros' eyes and smiled sheepishly. "Takes me a few moments sometimes."

Eabhiros grinned at him, reaching out and tousling Eisean's damp, tangled hair fondly. "Silly yob," he said.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Rhyden heard the sound of a key turning in the iron door of the crypt beneath Ardeaglais'Coroin; the faint, clacking noise of metal against metal drifting through the darkness. He looked toward the sound, feeling the noose about his neck slip tight as he raised his head. He had been alone in the cold, impenetrable blackness for hours, his heart seized with despair and fear, and he had scraped the soft flesh of his wrists open and bloody turning his hands desperately against his bonds. He had been fumbling with the thick knots binding his arms to the chair legs, trying in vain to loosen them. He remained now as he had from the first, despite his best efforts to free himself—trussed and trapped, helpless in the darkness.

The door opened and a silhouetted figure stepped inside, bearing a lantern in hand. Rhyden squinted, lowering his head against the sudden light, whimpering softly as the garrotte about his neck drew all the tighter. He forced himself to look up, to open his eyes.

"Beannacht, Lord Fabhcun," Llewyn said, smiling as he approached. Several young men came into the room behind him, dressed in the vestments of valets. They carried clothing with them, a resplendent outfit of cream colored silk with gold embroidery—shirt and breeches, sleeveless waistcoat and justicoat, a matching tricorne hat, polished ivory shoes with gold buckles and stockings. They lay these vestments out on the stone floor, arranging them neatly and near to Rhyden. Rhyden blinked at them in confusion, watching the last valet drape a length of ivory silk atop them all; a mask with eye holes trimmed in gold. Others brought in linens and a large porcelain washbasin; another still bore a pitcher. He looked at Llewyn, his brows drawn, his breath wheezing from around the confines of the gag as the valets took their leave.

"It is nearly time for the ball," Llewyn said. "I have spent the afternoon in counsel with Kierken. He is expecting us early this evening, to discuss final arrangements for Lahnduren's expected appearance. I have assured him you shall arrive in timely fashion—in my company, of course."

"Tho thutha uteth," Rhyden hissed, wrenching his hands against his ropes, shearing open his flesh all the more. *Go bugger yourself.*

Llewyn chuckled. He reached with both hands behind Rhyden's head, brushing his fingertips lightly against Rhyden's ears, his hair, and Rhyden flinched, drawing more quiet laughter from Llewyn. Rhyden felt Llewyn tug briefly against the scrap of fabric fettered about his mouth, loosening the knot, and then the tight strap was gone. Llewyn pulled it away from Rhyden's face, letting it fall to the floor.

Rhyden spat out the wad of linen tucked against his tongue and dragged in deep mouthfuls of air, leaning over despite the throttling garrotte. His mouth felt tacky and dry, and tasted stale and bitter, but he could draw breath in full again, and he closed his eyes, panting. "Whatever your plans, Llewyn," he gasped, "whatever harm you

mean to bring to the King tonight, you will not get away with it."

Lleuwyn chuckled. "Of course I will, Lord Fabhcun," he said. "And you are going to help me."

"Bugger off, you rot," Rhyden said. "Do you think you can make me turn against my King? Do your worst, bastard. There is no measure of pain or torment you can bring that will make me betray Kierken."

Lleuwyn smiled at him. "Is that so?" he asked, as three more figures stepped across the threshold, entering the crypt. Two of them were a Pobail soldiers, clad in the distinctive scarlet uniforms of Lleuwyn's personal cadre. They led a third, stumbling and practically dragged between them, and as they stepped into the circumference of Lleuwyn's lamp light, Rhyden's heart stopped in sudden, absolute despair.

"Taemir...!" he gasped.

His brother looked up at the sound of his voice. Taemir's eyes were dazed; he had been beaten and his nose was broken, caked with dried blood, his lips battered and swollen. He met Rhyden's gaze, and his brows lifted, his eyes swimming with sudden tears. "Rhyden..." he croaked, his voice feeble and frail.

"No!" Rhyden screamed, lunging against his ropes, thrashing violently, strangling himself. He rocked the chair on its legs as he struggled to reach Taemir. "No! No, you bastard! No! Let him go! Leave him alone!"

Lleuwyn nodded his chin once, sharply at his guard. "Hold out his hand," he said.

Rhyden stared at him, straining against his bonds. "Do not hurt him," he said. "Do not hurt him, you sick, bastard rot. If you touch him—if you hurt my brother, I will kill you. I will rip your bloody damn heart from your breast, you sick, fetid bastard."

"He is a writer, is he not?" Lleuwyn asked Rhyden. "A playwright and poet, sometimes a novelist? A painter, as well. I believe Kierken has one of his landscapes framed in his library. A rather remarkable piece of work, I must admit."

"I will kill you," Rhyden hissed as Lleuwyn walked slowly toward Taemir. Taemir whimpered at his approach, trying to draw away from him, to jerk his hand back, but was unable to free himself from the guards. In a sudden, swift movement, Lleuwyn wrenched Taemir's thumb back, snapping the bones and ligaments loose of their moorings with a sickening, moist sound. Taemir shrieked, his legs buckling beneath him.

"No!" Rhyden screamed. "I will kill you, Lleuwyn Peildraigh—by my breath, you bastard! All that I have!"

Lleuwyn glanced at Rhyden. He closed his hand against Taemir's index finger, and forced it back toward his wrist in a sharp, violent gesture. Again, bone and thw tore and again, Taemir screamed, writhing in agony.

"Stop!" Rhyden wailed, thrashing against the chair. "You bastard rot! Stop it! Whatever you want, I will do it! I will do it!"

The corner of Llewyn's mouth hooked in a thin smile. "I thought as much," he said.

Kaevir heard the screams from his tower chamber, and he froze before the door, his eyes flown wide. "What in the duchar...?" he whispered. He opened the door a brief margin, leaning out into the corridor beyond.

He thought he heard an anguished voice resounding again, but the sound was barely audible, as though it found its way to his ear from a great distance. Kaevir glanced at the stairwell. He did not mean to summon the wind; he did not even have the Stone in his hand. He did not mean to call the wind, but it stirred just the same. He felt it flutter against his face, brushing through his hair as it followed the tower up toward him. The wind carried voices with it, bringing them to his ear as though it had read his mind and understood his curiosity, his alarm. He could hear words now, plainly spoken.

"I will kill you, Llewyn Peildraigh—by my breath, you bastard! All that I have!"

Kaevir jerked in the doorway as though he had been slapped. It was Rhyden Fabhcun's voice; the wind brought it to him from the catacombs and crypts beneath the tower foundation. Rhyden was screaming at Llewyn, cursing him, and the only thing that kept Kaevir from dashing down the stairs, rushing to Llewyn's aid, was the stricken anguish in Rhyden's voice. He screamed furious words without any rage in his voice. He was frantic, terrified, his cries shrill and distraught.

"Stop!" Rhyden shrieked in the wind. "You bastard rot! Stop it! Whatever you want, I will do it! I will do it!"

What is Llewyn doing to him? Kaevir thought, dismayed and frightened. And ... and why?

"No more, please," Rhyden pleaded, his voice strangled with tears. "Mathair Maith, no more. Do not hurt him. I will do whatever you say. Please."

The wind brought Llewyn's voice to Kaevir for the first time; Llewyn's fond and familiar voice speaking in an unfamiliar, callous and contemptuous tone. "Give me your word. I know you are bound to it, you pathetic Gaeilge, whether it is forced from you or not. You cannot lie; you cannot deceive—and you cannot break your sworn oath. Give me your word, Lord Fabhcun, and spare him another."

Kaevir blinked, puzzled and aghast. He had always heard tell that Elves could not lie; that deception went against the grain of their very natures, but he had not known many Elves, and had never given the matter much thought. Llewyn had told him Elves could lie; he had told Kaevir that Rhyden and Kierken knew nothing in their policies and practices except lies and treachery. Elves could lie; Rhyden Fabhcun lied as he drew breath.

"But if he cannot," Kaevir whispered. "If he cannot lie, and he cannot deceive, he could not have set Eabhiros and Eisean up to be hanged ... could he?"

Kaevir sat on the cushioned bench of Lleuwyn's carriage as they rode toward the royal palace. Rhyden sat across from him, with Lleuwyn settled comfortably on the seat next to the young Elf. Kaevir stared at Rhyden; he had stared at him without flinching or wavering nearly from the moment Rhyden had ducked his head and entered the cab of the coach.

"I regret that his company is necessary," Lleuwyn said to Kaevir. "I had hoped his absence from the palace might escape Kierken's notice, but alas, it has not. If he does not appear, it might alarm the King, and we cannot afford such risk."

As Lleuwyn spoke, Kaevir studied Rhyden. The Elf sat with his head lowered, his chin towards his chest as though he had resigned himself to some horrific and unavoidable fate.

"He will hold his tongue," Lleuwyn said, mistaking Kaevir's silence, his scrutiny of Rhyden for misgivings. "Do not worry for that, lad. He has agreed to do his part, provided I agree to spare his life and keep him from prosecution or imprisonment for his treachery. A coward's bargain, if ever I have heard of such, but what choice do we have? He will swing from Pionos if he should fail us, and his cowardice will keep him silent."

Rhyden said nothing. Kaevir looked at him, troubled, thinking about the bargain he had heard through the winds in the tower—an arrangement far different from the one Lleuwyn had just described to him.

"Kaevir, are you alright?" Lleuwyn asked, drawing his mind from his thoughts. He glanced toward the Easpag'Ard and found Lleuwyn regarding him with a drawn, worried expression.

"I am fine, Lleuwyn," Kaevir replied, smiling slightly. "I ... I am anxious, that is all."

"This is hard for you, I know," Lleuwyn said. "I am sorry that our present circumstances would only leave you more ill-at-ease."

Kaevir nodded, not raising his head. Lleuwyn moved, abandoning his seat next to Rhyden and joining Kaevir on the opposite bench. "It is nearly over," he said softly, clapping his hand against Kaevir's shoulder. "Keep faith, lad, and we will see this through together."

Kaevir did not answer him. He looked toward Rhyden, and found the Elf regarding him, his eyes sorrowful and frightened. Rhyden looked as though he wanted desperately to say something, to speak to Kaevir, but he made no sound. He averted his gaze to the window, watching the royal city roll past him.

"You did very well, Lord Fabhcun," Lleuwyn said to Rhyden. "No one suspected a thing."

The two walked together along a broad, empty corridor away from the King's library. They had just left their meeting with Kierken to finalize their plans and preparations and returned to the main floor of the palace, where the mhas'cor celebration was already well underway and Kaevir waited for them. They were surrounded by a half dozen a'Pobail soldiers, their footsteps echoing along the hall's vaulted ceiling, resonating against its polished, granite floor. This portion of the palace was prohibited to party guests, and though the dim sounds of the revelry below found them here like phantom murmurs, no one else was about, no other people stirred.

Rhyden did not look at Llewyn. He kept his eyes forward, his mouth drawn in a frown, his brows pinched. "You will never claim the Stone," he said.

He had sat in relative silence during the course of the meeting, listening helplessly, feeling his gut wrench in a sickened, painful knot as Kierken unwittingly agreed to arrangements that would lead to his own murder. Neisrod had returned from Iarnrod; he had left Belgaeran frustrated and disturbed by Kierken's plans to wield the Talismans, and had returned in no brighter spirits, to judge by his disapproving expression, his drawn brows. Over and over, Neisrod had looked to Rhyden for support as he had again argued the dangers of the Talismans, and over and over, Rhyden had merely stared at the table top, unable to meet his friend's gaze. The surprise and disappointment with which Neisrod regarded his mute resignation shamed him beyond measure.

Rhyden's quiet, withdrawn behavior had seemed to trouble Kierken, as well, and before the meeting had adjourned, the King had leaned across the table, folding his fingers against Rhyden's hand. "Rhyden, you have not shared much on these matters," he had said.

Rhyden had looked at Kierken, at his friend's kind face and concerned eyes. *Kierken, it is all lies—all of it!* Rhyden screamed within his mind. *Listen to Neisrod—please, Mother Above, do not do this. The Talismans are a lie. Llewyn is going to betray you! He is going to murder you and I do not know if I can stop him!*

Kierken had once possessed a powerful gift of sight; next to Trejaeran, he had been one of the strongest telepaths among the Elves. In the years before the Second War, Rhyden's thoughts, his pleas would have resounded in Kierken's mind as though Rhyden had shouted them into his ear. But now, like those of all of his race, Kierken's mind was closed. "Ta tu maith, mo'cara?" Kierken had asked Rhyden gently. *Are you alright, my friend?*

"Whatever you would bid of me, I shall see done, Your Majesty," Rhyden had replied. "There ... there is little else I can share but this."

"The Cloch'suthain was right all along," Rhyden said to Llewyn, as he walked unwillingly abreast of the Easpag'Ard down the palace corridor to rejoin the party. "Only one of the chosen four may bear the Stone's power—only Kaevir. You will

never have it, never control it."

"I have come to realize this, Lord Fabhcun," Llewwyn said with a nod. "But I can still have the Crown."

"I will stop you," Rhyden whispered. "I will not let you hurt Kierken."

Llewwyn chuckled. "You would not risk harm to Taemir."

"I will not let you hurt him, either."

"Can you stop Kaevir, Lord Fabhcun? The winds? I think Pitlochry should serve as apt demonstration in that regard. You would be dead before you even raised a hand in full against me."

Rhyden's brows narrowed beneath his mask. "The power is Kaevir's—not yours. That precious Book of yours is worthless. Kaevir does not need it to command the Stone."

Llewwyn smiled at him. "I may not be able to command the Stone," he said. "But as long as I have its bearer, so much the benefit to me. I admit, the Book has indeed proven to be a tragic waste of time and resources these past fifteen years."

"The Talismans are a lie," Rhyden said. "Kaevir has fallen to your sway—not the Shadow's."

