

The Bound

jm douglas



The cover image is taken from “July” of *Très Riches Heures*, a French book of hours from the early 1400s.

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Readers particularly sensitive to violence, alcohol, sexual assault, or loss of mental control should be forewarned these are topics they may encounter.

To Anne, since when we were children I promised I'd dedicate a book to her, though it's unlikely she remembers.

1.
The Morning City



The print shop's selection was insultingly thin. It held nothing other than propaganda, but Finian hadn't come to shop. He considered slipping a few of his political fliers into the books, but the clerk kept looking his way.

Finian opened a plain pamphlet from the rack in front of him. From its pages, a clan born extolled the various virtues of the Sovereign. Finian leafed ahead and glanced out the street window.

There she was, at the lip of the stairs, coming onto the third tier. He slipped the volume back into place and exited the shop, thanking the clerk as he did.

He tailed her for a street before he caught up.

"Hi, guardsperson," Finian said, drawing next to Rowena.

She started, then smiled, then frowned.

“Fin. What are you doing here?”

“The city? Living, same as always.”

“No, talking to me,” she said.

“Don't worry.” He hefted the bag slung across his shoulder. “I bear gifts. Well, gift.”

“I'm tired. I'm going home,” she said.

“I'll walk you.”

“Fine,” Rowena said, and began to cut through the marketplace.

He had to strain to keep up without jogging. She was remarkably fit. Rowena moved with a warrior's unconscious grace.

They made a strange pair. He carried very little with him. The keys to his shop, which was also his home. A little belt-knife, more useful for opening box strings and cutting food than fighting. A few coins in his left shoe, because emergencies were rarely predictable. And, in the canvas bag, a bottle of dark wine, the top sealed with colored wax. With it, two ceramic cups.

Where Finian was slender and pale, Rowena was fit and dark. She wore her curly hair in long braids and carried a long knife on her belt. It was a blade meant for doing violence, and she was trained in its use.

Finian was clean and soap-scented. He wore a single brass ring in one ear, though he could have afforded nicer. His clothes were well-cut but loose; his chest was bound flat. From his narrow waist and thicker hips, a hawkish observer might still guess he had been pronounced female at birth.

Rowena wore the uniform of the guard. She smelled like sweat. She did not look presentable or neat; she looked tired.

“Here,” he said, pointing down a street. “A detour.”

“I just want to be home,” she insisted.

“Please, Rowena. I want to talk.”

“You can talk here.”

“Please, please. I won't take long.”

She scowled and followed him. The streets quieted; they emptied into a small park. They were its only occupants. Benches lined a grass square. A squat fountain attended by a yellow bird sat at the center. The bird ruffled its wings.

Finian sat on a bench and patted the seat beside him. Rowena continued to stand. He pulled the bottle out of the bag, and set the cups on the bench.

“I don't have time for this,” Rowena said.

“One drink, and then you'll be home. For old time's sake.”

Rowena folded her arms. She opened her mouth to retort, and then sat down instead. With his belt knife, Finian cut through the wax film on the bottle's head.

“One drink,” she said.

“It's been how long? Half a year?” He poured.

“At least. I've been busy.”

“Let it breath a moment,” he said as he passed the first cup to her. “This isn't the swill you normally drink.”

Rowena ignored him and took a long swallow. She tried not to wince. It was strong wine, full-bodied and sharp.

“My mother’s own vintage,” he said. “We’re selling it to the Righardan clan as a table wine. They’ve already ordered two cases.”

“I should be flattered. Whatever you want must be big.”

He sighed, and looked around. The gesture seemed casual, but Rowena watched too closely to miss its purpose. He checked each street-mouth and window before he spoke.

“I want you to work for me again,” he said.

“When you say work, you don’t mean sweeping floors and counting coins.”

“No. Of course not.”

“Find someone else,” said Rowena. “I’m done.”

“I can’t,” said Finian. “There’s no one else.”

“Nobody else, in the whole city?”

“Nobody for the job. Nobody in your situation.”

Rowena sighed and lowered the cup, cradling it in both hands. Rather than meet Finian’s gaze, she peered into the dark drink.

“No. I’m sorry, Finian. If you want to be friends again, that’s fine. I’ll always be grateful for the help you’ve given me. But the rest of it—I’ve moved on. I’m done.”

“I thought you believed in what I was doing. What *we* were doing.”

“Not enough to risk a hanging. I have to think of my sister.”

“I’ll pay you well. Her future would be secure. You wouldn’t have to work for the clans anymore.”

“I make enough to support both of us *without* breaking laws. If that’s all you want, you’d better leave.”

“You had no problem breaking laws before I got you this job,” Finian said.

If anyone were listening, it would have seemed like an odd statement. Wine merchants, as a rule, did not get anybody a position in the guard. The guard was where monarchs sent their third or fourth cousins and the children who were born too late to inherit. It was not *unheard* of for a common born person like Rowena to enter the guard, but it *was* highly unusual.

“I know you’re scared,” he continued. “After what happened—but it’s different now, we’re careful now—we can’t give up. Please, Rowena. Just this one time. It’s important. You know it is, or I wouldn’t come to you.”

“Look,” said Rowena, “I owe you my gratitude, but I won’t break any more laws.”

“Why not? You know they’re wrong. The guards are just thugs.”

“How dare you. I protect the lesser born as much as I protect the clans.”

“Listen to yourself. *Lesser* born? I was wrong about you. You must love it there.” He stood up, draining the last of his wine.

“You know I don’t,” Rowena said angrily. She hadn’t moved from the bench. “That doesn’t mean I’ll turn assassin for you.”

“Land and skies! I came here asking you to save a life, not take one.”

“What do you want, Finian?” Rowena said.

“I need a prisoner released.”

Rowena's eyes widened. She laughed disbelievingly.

"Bribe the Justice."

"No, a bribe won't do. They won't release her." Picking up the bottle of wine, he squinted at the color through the light: a red so deep it gleamed black through the tinted glass.

"I thought money bought everything," said Rowena dryly. "What did she do? Kill a clan born?"

"No. She's not even twelve."

"What, then? A... a political prisoner? Someone's child?"

"Just a thief."

"I'm sorry. I can't do that, Finian."

"I'll give you four thousand. Gold."

Rowena's eyes widened considerably. She leaned back, thinking.

"Four...? Whole, not halves?" He nodded. "Finian, how did you come into money like that?"

"By my own business. Do you want it or not?"

"It's a lot. Why do you care so much? Does she work for you?"

"I don't hire children. You know that. She's my cousin."

"Oh. I need to think about this."

"You'd better think fast," said Finian. "Her execution is the day after tomorrow."

Rowena took a large mouthful of the wine.

"Anyways," Finian said, "You still owe me. It's getting late, and I have other visits I need to make. Promise you'll come by the shop tomorrow."

"I'm not sure if..."

"A child's life. Really, is there any nobler cause?" He took her empty cup. "Just come by the shop, please. You owe me that much. We'll talk it over."

He was gone, the half-empty bottle perched in his place. She took it by the neck and set towards home.

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Rowena ate breakfast in the dim guardhouse cafeteria. At the end of the long room, a hired reader droned verses from a patriotic ballad. Her own thoughts consumed her, blotting out the noise.

She wouldn't go. She wouldn't help Finian. The girl would die, but that was that. Death was inevitable; it claimed victims of every age. To stay alive, you had to look out for yourself.

That was no good. She still felt sick. The girl was barely older than her sister!

She would go to Finian's shop when her morning rounds finished, and they would come up with a plan. Finian was clever, and he had resources: four thousand whole gold coins was no laughing matter. He had never been so rich when they were friends. Something in his situation had changed. Surely there was a way to free the child without a jailbreak.

Today she was assigned to a neighborhood on the second tier for her rounds. She took one of the staircases down through brick and clay neighborhoods, past houses with elaborate

gardens and past tall apartments that rose three, four levels off the ground. Slowly the houses became smaller, the yards rarer, the apartments more common. The wide manicured side streets became twisting alleyways. The path spat Rowena out onto the broad main square of the second tier. She wandered through the market there, looking for trouble.

Vendors from colorful carts sold oatcakes, spitted pigeon, onion pastries, canned fruits, drinks of every sort, strange concoctions to better your luck or protect your business. None of these worked. Blankets spread across the ground held bracelets, necklaces, bolts of fabric, bags and belt-knives. Nobody was buying very much.

At the tenth bell, a young man saw her staring and broke into a sprint. Rowena only chased him for half a block before giving up, stopping dead in the middle of the empty side street as the heel of his boot disappeared around a corner.

At the end of the morning shift, Rowena returned to the guardhouse to report to her captain. She had a sudden idea: perhaps the child could be freed legally. She was so distracted that even when guardsperson Tyne knocked into her on purpose she was barely angry.

The meeting was brief. Captain Chilton gave them updates on the rest of the city. He was a brown, balding man just reaching his thirties.

“Tomorrow morning I want everybody in the training yard at eight. We could stand to sharpen up. Now tell me your stories and get to your lunches,” he said. The other fourteen in Rowena’s squadron swarmed forward, but Rowena hung to the back so she could speak with him last.

Rowena barely remembered her rounds and breezed over them with an uncharacteristic vagueness. Chilton nodded at what she said and didn’t seem to notice.

“Alright. That’s all.”

“Actually,” Rowena said, “there’s something else. You once told me about a project you were working on. I have a favor to ask of you.”

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More than two years had passed since Rowena set foot inside Finian's shop, and it had changed. The wooden chairs were cushioned now, and the tables painted bright apple-red. The walls held framed portraits of the Aiteach clan nobles. Finian was no relation to them, but his family's vineyards were in the Aiteach lands. It looked like he was trying to garner favor. That was a joke, almost. The Finian *she* knew was more likely to spit on a clan member than bow or smile at one.

The shop patrons looked well off, well dressed. It was a different crowd than his shop had once drawn. Now they were the type of people Rowena would have stolen from, when she worked for Finian. She turned her thoughts aside quickly, glancing at her captain beside her. Chilton knew nothing of her past, and she intended to keep things that way.

Finian stood beside one of the round tables. He spoke cheerfully with a customer. He turned when they entered, and his expression soured immediately. He made brief apologies and farewells to the customer before approaching them.

“Rowena, lovely as always. What are you doing here?” He smiled, but still managed to look mortified.

“You said to stop by,” Rowena said. “I told Captain Chilton about your cousin. He’s going to help.”

Finian smiled tightly and nodded.

“Thank you for that. Well, what do you want? Red, white, ale? Something stronger?”

“Just water,” said Chilton. “Do you have food?”

“Only bread.”

“I’ll have it.”

Finian nodded again and waved them to a table. He turned heel, vanishing into the back of the shop.

It was a little cruel. She knew how Finian felt about guards, on the whole. Involving her captain ruined any chance of Finian rescuing the girl unlawfully. He was doubtlessly angry. But she was certain Chilton had the best chance of helping the girl, whether Finian liked it or not.

A serving girl came to take their order just as Finian returned.

“I have business with them, Ide. See to the others.”

He set down a tray with two full glasses, two little plates, a jam-jar, and a loaf of sliced bread.

“I used to come here all the time after work,” Rowena was saying. “Dice, cards, drinks—it’s a very different shop at night. Or, it was.”

“Join us,” Chilton said to Finian.

“I don’t have long,” Finian said, sitting.

“Of course,” said Chilton. “I’m sorry about your cousin.”

“Oh, well,” said Finian. “Rowena has been very kind, but I feel wrong bothering a captain of the guard.”

“Nonsense. This is my job. Actually, if you’ll forgive my crudeness, this may be a perfect opportunity.”

“Opportunity?” echoed Finian.

“I’ve had an idea for a program for some time.” Chilton took a slice of the bread and began to eat it. “I think I can save the child’s life, and guarantee her a career in the same breath, if she’s suited to the work.” He frowned and pulled the jam-jar closer, slathering a thick pat of something orange onto the bread.

“What?” Finian asked.

“I may want to make her a guard.”

“You... what? Truly?”

“I’ll have to see the child first, of course; there are a number of variables. I never pictured taking on a criminal. Rowena says she was arrested for thieving, is that right?”

Finian nodded.

“What was she stealing?” Chilton asked.

“Forgive me,” Finian said, “but... why? Children can’t be warriors.”

Rowena shot Finian a look, asking him silently to cooperate. Chilton put the bread down and clasped his hands in front of him.

“I’m meeting with the General today, and I may ask her to hand the girl into my custody. I’ve been looking for a candidate for some time, and I’d be pleased if I could save a life in the same breath. I was surprised: parentless children are blessedly uncommon in our city. Those I’ve found are the wrong age, or unsuited. One does not go before the General unprepared, or with frivolous requests. So, please, answer my question: what was she stealing?”

“That’s a lot of pressure on a young child,” said Finian. “Perhaps you should look elsewhere.”

Chilton caught Finian’s gaze and held it. Neither looked away.

“This is her only chance at a pardon. Would you prefer she died?”

“No, you’re right. Please excuse me. I’m worried, is all. Of course I’ll help however I can. She was caught in the treasure room of the Dorchalt house.”

“Clan business,” said Chilton, shaking his head.

“Dorchalt? The Proper, or the city palace?” Rowena said, startled to interruption.

“The Proper, out in the country. Oh—you’re from there, aren’t you?” Finian asked.

“It’s where I grew up. What’s her name?”

“Yedda,” Finian said.

“I don’t know it. A newcomer, I suppose. You never told me you had family in Dorchalt.”

“I didn’t know until my uncle wrote me, asking for help. I have a big family.”

“Tell me, how did an eleven year old *get* into the treasure room of a clan palace?” Chilton said, pressing on with his questions. He picked off a piece of the bread, popping it into his mouth.

Finian sucked in his lips and shook his head.

“I haven’t got a clue,” he said.

“Her parents?”

“I asked. Her mother’s dead. Her father was sent to the Sands.”

“The Sands? For what?” Chilton lifted an eyebrow. It was a harsh punishment: exile to the wasteland. There was no telling how many survived.

“Debt, I think. I never knew him.”

“Anything I should know about her? Physical problems, or mental ones? A bad temper?”

Finian shook his head.

“I really don’t know much about the girl,” Finian said.

“Alright. I’m intrigued. I’ll judge for myself,” Chilton took one last bite from his bread and drained the water glass. Standing up, he extended a hand to Finian across the table.

“I’ll send a messenger tonight, to let you know what the General and I decide.”

“Thank you,” said Finian.

“Rowena. Training yards, tomorrow, 8th bell.”

“Yes, sir.”

With a nod, Chilton left the shop.

“What have you done,” Finian gasped softly.

“What?” said Rowena. “I found a way to save her, without risking *everything*...”

“No, no, no,” said Finian, and buried his head in his hands. Other customers were looking now.

“Come on,” Rowena said. “D'you want to go to the backroom?”

“I want you to leave,” said Finian from behind his hands. “Just go away, Rowena. Hungry stones! I never should have gone to you with this.”

“If that child lives tomorrow, it won't be because of you,” Rowena said, and fled out the shop's front door.



Chilton never liked dungeons. They were ill lit and poorly ventilated. The stale air tasted thick with grime, and it was impossible to breathe through one's nose comfortably.

He entered the jailhouse with an unpleasant pang. The building itself was small and tidy, full of record books and weapons-stands. The twisting stairwell to the dungeon yawned at the back of the lobby. Beside it sat a plain desk staffed by a guardsperson.

“I need to go below,” said Chilton, unclasping one of his captain's triangles. The woman at the desk accepted it wordlessly and inspected it to make sure it wasn't a forgery.

“Who'll you be speaking with?”

“Her name's Yedda. I've been told she's in third row.”

She consulted a broad book in front of her.

“She's not marked for a visit.”

“This is guard business.”

“Without an order? She's a clan prisoner, not a city one.”

“I want to see her.”

“Sorry. Her case is marked closed.”

With a sigh he removed a necklace from beneath his uniform's leather chest piece. A circular pendant dangled from the end. The base was orange marble, wrapped in a thick gold

ring. A fat arching fish made from tiny blue gems sat flush inside the marble. Thin gold lines marked its scales. Its eye was a diamond.

It was the symbol of the Gillemar clan. No distant cousin would wear such a gaudy marker.

“Oh. I'm sorry. I didn't realize... third row, the fifth door. You'll want a lantern,” she said, pointing him to the shelf. She stood up and poked her head down the stairwell. “Keril! Sending a visitor.”

“Got it,” a muffled voice responded.

Chilton lit the lantern from a candle on the desk and descended.

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Yedda didn't know how long she'd been in the cell. Time had no meaning in the dark. She spent hours studying the strip of orange light at the base of the door, or running her hands over the wet stone walls, or pacing to warm up in the cold room. Meals were the only marker of time, but given enough days they blurred into each other. By the time she thought to count, she wasn't sure how many of them she'd had.

Footsteps halted in front of her cell. There was a scraping noise of a key being tried and turned. The door swung open, and Yedda squinted in the light. The man in the doorway was tall and dark. He carried a lantern and wore the same uniform as everybody in the place.

He was not here to feed her or to collect her plate. It was time for her to die, then. Yedda's throat closed. She wanted to hide in the back corner of the small room, but her legs wouldn't work.

“Don't do that,” the man said. He sat beside her on the bed, which was hard and narrow enough to be a bench. “I haven't come to hurt you. My name is Chilton. What's yours?”

“Yedda,” she whispered.

He studied the eleven year old with a careful eye. She didn't look like much, gaunt and quietly crying as she was, but Chilton was not a fool. He had seen enough prisoners go in and out of the jail to know what it did to people. His questions were about her future, not her present.

“I can't make promises to you, Yedda,” Chilton said. “So I don't want you getting hopeful yet, alright? But if I were to tell you that you could leave this place, that you could train to be a guard instead of ending your life on a rope...”

“Yes,” Yedda said. “Please.”

“I'm going to ask you some questions. I want you to answer honestly, okay?”

She nodded. Her dark, narrow eyes were suddenly sharp and focused on him. She tucked her matted mess of hair behind her ears and sat up straighter.

For an hour Yedda answered questions. He wanted to know about everything from her past to her opinion on moral quandaries. He checked her teeth and her fingers, tested her vision and her reflexes, and had her punch his hand as hard as she could. Then he took her into the hall and had her sprint from one end to the other and back.

“Can I try again?” she immediately asked when she slammed into the wall at the end.

“Why?”

"I can do better," she said.

"Alright. Show me."

He thought long and hard as he watched her.

"Again," she said at the end.

"No, Yedda, that's alright. Let's go back into your cell."

She stood and didn't want to move.

"Please," she said. "I'll do *anything*. Don't let them kill me."

"Let's sit down and talk some more," Chilton said.

Once they were seated in the cold damp room, Chilton reached into his pocket. He took out a wooden box the size of his palm, clasped shut.

"Being a guard is hard work, Yedda," Chilton said. "You'll often be asked to do things you find difficult. Our job is not all glory. It's also violence and dirty work, cleaning up the dredges of the city. It's not something you can quit. If the guard saves you, you'll be a member of the guard for life, serving the Sovereign and the Sovereign's law. Can you do that?"

She nodded.

He opened the box. Inside was a small gray mouse, no longer than his thumb, who immediately scurried out. Chilton trapped the mouse in both of his hands, dropping the box in the process.

"I want you to prove it to me," said Chilton. "I want you to kill this mouse."

Yedda was not sentimental. She'd grown up in the country. A mouse in the storeroom could mean a difficult winter. She swallowed and nodded.

Chilton extended his hands.

"Careful. It might bite. Don't drop it."

She took the mouse quickly and felt its soft head butting panicked against her fingers, nosing towards freedom.

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"Yes, Chilton, that's all very well, but pray tell why you picked a girl on the *gallows* list?"

The General's office was a large room with tall windows, plush carpets, and brightly glowing lanterns on the walls. At that moment it felt incredibly cramped to Chilton. He sat across from a pale blond person with a gaze as glum as a glacial freeze. She belonged, Chilton thought, in the mountainous north, not a sunny cheerful city like this one. He shuddered. He didn't feel he'd ever get the dungeon's cold out of him.

"Well, ma'am," started Chilton, "First of all, Yedda won't be missed. Another child would. What sane mother would entrust her youth to a band of warriors, when we've never done this before?"

"Any mother whose child is hungry enough," said General Dawn.

"Still, we won't be under the same scrutiny. There's no loss if we fail. "

"No loss if she dies, you mean. If we turn out a bad guard, well, there's a loss right there."

"What qualities do you look for in a guard?" said Chilton.

“Captain Chilton...”

“Please, ma’am. Humor me for a moment.”

Dawn sighed and lowered her head, peering up at him with a little frown. She was young for the position, and at that moment trying to determine whether captain Chilton was going to make her look bad. She had been the Righardan clan heir until a family scandal removed her titles, putting her uncle’s family in charge of the clan instead of her mother’s. Dawn was pardoned of guilt and given the post of General by a softhearted second cousin high in the government. Most Generals in valley history had been better trained, but from slightly lower social status. Monarchs and their heirs did not have to work unless they wanted to.

Despite her inexperience, it was not merely fortune that Dawn was good at the job. The second cousin had a good sense of people’s abilities and liked to see them well matched. Dawn had learned fast.

At last, she answered Chilton’s question.

“Physical ability, courage. A sense of justice and honor. Loyalty. The ability to follow orders.”

“Physical ability and courage,” Chilton parroted back. “An eleven year old girl, who broke into the Dorchalt’s treasure room?”

“I don’t want criminals for guards,” Dawn said. “Nor do we need a feud with the Dorchalt clan.”

“No, of course not. But the girl doesn’t have to stay a criminal. To be sure, she’s poorly raised, but children are still impressionable at that age. I was a terror, myself. You can’t teach courage, but you can teach manners. She’s a lanky thing, already tall. She has all her fingers. She’s missing no primary teeth, only milk ones. Good eyesight and hearing. She speaks clearly, if not properly, and can do basic sums. And she wants to do it. I asked her.”

“Do you have a connection to this child, captain, that you are so taken with her?”

“No. But last time we spoke about this, you said...”

“I said not to come until you had found the perfect candidate. Because the Sovereign’s funds can only be used for a project like this *once*, if it is not successful. But I expected you would find a clan born child, not a lesser born lawbreaker. And a lowlander, at that! I thought we were doing this one step at a time.”

There was a moment of silence in the room, punctuated by General Dawn tapping a finger softly against the wooden arm of her chair.

“You really believe this girl is worth the time and money?” said Dawn. “You aren’t just... feeling sorry for her and trying to save her life? If she turns criminal again after we’ve trained her, you understand that would be catastrophic.”

Chilton thought for a moment before he answered.

“I believe she is a capable girl who would do us proud,” Chilton said carefully, and very slowly. “That said, if I also believe we are doing her a favor—it is to our advantage as well. I mean no disrespect or treason against our births, but you cannot deny many clan folk come into the guard entitled, unwilling to listen—they have no sense of duty. A child to whom we have given a second chance, a child who owes us her life? I do not think we could ask for a better student. A better guard.”

The silence came back.

“I don't know, Chilton.”

“Please, Dawn. It's as though something is telling me to do this. It *feels* right.”

At long last, General Dawn nodded.

“Have the papers for her pardon prepared,” Dawn said. “I'll sign them immediately. Don't disappoint me, Chilton.”

The captain stood, bowed, and went to leave.

“Oh, and Chilton,” Dawn said, when he reached the doorway, “if it doesn't work out, it's back to the gallows. I'll suspend her execution for a year, but if she doesn't impress me I'm pulling the funds, and I'm pulling the girl.”

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A particularly stubborn bit of dirt clung to the toe of her boot. Rowena squinted at it and scrubbed harder. A knock at the door interrupted.

She set the brush on the table and wiped her hands on a rag, then opened the door and greeted captain Chilton with a bow.

“No need for that,” he said.

“What did the General say? Are we taking the child?”

“Yes,” Chilton said. “She was a little doubtful, but she approved it. The General is going to speak with the Dorchalts, to smooth things over.”

“That's not a bad idea.”

“I thought you might want to tell your friend yourself.”

“Thank you. Was that all?”

“The General put me in charge of the child. That changes things.”

“You aren't wearing your triangles,” Rowena said, noticing suddenly that the silver captain's mark was gone from his guard's leather vest.

“No,” Chilton said. “I have no desire to be both tutor and captain at once.”

“But wouldn't it be good for the girl?” Rowena said. “To see what command looks like? Sir, you're a wonderful captain.”

“Maybe when she's older,” Chilton said, leaning against the door frame. “For now, I prefer to demote myself.”

“Who's taking your place?” Rowena asked.

“You aren't going to like it,” said Chilton. “I'm sorry. But Tyne was up for promotion.”

“What? That sniveling—”

“Guardsperson,” Chilton interrupted with a raised eyebrow. “He's your captain now. I know the two of you have had problems, but you'd do well to put that aside.”

“Problems' doesn't halfway cover it,” Rowena said.

“He's the last one I'd recommend. But I didn't get to choose my successor. Commander Dalton and the General did. *Against* my advice, I might add.”

“This is going to be miserable.”

“If you want a transfer, I’ll put in a word for you. I know a few of the captains have room for another.”

“Thank you. I’ll think about it. My friends are here, though. When will you be a captain again?”

“I don’t know. If you play your cards right, maybe you’ll be promoted before then.”

“Oh,” said Rowena, taken aback. “Thank you.”

“Go tell your friend his cousin’s life was saved,” said Chilton.

“Captain?” Rowena asked as Chilton straightened from the doorway. “Does this mean I can sleep in tomorrow?”

“I’m not your captain anymore,” said Chilton. “I can’t order you to the practice yards. However...” he paused and leveled a finger at her. “I will be there at the eighth bell with a sword in my hand. I can only *suggest* you do the same.”

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The sun was setting as Rowena arrived at Finian's, this time in civilian clothes. She didn't want to cause a scene, and her business was as much personal as professional.

The shop was not bustling. One man browsed the labeled bottles on shelves. At one of the tables, three raucous women in colorful dresses enjoyed drinks. Finian stood alone behind the counter with his accounts papers. He looked up when Rowena entered.

“What news?” he asked when she reached the counter.

“The General approved it. The girl won’t be executed.”

“What will happen to her?”

“My captain—former captain—will take care of her,” said Rowena. “I don’t know the details.”

“You had no right to go to him,” said Finian. One of his hands tightened into a fist.

“And you had no right, asking me to break the law,” said Rowena. “I don’t understand, Finian. What’s the problem here?”

“We need to talk,” said Finian. He turned and leaned into the backroom through the open door.

“Ulla?”

“What?” a low voice asked. There was a thudding noise, as if a heavy weight was set down.

“I need you to watch the shop.”

“I have to be off,” Ulla said.

“For a minute. Please.”

A tall square-jawed woman emerged from the back. She was full lipped, strong nosed, dark-eyed, and ocher skinned.

“Thank you,” said Finian, and ushered Rowena into the back.

The backroom was dark. The only light came through the shop doorway on one end and the back-alley’s door window on the other. Rowena remembered the rules: Finian wouldn't allow a flame in the alcohol-laden room unless it was otherwise impossible to see. Barrels and crates of

wines and ales lined one wall, harder liquors among them as well. A washing station and shelves with cups stood opposite. A disheveled stack of boxes, either smuggled goods or wine, sat by the alley door. A ladder led to a cutaway in the ceiling, and Finian's living chambers above. In the center of the room was a round table with mismatched chairs and a scattered assortment: a hat, a half-filled water glass, a set of keys, a sheathed knife.

"Listen, Rowena. The worst place that child could be is in the hands of the guard," Finian said. "You have to get her out of there." He walked past Rowena and began to pace in the small space of the room.

"I know you hate the clans," said Rowena, "but the guard will keep recruiting whether you like it or not. This way she's alive. She'll have a better education than either of us did. And they'll feed her well."

"You aren't listening to me," said Finian. "This isn't about... Rowena, half of what I said was a lie. That girl isn't even my cousin. I've never met her."

"You—what? Then why did you say that?"

"To make you sympathetic! Because I needed your help. You wouldn't have taken a risk for a complete stranger. And then because you *told a captain of the guard* and brought him into my shop. I wasn't about to come clean then!"

"I don't understand," said Rowena. "Whose child...?"

"I don't know," said Finian. "But you have to make your captain choose someone else."

"No, impossible. The papers have been signed. Anyways, why should it matter? She's *someone's* cousin, probably. We still saved her life."

"I don't care about that," said Finian.

"Then why did you want her freed?"

"Never mind. I just need to know—is there anything you can do? Any way to remove the girl?"

"No. Like I said, it's already done. Finian, you aren't making sense."

Finian abruptly stopped pacing and placed his hands on the table, as if he needed the support.

"Rowena. Oh, Rowena! You haven't the slightest clue what you've done."

"I would if you'd tell me."

"They didn't catch that girl *in* the treasure room, they caught her *leaving* it."

"So what?"

"She broke a Binding," Finian said. "She shattered it and let the spirit out."

"But she's not Bound," Rowena said. "The spirit couldn't have..."

"Entered her?" Finian turned to look at her. "They waited a month to issue the execution. Kept her under watch. I don't know why they didn't just kill her... but, no, they found nothing."

"Then why does it matter? The girl isn't Bound. She's human."

"I don't think she is," said Finian softly. "I think there's a spirit in her, and she tricked them. Maybe it hasn't hatched yet. One of the Dorchalt servants found me and told me about her. He was convincing."

"No. It's impossible."

“Rowena, you don’t understand,” said Finian. His voice was about to break. “If she’s executed, the spirit won’t die. It’ll go into whoever’s nearest. Do you want an executioner to become Bound?”

“She would never have been sentenced to a city execution. They would have killed her in Dorchalt, and bound the spirit how they wanted. Perhaps the servant was scared and imagining things. This is ridiculous.”

“The possibility can’t be ignored. Maybe she could stop them killing her *because* of the spirit, I don’t know—there’s no telling what powers that girl could have. The rules all change when there’s a spirit about.”

“You really think the child isn’t human?”

“This is the chance of a lifetime,” said Finian. “A spirit for taking, a clan about to fall.”

“What were you going to do with her?”

“What do you think?” Finian said.

“Were you going to raise her yourself? A fugitive child with a spirit inside? Or were you going to kill her, and take it for yourself?”

“I shouldn’t have meddled,” said Finian, ignoring the question. “The Dorchalts would have their spirit again, one way or another. It wouldn’t be running loose in the hands of the guards.”

“How can you say that? She’s a child!”

“No, she’s not. She’s a weapon,” said Finian.

“Everybody is a weapon,” said Rowena, “If they *want* to be.”

“What do you think a group of soldiers will teach her?” said Finian. “Peace and compassion?”

“Don’t look at me like this is my fault. You should have told me at the beginning.”

“When I asked you to *commit a crime*, I didn’t expect you to tell your *captain!*”

“You made me a guard,” said Rowena. “You got me the job.”

“Then I’m giving you another one: watch over this child. Make sure nobody knows what she is, not before I can take her away.”

“I don’t have to listen to you,” said Rowena.

“We both know you do,” said Finian.

“I could arrest you right now,” said Rowena.

“You wouldn’t dare.”

“Don’t test me, Finian,” said Rowena.