"Yes, it would seem this mythos that the Elves have feared for so long has never been anything but," Llewwyn remarked. "No more than the evil contained within the heart of Ciardha ... loosed for a time upon the Bith and then conquered. The fodder of legend and lore; fables to frighten small children and simple minds." He smiled at Rhyden again, nearly sympathetic in his regard. "I am sorry that your friend Trejaeran and so many others died for nothing in the end. How very disappointed you must feel to have learned of this."

"Spare your pity and your breath," Rhyden hissed, making Llewwyn chuckle. "What will you do with him—with Kaevir—when you are finished with him? He is innocent of all of this—you have lied to him, deceived him, you bastard. What will become of him when his worth to you is spent? You would kill him, like Kierken?"

"I have a great many plans for our young Kaevir that will lead well beyond tonight," Llewwyn said. He glanced at Rhyden. "I think should like to see the Stone's might—Kaevir's power—unleashed next against Iarnrod."

Rhyden blinked at him, his footsteps faltering.

"Neisrod's alliance—indeed, that of all of Tirurnua—grows tiresome and strained. Kierken may lack the mettle to bring them to task, but I do not. I will wage war on them and I will conquer them. I will make our land whole once more, united under one Crown."

"That is madness," Rhyden said. "You will never succeed."

Lleuwyn smiled at him kindly. "Oh, but my dear lad," he said. "There is no way I can fail."

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Isbaenna groaned, coming to in the darkness. Her head ached, a terrible, throbbing pain and she opened her eyes, gasping softly for breath. She could not see anything. The darkness of her surroundings matched the black void of memories in her mind, and she struggled to remember where she was, or how she had come to be there.

She remembered returning to the Crown Theatre with Taemir, discovering to their horror that a'Pobail soldiers had been there in their absence. The guards had seized Taemir, beaten him; she recalled the heavy, horrible sounds of their fists pummelling his gut. They had grabbed her roughly; she had a vague and hazy memory of fighting with them as they tried to drag her from the theatre.

I fell, she remembered dimly. I ... I managed to fight loose of the one who held me, but there were too many of them. I struggled with them and I fell.

She had tripped, stumbling backwards, and felt a sharp, searing pain in her head as her brow had struck the unyielding corner of a large wooden crate. The blow had knocked the senses from her, rendering her unconscious, though for how long, Isbaenna could not tell.

Where am I? she wondered. She felt stone beneath her, smooth and cold, and to her right, pressing against her shoulder and spine, she could feel a wall. Disoriented and bewildered, Isbaenna drew her legs beneath her and sat up slowly. "Taemir?" she called out, her voice a scraping croak.

There was no answer, and Isbaenna frowned. She pivoted her hips, placing her palms against the smooth stone face of the wall. She stood, stumbling clumsily, and limped along the wall, keeping one hand against the stone and the other stretched warily before her, groping in the darkness.

"Hello?" she called hoarsely. "Taemir, can you hear me?"

A'Pobail soldiers had captured them; it seemed a likely enough assumption, even to Isbaenna's dazed and aching mind, that they would have brought them somewhere within the a'Pobail grounds and buildings of Ardeaglais'Coroin—if not the cathedral itself.

Mayhap a vault, she thought. Some place in the treasury building, where the walls would be thick, and no one could hear us cry out for help. Mayhap a cellar storage room used to house sacramental wine, or...

Her left hand, outstretched before her, suddenly fumbled against something cold, fashioned of stone. Isbaenna froze, her voice escaping in a frightened, breathless gasp as she jerked her hand back reflexively. She reached out again, hesitantly, and felt her fingertips brush against the carved contours of a face, the graceful slope of a stone throat, the curve of a shoulder. It was a statue, some sort of lifesized stone

figure standing against the wall, as though posted as sentry.

As Isbaenna stepped closer to the statue, keeping her right hand against the wall, she was startled when her fingertips fumbled across etched grooves in the stone. She paused, curious and puzzled, and felt along the markings.

They are runes, she realized. Characters carved into the polished stone, engraved writing likely marking a place of historic significance or...

Or of burial, Isbaenna thought, and her eyes flew wide. She was in a crypt beneath the cathedral, one of the clan tombs or private commemorative sepulchers that lay honeycombed beneath the nave.

"Sweet Mother!" she gasped, pressing herself against the wall, frozen and frightened. She realized to her dismay that if she was inside a crypt beneath the cathedral, she was as trapped as any treasury vault or safe. Each of the sepulchers was fitted with a heavy iron door or gate, which could be sealed fast. She could scream herself blue and not be heard through the doors. If the hour had drawn late enough, if the Samhradh ball had begun, screaming would do her little good anyway; no one would be about to hear her, even if they could.

"The ball..." she whispered, stricken. If the ball had started, it was too late. Kierken could well be dead, even as she stumbled about in the darkness. There was no one left to stop his murder; they had told no one of it. Rhyden had been hurt, taken from the woods of Pitlochry to the Good Mother only knew where. Their sanctuary beneath the Crown Theatre had been discovered, and Isbaenna knew Eisean had been captured once more, along with Eabhiros, Graelle and the Queen. They had all been taken, and now they only bided their time until Kierken was dead and Lleuwyn had claimed the throne.

Isbaenna felt tears sting her eyes and she gasped softly, sinking to her knees on the floor. *Eisean ...* she thought. If they had found him, they would surely bring him back to Gaol, and there was no imagining the horrors that awaited him there; the punishments Dochau Druery would have in store for him. "Oh, Eisean..." she whimpered helplessly. There was no purpose served in weeping for him, though she could not help herself. She would see him soon enough, she realized. They would all hang together, side by side from the crossbeams of Pionos.

She heard a sudden, sharp, metallic sound from across the chamber, and she jerked her head toward the unfamiliar noise. It sounded like a key turning in a lock, and Isbaenna scrambled clumsily to her feet, her eyes wide, her heart hammering in sudden alarm.

"Who is there?" she said, pressing her shoulders against the wall, trembling. She heard the sound of metal grinding, as the heavy iron plate of the door swung outward on its hinges. She saw a thin margin of light appear beyond the threshold, growing wider as the door opened in full. Even this dim glow hurt her eyes, and she shrank from it, drawing her hands toward her face to ward off the glare. "Who is

there?" she cried again, frightened.

"At long last, my lady receives my call," she heard a familiar voice say, and she gasped to find Calidore at the threshold of the crypt, holding a lantern in his hand and smiling gently at her.

"Calidore...?" she whispered, confused.

"Beannacht, Isbaenna," he said, stepping into the tomb. He trundled a large box between his arms, which he set on the floor. Isbaenna blinked at the box, and at Calidore, confounded and frightened.

"What ... what is this?" she asked. When he stepped toward her, she stumbled away from him. "What are you doing here, Calidore?"

"This is a costume, vestments I have ordered for you to wear to the Samhradh masked ball," he told her, sweeping his hand toward the box. "And as for me, I am here to rescue you, my lady, from this unfortunate plight you have found for yourself."

"Calidore," Isbaenna said. "Listen to me. Please, you must listen. Lleuwyn is holding me here against my will. He is going to murder the King at the ball tonight. Please, you must—"

For the first time, she saw the statue against the crypt wall. With the light from Calidore's lantern, she could read the runes etched into the stone clearly, and she moaned softly, stricken. The statue was crafted in the likeness of her father; the inscription on the memorial plaquard read: "Here lies Lord Baron Iasal Visant Gabhlan, fourteenth son of Dunnaghan, eleventh son of the Uasal Tyrahnys, High Ceannaire among the Buion aicmeach of the Donnag'crann Gaeilge. A great warrior and hero—and greater yet than these, husband, father and friend."

She floundered against the wall, her eyes enormous, her breath drawn still. Lleuwyn had locked her in her father's tomb; he had imprisoned her within Iasal's memorial crypt.

"Calidore," she whimpered, feeling tears well in her eyes as she gazed upon the marble face of her father. "Calidore, please. We have to leave. Help me. I must get to the palace."

"And I mean to bring you there," he said, leaning over to set the lantern on the floor. He stumbled in place, reeling unsteadily as though his balance failed him, and he began to laugh softly, amused by his own clumsiness.

"You ... you are drunk..." Isbaenna whispered, realizing. She shied back, her eyes wide with renewed alarm.

"I am indeed," Calidore replied, snickering. He effected a half-hearted bow for her, and staggered forward, nearly spilling onto his face. He laughed loudly, snorting.

"But the thought of you sees me intoxicated, my lady. Among other things."

"What do you want?" Isbaenna asked. He stepped toward her again, and she danced away from him. "Calidore—keep away from me."

"I cannot," he told her, clasping his hands over his heart and grinning. "Do you know how many years I have kept away from you, Isbaenna? My heart can bear no more such torment."

He lowered his hands to his sides, curling his hands slowly into fists. The smile faded from his face, and his brows drew narrow. "My Lord Peildraigh sent me tidings of you this afternoon," he said. "He told me that I would find you here—and what you have been doing these past days ... all this time when your handmaid, Maiwen has told me you were accepting no callers or company. I must tell you, my lady, I am disappointed in you. Truly so."

"Calidore, whatever Llewyn has told you is a lie," Isbaenna said. He stepped to her left, blocking her path to the door, and she took hedging steps to the right, moving back toward Iasal's statue, as if seeking sanctuary from her father's effigy.

"A lie?" Calidore asked, arching his brow. He was near enough to her now that she could smell the brimague, strong and pungent on his breath.

"Yes," she said softly. "A lie. He ... he is going to murder Kierken tonight at the Samhradh ball. We have to stop him. Please, I beg of you—help me stop him."

"You are going to marry me, Isbaenna," he said.

She had never seen him like this before; there was a crazed and manic gleam to his eyes that was unfamiliar and frightening to her. "No, Calidore, I am not," she said warily, shaking her head. "I do not love you, and I am sorry. I love Eisean, and I would marry him. Only him."

Calidore snickered. "That is unfortunate," he said. "Because you really have no choice in the matter."

He seized her by the throat, mashing his palm against her windpipe and slamming her so forcefully into the wall that the impact with the stone nearly knocked the senses from her. Isbaenna sucked in breath to scream, but there was no air, and she gagged, struggling against him.

Calidore pressed his body against hers, throttling her. "Every willful woman is one waiting to be broken. She only needs to find the man with heart—and hand—to take her well to task. For you, Isbaenna—that man has always been me."

He slipped his hand from her throat, but before Isbaenna even had time to recover her breath, he curled his fingers against his palm and swung his fist around, driving his knuckles into her face, knocking her sideways. Isbaenna fell to the floor, slamming her head painfully against the stone. She felt blood coursing from her

nose; she could taste it in her mouth.

She lay there, hurting and dazed, her mind reeling, floundering on the verge of unconsciousness. Calidore knelt beside her and seized hold of her contouche, ripping the silk from her back, tearing open the sleeves as he yanked it off of her.

"You will marry me," he said to her, jerking at the ties of her stomacher. Somewhere in the dim, fading recesses of her mind, she realized what he was doing, what he meant to do, and she struggled.

"No," she gasped, choking on blood.

Calidore grabbed her shoulder roughly and shoved her onto her back, drawing a frightened cry from her. He moved, lowering himself atop her, crushing the frame of her pannier beneath his hips as he clamped one hand against her throat, strangling her again. He ripped at her stomacher and sway with the other, pulling them loose from her breasts.

"All I have ever wanted is you," he hissed, leaning down. He kissed her, loosening his hand enough to let her draw a single, desperate gulp of air before his mouth pressed against hers, his tongue jamming between her lips.

"Stop ... no..." Isbaenna said, wrenching her face away from his.

"All I have ever wanted," Calidore whispered. She felt him jerk her stomacher and underpinnings once more, and then his hand closed against her breast, his fingers kneading painfully, pinching and prodding.

"Get your hand off me! she hissed, squirming.

"You would make your bed with some common scrap of peasant trash," he said. His hand moved from her breast and groped against her skirts. He shoved them toward her hips, grasping at her crinolines, and she struggled against him.

"No, Calidore! Turn me loose, you bastard!"

"You have always pretended that I am not fit to lick your boot heels, you pretentious bawd," Calidore said, ripping at her clothing, tearing at her underpinnings. "I am of noble birth—I am a bloody damn Biocaire, and you would take that refuse between your thighs? You would let him sully you with his peasant seed?"

Isbaenna's brows pinched in sudden, bright rage. "Get off of me!" she screamed, and she drew her knee up, slamming it mightily into his crotch. Calidore screeched, his voice ripping up to operatic levels. His hands darted to his groin and he crumpled off of her, onto his side, his breath whooping from his mouth. She staggered to her feet and tried to run, clutching at her torn clothes, limping toward the door.

"You ... bloody ... bitch," Calidore wheezed. He reached out and grabbed her ankle

as she moved past him. Isbaenna uttered a frightened cry and fell hard against the floor. She kicked at Calidore, driving her heel into his face.

"Turn me loose!" she shouted as he yanked her toward him, his hands grasping at her skirts. She struggled, kicking at him, but he managed to hook his fingers into the boning of her pannier and haul her back. He crawled atop her, his teeth gritted, his face twisted in a terrifying, crazed sneer. Isbaenna punched him, trying to drive her fists into his face, but he caught her by the wrists. She screamed, arching her back and bucking her hips as he wriggled further atop her, forcing her arms to the floor, pinning them against the ground. "Get off of me!" she screamed.

"Not until I have claimed what is mine," he hissed. "I have waited years for this—and I bloody damn mean to have it."

Isbaenna caught a blur of movement out of the corner of her eye, and she looked up in time to see the statue of Iasal fall from its pedestal. The life-sized marble figure toppled forward, crashing down toward them. Calidore heard the groaning sound of stone scraping, sliding, and he glanced over his shoulder, his eyes flying wide.

"What the—?" he began and then the statue plowed into the side of his head. Isbaenna shrieked, hunching her shoulders and jerking her face to the side as something hot and wet splashed against her: Calidore's blood and his brains. She felt a sudden, crushing, tremendous weight against them and Calidore uttered a strangled, birdlike cry. The cry dissolved in the a gurgle and then faded altogether. He collapsed against her, his hand loosening against her wrists.

Isbaenna kept her eyes tightly closed, and she lay still beneath him, trembling, whimpering, her frightened breath shuddering from her chest. She could feel Calidore's blood seeping from him, pooling against her throat, her bosom. "Sweet Mother..." she whispered. "Calidore...? Calidore, are you...?"

There was no point in finished the question. Calidore was not alright; he was dead, crushed beneath the marble, his head splintered open like a rotted melon beneath a mallet.

She tried to move, but the statue had pinned Calidore against her, and she could not wriggle out from beneath him. She opened her eyes and moaned; Calidore's head rested against the nook of her shoulder, and though she could not see his face, she could see the place in his skull where Iasal's stone head had struck; it had a peculiar, sunken look to it, and his hair was matted, glistening with blood.

She groaned, wrenching her arm out from beneath Calidore. She shoved her palm against the statue's forehead and shoved. It was impossibly heavy, but did not rest squarely upon the floor; the pedestal had caught at an angle, one thick corner smashing into Calidore's leg, crushing his ankle beneath it. Isbaenna grunted, planting her other hand against Iasal's head, and then she pushed with all of the might she could muster, rocking the heavy pillar of stone away from her. The statue crashed onto its side, facing her; she felt the stone floor beneath her thrum with the forceful

impact. Isbaenna stared at her father's bloodstained, unblinking gaze and began to weep.

She shoved Calidore off of her. He pitched sideways, lifeless and cumbersome, like an enormous ragdoll. The back of his head smacked against the floor with a horrible sodden sound and she moaned in disgust. She sat up slowly and her head swam dizzily.

She staggered to her feet, swaying unsteadily, her entire body shuddering with sobs. She stared down at Calidore, his blood yet wet and stained upon her flesh and her clothes, and her breath hitched helplessly in her throat.

She stumbled out into the corridor beyond the crypt and looked around, trying to gather her bearings. The hallway was lined with sepulchers, and she moved from one to the other, checking them each in turn. A lantern had been left in one, with a slat-backed chair in the center of the room. Severed lengths of rope lay about the legs of the chair, some still fettered in thick knots to the seat frame. A wadded bundle of fabric and a frayed strip of linen lay beneath the chair; a washbasin and pitcher sat against a wall by the chair, along with a pile of rumpled, dirty clothes.

Isbaenna shuffled slowly across the room. She took the lantern in hand and blinked at the tangled ropes around the chair legs. Some of the lines had smears of blood against the fibers, as though they had been drawn tightly enough against flesh to shear it open. She whimpered softly, frightened by the ominous promise of the blood. She knelt, lifting the discarded clothes each in turn from the floor. She recognized them, even though they had not been bloodstained, torn and muddied when last she had seen them. It was Rhyden's outfit, Rhyden's clothes—the vestments he had been wearing when he had gone to meet Kierken at the Pitlochry Overlook.

Rhyden had been here. He had been bound to this chair so viciously that he had scraped his flesh open as he had struggled to free himself. The peculiar wad of linen had likely been crammed into his mouth to stifle his voice. He had been alive—and he had been there.

"Where are you now?" Isbaenna whispered, cradling Rhyden's coat in her hands. She trembled, pressing her lips together, fighting new tears. "Oh, Rhyden ... Where are you now?"

She found Taemir in the next adjacent crypt. He had been sitting on the floor and rose, staggering across the chamber toward Isbaenna, catching her in his arms as her knees failed her and she slumped toward the floor. "Taemir...!" she whimpered. She cupped her palm against his cheek and he turned his face against her hand, tears spilling from his eyes. "Oh, they ... they hurt you."

"I am alright," he said. "How did you find me? How did you get away?"

"Calidore Ineadan came," she said. "He ... he was drunk ... mad, and he ... he tried

to rape me."

Taemir drew her near, holding her fiercely. "That bastard rot," he whispered.

"I fought him," Isbaenna said, huddling against his shoulder. "I was in my father's crypt and the statue, Daddy's statue, it ... it fell and somehow ... crushed him." She looked up at him. "We have to check the other crypts. I found Rhyden's clothes—he must have been here, Taemir! We have to see if Eisean is, too, and Eabhiros, and the others!"

"Eisean and Eabhiros are not," Taemir said, and Isbaenna blinked at him, bewildered. "Lleuwyn and his soldiers ... bloody bastards ... They kept asking me about them. Where they were ... where we had hidden them. They did not find them in the tunnels. They are alive and they are out there somewhere. They escaped somehow."

"And Rhyden...?" she whispered.

"They took him," Taemir said. "They took him away, to the Samhradh ball."

"What? Why?" Isbaenna asked, baffled.

"I do not know," he said with a frown. "Lleuwyn broke my bloody fingers to get Rhyden to agree to it, whatever he has in mind. He made Rhyden swear to go with him to the ball, to do whatever he is told. I think Lleuwyn had no other choice. Kierken must have noticed Rhyden's absence by now, grown suspicious of it."

"We have to get out of here," Isbaenna said. "If Eisean is alive ... if he and Eabhiros are alive, surely they know we have been taken. They will go to the ball and try to find us, find Lleuwyn. There yet may be time to find them and save Kierken."

"What about Graelle and the Queen?" Taemir asked. "You are right—we have to search the other crypts first. We may never get into the palace in time without Qynh and Graelle to explain matters."

"We will need to hurry," Isbaenna said. "Surely the ball has already begun. We have run out of time."

CHAPTER TWENTY

"How do you fare?" Eisean asked Eabhiros softly, lifting his chin and speaking nearly against his friend's ear. The two walked pressed together, with Eabhiros' arm across Eisean's shoulders as he let Eisean lead him.

"I ... I am alright," Eabhiros whispered, his brows drawn as he nodded his head. His palor was ashen, his jaw set at a determined angle, as he struggled to meet Eisean's pace. He walked with his right arm draped against his midriff, and leaned heavily against the younger man. Eisean kept his arm wrapped firmly about Eabhiros' middle to support him upright.

Eisean looked up at Eabhiros, his eyes round with concern. His face was nearly obscured by a bright green silk mask. They had carried their costumes with them through the tunnels beneath the city, changing into the gaudy vestments once they had reached the relative safety of the palace's vacant laundering chamber. They had lost precious time in their return from the catacombs beneath the Crown Theatre, making far slower progress than on their first passage through the sewers. They had to keep ducking into drainpipes or alcoves along the way, hiding from passing patrols of a'Pobail soldiers. Their pace had been further hampered by the simple frailties of their own forms; they had both been exhausted and hurting before they had embarked once more from the theatre, and by the time they had reached the chimney shaft leading up into the laundry room, Eisean had been practically carrying Eabhiros slung across his shoulders.

They now made their way from the laundering chamber upstairs to the main floor, where the guests gathered in droves; this lower level remained relatively vacant. Just as they rounded a corner, nearing the stairwell to the upper level, they plowed nearly headlong into a man as he strode briskly toward them.

"Hoah—!" Eisean yelped, stumbling sideways as he smacked into the man. Eabhiros sucked in a hurting gasp through his teeth and staggered against the wall, his hat spilling from his head.

"Watch where you are going, you bloody rot," the man snapped, reclaiming his footing after a clumsy, momentary stumble. He was dressed in costume, with hat and mask, but his irritation was still apparent in the sharp tone of his voice. He reached out, planting his hand against Eisean's shoulder, giving him a shove out of the way for good measure.

"Get your hand off—" Eisean said, and then he yelped again as he stumbled aside, falling gracelessly onto his rump. He balled his hands into fists as the man walked away. "Bloody bastard," he muttered, starting to rise.

"Let him go," Eabhiros said, grabbing his arm to stay him. "Just let it go. We have to get upstairs."

The man paused in midstride, turning to look at them. "What did you say?"

"Oh, Sweet Mother," Eabhiros hissed, as the man walked back toward them.

"I called you a bastard rot," Eisean said, limping to his feet. He stepped deliberately into the man's path, his brows furrowed.

"Not you," the man said, looking toward Eabhiros. "You. I know your voice. I know you."

"I think you are mistaken, sir," Eabhiros said. He caught Eisean by the elbow and tried to forcibly draw the younger man back. "And I beg your pardon for my friend, sir. Too much brimague upstairs, you know. It can make a man too clumsy and bold for his own good."

"I know your voice," the man said to Eabhiros again. He reached out and caught Eisean smartly by the cravat, jerking him forward and catching him by surprise. Eisean yelped as the man tossed him sideways, sending him slamming against the wall and crumpling to the floor, dazed.

"I know your voice, you rotted bastard," the man said, stalking toward Eabhiros. He cast aside his hat and reached for the ties of his mask to loosen them. "You broke my nose. You busted my bloody teeth."

Eabhiros backed warily from him, bewildered and alarmed. "I do not know what you are talking about," he said carefully. "I think you are mistaken, sir."

"I mistake nothing," the man hissed, tossing aside his mask. His face beneath the silk was battered and swollen; his nose misshapen and distended, his lips busted and darkened with bruising. "You did this to me, you rot—in the woods, by the church, not a week ago."

Eabhiros backpedaled, his eyes flown wide in startled realization. "Bugger me," he said.

"You ruined my teeth," Tressach an'Clare said, drawing a dagger from beneath the flap of his justicoat. "Do you know what a good set of false ones sets a man back? You are about to find out, you bloody bastard—I am going to take it out of you measure for measure."

Eisean uttered a cry as he leapt at Tressach, plowing into the man from behind. He wrapped his arms in a stranglehold around his throat. Tressach howled angrily, dancing clumsily beneath Eisean's unexpected, sudden weight. He floundered about, slamming Eisean mightily back against the wall. Eisean whoofed for breath; Tressach staggered forward and then slammed Eisean backwards again, pummeling the wits and wind from him. His arms loosened from about Tressach's throat, and he crumpled to the floor, dazed and gasping.

"Which Highwayman are you?" Tressach said, closing his fist in Eisean's hair and

wrenching his head back. He shoved the blade of his dagger beneath the shelf of the younger man's chin. "The one Lahnduren ran through, or the one who claimed the Stone? It does not matter—you are about to be carved."

"Get your hands off him!" Eabhiros yelled, hurling himself at Tressach, plowing into him and knocking him sideways. Eabhiros landed atop him, and the dagger was jarred from Tressach's hand. It skittered away from them, just beyond their reach, and Eabhiros did not give the man any time to recover his wits enough to scramble for it. He punched Tressach in the face, rearing back and straddling the man, driving his fists around again and again.

Tressach struggled beneath him, kicking and thrashing, but Eabhiros kept swinging. His brows were furrowed, his teeth gritted; he did not even see Tressach manage to hook his fingertips against the hilt of the dagger, to draw it within grasp.

"Eabhiros...!" Eisean cried hoarsely, trying to rise.

"Bloody bastard," Eabhiros grunted, pummeling Tressach's teeth, smashing his already broken nose, rebloodying his brow, his lips, his nose. "You ... bloody ... rot damn...!"

He caught a wink of light against steel out of the corner of his gaze, and caught Tressach's wrist against his palm just as the man brought the dagger around to stab him. The two struggled with the knife between them; Tressach shoved his hips mightily and Eabhiros fell sideways. They rolled together, tumbling across the floor, tussling and cursing.

"I am going to make you shriek, you rot," Tressach hissed, straddled atop Eabhiros, leaning over to bear his weight fully against the dagger. "You will beg me for mercy. You—"

"Bugger yourself," Eabhiros snapped, lunging forward, ramming his forehead squarely into Tressach's. Tressach reeled, dazed by the blow, and Eabhiros shoved mightily, forcing him backward. They rolled again, with Eabhiros winding on top, and as their weight shifted, Tressach uttered a sharp, startled cry, his eyes flying wide.

Eabhiros blinked, equally surprised, and when he looked down, he realized he had inadvertently pressed Tressach's hand toward his own gut; when he had straddled the man, his weight had shoved the dagger deep into the meat Tressach's belly. Already a dark stain of blood had formed; Eabhiros blinked at it in morbid aghast. "Hoah, Sweet Mother...!" he gasped, scuttling off of Tressach.

Tressach's hand fell away from the knife, leaving it protruding from his middle. He gasped softly, moaning, kicking his feet feebly against the floor. "You ... you bastard," he whimpered. His hand fluttered toward his face, not his gut, and his fingertips prodded lightly against his injured mouth. "My teeth...!" he gasped. "My ... my new damn teeth, you ... you rot...!"

"Eabhiros, come on," Eisean said, grabbing Eabhiros by the arm and tugging at him. "Mother Above, get up—come on. We have to get out of here!"

"Eisean, he is hurt," Eabhiros said, stricken, as Eisean forced him to his feet.

The bloodstain on Tressach's shirt was spreading in grim circumference. Even still, Tressach seemed oblivious; he covered his mouth with his hands, moaning. "My teeth...!"

"Leave him!" Eisean hissed, jerking mightily against Eabhiros. "If he is here, then Lahnduren cannot be far away. Come on! We have to find him!"

"I have to see the King," Isbaenna said to the royal guards posted at the main gates of the palace. It was nearly midnight; at the tolling of the cathedral bell towers, a tremendous fireworks display was scheduled to begin. Shortly before this, Kierken planned the official announcement of his honorary appointment for Rhyden. Kierken had not been murdered yet; that much was apparent by the festive mood of the crowds. Isbaenna had realized Llewyn likely planned his move for the moment of Kierken's most apparent vulnerability—when he stood alone and exposed on the ballroom floor, offering Rhyden the commendating recognition.

"Please," Isbaenna said. "I am Isbaenna Gabhlan, his majesty's ambassador to Tirurnua. He is in terrible danger! Please, Kierken is going to be murdered! You must let us pass!"