“Don’t make empty threats,” said Finian. “It would be the stupidest thing you’d done in your life, and you know that. Now get out of my shop, and make sure that girl stays a secret.”

-

When she knocked on Chilton’s dormitory, Tyne answered.

“What are you doing here?” Rowena scowled.

Tyne folded his arms. There was something unnerving about his smile. Like any bad liar’s, it did not reach the rest of his face.

“They’re my rooms now. Care for a tour?”

“Don’t be lewd with me. Where’s Chilton?”

“Insulting your new captain? I could write you up.”

“I’m sorry. Sir. I need to speak with Chilton.”

“He’s not a captain anymore. Try the next floor.”

After some searching, she located Chilton’s new suite. With his voluntary demotion he had moved from the large rooms of the second floor to the more cramped quarters of the third, where Rowena lived. Of course, all the dormitories were relatively nice; they were populated by the wealthy and the clan cousins. There were never drafts or leaks.

She knocked on his new door and heard laughter on the other side. After a moment Chilton answered, dressed as informally as Rowena.

“Hello,” he said. “Can I help you with something?”

“Hello, Cap—Chilton. I just wanted to know if you’d fetched the girl yet?”

“Yes. She’s in her room. Apparently, she’s never had one of her own before.”

“Can I meet her?”

“If you treat her professionally. Not like a child.”

“I understand.”

Chilton let her into the common room. It was identical to Rowena’s, except in decoration. His shelves were fuller and the items on them far nicer. A landscape hung on the wall, a simple ink painting of the flat farmlands his clan family ruled.

A short, broad man sat at the table looking at a hand of cards. He nodded to Rowena, who nodded back.

“Yedda, someone to meet you,” Chilton said loudly. “Go ahead, Rowena; second on the right.”

The girl sat on her bed, the same thin horsehair mattress and woolen sheets the guard provided everyone. Next to her, on a night table, an oil lantern burned. She balanced a student’s wax tablet on her knees and fiddled with a stylus. Any mistakes she made could be easily smoothed out by melting the wax, saving costs on ink and paper.

“I’m Rowena. Mind if I sit?”

The girl had fair skin and straight black hair. She peered at Rowena through dark, narrow eyes. They had not fed her well in prison. Her gaunt face was thrown into sharp relief by the lantern. Rowena had almost expected to recognize her, although she hadn’t been to Dorchalt Proper in years. The guard didn’t give enough leave for her to go home and see her sister. All she could do was send money.

“Go ahead,” said the girl, and bent her head again.

Though the girl was unfamiliar, Rowena knew they shared a common past. Dorchalt proper rose in her mind, the images like a ship’s sail unfurling; this girl had walked the same hills, heard the lowing of the cows, seen the setting sun blaze behind the crumbled castle like a fire.

“What are you working on?”

“Sums.”

“I’ve heard a lot of stories about you,” said Rowena. “Are they true?”

“How should I know?” said the girl. “I didn’t tell them.”

“Fair point,” said Rowena. “Can I see that?” she held out a hand for the tablet. Yedda passed it over. Chilton had written simple equations in lines.

“You should check your work on the second one,” Rowena said, and passed it back. “I heard you’re from Dorchalt. So am I. Do you know a girl named Corliss? She’s about your age. She looks a little like me.”

“We’re friends. She doesn’t look like you, though. She’s fatter.”

“She eats well, then? I’m glad.”

“Sure,” said Yedda. “Are you her sister?”

“Yes. Yedda, what were you doing in the treasure room?”

The girl pouted and looked down.

“I don’t want to talk about it,” she said.

“It’s important.”

“I don’t want to.”

“Well, alright. We can talk later. I’m going to speak with Chilton. So... welcome to the guard.”

Rowena shut the door behind her when she went into the common room. She wasn’t an expert, but the girl seemed human.

“She got spared from her execution today,” said Rowena. “You don’t want to give her the night off?”

“I don’t believe in nights off,” said Chilton.

“Hypocrite. You’re playing cards.”

“I was joking. She’s been sitting in a dungeon for a month. Her brain needs the work. She’ll get a break when she needs one. What? Stop glaring at me that way.”

“She’s a child, Chilton,” said Rowena.

“I’m aware of that.”

“She’s going to need friends.”

“She can make them herself. I appreciate your concern, but the child is my ward.”

“Chilton...”

“I gave her *seven problems*,” Chilton said. “I told her she could stop when they were done. *She chose* to work alone in the room instead of with my help. Either join this card game or go somewhere else, but I don’t need parenting advice!”

Rowena sat at the table.

“I’m Lodan,” said the burly man, stretching out a hand. Rowena took it, answering with her own name.

“We were playing all fours,” said Chilton. “Should we switch to basset?”

“That depends,” said Lodan. “Are we gambling?”

“It’s no fun otherwise. Maybe for chores?” suggested Chilton.

Lodan and Rowena agreed. Chilton collected the cards, shuffled, and dealt them back out.

The guardhouse sat on a large piece of land. The main entry was off the street, but behind the house stretched stables, practice yards, and holding cells for criminals who had yet to be processed.

High above her, from the palace on the top tier, Rowena heard the faint rolling clang of the 8th bell. Soon the sound would be picked up by every major temple and governmental building, the sound rising as it swept down the city.

Though Chilton said they would train at 8, the practice yards were empty. Rowena didn't feel like doing forms by herself, so she stretched and did muscle exercises instead. She didn't have rounds that day until noon. If nobody came soon, she would go back to sleep.

Before long she was joined by Nyla and Gavan. They were members of Rowena's squadron, now serving under Captain Tyne. The three chatted and were about to start sparring when Chilton at last arrived, Yedda on his heels. The girl was two feet shorter than him. Her hair was tied up; Rowena didn't know if that was courtesy of the girl or of Chilton. Either way, it was sloppily done. Both Yedda and Chilton carried wooden practice blades.

"Sorry," said Chilton. "Do you know, I had to argue with the quartermaster for half an hour to draw funds?"

"What? Really?"

"He said the orders from the General weren't in yet. They were unopened on his desk the whole time! Nyla, Gavan, this is Yedda. She's my ward."

"So you're the reason we lost our captain," said Gavan. "What've you got to say for yourself?"

"Lay off," said Chilton.

"I was joking. Really, though, Chilton, a lowland lesser? What are you trying to prove?" said Gavan.

"Are you doubting me?" Chilton said.

"I guess not," Gavan said.

"How are we doing this?" asked Nyla.

"If the three of you want to spar, I'd like to show Yedda some basics."

Chilton and Yedda worked in a corner of the yard, the former captain demonstrating stances, movement, and basic strikes. Nyla, Gavan, and Rowena had a series of short matches on a rotation. They worked hard and wanted a break long before Chilton and Yedda were done. Chilton soon found himself with an audience.

"What's a sword fight without a sword?" Gavan gasped, his breath still returning. He leaned on his practice sword like a cane. Chilton had taken Yedda's blade and was having her focus on footwork.

"Everybody starts somewhere," Chilton said.

"And then they get bored and leave," said Nyla. "Really, Chilton, the girl's first day and you're having her practice dance moves instead of letting her fight?"

"That would explain your sloppy technique," said Chilton.

"One bored girl, and four competent guards," said Nyla. "We'll be careful. What about it, Yedda? Want to spar?"

“Do you think I’m ready to?” Yedda asked Chilton.

“No. Spirits, no,” he said. “But if you really want to, I suppose it won’t make you *worse*.”

“Will I get hurt?” The girl wanted to know.

“Nyla won’t give you worse than a bruise,” said Chilton. “And that, you’ll have to get used to. Go on, then.” He returned her practice sword hilt first, shaking his head.

Rowena watched as they fought. Nyla went painfully easy on the girl, moving slowly and with exaggerated tells. Yedda blocked two strikes, if flimsily—in a real fight, Nyla’s blade would have pushed through the defense—and was finally hit along the gut.

“Dead,” said Nyla.

After that Rowena had to try, and then Gavan. Rowena was nervous and tense during the whole match. Yedda the girl was easy to beat, but Rowena had a lingering fear that Finian was right. If the girl was a spirit, there was always the risk of something odd happening. Rowena did not want to burst into fire or become violently ill.

Yedda fought passionately, but she frustrated quickly. She was emotional after she lost to Rowena, and so distracted fighting Gavan that she dropped the sword without being hit.

“Pick it up,” said Chilton. “The fight doesn’t stop because you’re done. It stops when someone wins, or loses.”

“I lost,” said Yedda. “They all would have killed me by now.”

“And they’re all experienced fighters. Pick up your blade and finish the round.”

She did.

“Thank you, I’ll take my student back now,” Chilton said when Gavan stopped a swing a fist-width from Yedda’s neck.

“You need to have more fun,” Nyla said. “It’s no fun, having an uptight teacher.”

“A teacher isn’t meant to be fun, Nyla,” said Chilton. “On the day you can beat me, you can tell me about my job.”

“A challenge!” roared Gavan. Chilton protested, but none of the others would rest until he agreed to fight Nyla.

“I had to!” said Yedda, who perched herself on the ring’s fence to watch the fight.

It didn’t last long. They squared off. Nyla moved first, her blade whipping in an arc and slicing in towards Chilton’s torso. He parried with the tip of his sword down, then reversed to bring the blade on Nyla from above. She did not even have time to block. In two moves, the parry and reverse, he brought his blade onto her collarbone. He dragged it lightly down her torso to mark where he would have cut, moving the wooden sword as if it were a feather so it wouldn’t catch on her clothes.

“Dead,” said Chilton. “But at least you tried.” He shrugged and grinned so the others knew he was joking. There was a round of laughter from everyone but Nyla, who blushed.

“I still say nobody cares if you’re good, if they fall asleep when you talk,” said Nyla.

“When you find a way to end riots with parties instead of swords, let me know,” said Chilton. “Until then, the guard values skill over humor.”

“Clearly,” said Rowena, “or Tyne never would have been promoted.”

“Guardsperson,” Chilton said stiffly. “Must I remind you, it is improper to speak ill of a commanding officer—now your Captain—particularly when he is not here to defend himself. I could report you.”

“You'd *do* that?” Rowena asked.

“I'm not going to. But if you keep saying things like that, I'll have no choice. Hello—that's the bell for breakfast. I'm hungry. Who's coming?”

“Me,” said Yedda.

“You didn't have a choice,” said Chilton, patting her head.

As they made their way towards the hall, Rowena tugged on Chilton's sleeve and urged him to fall back with her. He shoed Yedda on ahead with Nyla and Gavan.

“What is it?” Chilton said. “Has Tyne given you trouble? I don't mind talking if it's just the two of us, or if he's caused a real problem.”

“No,” said Rowena. “Look, I think there's something strange about Yedda.”

“What do you mean?”

Rowena decided not to say anything about the spirit. Nothing about Yedda seemed inhuman. She could talk to Chilton if it became a problem; until then, it was best to avoid dramatics.

“It's... well, Finian.”

“The person at the wine-shop?”

“Yes. He was angry when I told him the news.”

“Angry? Why? He should be grateful!”

“I don't know his reasons. But Yedda's not his cousin. He said he doesn't know her, and he was lying before. I got him to tell me that much. And another thing: how *does* a child that young get into the treasure room? And why? She must have had help. I'd bet my tongue some adult talked her into it, maybe even helped her.”

“The Dorchalt's security isn't our concern,” Chilton said, “but you're right that it's odd, beyond a doubt. Why wouldn't Finian want her in the guard, either way? It's an honor, and far more than any child of her birth could hope to expect. Sorry, I know you're lesser born too. But it's the truth. Why did he even go to you for help?”

“I don't know. I think he just wanted a pardon for her life. We... Finian and I aren't close, but I knew him from before I was a guard. All I'm saying is we never would have become friends if I was already in uniform.”

“Do you think he set her up to it?” Chilton said. “You think he was responsible for the theft?”

“Oh. I'm not sure I'd go that far,” Rowena said.

“I'll look into it,” said Chilton. “Thank you for letting me know.”

“Just be careful. I don't want you in trouble for this.”

They were inside now, at the door to the cafeteria. Chilton opened it part way, then turned to Rowena.

“Actually, can I ask you something?” he said, his brow furrowed. He let the door close, keeping them outside.

“Of course,” said Rowena. Her heart was pounding. One wrong question, and she could look very, very bad.

“Everybody seems to be criticizing me,” he said. “You, earlier Perrin, now Nyla. Do you think I made a mistake, doing this?”

“No,” said Rowena, relaxing. “Look, everybody has opinions. You’re probably going to be criticized some more. Some of it might even be good advice, but you can’t please everyone.”

“Still. Maybe I should have started with a clan child. A lot is riding on her.”

Rowena had to choose her words carefully. If she spoke from hurt, Chilton wouldn't listen.

“I grew up like Yedda, and I lived there longer. You trained me well enough. You'll do even better with her.”

“You’re right,” he said. “Still, I intended to take another student, not become... well, a parent.”

“Like it or not, Yedda is young,” said Rowena. “She needs both. Listen, Chilton—I promise I won’t question your teaching, but will you let me help with her? Or at least be there? She knows my sister.”

“Thank you. I appreciate the offer.” He opened the door, and they walked inside.

Yedda, Gavan, and Nyla were seating themselves at a table. Chilton looked at the plate Yedda had put together for herself.

“That's all?” he asked.

She looked up at him without responding. She hadn't wanted to take more than her share.

“Again,” said Chilton, escorting her to the back of the line. This time he loaded her plate for her.

“I can't eat that much,” she protested.

“Then leave it behind. But you have a lot of catching up to do,” he said. “A mouse could eat more than you had.”

“Family of mice, maybe,” she muttered back. “*Big* family.”

Rowena sympathized. She remembered how shocked she had been during her first weeks. The guards ate simple food, but there was an endless supply and it was all of good quality.

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The next few days passed with familiar rhythm. Rowena worked hard: some short shifts, and some days where she was on her feet from rise until sleep. Tyne called his first meeting as captain, and Rowena hung at the back of the room. In return, he didn’t address her directly.

Unlike Chilton, he did not schedule practices. Some of the others rejoiced at their newfound free time, but Rowena counted it as a mark against Tyne and continued to train at the informal spars Chilton held. She ate and slept as usual. All that had changed was that Chilton was no longer her captain, and Yedda was now his shadow.

Rowena made a point of talking to Yedda whenever she saw her, even if it was only to say hello or ask how the girl was doing. Everywhere the girl went, mutters about her birth and class followed.

It had been the same when Rowena joined the guard. The mutters had more or less died down over time, though the occasional insult still snaked its way to her ears. She wished she could shield Yedda from it all. Growing up a servant in the Proper was not a kind childhood either, but at least there Rowena had been surrounded by her own people. The world she and Yedda now walked through was the world of the clan born, where everywhere she went she felt eyes on her and saw backs turn away.

She was hungry for Yedda's company. She told herself she was protecting the child, but truth told, Rowena drew more strength from the interactions that she could have expected.

I missed this, she realized. That way of thinking, talking, seeing things. How did I forget so much of myself? Despite this revelation much of the time she spent with Yedda was working to mold the girl into life in the guard, pulling her away from that shared past. Rowena even gave the girl a short lesson on proper punching during her free time, when Chilton asked her for a break from his duties.

"I never knew children were so much work," he said. "I owe my mother an apology."

"Be thankful she's not an infant, or you wouldn't be able to sleep now, either," was all Rowena said.

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Rowena was headed to rounds when she crossed Chilton in the guardhouse lobby.

"I was looking for you," he said. "Yedda, go ahead to the room. This will only be a second." With a smile to Rowena, the girl ran off.

"I was thinking about what you said about that shop-keep," said Chilton.

"Finian?" she checked her gear as they spoke, patting her blades and pockets.

"Yes. I didn't want to get you involved. I know you were friends. I asked captain Fola to have the shop searched. She owed me a favor."

"You what? Really?" Rowena asked, eyes widening.

"You wouldn't believe what they found, Rowena. He was in serious business! I'm talking everything. Drugs, poisons, stolen goods, lock picks, weapons no commoner should own. *Pounds* of gold and gems. Yedda must have been stealing something for him."

"What happened?" Rowena asked, throat tight.

"We took him into custody. He'll have a hearing in a week. People like that don't exist without a network. If he's willing to give us the right information, maybe he can save his life."

"They'll kill him?"

"I don't know. The Justice won't be kind. Such markets are treason, a subversion of clan-sanctioned trade."

"Right," said Rowena, and blinked. "Thank you for telling me. Where is he being held?"

"I don't know. I didn't process the papers," said Chilton. "I just heard what Fola told me. Who would have thought, though? Pity. It was a nice shop. I would have liked to go back."

“And Yedda?” Rowena asked.

“What about her?”

“What if his being in trouble gets her in trouble, too?”

“Yedda’s my ward. I have documents from the General saying so. I doubt anything he says can undo that..”

“If it were something dark, would you still want her?”

“I made a promise,” said Chilton. “And she’s a talented girl. If someone of her background can succeed at this, we can greatly strengthen the guard without much increase of funds. I wasn’t just doing favors when I spoke to the General on her behalf. I have plans for Yedda.”

“Good. Excuse me, but I’ll be late.”

“Of course. Oh, sparring at sixth bell, if you’re free.”

Rowena waved and hurried out the door.



“I thought you’d stop by,” Finian said. “Only, I expected you sooner.”

“I’m sorry. I had to wait for your jailer friend to go on duty.”

Prison was not treating him well. It had only been five days, but his thin face was already gaunt. His hair was greasy and unwashed, his skin toneless except for the bags under his eyes. His clothes were dirty and distinctly unwashed. The stale air of the dungeon was thick with human stench: dung, sweat, urine.

“How are you doing?” said Rowena.

“How do you expect?” Finian asked, pressing his face to the bars. “You’re going to regret this.”

“Calm down. I didn’t give the orders.”

“Then get me out of here.”

“It’s not that simple, Finian. You *are* guilty.”

“You want something. Out with it.”

“They’ll offer you a deal. Name your accomplices, and your crime will be reduced. You should take it, but I’m worried about what you might say. You shouldn’t name the wrong people.”

“You’re worried I’ll betray *you*?” He looked angry.

“I’m worried you’ll get desperate and say anything.”

“Well,” Finian said, “there’s a simple solution. Don’t leave me in here.”

“I’m not springing you out.”

“Then I’ll tell them everything.”

“Then you’ll die before you’re freed.”

“Rowena,” Finian said. “You’re right, I do know everyone. Who do you think can reach your sister first? Where is she again? Dorchalt Proper?”

“You wouldn’t dare,” said Rowena.

“Then you don’t know me very well,” said Finian. “I already gave the order. Get me out alive, and we’ll leave her alone.”

Rowena ran the whole way back to the guardhouse. She knew she needed to get home, and quickly. Home not to her room, but to Dorchalt Proper, the palace she had once grown up beside. The problem was this: Guards could not simply leave their posts. Approval was difficult to get, and required permission from the captain of a squadron.

Tyne was now her captain. Rowena was certain that Tyne would not give her permission. She once publicly ridiculed him because he refused to stop making inappropriate comments to her. He complained to all of her superiors, accusing *her* of being unprofessional. Only Chilton took her side: Tyne was a clan born, and more respected than Rowena. By nature, the law was always on his side. Chilton made sure that Rowena kept her position and Tyne’s behavior was put on record.

Chilton was who she needed now. She knocked on his door, chest heaving from the long run. Nobody answered. Next she checked the practice courts. There was a spar underway, and she paused long enough to search the gathering for Chilton. He wasn’t there. At last she found him in the stables with Yedda. Leather horse gear, and disassembled pieces of it, lay strewn out in front of them.

“We’re cleaning bridles,” Chilton said when he saw her. “Want to help?”

“Chilton, help me.”

“What's wrong? Yedda, take a break. Go on.”

Yedda went to greet a gray mare hanging her head over her stall door. Chilton and Rowena stepped outside the barn.

“I need to leave, now. I talked to Finian. He threatened me. He'll hurt my sister if I don't break him out of jail.”

“Report him,” said Chilton. “Why did you go? He's a criminal. He *lied* to you.”

“Because we were friends, too, once. I don't have time to report him. I have to leave,” said Rowena. “He wouldn't make an idle threat. I need to beat him to my sister. He knows a lot of people, Chilton.”

There was panic in her eyes. He could see it, wild and frantic.

“Alright. Then go. Should you take someone with you?”

“I'll be fine if I can just go,” said Rowena. “But Tyne would never let me leave. I need your help.”

“No. Oh, no,” said Chilton. “I am no longer your captain. I don't have the authority.”

“You had the authority a week ago,” said Rowena. “Can't you tell Tyne you already gave me permission?”

“He'll revoke it.”

“Let me leave first. Go to Tyne after I'm out the gate. He won't bother to call me back.”

“How can I have given permission a week ago when it's for an emergency now?” Chilton said.

“Say it's for something else,” Rowena said. “You gave me permission to attend a wedding.”

“Whose wedding? Why would I let you leave for a wedding?”

“Chilton! The details don't matter, just say I was allowed to go!”

“Fine. When are you leaving?”

“I'm packing and then I'm gone.”

“I'll tack a horse,” said Chilton, “and sign it out. Run along.”

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If there was one thing Rowena knew her way around, it was a horse. Chilton could outfight her with bow, sword, spear, knife, or hand, but she could outride him any day. She had never owned a horse like many of the clan-born in the guard, but her father had been the Dorchalt's stable-master. Her youth was spent in a monarch's barn.

By the time she returned to the stable, Temperance was waiting. She was a tall liver-chestnut mare who everyone just called “Temper” or any other assortment of nicknames, many unflattering. The mare had a reputation for being headstrong and finicky. Most would never dare to ride her in the crowded city, where a runaway horse or a fall onto the rough cobbled stone could mean disaster. Nonetheless, she was sure-footed and fast, qualities which had kept her from being sold. Under a talented rider, Temper turned into one of the guard's finest steeds.

“Thank you,” Rowena said, both for the choice and the favor. Chilton held the reins while she tightened the straps on her travel-pack and checked the length of the stirrups. He helped boost her into the saddle and let go as she sorted out the reins.

“Come back as soon as you can,” he said. “I’ll make your excuses, but they’ll only last so long.”

“I know,” said Rowena. “I’ll do my best.”

She held the mare to a walk and trot down the winding road of the city, through the crowds of carts and foot traffic. By the time Rowena reached the lowland, farmer’s fields spreading out before her, Temper was warmed up and ready to run. Rowena gave the mare her head and the two took off, Temper’s hooves eating the ground. On a horse like this, it wouldn’t be more than three days to reach Dorchalt proper. She knew she should conserve the mare’s energy, but right now Rowena needed to feel the wind. She didn’t want to think. She just wanted to run.

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“Jailer!” Finian shouted as soon as Rowena left the prison, banging on the door of his cell. “Jailer!”

“Shut your mouth, boy,” Oren the jailer said.

It was only pretense. Finian had once gotten medicine for Oren’s youngest daughter, at a tenth the market price. Without it, she would have died. When he reached Finian’s cell, he looked through the bars at the wine-merchant. “What is it?” Oren asked in a low voice.

“I need a message carried.”

“I’ll be off duty in an hour or so. Tell me.”

“I need to talk to my friend Sileas. He lives in the brick house at the end of Smithy row. Third tier.”

“I’ll see what I can do,” said Oren.

“I need it done *now*,” said Finian. “Please, or I’m dead.”

“I can’t do every favor for you,” said Oren.

“Sileas is rich. I’ll see that you’re paid, and handsomely.”

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Disrepair was the chief character of Dorchalt proper. The estate held an air of forgotten splendor, a masterpiece of stonework and gardening that had turned sour with its age.

The architecture of the country palace was grandiose. Delicately carved archways of stone and wood ruled the ground levels, and spindled towers rose high into the sky above. The inside walls bore tempera wall paintings of elaborate scenes and histories. The outer ones were carved with repeated motifs of flowers, ravens, and swans.

Now the gray stone proper crawled with ivy. The gardens, once expansive, were cut back to a simple walking-path and a kitchen plot. The rest grew wild. Rose-brambles overtook pavilions. Fishing ponds sat sick with algae.

Half the stalls in the stable were empty.

"I can take your horse, guardsperson," a boy said behind her. Rowena had already dismounted and was leading Temper. She turned to face the speaker.

"Iorwin! Is that you?" She said, recognizing the boy by his thick eyebrows and pointed nose. She had known him as a child. Their mothers had been friends. His eyes widened, and he grinned.

"Rowena? Spirits, it's been years!"

"I know. Be careful with the horse, she's not mine."

"A fine beast," said Iorwin. He took the reins as the mare inspected him with her nose. He stepped back to get a better look at her.

"Yes, but she's tired. I've been riding practically without break."

"Why? Trouble in the city?" He turned to face her again while patting the mare's damp neck.

"No, nothing to worry about. I'm in a hurry, though. Is my sister about? I need to see her."

"She works in the kitchens. Will you come to dinner?"

"I don't know. I'm sorry, but I have to be going."

"I'll tell my ma you're here. You'll have to come or she'll be mad. You remember the house?"

"Yes. Fine. Thank you," said Rowena, walking away. "I'm sorry, but I need to be going."

"Ah, sorry, it's a penny to..." he pointed at the horse, blushing that he couldn't do the service for free. Rowena pushed the coin into his palm and continued on.

She was exhausted. She wanted to stop for a moment, to sit down and have a meal. Better yet, she wanted to sleep. But Finian's threat had planted a fear in her. She couldn't rest until she knew with her own eyes that Corliss was unharmed.

The kitchen had its own set of doors at the back of the Proper. Rowena walked through the garden plot and tugged on the handle. The door was bolted shut. She knocked.

A middle-aged woman with flour on her hands opened the door. She squinted at Rowena, who stood silhouetted by the bright light of the outdoors behind her.

"Does a young girl named Corliss work here?" Rowena asked.

"Who wants to know?" the woman asked, peering at Rowena's uniform. "Is she in trouble?"

"No. I'm her sister. I need to see her."

"She's working in the back. I'll show you, if you can be quick about it."

"I'll find her myself. I grew up here," Rowena said. The words felt odd in her mouth. It was strange meeting someone who didn't know her. The woman nodded and closed the door behind Rowena.

It took a moment for her eyes to adjust to the dark kitchen. It was smoky, lit by a wall of ovens and open fires. More light came through a handful of high ventilating windows. The kitchen workers watched as she made her way between the tables. A few of them gave tentative greetings.

They were preparing lunch for the Dorchalt household. Bread baked in the ovens, and fat dripped off roasting honeyed birds. Rowena's stomach sharply reminded her that she had not had a true, decent meal in days.

In the back corner a young girl sat on a stool, peeling and quartering turnips. A bucket to one side held the finished products, white misshapen things; to her other side were the unpeeled vegetables, their skin a deep rosy purple. All around her feet were the trimmings. She had a half-peeled turnip and a knife in her hands and a wooden cutting board balanced on her knees. She looked up as Rowena approached.

Despite the difference in their years, the similarity was plain. Both of them had coarse, wavy hair and brown skin; Rowena's darker since she did not work in the dim kitchen but in the full sun. Both had full lips and narrow eyes seated under flat eyebrows. Corliss was thicker than her muscular sister: the child was plump, her arms round but her chest still flat with childhood. Her clothes were unwashed and full of holes. A little kitchen-child didn't need to be well dressed: she was no maid, to be seen in the grander halls of the great house.

"Cor," said Rowena, her throat tight. She had not seen her sister in years and it was odd to see her so grown up. Still young, but *tall*, even sitting down.

Corliss jumped up, juggling the cutting board, turnip, and knife. She hurriedly placed them on her stool and turned to her sister. The two embraced tightly for a long moment.

"Why are you here?" Corliss asked, still hugging her sister.

"I came to see you, little mouse. Are you alright?"

"I'm fine. Are you?"

"Yes," said Rowena. "I just wanted to see you."

"You said you never have time off," said Corliss, scrunching her mouth to one side. "It's been years since you were home. Be honest."

"You're clever! Alright, I'm afraid I've somewhat gotten into trouble. Can you leave work?"

"Um... no. Not until lunch, and I have more this afternoon." Corliss pulled away from her, lifting the tools and sitting back down on her stool.

"That's fine. I'll stay with you." Rowena pulled up a chair of her own from a nearby table.

"What's wrong?" Corliss asked.

"Nothing you need to worry about. Nothing much at all."

"Rowena, what's going on? What have you done?"

"I'm sorry," said Rowena. "It's hard to explain. Your friend Yedda got into some trouble, and by helping her, I might've made someone angry."

"Yedda? *You* don't know Yedda."

"I do now, little mouse."

"You should know better than to talk about her. They took her away. She's a thief."

"I thought you were friends."

"We were," said Corliss, finishing the turnip and tossing it into the pail. "I feel sorry for what happened. Is she okay?"

"She's fine. Better off than you! They made her a member of the guard."

“What?” Corliss looked up with a grin, knife buried halfway under a turnip peel. “Mother of Shadows! How?”

“It’s quite a story,” said Rowena. “Look, you’re right. We shouldn’t be talking about this. Can I help?”

With her foot, Corliss pushed the bucket of unpeeled turnips between them.

“There are clean knives on the middle counter,” said Corliss.

A few minutes passed in comfortable chatter. They had too much to catch up on to worry for long. Rowena wanted to know what everybody in the proper was up to; Corliss wanted to know what life in the guard was like.

“The water’s almost boiling,” someone called. “Are those turnips ready?”

“Almost,” said Corliss.

They finished the vegetables hurriedly. Corliss laughed when Rowena insisted on carrying the pail of them.

“It’s heavy, I’ll get it,” the guard said.

“Lots of things are heavy in a kitchen,” said Corliss. “I’m strong enough.”

But Rowena carried the turnips over to one of the stoves, and set the pail down on the counter where an elderly person, wooden spoon in hand, pointed.

“Should I start on the apples?” Corliss asked.

“No. This is your sister?” both of them nodded. “Then take the rest of lunch off. Sweep up those peels first. And don’t worry about the garden, I’ll have Lia do the weeds.”

“Thank you,” Corliss squealed. She turned around with a little jump, half-skipping back to where she had peeled the turnips. Along the way she swung by another wall to pick up the broom that leaned against it. Rowena followed, smiling and shaking her head.

When the floor was clean, Corliss fetched two wooden bowls and began to fill them with food. The lunch, not yet finished, was off-limits until the Dorchalt clan had eaten their fill. There were leftovers from the morning and scraps from the cooking. Corliss gave each of them a heap of boiled spiced cabbage and carrots, then laid a cold filet of lake trout and an oat biscuit on top. Handing Rowena one of the bowls, Corliss grabbed two spoons and headed for the garden door.

“Come on, let’s get out of here,” said Corliss.

-

Rowena wanted to leave the Proper quickly, but she supposed it could do no harm to linger for that day. If anything happened, she was with Corliss and had her sword. Anyways, they had to eat and sleep somewhere. Free food and lodgings was better than paying for a bedding house on the road.

It only took a few minutes to walk to the east garden, long in disrepair. Rowena wanted to see it. She had often played there as a child. The pathway was kept passably clear, even if the plants were long untrimmed and the weeds ran rampant. They climbed up a set of stone stairs and followed a toe-path until they met with a low stone wall winding along the spine of the short ridge.