"Do you have an invitation?" another guard asked.

"Do we look like we are carrying bloody damn invitations?" Taemir shouted, angrily, his brows drawn. He carried the Queen in his arms, with Graelle shield behind him. "Let us pass, damn you! Lahnduren is in there somewhere! He and Llewyn Peildraigh are going to murder the King!"

His loud voice, his sharp words drew the merrymakers around him silent. People began to blink at them, noticing them in full, hearing Taemir's words—the mention of Lahnduren. They murmured together, their faces growing frightened, their soft voices confused.

"Have you been robbed?" a soldier asked them from the other side of the gate, striding toward them. He studied their beaten visages, their torn and tattered clothes, and frowned at one of his fellows. "Call for the constable. Summon Commander Cathair—at once. What is the matter with the lot of you? Can you not see these people are injured?"

"There is no time for that!" Isbaenna cried, frantically shoving her way past the sentries at the gate and grasping hold of the iron bars. She stared, pleading at the approaching soldier, as he seemed the only one among the guards capable of rational thought. "Please, we are telling the truth! Lahnduren is here—he is already inside! He is going to kill Kierken at midnight! Llewyn Peildraigh has planned it all!"

The guard removed a heavy keyring from his belt and moved to unlock the gate. "Stand aside, my lady," he told her. "Who did this to your face?"

"It does not matter," Isbaenna said, stumbling backwards, watching him open the gate. "Please, we have the Queen, and we ... we must—"

At this, the young soldier's head jerked toward her, his eyes flown wide. He stared at Taemir, realizing for the first time that he indeed bore the Queen against his chest, draped in his arms. His brows drew narrow as his gaze settled on Isbaenna once more, and her breath drew still in horrified realization.

"No, we did not take her," she whispered.

"Stand fast where you are," the guard told her, drawing his sword.

"No..." Isbaenna said, staggering back, shaking her head. "No, no—we rescued Qynh. We found her!"

"You bloody damn idiots!" Taemir cried. "We did not take her! We saved her!"

"The lot of you," the soldier snapped, and now the other guards drew their swords, moving about them, surrounding them. "Stand fast where you are! You are under arrest!"

A frightened murmur rippled through the crowd at this; as more soldiers rushed forward, charging through the gates from the palace grounds with swords brandished at the ready, soft, shrill cries resounded throughout the throng.

"Taemir, Graelle—run!" Isbaenna yelled, darting through the gate. She felt soldiers grabbing at her, grasping at her hair, her clothes, but she ducked around their hands, bolting for the palace. She spared a glance over her shoulder to see if the others followed, and plowed headlong into a soldier who stepped into her path. She hit him hard enough to whoof the breath from her lungs, and she floundered backwards, spilling onto her rump. She stared up at the guard and tears sprang to her eyes. "No..." she moaned as he reached for her, closing his broad fist about the crook of her elbow.

"Lady Isbaenna Gabhlan," Eamon Cathaoir, Commander of the Royal Constabulatory said to her, his brows drawn, his mouth set in a disagreeable line as he yanked her to her feet. "Why am I not in the least surprised to see you in the midst of such a ruckus?"

He glanced up as other soldiers approached, dragging Taemir and Graelle in struggling, squirming tow. "Taemir Fabhcun. Here is another I might have expected. Take the damn lot of them to Gaol and hold them until I speak with Kierken." He met Isbaenna's eyes and his brows furrowed all the more deeply. "They have kidnapped our Queen."

"Where is Tressach?" Lahnduren hissed at Llewyn, appearing abruptly from among

the crowd in the palace's grand ballroom and standing directly before the Easpag'Ard. Kaevir jerked, alarmed by the sight of him at so close a proximity, and at his start, the wind stoked outside, gusting suddenly, swiftly against the windows, rattling the glass. At the sound, barely perceptible over the din of the festivities, Kaevir closed his eyes, his brows drawn, as he willed the wind to fall still.

Not yet, he thought. Not yet, damn it, not yet...

Lahnduren wore a splendid silk coat, open and loosely flowing in billowing folds that disguised the hunched shape of his spine. The ruffled cuffs of his blouse sleeves hung to below his fingertips, to help hide the fact that he had only one hand. He wore a wig, a long tumble of glossy, ebony curls. His mask kept his entire face and neck from view beneath a glazed, contoured plate of unadorned white porcelain.

Rhyden gasped to recognize Lahnduren's voice floating forth from beneath the pale, featureless mask, and he drew back as well, his eyes flown wide in start. Llewyn closed his hand firmly against Rhyden's sleeve, holding him fast in place while he awarded a broad smile to Lahnduren.

"I beg your pardon, my lord?" Llewyn asked quietly.

"Do not play coy with me, you pathetic rot bastard," Lahnduren said. "Where is Tressach? He went to find you upon our arrival and that was more than an hour ago."

"Has it ever occurred to you, my lord, that he may simply be weary of your company?" Llewyn asked. "He will make himself known to you when he is ready and no moment sooner. Now get away from me, you bloody damn idiot, lest you see it all ruined."

While they spoke, Kaevir took advantage of the moment. He angled his body, stepping nonchalantly toward Lahnduren, dipping his hand into his pocket and cradling the Stone against his fingers. This was part of Llewyn's plan; the Easpag'Ard had discussed it with him at great length that afternoon, and again along their coach ride to the palace.

"If need be, call the Stone forth before Lahnduren," Llewyn had instructed. "Slip it into his pocket. You are unfamiliar to him. You can draw near enough without notice. Put it in his pocket and when you summon the winds, call it forth. They will think Lahnduren bears it—that Lahnduren commands it."

Kaevir moved swiftly, years of picking pockets serving him well. He slid his hand from his pocket and brushed against Lahnduren's coat as the Elf leaned forward to hiss at Llewyn. Kaevir unfurled his fingers as they fluttered against the edge of Lahnduren's pocket; the Stone dropped inside, quiet and unnoticed.

"And who is this little lamb?" Lahnduren asked, sparing Kaevir a glance. "A new toy for you, Llewyn? I have always said you had neither the loins nor libido to pursue

the fairer sex with any measure of aptitude—"

"This is my nephew, my lord," Llewelyn said, his brows pinching. He reached out, laying his hand against Lahnduren's shoulder, stepping protectively between the Elf and Kaevir. "That is all you need know. Now get hence."

Lahnduren turned his mask, his gaze settling on Rhyden, creeping along the young Elf's form for a long moment. Rhyden stared back at him evenly, his mouth turned at a grim, angry angle. "I will see you soon, little mouse," Lahnduren purred, turning about and hobbling once more into the crowd.

When he was gone, Llewelyn glanced at Kaevir, arching his brow, the corner of his mouth hooking in a smile. "Did you do it?"

Kaevir nodded, and Llewelyn's smile broadened. "Splendid, Kaevir," he said. "All is ready then. You have done perfectly."

"Begging your pardon, Your Grace, my lords," said a voice from behind him, and Llewelyn turned to find a pair of royal soldiers before him.

"It is time, Your Grace, my Lord Fabhcun," one of the young guards said, lowering his head in respectful deference. "It is ten minutes until midnight, and His Majesty is prepared for the presentation."

"Does the hour draw near so soon?" Llewelyn asked, raising his brows and smiling at the soldiers. He turned toward Rhyden and found the young Elf nowhere near as enthused. "Wherever does the time go during such splendid affairs?" He dropped Kaevir a wink, as if to say, here we go, and then turned to Rhyden. "Shall we then, Lord Fabhcun?"

"Have I any choice?" Rhyden asked, dryly, his brows drawn.

Llewelyn laughed, clapping Rhyden on the shoulder, steering him into step behind the guards as they crossed the ballroom together. "No, my lord," he said. "As a matter of fact, you do not."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

"Oyez! Oyez!" cried out one of the young heralds, his high voice resounding over the quieted crowd as Rhyden and Lleuwyn approached the center of the ballroom. "My lords and ladies—His Majesty, Lord and Liege of Tiralainn, Kierken Mailp, nineteenth son of Sheain, third son of Taemas, of the Donnag'crann Gaeilge."

Thunderous applause roared through the ballroom as Kierken stepped forward. He offered his hands humbly to his guests, lowering his head in collective, respectful deference to them. While the din would cover his voice, Rhyden turned to Lleuwyn, closing his hands into fists. "I will stop you," he said.

"So you keep saying." Lleuwyn glanced at him, his brow arched. "And yet here you stand, idle for Taemir's sake."

"I will not let you hurt my brother or my King."

The corner of Lleuwyn's mouth hooked. "You could as easily prevent the tide, my lord."

Kierken strode toward them, opening his arms. "Rhyden," he said, embracing the younger Elf. Rhyden turned his face, drawing breath to warn Kierken, but the King pulled away too swiftly, turning and offering his hand to Lleuwyn. "Mo'Easpag'Ard—such occasion would seem incomplete without you by my side, mo'cara."

"I am pleased you would see me a part of it, sire," Lleuwyn said, clasping his hand warmly against Kierken's wrist. In a lower voice, a grimmer tone, he said, "All is in place. We will see it through. Do not worry."

Rhyden looked out among the crowd and found Lahnduren standing almost directly in front of him, no more than ten broad strides across the ballroom floor. Lahnduren stood among the guests with two a'Pobail soldiers before him, facing him—two guards Rhyden knew would let him pass to make his move against the King. Rhyden stared at the flawless, glossy plate of white masking Lahnduren's face from view, his form from recognition, and he felt his anger stoking all the more, his fear dissolving into furious, dogged resolve.

I will not let you, you bastards, he thought, looking from Lahnduren to Lleuwyn, watching in disgust as the Easpag'Ard leaned forward, folding at the waist to bow before the King he would see murdered. *I will stop you both. This will not happen. By my breath, it will not come to pass.*

He found Kaevir just beyond Lahnduren in the crowd, and watched the young man purposely move to stand behind the Elf. He did not know for certain what Lleuwyn's plans were for Kaevir that night; he had caught only murmured and enigmatic fragments of conversation between them in the carriage, but it had been enough to understand that Lleuwyn intended Kaevir to wield the Stone's power if need be and

to make it seem that Lahnduren called forth the winds.

I do not want to hurt you, Kaevir, Rhyden thought. Kaevir was as much a victim in this as Qynh or Kierken; his poor heart had been broken and manipulated, his mind stricken with undue grief and cruelly deceived in this vulnerable state. *I do not want to hurt you, but I will if I have to. I cannot let this happen. Not while I draw breath to prevent it ... to prevent you, Kaevir.*

Kierken smiled, clapping his hand against Rhyden's shoulder and drawing his gaze. "Are you ready for this, mo'cara?" he asked softly.

Rhyden cut his eyes briefly toward Llewyn, meeting his gaze. *I will stop you, you rot bastard,* he thought. *I must.*

"Yes, my Lord," he said to Kierken, turning and smiling at his friend, his King. "I believe that I am."

Kaevir shouldered his way through the crowd, safe in the anonymity of his mask as he moved behind Lahnduren. If something went wrong, if he had to call forth the winds, he needed to be near to Lahnduren; it had to look as though Lahnduren summoned them.

"It is the only way to keep you safe," Llewyn had whispered to him in the coach. "No one must know you possess the Stone. No one must know you are chosen for it until the King is dead, and this behind us. Do what you must—but only if you must—and make it seem as though it comes at Lahnduren's bidding."

Someone jostled roughly into him in the throng, knocking his tricorne from his head. The hat fell among a tangle of legs and hoop skirts pressed together and Kaevir stooped, hooking it with his fingertips. Someone bumped into him roughly again, sending him stumbling forward, nearly face-first into the bustled rump of a noblewoman's broad pannier. He frowned, snatching his hat and looking for the offender as he stood once more, catching sight of a pair of drunk lords staggering past him, their backs to him as they passed. They wore ridiculous ensembles; one in green and the other in bright yellow. The one in yellow was taller, and clearly the more inebriated of the pair; he stumbled along with his arm slung over his fellow's shoulder, leaning heavily against him, too drunk apparently to bear his own weight.

"Bloody jobs," Kaevir muttered, slapping his hat on his head. He moved once more, shoving roughly against the shorter nobleman's back with his elbow as he went around them. He had seen Lahnduren in the crowd, and needed to act swiftly lest the Elf decide to move.

"Hoah—!" he heard the young lord say, but by the time he whipped his head about toward Kaevir, Kaevir had moved past him through the crowd.

"Bugger off," Kaevir whispered, his brows drawn, his hands curled into fists. He shouldered his way past more guests until he came to stand immediately behind

Lahnduren. He heard the trilling of trumpets and looked beyond Lahnduren's shoulder, watching Llewyn and Rhyden stand with the King in an open space on the ballroom floor. A'Pobail soldiers stood between Lahnduren and this area, but Kaevir was unconcerned, as undoubtedly Lahnduren was. The soldiers answered only to Llewyn, and the Easpag'Ard had ensured they would allow Lahnduren past them.

"Oyez! Oyez!" called out a royal herald, drawing the crowd to silence.

"Where is Lahnduren?" Eisean whispered to Eabhiros. They had moved to the front of the crowd; only a pair of a'Pobail soldiers stood between them and the open space where the King stood with Rhyden and Llewyn. Eisean was frightened, tremulous with mounting panic. The moment was at hand; surely, at any moment now, Lahnduren would strike, while Kierken stood exposed and vulnerable on the ballroom floor. He and Eabhiros still had no idea what in the bloody duchan they were doing, what they could do to prevent him—only that they had no choice but to try.

"I do not know," Eabhiros murmured. He unslung his arm from Eisean's shoulders and stood on his own, studying the veritable sea of masks and costumes. "But he is near, I know it. We will know him when he moves forward to advance against the King."

A royal herald had stepped forward, standing before Kierken to address the crowd. He unfurled a length of parchment scroll between his hands and began to read aloud from it. It was a poem—one of Taemir's epic accounts of Rhyden's life and adventures, a chronicle in eloquent prose of the Shadow Wars, and of Rhyden's bravery in battle, his self-sacrifice and determination. As the herald recited the verses and measures, Eabhiros watched Rhyden. Rather than bolster him, the words seemed to bear heavily upon the young Gaeilge; he seemed to wither before them, his shoulders slumping, his gaze traveling to the floor. Eabhiros could not see his face in full because of the mask, but he did not need to in order to realize Rhyden's dismay.

Eisean scanned the crowd, moving his eyes slowly, frowning as he tried to discern faces beneath masks and wigs. He caught sight of a suspicious figure to his left and his frown deepened. The nobleman wore an unadorned mask, a plate of featureless, white porcelain that seemed somehow sinister in its simplicity, its stoic and expressionless regard. A wig fashioned of long, glossy black curls framed the mask, and a brightly colored costume, a long, flowing, and untailed coat, served to hide the man's frame.

"Do you see the nobleman in the porcelain mask?" he said. "Beyond my shoulder—do you see?" he whispered to Eabhiros.

"The black wig? Yes, I see him."

"I think it is Lahnduren," Eisean said. "The coat would hide his crooked spine."

"Keep your eye on him, then," Eabhiros said. "If he moves forward, draw your blade on him. I will get to the King somehow."

The herald's voice fell quiet, the poem completed. The crowd began to applaud, and Kierken placed his hand against Rhyden's shoulder, drawing him in step as he moved forward, walking closer to the throng.

"My lords and ladies, friends and fellows," he said, his voice carrying with practiced ease across the expanse of the ballroom, bringing the applause to respectful silence once more. Kierken looked about at his guests, his mouth unfolded in a smile. "It is a joyous occasion which brings us together this night, for we honor and celebrate the mettle and deeds described in this poem—and countless others. A young Gaeilge who has always and selflessly offered all that is his own to serve and honor his realm, his peoples, and his Crown."

One of the heralds stepped forward, bearing between his hands a glittering, gilded sword. It was a decorative blade, with no sharpened edges, fashioned of plated gold and gemstones. Kierken took the golden sword in hand, holding it aloft before him as he turned to face Rhyden. "Kneel, my friend," he said.

Rhyden did not move for a moment, long enough for the crowd to be aware. A soft murmur of collective puzzlement rippled through the guests. Eisean glanced at Eabhiros, his fingers twining against the thin wool of his sleeve. "What is this?" he whispered.

"Rhyden?" Kierken asked softly, raising his brows in concern.

Rhyden stared at him, stricken. "Kierken," he whispered. "Do not do this."

"What?" Kierken asked, blinking, his expression growing confused.

Rhyden heard Llewyn's footsteps behind him, and felt the Easpag'Ard's hand settle firmly against his shoulder. "My Lord Fabhcun...?" Llewyn said quietly.

Rhyden frowned, shrugging away from the Easpag'Ard's grasp, stumbling from the force of the gesture. "Take your bloody hand from me!" he snapped loudly, his voice echoing against the ballroom's vaulted ceiling. He heard people in the crowd gasp in surprise, and watched startled bewilderment fill Kierken's face.

"Rhyden?" Kierken asked, blinking between Rhyden and Llewyn. "What is this?"

"It is a trick, Kierken," Rhyden said. "A trick and a trap. Lahnduren is among us. He is right at hand. Call Eamon and your guards forward."

"I ... I know this, lad," Kierken said softly, bewildered all the more. "Rhyden ... that has been the plan all along, that we might..."

"The plan all along has been to see you dead," Rhyden said, drawing Kierken's voice to a startled, stricken halt. Rhyden's brows drew narrow as he glared at Llewyn. "It

has always been Lleuwyn's—"

The wind struck him suddenly, slamming into him, hurtling him across the chamber. The force of the blast threw Kierken sideways, tumbling to the floor, cracking his skull audibly against the polished granite, and sent Lleuwyn reeling, floundering backwards. Rhyden smashed into the far wall of the ballroom, the back of his head striking painfully against stone, and he collapsed, falling to the floor.

The crowd shrieked in fright and alarm; the din of their confusion and fear only grew as all of the towering windows framing the ballroom exploded at once, spraying glass and sending winds gusting through the chamber.

The crowd surged in sudden, bright panic, rushing in all directions at once as thousands of shards and splinters of glass showered down on them. Their voices rose in shrill, panicked screams, and Eisean ducked, throwing his hands over his head as he felt the rain of glass strike him, shearing through his clothes, ripping into his hands, his arms. He heard Eabhiros cry out, but before he dared lift his head, he felt people slam against him in a frantic stampede. An elbow smacked squarely against the back of his head, knocking his hat to the floor; a hip slammed against him, throwing him forward, and he stumbled, losing his balance and falling.

"No—!" he heard Eabhiros shout, and Eisean jerked his head at the sound, watching in horror as Eabhiros lumbered past him toward the King. Kierken had managed to stagger to his feet, and limped about, his palm pressed to his forehead as though he were dazed. There was blood on his face; the glass had sheared open his cheek and temple, and his eyes were flown wide with shock. In the confusion, he did not even see Lahnduren spring forward from the panicked throng, rushing at him with a thick, curved dagger clutched in his hand.

Eabhiros threw himself at the King, battering Lahnduren aside with his shoulder and sending him stumbling, cursing and shrieking. Eabhiros hooked his arms around Kierken's middle and forced him off of his feet.

"Eabhiros!" Eisean screamed, scrambling to his feet. He bolted forward, screaming anew in horror as Lahnduren drew back the dagger, meaning to punch it through Eabhiros' chest.

"Bastard!" Lahnduren shrieked. His mask had loosened when Eabhiros struck him; it listed at an angle on his face, obscuring his view, and he reached up with his fist, still clutching the blade, knocking the porcelain to the floor, shattering it.

Eisean tackled him, launching himself at Lahnduren and sending him careening to the floor, knocking the dagger from Lahnduren's startled hand. Lahnduren thrashed beneath him, struggling wildly; Eisean gasped as Lahnduren's knee slammed mightily between his legs. He crumpled forward, and felt Lahnduren's hand hook against his face, his palm smash against his nose.

"Get off of me!" Lahnduren shrieked, spittle spraying against Eisean's cheek. He

tried to ram his knee into Eisean's crotch again, but Eisean jerked his thigh, blocking the blow. Lahnduren struck at him with the ruined stump of his arm, his hand still shoved against Eisean's face, his spindly fingertips clawing for his eyes. "Get off of me! Get off of me, you bastard!"

Something fell out of his pocket in his struggling and rolled across the floor. Eisean curled his hands into fists and swung wildly for Lahnduren's face, screaming as the Elf's fingers ripped into the corners of his eyes, digging, gouging. He felt his knuckles plow solidly into Lahnduren's temple, dazing him, and his hand loosened, slipping away from Eisean's face.

"Rot damn ... bastard...!" Eisean gasped, jerking away from Lahnduren's grasp, sending his fists sailing once more, battering Lahnduren. He saw the object that had slipped from Lahnduren's pocket; a black stone, round and polished, a sphere of glossy black, and he realized what it was.

The Shadow Stone—Mother Above, that is the Shadow Stone—that is Kaevir's Stone—!

"Where is he?" he screamed, shoving his hands against Lahnduren's throat, throttling him. "What have you done with him, you bastard? Where is he?"

Wind slammed against him, seeming to blast out of the very floor beneath them. It struck Eisean mightily, rocking his head back, wrenching his hands loose from Lahnduren's neck. He tried to scream, but it sucked the breath from his lungs, jerking him into the air. He heard it roaring in his ears as he flew, careening backwards. He did not realize Eabhiros was behind him, struggling to clamber to his feet, and the wind plowed Eisean into him, sending him sprawling again. Eisean heard Eabhiros scream; the wind threw Eisean against the floor, and there was a bright, blinding light as the side of his face smashed against the stone, knocking the wits from him.

It had all gotten out of control; the plan had dissolved into madness from the moment of Rhyden's hesitation, his attempt to warn the King. Kaevir had been seized with bright panic. He had not known what to do, and the winds had responded to his confusion, his fear. They whipped through the ballroom now, frenzied and furious, as the crowd rushed about him, frantic and terrified. Soldiers swarmed everywhere, trying to force the throngs of noble guests out of the ballroom to safety. Kaevir was knocked about as people plowed into him. He lost sight of Lleuwyn as the throngs surged forward and as his panic only mounted, so did the wind.

"Lleuwyn!" he cried, forcing his way through the crowd, trying to find him.
"Lleuwyn!"

He caught a glimpse of Lahnduren; someone had tackled him, the drunk nobleman in the awful green costume Kaevir had bumped into earlier. The lord was trying to play the hero, his hands clasped about Lahnduren's throat, strangling him, and Kaevir had only to entertain fleeting thoughts before the winds rushed forth, plowing into the

man, sending him flying away from Lahnduren.

Lahnduren lay on the ground, writhing and wheezing for breath. He was injured; his face beaten and bloodied at the nobleman's hands, and Kaevir realized it was too late; it was ruined. Lahnduren had knocked his mask off; people screamed anew to recognize his face, and already, soldiers shoved and fought their way through the panicked throngs to reach him, seize him.

Sweet Mother, it is ruined, Kaevir thought, terrified, stricken.

"Get up!" he screamed, striding toward Lahnduren's wretched, moaning form. He reached up, jerking aside his mask and balled his hands into fists. "Get up and finish it, you bastard rot! Finish it!"

Lahnduren stared at him, his blue eyes bulging in bright, sudden terror. He recognized Kaevir; he knew his face plainly, and he began to kick his legs feebly, trying to scuttle away from him.

"Finish it!" Kaevir shrieked, and he saw the Stone lying on the floor beside Lahnduren. He thrust his hand out and the wind caught the orb, sending it sailing through the air, slapping against his palm.

"Le ... le do thoil..." Lahnduren whimpered, drawing the stump of his arm toward his bleeding, bashed face.

Kaevir whirled about, his brows drawn. He saw Kierken among the crowd; watched the King stagger to his feet. Lahnduren's blade had not found its mark; the King was injured but alive, and Kaevir knew he had no choice, no recourse. Lahnduren would not rise; whatever existed within him that had seen him thus far was gone, battered from him, and Kierken still drew breath.

"No," Kaevir hissed, and the Stone began to turn against his palm. He loosened his fingers and felt it rise from the cup of his hand, spinning before him. "No, by my breath, this will not be for nothing."

The wind rushed past him, sending his hair whipping into his face, the tails of his justicoat slapping against his legs. It cleaved a broad path before him, sending soldiers and partygoers reeling and flying in its path, knocking a wide circumference of open space between him and the King. He deliberately spared Kierken the wind, watching the King's expression shift from dazed confusion to startled alarm and then to fear as all around him people scattered, plowed aside by the wind. He looked up, stumbling in place, bleeding heavily from gashes in his face, and he saw Kaevir—he saw the Stone.

"No..." Kierken whispered, staggering back. He lifted his hand as if in implore, his fingertips and palm smeared with blood.

Kaevir began to walk toward him, keeping the winds whirling about them, holding anyone who dared to step forward and defend Kierken at bay. Kierken floundered

away from him, his eyes flown wide in shock and terror. "Please..." he said. "Please ... do not..."

"Kaevir—no—!" he heard someone cry out sharply. Kaevir whipped his face toward the sound and saw Rhyden staggering through the crowd, rushing toward him. Rhyden had claimed a sword from one of the soldiers and brandished it between his hands. He was limping, blood coursing from his nose, smeared across his face, and his brows were furrowed with desperate determination.

"Do not do this!" Rhyden shouted. He forced his way through the barrier of wind Kaevir had erected, staggering and nearly falling as the swirling gusts buffeted him, sending his hair thrashing about his face. He stumbled toward Kaevir, holding out one hand, grasping the sword in the other. "He has lied to you!" Rhyden cried, the wind tearing at his voice.

Kaevir sent a blast of wind at him, battering the sword from his hand with enough force to wrench Rhyden's arm around his back, snapping his shoulder loose of its moorings. Rhyden cried out in pain, crumpling to the floor.

"Leave me alone!" Kaevir screamed. "You cannot stop this! It has to happen! It has to end! Lleuwyn would not lie to me!"

"Kaevir...?"

A soft voice from behind him, tremulous and shocked, drew his gaze, and he turned. The two drunk nobles had collapsed to the floor during the melee, and the one in yellow lay prone and unmoving in a heap. The one in purple had been huddling over him, scarcely conscious, but he looked up at Kaevir now. His garish hat was gone, his dark hair windswept and tangled about his face. He reached up, his fingertips trembling as he pulled at his mask, drawing it down.

"Kaevir?" he whispered again, his voice filled with confusion, tremulous with tears. As the scrap of silk fell away from his face, Kaevir staggered, his eyes flown wide, his breath and heartbeat drawing to stunned, disbelieving halts. His limbs went numb and leaden; he felt the strength wane in his knees, draining through his soles into the floor. His fingers went limp, unfurling from the Stone, and it fell, smacking against the granite tiles and rolling away from him.

"Eisean...?" Kaevir whispered. He felt tears burn his eyes, and he moaned softly, stumbling as though he had just taken a mighty blow to the groin. "It ... it cannot ... It cannot be."

Eisean stood, swaying unsteadily on his feet. His chest hitched, and he began to weep. Kaevir reached out, tears spilling down his cheeks as he brushed his fingertips against Eisean's cheek. Eisean turned his face at Kaevir's touch, clasping his hands against Kaevir's wrist, pressing his cheek against Kaevir's palm.

"Mother Above..." Kaevir gasped, and then he seized Eisean, wrapping his arms

about him and clutching him. He began to sob, pressing his forehead against Eisean's shoulder, holding him fiercely.

Eisean clung to him, shuddering against him. "I knew you were alive!" he cried. "I knew it!"