“Here's a nice spot,” Rowena remarked, and the two sat down on the wall. Corliss handed Rowena a spoon and they began to eat. From where they sat they could look back over the Proper and its grounds. The palace was too tall to see over, but far to the left the ground kept falling away beneath them. A small town sprawled out there, little cottages and huts to house the workers who kept the palace running and the Dorchalts happy.

“I made the biscuits,” Corliss said after they had been eating in silence for some time.

“Did you? They're good,” said Rowena, and took a more enthusiastic bite.

“Ma'am Colturn—she runs the kitchen—says I can start making some of the baked goods on my own. The fancy ones,” Corliss said. “I like working with the ovens.”

“Mm,” said Rowena. “Actually, we should talk about that.”

“Baking?”

“No, leaving the kitchens,” said Rowena. “You know I've been saving money, right?”

“I remember,” said Corliss, “For when I'm grown up, you said.”

“I've been thinking,” said Rowena. “All this business with Yedda—perhaps it's better to have you set up now. Learn something now.”

“I'm learning to cook,” said Corliss defensively.

“I know, and it's a good skill. Every household needs a cook! But I don't like having you so far away. I've been putting away money every month. I think I could send you to a school in the city.”

“Where would I live?” Corliss wanted to know.

“With me. We could rent a little room. Nothing fancy, but it'd do.”

“I like working in the kitchen,” said Corliss. “What do I need school for?”

“You could be a ladies' maid,” said Rowena. “Or a scribe, or any number of things.”

“But I like the kitchen,” said Corliss.

“Then you could work in a great grand one! There are bakeries all up and down the city, Cor, and big palaces for all the clans, cooking feasts every day the likes of which this Proper has once a year, if they ever do. This is just a country palace. You can't imagine what the city's like. And Yedda lives there. Don't you want to come stay with me, little mouse? Or we could travel. There's a whole world outside the valley, you know, and clan lands far grander than this one.”

Corliss shrugged and didn't say anything.

“I'm worried about your safety,” Rowena said. “If somebody comes to hurt you, I can't protect you.”

“Who would hurt me?”

“Don't you want to live with me, little mouse?” Rowena ignored the question altogether.

“So, *you stay here*,” said Corliss.

“There isn't work for me here.”

“That's not true. The Dorchalts have guards too, you know.”

“My life isn't here.”

“But mine is!”

“You're ten. You don't have a life.”

Corliss hunched her shoulders over and played with her spoon, frowning.

“I’m sorry,” Rowena relented, after a moment. “That was mean, I know. But you’d like the city, you’d see. And you’d be at home there in a moment, I’m sure. Won’t you come back with me? You could get all sorts of jobs if you knew how to write and do some sums. And if you still wanted to work in the Dorchalt kitchens, they’d take you back in a snap. You have to think about your future. I wish I could have gone to school when I was your age.”

“But you didn’t, and you’re in the guard now,” said Corliss. “I don’t need to go to school.”

“No, Corliss, I got lucky. It’s not normal, I swear. You can’t count on that happening. Trust me, folk will be turning up their noses at you your whole life just because you’re lesser born, and from the lowland. You should grow up in the city, and go to school. You’ll have an easier life if you do. I’m not asking anymore, Corliss. I’ve decided. When I leave tomorrow morning, you’ll come with me.”

-

Despite being tired, Rowena did not sleep well that night. Corliss lived in the servant’s quarters of Dorchalt proper, in a little room she shared with three other children. Rowena slept on the floor, bundled up in borrowed blankets. It was cold on the stone, in the cellars of the palace. Summer was drawing to a close and the nights carried a chill now.

Discomfort was not what kept her awake. She had slept in far worse places, and did not live such a comfortable life that she needed a real bed. She kept thinking about the future and the past. Tomorrow she would be taking her sister to the city, and a whole mess of challenges waited for them there.

Apart from saving money, she had not had to worry about her sister for years. The workers at Dorchalt proper had taken care of her, but now Rowena would have to watch over Corliss. She would have to give up her guard’s dormitory and rent a room in the city, which would cost as much as sending Corliss to school. She would not be able to go out for cards or drinks. She would have to live a very modest life. And what if Corliss hated the city after all? Would she blame Rowena?

Still, Rowena was convinced she was doing the right thing. If she’d had the advantages of a city youth and a proper schooling, perhaps she’d have more friends among the guard now. Perhaps she could have joined the guard through legal ways, rather than bribes and favors and the friendship of a crime lord.

That thought brought a pang of guilt. She had not forgotten that Finian was behind bars, but she had been trying very hard not to think about it. She didn’t want him to die. But there was no way she could think of to see him released. The evidence was enough to get him hung ten times over. She didn’t worry too much about what he would say about her: it was easy enough to explain that she’d told Chilton about him, so he was trying to get back at her by lying. Nobody would delve into her background on the accusation of a jailed crime lord. Not when she’d helped to put him there.

Still, she didn’t need her name sullied by association. In her head he occupied a strange space between life and death: he still breathed now, but he likely wouldn’t for long. How many more days would he rot in a cell before the noose tightened around his neck?

Though she hated him for threatening Corliss, didn't she still owe him? He had housed her, employed her, and secured her a job as a guard. She had almost gone back to the lowland because the city was such a hard place to live, for those who didn't know its ways.

And then, there was the night they had spent together. But she couldn't think about that now. They had always been better friends than lovers, when they were friends at all. *That* was nothing more than a product of too much wine, and adrenaline from a close call—they'd been chased down side streets, that night—it was years ago, they'd been different people. She had almost forgot it about it, but there it was, like a loose tooth in the back of her mouth.

At long last she managed to sleep. The sun rose too soon and Rowena only got up at Corliss' urging.

"Can't we sleep in?" Rowena wanted to know.

"You already did," the young girl said. "The ovens have been burning for hours. I *should* be with them."

Rowena relieved herself in the latrine. She folded the blankets. Iorwin's mother had given her an old tunic the night before. Gratefully, she put it on over her undershirt, wishing she had a whole set of clean clothes. She belted her sword and money pouch over the plain tunic, bunching up the guard tunic and stuffing it into her pack. She pulled and tied her hair back, watching Corliss slowly pack her few belongings into a blanket. The girl dawdled, but Rowena didn't have energy to scold.

"I have to say goodbye," Corliss said.

"You did that last night," said Rowena.

"No, I told them I was leaving. I didn't say my goodbyes."

"Fine," said Rowena. "Don't take long. I'll be in the stables."

-

Iorwin emerged from the stables as Rowena approached. He led two haltered horses, a rope in each hand.

"G'morning," the boy said cheerfully. "Let me put these in the pasture, and I'll get your mare for you."

"I can do it," said Rowena. "You needn't worry. Please thank your mother for the meal last night."

"Of course," he said, and left.

Grooming was only a moment's work. Iorwin had done a beautiful job with Temper yesterday, and she hadn't been out to pasture. The mare had her face down, eating from a pile of hay. Rowena checked her hooves for stones before she left the stall to fetch the saddle. She was carrying it back when she noticed the riders.

Either they had ridden through the night, or they were up and horsed early, to arrive when the sun was barely above the horizon. There were two of them, both men. They rode their horses to the lip of the stable and dismounted wordlessly, leading the mounts inside. Both men wore swords but neither sported the chestnut livery of the Dorchalt guards.

"The stable boy stepped out," said Rowena. "Can I help you?"

“We need directions,” said the taller one. His sleeves were rolled up, revealing forearms that looked doughy and weak. Though he carried a sword, Rowena doubted he was a fighter. He wore his blade like an unexpected weight, not a third limb that went with him everywhere. “If you’re a traveler yourself, we’ll simply wait.”

“I’m from here,” said Rowena. “What is it you’re looking for?”

“Mightn’t you know a little girl named Corliss? We’ve got a message for her.”

“What kind of message?” said Rowena. She put down the saddle quickly, almost dropping it.

“It’s for her, not you,” the tall one said. “You seem to know her?”

“Throw your horses in the stalls, they aren’t allowed inside,” said Rowena, gesturing to the open doors. The men did so quickly. They didn’t bother to remove the tack, just loosened the girths and tossed the stirrups across the saddle-backs.

“This way,” said Rowena.

She was on edge, every sense elevated; surely her heart was beating quickly, but she couldn’t feel it. It was always this way before a fight. She keenly felt each inch of her body, but it seemed at the same time she floated above it. She was acutely aware: Rowena knew how her weight was distributed, noticed the curl of her fingers, rubbed the sword-pommel at her waist with the pad of her thumb. There was a knot in her left shoulder, from sleeping on the floor. A slight ache in the arch of her feet.

She led them out the stable-door farthest from the kitchens. Rowena did not want Corliss to come in the middle of this. The door exited onto open ground. Fields and pastures rolled out in front of them. The palace rose behind them, on the other side of the stables. Iorwin was a dot off in the fields, releasing the horses he had led outside. Rowena stopped at the doorway and let the men walk past her. They looked around for a moment, then turned in confusion.

“Where...” one of them started to say.

“Finian sent you,” Rowena said, taking a balanced stance with her hand on her sword hilt. “Didn’t he?”

The men exchanged looks, both of them going to their sword belts.

“We don’t want trouble...”

“Hungry stones, you don’t. What business do two city men with swords have with a little kitchen girl, tell me that!”

They shifted their own weight, glancing at each other and then at her, evaluating. Their lack of response was a clear enough answer.

She pulled her sword from its sheath. In the same swing she brought it down across the front of the man closest to her, the taller of the two. He jumped back just as he struggled to pull his sword out of its sheath, narrowly missing her swing. She reversed and lunged forward with the sword slicing again.

The man blocked, but the angle of his sword was not firm enough to hold her strike. Their blades connected. Rowena’s sword kept moving, and with a screeching skitter it passed down the length of his blade, jumped over the edge, and gouged into his thigh. The man shouted once, sharply, and swung at her from above. Rowena, blade already free of his flesh, blocked easily.

He bled heavily. Rowena was the better fighter. She had spent the last three years training with Chilton. But she had two opponents. There was another sword coming in from her side. She slipped her blade away from one block and swung into another.

Was Rowena a good enough fighter to beat both of the men at once? Technically, yes. She was not a *great* fool: she knew her own skill, and she had correctly judged that neither of the men was a master fencer.

But she was still a fool, hotheaded with fear for her sister. A fight is never fair. There are always countless variables, unforeseen circumstances. Even a novice might strike a blow, lucky one in ten thousand times, and Rowena was no master. It was always better to avoid a fight, especially a fight with blades.

Both the swords were coming at her at once. She ducked under one and threw herself towards blocking the other.

The swing she had ducked reversed. The blade came back and sliced into her shoulder, too fast for her to react. It was her left arm, not her sword arm, but being hit slowed her down nonetheless. She pulled back with a yell of pain, but the shorter man was lunging in with his sword, set to stick her in the stomach. She blocked him automatically, but not with enough force to stop him from striking through. All she did was knock the blade off course, not far enough.

In a fight with blades, there are no such things as second chances.

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The tall one, Devon, lowered himself onto the ground. Blood leaked from his leg. There were tears on his face, but he didn't feel pain: he was too much in shock, both from the killing and from the wound. He tried to staunch the bleeding from his leg, but ended up just covering his hands in blood. He stopped and stared in silent fascination. Then he whimpered.

The shorter man, Sholto, knelt and wiped his blade on Rowena's tunic. He sheathed it while she looked at him. She was dying, and mute with it. Her groaning shouts had ended. Her lips moved wordlessly, then she looked up at the sky. Her mouth contorted into a shape recognizable only as pain. Her hand fluttered, grasping towards the sword at her side.

Sholto looked at Devon, and then the stable boy, frozen on his way back to the barn. The stable boy watched him from a good distance, but turned and began to run back to the fields when he saw Sholto looking.

Sholto cursed.

His boss Sileas only paid them to take the little child into custody. Sholto hadn't been expecting a fight, or killing.

"I'm bleeding," Devon said.

"I know," Sholto said, and then: "Spirits, you're *bleeding*. Give me your shirt."

Sholto knelt as Devon took off his shirt. Sholto wrapped the garment around Devon's thigh and knotted it together at the end.

"I don't know if that's enough," said Sholto. "You need a doctor."

A doctor wouldn't help. Sholto knew death when he saw it.

"Get one," Devon groaned.

“Wait here,” said Sholto, and ran back into the barn, heart pounding and mouth cursing blindly. He dashed into the stall and threw himself against his fat skewbald horse, wrenching the saddle-girth tight as the gelding stomped and tried to skitter away. He led the horse out of the stall.

There was a little girl at the end of the stable, some distance from the door to where Rowena and Devon lay. She would not be able to see the bodies from where she stood. How long had she been there? Had she heard the screams?

She carried with her a cloth bundle of belongings. Just run, thought Sholto. Get on this horse and take off. Let them all sort it out. But he'd been paid to take a child into custody, and he'd be paid again when he brought her to Sileas.

“Are you Corliss?” he asked. She nodded, eyes wide.

Fortune smiled on him.

“Where's my sister?” she asked.

“She's in trouble. I'm a friend. We have to hurry. Can you ride?”

She nodded. He led the horse to her and tossed her, squirming, into the saddle. He hurried to bring Devon's lean flea-bitten mare from her stall, first tightening the girth and flipping down the stirrups. Meantime she settled on the horse, gathering the reins in her little fists.

“Who are you? What are you doing?” Corliss demanded.

“I'll explain as we go,” said Sholto. “But we have to move fast. Come on!”

-

It quickly became clear to Chilton that Yedda's stay in prison deeply affected her. And who could blame her? He had taken her from her cell only a day before she was scheduled to be executed. Now, for the third night, she woke and padded around the common room. He heard her quiet footsteps and the sighed response of the floorboards. He wanted to go to her, but forced himself to stay put. She was going to be a soldier.

He suspected nightmares. Either way, she did not seem to be getting enough sleep. She was tired every day, but he pushed her harder, hoping that in her exhaustion she would learn to sleep through the night.

Their schedules quickly took on a pattern. Chilton thought it would be wrong for him to stay a guard in the squadron he used to captain. It would not be fair to his former subordinates, to complicate their relationships to him so much. Instead he became an honorary guard in Captain Daigre's squadron, honorary because he was allowed to work fewer hours than the rest of them.

He signed up for morning patrols. On days he worked, Chilton and Yedda ate breakfast at the same time, and then he set her to tasks while he did rounds in the city. He returned in time for lunch and spent the afternoon teaching her. They generally spent the afternoons on athletics, but Chilton also used the time to review her morning's studies. He collected a whole mountain of work that he thought she could do unsupervised. They would eat lunch in the cafeteria while the hired reader told stories or recited from patriotic texts, and then it was back to the common room. There, they would talk about how much work she had gotten through, what had been difficult, and any questions she developed.

Yedda could read a little, although not quickly, so he picked simple books to start with. One was a school-book with basic mathematics. This, he had purchased with his own money so that she could write the solutions directly in the book. Many of the others came from the city library, a vast collection at the upper lip of the third tier that charged exorbitant fees for access to their collection.

They studied a little of everything: politics, philosophy, history, medicines. He even had her read biographies of clan monarchs and guard generals from years past.

“Are you going to send me back?” Yedda asked once, as Chilton tried to explain how to divide a number into another.

“What?”

“If I don't get it, are you going to send me back?”

“Focus on your work, not on worries.”

“I don't understand why I'm here,” she said.

“I told you, to become a guard. I'm training you.”

“But why? The guards never trained anyone like me before, did they?”

“No, that's correct. Think of it as... as an initiative.”

“A what?”

“A project, a test. The beginning of something new.”

“What are you testing for?”

“I'm hopeful that if you do well, the Sovereign will invest money in training children who grew up like you did. So take a deep breath, and let's try this again.”

A week and a half passed. After breakfast Yedda took a seat at the common-room table with a glass of water and a little green book.

“Not today,” Chilton said, coming out of his room with a scroll in his hand. He was dressed for work, his guard's uniform immaculate and tall boots already laced up. “I want you to figure this out.”

“What?” asked Yedda, as Chilton unrolled the scroll in front of her. “Oh, it's a map?”

“It's the city,” said Chilton. “And it's very sensibly laid out, once you learn the pattern.”

“It's a rat-warren,” said Yedda.

“Don't interrupt,” said Chilton. “You need to know your way around it.”

“You want me to spend the whole morning staring at a map?”

“Are you complaining?”

“Why can't I go with you on patrol?”

“You can when you're older,” said Chilton. “You aren't a guard yet. Get to work.” He knocked his knuckles on the table and left out the front door.

Yedda stared at the map for half an hour. She found the guardhouse, labeled in a tall curling script. That rectangle of green was the small park they sometimes ran to. Bored, she turned back to the book. She was near the end of it when Chilton came through the front door, his garments somewhat mussed.

“Reading?” he said.

“I looked at the map, too,” she said.

“Good. Here's some money. You can get lunch in the market. Don't even try an eating-house; they all charge a fortune.”

“The market?” said Yedda. “Why aren't we eating in the cafeteria?”

“Because I told captain Daigre that he could use you as a message-runner for the afternoon. It's the best way to learn your way around the city. You can eat on a break. I hope you learned that map.”

“Can I take it with me?” Yedda said, her eyes wide and voice nervous.

Chilton sighed and sat down at the table, tired of standing.

“Why do I get the feeling you didn't study it?” He propped his chin up on one hand.

“I did! I swear I did! Just... I could still get lost.”

“Lying gets you nowhere, Yedda,” said Chilton. “Yes, you can take the map. But I'd be careful not to look at it too much. If you look lost, people might try to take advantage of that. Now put your boots on.”

-

The girl wasn't a good rider, but hopefully she could stay on her horse. There was no time to shorten the stirrups and so she had nowhere to rest her feet. She wrapped her fingers into the horse's mane and held tight, crouching over the horse's neck, muscles tense. It was a good thing she rode his simple skewbald mount, Sholto thought, more prone to stopping and eating than bolting off into the distance. He didn't need her injured or dead.

“Where's my sister?” Corliss asked again as they left the stable, the horses bouncing at a trot.

“I'm sorry, lass, but a bad thing happened,” Sholto said. “She got mixed up in a nasty business and asked me to see you safe and far away.”

“Is she hurt? We have to go back,” Corliss said, yanking one of the reins out and pulling her horse around. The animal threw its head in protest, mouthing at the bit.

“No, we can't,” Sholto said, and leaned out of his saddle to grab her reins, taking hold of both mounts. “There are bad men back there, and your sister is fighting them off. She'll do her best, but what matters to her is that you're safe.”

“But there are others,” Corliss said. “Ma'am Colturn and the other cooks...”

“They'll be fine, lass,” Sholto said. “The bad folk want your sister, so they want you, too. The rest, they'll leave alone.”

“Why?” asked Corliss.

All the while they rode. They were through the town now and in the open country, on the cobbled road connecting Dorchalt Proper to the big city days ahead of them. To either side they passed fences holding varied combinations of cows, horses, and goats. Odd white birds picked their way through the fields, eating bugs from the larger animals' waste.

“I'll bet you didn't know this,” Sholto said, “But there's a revolution going on, a band of honest folk fighting to help us common born. And your sister is a part of that.”

In truth, it was Sileas who was a part of that; Sileas who hired him to take this child captive. Sholto didn't know the reasons. He could only hope that Corliss believed him.

“My sister is a guard,” said Corliss.

“Ah, but she's both,” said Sholto. “She's... a... like a spy, see. But her heart is in making things right, not locking folks up.”

“Why didn't she tell me?”

“She didn't want to risk you getting in trouble.”

From the corner of his eye he could see her figuring things out, thinking it through. He let go of her reins and they rode side by side.

“And she got caught?” Corliss asked.

“Yes, but I suspect she'll be alright. Your sister is a mighty fighter. She might have to go into hiding, though, so don't worry if she's nowhere to be seen for awhile.”

“That's why she was nervous. That's why she came here?”

“Yes, that's it exactly.”

“Where are we going?”

“We're going into hiding, too.”

“Can't I go back to the kitchen?”

“No, they'll find you. If they catch a rebel they kill the whole family.”

“How will she find me? How will she know where I've gone?”

“She'll know,” said Sholto. “Don't worry. Your sister will know.”

-

It took the better part of the week to get to the city. Sholto knew they couldn't go quickly, since the child wasn't used to riding. They kept mostly to a walk and took many breaks. She often complained that she was sore from riding. The horse was far too big for a person of her size. She looked like a bug perched on the back of the mount. She swayed about like a drunk, trying to balance.

Sholto was not wealthy. They stopped at bedding houses along the way, but he begged having few coins and got them space to sleep in barns and tool sheds rather than beds and cots. To those who asked, he said he was escorting Corliss to the city, where she'd be apprenticed to his own master, a blacksmith.

At last they came to the city. An odd sighting marked their approach. As they neared, a shadow passed over. Looking into the sky they saw a shape above them. It was not a bird, but it was winged. The body of the creature was shaped human, but thin and drawn out, as if stretched. The wingspan was enormous, twenty feet at least.

“What's that?” Corliss asked. It was one of the first questions Sholto answered honestly.

“One of the Sovereign's Bound,” he said.

“What's a Bound?” she asked. He looked at her sharply.

“Spirit-Bound? Wizard-folk?”

“Oh, a wizard. I know those. It doesn't look human,” she said.

“Haven't you seen one before?”

She shook her head.

“You're a country girl alright,” he said. “If the spirit is strong enough, it warps the body over time. They all look different. Mighty scary up close, if you ask me. That one must have been Bound for, what, a hundred years, to look that way. That, or the spirit is awfully strong, stronger than the person who carries it.”

Corliss's fascination with the Bound was soon overtaken by the city itself. She had never seen anywhere bigger than Dorchalt Proper, the decrepit castle with its little town.

The Morning City was only ever called 'the city' because there was no mistaking it for anywhere else in the valley. Built on a massive, tiered plateau, it rose grandly up from the lowland, filling half the horizon, towering taller the closer they got. Even against the bright sky they saw plumes rising up from a thousand chimneys, making the sky shimmer. The slanted slate rooftops glowed in the light, catching the sun's rays and reflecting them.

More majestic than the whole city combined were the highest tiers, the fourth and fifth levels of the city. These were sparser than the rest. The fourth tier held palaces, one for each of the clans. Like Dorchalt proper, they were built an age ago. Estates surrounded the palaces, so the buildings rose out of miniature forests and sprawling gardens. Each structure sported its own assortment of towers, flags, stables, and outbuildings.

“What's that?” Corliss asked, pointing.

On the fifth tier, the Morning Palace sprawled like the body of a giant, an assortment of wings and columns. It was big enough to be a city in itself. The citadel was a wonder of white marble capped by gilt domes and a peaked bell tower.

“Sovereign's palace,” said Sholto. “The Gillemars live there.”

“The Gillemar clan owns all that?” Corliss asked.

“No, lass, all the clans do. Whoever wins the sovereign trials gets to live there, until the sovereign dies and a new one is chosen.”

“It's so big,” she said.

“That it is,” Sholto replied grimly.

“Wizards built all this?” she asked.

“Don't call 'em wizards. Bound is the proper term, if you want to sound educated. And yes, they built a lot of it, but people did some work too.”

“Will we wait for Rowena here?” Corliss asked.

“You don't need to keep asking,” Sholto said. “The answer isn't going to change.”

They rode past the trash-pools outside the city, fed by stone trenches that ran from the top tier down to the bottom carrying human waste and worse.

“How can anyone stand it?” Corliss said, plugging up her nose. She breathed through her mouth and gagged, then coughed, and pulled her shirt up so that it covered nose and mouth alike.

“You get used to it if you live by it.”

The main road was a wide stone avenue carved into the city like a riverbed. It switch-backed on itself to keep from being too steep. The avenue was flanked with staircases for the able bodied who wished to avoid traffic and horses. Everyone else rode, or paid for a ride on one of the horse carts that trotted up and down the road all day looking for passengers or shipments to make a coin off. Sholto and Corliss rode at a walk, the child's eyes wide as she scanned the buildings and the people.

As they climbed, the buildings became larger and in better repair. The whole way businesses and markets lined the main road. Most of the buildings were many storied, with apartments above the shop fronts.

On the third tier, they turned off the main road and headed down small side streets. Now they passed town houses with gardens in front of them. A dog behind a fence bayed at them, tail wagging.

“You live here?” Corliss asked in wonder. Dorchalt Proper was still bigger, but these houses were finer than anything in the town around Dorchalt.

“I do not. A friend does.”

“Where do you live?”

“Bottom tier, born and bred,” said Sholto. “Here we are.”

He turned into a yard. A brick pathway led from the street up to a wooden door painted deep green. The thin house rose three stories, built of old chipping stone. Corliss knew most of the garden plants. They were for use rather than beauty: fennel and garlic, sage and parsley, chamomile and betony.

They dismounted by an iron hitching post. Sholto tied both horses and knocked on the door.

It was presently opened by a tall, bearded person with red hair.

“I need to speak with Sileas. Will you see to the horses?”

“It’ll be done,” said the person. “Come inside.”

Sholto waved Corliss in with him. The bearded servant led them to a sitting-room and left.

Sholto sat down on a plush couch, and Corliss wandered over to a painting on the wall.

It was a quiet sort of house. Light streamed through arched windows, old dust-motes floating in the sunbeams. Even as autumn took hold of the city, the room was warm from the light.

It was a short wait until the doorway was taken up by a big fat man, as tall as he was wide. Sileas was tawny-skinned and had long, dark hair, more or less straight, that had been brushed until it shone. His forehead was creased from thinking, and the lines by his mouth carved deep from smiling. The red-bearded person stood behind him.

“Ah, the wood Bound,” Sileas said, with a nod to the painting Corliss stood in front of. She spun, startled by the noise. “I saw it once when I was much younger,” Sileas continued. “I’ve never seen anything so beautiful or odd again. I had it drawn from my description.”

The painting was delicately done in layers of richly pigmented oils. Not a brushstroke could be seen, and it glowed from within. A figure with emerald green skin slipped its way between trees. Its eyes were wide and dark as plums, its stomach round and swollen, its arms long and thin.

“Did you talk to it?” Corliss wanted to know.

“No, child. One doesn’t talk to a Bound, not a feral one. That’s one of the few not in service of the Sovereign or dead, and mostly because it’s hard to find. I searched for another month after I saw it and never found so much as a trace again. Are you hungry?”

Corliss nodded.

“This is Ridley. You two go see the kitchens,” Sileas said, with a hand to the bearded person behind him.

Corliss looked at Sholto, who nodded.

“We're all on your sister's side,” Sholto said.

Corliss followed Ridley away. Sileas sat on the couch next to Sholto, leaning against the armrest.

“Well, then,” said Sileas. “You must tell me everything. I can see the child thinks you're a friend, not a captor. Where is Devon?”

Sholto explained as quickly and simply as he could. It was difficult to speak of Devon's death. When he was done, Sileas sat thinking for a long while. He planted his hands on his knees and slowly drew in and out deep breaths of air.

“Well,” he said, and lapsed into silence again. “Well, well.”

“I brought her, at least,” said Sholto.

“Yes, but I don't think it matters,” Sileas said. “It appears you've killed her sister, isn't that so?”

“Yes, but Corliss is safe.”

“She was only ever a hostage to make her sister co-operate. Never mind, you didn't know. And you must defend when you are attacked. You'll still be paid.”

“Ah,” said Sholto, comprehending how thoroughly he damaged things. “Why did you need her sister?”

“I have a friend in jail. He thought she could get him out. I suppose he'll die now. Pity. I wonder if I can do something about that.”

There was silence again. Sileas clasped his hands together and rocked forward, uttering a long 'hmm.'

“What is to be done with the child? Will you kill her?” Sholto asked.

Sileas jolted up, awoken from his thoughts.

“No, certainly not!”

“Then you'll release her?”

“I think not. You've taken her from her home. She is now our responsibility. Furthermore, whether she cares or not, she is aware of the revolution. Did she seem friendly to the idea?”

“I don't know. She's a child. She thinks her sister was a part of it, at least. She'd likely take the same side.”

“It's been years since a child lived in this house,” said Sileas.

“You're going to raise her?”

“Ah, probably not. But someone will.”

“What will you tell her?”

“The same thing you did. It's the truth, after all. This is a safe house. She need never know her sister was our enemy. The corpse won't speak.”

“I'd let her go, if I were you,” said Sholto. “You've got bigger things to worry about than a stray.”

“My dear, you know I am fond of you,” said Sileas. “I’ve found your services indispensable over the years. But I think you do not understand what I am trying to do. Even the smallest child must be protected.”

“You’re fighting a war,” said Sholto. “Do you really have time and resources for such things?”

“If you do not live what you believe, can you truly claim to believe it?” Sileas quoted.

“What’s that?”

“My favorite line from Wisewoman Renwast. In this case, it means: if I want to make things better for everybody, I cannot abandon even one child in the process, or I have already become corrupt.”

“I guess I’m glad,” said Sholto. “She’s a sweet thing, for all she cries too much. I’d hate to see her harmed.”

“You warm my old heart,” said Sileas. “If she stays in the city, you can visit her.”

“I’m not that fond of the child,” said Sholto. “I just meant it’s better for her to live. I’ll sleep more soundly.”

“And still I think if I told you to kill her you would have,” said Sileas. “That’s what makes you a good servant, Sholto.”

“Yes,” the warrior responded uncomfortably. “Your Wisewoman would say I don’t believe much of anything.”

“You believe in your own survival,” said Sileas. “That’s not so foolish. It makes you pleasant to bargain with.”

“You’re a kind old fool.”

“Aren’t you glad?” said Sileas.

“Only a little. One day you’ll be executed. I have no doubt of that. Forgive my bluntness.”

“Forgiven before you spoke it,” said Sileas. “Though I’m not so unprotected as you seem to think.”

“Mother of Shadows, but I do hate you clan-folk,” said Sholto with a displeased grumble. “Don’t *any* of you have consequences?”

Sileas only laughed.

“Tell Ridley to pay you the rest of what you’re owed,” said Sileas. “You can go home, but you’d better stay alert. I think I have need of your services tonight.”

-

Corliss waited in Sileas’ house for word from Rowena. Sileas wanted to get her a tutor for the meanwhile. After a small dispute, Corliss agreed.

“It would be silly to get a job in a kitchen,” Sileas said to win her over. “What if your sister shows up all of a sudden and wants to take you somewhere else? It’s easier to cancel a tutor than to leave a job, and more honorable. You’d get someone in trouble if you quit right after they hired you.”

“Alright,” Corliss agreed, and the tutor, a poor but radical academic friend of Sileas’, came for a single day.

Then Corliss was bedridden with a headache so wretched she asked for the curtains to be drawn. Even sunlight was too bright. She developed a fever so hot she was delusional for hours, raving about soundless voices and glass prisons. Sileas pressed his hand against her sweaty forehead and pulled away when she snapped at him, lurching up from her pillow. He chuckled nervously.

“At least she's got fight,” he said to the doctor who came to take her pulse. The doctor left shaking his head, saying the child might not live the night.

“Keep her cool,” he said, “and give her fluids, if she'll take them.”