"He ... he told me you were dead..." Kaevir whispered. "Oh, Eisean, he told me they had hanged you..."

He looked down at the man in the yellow costume lying on the floor in sudden, anguished realization. "Eabhiros!" he cried softly, drawing away from Eisean and collapsing to his knees. He cradled his cousin's head between his hands, lowering his yellow mask and weeping anew to see the bruises and gashes on Eabhiros' face. "Oh, Mother Above! What have I done?"

Eabhiros' eyelids fluttered. He smiled dazedly. "Hullo, Kaevir..." he whispered.

"Eabhiros," Kaevir said, trembling with tears.

"Look at you," Eabhiros said. "Weeping like a ... bloody woman ... dressed like a ... damn foppish ninny..."

Kaevir uttered a soft cry and wrapped his arms about him, embracing him, folding himself over Eabhiros. "You are alive, both of you ... alive."

Lahnduren sat up on the ballroom floor, dazed and gasping for breath. His throat felt raw and agonized from where the rotted little whelp had tried to throttle him; his mind reeled, his vision blurred from where the bastard's fists had found their mark. He turned his face and spat blood against the floor.

"Bastards..." he hissed. He had recognized the one who had approached him, the young man with blue eyes and blond hair who had screamed at him to finish it. The Stone had somehow come to be on the floor beside of him; Lahnduren had spied it, entertaining a fleeting, frantic moment's thought of snatching it, curling it against his fingers before the winds had seized it and bore it beyond his reach, sending it against the young man's palm. He had known before that moment, however; he had known from the moment the young man had stepped forward—even before he had pulled off his mask to reveal the face Lahnduren had seen over and over within his mind, his dreams. He was Kaevir Macleod, the bastard whelp who had attacked him in forests outside of Belgaeran, the one the Stone had chosen as its bearer.

"Bastard," Lahnduren wheezed, limping to his feet. He saw his dagger on the ground and staggered toward it, his breath snuffling from the battered ruins of his nose. Kaevir Macleod had ruined everything—him and the pair of dandied fops who had thwarted his attempt against Kierken. Soldiers converged upon them now, royal and a'Pobail guards alike, swords in hand as they rushed forward. The crowds parted around them, making room as the soldiers advanced, and Lahnduren realized it was over. He would have no other try at Kierken, not with the soldiers flocking to his aid.

It was over. Llewyn's plan had failed, and all was ruined. Kaevir Macleod had stolen his Stone—claimed what was Lahnduren's by right—usurped his power, ruined his schemes, destroyed his life's efforts.

Lahnduren stooped, hooking his fingers about the hilt of the fallen dagger. He scooped it from the floor, clutching it against him, his brow furrowed deeply between his eyes, his thin lips wrinkled back from his toothless gums in a furious, disbelieving snarl.

He staggered toward Kaevir, clutching the dagger, rearing the blade back to thrust it between the young man's shoulder blades, clear through to his heart. Kaevir did not notice his approach, nor did his friends; they were too busy huddling together, weeping and sniveling in tender reunion. "By my breath," Lahnduren whispered. "You will answer."

He swung the dagger in a sharp downward arc. A blur of movement out of the corner of his eye attracted his gaze, and then Lahnduren shrieked, howling in outrage as a strong hand grasped him firmly by the wrist, blocking the dagger's descent.

"I think not, Lahnduren," Llewyn said, and there was a whisper of a breeze as he swung a sword in his other hand.

"You bastard—" Lahnduren began, and then the blade caught him beneath the chin. He uttered a startled cry and then his head parted from his neck as the sword completed its swing. His fingers splayed wide as blood spurted from the stump of his throat, spraying against Llewyn. The dagger clattered against the floor, and Llewyn released his grip on Lahnduren, letting him crumple backwards.

"Llewyn—!" Kaevir gasped, rising to his feet, his eyes enormous and stunned, his face ashen with shock. He had heard Lahnduren's indignant howl from behind him, and had wheeled about at the sound in time to see the Elf directly behind him, a long dagger blade poised for his back. Llewyn had caught Lahnduren's arm, staying the blow, and the Easpag'Ard had cleaved Lahnduren's head from his shoulders with a sword.

Lahnduren's skull smacked against the floor with a heavy thud; blood sprayed across Kaevir's face at the impact. The head rolled a few wobbling measures and then fell still, blood pooling about it in a widening circumference, the dead Elf prince's blue eyes staring directly into Kaevir's own.

"Mother Above...!" Eisean whimpered.

Kaevir stared at Llewyn. He did not know what to say; his breath and wits would seem to have abandoned him in his shock.

"Mo'Easpag'Ard!"

"Your Grace!"

"He is injured! He bleeds! They have attacked him!"

A flurry of voices sounded, overlapping in frantic concern as at least twenty a'Pobail soldiers reached them. Kaevir stepped back, his eyes widening in alarm, but as he thought to summon the wind, he heard Eisean cry out to him in warning:

"Kaevir, no—!"

and something smashed against his temple. One of the guards, thinking Kaevir had attacked Llewyn, had driven the pommel of his sword hilt against Kaevir's head, knocking the senses from him. Kaevir's eyes rolled back, his eyelids fluttering as darkness swooped upon him, engulfing him. He fell, crumpling against Eisean.

"You are under arrest," Kaevir heard one of the soldiers say as his consciousness abandoned him. "For treason against the Crown and assault with murderous intent against our King."

No ... no, please ... Kaevir thought, and then he fainted.

The guard had struck Kaevir before Llewyn had even realized his intentions, much less drawn breath to stay his hand. Llewyn whirled upon the soldier, shoving his palm against the young man's shoulder, staggering him as Kaevir collapsed, unconscious, against his friend.

"Do not hurt him!" Llewyn roared, and the soldier blinked at him, stricken and stunned. "My ... my lord..." he whispered, shaking. "Your Grace, you bleed! I thought he..."

"You thought wrong," Llewyn hissed, still brandishing the sword in hand. He turned back to Eisean, who cradled Kaevir's form against his chest. The young man blinked up at him, his eyes wide and frightened. More a'Pobail soldiers had appeared, surrounding them, nearly one hundred members of Llewyn's elite Cadre. More than a dozen had thrust their blades forward in the Easpag'Ard's defense, and the flat of a sword rested beneath Eisean's chin, poised and pressed against his throat.

"Arrest them," Llewyn said. "They are the Gentleman Highwaymen—allies of Lahnduren. They meant to murder the King."

"No..." Eisean whispered, shaking his head. Eabhiros tried to sit up behind him, his brows drawn as his breath heaved from him in a loud, hurting gasp.

"You ... bloody, lying bastard..." Eabhiros said.

"Leave Kaevir to me. He is innocent of this," Llewyn said. "Arrest these two and bring them to Gaol for reckoning. If they offer resistance, run them through."

"No..." Eisean said again, his eyes flown wide with terror. "No, you cannot, you bastard, you—"

"Belay that order," snapped a voice from behind him, and Llewyn turned in surprise. He staggered, his eyes flying wide as he saw Kierken walking toward him—holding Qynh in his arms as she stumbled in step with him.

"By my command, all of you lower your weapons and stand down," Kierken said. Qynh stared at Llewyn, her brows drawn together, her cheek pressed against her husband's shoulder. Behind them, Llewyn could see Eamon Cathaoir, commander of the royal guards, in the company of Taemir Fabhcun, Isbaenna Gabhlan, and the handmaid, Graelle. Nearly every royal guard had been rallied from throughout the palace and grounds, it seemed, and they flanked their King in a broad circumference, swords in their hands.

Despite such seeming ill circumstance, Llewyn managed a smile. "My liege," he said, raising his brows. "You ... you have caught me most unawares, sire. These are the Highwaymen who escaped from Gaol—the pair who served Lahnduren and meant to see you murdered tonight."

"I know who they are," Kierken said, his brows furrowed. "Spare your breath. It is over. All of these years ... all of these deceptions, you rotted bastard—it is over."

"You heard the King!" Eamon roared at the a'Pobail soldiers. "Lower your damn weapons and stand down!"

The corner of Llewyn's mouth hooked. "I think not," he murmured, and he arched his brow. "Kill them all," he said to his soldiers. "The Crown is mine the moment Kierken no longer draws breath. Claim it for me."

Kierken met Llewyn's gaze. His soldiers began to move hurriedly, drawing him and the Queen back among their ranks.

"Take them now," Llewyn said, and his men howled out battle cries. The a'Pobail forces surged forward, charging the royal guards. There was the thunder of sabatons against the granite floor, the bellowing din of voices raised in furious resolve, the melodic crashing of sword against steel, and suddenly the ballroom became a battlefield.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

When the a'Pobail soldiers surged forward, Eisean fell atop Kaevir, folding himself protectively over his friend. He felt the guards slam against him, stumbling over him and around him as they rushed against Kierken's troops, and he cried out in pain, clutching Kaevir against him. He heard Eabhiros scream, felt his sudden weight against his back as he collapsed, and Eisean hooked his arm behind him, wrapping his hand against Eabhiros' shoulder, trying to shield him somehow with his body.

Eabhiros had been punted in the ribs; the subsequent pain as the broken bones had smashed together made him faint, and when Eisean opened his eyes, lifting his head warily, he found himself the only one among them yet conscious behind the battlelines.

"Eabhiros..." he whispered, feeling Eabhiros slump beneath his arm, crumpling to the floor behind him. He pivoted, reaching again for his friend. "Oh, Mother Above ... Eabhiros!"

He felt something press suddenly beneath his chin—the sharpened edge of a steel blade—and he froze, his eyes flying wide. In the sudden madness of the battle charge, he had forgotten about Lleuwyn.

"Remove your hand from Kaevir," the Easpag'Ard said. When Eisean did not move, Lleuwyn shoved the edge of the sword firmly against his throat, drawing a soft whimper from him. "Remove your hand, lad. Do it now."

"No," Eisean said, meeting Lleuwyn's gaze. His brows drew together. "No. You cannot have him."

Lleuwyn smiled at him. "You are wrong, lad," he said, and he jerked against the sword, meaning to open Eisean's throat. The wind caught his hand, engulfing the sword, shoving the blade away from Eisean's neck, sparing the young man injury, and Lleuwyn had a split second to realize Kaevir was awake; he had come around once more.

"Kaevir—" he said, and then a gust slammed into him, throwing him back, sending him crashing to the floor. The back of his head struck the granite with enough force to knock him senseless.

He sat up slowly, pressing his palm against his forehead. He could see Kaevir sit up, glaring at him. "Get Eabhiros," Kaevir said to Eisean. "Get him out of here."

Lleuwyn groaned, his vision blurring, and he struggled to draw his legs beneath him, to rise to his feet. He had lost the sword; the wind had snatched it from him, and he could not clear his head enough to see what had become of it.

"No," Eisean shook his head, clutching at Kaevir's sleeve. "No, I will not leave you,

I will not."

"It is alright," Kaevir said, and he drew himself onto his knees. "Eabhiros is hurt. Get him out of here. I will take care of this. It is mine to finish."

Kaevir stood, stumbling. He looked down at and saw the Shadow Stone against the floor. He held out his hand and the Stone flew toward his palm. Kaevir folded his fingers about it and walked toward Llewyn, his brows furrowed, his face blood-smearred and battered.

"Kaevir..." Llewyn whimpered, staggering to his feet. He limped away from Kaevir's approach, holding out his hands. "Kaevir, lad ... Please, let me ... let me explain. Give me the chance to..."

"You lied to me," Kaevir seethed, and the winds stoked, whipping through the shattered windows, billowing about the ballroom. Llewyn cringed as they slapped against him, blowing his hair about his face, tangling his coat tails about his legs. He stumbled against their force, floundering, throwing his hands up toward his head.

"Kaevir—please—!" he cried out.

"You lied to me," Kaevir said, and then the wind plowed into Llewyn, smashing against his chest, throwing him off his feet. The entire palace began to shudder as the winds rose, whirling about it. From overhead, the ceiling joists began to groan and creak.

"No more," Kaevir hissed to Llewyn, as plaster began to rain down upon them from the ceiling. The wind howled outside of the ballroom, shrieked within the confines of its walls. Kaevir's hair whipped about his face; his justicoat tails flapped about his hips. As the sounds of battle died, as the soldiers—a'Pobail and royal guards alike—paused in their bloody, brutal battle and the winds whipped through their ranks, the resounding clamor of thousands of windows—every pane of glass within the palace—shattering all at once could be heard.

The winds caught the a'Pobail soldiers, ripping them away from Kierken's guards, sending them smashing and pummeling into walls, through windows, throwing them into the air and battering them about the room. The gusts and blasts that sent them flying like toys flung by a furious child did not touch Kierken's royal troops; it buffeted against them, snapping against their clothes, their hair, but left them unharmed.

"Kaevir, no!" Llewyn said, holding out his hand, pleading. He could hear a terrible, wrenching sound from above, and he looked up, watching the winds pry the roof from the building. Shingles flew about outside of the palace, smashing through empty window frames, slamming into walls. The eaves groaned and creaked and began to rise, lifting from the force of the wind, letting debris tumble through new openings in their wake.

"No ... do not...!" Llewyn cried, shrinking back.

"No more!" Kaevir shouted, and he threw back his head, spreading his arms out wide. The wind seemed to blast from the ground beneath him, smashing against the ceiling, wrenching the roof loose of its moorings. With a thunderous roar of snapping timbers, the roof of the ballroom lifted overhead, tearing loose of the walls, rising as though an enormous hand had plucked it aloft. Plaster, shingles, torn cross beams, and yards of lumber flew through the air. An enormous section of roof ripped asunder and flipped toward the sky, tumbling end over end, crashing against the grounds beyond with enough force to make the earth underfoot shudder.

Debris showered down upon the chamber; broken shingles, shattered lumber and iron girders smashing to the floor. The westward corner of the palace collapsed inward, the mortar and stone crumbling as the wind bore the roof aloft, and the soldiers screamed, rushing about frantically, throwing their arms over their heads.