Ridley the serving person made a honeyed broth and tilted it down Corliss' throat one spoonful at a time, holding her face down and her mouth open with his other hand. Ridley looked near tears. She spat out half of it, and Ridley dabbed at her cheeks with a fancy table-napkin. By persisting over an hour Ridley managed to get a whole cup of the mixture into her. Sileas' servant wouldn't leave her side after that, referring to her as their 'sick little bird' when speaking to Sileas.

The next day her senses seemed returned. She wouldn't leave the bed, but sat up and spoke with them, and asked that the blinds stay drawn a little longer.

“I can't think with all this hair,” she snapped at last. “Can't we cut it off?”

Ridley and Sileas exchanged glances, but obliged. Ridley brought a pair of silver scissors. Corliss cut it herself, but let Ridley straighten her mess of a job.

“You look like a little boy,” said Sileas with a chuckle.

“I'm not,” said Corliss.

-

When the fever left her, Corliss found her mind a battleground. There was an acidic taste in her mouth. Something uncoiled in her brain, a parasite stretching out its full length. An unknown power curled into her fingertips, wrapped around her heart, and slunk its way to her knees and below.

She was Corliss, the kitchen-help, and she was not. She was Corliss and she was DoI, Father of Fire, an ancient spirit waking from three hundred years of sleep. He entered her weeks ago, but now he hatched, rising to the surface.

She blazed. The fever brought her to the very brink of death. He would kill her, rather than be imprisoned—he would rule her or end her—and the young child flailed, burned, lost and found herself a thousand times.

The familiar voice soothed her.

You must live, the voice said. It was a flat, clicking whisper worming through her and her skin convulsed. She had the sudden image of a hundred-legged creature crawling up her spine, but some of the pain from the fire was gone.

I can't, Corliss thought. *It's too strong. I'm burning.*

Remember the fire of the Kitchens, of the ovens. The heat will not swallow you. I am here.

That gave her something to focus on, a memory she could grab. The fire spread through her in waves. For a little while she lost herself. Then she thought, oddly, she could smell bread baking, could see the bundles of drying herbs hanging from the ceiling. She heard Ma'am Colturn's knife snapping off the head of a fish, and Ma'am Colturn's voice, warm and wordless, as if coming to her over a great distance.

If I could die, I would, Corliss thought. To be free of the pain.

No. It will pass. You must continue. You must own it.

It's too strong, Corliss thought. I can't hold it.

Make him sleep. He has slumbered hundreds of years. He can close his eyes a little longer.

-

Corliss began to feel better. She asked that the heavy curtains beside her bed be parted so she could look out on the street for entertainment.

That night she couldn't sleep. The parasite in her mind withdrew, but she still felt it. There was a heat below the surface of her mind, like a pot threatening to boil over. She knew she must watch it constantly and reprimand it whenever it tried to take her body from her. Her head ached, a dull reminder that it was not used to being so used.

She watched a scruffy fox make his way across the street. He paused and crouched down in the middle, aware of something she couldn't see. Then he moved on. An hour passed. Her eyes began to flicker closed when a cart rattled up the street, passing through pools of lamplight. Next to the cart-driver sat Sholto, the man who had brought her from Dorchalt proper. The cart stopped in front of Sileas' house. Sholto and the driver jumped off the seat as Ridley came out the front door with a lantern.

Rugs and fabrics covered the back of the cart. They dug through it all and lifted out a frail man, who waved them off and insisted on walking himself. Sholto and the driver left as Ridley escorted the man into the house, one hand on his back, ready to catch him if he fell.

Exhaustion beat curiosity. The fire in Corliss' brain left her little energy for the rest of the world.

As she dozed off, the rest of the household came awake below her. Sileas stood in the entry hall in a silk dressing gown, watching Ridley bring Finian inside.

"Get him bathed, please. I won't have my house smelling like filth."

"Fine to see you, too," said Finian, voice hoarse and croaking.

"No need to be thankful, I only saved your life," said Sileas. "The kitchen is heating up a meal."

"That first," said Finian.

"No, you bathe first. You can make it a half hour without food, I dare say. Besides, it isn't ready yet."

By anyone's account, Finian needed a bath. He had not so much as rinsed himself since he was imprisoned.

"I can do it myself," Finian said as Ridley tried to help him take off his filth-crusted clothes.

"Alright, then," said Ridley, and turned around. "I won't watch. But I'm staying here, in case you collapse. Keep making noise so I know you're alive."

Finian didn't have the energy to fight. Even as eager as he was for the food, he washed slowly. Soap and water felt strange, but also good, even if the water was lukewarm and the room cold as winter. He did not have the strength or will to move quickly. At last he was passably clean and clambered shaking from the tub, the water murky with weeks of prison. He wrapped himself in a towel. Ridley presented him with a set of clothes. Finian left his chest unbound. He wanted to breathe deeply.

Ridley led him downstairs to the dining room, where Sileas set down a tray of braised onions and parsnips with the rest of the food. Finian couldn't help but cry. The spread was overwhelming.

"Slowly!" Sileas reprimanded as Finian grabbed a chicken-breast and slid into a seat. Finian ate without stopping to breathe. "My word, you've forgotten all your manners, haven't you?"

Finian didn't think a response was necessary. According to Ridley, he had been in prison for nearly three weeks. In that whole time, he'd had nothing to eat but stale bread and cabbage boiled to a pulp. Once or twice, perhaps when there was a market sale, the guards had pushed some other vegetable through his grated cell. He ate now until he was certain he would be sick, and lay his head down on the table, clutching his stomach and groaning.

"I once read an account of someone lost in the mountains with nothing to eat, you know," said Sileas conversationally. "They fed him such rich food when they found him that he died. His stomach didn't know what to do with it."

"I'm not going to die," said Finian. "I just found out I was alive."

"I'd still be careful if I were you," said Sileas. "I'm glad I was able to get you out. It was a close call, you know. You cost me a fortune."

"If you're expecting me to grovel, wait," said Finian. "I'm not moving until tomorrow."

He started to cough, then, a racking noise from deep in his chest.

"That doesn't sound good," said Sileas.

"I'm fine." Finian sat upright slowly, leaning back into his chair and closing his eyes. He coughed again, softly.

"I hope so," said Sileas. "It'd cost a second fortune to bribe a doctor. My house seems full of invalids."

"I'll be gone soon."

"I don't think so. The moment you walk out this door, you'll be arrested."

"They haven't got a clue what I look like," said Finian. "Nobody looked at me twice, in there."

"Not a chance I'm taking. You'll go from felon to famous overnight, I promise it. Very few people escape from those prisons. And the night before your execution, no less! I'm proud of that, I'll admit. It makes quite the dramatic story."

"What am I to do, live in your house the rest of my life? From one cell to another?"

“Don't look so grim. At least you'll eat well here,” said Sileas. Finian glared. “I'm only joking, anyways,” Sileas amended. “When you're feeling a little better, we can talk about it. You can live anywhere but the city. Oh, don't look so glum. There's a whole world in the lowlands that you can explore. Your family might even take you back. I'll get you a job. You could at least be grateful.”

“I am, Sileas,” said Finian. “I am grateful. But I'm angry, too.”

“Angry? Without me, you'd be dead,” said Sileas.

Finian snorted.

“How much money does your black market bring each year?”

“Ah, yes, that's true. Less, now that half my merchandise was confiscated in your arrest. But still. Just think how boring an honest life would be, and how unrewarding.”

Finian began to eye the parsnips. Sileas chuckled and pushed the plate towards him.

“Just be certain to listen to your stomach,” said Sileas. “You don't want to strain it.”

“My stomach doesn't know left from right anymore.” Finian spooned one of the parsnips onto his plate, wiped his greasy hands on his unused napkin, and picked up fork and knife for the first time.

“How's your head?” Sileas asked.

“Why?” Finian asked.

“There are things you need to know. Should I wait?”

“I don't care.”

“Rowena's dead.”

“What? No. How?”

“One of my men killed her.”

Finian set down his fork and leaned back, shaking his head slowly in disbelief.

“*Why?*”

“You asked me to take her sister captive.”

“I... I only...”

“She attacked the men I sent. She didn't survive. And she killed Devon. Quite a fighter, your girl was.”

“Stop joking.”

“My dear, I don't joke about these things. Corliss is now under my protection, sleeping upstairs. She thinks her sister was one of us, and is waiting for her to return. She hasn't a clue that her sister is deceased, and you won't tell her.”

“Then why tell me?”

“Because I trust you are strong enough to bear the secret, and because we all deserve to know the consequences of our actions.”

-

It was in the papers the day after next, crowding out the other headlines: 'Crime King Vanishes Without a Trace,' 'Traitor on the Run.' Somebody who knew Finian had helped make a

block-print of his face. It was unfortunately accurate, Finian thought, as his eyes stared back at him from the ink.

"I told you," said Sileas. "You really shouldn't go outside."

-

After stretching and doing a series of strength exercises, Chilton taught Yedda two new blocks and how to get out of a side headlock.

"That's enough for today," he said as bells chimed the third hour. "Go take a bath. And don't just dab, I want you clean."

On his way inside, Chilton passed the stable and glanced inside, as if expecting to see Temper's head poking over one of the stall doors. It was not.

-

"What's this?" Yedda asked when she entered the common room, hair still wet from bathing. There was a set of folded clothes and a new pair of boots in front of her door. Chilton looked up from the table. He was reading a paper and cutting pieces off an apple to eat.

"New clothes," he said. "Get changed."

"What's going on?"

"We're going to see the General," said Chilton. "You have to look presentable."

"The General? Why?"

"She's the one setting aside funds to train you, goose. She wants to see what all this money is going to."

"Do I really cost that much?" Yedda wanted to know, vanishing into her room with the clothes in hand.

"No, I do," said Chilton. "I get paid for this, you know. All the time I spend with you is time I spend *not* locking up criminals and breaking up fights."

"Sorry," said Yedda.

"That's not something to apologize for," he muttered, returning to his paper.

Yedda emerged. She had worn cast off clothing from the guards before, the limbs cut and the pants belted around her small frame. These clothes had been made especially for her, and they fit properly, with extra fabric hemmed so it could be let out as she grew. The shirt was dyed the deep blood red of the guards, the pants so dark brown they looked black. There was a coat to go with it, now that the air was cold. She did not, however, have the armaments of the guard: no plated leather vest, no horn to call for help, no weapons other than fists and knees and elbows.

"Am I presentable?" asked Yedda.

"Very nice," Chilton approved.

"Aren't you going to change, too?"

"Yes, in a moment," Chilton said. "Get a book or something. I want to finish reading this."

General Dawn had an office in the guardhouse but spent little time there. She preferred to work in more comfortable conditions.

Yedda had never been to the fourth tier before. Once a week Chilton lent her to captain Daigre to run messages, but the city guards mostly kept to the first through third tiers. The clans each had their own guards.

The air grew fresher as they climbed the stairs. It was traced with the sweet scent of roses. In the entry garden an elegant Righardan passed them, trailing servants. He paused to greet Chilton warmly.

The Righardan palace was beautiful, but far from delicate. The architecture was heavy and northern. Its outer wall carvings reminded Yedda of Dorchalt proper, and she stopped for a moment to admire them. Dogs and riders chased deer and foxes in high relief. No expense had been spared. The eyes of the animals sparkled with inset jewels, protected from would-be thieves by their height from the ground and the tall, guarded wall which wrapped around the whole estate. Yedda tilted her head backwards to admire the handiwork. It would take a ladder, or a very skilled climber, to reach them.

At the doorway to the palace, Chilton stopped and turned to Yedda.

“General Dawn is both highborn and incredibly powerful. She has the power to change everything for you, better or worse. So I want you on your best behavior.”

Inside, a maid led them up a tightly curled wooden staircase to a tower room. It was Chilton's second time in the circular chamber full of lanterns, windows, and bookshelves.

Dawn sat at a long wooden desk by a window, looking out over the city. The light coming through the window was cold and gray with the growing winter. She glanced up as the maid softly knocked on the open door.

“Come in,” she said, her voice hollow but not lacking in warmth. She wore her white-blond hair in an elaborate braid around her head. Even her lips were pale. Her only color came from her dress, a bright Righardan jewel blue.

There were seats in front of the desk. Chilton bowed and took one. Yedda copied him. They were uncomfortable wooden chairs without any padding. Nonetheless, they were elegant. The sides were carved into wooden lace out of a rich red wood.

“You must be Yedda. I’ve heard good things about you,” Dawn said.

The maid returned with a tray balancing thin glass cups and a pitcher of rose water. She poured a cup for each of them and melded silently into a corner.

“Chilton says you're a fast learner,” Dawn continued.

“Am I?” Yedda said. “Um—that is—thank you. Ma'am.”

The General smiled.

“She is,” Chilton said. “She was only passably literate when I found her. She writes her letters beautifully now. The spelling could use some work.”

Yedda blushed. Why did he have to mention that?

“All things in time,” said Dawn. “Well, Yedda, what else have you learned?”

Yedda looked at Chilton, but he was not about to answer for her. She shifted in her seat and cleared her throat.

“Uh... fighting, swords, horses... the city... math, history, law, ethics... crime reports. Medicine.”

“My word. That's a lot, for a scant few months,” said Dawn.

“It's all very basic, of course,” Chilton said. “But depth comes with time. I want her to have a broad foundation in all things useful.”

“You find you have enough time to tutor her and keep up with your own duties?”

“Well enough. As I said, she learns fast. She reads, we talk, and that's it. And the fighting keeps me in shape, too, though of course she's just a beginner.”

Embarrassed, Yedda took a sip of her water.

“Did you have much education before?” Dawn asked.

“No,” said Yedda. “Well, my father taught me. What he could. He was from here, the city.”

“From the city to the country. What a shame. What did he do?”

“He was a gardener, ma'am.”

“Tell me, Yedda, do you like it here?”

“Yes, ma'am. It's hard, but... I don't want to go back.” Her words became soft, tentative. This was a constant fear for her.

“Good. I'll be curious to see where you end up in a few years. I hope Chilton's efforts pay off.”

“Me too,” said Yedda. She suddenly felt very conscious of all the times she could have worked harder.

“I'd like your honest opinion,” Dawn said. “Do you think—and truly, be honest here—do you think other children of your background would do as well as you have?”

Yedda blushed again, and thought for a moment.

“It's hard to say,” she said at last, speaking slowly. “There's nothing like this in Dorchalt... so there's no way to know what someone else... that is, I have a few friends who would do well, I'm sure. I suppose not everyone would, but that's like anything. Most of the city children would be the same, wouldn't they?”

“I expect you're right,” said Dawn. “You don't sound your age, did you know that?”

“No,” said Yedda.

“Another question,” said Dawn, “and not an entirely happy one. Yedda, you should know that we are very *invested* in your success. Men like Chilton, who are dedicated and highly trained, are a rare breed, and increasingly difficult to find. Many of them don't live out their full time. Casualties are higher than we might hope. What I mean to say is this: Chilton and I have high hopes for you and your kind; this is how he was able to convince me to divert some of our funds and his abilities to your training. Some, and I regret to say our benevolent Sovereign and many of his advisers included, see very little potential in a program of this sort and are reluctant... but, in any case... your circumstances are themselves unique, having taken you not from the fields but from the gallows.”

“Yes, ma'am,” said Yedda, gripping her glass tightly.

“Chilton tells me he asked about the circumstances that led you to that day, and you would not divulge them.”

Yedda looked at Chilton in horror.

“Ma'am,” Yedda said. “I was told I had been pardoned?”

“And so you have,” said Dawn, “but when I asked the Dorchalts, they were equally reluctant to speak with me about the matter, saying only that if I wished to take a thief into my hands it was at my own risk. In fact, they very nearly fought me over your life, until I reminded them that the jails were my jurisdiction. Tell me, Yedda, what were you attempting to steal? Were you hungry?”

“No, ma'am.”

“Then what were you doing in the treasure room?”

“It was a dare,” said Yedda.

“A risky dare. Who made it?”

Yedda looked at Chilton.

“Go on, child,” he said kindly. “This is the General you're talking to, remember.”

“I... I don't know,” Yedda said. “I was with a friend, and we both heard this... voice, but it came from nobody, and...”

“You went into the treasure room,” Dawn finished when Yedda stalled.

“We *both* did,” said Yedda. “And then guards came, and they caught me, and somehow she was gone.”

“How did you get inside? It wasn't guarded or locked?”

“No.”

“Odd. That was the dare? Go into the treasure room?”

“No. There was a knife, all made of glass, and we were supposed to break it.”

Dawn leaned forward, her body tense.

“Did you?” her voice turned sharp as a spearhead. “Did you break it?”

“N..no,” said Yedda. “My friend, though... she dropped it. It shattered.”

“What was your friend's name?”

“Corliss,” said Yedda. “That guard I met when I came? Rowena? It was her sister.”

“I want to talk to her,” Dawn snapped, leaning back.

“There's a problem,” said Chilton. “Rowena's gone.”

“Gone?”

“It's in the reports,” he said tiredly. “I don't *know* what happened. I gave her a little leave, just before I left captain—” he'd said the lie so many times it came naturally, even before the General. “She never came back.”

“A deserter?”

“I don't think so. She was a good guard. A favorite of mine, truth told. I fear she met with some evil beyond the city walls. The commander said we couldn't investigate when we had no proof she didn't simply leave.”

“Did you tell the guards about your friend, when they arrested you?” Dawn wanted to know.

“No, I didn't want them to hurt her,” Yedda said. “She's my friend. And I was there, too, so I figured it was my fault, even if I didn't break it.”

“That's admirable of you,” said Dawn. “No wonder the Dorchalts wouldn't talk about it.”

“No wonder?” Chilton asked. “What do you mean?”

“That was no ordinary knife,” said Dawn. “Chilton, find someone else to watch the girl. I want you to ride to Dorchalt and find—what was her name? Your friend?”

“Corliss,” said Yedda.

“Corliss,” Dawn said. “Find Corliss. That wasn't an ordinary knife. Unless I'm mistaken, that was one of Adlen's relics. The Dorchalts haven't got a right to rule if they lost that knife. Neither of you are to speak about this to anyone, do you understand?”

Both of them nodded.

“I mean it,” Dawn said to Yedda. “I know how children gossip. I was one myself.”

Yedda nodded again.

“She knows how to keep her mouth shut,” Chilton promised. “This is the first I've heard of any knife, or any voice coming out through the walls.”

“About that,” Dawn said. “This voice. Did you recognize it?”

“No,” said Yedda. “I'd never heard it before.”

“Could you describe it?” Dawn asked.

“It was like someone talking in my head,” Yedda said. “I didn't hear it so much as I felt it. It... it wasn't a *voice*, not really. Just words.”

“Does that sound familiar?” Dawn asked Chilton. “Are there spirits with a property like that?”

“Not in the slightest,” he said. “Not that I know of.”

“Perhaps you imagined—” Dawn began to say.

“No,” Yedda interrupted. “I *felt* it. We *both* did.”

“What I can't understand,” said Chilton, “is why they allowed her to leave the treasure room at all. Much less why they brought her to the city and allowed you to pardon her.”

“Have you forgotten to tell us something, child?” Dawn asked. “Left out some bit of the story for any reason?”

Yedda shook her head.

“The whole thing is odd,” Dawn said. “Chilton, leave tomorrow. Ride as a captain, you'll get more done. Report to me the moment you're back. If it's important, any hour of the night, the middle of any meeting. You understand?”

Chilton stood and bowed. Yedda copied him.

“Oh, and Yedda,” said Dawn. “Next time you hear an odd voice asking you to do things? Don't listen to it. Tell Chilton, or another adult you can trust.”

Yedda nodded meekly. They left the room at a brisk walk, Yedda nearly jogging to keep up.

“What's a relic?” She asked in the hall as they followed the maid.

“Hush,” Chilton said. “We'll talk when we're home. You haven't a clue how lucky you are.”

Chilton packed. Yedda sat cross-legged on his bed, watching as he folded clothes and mulled over his knives.

“So spirits can be bound to things other than humans?” Yedda asked.

“Yes, but human bindings are the safest,” Chilton said. “Nobody really makes inanimate bindings anymore. Well, not that there are many stray spirits to bind! But if there were, they'd go into people. It's far easier to manage the spirit that way.”

“But weird things happen,” Yedda said. “To the Bound. They don't stay human.” She had seen a few of the Sovereign's Bound since arriving at the city, but only ever at a great distance.

“Well, what's worse? One misshapen person, or a whole village eaten by pestilence on accident?”

“What's pestilence?”

“Disease. An ill plague. There are Bound who deal in such things.”

“I see,” said Yedda. “But why leave the knife in a room, then, if it was so dangerous?”

“They're not dangerous if nobody touches them. In that sense, I suppose they *are* better than a Bound human, but in the wrong hands they wreak havoc. The highborn in each clan train for years to be able to handle them, just like you're training now. Only, they spend all their time doing mental exercises, so they can control the spirit. They only use it if there's an emergency, or if the Sovereign dies and they're competing to see who will rule next. It's too much of a risk the rest of the time—the spirits behave better if they share a human body. Each clan has a relic, and each relic has different powers.”

“And since the knife broke?”

Chilton stood up from where he'd been crouched on the ground, looking from one side to the other for something he'd misplaced. He patted his pockets. “Well, the spirit went somewhere,” he said. “Maybe it died, if it didn't bind with anyone.”

“What if it bound with me?” Yedda said. “What if *I'm* a spirit?”

“We'd know by now,” said Chilton. “Trust me. Adlen's relics were no lesser spirits. Those were the greater spirits, the spirit-gods, who came and shaped this country in the first place. They made this plateau, and flattened the valley, and rose the mountains around it. Remember the stories? You must have heard them as a child: how Adlen spirit-killer came to the valley and made it safe for people to live here again.”

“And the knife was one of those?”

“If I'm not mistaken, the Dorchalt's relic was Dol, a great fire spirit. But it seems I have some research to do. I didn't know it was so easy to break a binding. Only one of the relics has broken before, and that was... one, two hundred years ago.”

“What about Corliss?” Yedda asked suddenly. “Do you think *she's* a spirit?”

“Do you want me to be honest?”

“Of course,” said Yedda.

“Either the spirit died, or she did,” Chilton said. “If there's a greater fire spirit in the body of a young child, Mother of Shadows preserve us, the whole valley would be in flames by now. Or frozen solid. She'd never learn to control it.”

There was a knock on the common room door, muffled across the distance.

“That’ll be Lodan,” Chilton said. “Get the door, will you?”

Yedda did as he asked.

“Hello,” Lodan said to her. “Is Chilton here?”

“Here,” Chilton said, coming to his doorway. “Yedda, would you give us some time?”

She had other questions, but they would have to wait. Lodan went into Chilton’s bedroom, closing the door behind him. Yedda went into her own room and lit the oil-lantern by her bedside. She had a new stack of books from Chilton. Perhaps this was a good time to look them over.

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“If you have any problems, you go to Lodan. And you take orders from him, too,” Chilton said the next morning in the common room. It was early, before breakfast; Chilton wanted to be on the road as soon as he could. Lodan was there. Yedda suspected he had stayed the night, but she didn’t ask. They had still been in Chilton’s room when she went to sleep.

“You know where my rooms are, if you need me when we aren’t training. Unless I’m on patrol. Then you go to whichever captain you can find,” said Lodan.

“Is my schedule the same?” she asked.

“More or less,” said Lodan. “I work more shifts than Chilton, so you’ll have some afternoons alone.”

“It won’t matter,” said Chilton. “For the mornings, I doubt you’ll get through those books. Write down any questions; we’ll go over them when I get back. If Lodan is busy in the afternoon, sign out a horse and ride into the lowland for practice. Don’t cut cross-country; keep to the road. Take Bliss, or Honor. Nobody you can’t handle on your own. You understand? Riding is serious business.”

“I know,” said Yedda. “I’ll take Honor if I go.” The swaybacked old mare was one of Yedda’s favorites: a reliable horse who knew her own way around the city, having seen years of faithful service in the guard.

“We’ll do some knife fighting when I’m free,” Lodan informed her.

“It’s his specialty,” Chilton said with a grin. “So you’d better pay attention. We’ll spar when I get back. How about that—this is your chance to learn some tricks and throw me over.”

“I know all his weak spots,” Lodan whispered to her. “I’ll show you.”

“I heard that,” said Chilton. “You take care, both of you. Alright?” He ruffled Yedda’s hair.

“You too,” she said. “Say hi to Corliss for me. That is...”

“I know,” said Chilton, his smile suddenly gone. “I’ll tell her if I see her.”

“Don’t be a hero,” said Lodan. “Get yourself home.”

Chilton threw a mock punch at him, lightly. Lodan didn’t bother trying to block.

“Well, bye,” said Chilton.

“I’ll see you out,” Lodan said, suddenly, and followed him out the door.

Chilton saw no need to attract attention on the road. He dressed as a civilian all the way to Dorchalt, passing other riders with a nod and a wary smile. He kept a knife close to hand in case there was trouble. When darkness crept over the sky he pushed on until the nearest bedding-house, teeth chattering in the cold.

In one or two of the little towns that he passed through there were real taverns to stop in, though he often passed them at morning or mid-day when he still had miles to ride. Most bedding houses were simply farmsteads with an extra cot they were happy to get a coin for.

Chilton stayed in such a house his last night. Waking up, he struggled to leave the warm bed. He quickly donned his full guard's uniform and snapped the silver triangles to his shoulders. The slight weight they added was both familiar and foreign. It had been some time since he had worn the badges, and he spent a moment admiring them in a polished metal mirror. He ran his fingers over the shape and shook his head with a smile, then stuffed his old clothes into his bags and left the room.

The family he stayed with had just sat to breakfast. They all stared wide-eyed and wordless as a captain emerged from where a simple traveler had gone the night before. He nodded his head, thanked them for their hospitality, and was on his way before they could ask any questions.

It was easy to find Dorchalt Proper, though he'd never been there before. It was the end of the road he was riding. There were no true forks in the cobble street, just worn cart tracks parting ways here and there, marking the paths to more distant farmsteads. It wasn't long until he found himself riding through the biggest town he'd seen since leaving the city. Just beyond it was the great stone palace, covered in ivy and worn carvings. As he arrived a light snow was just beginning to fall, melting as it touched the ground.

He turned his horse right towards the long sloping buildings that could only be the stable yard.

"Do you need a hand?" the horse boy asked, coming to the door. The boy had eyebrows like black caterpillars, and wore a long scarf wrapped so many times around that it nearly covered his mouth.

His wary eyes refused to look straight at Chilton. He held a long sharpened pitchfork as a staff. Presumably it was for forking hay to the horses, but the boy gripped it like a weapon in front of him.

"Please," said Chilton, and dismounted. His legs and backside ached. He was not used to such constant riding, and had a feeling there were bruises between his legs.

Chilton walked the horse to the stable boy, who took the mare in hand and leaned the pitchfork against the wall. Chilton fished a gold eighth from his pocket.

"I'll need to get change," the boy said.

"Keep it."

Iorwin's fist tightened around the coin. He stuffed it into his pocket.

"Thank you. I'll see her watered. Does she need a feeding?" The boy asked, his hand running down the mare's neck.

“Please,” said Chilton. “A blanket would be good, too, if you have a spare one.”

The boy started to lead the horse away. Chilton started to turn, then stopped.

“Actually,” he added, “I don't suppose you could help me? I'm looking for a child. Her name is Corliss.”

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Not an hour later, Chilton stood in front of Rowena's grave.

“You could have sent word,” he said resentfully.

“We didn't know who to send to,” said Iorwin, hands clasped behind his back. “Her coming back was the first I'd heard from her since she left.”

“The Office of the Guard,” Chilton said softly.

Of course, Iorwin had lived in Dorchalt proper his whole life. Rowena was the only guard he'd even known not directly employed by the Dorchalts. He couldn't have had a clue who to send anything to.

Chilton took a step forward and reached down to touch the stone marking Rowena's resting place. It was plain and unmarked, a squat boulder mottled with lichen. They had buried her with the horses, not knowing where else to put her. In a way, Chilton thought, it was fitting. He closed his eyes and crouched down, keeping his hand on the stone. Chilton focused on the feeling of the gritty rock beneath his fingertips. If he let himself think too hard about Rowena, he was going to cry. He felt the tears gathering behind his eyes now, a pressure on the sides of his nose. He frowned, pressing his lips tight together. He could cry later.

It took him a long time to control his emotions. Embarrassingly long, he thought, for a captain of the guard. There was no shame in feeling, but he owed allegiance to his duties, not to himself. He had known Rowena was dead for more than a month now, or at least suspected. She had taken to her job like a duck to water. She would have come home to the city if she could have.

He had doubts when he agreed to let an uneducated lesser born from the country join the guard, and *his* squadron, at that. It was the horses that had changed his mind. She dealt with them as if they shared a secret language, and even the most wild of the guard's steeds was servant to her request.

She had no special skill at fighting and no idea of how a guard should act, but she threw herself into the life. She asked questions that nobody thought to ask, and fought with Chilton when she thought he made an unwarranted arrest. She took her job more seriously than any of the guard, because she had lived among the city and the country folk. She was lesser born and she knew what the law meant, knew what impact it had. She had never cherished her power the way many clan born did. She had never taken it for granted, or put herself above the people who the guard hunted and protected. It was Rowena's success which gave him the idea to train a young lesser born like Yedda in the first place.

If he hadn't let her leave, she would be alive. He shouldn't have lied for her. He should have reported Finian for threatening her sister, and told Rowena to stay put in the city. She would still be alive.

Despite his thoughts, Chilton knew that he couldn't blame himself. He hadn't caused any of it to happen. He'd learned that lesson long ago. Rowena was not the first of his guards he'd had to mourn. They each made their own choices, and died their own deaths.

Once Chilton made his peace, he stood up. His knees were cold and damp from kneeling on the snow-patched ground, but against the dark fabric of the guard's pants it couldn't be seen. Iorwin still stood at the edge of the grave. If he noticed that Chilton briefly wiped his eyes, he said nothing.

"Two men, you said?" Chilton asked.

"Yes. One was gone before anybody could stop him. The other died soon after."

"What did you do with him?"

"Burned his body. Nobody had energy to dig another grave."

"Do you know anything about them?"

"No," said Iorwin. "They had swords and wore plain clothes, that's all. I didn't even get a good look at their horses."

"What about money? Did the brute who died have much?"

"Seven gold halves and three copper pennies."

"Not rich, not poor," said Chilton. "I'd guess they were mercenaries. Filth!"

Iorwin was fairly certain that seven gold coins stored on one's person made one rich, but he said nothing, thinking of the gold now tucked in his own pocket.

"What about the girl, Corliss?" Chilton asked. "Who knew her best?"

"For that, you'll want to visit the kitchens," said Iorwin. "She worked there the past few years, since her sister left."

The first thing Ma'am Colturn wanted to know was whether Chilton had eaten.

"She was a good child," she said as she heated a rich stock over the fire. Chilton stood beside her, warming his hands by the flame and watching the soup swirl. The top was iridescent, fat from the meat shining out of the pale brown liquid.

"I'd believe it," said Chilton. "Her sister served as guard under me."

"Ah, Rowena," said Ma'am Colturn. She was an older portly woman, and rested one of her hands on her hip now as she stirred. "I don't know what she brought with her, that two killers followed her. But she would've done better to stay away."

"You blame her for Corliss leaving," Chilton said.

"Of course! No trouble at all, and then she showed up, after four years away—forgive me. I know she's passed. But who leaves a six year old child with no family?"

"She was trying to do what was best," said Chilton. "She was saving money to send her to school."

"That child didn't need a school, she needed a family." Ma'am Colturn's bottom lip turned down. "I did my best by her, but it's no substitute. I'm kept busy."

"You cared for her," Chilton said softly.

"Of course I cared for her! She worked in my kitchens, didn't she?" The woman lifted the heavy iron pail off of the fire with an oven-mitt. She ladled it into a bowl, then set that on a table

with a heel of bread and a small ball of white cheese rolled in oats. The soup was studded with leeks, carrots, and bits of duck.

“Thank you,” said Chilton, and sat himself at the table. “So, she disappeared. Had she acted odd before then? I know a friend of hers was arrested by the guard.”

“That business,” said Ma'am Colturn. “No. She was mighty quiet for a bit. Scared, I think. But she was getting back to normal when her sister...”

“Colturn.” The intruder was tall and short-haired, dressed in a dark dress that covered from wrists to neck to ankles. A stiff back and a regal bearing: a monarch's maid, if Chilton had ever seen one. “My mistress wishes to know why she was not informed that a captain of the guard was on her grounds. Sir, put down that spoon. You will join my mistress in the sitting-room.”

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“I hope you don't punish anybody,” said Chilton, seated in the presence of the monarch. “I asked to see the kitchens. It was by no failing of your servants that I ended up there.”

“What business does a captain of the guard have in my kitchens?” Ailia of Dorchalt wanted to know.

“The sister of one of my friends went missing,” Chilton said. “The child worked in your kitchens. I thought, perhaps, that your cook might have an idea of where I could look, since she seemed to have known the child well.”

He felt a strange urge to clarify: the sister of one of my *dead* friends, who is buried just outside your door. He knew better than to give in to the temptation.

They were in an antique room. The furniture had once been quite elegant. It still retained an air of wealth, though the fabrics were worn thin and the stuffing gone hard and uneven. On a low table between Chilton and Ailia were buttered flaky fruitcakes stuffed with raisins and nuts. A gray-haired hound lounged at the woman's feet, raising his head mournfully whenever one of the humans removed another cake from the tray. They were good, but Chilton wished the soup was back. He was hungry, and it was cold in this room, even with the fireplace crackling.

Ailia wore a simple gown. Chilton knew wealthy lesser born, merchants hoping to marry highborn, who dressed better. What they said about Dorchalt was true, then; the family was on hard times. He would not tell her that he was a member of the Gillemar clan unless he had to. Gillemar was as rich as ever.

“And have you?” the woman asked. “Have you found a trail to follow?”

“No, regrettably,” Chilton said. “Mercenaries seem to have carried her off. What they want with a child, I haven't a clue.”

“No,” she said slowly, “neither have I.”

The maid who led Chilton to the sitting room returned with a hot spiced wine. Chilton accepted the cup and tried a small sip before placing it on the table before him. It was far too early in the day to be drinking, but the ruler of the house gripped hers firmly.

“You are aware a guard was killed outside of your stables two months ago?”

“I heard,” said Ailia. “A regrettable incident, but no fault of mine.”

“These are your lands,” Chilton said. “What if the guard carried a message for you? Under the Sovereign's law, you should have reported her passing to the city.”

“She was here a full day. She was preparing to leave. I doubt she carried a message. It seems I am a constant host to the city's guard these days. I was not aware my lands were in the bounds of the Morning city.”

“Two guards in two months is hardly playing host,” Chilton said, and then reined himself back. Despite his status, these were her lands. He could still get into trouble. “Forgive me. The guard who died was a friend of mine. I would have liked to know of her passing.”

“I am sorry for your loss.” She took one of the fruitcakes and bit into it delicately.

“Might I speak freely?” Chilton asked. “If it is known that a guard of the city—a trained and armed person of moderate status—can be killed without reprimand, and a child in your service stolen from you, it does not reflect well on your family name.”

“The child was no longer in my service,” the woman said. “She left her position the evening before she disappeared. For all we know, she may have left these grounds of her own accord.”

“Answers like that may help you with a Justice, but you aren't on trial. Reputation is not so neatly calculated. Either way, guardsperson Rowena is dead, murdered. I would speak with your captain of guard, if I were you. You may wish to hire somebody new for the position. The gates to Dorchalt proper are kept wide all day long. Your servants say they are only closed at night. I recommend you place a guard there, so if those with unsavory business attempt to enter you might apprehend them first.”

“My guard exist to serve my family,” Ailia said. “The lesser born owe their allegiance to me, not I to them.”

“You are their *monarch*,” said Chilton, his temper lighting. “You cannot expect them to obey you if you do not protect them.”

“Are you threatening me?”

“No, I'm merely attempting to present you with facts you may not have considered. The lesser born are not a mindless herd. They only follow your justice if you do your duty by them.”

“The lesser born obey me because their lives depend on it,” Ailia said. “You are not a ruler, sir, and have little understanding of politics and governance. Your advice is not wanted here.”

The hound whined, worrying at the tone of her voice.

“I will refrain from offering anymore of it, then.”

“Thank you,” said Ailia. “How long do you propose to stay at Dorchalt Proper?”

“I've conducted my business,” said Chilton. “If you'll allow it, I may rest myself and my horse for a very short while before departing.”

“Then you will have lunch with the family,” she said, putting down her empty cup and standing from her chair. Without saying a farewell, she left the room. The hound trotted after her, tail high.

“Lunch is in an hour in the lower hall,” the maid said. “I'll tell the help to expect one more.” She'd been standing in the corner so silently that Chilton had forgotten her presence.

“Thank you,” he said.

She curtsayed and left the room after her mistress.

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Chilton walked for an hour, too saddle-sore to be sitting. It was a poor town and there was very little to see. The only industries that existed in Dorchalt proper were those to support the palace. He chatted with the blacksmith, who pulled out a few swords for him to look at. The handiwork was fine (it had to be, since the maker served a Proper), but none of the pieces caught Chilton's heart so fiercely that he had to buy them. There was better to be had in the city, and for less.

He returned to the palace in time for lunch, feeling anxious. He was not fond of Ailia. In her defense, Chilton thought, she had to be on edge. If the clan had truly lost their relic bound spirit, they were in their final days, unless they could find a way to replace what had been taken from them. There were many legends that spoke of doors to the spirit-world, but Chilton wasn't even sure he believed them himself. One could spend a fortune hunting for a gate and never find it. There had been no new spirits for a century at least, only old ones who kept to the deepest shadows of the woods. They were harder to find than rare gems, and more precious, hunted to the brink of extinction.

All assembled, there were some two dozen at lunch. Ailia sat at the head of the long table, her uncle opposite. The other highest-ranking members of the family sat to either side of them. Rank fell away as each seat marched nearer to the center of the long sides. Chilton was placed at the border between the Dorchalt children and the few servants high-ranking enough to attend the meal. It was a snub, and he knew it. As a guest, he was owed some honor. A good host would have placed him to Ailia's left—even without knowing he was a Gillemar, and no distant cousin at that. Luckily, Chilton didn't care. Food was food. He would rather sit with servants than with nobles who had their heads up their rear ends.

Lower ranking servants presented them with the courses. They began with the soup Chilton had been offered earlier. His stomach was pleased to see it.

To his right was the steward of the house, an aging man who was more interested in food than in conversation. To his left was one of the Dorchalt children. The boy looked like he was perhaps twelve, and sickly. He was a frail child, with translucently pale skin and dark bags around his eyes. His hair was long, but unkempt.

At first Chilton was thankful he had not been placed with the more infantile children who sat across from him. He hadn't a clue what to say to a six year old.

They all ate in silence for a little while, until Chilton turned to the boy.

“Are you studying?” Chilton asked.

The boy looked at him askance, then back at his plate.

“No.”

“What do you do with your spare time?”

The boy shrugged.

“Alone,” he said.

“You like to be alone?”

The boy nodded and gripped his spoon like a knife.

“Well, that's lovely,” said Chilton.

The soup was replaced with a tough cut of venison in mushroom and almond sauce.

Chilton leaned back so that the servant swapping his bowl for a plate could reach more easily.

“Thank you,” Chilton said, and turned to the steward beside him.

“Worked here long?” Chilton asked.

“Eh? Long enough,” the steward said, sawing off a piece of meat. He plucked it off his fork with an exaggerated gesture, opening his mouth far wider than was necessary.

Chilton began to think he would rather be with the younger children. They were too far across the table to talk to easily, but it was clear from their chuckling faces they were having a grand time.

The sickly boy to his left stood up suddenly, knocking his chair over. He left the room at a fast walk, head down, hands over his ears.

“What's wrong with him?” Chilton asked, watching over his shoulder. “Shouldn't somebody make sure he's alright?”

“That's mad Murdoc,” said the old steward, leaning close to Chilton. He smelled of musk and age. “The boy's maid died. A few years back.” He paused for a bite, and kept his fork raised. “Drowned herself in the lake. He's never been right since.”

“Shouldn't you get him help?” Chilton said. “You know there are doctors in the city who specialize in such things, don't you?”

“Better off left alone,” the man said. “He's a bastard child. Barely a Dorchalt at all.”

“That's a fine way of looking at the world,” said Chilton. He finished the rest of the meal in silence and couldn't bring himself to say farewells afterward. Iorwin the stable boy was gone, likely having a lunch of his own. Chilton groomed and tacked his horse, then put Temperance on a lead. Iorwin had fetched the horse after Chilton arrived. She had been absorbed into the Dorchalt herds, but now he would take her home. Shaking his head, Chilton set off on his way back to the city.

CHAPTER



“All's clear,” said Ridley, knocking on Finian's door.

“The tutor's gone?” Finian asked, stretching and standing from the chair he'd been reading in. He came to the door and opened it. “That was faster than usual.”

“Little Corliss scared him off,” said Ridley, with a sigh. “She's a fierce thing.”

-

Corliss curled up on the couch of the sitting room. Sileas slowly sat down next to her.

“He said I could pay twice as much, and he still wouldn't come back,” Sileas said.

“Good.” Corliss' voice was muffled by the pillows on the couch. She wore finer clothes now than she ever had in her life, though they were simple cast-offs from the market. “I don't want him to come back. You were wasting your money.”

“You can't put a price on a good education, you know,” said Sileas.

“I'll bet *it* didn't have a tutor,” Corliss said, and threw her hand out at the painting of the wood Bound, the strange green creature between the trees. Sileas laughed a little.

“My dear, it is far from human. You'd do better to leave it out of this.”

“Why can't you teach me? You know everything.”

“Oh, that isn't even near true,” said Sileas. “I'm flattered, but I'm a very busy person. I have meetings all day. So, little wolf, what are we going to do? That's the second tutor who's quit in a week.”

“It's not my fault. They're as easy to set a fire as dry kindling.”

"My mother would've had me beaten, if I'd spoken to my elders as cruelly as you do."

"It's too hot in here. Can't you put out the fire?"

"My dear, it's the middle of winter. How can you possibly be warm?"

Sileas himself was wearing slippers and thick wool clothes. His hands were ensconced in mittens, despite being indoors. His circulation was not as good as it had once been.

"I just am," said Corliss. "I feel like I'm on fire."

"That fever never quite left you, did it?" said Sileas. "I have trouble imagining you working in any kitchen without being fired."

"I hate the city," was all that Corliss would say.

Finian came to the doorway. He was unrecognizable from when Corliss had met him. No longer gaunt, he once again approached his healthy weight. It had taken a month for him to care about his appearance again, but his fingernails were once again trimmed, his hair cut, and his chest bound.

He was a brooding shadow in the house. Even with free run of all three stories, he kept mostly to his room, and spent all his time looking out the window and thinking. He was even paler than he had once been, having been deprived of sun for so long.

"What did you say to this one?" he asked softly, taking a seat in a low chair across from Sileas and Corliss.

"She told him she was going to set him on fire," said Sileas. "Thankfully, she didn't actually try to."

"He rapped my knuckles," said Corliss. "I don't like being hit."

"Why'd he do that?" said Finian.

"I said I hadn't got a use for history."

"Well, I can't say I'll miss him. I hate being shut up," said Finian.

"You spend all your time in your room either way," said Corliss. "What difference does it make?"

"The difference of choice," said Finian.

"It's so hot here," said Corliss.

"Let me feel your forehead, child," said Sileas, tugging off one of his mittens. Corliss brought her head up from the pillows and Sileas pressed the back of his palm to her. "You're burning. I wonder if you have a fever."

"I'm fine. Leave me alone."

"I should call the doctor," said Sileas.

"I'll throw him in the fire. I'll throw you in, too."

"Careful," said Sileas. "Little dogs who bite find themselves out in the cold."

"I'm not a dog."

"But you are a stray," said Sileas.

"Where's my sister? She should have been here weeks ago."

"I don't know, child," said Sileas. "But you need to apologize to me. I have been very gracious to you."

Corliss sighed and scrunched up her face.

"I'm sorry, Sileas. You know I wouldn't hurt you. But I won't apologize for the tutor, or the doctor."

"Then I won't call one in," said Sileas. "I don't have time for this, Corliss. Figure out what you want and let me know." He got up and left the room.

"You have quite the temper, little girl," said Finian.

"I'm not a girl," said Corliss.

"Oh, I'm sorry. I didn't realize. I won't make the mistake again."

"You aren't going to tell me I'm wrong?" Corliss sat up.

"Me? No. Certainly not. Why, has somebody said so?"

"Sileas."

"I'll speak with him," said Finian. "I'm sorry. I thought Sileas understood these things."

"Understood what?"

"They used to tell me I was a girl, too," said Finian. "But I'm really not."

"You're a boy, though," said Corliss. "I'm not one of those, either."

"Oh," said Finian. "Well, that's fine. Should I still call you 'she'?"

"Sure. I don't care. I think I might be a lizard now," she said.

"That's a first. You can't be a lizard, though."

"I knew you'd laugh," Corliss said, and threw herself back onto the couch.

"No, that's not it," said Finian, trying not to laugh at how serious her young face was.

"Lizards like the heat. I used to know a little one. He'd visit me every summer and sun himself on the rocks outside my shop."

"That's just it," said Corliss. "I don't want to be a lizard. I'm trying to teach myself not to be. The warmer I get, the more like a lizard I feel."

"You shouldn't be ashamed, little lizard," said Finian. "There are worse things a person can be. I've never had any problems with lizards."

"I like you," said Corliss. "You make sense."

"Thank you," said Finian. "But I don't think you'd like me if you knew me better."

"If you were my teacher, I wouldn't set you on fire," said Corliss.

"That's comforting."

"We should start tomorrow."

"Pardon?"

"I'll tell Sileas," said Corliss, and skittered out of the room.

-

The voice came back that night.

Are you fighting it?

Hello? Thought Corliss.

Are you fighting it? Which are you, child or spirit?

Myself. Whichever that is, thought Corliss.

You must be strong. You're better than I hoped for.

Who are you?

The response was so long in coming that she almost fell asleep.

I don't know anymore. Nothing makes sense.

You're the one who told me to break that knife, aren't you? Why?

It had to be done. You had slept for an age, brother.

Something stirred deep inside Corliss. She'd organized her head into a kitchen, where she could keep track of the parasite in her. The fire was leaping higher without reason. She had not fed it but suddenly the water, once simmering, was a roiling boil. Brother, brother; the word called to her. Something in her was sleeping, something in her had slept. It woke.

What do you want from me?

Learn to let him live through you.

Can't you help me? How can I find you?

Don't. You're better off alone.

-

Finian was awake too, but not talking to a voice in his head. He padded through Sileas' library with a lantern in hand, wearing a long coat that covered to below his knees. There were no fires lit. He coughed softly. The sickness that found him in jail had still not quite left. It was, in fact, what pulled him out of bed that night: he had been chilled and sweating, unable to sleep. The symptoms seemed to come and go. Tonight they were in force.

The book he wanted was on the top shelf. He needed a stool to reach it.

The fires in the kitchen were never fully put out. He put his lantern and the book on a wooden table by the hearth and stirred the sleeping embers. There was a large wood-bucket to the side of the hearth. He built up a little fire for heat and sat himself at the table nearest to the flames, reading by the flickering light of the lamp.

The volume he read from was the *Book of Adlen*. It was the most famous book in the whole valley, though not as widely read as some of the more modern stories. Every educated household had a copy. Finian had not read it in many years. Sileas' copy was old, full of misspellings and turns of phrase that hadn't been used in the past two hundred years outside of academia. It was also very expensive, hand-painted on fine vellum instead of printed on newer wood-pulp paper. He puzzled his way through the first half-dozen pages before turning impatiently ahead.

He coughed into the crook of his elbow, then frowned and lifted the lantern. Was that blood on the coat? It was hard to tell. The outside of the coat was dark tanned leather and the light was dim. It was possible he was sicker than he had thought. He went and got a dishtowel to cough into, and turned back to the book.

He knew the basics of the story. Every valley-child did.

Adlen was a child when the spirits came. Back then, it was barely even a valley. Hills ringed it instead of mountains. The spirits wreaked destruction. Adlen fled with the rest of his village.

He came back to a changed landscape when he was an adult, a hero, with nothing but a sword. In some accounts, a Vikauldish half-prince from the north accompanied him with a whole

retinue. Most newer copies didn't mention the Vikauldish prince. They preferred to keep glory out of foreign hands.

Adlen killed the spirits and Bound them, creating the relics from which each clan drew their right to rule. There had once been six relics, and six clans. There had only been five for the past hundred-so years. The wasteland called the Sands sat like silent death where the sixth had been. It was a testament to the horrible potential of the Bound.

Now, Finian knew, there were only four relics—but still five clans. The child Yedda had broken one and been arrested for it; she was with the guard now. And Corliss had been Yedda's friend. He knew the Dorchalt relic had something to do with fire, but he wanted to know more about its origins. He was unnerved by the way Corliss was beginning to talk.

From Dol's first human handlers, said the book, came the mighty Dorchalt clan. In the spirit's dying breaths, Adlen had plunged a glass dagger into the great serpent's heart, and the spirit had taken up a new home in the knife.

Dol, the great serpent. Dol, the father of fire. A lizard with a head on either side. A lizard who spewed fire and wreaked havoc.

Finian closed the book. He sat on the stool, caught between the light of the fire and the lantern, and stared into the darkest corner of the kitchen. The only sound was the crackling of the fire, punctuated every now and then by the deep coughs that tore out of him like barks from a dog.

CHAPTER

The doctor sat up slowly and turned to Sileas, shaking his head.

“What?” Finian said. The word triggered another coughing fit. The doctor sighed.

“You have fluid in your lungs,” said the doctor. “You might recover, but there's no promise. I don't think it's likely.”

“If I don't recover?” said Finian. “You mean I'll be coughing the rest of my days?”

“Yes, what few of them you have,” said the doctor. “I suggest you make your peace.”

Corliss, standing next to Sileas, reached over and took the large man's hand. She was the only one not wearing an indoor coat.

“There isn't anything you can do?” asked Finian.

“You should rest, and drink lots of fluids. Don't smoke or let anyone smoke around you. Steam is good, though; it will help whatever is in your lungs to find its way out. It would be better if the air weren't so cold. If you can make it to spring without getting sicker, I'd give you better chances. Do you have allergies? Do you find it hard to breathe in the spring?”

“No.”

“Be thankful, then, and wish for an early warming. Sileas, call me back if he gets worse.”

“What will you do?” Sileas asked, still holding Corliss' hand.

“Drain his lungs,” said the doctor.

“Can't you do that now?” Finian wanted to know.

“I wouldn't dare,” said the doctor. “You're as likely to die in surgery as you are of this disease. Try to beat it on your own first.”

Ridley led the doctor out of the house. Corliss let go of Sileas' hand and climbed onto Finian's bed.

"Be careful," said Sileas. "You should give him his space."

"It's fine, Sileas," said Finian. "I could use the warmth."

"I could make the air warmer," Corliss said.

"If we build the fire any higher, it'll leap out of the hearth," said Sileas.

"You don't have to. I can do it," said Corliss.

"Ha," said Finian. "I thought so. Little lizard."

"What are you talking about?" Sileas asked.

"You remember—" Finian paused here and coughed, then made a face. He gestured to the cup on his bedside just out of reach. Corliss handed it to him and he spat thick mucus into it.

"Ew," said Corliss.

"Don't mock sickness," Sileas reprimanded. "What are you talking about, Finian?"

"I told you there was a child in jail, with a spirit in her."

"Of course I remember. You talked me into giving you quite a lot of gold, on the off chance you were right."

"I was wrong," said Finian. His eyes flickered closed. "She wasn't the Bound. Your little Corliss is, though."

"You should rest," said Sileas, concerned. "I think you're going mad. I think this house is full of sickness..."

The fire faltered a little. The air grew warmer, not as hot as an oven, but warm like a pleasant summer day. In the rest of the house, the chill grew colder. A maid on the bottom floor shivered. Corliss had pulled the surrounding heat into the room.

"My word," said Sileas, and pushed up the sleeves of his coat. "This room is..." he shook his head and gave up on the sleeves, pulling the coat off altogether. "I'm quite warm," he said. "How is it so warm?"

Corliss began to shake. She leaned over and was sick on Sileas' feet.

"Ridley!" Sileas called. "Ridley, come at once! Bring the mop!"

-

I used my power, Corliss thought. Are you listening? I used my power.

It's not yours. You are merely a vessel for a great spirit. You share a body.

I wanted the room to be warmer, and then it was. And I'm still me. I mean, I'm still in control.

Good.

Aren't you proud? You said I had to learn.

Don't be so confident. He will steal your body from you the moment he sees the chance. You are never safe.

You don't have to be so awful all the time.

A long silence. Was the voice listening?

I'm losing my mind.

What? Why?

A spirit rides me, too.

Are you no longer you?

I don't know. I don't know who I am. They all say I'm mad.

'They?' Who's they?

Everyone. I hear them whisper. I hear things.

Then don't listen to them.

Then who?

Listen to me. Remember who you were before. You talked to me when I was... she searched for the word and the spirit gave it to her. When I was hatching, being Bound. You said to imagine the fires of the kitchens, to fight it that way.

This is no kitchen-fire. This is no fire at all. It is a nightmare.

Then find a way to wake yourself up.

She waited for an answer. But the voice was gone.

-

“Little lizard,” Finian said sleepily when Corliss let herself into his room. The early morning sun cut through the window to form a patch of light on his bed. She felt its heat from the doorway, a warm beam ahead of her.

“Should I make it hot again?” asked Corliss.

“I don't want to make you sick,” said Finian. “Anyways, I feel a little better.”

“I want to try,” said Corliss. “I think I have the trick of it now.”

She anticipated the beast roaring up in her. She remembered clearly the backlash from when she had first warmed the room, how acid and bile raced through her like an angry volcano, magma snapping at the sky. She closed her eyes and tended to the slumbering beast, waking it gently and leading it to her surface. She thought again of the ovens and kitchen-fires. Too much heat meant burning, meant a ruined dish.

Corliss opened her eyes. Sweat beaded on Finian's face. He kicked off the blankets.

“That's more than enough. Thank you.”

She beamed. The fire leaped up in her and she squeezed her eyes shut again, focused on it, tried to calm it down.

“You're shedding,” Finian said after a moment. He coughed again, but there was no blood or mucus.

A clean, empty cup and a pitcher of water were on his nightstand. Corliss poured him a glass and handed it to him.

“Thank you,” he said. “Really, child. What's happening to your hair?”

Corliss reached up to touch her head. A clump of curly hair, already trimmed short, came back with her hand.

“Oh, no,” she said. “I dreamed I was turning into a lizard, a big lizard, for real.”

Finian reached over and ran his hand through her hair. More of it came out.

“I think perhaps you'd better try being human for a while,” he said. “No more fire tricks, little lizard. Anyways, losing your hair isn't so bad. It'll make your eyes stand out. And if you really want, I'll bet Sileas would get you a wig. He has the money.”

Finian let the hair fall to the ground, and looked back at Corliss.

“You don't look so much like your sister now,” he said, his voice barely more than a whisper. Was he imagining it, or was her skin redder than it had been before? It seemed to glow from within.

“Rowena isn't coming back, is she?” asked Corliss.

“No, I don't think she is,” Finian said, and stared off into the fire. “I wish very much that she would.”

“Were you close to her? Were you friends?”

“In a way,” said Finian.

“Tell me about her,” said Corliss.

“Oh, lizard. I don't have the energy, or the heart. I think I'd better sleep a little longer. Ask me another day.”

-

Tell me something.

What do you want to know?

It was you who told me to go into the treasure room, wasn't it?

Yes.

Is that why this happened? The lizard?

Yes. You freed him and gave him a new home.

Why? Why did you tell me to do it?

The Father of Fire had slept many years. The time came to wake him.

Are you the one who kept us safe?

I do not think you are safe.

But they didn't kill Yedda. They didn't even see me. When we took the knife—did you keep us safe?

Then? Yes. In such a sense, I suppose I kept you safe.

-

At long last, winter began to leave the city. Shoots of grass and plants came up between the cobbles of the streets, and the trees began to bud and leaf.

For a month, Corliss read and studied under the tutelage of Sileas and Finian. Sileas seemed more willing to deal with her temper now that he knew the child was Bound, although he was undeniably scared of her, too. He flinched at every frown and gave his fireplaces a wide berth. Still, he was not unkind. Ridley barely spoke to her, and none of the other servants were aware of her condition. She lost the rest of her hair, and her eyebrows and eyelashes too, but

nothing else changed. Finian wouldn't let her use the spirit for anything fun, though Corliss warmed his bedroom a few more times when it was particularly cold.

Only Finian treated her like nothing had changed. It was Finian, with long hours of bed rest, who devised a study plan for her. While Sileas went about the city speaking to would-be allies and fermenting unrest, Finian combed the rich man's library for every book he could find on the Bound. He and Corliss read them together. His voice crackled, punctuated by coughs. She spoke slowly and uncertainly, her mouth laboring to draw words out of the unfamiliar shapes on the paper. Sometimes, especially as she became more used to the task, she read aloud to him. Sometimes they traded books back and forth. Sileas was useful for the words and passages that neither of them understood, since he was infinitely better read than either of them ever hoped to be.

The chief lesson of the Bound books was that they could expect nothing. Her body would or would not mutate in certain ways. She would or would not retain the human parts of her mind. Would or would not develop greeds so strong that she could be controlled by gifts. The more powerful the spirit and the weaker her mind, the stranger and less predictable she was likely to become. The Sovereign's Bound gathered every year to ensure that none of them had gone corrupt beyond control or reason. They killed those who had and put the spirits into new human bodies.

Finian came up with game after game to work on Corliss' mental control. She learned how to calm herself with breathing exercises. He made her sit still for hours at a time, trying to make her mind go blank: for a ten year old (almost eleven, now) with her levels of energy, this was the hardest game of all. He even made her work on physical exercises, since he knew from experience that it took a great deal of will to push through exhaustion.

They studied the typical academics that Corliss had hoped to avoid.

"Lizards don't need math," Corliss insisted.

"Some of them do," said Finian. "The lizards who are also human children do."

"What do numbers have to do with fire?"

"It's another part of your brain," said Finian. "The whole thing has to be strong. And the world is made of more than fire, little lizard. You can't burn everything down."

He liked to think that he was making up for Rowena's death by teaching the child. Still, he was restless. The healthier he grew, the more he paced the house and bemoaned the familiar walls. It was months since he had been outside. The only breeze he felt came through a window, and the only sun came the same way. It was no way for a person to live.

He fed on the revolutionary meetings Sileas held in his cellar. Once a week Sileas gathered those he trusted most to discuss news of the city and plans for its future. They came from every level of the city, and every walk of life. A pickpocket from the first tier, a baker from the second; Sileas and Finian had spent the past two years cementing alliances. The fire and the energy of the meetings flashed through his long, lonely weeks like bolts of lightning in a dark sky. But when the meetings ended, everybody would leave. None of them were friends.

Except for Ulla, the woman who brought Rowena to Finian so many years ago. Sileas' smuggler understood Finian on a deeper level, he felt, than any of the others.

They had both been involved in illegal trade. Both had been assigned the wrong gender at birth. The only problem to their friendship was that she was almost always gone, traveling the lowland roads with stolen or illegal merchandise. She came to one meeting, and sat silently in the corner. The group discussed a vandalized statue; none of them knew who had done it. Then they worked out the wording for a new flier that would shortly find itself littered across the city.

It grew late, and the group disbanded at last with hearty farewells, slipping one by one out of the house. Ridley followed Sileas from the room. At last only Finian and Ulla were left.

“So,” she asked, when the last footsteps faded, “are you dying?”

Finian laughed.

“Not yet,” he said.

“Good.”

They went around the room blowing out the candles, then climbed the steep stairs to the rest of the house by lamplight. They settled in the parlor, sprawling on different chairs.

“Who sells your goods now, city-side?” Finian asked.

“A few market men and peddlers.”

“Business is good?”

“It didn't collapse entirely with you.”

“Good. You've been to Aiteach lately?”

“Over the Gillemar border. I didn't go by your vineyards,” Ulla said.

Finian only grunted in response.

“D'your family know you were arrested?” Ulla asked.

“Sure. Shop's closed, isn't it? I've probably ruined them.”

“You heard from them?”

“Of course not. I'm in hiding, aren't I?”

“I'm sorry.”

“For what? It's not *your* fault.” He was terse, snapping more than usual; it wasn't fair to her, but he couldn't stop himself.

“Well, everything they found in your shop...”

“Please, Ulla. If you hadn't supplied it, someone else would have.”

“True enough.”

There was a long pause, as often happens in nighttime conversations. Both of them were weary. It was dark, and they were comfortably swallowed in the plush furniture.

“Do you regret it?” Ulla asked at last.

“The arrest?” asked Finian.

“Sure. The crime.”

“No. My stupidity. The way it happened. But I'd do it again.”

“Sometimes I wonder,” said Ulla.

A long pause again.

“Wonder what?”

“What we're doing,” said Ulla.

“I don't,” he said. “I know. All the friends I lost. The tributes and debts and blood. Things I'll never get out of my head.”

“Sure,” said Ulla. “Me too.”

“Then why ask?”

“I’ve been at this five years now,” said Ulla, “and I wish I could say things were changing. The lowland isn’t alright, Finian. Things are *bad* there. We aren’t doing enough.”

“You’re thinking about quitting?” Finian asked.

Ulla sighed and rubbed her eyes.

“You know I wouldn’t,” she said. “That’s not what I meant.”

“Things’ll get better. You’ll see. The Bound child.”

“Sure, I’m just feeling useless.”

“I know the feeling,” he said dryly. “At least you’re free.”

“You’ll be on your feet before long.”

“Sileas won’t even let me outside,” said Finian, curling up in his chair.

“What, does he own you now?”

“He’s worried I’ll be arrested.”

“Dung on that. He’s a clan born, Fin. You want to leave, you leave.”