Llewyn shrieked and tried to run. He felt the wind catch him, jerk him off of his feet and send him flying through the air. Kaevir threw Llewyn the breadth of the ballroom, sending him crashing through the remnants of the fallen wall. Llewyn smashed through broken granite, glass, and beams, and the wind sent him careening to the grounds below, slamming him against the lawn.

Kaevir fell to his knees, shoving his palm against his brow. "No more," he whispered, struggling to still the winds. His heart was racing, and the wind did not want to quiet. He had loosed in full; he had released any inhibitions within his heart and mind that might have contained the wind, held it in check. He had lost control of it, and it did not want to be reined once more. He could feel its might searing through him, the sheer and unbridled power of the wind, and he cried out hoarsely, tangling his fingers in his hair, willing it to fall still. "No more," he gasped. "Please, no more ... No more ... please..."

At last, he felt the winds begin to slow and fade. They swirled about him, brushing against him like fond fingertips, waning in velocity and force until they fell silent and still. Kaevir crumpled forward, dropping the Stone, covering his face with his hands. "No more," he whimpered, feeling the last hint of breeze ruffling his hair. "Please..."

At first, there was near silence. He could hear the pattering sounds of rubble and debris spilling against the floor, the shuffling sounds of the soldiers' sabatons scrabbling against broken stone, plaster and glass. He could hear soft voices begin to rise, moans from the injured, groans that mounted into cries and pleas. He could hear people weeping and screaming from the grounds, the city streets beyond. He could hear his own harsh breath wheezing from his throat, the fluttering of his sobs as he began to weep.

Within moments of the winds dying, a new sort of pandemonium broke out. Everyone began rushing about in a panicked, frenzied state. The wind that had nearly destroyed the palace had ravaged the entire city of Belgaeran, and as the soldiers

gathered their wits about them, reeling and staggering about in shock, people began streaming into the ruined ballroom, screaming and shouting. Isbaenna rushed for Eisean. Taemir stumbled along behind her, his eyes enormous as he turned about in clumsy circles, his face lifted skyward, his mouth agape.

"Do you see this?" he cried out, his voice hoarse and stunned. "Mother Above—have you ever seen the bloody likes? The whole city—roofs wrenched from moorings—buildings toppled, walls collapsed, trees overturned! And no one bloody hurt but the a'Pobail! Not a damn other soul more than scraped or banged a bit!"

He stumbled gracelessly over Lahnduren's corpse, his feet skittering in the blood, and when he punted Lahnduren's severed head, sending it rolling before him, he paused, his eyes flying all the wider. "Hoah ... well ... Mayhap one other, then..." he said.

"Eisean!" Isbaenna cried out. He had staggered to his feet, and she threw herself against him, wrapping her arms about his neck as she burst into tears.

"I am alright," he whispered, holding her. "I am alright, Isbaenna."

"Eabhiros!" Kaevir gasped. He scrambled to his feet and rushed to his cousin's side, falling onto his knees as he reached for Eabhiros' prone, motionless form. He felt along Eabhiros' throat, his fingertips fumbling until he found the faint, thready measure of Eabhiros' pulse, and he cried out softly in relief. "Help me!" he cried, looking toward Taemir and Isbaenna. "He ... he is hurt, too ... ! Please...!"

"I will carry him," Rhyden said, limping forward. Kaevir blinked at him, and Rhyden met his startled gaze evenly. "I will carry him," he said again.

"You are hurt, Rhyden. Let me," said a voice, and Kaevir looked over his shoulder, startled to find the King walking toward him.

"He saved my life," Kierken said, kneeling beside Kaevir. He reached out, drawing his arm beneath Eabhiros' shoulders, holding him against his chest. Kierken turned his face, looking at Kaevir. "He saved my life," he said again, softly. "Let me carry him."

"This is ... In all of my days, I have never ... could never ... Hoah, is anyone besides me bloody speechless?" Taemir cried, stumbling about. Eamon began hollering orders to his stunned and staggering soldiers, galvanizing them into motion, sending them about to arrest and disarm the a'Pobail guards.

"I do not care if they are hurt—moaning and bleeding besides—round them up!" Eamon shouted. "The bloody lot of them are traitors! Disregard my damn command—stand against my King? Hoah—we will string them up by the dozen from Pionos if needs be! Round them up!"

"Lean on me, Kaevir," Eisean said gently, placing his arm around Kaevir's waist. "Come on now. Let us leave here."

"No," Kaevir whispered, shaking his head. He drew away from Eisean, pressing his fingertips against his temple. "No, Eisean, not yet. I have to find Lleuwyn. He might have survived."

"Let him go, Kaevir," Eisean said. "If he lives, let the soldiers find him, deal with him."

"I cannot," Kaevir said, shaking his head again. "He lied to me, told me you and Eabhiros were dead." He blinked against sudden tears and stared down at the ground, his brows furrowed. "He made me trust him. I have to find him. I have to know."

Lleuwyn stirred, moaning softly. He lay on his back in a pile of debris, crumbled rocks and broken timbers, shattered glass and twisted ruins of steel. He moved his legs, crying out hoarsely as the motion sent searing pain shooting through him. He brought his hand to his face, pressing his palm against his brow as he blinked dazedly up at the sky.

The winds were gone. The air had fallen still, and above him, thousands of stars glimmered in silent, stoic regard. He could hear voices, people crying out faintly, shouting and calling to one another, and he realized they would be coming for him. It was over; he had failed. Fifteen years of effort and energy for nothing.

The soldiers would be coming; he could hear Eamon Cathaoir's voice above the others, barking out sharp imperatives to his guards. They were arresting his troops; even as he lay there, struggling for breath, the cadre he had worked so hard and so long to build was being arrested for treason.

Lleuwyn giggled, despite the pain it caused him, and he drew his legs beneath him, staggering to his feet. He shambled about dizzily; every time he stepped down on his right leg, his knee sent a screaming bolt of pain through him. He stooped, reaching gingerly for his leg, and blinked as his fingertips brushed against something foreign protruding from his breeches; a sharp point of steel. He looked down and laughed again; part of an iron beam had speared through his leg and broken off. The splintered remains were lodged just above his knee, in one side and out the other, piercing flesh and thew. His pant leg was soaked in blood, his white stocking stained dark with it, and when he stepped, he could feel it pooled in his shoes, hear it squelching moistly beneath his heel.

He laughed again, but the chortle twisted into an agonized and breathless cry as he tried to wrench the shard of metal loose. There would be no moving it—not for the moment. It was lodged deep and fast, and it would need the attention of a proper surgeon. He doubted Kierken's physician would see it tended to for him—but the thought of this made him cackle again. It would have to wait. He needed to escape first.

He began to shamble along the side of the palace, limping horribly, dragging his injured leg along behind him. The defensive walls around the palace had collapsed in

broad areas from the force of the wind; iron street lamps had crashed through in places, and trees had toppled in others. Kaevir had unleashed his might in full, turning the Stone's power loose unabated, and he had destroyed not only the palace and grounds, but bloody damn likely the whole of Belgaeran itself. This realization made Lleuwyn laugh again. His laughter turned to tears and he frowned, struggling not to weep as he inched his way toward a broken section of wall, meaning to slink forth into the city and flee in the midst of the confusion.

He reached the toppled wall and started to clamber up the rubble. He struck his leg against a corner of collapsed, crumbling stone as he climbed, and he gritted his teeth against a shriek as the jagged piece of metal moved within his limb. He curled his hands into fists and lay against the rocks, his breath stilled, his voice whining shrilly in his throat until the wave of agony subsided within him.

Lleuwyn unfurled his fingers and clawed at the rubble, moving again. He felt a light breeze press suddenly against his face, sending loose stone and grit fluttering against him, and he froze once more, poised and still upon the stones.

"Beannacht, lad," he said softly, not turning his head.

"Why did you save me?" Kaevir said from behind him. "Inside, when Lahnduren came at me with his knife. Why did you save me?"

Lleuwyn turned around, letting himself slide somewhat down the slope of the debris. He winced, sucking in a sharp, hurting breath as the movement pained his leg. "I ... I do not know."

They heard the sound of soldiers approaching, their footfalls against the ground, and Kaevir jerked his head toward the noise, his eyes flown wide.

"They will hang me if they discover me," Lleuwyn said.

"You deserve it," Kaevir said. "You should answer for what you have done."

The soldiers were near now, the light from their torches fluttering against the walls of the palace as they approached. Kaevir held Lleuwyn's gaze, his brows drawn, his mouth set in a grim frown.

"Ten minutes," he whispered. "You saved my life—I will save yours and give you that."

"Alright," Lleuwyn said softly, nodding his chin.

"I will follow you," Kaevir said, opening his eyes, staring at Lleuwyn. "I will give you ten minutes, and then all between us is gone. I will follow you, and if I find you, I will grant you no mercy."

Lleuwyn looked up at him, opening his mouth, meaning to speak. Kaevir shook his head, turning away from him. "Go," he said. "Ten minutes, Lleuwyn—and then I am

coming for you."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Three weeks passed since the night of the mhas'cor. Belgaeran had started to rebuild; the royal city had survived millennia of war, strife, and the torments of nature in one form or another. It had crumbled before, been torn asunder and ruined, only to rise once more from the rubble. It rose yet again in the wake of the winds; a resurrection heralded by the clattering of hammers, the grinding of saws, the hiss of flame to steel, and the clanking of mallet to masonry.

Rhyden folded a leine into a neat bundle and tucked it into his traveling case. He had moved his belongings back to the palace, remaining there in the weeks since the Samhradh ball under the pretense of keeping near to Kierken, offering his support to the King. He had really kept there for the purpose he now pursued—leaving without Taemir discovering and trying to persuade him to remain.

"You are leaving?" a quiet voice asked from behind him, and he started, turning about. He had not even heard the door to his chamber open, and he blinked, startled anew to discover his guest.

"Qynh..." he said softly.

The Queen walked toward him, smiling inquisitively, the corners of her lovely mouth unfurling.

"I ... I did not hear you knock," he said, averting his gaze, staring down at the shirt between his hands.

"I did not knock," she said. "Forgive me. I suspected you might be up to this. Leaving us without farewell."

"I was going to say farewell," he said, glancing up at her. In his mind, he knew she had never written to him, had never loved him; but his heart remained duly and stubbornly unconvinced.

"No, you were not," Qynh told him, raising her brow, making him smile despite himself.

"I left letters to that effect," he said. "I do not like farewells. There is too much sentiment involved. A great and poignant to-do over no more than an exit."

"Does your father know?"

"Yes, I told him last night," Rhyden said. He turned around and pretended to occupy himself packing once more.

"You have forgiven him," she said quietly, standing beside him.

"I do not know about that," Rhyden said with a shrug. "I am speaking to him, if it

counts for anything."

"I am happy for it, Rhyden. He loves you very much."

"He knows I do not like a fuss over these things ... and Mother would only weep if she knew, follow me to the pier and make a scene. I gave him correspondences for her ... you and Kierken ... some others, and Taemir, of course..." Rhyden remarked, shoving his shirt down into his case.

"You will not tell even Taemir good-bye?" she whispered, and he paused.

He forced a smile and glanced at her again. "He is far too busy spending time with your Lady Graelle to be bothered. Did you know? He is quite taken with her; writing poetry, sketching her portrait and what-not."

"I know, yes," Qynh said, smiling. "And she is fond of him. He is very kind to her, and gentle."

"You see?" Rhyden arched his brow, turning his gaze toward the trunk once more. "He will scarcely even notice I am gone."

"Who says you must leave?" she asked him. "You could stay, Rhyden. Kierken would let you. He owes you so much—he would love it if you did."

"I have work to do," he said, and he ran his palms against his clothing, smoothing away wrinkles that did not exist. He took another shirt in hand and folded again. "I have already been gone far too long. The Good Mother Above only knows what manner of chaos awaits me in Cneas."

Qynh did not say anything, and he felt obligated to continue rambling, if only to justify his departure. "Besides, if I do not leave now, it might be weeks—months, even—before there is room for me on another ship. I ran into Aedhir Fainne after the mhas'cor—he came to see me while I was recovering, do you believe it? I have not seen him since the First War—surely, twenty years. He has been in service to Kierken's navy all this while since and his frigate embarks for Cneas today at three. He offered me passage at no fare. That is a deal I cannot—"

"Rhyden," Qynh said softly, laying her hand against his, drawing his voice and breath to a halt. "She always read your letters to me. I always heard them, every word."

He lowered his face, closing his eyes. "It does not matter now," he said.

"I had a dream of you," she whispered. "I dreamed I came to your door in Torach, that I ... I roused you from your bed, and begged you to come to Iarnrod. I tried to warn you of Lleuwyn. I told you I followed the moon to find you."

He blinked at her, startled. She reached for him, touching his face, and he shied from her hand, ducking away from her. "Please do not," he said.

She touched him anyway, despite his protest, pressing her palm gently against his cheek. "I knew you would come," she said to him.

"Please, Qynh," he said again, drawing away from her. "It does not matter now."

"Yes," Qynh told him. "It does."

"No, it does not. You are well again, and Kierken is ... He is so joyous for it, like I have not seen him in so long." Rhyden looked up, meeting her gaze. "And you have the baby now. You will tell him of it?"

She nodded. "Tonight."

"You will tell him it is his?"

Qynh smiled at him, tears alight in her eyes with the new morrow's sun. "He has so longed for a child," she whispered.

"Then, you see?" he said. "It is for the best that I leave." He smiled at her. "I think I have aptly demonstrated that I am not much for keeping the truth from my King." She laughed softly and he brushed his hand against her face. "I will never tell him. Do not worry for that. I gave you my word—I am bound to it."

"I do not need your word, Rhyden, to trust you," Qynh said.

He looked at her for a long moment and then turned away, packing once more.

"I love you," she said softly.

He paused, a shirt between his hands. "In what way?"