Ulla spent the night and left in the morning. She was expected at the Gillemar port. The clan heavily taxed incoming goods. Clever captains could make a good profit selling to lowland smugglers, eliminating the clan’s massive cut.

-

“You told me I could get a job in the lowland when I was better,” Finian announced four days later. Spring had brought new foods, better foods than the endless canned goods and root vegetables of the winter. They ate greens with mint and fresh trout in a butter sauce.

“Indeed I did,” said Sileas.

Corliss looked from one to the other.

“No, you can’t go,” she said. “This is your home.”

“It was only ever a stopping point,” Finian reminded her. “I’m tired of being inside. I want to taste the air and move my legs.”

“Then I’m tired of being inside, too,” said the child.

It was true Sileas rarely let her leave, even to play.

“The house will be awfully quiet,” said Sileas.

“You can’t mean it,” said Finian. “Little lizard, you can’t come with me. It’s not a good idea. Don’t you want to wait for your sister?”

“Why not? She can come find me.”

“I’m a wanted man, remember? I could be arrested anytime. And then where would you be, alone in the lowland?”

“If they tried to arrest you, I’d set them on fire.”

“No, no. You wouldn’t. See, that’s the problem. You can’t just set people on fire. We’ve talked about this.”

“What’s the point in being Bound if you can’t ever use it?” Corliss said.

“You will one day,” said Sileas. “But not until you can control it. Not until you're older, and you know what it means. You could start a premature war, child, and get yourself killed.”

“I'd be careful,” Corliss said.

“Finian and I will talk about the lowland after supper,” Sileas said. “Have some more of the greens, won't you?”

-

“I think it's a brilliant idea for her to go with you,” said Sileas. “She can't be outside here, really, and she needs to practice using her spirit.” He packed a pipe at the table.

“Should you really do that in here?” Finian asked nervously.

“I'll smoke it away from you, my ill friend,” said Sileas. “Your cough needn't worry itself. But you understand the responsibility that will be on your shoulders?”

“It's why I prefer to go alone.”

“My dear, think of her poor sister. I think you owe it to the child.”

“I plan to travel. To work. To make sure my family is well, or to join Ulla.”

“Plan again. You will take her to the mountains. You'll have plenty of fresh air there.”

“You just don't want to be left alone with her.” Finian stood up and began to pace.

“Don't be ridiculous. I've dealt, happily, with worse.” Sileas set his pipe to the side. “If you watch over her, I would consider it a job. I'll pay you to do so. Enough to support the both of you.”

“No, Sileas. I want my freedom back. If she comes, I'll have to keep her hidden.”

“Stop acting like a child.”

“I'm not...”

“You owe her a responsibility. You lost your freedom with your arrest. And she is now the key to this revolution. Will you do your duty or not?”

Finian fumed for a moment, then sighed.

“What are your conditions?”

“Bound spoil as easily as fruit, when they come into their full power. Especially strong Bound, as any relic promises to be. Keep her as human as you can.”

“I thought you wanted her power.”

“I do. But not until the city is ready. She must be a secret until then. I want no rumors of a powerful free Bound.”

“Feral Bound already exist. Think of your wood-witch.”

“She? I think she would not involve herself in any human conflict. She's as old as the trees she lives with. Corliss is not so much *feral* as she is, or will be, directly opposed. Not ambivalent to the throne, but actively against it. There's my last order: when I ask of it, you must both be ready.”

“For what?”

“Our war, of course.”

“You can't tell me I still have a part in that.”

“Of course, unless your sickness kills you first. A deal is for life, my dear. You were once to be my general. I have high hopes yet.”

2

Brother Whisper

“Come *on*,” said Yedda. “It’s not *fair*.”

“Yes, it is,” said Chilton. “You aren’t allowed to compete. You aren’t a guard.”

“I live here, don’t I? What do you think I *do* all day?”

“You’re a student,” he said, lacing up his boots. “You can join when you’re older.”

The guard tournaments were hosted in the first week of March every year. Any guard who wanted to compete in hand to hand combat, swords, knives, archery, open weaponry, horsemanship, climbing, and running. Though the tournaments were fun, they were rewarding, too: winners in each category received days off, money, or quality equipment as prizes. Regular city folk came to watch and sell goods, turning the long tradition into a festival.

“It’s not fair,” Yedda repeated. “You said I’m better than some of the guards.”

“No, I said you *work* harder,” said Chilton. “Look, Yedda, you’ve only been training since Summer’s end. You don’t have half a chance. Why do you care so much?”

“I want to win,” she said. “I want the money.”

“Spirits, girl. What would you even do with it?”

“You don’t care.”

“I do. What do you need money for?”

“I want a dress.”

“A dress! What do *you* need a dress for?”

She made a noise that was, by all accounts, distressing—something between a squeal and a sob—and ran into her room, shutting the door loudly behind her.

-

“Can you talk to her?” Chilton asked Nyla. They leaned against the fence of the practice yards, watching two guardsmen fencing over third place in swords. Chilton had already taken second place out of two hundred-some guards, and blamed it on not getting enough sleep.

Yedda had declared that if she wasn’t allowed to compete, she wasn’t going to go at all.

“I haven’t a clue what I did wrong,” he said to Nyla.

“Twelve isn’t easy,” said Nyla. “Likely enough, you did nothing wrong.”

“Can you talk to her about *all* of it?” Chilton asked. “She’s starting to, well, look older.”

“Consider it done,” said Nyla. “You want to give her an afternoon off? I’ll buy her that dress she wants, and we can talk.”

“I’m not sure you should give in to that one. She doesn’t need a dress.”

"If the girl wants to look pretty, she should be allowed to," Nyla argued. "She didn't choose to be a guard."

"It was that or the gallows. She should be—"

"Grateful?" asked Nyla dryly. "She's a child. Don't hold her past over her head."

They both started clapping. One of the men had won.

-

More than once that spring, Chilton regretted taking Yedda into his protection. Every time the thought crossed his mind, he cursed himself for having it. She'd be dead without him. No matter how frustrating she became, he reminded himself that she would grow up soon.

"She'll come around," Lodan told him. "Stop beating your head against the wall, and just wait it out."

"Still, I can't believe this is what I gave up captain for."

"This is about a badge?" Lodan laughed. "You'll get it back before you know it. Twelve is hard. I have a younger brother; I'd know."

"Everyone keeps telling me that," Chilton groaned. "I hope thirteen is better."

"Keep hoping. Poor you. Do you miss being a captain that badly?"

"No, I'd just rather be in charge of fifteen guards than one twelve year old child. Is that sad?"

"You can always boss *me* around," said Lodan.

"Good. Watch Yedda for a day? Or better yet, a year?"

"I had something more fun in mind," said Lodan. "You're getting old, and boring."

-

Chilton learned to compromise. Even the guards, Yedda said, got *some* time off; she should have the same. Every Saturday afternoon, she would have no training and no duties. He even gave her a small allowance, although she'd have to save money if she wanted to buy more than a box of candies. Anything serious, he paid for: that year she got her first real knife and a whetstone to keep it in order. There were new clothes, too, although Chilton would only buy practical clothing, boots that were good for fighting and running. As she'd promised, Nyla bought Yedda a simple blue dress, the sort of thing a little village-girl might wear. Yedda put it on every time she had a day off. Nyla also asked Chilton for money so that she could buy "the sorts of things her body might need" for Yedda. Chilton dug into his belt-purse without a question.

"That squeamish? It'd be easy to rip you off," Nyla said with a grin. "Perhaps I should explain it all, just to see the look on your face."

"There are some mysteries I don't need answers to," was all he said.

"You're pathetic," said Nyla.

Yedda made friends with some of the city children. They met weekly at a park on the third tier, not having the money to sit at an eating-house the way adults did. At first, the other children made fun of Yedda's poor, unchanging clothes. When one of the boys called her Yedda

blue-dress, she hooked her hip under him and threw him onto his back. The breath was knocked out of him. They all treated her with scared reverence after that.

Though she only saw them once a week, she quickly became one of them. She was particularly taken with Brede, one of the girls, who would often visit her in the guardhouse at night. They stayed up late giggling and gossiping about boys until Chilton made her leave, asking every time if her mother wanted her out so late.

Chilton had complained, but now he was nervous about Yedda moving away from the guard and into other things. He felt he was losing her. She barely talked to him aside from the necessities. She rushed her work and didn't care to ask him questions.

"I told you, let her be her," Lodan insisted. "She needs to be herself right now. Look at you, mama duck after all."

"Don't make fun," Chilton said. "She's got a serious job."

"And she's good at it, isn't she? You worry too much."

One afternoon Chilton took Yedda on a run through the city, as he often did. When he saw her staring hungrily at the shop fronts they passed, he took her inside a sewing house to have her measurements taken for a second dress.

"Any color you'd like," he said, and felt a strange happiness when she hugged him. He hadn't realized his happiness was so tied up in hers. Mama duck after all, he thought, but he wasn't entirely unhappy about the matter. She was still a good student, he thought grudgingly, just a little distracted by growing up. And who could blame her? It was hard to remember, but he had a vague recollection that he'd been the same at her age, minus the dresses. He just hoped that she didn't get caught up with anyone in a romantic sense. That, he wasn't ready for.

CHAPTER

When Finian and Corliss left the city, they rode in Ulla's cart.

Sileas' smuggler was also legally an official merchant. Her cart rolled through the lower gate with only minimal prodding and glancing at papers. The guards made a show of searching without truly doing any work.

The false bottom ordinarily might hold weapons or other black market goods, but now it held Finian.

Corliss rode alongside Ulla on the bench. The horse and pony Sileas bought them for the journey followed the cart on leads, and unlike her own sturdy carthorse Ulla declared them tradable goods.

"Have you been to the country?" Ulla asked Corliss as they left the city behind.

"I grew up in Dorchalt Proper."

"That's different. The true lowland, I mean."

"No," said Corliss. "Different how?"

"No highborn clan. There's the rich lowland, and then there's the rural country, the reaches, the low folk living their lives away from all the gold and frivolity. You'll have to make

up your own mind,” Ulla said. “It’s rougher in some ways, but it makes more sense to me. The way people think out there. Realer.”

“I like that,” said Corliss.

“I thought you might.”

On a quiet stretch of road far outside the city, where no watchers were in sight, Ulla pulled the cart over. They had to partially unload the back to get Finian out from the bottom. Then the three shared a lunch of hard, salty cheese and dense nut bread. Ulla meted it out, and they sat beneath a full-boughed tree while the horses grazed. Ulla passed around a jug of water.

“How does it feel?” Ulla asked Finian.

“Like home,” he said.

When they had finished eating, Corliss and Finian separated their supplies from Ulla’s. The smuggler reached into the cart and came back with two long parcels that Corliss was certain had not been there before. Corliss’ felt heavy in her palm. It was much smaller than Finian’s.

“Don’t open them in front of me. I get sentimental,” said Ulla.

“Before you drive off, merchant, I’d like to make a deal,” said Finian with a smile. She laughed.

“I’d be honored. What would you like?”

He purchased a good glass jar and pouches of spice.

“How much?” Finian wanted to know.

“If you’re brewing again, you’ll just have to pay me with a drink, when I visit.”

“Please,” Finian said, offering three quarter-silvers.

She took the money, but later, long after they’d split ways, Finian found it in his pocket.

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It seemed to Corliss the forest at night was a city of its own. It was louder in the woods than it had been in Sileas’ townhouse. Crickets replaced the rattling sound of cartwheels on cobbles. Instead of soft slips of drunken laughter, her ears pricked at a hooting owl. The thicket by their camp-spot rustled. She lay awake, holding the serviceable little knife that had been Ulla’s present.

After hours of sleeplessness, she was too exhausted for fear. Finian had strung waxed cloth covers between the trees, in case of a rain that had not come. She crawled out from under hers.

She just saw the dim smudge of Finian’s cloth across the glade. Moonlight turned the tiny clearing silver, streaking grass, clover, and flowers with its touch. The two mounts they had rode stood hobbled, heads low. Wildflower, the pony Sileas bought for her, swung his neck to watch Corliss out of one dark eye. He flicked an ear towards her, then turned away again. She went to him and calmed herself by leaning against his sturdy form and running her fingers through his long coarse mane to pry apart the tangles. His side was warm and soft as silk. He stood still, lips and eyelids drooping.

It was a comfort to be among living things. The fatigue that should have claimed her long before began to come now. Her mouth split with a yawn, and her fingers slowed to a halt. Soon she stopped petting Flower and only slumped against him. He shifted a hoof, and she stirred.

There was a human noise, a quiet pained groan. It came from Finian. Corliss started. For a moment she stayed with the pony, but the noise came again. She crept across the glade with her heart in her throat. The noise stopped. It was replaced by a soft muttering. Corliss stood at the edge of his makeshift tent. She brushed a hand out to the fabric and thought of lifting it.

“No,” he said.

“Sorry,” she whispered, fearing she'd crossed some boundary, but he didn't say anything in return. He was only talking in his sleep.

At last Corliss returned to her tent covering. She thought she'd be up the rest of the night, but she was asleep before the thought finished its course.

Finian pulled back the cloth over Corliss. Even between the trees the sun spilled brightly onto her, and she rose a languid arm to block it from her eyes.

“Come on,” he said. “We need to keep moving.” He walked away, leaving her to get up on her own.

They had brought simple food for the road, things that could last a few days. Breakfast was salted jerked hare and a wedge of dense, dark bread. They washed it down with gulps of water from a pig-bladder flask. They tied their cloth coverings with the same ropes they had used to string them up between the trees, and attached the bundles to their travel packs. Corliss rolled hers messily, and Finian made her do it over again. She pulled on a thin cloth cap to hide her naked head. Then they saddled the horses and made their way back to the road. Finian had marked the direction with his knife the night before.

They rode in near silence. Now and then Finian shared a bit of knowledge, or Corliss asked a question. Even the journey from Dorchalt Proper to the city had been a selective view of the lowland, since then Sholto had kept her to the major circuit road.

They had ridden the circuit with Ulla, but now Corliss and Finian took a fork into the Duitiel woods. They took this smaller road towards the mountains, away from the city and into the true lowland of the Duitiel clan province.

Here were areas the clan never ventured, and in result these were areas they fed to spirits.

Much of Duitiel was forested, since the eastern clan made its money off industry and tree products rather than massive farms. Travelling east towards the mountains, they soon reached a line where the woods began to thin.

The horses knew about the stag before the humans, and began to dance nervously rather than walk in a sensible manner; they wanted to stop or turn aside. A few steps further and Finian pointed it out.

It stood alone under the shadow of a tree. The eight-tine stag had its head lowered. It seemed to graze without noticing them.

After they'd stared at its frozen body for a few minutes, in flew two large birds with the crooked necks of vultures. One lit down on a tree branch. The other flew lower and landed on the stag's back.

The stag remained motionless. It continued to pointedly not move as the vulture tugged a strip of flesh from its back.

“Off!” Finian shouted to the bird. He dismounted and passed his reins to Corliss. “Stay here,” he told her. He ran up the hill waving the long knife Ulla had given him. After a moment of hesitation, the vulture on the stag joined its companion on the tree.

Finian circled the stag and looked at its wounds. Up close there were plenty of flies. The blood was tacky and thick on the ground. He braced himself with one hand on the back of its neck, then sawed his knife across its throat as deeply and quickly as he could. More blood fell.

He wiped the blade on the grass as best as he could, which wasn’t very, and returned to the horses.

“What happened?” Corliss asked. The edges of her mouth tilted down and her voice wobbled a little.

“Somebody stole a little time from this place,” Finian said. “The stag was stuck, the birds clearly weren’t. It might’ve woken up in an hour. Maybe a week.”

“Why’d you kill it?” She asked as he mounted his horse.

“Because it was going to die either way. I wanted that to happen before it woke up again,” Finian said. “Come on, let’s have some distance from this place.” They rode on.

At last the wood ended, and they found themselves at the foot of a dry and dusty plain. The land here was of poor quality, ravaged as it was by spirit-work. Duitiel’s free villages sat ahead of them, on the outskirts.

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The town of Wolfstooth was small and simple. It consisted of a ring of houses with a clearing in the middle. Other dwellings scattered further out with no real order.

In every way it was a contrast to the gridded city.

This was a free town. They paid tribute to the clan, but the common born here owned the small farms they plowed.

Not a single villager ignored them as they rode in. Everybody stopped their work to stare at the newcomers, but nobody said a word. Corliss stared between her pony’s ears and tried not to meet anybody’s gaze. Finian reined in his horse before they reached the town center.

“Wait here,” he muttered to her as he slipped off his horse, handing Corliss the reins. “Don’t talk to anyone.”

A gray-haired person came out of one of the houses as Finian walked into town. They began to speak. Finian nodded a few times, then looked in the direction the villager pointed. They shook hands and Finian walked off, vanishing from Corliss’ view into one of the open doorways. An hour might have passed. She turned the pony in circles to keep them both occupied.

At last Finian came out through the door, laughing over his shoulder. He carried a large, full bag in his hands. He waved to a figure in the doorway and made his way to Corliss.

He filled both of their saddlebags with the food he had bought, what extra the village had, then stuffed the rest into the packs they each wore on their backs. The woman from the house he'd emerged from came out to hand him another bag. He gave her back the empty one.

"You can keep this. Thank you," Finian said. He took the full sack from her with a grunt once he was mounted. It clunked when it moved. Evidently, it was heavy. He hoisted it over the saddle in front of him, holding it steady with one hand while the other gripped the reins.

"Thanks for the welcome," said Finian.

"Of course. It's been a while since we had a city man here," the woman said. "Come visit once you're settled."

"As you please," Finian said.

She smiled at Corliss and made her way inside. Corliss looked away. When she looked back, the woman was gone.

"What happened?" Corliss asked, nudging her pony to follow him out of the town.

"There's a cabin a half-day's walk up the mountain, shorter by horse. It'll house us both. Come on, let's go find our new home."

"Won't these people be hungry?"

"I paid them more than it was worth. They can buy whatever they need from the other towns here."

-

A stream flowed past Wolfstooth, and the mountain cabin Finian bought with Sileas' money sat high on its bank in a weed-filled, sparse field. It was a small wattle and daub house with a fenced paddock and a coop inside. The building was long empty. It had once been inhabited by goatherds, and would do well for the two of them. There was a room with a table and hearth, and a little chamber with a straw sleeping pallet. There was an old outhouse that seemed very grim after the city's sewage system, though there was no stench yet. That, Finian assured Corliss, would come in time, but it had been unused for years.

The stream rushed cleanly forward, pouring down the river to the lowland. But the mountains themselves were crumbling and sickly, the trees stunted, the soil going slowly sandy.

As the woman had promised him, there was old cooking gear left from the goatherds—her family. A cabinet held woven blankets and little else.

To settle in they each claimed shelves, and agreed Corliss would sleep in the main room beside the hearth while Finian had the room. They gathered water from the stream, and wood as fuel for the fire. There was not much wood, being a place of mostly grass and shrub, but Finian explained the horse's droppings would also work for fuel, albeit less pleasantly.

The food they ate that first night was simple, like all the food they would eat on the mountain. Corliss made simple bean-flour dough and fried it into a sort of bread. They ate it with fried eggs from the town, and went to sleep a little hungry, both wondering how they would survive.

The next day Finian surveyed the slope and the soil and decided it might be a good place to grow wine.

“But it’s bad farmland,” said Corliss.

“That depends what you’re growing. A grape does better with a little hardship.”

“Like a person,” she said.

“Maybe,” he said, giving her a long glance.

Finian asked about grape seeds when he next went to Wolfstooth, and realized he’d have to go to the next town over at least. As it was he began to brew meads and ales, which were a better endeavor in any case; a planted vine would take a few years to produce fruit and he needed a craft now. After the first bottled mead was a success in Wolfstooth, he tried making a sort of wine with local rowan berries as well. He got the recipe (for the berries were poisonous if uncooked) from Lise, a friendly woman who always invited him to sit and talk when he visited town. She told him that most of Wolfstooth made and drank the simple wine, for it cost nothing but time to make, and they had nothing else to spend.

It took very little work for Finian to improve the recipe. The result, as he created these beverages, was that he had something in town to trade other than just Sileas’ money. He was able to feel, at least a little, as if he were supporting himself. Though the horses had also been from Sileas, he pleased himself making a trade of them.

Mostly when Finian visited Wolfstooth it was under the pretense of buying food. He and Corliss were working on a vegetable garden, and they were both trying to learn to fish and trap, but they needed plenty of help.

He always brought his drinks down mountain with him to sell. Finian never encouraged visitors. He didn’t want them to see Corliss, who still looked human but might not for long. Spirits were as hated in the lowland as they were coveted in the high.

He worried about Corliss, who had only him. She didn’t travel to the village like Finian. She was without contact. That was good, from a revolutionary standpoint; he spent lots of time talking with her about the corrupt clans and the need for change, and she’d seen enough already to believe him. But it could not possibly be good for her.

Of course, he didn’t know that Corliss had other company: the voice of another Bound, speaking with her mind-to-mind. Though she took great comfort in the companionship, she hadn’t told Finian.

Once he had reached the conclusion she was lonely, the answer was simple. He returned from a trip carrying a gangly puppy in his arms. The animal was mottled in stripes, pale brown and dark. Corliss squealed and took the puppy from him.

“Where’d you get him?” She asked as the dog gave her a tentative lick. It was too tired from the journey for much else.

“Her,” Finian said. “There was a litter.”

“What’ll we name her?”

“I don’t know,” said Finian. “You choose. What are we doing for supper? I’m too tired to think.”

“I can cook.”

Corliss wanted to eat with the dog on her lap, but Finian insisted that she give the animal some space. She burned through a dozen names in the first hour.

“How about Birch?” Finian asked at last.

“Birch?”

“It's a tree. She looks a little like the bark, with those markings. Birch. It's a good name, a strong name. Sturdy. Trees don't move. You want a dog to be loyal like that, steadfast.”

“Birch,” said Corliss, looking into the corner where the dog flopped on a folded blanket. Her chest rose and fell, the eyes closed in shallow sleep.

-

As Finian walked again down the mountain, he thought: *I spend all my time doing this. Going back and forth.* The village was steadily growing richer, despite the fact that he'd nearly bought them out of house and home with his need for food and cookware and livestock. Now he was going to ask for *more* flour or fruit or roots, and he knew he'd give a price that was past fair and into theft, and he didn't mind; why *shouldn't* Sileas' money go to these folk?

He was about to burst from the last layer of trees and brush into the first field when he saw the guards.

Wolfstooth milled with them. Warriors in Duitiel green sat on horseback, or passed through the doorways of houses. From the riderless horses roped together he guessed there were a dozen of them.

He'd been too careless with the money, that was it. They'd tracked him, or tracked Corliss, by the trail of gold he'd suddenly scattered into this area. Or maybe tracked nobody, but they'd come here nonetheless, and certainly the villagers would point the guards up the mountain, and they would find Corliss, and they would find him, and then they'd both be dead, and the Duitiel clan would have another spirit...

If he were smart he'd turn and run up the mountain and get the child. They'd flee together. But something kept him staring out from the trees. He crouched low and tried to position himself so the undergrowth would shield him from view.

At last the guards went to their horses. Finian turned and started to climb, as quickly and silently as he could. His heart pounded.

He had to cough, suddenly; he couldn't help it. Sometimes the old sickness still came over him. He muffled himself by clamping a hand on his mouth. He glanced over his shoulder—nothing there—and kept going.

Fifteen minutes later he turned and there was no sign of the guards. The woods here weren't thick. If they were coming for the cabin, they long would have caught up with him. He waited until his heart stopped pounding, then returned slowly to the treeline. No sign of the guards. It was as if they'd never been there.

If he went home, he wouldn't know if they needed to flee or not. He had to know why the guards were there. Closing his eyes, he steeled himself with a few deep breaths, then emerged from the woods as if nothing were wrong.

-

Finian knocked on Lise's door. He always visited her first. She was the nicest, and she could often tell him who was or wasn't worth talking to that day.

"Birds," he said, after their rudimentary greetings. "I was hoping to roast one tonight?"

"Sorry, you'd better come back," she said. "Nobody can sell."

"Nobody?"

"Nobody, nothing. For miles. The guards will be everywhere."

"Guards?"

"Yes, they came this morning."

"Why?"

"Tribute," she said, as if this were an obvious fact.

"They come often?"

"Twice a year." From the way she squinted, Finian figured he'd just labeled himself as even odder than he'd already looked.

"And you'll be okay? I mean, they didn't take too much?"

"We'll manage," she said. "We have to."

"Should we expect them up mountain?"

"Nah," Lise said, and grinned. "Not worth the hike. Besides, we hid our gold. Didn't tell those hogs you were here at all."

"Thank you," Finian said.

"No need. We didn't do it for you." Lise shrugged. "Come back in a few weeks. I'll keep in mind you want a few hens. Maybe I'll go trapping."

-

One of the few fights they had was when Finian found Corliss hiding lit candles under her bed at night.

"Do you want this whole place to burn down?" he shouted, pointing at the puddles of cooled wax collected on the floor.

"As if I can't control a candle," Corliss muttered to herself, but she finally bent and obeyed when he began to argue the cost of it.

Together they built a mudstone oven. On the days Finian traveled down-slope Corliss woke early to bake fancy bread or pies for him to barter with. Added to Finian's drinks, they did an alright business, but the people of Wolfstooth weren't in much of a position to trade.

The garden came in raggedly, and they lost much of what did grow to woodland creatures. They grew barley, kale, and peas. They found apple and cherry trees nearby, either growing naturally or planted by an earlier family. The trees had been there for a while, and were not in neat orchard-rows.

Farming was hard work, even on their small scale, but when Corliss had energy and time she went exploring with the gangly Birch. The dog grew rapidly.

Sileas or Ridley wrote them monthly with news from the city, and one of them, usually Finian, responded with stories about Corliss' training or new abilities she had discovered, writing in a simple code in case anyone else read the letter. It was a day's walk to the villa ge large

enough to have a postal exchange. When Finian went, he stayed overnight. Now and then Sileas sent coins, though he was wary of mail being stolen.

The conditions of his support were simple, and not driven by love. He would make sure they were in good health, he said, if one day he could call on Corliss and her unique abilities. Sileas was as sure as ever that a war was coming, and he wanted to be certain of what side she was on.

Once, Corliss wrote to Sileas asking what forest he had found the wood Bound in. She was taken with a fancy that she might go adventuring and find another Bound, but if Sileas got the letter, he never answered it.

As Corliss aged she explored her powers more, lighting fires and pushing heat away from them on hot summer days. Finian cautioned her against doing more. Again and again, he had read that losing control was a steep, slippery slope. Her abilities, too, had strict limits. She could not create heat out of nothing, only move it around. To warm one area, she had to cool another. She couldn't start a fire without making a frost.

It was a quiet, lonely sort of life, but they were both suited to it. Finian learned to go days without speaking. Once, that wouldn't have been possible for him, but something about him had changed with jail and Rowena's death.

-

It was spring. Nearly a year had passed. The door was open to let in the pleasant breeze. Suddenly Birch's nose lifted into the air, and her ears pricked up, and then she bounded out of the cottage and began to bark.

Corliss and Finian followed. The tall young dog ran to the edge of the woods and back to them, barking at the tree line.

"There's someone coming," Corliss said. Finian ran to get his knife, then laughed when he returned outside.

"Ulla!" he shouted. The figure looked up and waved, but didn't respond: she was still far away. This time she was without her cart.

The reunion was happy. The smuggler embraced Finian tightly, then clasped Corliss' hand with a warm smile.

"How'd you find us?" Finian asked.

"Sileas gave me directions. Sorry I didn't write ahead."

"No, it's welcome! What brought you?"

"I was passing nearby on business," she said with a wink. "I thought I'd say hello for a few days, if you don't mind. Don't worry, I brought gifts."

"You can stay as long as you'd like," said Finian. "*Especially* if we like the gifts."

Ulla laughed, and let her chestnut horse into the empty paddock. She hung her bridle over a peg on the fence. She carried the saddle inside and set it against the wall, safe from weather. It was plain, but expensive and made just for her. She spent too much of her life on the road to not invest in her travel.

Ulla did her best not to stare at Corliss once they were seated inside. She had seen odder things, and she was good at keeping calm, at keeping her mouth shut. Finian followed Ulla's gaze with an inward sigh.

The child was less human every day. She remained entirely androgynous. She was growing tall like Rowena had, but her chest and hips had no more fat than the rest of her body, though she was young enough that puberty might still change that. The hair on her head had not grown back; in fact, she was entirely hairless. Her once brown skin had a decidedly red gleam to it. In direct sun, she looked like fire. In shadow, she looked like dried blood, or the deep red of roses that are almost black.

Strangest were her fingertips. They had grown over with thin scales like little half-moons, shining hard crescents that seemed impervious to heat. The scales kept creeping further down her fingers; now, they almost reached her palms.

Inside the cabin Ulla unpacked her goods. She had brought fur hides and a spicebox for Finian, and a bundle of revolutionary papers from the city. For Corliss there was a little metal lizard with its eyes painted red.

"How did you know?" she asked in wonder.

"Sileas, of course. It came from Feagren. That's across the sea. I saw it and knew you had to have it. The rest are nothing much, just extras I picked up," she said, turning to Finian. "If you tell me what you need, I can try to get it next time I visit."

"You're a merchant?" Corliss asked.

"In a way," Ulla said. "Not one the Sovereign likes."

Ulla had new stories, which was helpful after a year of the mountains. The three of them cooked together while she told them all about her recent travels. She'd had to run from an angry farmer just the week before. There had been an ambush in a Gillemar town the week before that; desperate folk had hoped to take her trade without paying for it. She had things to give them, supplies bought by Sileas for free distribution, but they weren't satisfied with their share.

"You're okay?" Finian asked, eyes wide.

"Of course. It helps to be handy with a knife."

"That's scary," said Corliss.

"Please take care of yourself," Finian said. "In any case, I think it's time for a drink. I remember owing you one."

"That's right," Ulla said gleefully.

From a line along the floor wall, he selected a bottle. Ulla fetched three ceramic cups from the shelf. Finian poured a goodly portion for himself and Ulla, and an inch for Corliss, so she could try a little.

"Not bad," Ulla said. "I could get used to it."

"It's no Gold River," Finian said. "What I wouldn't give, for a bottle."

Ulla slept in Finian's room, leaving Corliss to her space. The first morning, Corliss had just awoken when Ulla emerged.

"I didn't know women could grow beards," Corliss said, staring at Ulla's face. The woman raised her sleepy eyebrows and rubbed her chin, where the stubble was coming in.

“That was rude, Corliss,” said Finian. He was standing in his doorway, behind Ulla.
 “Some women can,” said Ulla. “*I* didn't know people could grow scales.”
 “*I* didn't mean it in a bad way. *I* can't grow hair at all,” said Corliss. “You're very lucky.”

-

Corliss threw a tantrum when Ulla left. The merry little hearth shot up in a blaze of heat.
 “Now, calm down,” said Finian sternly. “Ulla's got work to do. She's got a job.”

“I'll be back,” Ulla promised. “Maybe not for a year—I've got a lot of places to go! But I'll be back. It's not goodbye forever.”

The next week Finian found Corliss in front of the burning hearth. That was a normal sight, but the little metal lizard was perched on top of one of the flaming logs. Why would she burn her gift? Was she angry at Ulla for leaving?

He opened his mouth to say something, choking over the words, when Corliss reached in and plucked the lizard from the fire. The metal had not gotten so hot as to warp or melt, but heat lit it from within. She began to play with it, as if this were a delightful new game. He realized it was not anger at all.

-

Ulla kept good on her promise. She rode up the mountain when the leaves turned and fell. This time her bags held a set of sharp cooking knives, a bottle of wine Finian accepted with deep gratitude, and a set of fat white candles.

“Can't I go with you?” Corliss asked at the end of the visit. “I want to see the lowland. The real lowland.”

“Maybe another time,” Ulla said, her hands wrapped around a mug of hot sweetened liquor. It was dark, the evening before she would leave. She had passed three days with them already. The air tasted crisp with coming cold and sweet with ripe autumn apples, which fell browned from the trees faster than they could be swallowed.

Finian was still working on his recipe for cider.

“You tell such stories,” said Corliss. “All the things you've seen, places you've been...”

“And all the while, I'm hiding and sneaking,” said Ulla. “I'd have to hide you, too, and then I couldn't carry so much, or run so fast. You're better off here, little lizard. I wish *I* could stay in one place.”

“You could stay here,” said Corliss.

“I've work to do. But I'll be back again.”

She was gone the next morning, leaving Corliss and Finian to their solitude. Life was pleasant, but the house felt less alive when Ulla left.

Time passed. Ulla came and went. Before long it had been three years since they left Sileas' house. Corliss was almost fourteen. The spirit had changed her.

When Corliss needed more company than Finian or Birch could provide, the voice in her head was there. Now and then the boy-spirit barged in when she didn't want him to, but most

days she hungered for his company. Finian was open minded and willing to learn, but there were things about being Bound nobody else could understand. She didn't know the boy's name or anything about his daily life, but she knew him better than she'd known anyone. He was split, inhabited, like her.

*

Are you there?

Always. Are you in control?

Not so good today.

What happened? Corliss sat up in the rough cot. Finian's snores drifted soft under the door. Talking with the boy-spirit was a silent matter, but Corliss went outside anyways. She liked to look at the stars; liked to think her unknown friend was watching them too.

Birch watched her leave, but didn't follow. The dog laid her head on her paws and closed her eyes.

We don't know. Someone is dead.

Because of you? A chill ran through Corliss.

We don't know. We don't know what is going on. We don't remember today. Are we mad?

No, you're Bound. It's a fine difference.

What do we do, fire-heart? There is yelling all around us.

You hold on to the things you know are true.

But everything is madness and nightmare and we cannot wake up.

Listen to me. Where are you?

Fire-heart. We don't know. There are ten thousand worlds in our head. We hear everything at once.

Open your eyes. What do you see? You can trust me. You know me. Tell me.

A stone wall. A great stone wall.

What else? Corliss shut her eyes and tried to picture it. Sometimes she felt glimmers of the boy-spirit, caught them drifting down the hollows of her mind.

It's covered in pictures of flowers and birds.

Corliss's heart startled into her throat.

What birds? Ravens, swans? And ivy? It's covered in ivy?

How are you in our head?

Wake up. You know me, don't you? You knew me when you chose me, when you told me to break the knife. Dorchalt Proper. We're both from there, aren't we?

Yes, he said. Dorchalt. Yes.

Corliss's heart beat a fast tempo.

Leave. Come to me. Ride to the mountains. Ride west to Duitiel, to the town of Wolfstooth. Then up, into the mountains. You'll be safe here. You'll be with me.

*

Lunch was wild trout Corliss caught, and garlic from the garden, and thin mushrooms Finian bought in town, since neither of them knew fungi well enough to gather it safely.

They sat down at the table and traded their plans for the day. Finian wanted to go down-mountain gathering wild edibles. Corliss planned to pull weeds and then read. She'd at least skimmed everything that Finian had, but some of the books were the sort to bear repeated readings. Densely philosophical political essays, detailed histories, dry books of battle tactics.

The discussion done, they ate in comfortable silence.

"Ah," said Corliss, at the end of it. "I should tell you. We may not be alone long."

"Oh? Why's that?"

"A friend of mine's coming," said Corliss, shifting in her seat.

"A friend? Little lizard," said Finian. "Who do you know that I don't?"

"Um," said Corliss. "Another Bound."

"What?" Finian raised an eyebrow. "*How?* Who?"

"We talk sometimes," Corliss said. "I don't know what his power is, but I hear him in my head."

"You hear voices," Finian said.

"One. Only one voice. I know what you think. I'm not mad, and neither is he."

"He," said Finian.

"Yes," said Corliss. "Can't you just trust me? He might be a little... out of sorts. Unusual. Like me, but very, very different."

"Yes," said Finian. "If I see someone coming, I won't hurt him. What's his name? What does he look like?"

"Er," said Corliss.

"You don't know? How do you know we can trust him?"

"I've known him since before I was Bound," said Corliss. "Maybe my whole life. He's from Dorchalt."

"But you don't know his name."

"I have a few ideas about who he might be. By the way, how does one get from Wolfstooth to here? In detail?"

-

For a week Corliss whispered directions, hoping the boy-spirit would find his way without forgetting. She knew he slipped in and out of reality, could feel him pulsing between the two. She worried he'd get lost in the mountains. They were a maze of hill and dip, run wild with bramble-growth and scruffy meadows that mimicked each other. The stream cut a path from the town to their house, but it was met with tributaries, forks that could be followed wrong.

Corliss sat and read inside. The window light was bright enough. Midsentence she paused and peered up, startled by Birch baying an alarm.

Finian was gone in the woods, trying to hunt and likely failing miserably—he was a mess with a bow, though he kept trying to get better. Ulla had visited just a month before and brought the weapon with her.

It was her other visitor, then. The other Bound.

Before Corliss made it out the cottage, there was a loud thud.

Outside was a tall black horse, the sort of sheened and fine-boned beast kept by wealthy clan folk. His rider had fallen face-first to the ground. Birch circled. She ran her wet nose across the body. It twitched, and jumped back before creeping forward again.

Corliss ran and turned him over. The body was heavier than expected, and it took a big effort to roll over. He appeared more or less unharmed. There was no blood.

“Hey! Hey, are you alright?”

“Fire-heart,” he said. His spoken voice was different than the one she heard, which was really very similar to her own. This was deeper, but slurred. “Prettier’n we imagined.”

“Are you okay? Can you get up?”

“Fine. Let us lie here.”

His skin stretched white and colorless, save for a spattering of red blemishes. His black hair was long and pulled back low on his neck. She was disappointed in how human he looked. She had hoped to find someone who understood what it was like to look different, but the only different thing about this boy was how ill he seemed.

He was familiar. She had seen him before, often, as a child.

“Not Murdoc?” She asked. “You’re... a Dorhalt?”

He didn’t answer. He looked like he was sleeping. Perhaps he’d been injured in the fall.

“Come on. You have to get up, you can’t stay here.”

She tugged on him until he sat up. She convinced him to walk into the house, supporting him most of the way. He stumbled once, and almost fell. His skin felt unwashed, as did his clothes. He smelled like he needed a bath.

Corliss pulled a blanket over him. She wanted to stay with him, but she remembered the horse and went outside.

The animal hadn’t wandered far. He lipped at the sparse grass by the house. In a hurry, Corliss took off the horse’s saddle. She led him into the paddock and took off the bridle, then ran to the corner and waved at Finian, who carried his bow and gear but no kills.

“Your friend arrived?” He asked when he had drawn near, an eye to the saddle on the ground and the bridle in her hands.

“Yes, I put him in my bed. He’s not well.”

“Not well how?”

“I don’t know.”

“Hm.”

Corliss followed Finian inside. The horse paused his grazing to swing his big head up at them. The boy lay asleep on Corliss’ pallet before the hearth.

“Oh. Ugh,” said Finian, bending over the boy, fast asleep. “How old is he? Fifteen, sixteen?”

“Something like that,” Corliss agreed. “Why, what’s wrong?”

“He reeks of alcohol,” said Finian. “And where'd he get the horse? That wasn't a cheap animal. Corliss, who is he?”

“I've told you. He's a Bound, like me.”

“You don't remember how you know him?”

“That,” said Corliss, and sighed. Finian wasn't going to like it, and she knew. “Well, he's sort of. Well. His name is Murdoc.”

“...And?”

“He's not just *from* Dorchalt. He *is* one.”

“A clansman?”

“Yes,” Corliss said. “Clansman. But not a cousin. The monarch's son. The third heir.”

Finian left early with Birch, hoping to clear his head. Murdoc woke long after and came padding out of Corliss' room. She was tending the fire and the food over it, so he sat himself at the table.

“Are you hungry?” Corliss asked.

“Yes.”

She set a bowl of soup before the boy. Corliss had spent the morning making it out of yesterday's scraps and ripe odds from the garden.

“Thank you,” he said, and began to eat slowly, wincing at the heat and blowing on the spoon before taking a second sip.

“Do you like it?” she asked.

“Yes,” he said, and kept eating.

He was more talkative in my head, she thought.

We heard that. Be careful with your thoughts, fire-heart. They are very loud.

Their eyes caught, hers surprised. He smiled.

“Can you do that with everyone?” she asked. “I don't know why I'm surprised.”

“Maybe. It is very loud in our head. We prefer not to. You, we are used to hearing.”

“You know everything I think?” she asked.

“No, thankfully. We try not to listen. Some thoughts are louder than others.”

“Why? To be polite?”

“No. No. We do not want to hear. We have no choice. We would rather have fewer thoughts. There is so much.” He focused back on the soup.

“You're not how I would have imagined,” she said, sitting down across from him.

“What were you thinking?” he asked.

“Not so highborn.”

“We're no more highborn than we are human.”

“You seem quite human,” she admitted. “You don't look Bound at all.”

“A mixed blessing.”

“A whole blessing,” she said. “Don't spit it in my face. I can't go anywhere looking like this.”

“Our body is not wholly human,” he said. “But our flaws are more easily disguised.”

Corliss looked down at her scaled hands and folded them together.

"I prefer not to think of them as flaws," she whispered. He set down his spoon. "Just inconveniences."

"No. Yours are not. Ours are."

"What makes you think..."

He shook his head.

"We would prefer you did not know. We don't understand ourselves, fully." **If you have a question, you should ask it.**

I have too many. Do you prefer to talk this way?

It is less confusing, he said. "We find, often, that we are in our head, rather than..." he gestured to the world around them. "We get lost here."

"That's confusing," she said. "Can we do one, or the other? Whichever you prefer?"

Yes. Fine.

You were drunk. When you arrived.

It is the only thing that dulls the voice.

The voices you hear? Voices like mine?

He sighed aloud, in their normal world, and took another sip of the soup. Murdoc licked his lips and tilted his head to the side. The ensuing pause lasted longer than was normal in conversation.

I said—

We heard. Forgive us. There are many distractions. No, not your voice. There is another, stronger.

Whose?

The spirit, the half of us. It is always—chattering. Saying things the boy does not wish to hear. We don't want to talk about it any longer.

Then we won't, thought Corliss. She reached and placed one of her scaled hands over his. He flinched and pulled away.

"Sorry," said Corliss.

"No," he said, and wrapped his hands onto either side of the soup-bowl to give them something to do. "You have no need to be. Touch is... odd. It is odd."

"It's funny," said Corliss. "I've been out here with nobody but Finian for company, but somehow I think you must be the more lonely, of the two of us."

"No," he said. "We are never alone. We are together. Bound. Boy and spirit."

Did nobody else know? They all thought you were human? Corliss asked.

It was easy to speak this way. She was used to talking to him in her head. If she thought the words *to* him, he seemed to hear them clearly. Her private thoughts, he didn't seem to react to anymore; perhaps he heard them but knew better than to respond. She hoped not.

No. We did not understand ourselves, until we realized what was happening to you. We thought something was wrong with us. After we understood, it was best to keep it a secret. We did not wish to serve the Sovereign, as all Bound are required to.

How did it happen, your binding?

The boy was seven. He does not remember it well. What we do remember, he wishes we did not. Except that it serves as a reminder to us both.

Someone is coming. Your friend.

You hear his thoughts?

The echo, distorted. The presence of them. We can tell he is nearby.

That's useful.

No. His mouth tilted down in displeasure and he looked at her across the table. **Try sleeping. Try to do your work, aware of every human in...** he shrugged. **In a long distance. We could hear you, couldn't we? And we never left Dorchtal proper.**

No wonder they thought you were mad. Was he laughing? She felt laughter, but his face stayed stoic.

Finian came in the front door with Birch. Birch wriggled around him to poke her cold wet nose against Corliss' arm and snuffle a hello.

"You're a quiet bunch," Finian said. His voice was tight.

"Hello," Murdoc said, aloud. He sounded different again, nervous.

"This is Finian," said Corliss. "He's both a teacher and a friend. I've lived with him for nearly three years."

"I know," said Murdoc. Corliss noted that he had switched from *we* to *I*. He purposefully avoided pairing the boy with the spirit.

He hates clansmen. I'm sorry. I shouldn't have told him.

Murdoc looked at her and shrugged.

It is wrong, generally, to avoid the truth. We do not mind, so long as he tolerates us. And—the boy dislikes his kin, as well.

"You're talking in your heads, aren't you," said Finian.

"Yes," said Corliss. "I'm sorry. I don't think we can help it."

"If you prefer, I will not do it with you," said Murdoc.

"Yes. Stay out of my head," said Finian. "So, Murdoc. Tell me about yourself. Corliss says you're Bound."

Murdoc seemed to shrink. He dropped his eyes and his shoulders hunched down. He cleared his throat.

"Not much to tell," he said.

"Nonsense. You're an heir? Are they looking for you?"

"No."

"They aren't worried you've run off?"

"Don't care."

"You don't? Or they don't?"

"They," Murdoc said, and met Finian's eyes. "Think I'm mad."

"Are you?"

"I..."

"Finian!" snapped Corliss. "Don't be rude."

"It's fine. I'm not today. Sometimes I am," Murdoc said. "The same way sometimes Corliss is fire. We can't help it."

"You don't look Bound. What are you? I didn't know there were other loose spirits."

Murdoc's eyes glazed over. Birch growled, a low gravelly sound. It rose to a whine and stopped.

I am madness and wisdom. From Finian's face, it was clear the voice was in all of their heads. **I am the first and I will be the last. I am your nightmares and dreams and I am the thoughts that come unwelcome in the night. The boy is my vessel. You could not look on me and live, little human.**

Murdoc fell forward. His face hit the edge of his soup bowl, flipping it and spilling the contents. Corliss leapt out of her seat and to his side, shaking him awake.

“Shh,” he said. **We need to sleep.**

“Land and skies,” said Finian.

CHAPTER



When Yedda turned fourteen, Chilton decided it was time to broaden her learning.

“There's only so much *I* can teach you. I'm just one person,” he said.

With Yedda seeing other teachers, Chilton had his freedom. He told Dawn he could take his position as captain back whenever there was an opening.

He didn't expect one for at least a year. Dawn had other plans. After he promised he really was done with the bulk of Yedda's training, Dawn created an opening: she demoted captain Tyne, Rowena's old enemy.

Chilton added his captain's triangles back to his uniform and took command of his old squadron. Though he was offered a room on the captain's floor, he insisted he was happy to continue living the way he had. He still wanted to mentor Yedda, so they continued to share their common room. It was Chilton who arranged for all of her new lessons, meeting with teachers and talking with other guards on her behalf.

For Yedda, the mornings remained academic rather than athletic. For the first half of the year, Chilton found her a place in the courts of the Justice, wanting her to witness firsthand how laws manifested into trials for those the guards caught. First she worked as a scribe, and then as an assistant for the guards who came into the courts. Sometimes all she did was fetch papers or comb through boring books to find details on obscure, contested laws. More than once, she was sent to buy food for guards or court officials. On rare days, she was allowed to handle prisoners.

After a half-year in the courts, Chilton moved Yedda to a clinic on the first tier. If she had been happy to leave the courtroom, she suddenly found herself wishing to go back. Chilton had taught her about bandaging wounds, but it was all theory. Now she found herself offering her services to the city's poor, who couldn't afford to pay for medical care. When she protested that she didn't have the training, the doctor she had been assigned under gave her a tired look.

"Then go," the doctor said.

Yedda tried to leave, but found herself walking past a line of injured and ill: more than the doctors of the clinic could possibly tend. It was true she had only basic training, but she knew how to slow bleeding, treat infection, sterilize cuts, and stitch skin back together. She knew the uses and applications of a dozen medicinal plants. It was better than what awaited those common born who would be turned back to the street without care. She realized she had to do what she could, if only because it was better than nothing.

In half a year, she saw enough blood to last a lifetime and learned more about medicine than she knew existed. She cried often, not so much from tragedy as from stress. It was hard work. There were no breaks. She closed her eyes and still saw protruding bones, strange rashes, gored openings.

In the afternoons, she was passed from one teacher to another. Some of the guards she met with throughout the year, but some were limited engagements. Lodan, who continued to teach her about knife work, was one regular. Nyla was another. Archery wasn't often used by the guards, who more often than not were in tight quarters, but Nyla was handy with a bow and Yedda was curious enough to learn.

Chilton arranged for her to spend a week with the stable master of the morning palace, the finest judge of horseflesh in the whole valley. He was silent most of the time, reserving his impeccable manners for the clan folk he served. Occasionally he would turn to Yedda and snap out a fact, lifting up a horse's lips to say: "see how pale his gums are? He needs water. He was ridden too hard. Go fetch some."

She spent an entire month with a troop of acrobats who performed at parties for clans and wealthy merchants. They taught her invaluable things about balance. She would never be able to

mimic half the tricks and flips they could do, but she left more aware of her own body, and with a new appreciation for flexibility. She was awed by their trust and teamwork. The guards had their own brotherhood, but the acrobats put their lives in each other's hands with many of the acts they preformed.

Nobody disputed that Chilton was an expert with a sword, but by his own admission he was not the only one. There were three other guards Chilton considered worthy opponents. Each of them, Chilton said, was good for different reasons. It would be useful for Yedda to work with them. She was at a point now to develop her own style, not simply copy his.

Daigre and Fola were captains. Fola was particularly good. When Chilton lost, it was most often to her. She was a short, thin woman who didn't look like much but moved like she was part snake, striking with a speed and agility that Yedda considered inhuman. Chilton's strength was brutish compared to hers, but she could strike before he was halfway through a swing.

If Yedda ever came close to beating them, it was only from luck. They all had over a decade more experience than she did. Still, she was shaping up to be stiff competition one day. Daigre and Fola agreed that sparring with her was never boring, even if she was still just learning. Despite the praise, Yedda stayed humble. She lost time and time again, and always seemed to have a bruise somewhere. Once, when she was feeling particularly defeated, Chilton had to remind her that she was losing to experts: she measured her success against the highest standards.

Yedda didn't spar with the third fencer until the very end of her fourteenth year, because it took Chilton that long to convince him it was worth his time to fight a fourteen year old.

It was fall, and the days were getting cold. She came back from the medical clinic tired. Her hands burned because she had scrubbed them clean so many times, and she still felt like they were covered in blood.

"I'd eat a light lunch, if I were you," Chilton said as she walked into the common room. "You don't want to be ill."

"What's today? Wrestling?" she asked, slipping off her boots with a weary groan.

"No, sword fighting. You're due at the practice courts in an hour."

Yedda changed, ate, and stretched. She went to the courts with her dull practice sword in hand, expecting Fola or Daigre.

The courts were empty but for a lone sparring pair. Yedda watched them closely. The longer she stared, the more disappointed she became. She could spot plenty of openings on both of them. Neither was very good. Again and again, the fight could have ended, but one or the other refused to strike. They kept hesitating, moving slowly, attacking openings that were no longer there. A *good* spar never lasted more than a couple of seconds. All it took was one hit to end it.

"What do you think?" a voice behind her asked.

"I think they're in trouble, if they ever make it to the street," Yedda said, turning.

The man wasn't wearing a guard's uniform. His outfit was simple and designed for movement, loose enough to not constrict. The fabrics were far finer than simple street clothes.

Though many liked to wear light leather armor when they sparred, he wore only cloth. Either he didn't mind bruises, or he didn't think he was at risk of getting them.

He was, Yedda thought, impossibly tall. He looked like he was at the end of his thirties. Yedda couldn't decide if the man had fair brown skin or if he was pale and very tan. He had full lips and a narrow arching nose that had been broken at least once. He stood at ease, his hands resting on the hilt of a tall sword whose tip dug into the ground. Liked Yedda's, it was a dull practice weapon, more likely to raise a nasty welt than to cut. The blade was thinner than Yedda was used to wielding, but longer.

"May I?" She asked, leaning her own sword against the fence of the practice yard.

"The blade? Of course." He handed it to her, hilt first. She took it carefully.

"It's light," she said in surprise. "Well, lighter than I expected, anyways. For a sword so long." She swung it two-handed in a sideways figure eight to get the feel of it: a downward diagonal slash, a reverse, and a downward diagonal slash the other way.

"That's because the blade is thinner than yours," he said. "It's called a hand-and-a-half, since you can choose to wield it with one hand or two. Well, I can. You probably *need* both, but I'm a good deal taller than you. They're popular to the east of here, across the mountains. Should we begin?"

"Begin?"

"Oh, I'm sorry," he said. "I mistook you. I assumed you were Chilton's girl."

"I am," she said. "But who're you? I know I've seen you around before."

"Dalton." He stretched out a hand and she shook it.

"Dalton?" she balked. "Not *Commander* Dalton?"

"Don't let it go to your head. Chilton promised me a good fight."

After General Dawn, Dalton was one of the highest ranked members of the guard. Unlike Dawn, who had gotten her job through her political rank, he had worked his way up through the guard. She was a bureaucratic official, the branch between government and guard. He was, in practical terms, the captain of the captains. The General dealt with money and politics and broad strategy. Commanders dealt with daily tactics and warfare. Generals gave goals; Commanders made them happen. The captains of the first tier reported to Commander Ena, the second and third answered to Commander Dalton, the royal guard and the Bound answered to Commander Guaire. Yedda realized that he was already halfway across the practice ring. She grabbed her sword and ran to catch up.

-

Brede was the only one of the city children Yedda remained friends with. The others slowly lost touch with her. They had far more free time than she could ever hope to, and she missed out on too much for them to consider her in their plans. One of them was bold enough to tell her, to her face, that her bloodline was a problem; he was getting old enough that his mother only let him visit with clan born. He had a future to think about, after all: "You understand, right?" he asked Yedda.

Yedda was at turns angry and jealous, but she learned to get over it. Despite her begging, Chilton refused to give her more free time, insisting she would appreciate it when she was older.

“Before long, you'll have more friends in the guard than you know what to do with,” he said. “You're going to be a guard, and the guard is like a big family. Your place is with us.”

-

It was a new year, and Yedda had been fifteen for two months. She woke early by habit. The sun struggled through her window, bubbled glass covered in a film of frost. The young woman pulled herself out of bed and quickly robed. After lighting a lantern, she combed and tied back her hair, dressed in warm clothes for a day in the clinic, and slipped out of her room.

Chilton was already in the common room reviewing crime reports by lantern. He hunched over the table, cocooned in a blanket, a thick hat on his bald head.

“Good morning,” he said.

“You're up early,” Yedda said.

“I've got too much work to sleep late. The Dalton says we need the streets clear of criminals by March.”

“He says that every year,” said Yedda. “It'll never happen.”

“I know, but I still have to try,” said Chilton with a lopsided grin. “Today's your last day at the clinic. Make sure you tell them.”

“Already? What's next?” Yedda asked, finding to her surprise she was disappointed.

“It's a surprise. I'll tell you when you're home. Make sure you're back for lunch.”

-

“What's going on?” Yedda asked when she followed Chilton into the guard cafeteria. It was fuller than it had ever been at the noon hour, and everybody began to clap when they saw her. “Chilton?”

“Congratulations,” he said, and patted her on the back without explaining.

At the head of the crowd stood General Dawn and Commander Dalton. The likes of them *never* ate in the cafeteria. Dawn was particularly out of place, dressed in an embroidered velvet gown in the Righardan clan's bright blue. She held a sheathed sword.

“Come, Yedda,” Dawn said, holding the sword out. “This is yours now.”

“A sword?” Yedda asked. The sheath was tooled, patterned leather, spotted with decorative metal studs. Yedda pulled out the sword. It had a simple hilt and cross guard. The grip was wrapped in leather. The blade was long and thin. It was without elaborate design, but made of good hardened, tempered steel. The sides were sharp, but unlike many valley swords, so was the tip. It reminded her of the style Commander Dalton favored. She had long and openly been envious of his weaponry.

“That's a *very* fine blade,” Chilton said softly from behind her. “Take care of it.”

“Thank you,” said Yedda, looking up at Dawn. “But I don't understand. What did I do?”

“Every guard needs a sword,” said Dawn. “You can't join our ranks without one.”

“But I'm fifteen,” said Yedda. “I thought—”

Would-be guards were not accepted until their eighteenth years.

“We give our recruits three months of group training,” said Chilton as she turned to face him. “*You’ve* had four years of private tutelage. I won’t throw you on the streets alone. You’ll be more supervised than any guard in history. You’re more an honorary, at this point. But Commander Dalton agrees you’re ready to leave the practice ring. Unless you’re scared?” He teased at last with a grin.

“No,” said Yedda, and sheathed the sword with a smile. “No. Thank you!”

Chilton hugged her. Dalton and Dawn shook her hand. Then she had a round of hugs, handshakes, and congratulations from the other guards, Lodan and Nyla at the head of it. By the time that was finished, Dalton and Dawn had long since disappeared.

The kitchens had made little sweet seed cakes for everyone to mark the occasion. Yedda ate three of them.

-

Somehow, Chilton managed to get gifts into the common room while they were all at lunch. A set of new guard’s uniforms were folded on the table. With the cloth pants and shirts was an armored leather vest and metal arm-guards, and a metal helmet lined with layers of plush fabric. Beside the clothes sat a fine leather belt-purse for carrying coins or small trinkets. There was a guard’s horn so that she could summon help if she needed it. She already had a good belt-knife, but Chilton had ordered a new sheath made for it that matched the covering of her new sword.

“You shouldn’t have,” said Yedda, hugging him again. “Thank you.”

“Don’t be silly,” Chilton said. “Of course I should’ve. I wanted to get you something. Anyways, most guards have family to buy them all the gear they need. I figure you’re as like to a daughter as I’m ever going to have. I’m proud of you. You’ve worked hard.”

She wished that he would call her his daughter, his real daughter. She had almost expected him to. She had to remind herself not to be stupid. Chilton was her teacher and her captain.

“I’ll make you prouder yet,” she said. “Wait and see.”

“I don’t doubt it. Two other things. We move tomorrow, both of us.”

“Move where?”

“You, in with the other guards. Me, back to the officer’s floor. I’m getting tired of how close together these walls look.”

“Truly? What’s the other?”

“Keep those new clothes nice. Dawn’s throwing a party in a week. She wants to show you off.”

-

When Yedda moved into her new rooms, her suite mates were both on rounds. She had seen Anluan before, a young guard who’d recently joined Chilton’s squadron, but did not really know him. The only other inhabitant was a mystery, a recent recruit to another captain’s

squadron. The common room was too barren to be messy, but showed signs of interrupted life. One of the bench chests was flung open. The inside held a wooden medicine box and a tangled assortment of winter accessories: gloves, hats, scarves. On the table, shriveled shapes like small dark tongues poked out of a linen pouch.

“What's *that*?” Yedda asked.

Chilton bent to sniff.

“Dried strawberries,” he said, and took one.

He helped her move the rest of her things into the room, patted her on the back, and left.

She was rearranging her clothes and weaponry when Anluan came home. She heard the front door open, and a whistled snippet of a song. Yedda walked to her open door and peeked her head out.

“Oh, hello,” the man said. He was young, though not compared to her; he'd be twenty in a month. He wore his copper hair just long enough to be tied back and had an easy smile.

“Hi,” she said.

“It's Yedda, right? I'm Anluan. Listen, I'm off to play dice with friends—I just have to grab my purse. You want to come?”

“Won't your friends mind?”

“No,” he said. “Why would they?”

Yedda had no plans until tomorrow's mid-morning, when Chilton required all of his squad to report for training. She could do with a friend.

“Okay,” she said. “Just let me get my boots on.”

-

The tavern Anluan took her to was a cellar on the second tier, carved into the city rock. The small room was crowded and smoky from poor ventilation, warm and glowing with dripping candles and a blazing hearth. Yedda shadowed Anluan as he elbowed his way to a table at the back. The people sitting there were all his age. Yedda recognized a few of their faces: other guards, though none were in uniform.

Anluan got her seated and clapped her on the shoulder.

“What'll you have?”

“What?” Yedda asked. It was loud.

“What's your drink?”

“I don't know.”

“I'll pick you something,” said Anluan. Yedda watched him leave. The small crowd swallowed him. She turned back to the table. One of the women shook a wooden dice-cup and upended it. The white bone pieces clattered out. She cursed; one of the men cheered.

Yedda tried to follow the conversation. She wondered if she should introduce herself. They were all older than her and seemed like good friends already.

Anluan came back and handed her a glass filled with a dark frothy liquid. She didn't tell him Chilton had forbidden her to try alcohol until she was older.

“How much was it?” Yedda asked.

“That's okay. Save your money.”

She took a sip. It was foully bitter, unlike anything she had tasted before. Yedda resisted the urge to spit it back out. Anluan and his friends were drinking theirs eagerly enough. It was a strong brew, and by the time Yedda finished it the taste didn't bother her so much. She found that making conversation with the older strangers was easier, too.

It was late at night before they all made their way back. She was perfectly capable of walking, but might have stumbled down a side-street in pursuit of adventure if Anluan had not been there to guide her.

“There's a little garden, though,” she protested as he turned her around and pointed her back up the city stair. “Can't we?”

The next morning, Yedda felt sluggish. Nerves churned her stomach and pulled her from bed early. She splashed her face with water and cursed the folly that prevented her from getting a good night's rest.

It was her first day with Chilton's squadron. She was going to make a tired fool of herself practicing, and then on rounds. She wanted to sleep another week at least, and never move again. They were all going to laugh and say she was too young, and look side-eyed at Chilton for having trained her so poorly. And Chilton—she pictured his disappointment. He was going to know. Her mouth tasted of stale ale. No amount of water washed it clean. With every breath the taste renewed.

The common room was empty, and all the doors but hers closed. Yedda dressed and left on a long walk to clear her mind and loosen her tired muscles. There was a chill, but the morning sun made the city's streets bearable. She jogged most of the way, to keep warm. She returned to the practice yards well before the training hour and had stretched completely by the time the squadron came.

Her hands trembled and her stomach flipped over itself. The members of the squadron joked and laughed among themselves. Anluan caught her eye and smiled. She looked away.

“Knife defense,” said Chilton, clapping his hands for attention. “If you're caught unaware you might not have time to draw your own blade. Pair up, and form two lines—here and here—Nyla, why aren't your boots laced? This side, grab a knife. The rest of you are defending.”