Qynh smiled at him, reaching out and touching his hand, twining her fingers through his. "In whatever way makes your heart feel safe ... and not alone," she told him. She leaned toward him, pressing her lips softly against his. "Slan leat, Rhyden," she whispered to him. *Good bye.*

Isbaenna stirred late that morrow at her flat. She opened her eyes, blinking sleepily to discover the sun had already lifted high enough in the sky to drop through her bedroom window in broad beams, spilling across her bed. She stretched slowly, letting her legs unfurl beneath the blankets. She reached for Eisean, not the least bit surprised to discover his half of the bed empty, the warmth of his body long since faded from the sheets.

Isbaenna crawled out of bed, drawing her silk dressing gown about her shoulders, lashing it loosely about her waist.

"Says here they are going to raise the tax on pipe weed another twenty quill," she heard Eabhiros say from the kitchen.

"What?" Eisean said. He was likely cooking; she could smell the sweet aroma of

melted butter and heard the faint, bubbling, sizzling sound of eggs frying in an iron skillet. She smiled to imagine him in her mind, a wooden spatula poised in hand as he turned from the stove, his brows lifted to match the surprise and chagrin in his voice. "They cannot bloody do that, can they? Already, it is ... what? Nearly a full mark for but an ounce!" Isbaenna heard the soft sound of pottery knocking together, as Eisean lifted a plate from a cupboard. "How is this for your yolk? Too runny?"

The paper fluttered again; Eabhiros lowering the gazette. "It cannot be too runny," he said. "That is perfect, Eisean. You will see me spoiled. Where is Kaevir? I will eat his share if he does not hurry up."

"He said he had some sort of errand to run," Eisean said, his voice growing somewhat troubled. "He left a little while ago. He told me not to worry for it, that he ... he would be back this evening."

"Then I would not worry for it," Eabhiros said gently. "Fix an egg for him still the same, and give it to me."

There was a moment of silence, and then Eisean laughed. "You are a job."

Isbaenna stepped into the doorway quietly, watching them, smiling.

"*'Yob'* is *'boy'* spelled backwards, did you know?" Eabhiros asked Eisean, munching on a bite of egg. He had lifted the paper again, and though he sat facing Isbaenna, he did not notice her straight away.

Eisean sat with his back to the door. "No, I did not," he said. "I suppose that makes a sort of sense."

"Have you an extra egg for me?" Isbaenna asked, and though Eisean jumped, startled, smiling broadly as he turned about in his chair to face her, Eabhiros did not so much as sniff.

"I suppose if we do not, he might be convinced to fry another," he said, as though he had realized she was there all along. He lowered the edge of the gazette and dropped Isbaenna a wink and a smile. "Maidin mhaith, my lady."

"Good morrow," Eisean said, rising. He was still smiling as he walked over to her, smiling as he cradled her face between his hands and smiling as he kissed her softly, his lips lingering against hers.

"Good morrow," she whispered, smiling back at him. "Maidin mhaith, Eabhiros. We are to meet Taemir and Graelle for lunch this afternoon. Why do you not come with us? Rhyden might be there ... if he does not beg away again."

"Taemir and Graelle seem fond of one another," Eabhiros remarked. "That is nice, I think. Something else good to come of it all. She fancied Rhyden for a time, did she not?"

"I think so," Isbaenna said. "He probably will not come because of that. I think it makes him uncomfortable."

"I think good-byes make Rhyden uncomfortable," Eabhiros observed, sipping his tea. He flapped his hand at them. "You two go ahead. I will be fine. I have some lunch plans of my own this afternoon."

Isbaenna glanced at Eisean, but found him as surprised by this news as she was. "Oh, really?" Eisean asked, arching his brow.

"Oh, really," Eabhiros said, pretending to be fully absorbed in his newspaper. "As a matter of fact, Lady Igraine Penwyn and I have agreed to meet."

"Igraine?" Isbaenna asked, blinking in new surprise.

"Muise," Eabhiros said. *Indeed.*

Eisean laughed, clapping Eabhiros across the shoulder. "You are a job," he told him fondly. "Backwards or forwards—a bloody damn job."

Kaevir reached the Cuan'darach port by two o'clock. By the time he went through all of the sentry checkpoints and registries and sprinted along the boardwalk toward the loading docks, it was well after two-thirty. He ran as fast as he could, jostling past people along the platforms, ducking in and about crates and boxes. He was looking for a frigate, the *a'Maorga*, set to depart at three o'clock.

I will miss it, he thought desperately as he ran. There is no time—surely he has left the pier to board by now. I will miss it. Damn it, I should have left the city earlier—woken before dawn!

He looked out over the harbor, spying the three distinctive, towering masts of the frigate out upon the water. Her sails were still furled, her riggings fettered, her anchor dropped and holding beneath the choppy surface of the bay, and he felt his heart seize with hope. It was the *a'Maorga*—he knew it was. If the ship yet remained, he had hope—even if he had to hire a boatman to row him out to it; even if he bloody damn had to swim.

He raced down the pier, lugging with him a large, heavy iron box tucked against his side. His boot soles hammered noisily against the wooden planks beneath his feet, and he gasped for breath. Someone stood at the end of the pier, still a distance from him, with his back turned to Kaevir's approach, his gaze out upon the water. There was no mistaking the long sheaf of wheat-colored hair that fell to the man's waist, fluttering in a light breeze behind him, and Kaevir shouted out, holding aloft his hand to draw his attention.

"Rhyden! Rhyden Fabhcun!"

Rhyden turned about, curious at this unexpected beckon, and Kaevir waved at him.

"Hoah—Rhyden! Wait! Wait a moment! Wait!"

He ran up to the Elf, and stood before him, panting for breath. He leaned over, pressing his hand against his thigh and gulping at air, winded and flushed with exertion. Rhyden looked down at him, tucking his hair behind the tapered points of his ears, his brow arched.

"Wait..." Kaevir gasped at him. "Please ... wait a moment..."

"I am waiting," Rhyden told him pointedly. "My boatman is on his way."

Kaevir looked up and found Rhyden regarding him, his brow raised, his expression quizzical. During the last weeks, a tentative sort of relationship had developed between the two, a sort of cordial, mutual regard born from the fact that neither had much time to befriend the other more deeply.

"Rhyden..." Kaevir wheezed.

"Kaevir," Rhyden replied. After a long moment with only Kaevir's effort for breath to break the silence, he spoke again. "What are you doing here?"

"I came to find you," Kaevir told him, straightening, hefting the iron case more comfortably against his hip. His shoulder ached from the burden of carrying it about. "I ... I came to find you before you left to ... to go back to the Morthir."

"How did you know I was going?"

Kaevir looked down at the ground, sheepish. "I overheard you tell your father last night at the palace," he said. He glanced at Rhyden. "Why are you leaving?"

"I have things to do there," Rhyden said. He offered a slight shrug. "And have run out of things to do here. You came all of this way just to ask me why I am leaving?"

Kaevir shook his head. "No," he said, and he hefted the iron box between his hands. "I ... I wanted to give you this."

Rhyden raised his brow again, reaching for the box.

"It is heavy," Kaevir said, as Rhyden slipped it from his arms.

"Yes, I can see that," Rhyden said, grunting slightly as the heft of the box settled against him. He blinked at Kaevir. "What is it?"

"I ... I know that you burned the Book of Shadows," Kaevir told him. "Kierken told me. He ... he said Trejaeran Muirel had begged a promise from you to do it—that he was your friend."

"Yes," Rhyden nodded. "He was my best friend."

"Kierken kept you from keeping your promise to him," Kaevir said. "He told me that, too. Trejaeran said it was evil—he took the sight from the Elves so that the

Book could not call to anyone anymore. You told him you would destroy it, but Kierken kept it hidden from you. He lied to you."

"Yes, he did."

"I thought Elves could not lie," Kaevir said.

Rhyden met his gaze. "I always thought so, myself," he said. "Sometimes grief, despair ... these things would see anyone defy what is inherent in their nature. Kierken did as he did because he thought it was right. I have never blamed him for that."

"You burned the Book," Kaevir said. "It ... it is destroyed, is it not? You kept your promise?"

"Yes," Rhyden said. "I did."

"Good," Kaevir said, and he lay his hands against the iron box. He stared at Rhyden, his eyes round and imploring. "Then ... then make me a promise, as well," he whispered.

Rhyden blinked at him in startled realization. He looked down at the crate, and then back at Kaevir, pushing it toward him. "I cannot," he said.

"It is the Stone," Kaevir told him, pushing the box back against Rhyden's chest. "I locked it inside."

"I know what it bloody is," Rhyden said. "Take it back. You cannot give this to me."

"I want you to get rid of it," Kaevir told him, desperately. Rhyden fell still, staring at him. "Please, Rhyden. I want you to take it with you—cast it into the sea. Someplace far from shore, where the water is deep—where no one will ever find it."

"Kaevir, I ... I cannot do that," Rhyden told him. "It will only find its way to you once more. It is yours."

"I do not want it," Kaevir said, stricken. "It has cost me too much, and I ... I do not want it. Please, Rhyden. It cannot get out of the box—not unless someone opens it, and I have the key. The key is in Belgaeran, and I mean to throw it into the Thoir River tomorrow as we make our way home to Siochanta."

"It will not take the power of the Stone away from you, Kaevir," Rhyden told him gently.

"You do not know that," Kaevir said. "No one knows that—even I do not know. There is so much legend and myth about that Stone that no one knows truth from fable anymore. If it is gone—if it is far away from me and it can never find its way back to my hand, mayhap ... mayhap it will leave me alone." He stared at Rhyden, imploring. "And if it does not—at least, it might keep someone else from claiming it

... from it choosing another. Another like Ciardha—or Llewyn. Someone who would use it for evil."

Rhyden looked at him for a long, silent moment, his brows drawn, his expression troubled.

"Please, Rhyden," Kaevir said again. "I can trust you to do this. I know I can. That is why I came here—why I had to find you. Because I know if you give me your word, I can trust in it."

Rhyden looked down at the crate between his arms. His boatman had arrived; they both turned as they heard his voice call up from below the pier. "Hoah—Lord Fabhcun! Here we go now!"

"Just a moment, le do thoil," Rhyden called to him. He looked at Kaevir.

"Please," Kaevir whispered.

"I will take it," Rhyden said, and Kaevir uttered an audible breath of relief. "I will cast it into deep waters far from any shore. I will promise you this, Kaevir. I will give you my word."

"Thank you, Rhyden," Kaevir said.

"But you must make me a promise in return," Rhyden told him, his brow arching again. Kaevir blinked at him, puzzled. "If the power remains with you—even with the Stone gone, if its power over the wind is still with you, you must promise me that you will never wield it again. You can control it—and I want your promise you will never call on it for any purpose—good, fell, or otherwise. Give me your word, Kaevir—your oath for mine." He cradled the box against his right arm, holding out his left hand to Kaevir.

"I promise it, Rhyden," Kaevir said, and he clasped his palm against Rhyden's wrist, feeling the Elf's fingers close against his arm. "By my breath, I swear on it."

"Then so do I," Rhyden said.

"Lord Fabhcun, Captain Fainne has called all hands to deck," the boatman called. "They are releasing the sails as we speak, my lord. We must go."

"I am coming, dammit," Rhyden muttered. He glanced at Kaevir. "I had best leave now."

"Thank you, Rhyden," Kaevir whispered again.

He watched Rhyden descend a wooden ladder down the side of the pier, toward the waiting longboat below. Once Rhyden had settled his feet against the bottom of the boat and discovered his balance, Kaevir helped pass his belongings to him; a heavy, wieldy traveling trunk, an overfilled knapsack, and the iron box.

"Many thanks, mo'cara," Rhyden said, taking the box in hand and turning his face up toward Kaevir. "Trejaeran told me something before he died," he said. "After he begged his promise of me. It ... it was the last he ever spoke to me."

"What?" Kaevir asked, puzzled.

Rhyden squatted, setting the crate on the floor, and then stood, looking up once more. "He told me the true measure of a man lies in his heart, not his deeds. He said, 'Tell him he is not chosen. It is he who can yet choose.' I have spent many long years wondering what he meant ... and who he meant me to tell it to."

Kaevir blinked, thinking of the words of the Stone within his mind, the whispers that had drawn him to it from the first.

You are chosen.

"I suppose now I know," Rhyden said with a smile. "And you did not need me to tell you at all." He rose onto his tiptoes and stretched his arm out, reaching for Kaevir. "I do not like farewells."

"Neither do I," Kaevir said, leaning forward, brushing his fingertips against Rhyden's. "Histrionic drivel, I think."

The Elf smiled at him. "Pointless melodrama, I have always said." He placed his hands against the nearest piling, offering a hearty shove to see the boat drift away from the pier. The boatman dipped his oars into the water and began to row, steering the longboat into the harbor toward the *a'Maorga*.

"Go home," Rhyden told Kaevir, balancing easily as the boat swayed beneath him. "Be with your family, your friends. Enjoy your life."

"The same to you," Kaevir said.

"Too late for that," Rhyden laughed. He lifted his hand, waving to Kaevir. "Mayhap I will see you again someday, Kaevir Macleod."

Kaevir smiled at him, raising his hand, returning Rhyden's wave. "I would like that, Rhyden Fabhcun," he called. "Slan leat." *Good bye.*

Rhyden offered no reply. He merely turned and sat down on the bench of the boat, smiling and shaking his head.

THE END

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Sara Reinke lives in Kentucky, where she is a freelance writer and editor. Her debut fantasy novel, “Book of Days” from Double Dragon Publishing was named one of the Top Ten Sci-Fi/Fantasy novels of 2005 in the annual Preditors & Editors Readers Poll and was a Finalist in the 2005 Dream Realm Awards for excellence in electronically published speculative fiction. Visit her online at www.sarareinke.com to learn more about her upcoming titles, enjoy two free short stories from the Chronicles of Tiralainn and more.