Yedda found herself paired with a broad fighter ten years her senior.

“First day? I'll get the knife,” he said.

Chilton paced up and down the row, calling corrections or giving advice as he saw fit. He shook his head when he saw Yedda's partner explaining the strike to her.

“She's trained,” Chilton said. “Don't be soft on her. She'll surprise you.”

“Ready, then?” the man asked.

Yedda nodded, her mouth clenched together. She would have been fine to take things slowly.

It *seemed* slow, when the strike came. She saw the movement and her mind silenced, her body taking over. She slipped to the side, trapping the wrist that held the knife with one arm. It was not enough to block an attack: she had to retaliate as well. Chilton had taught her that early. You had to sting your opponent, or they would simply strike again.

She did not hit her partner hard. Training wasn't meant to inflict real damage. She expected him to fight back, to spar. He took her blows without resistance, half-raising one arm too late. When she stopped, he was on the ground and the knife's hilt was in her palm. She softened her stance and reached her free hand to him.

"Are you okay?" she asked. "Sorry. I thought..."

He laughed and shook his head, rising without her help.

"Don't apologize," said the man. "Captain said 'don't' underestimate'—shall we go again?"

CHAPTER

"How much longer?" asked Finian, bent low over a bowl of hot broth.

"Pardon?" asked Corliss, turning over her shoulder to look at him. She stood at the hearth-fire, cooking the small eggs Finian had bought. Birch watched hopefully.

"When's he going?" asked Finian.

"Murdoc?" Corliss turned all the way around, frowning. "What d'you mean? He lives with us now."

The boy was still asleep.

"I don't think I can do that," said Finian, before devolving into a brief coughing fit—a last remnant of his old sickness.

"You hate him that much?"

"I don't. I hate these *nightmares*. Don't tell me you don't have them?"

"A few. They're not bad, though. I can manage."

"I'm up half the night," Finian muttered. "Thinking things I'd rather not. And the amount he drinks! I know an alcoholic when I see one."

"He can't help it."

"That's the problem," said Finian. "It'll kill him if he doesn't stop. The longer he goes, the worse it'll get. I'm locking away my bottles from now on, and neither of you are to touch them."

"You'd do that?"

"It's a serious thing, Corliss. I've watched folk die of it."

"Curse it," said Corliss, turning back to the eggs. "They were almost perfect a moment ago." She had let the fire get too hot; it sometimes responded to emotions. She pulled the pan off the fire with a heavy sigh, scraping the eggs onto a plate. "It's not easy, you know, trying to control a spirit. He does his best."

"You seem to manage."

"Mostly," said Corliss, frowning at the eggs. "I've had a lot of help from him, you know."

"Can't *you* help *him*, then? I could use a night of sleep."

"I try," said Corliss. "I suppose I'll have to try harder."

"I hate to ask it of you, but please, yes. Do that."

"Could you get another cooking-pan when you go to Pellsbrook? An iron one, if they have it? It's hard to make breakfast for all three of us with just the one."

"Alright. I might go for mail today."

“Today?”

“Yes, I thought I'd see if Sileas sent anything.”

“You went last week. Are you waiting for something?”

“No,” he said. “It’s an overnight trip. It's refreshing, being able to sleep.”

-

Finian arrived home two days later in the evening. He had taken Murdoc's gentlemanly horse.

Corliss read at the table. Murdoc rested across from her, holding his head in his hands. Every now and then his closed eyes would flicker or pop open. Then he would squeeze them back shut.

“Is he bothering you? The spirit?” Corliss asked.

“Always,” said the Bound with a wry smile.

“What's he saying?”

“Don't worry yourself, fire-heart.”

“I doubt those are his words,” said Corliss, turning a page.

Your friend is home.

“Why do you always call him that?” She looked up at the door.

Because he is not *our* friend. He does not like us much.

“I'm not sure that's true,” said Corliss.

Your lies are sweet, but they are still lies. We prefer when you don't tell them.

A moment later, Finian came through the door with the saddle packs slung over his shoulder. In his hand was a heavy iron frying pan. He put it on the table between them and went to warm his hands by the fire. Murdoc opened his eyes.

“Thank you,” said Corliss.

Ask him what is wrong.

“What's wrong?” asked Corliss.

“Sileas wrote,” said Finian.

“Bad news?”

“Things are changing after all,” said Finian.

“What?”

“You can read for yourself. Ulla's bringing others. For good. Sileas wants us to add more sleeping space, and soon.” Finian pulled the letter out of the saddle pack and handed it to her.

“Others are coming?” Murdoc asked.

“Yes, the poor things,” Finian said. “Other fugitives from the city, radicals. He didn't say how many. I'm not sure he knows.”

“Ulla's staying? Not passing through?” Corliss asked with a smile.

“Yes, or at least for longer. And she's bringing weapons.”

“Why do we need more weapons?” Corliss asked, putting down the paper.

“Why does anybody need weapons? Because we're going to hurt people with them,” said Finian.

“For an important cause,” said Corliss.

“True enough,” said Finian, and sat at the table. “But I’m not a soldier. I don’t care for the bloodshed.”

Murdoc stared at Finian.

“You don’t have to do what Sileas says,” Corliss said. “You’re a free man. You could help in other ways.”

“No,” said Finian, shaking his head. “Well, you’re right. But I do believe in everything he’s trying to do, truly... I’m just scared. Old and scared.”

“You’re not old,” said Corliss. “You’re not even thirty yet.”

“I’m old enough to be scared,” said Finian. “I didn’t used to be.”

She doesn’t know.

“Stop,” said Finian. “My head is off-limits.”

You would prefer we said it aloud? You killed her sister.

Corliss was outside, but there were some conversations too private to have out loud.

No, thought Finian. No, it’s not my fault Rowena died. I didn’t tell anyone to kill her. She attacked the man Sileas sent. She wasn’t ever supposed to die.

We feel your guilt. You bear the weight of it. What else are you hiding?

“Stop. Stop! I *feel* that. I can feel you in my head.”

So. You had little fire-heart kidnapped. Your head is very sick about it.

Don’t tell her, thought Finian.

If you are trying to speak, you must be louder. All we taste is your fear. No wonder we make you so sick with nightmares. And you blame us! It is all from your own blood!

Finian began to cry. “Please,” he said. “You don’t understand.”

Murdoc reached a hand out and touched Finian’s face. Finian jolted out of the way. With a frown, Murdoc reached out again. He pressed his hand to Finian’s forehead, firmly. Finian didn’t move this time. He was still crying, but silently.

And they call us mad? Your head is twisted all about. You are like a tree with a sickness in its roots.

“I loved her,” said Finian. “Not when it happened— before. I had loved her. And she died because of me.” It was the first time he had ever said it.

It is wrong that she does not know.

“You can’t tell her,” said Finian. “She’d hate me. It’s all a lie. She couldn’t handle it.”

You do not know what fire-heart can and cannot handle. Do not call her weak.

Please. Please, you have to understand. Think what it would do to her. She would turn on me, she would turn on Sileas, on the revolution, on everything.

None of that matters to us. If you had not taken her she would have been at Dorchalt. We would not have been alone for so long.

You can’t change the past. Believe me, I’ve tried. We’ve built something beautiful here, haven’t we? Haven’t we? Corliss and I are family now. Don’t break that. Don’t take it from me. I know I don’t deserve it. But it’s the only thing I have.

We will not tell her. Yet. But we will not lie, either, if it comes down to it.

CHAPTER

Yedda was allowed nowhere alone on duty. She worked often with Nyla, since Chilton didn't want her with anybody inexperienced. Because Chilton refused to put a fifteen year old too far in harm's way, he negotiated with Commander Dalton for his squadron to be temporarily relieved of night duties. Mornings and days tended to be less violent, especially in the third tier, where he confined Yedda.

There was a party in the Righardan palace after her first week. Chilton gave her the afternoon off to prepare. She had been cleaned, changed, and ready to leave for nearly an hour by the time he returned from hearing reports. When he at last knocked on the door, she was sitting in the common room with a book.

"There'll be lots of people there?" she wanted to know as they clattered down the staircase.

"Yes."

"And Bound?"

"Yes, and Bound."

"What about music?"

"Yes, and music. Stop pestering me. It's for business, not fun." They pushed through the door to the cold evening air. Lantern-lighters made their way down the streets with stepladders and hooded candles, pausing at each lamppost to ignite it.

Chilton listed rules as they walked.

"Bow briefly for anyone but a servant. When you're introduced to a monarch, you bow *low*, and you hold it and count to three. You remember this?"

"A monarch?"

"Don't talk unless you're addressed. Don't share any opinions you aren't asked for."

"A monarch? Really? Will the Sovereign be there?"

"Focus, Yedda. This is important."

"Why?"

He stopped, putting a hand on his face, and turned to her with a deep breath.

"Yes, the Sovereign will be there. He's the one who decides whether or not this will *ever* happen again, do you understand?"

"This? You mean, training me?"

"Training anybody. Having a skilled guard. Taking lesser born and funding an education." He started to walk again. "Accept no food from servants. Eat or drink only if a clan member invites you to directly. The names of the royal family—do you remember them?"

-

A servant led them to a long parlor. The party was not big enough to warrant use of the great hall, but neither was it intimate. Yedda couldn't tell what was finer: the clan folk draped in embroidery and silk, dripping with pearls and gemstones, or the room itself. Thin lines of

shimmering gold leaf traced flowers across the deep blue walls. A line of chandeliers sparkled above them, the metalwork arching like swan's necks with candles for heads. Arranged on and around the clusters of velvet furniture were the clan folk. Yedda spotted what looked like two Bound among them: a hulking figure with blue-tinted skin, and a hooded, shorter form whose absurdly long arms dangled out below its cape. The sight of them made her queasy. Had they really once been human?

Clan folk gossiped in small groups as servants drifted through the room with silver platters of food and drink. A flutist and harpist sat in one of the corners. Their music wove through the air softly. Chilton paused in the doorway to scan the crowd, then steered Yedda towards one of the small gatherings.

Most of the circle wore orange velvet or silk, trimmed with highlights and embroidery in blue: the Gillemar colors. Some chose variations with reds and yellows. Dawn alone wore a gown in the full Righardan blue, embroidered around the square neck and tight sleeve-ends with silver thread.

The circle opened to allow Chilton and Yedda room. Generous greetings passed between the Gillemars; one woman embraced Chilton heartily. Everybody but Dawn shared some level of resemblance to Chilton, whether slight or prominent, but this woman looked the closest. Their noses could have been replicas. She was his sister.

“And who's this?” she asked with an eye to Yedda.

“My special project,” he said as Yedda bowed.

“Not—from the jails?”

“The very same.”

There was a round of soft titters.

“You haven't given that up yet?”

“No,” said Chilton.

“How droll.”

“I myself have been pleasantly surprised,” Dawn interjected. “I have all hope that the future of the guard will reflect the progress captain Chilton has made.”

The conversation turned to city governance and policies, then the outcome of a horse-race and the coming warmth. Yedda was forgotten. She stood silently as Chilton laughed and made gossip. Servants refilled goblets and offered platters with arrangements of tiny cakes, slivers of pastry with shaved lamb and sauces, mushrooms plumped with minced pheasant and vegetables. Nobody offered Yedda anything. A man in gray came and placed his hand on Dawn's lower back, perhaps a husband or a lover; he whispered something to her and she excused herself with a gracious smile.

“I should make rounds as well,” Chilton said a minute after Dawn had left. “If you'll excuse me?”

“Come to lunch tomorrow,” said Chilton's sister.

“I'll see,” he said, and extracted himself. Yedda followed.

They drifted from group to group. Between clusters Chilton handed her tidbits from passing trays, but never when they stood among the clan folk. The night was growing late when Dawn tapped Chilton on the shoulder.

“He's ready,” she said. Chilton nodded and strode after her. Yedda followed, stifling a yawn.

An exorbitantly dressed man, even among the others, had draped himself on a low couch. He wore long white robes turned stiff with gold embroidery and beaded with tiny orange gems. His fingers sparkled with rings. His dark carved face was crowned with a surprisingly simple gold circlet.

Chilton and Dawn bowed for the first time that evening. Yedda bent as they did. She was certain to stay down for longer than either of them. When she rose the man waved away those he had been talking to. He studied Yedda briefly before turning to Chilton.

“This is what keeps you in the lower city?” the man said.

“One of many things,” Chilton answered.

The man propped himself up.

“I don't know why you spend your time this way.”

“It's our future, Uncle.”

“What about *your* future?”

“I like the work.”

“Then you should join the royal guard. Leave the bottom city to men of less stature. You aren't even a commander, for Adlen's sake.”

“You misunderstand me. I like the bottom city. I enjoy the challenge.”

“Well, you've certainly given yourself one, haven't you?”

“It's been a success so far.”

“Your talents have better uses.”

“No, uncle. You'll see when she's older. Do you really think we can continue to start our trainings so late in life, with our northern neighbors in such a state? It would be a credit to your rule to support this. If we start training guards from childhood...”

“A whole herd of them? It would cost a fortune. The Bound will do, Chilton.”

“It would be worth it. The lesser born are capable of such work, Uncle. The clans are too small to garner any real force, and we risk our lives in the bargain. You *have* the money. The guard is a joke now. No offense, Dawn.”

“That may be putting it harshly,” Dawn said. “But I agree we will benefit from this. All we ask is that you keep an open mind, majesty. If such a project worked, it would do you credit.”

“*If* it worked,” said the man. “Well, we shall see. I'll look at her again once she's done something of note. Until then, you'll stop bothering me.”

Chilton, Dawn, and Yedda all bowed again. With a hand on her shoulder, Chilton steered Yedda towards the doorway.

“We've done what we came for,” he said. “Let's go home.”

It was cold outside, far colder than it had been when they left.

“I'm too tired to bother,” said Chilton. “Let's wait inside. We'll take a carriage.” He paid one of the Righardans' servants a golden eighth to find a driver.

They worked from mid-day to sun up. Once the bells chimed seventh hour, they trudged back to the guardhouse to report to Chilton. Nothing began until they had all gathered; if somebody did not return, it meant trouble.

Chilton announced news to them, then they lined up to report. Yedda always spoke with him last, unless she had somewhere special to go; their conversations could take a while.

Tyne, who had captained the squadron until Chilton took it back, shouldered into her on his way out of the room. Yedda watched him go and shook her head. Did he blame *her* for being demoted? She'd heard stories. Nobody liked Tyne, especially not the other female guards. If he was angry, he only had himself to blame for not acting like a decent human being.

"Nyla tells me there was a fight," Chilton said, picking at the dirt under his nails with his belt knife. Yedda rolled her eyes.

"You don't have to check on me after *everything*," she said. "It's been a month. I haven't died yet."

"I'm your captain. I have the right."

"It was nothing. A man was drunk, they called us into the tavern, he tried to punch me."

"I assume he regretted that."

"I doubt he remembers it. His arm will, though."

"You broke it?"

"Chilton! Mother of Shadows. I just dislocated it."

"That was kind of you."

"It was only a drunken brawl. He's already getting fined. I didn't need to put him out of work, too. Don't tell me you disagree?"

"No. But you would have been within your rights." He wagged the knife at her. "It isn't a light matter, hitting a guard."

Yedda shrugged. "That's a stupid way to look at it. He didn't even know who I was. And he didn't actually hit me."

"Only because you were good enough to block him. Do you like being a guard? So far, at least?"

"Sure. Why?"

"Do you ever wish you weren't?"

"What?"

"If you had had the choice, would you still choose this life?"

Yedda stretched while she thought.

"I don't know. Why does it matter what I'd choose? My choices almost got me executed. *You* chose *me* to be a guard, Chilton, and you saved my life."

"Yes, but are you happy?"

"I love the city," she said. "I'm thankful I was given the chance. I'm probably the luckiest person in the valley, when you think about it. Why?"

"You're a good guard, Yedda."

"I thought it was just honorary. I'm not a full guard."

Chilton shrugged. "But you will be. That's what matters."

"Do you mind if I go? Anluan mentioned something about cards."

“Admit it. When I get sentimental, you get bored,” said Chilton, with a big grin to let her know he was joking.

“You don't have to make me feel bad about it,” said Yedda.

-

It was early; they had the morning shift. Chilton gave assignments by neighborhood. At last only three were left: Yedda, Nyla, and her suite-mate Anluan.

“Monarch Ailia wants an escort for the morning. She'll be making a series of house calls. Go saddle up,” said Chilton. “You'll all be riding. You need to be at the Dorchalt palace in a half hour. You and your horses had better look *presentable*. Straighten your shirt, Anluan. You look like you just crawled out of bed.”

“That's because I did,” he muttered to Yedda.

“Doesn't Dorchalt have their own guards?” Yedda asked. She vaguely remembered Ailia from after the glass knife had broken: in her mind was a vague image of a furious face. She doubted she would recognize her. She hoped she would not.

“By law, the city guard serves the clans and the clan monarchs as much as we serve the Sovereign. It's well within her rights to make such a request,” said Chilton.

“I know, but it's unusual, isn't it?”

“So maybe she's trying to save money. It's the Sovereign's treasury that pays us. *Ailia's* guard comes from her own pocket.”

“Don't complain,” said Nyla. “I like working escort. Sometimes they feed us.”

It was an unremarkable morning. They kept to the upper reaches of the third tier, where the richest city-dwellers lived. Here were the finest houses in the city, apart from the clan palaces the tier above. Almost everyone who lived here was a member of a clan, rich first cousins who had no home in the palaces but still carried the wealth and prestige of the clans. A handful of successful merchants and officials lived among them, but these too had clan ties, even if more distantly. Many of the houses were sprawling estates that must have cost a fortune in the crowded city. They were surrounded by gardens and enclosed by fences that were as decorative as they were secluding.

The guards were unable to talk as they rode, taking different points around the monarch's carriage. Yedda had the right flank. Ailia retained her personal bodyguard, a man they saw little of since he rode in the carriage with her. As Nyla predicted, many of the houses offered them refreshments while they waited in the stable yard for Ailia to finish socializing. She was done just after noon. They rode with her back to Dorchalt palace before returning to the guardhouse.

“Yedda,” said Anluan. “Dear, sweet Yedda—”

“What do you want?” She asked, slipping off her mount and pulling the reins over his head.

“If you'll groom this noble beast, I'll make your report for you. *And* I'll clean the common room.”

“Half of it's your mess!” Yedda protested.

“So, the other half is a mess I have no responsibility to clean.”

“You're going to see that shop-girl, aren't you? What's her name again?”

“Hollen,” he said. “I really need to bathe first. I want her to like me. Please?”

“At least put him in his stall until I can get to him,” said Yedda. “Go, go. Have fun.”

Anluan loosened his horse's girth and removed the bridle. Yedda had just finished grooming her own mount when Nyla rapped on the stall door for her attention.

“I'm going in. See you for supper.”

“Alright,” said Yedda, carrying the bucket of grooming tools into the stall Anulan's mount stood inside, slurping up water.

She took her time. The weather was nice, and it was quiet and peaceful in the stable, the big chestnut horse ignoring her as she worked on him. The ground had been muddy, and he'd picked up a few pebbles in his feet. He was mostly clean, but she groomed him again until his coat shined. At last she left, giving him a pat as he turned to lip at her. She put away the grooming supplies and polished both of their saddles, then cleaned the green gunk—a mixture of grass and horse-spit—from the bridle bits.

“Anluan said I'd find you here.” Tyne stood in the doorway of the stable.

“Did Chilton need me?” Yedda asked.

“No. You're his little lackey, though, aren't you? Always crawling after whatever he says.”

“He's my captain,” said Yedda stiffly. “What do you want, Tyne?”

“He won't love you,” said Tyne. “He's too highborn for a cur girl like you. Lie with me instead”

“You're sick,” said Yedda, incredulous. “Leave me alone.”

“Don't be a fool. You won't get a better offer,” said Tyne.

“I'll report you. I'm not afraid of you.” He walked towards her. “This is your last chance, Tyne. Leave me alone.”

“Who'll you go to, Chilton? He won't care. All he wants is Lodan. They're filthy beasts. You aren't—”

Tyne was close to her. Too close. If he were smart, he would have stayed out of her range. Yedda's right knee snapped up. The ball of her foot punched forward, catching Tyne in his stomach. He doubled over with a grunt and she drove forward off of her left foot, slamming her opposite elbow across Tyne's face with the same twisting motion of a hooked punch.

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Commander Dalton's office was on the ground floor of the guardhouse. It was a spacious room, with both a desk and a meeting table. The walls were covered in maps of the city's neighborhoods. The desk was covered in papers arranged into neat piles.

Tyne sat on one side of the table. Yedda and Chilton sat on the other. Tyne had a large bruise forming on the side of his temple, and refused to look at Yedda. Yedda had her arms crossed in front of her, staring down. Chilton fumed, looking back and forth between the two of them. The room was silent.

Commander Dalton came in and shut the door behind him, then walked around to the head of the table. He did not sit, but planted his fingers on the table, leaning forward.

“Unacceptable” was the first word out of his mouth. “You are members of the city’s *guard*. You are the law and the military of this *nation*. And you are going to tell me...” he looked straight at Yedda, “you cannot solve a simple *dispute* without resorting to a fistfight? You are on the same side and I expect you to act like it. We arrest people *every day* for fighting. What about that is so hard to understand?”

“Sir,” Tyne whined. “Sir, she started it. I barely—”

“*Shut your mouth*,” Dalton roared. Tyne and Yedda’s eyes widened considerably. Chilton’s did not. He had heard Dalton yell many times before. That such a loud noise could come out of a human was shocking to Yedda. “I was not done *speaking*. Guardsperson Tyne, you will respond when you are *asked to*. You were just lewd to a fifteen year old, who then *beat you*, and a part of me is glad she did. You are a disgrace to this guard. I find it hard to believe I *ever* agreed to make you a captain. If I’m not sorely *mistaken*, this is not the first time you have been in my office because you made somebody uncomfortable. Captain Chilton!”

“Yes sir,” said Chilton.

“Am I incorrect? Does guardsperson Tyne have such a record?”

“He does, sir,” said Chilton.

Commander Dalton looked at Tyne. He leveled a finger at him. “Disgusting,” said Dalton.

Yedda laughed. It was a mistake. Dalton slowly turned to look at her and she shrank, turning away.

“Are you a child? I thought you were a guard. Don’t turn away when I talk to you,” said Dalton, his voice soft. Reluctantly, Yedda turned to him.

Dalton raised his voice into a yell again.

“*There is a word* for someone who uses violence when they don’t have to: a brute.”

Chilton snickered, pleased at Yedda’s ability to defend herself. He quickly straightened his face again.

“*Is this funny, captain?* You are the girl’s teacher. *You* are responsible for her actions. Yedda, did Tyne hit you? Touch you, even? Make a move to?”

Yedda hung her head, then forced herself to look back at Commander Dalton.

“No, sir, but what he did was...” she whispered.

“I can’t hear you.”

“No, sir, he did not.”

“Tyne is clan born, Yedda. Are you?”

“No, sir,” said Yedda, and blushed with something between shame and anger. What did it matter in a moment like this, that Tyne was clan born? How could that excuse him if he were wrong?

“We use violence when we have to. We do *not*—” here, he hit the table with his fist— “use violence without *thinking*. As a way to solve an argument, or prove a point. If you are not mature enough to be a guard, I have no choice than to remove you from the street. If you let your

temper get the better of you out there, no matter *what* the circumstance..." he pointed to the door of his office: "*you will get yourself and others killed. Do I make myself clear?*"

"Yes, sir," said Yedda. "I'm sorry." She had to bite her tongue to stop from crying. She couldn't cry in front of Tyne and Dalton. She couldn't afford to look any more emotional than she already did.

Dalton took a deep breath.

"Good," he said, his voice softening to its normal tone. He finally took his seat at the head of the table. "Then let's talk like civilized folk. Yedda, you said Tyne was being inappropriate. So, tell me: what did he do that was so bad you felt the need to hit him?"

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Yedda sat in Chilton's suite, miserable. On the officer's floor, each room had its own common area, bedchamber, latrine, and tiny study. They sat in the common area.

Chilton poured himself a small glass of golden liquor. He stopped pouring, looked at how much he had, and then poured more. He put the stopper back in the bottle and sat down across from Yedda with a sigh. They had been told to wait inside while Dalton decided what to do.

"I'm sorry," Yedda said. "I let you down. I'm a bully. I shouldn't be a guard."

"Stop it, please. You're overreacting."

"You heard what Commander Dalton said. I was wrong."

"Listen. There are rules, and then there are truths. They aren't always the same. You understand that, don't you? The law isn't always right."

"But we're supposed to protect it. We're supposed to enforce it."

"Yes," said Chilton. "That doesn't mean you can't have your own opinions. Alright? If it were up to me, Tyne would have been thrown out of the guard years ago. Someone like that..." Chilton shook his head. "He isn't worth much." Chilton took a gulp of the liquor. "It's wrong, and it's foul. Dalton interprets the laws word by word, not by his own opinions. He said what he felt he needed to say. That doesn't mean it's true or that you're wrong."

"But I shouldn't have hit him," said Yedda.

"I'm proud as anything that you did. I wish I had been there. I would have hit him for you."

"It's not like he tried anything," said Yedda.

"Don't defend him. You know he was about to, so don't second-guess yourself. If you said no, that was more than enough. He shouldn't have started on you in the first place."

Yedda began to cry.

"Yedda, Yedda. It's okay. We'll get this sorted out."

"He insulted you, too," said Yedda. She had been too embarrassed to say anything to Dalton about that.

"He did? What did he say?"

She told him what Tyne had said about Lodan.

"Oh, of all the... he's not even creative about it. It's okay, Yedda. I've heard it all before. From my family, even: 'Gillemars need heirs,' that sort of trash."

“How could that make it okay?”

“You're right. It's not okay, not really. But I don't need *you* to defend my honor. I don't ever want you fighting on my behalf, alright? It's sweet, but Lodan and I can take care of ourselves. Is that clear? Never risk your health or your job over me. That's not the way this works. I'm supposed to take care of you. Alright?”

Yedda kept crying.

“Lass, lass,” said Chilton. “After everything that happened, *this* is what you cry over?”

“What if I'm like you?”

“You mean—if you prefer women, and other non-men?” Yedda nodded, and then shrugged, her face full of tears.

“Then it's as simple as that, and Tyne can shove his stupid ideas up his... well. You know the rest.”

“But...”

“It doesn't matter,” said Chilton. “Some like one, some another, some any type, some none at all. You don't need to know for sure. The important thing is that, whoever you choose to love, nobody pushes anyone else to do or agree to anything they don't want to. So long as everybody involved is an adult and you're certain you all want it to happen, I don't care what you do. Anybody who does isn't worth your time.”

“Thank you,” said Yedda, wiping off her eyes.

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In light of his long-standing record of harassment, Tyne was dismissed from the guard without ceremony or honor. Better yet, Dalton submitted every complaint that had been made against him to the Justice for review. A month later, when the courts got around to Tyne, he found himself with additional repercussions. Two women from the second tier heard about his case and came forward with their own stories about Tyne's behavior. He was sentenced to spend two years and three months in jail. It might have been longer, but he was a third cousin of the powerful Gillemar clan—technically a relative of Chilton's—and had once been a captain of the guard. Anyone who had ever complained about him, including Yedda, was lesser born.

Yedda's punishment was far milder. Dalton banned her from going on patrols for two weeks. He didn't want her to use the time for fun or relaxation, however.

“Don't think I'm unsympathetic,” said Dalton. “You were right to protect yourself. But there were other measures you could have taken. You should have run and found help. You should have used your horn—you were right next to the guardhouse! I'm punishing you to teach you that violence is never a casual matter, especially against a clan born—not that Tyne was right to do what he did. I'm sure we can find ways to keep you busy.” For two weeks, Yedda washed dishes, shoveled the stable clean, organized the storerooms, and helped to copy old arrest records out of a book whose cheap pages were beginning to crumble. She would have been permitted to fight in the guard tournament that year for the first time, but Dalton revoked the right. He didn't want her to glory in violence.

She took both her punishment and Chilton's perspective seriously. She would never let someone like Tyne have his way with her, or with anyone else. But neither would she escalate to violence, she promised herself, unless it really was the last resort she had.

CHAPTER

Murdoc sat staring at his thumb for a long time. There was a drop of blood beading up from where a nail had broken his skin.

“Land and skies, boy,” said Finian. “What's wrong with you? Haven't you ever used a hammer before?”

“No,” said Murdoc.

“This is useless,” Finian moaned. “Okay, stop, put everything down. This isn't going to work. Clearly, we need help.”

Finian hired Lise's whole family from Wolfstooth to build them a second house up in the mountains. There was no way to know when Sileas' folk would show, but their cabin already felt strained with just the three of them.

“I'm sorry, but you really shouldn't stay,” he told Corliss. “You look too Bound.”

“Fine,” said Corliss. “Tell them I'm on a hunting trip, then, or they'll wonder what you need another house for.”

“They'll wonder anyways, when people start coming,” Finian grumbled. “There's going to be a lot of talk in that town.”

“I'll go with Corliss,” said Murdoc. “I'll sense when they leave, after all. So we'll be back right after.”

“Fine. But you'd best *both* behave yourselves. You return as human as you've left.”

Both Corliss and Murdoc wore full leather bags carrying supplies. They brought blankets to lie on top of, a metal pot to boil water in, two knives, and food from the garden. Meat, Corliss could hunt. They found a rock overhang half a day up the mountain and built their camp there.

She was learning to hunt with her spirit. It was late August, and the woods were full of grouse, hare, and deer. With a good deal of concentration, she drew heat out of her prey and left it dead; a pair of scrawny hares became their dinner. The hares felt as cold as if they'd been on ice. The act left her sweating and shaky, dizzy and faint.

“It's good practice,” she told Murdoc, breathing labored, when he expressed concern.

The scales were growing. Both of her hands were covered. If the scales were not so seamless with her skin, it would look as though she wore tight-fitting gloves.

That night Corliss lay next to Murdoc and looked up at the stars, scattered like flour between the gaps of the trees. She felt for him in her mind.

What?

You didn't get me anything for my birthday.

Neither had Finian, but neither of them mentioned that.

What do you want?

A favor. I get to ask you for something, and you have to do it.

Good, he said with a touch of humor. **We don't have any money.**

Then it's agreed? We have a deal? She tried to keep her heart from pounding.

Sure, fire-heart. Whatever you want.

You have to show me the parts of you that aren't human.

He sat up.

Unfair. You tricked us.

You should have thought about that. You're supposed to be the wise one.

You know better than to ask us that.

“It isn't fair. You know everything about me. You see the girl and the spirit.”

It's not a risk we are willing to take.

“I won't think any less of you. Is that what you're worried about?”

No. We know better than that.

She reached out and touched his shoulder. He shrugged her off, stood up, and walked a few feet away.

“Then at least tell me why,” said Corliss, sitting up. “At least tell me that.”

Fine. He waited a long moment before starting, though, his mind and his mouth both silent to her. When he spoke, it was only as the boy, without the spirit.

“I was seven when I was Bound. There was a woman, a maid who cared for me. You understand? She was more of a mother than my own mother was. Something crawled up my back and bit me, right where my neck and my head met... I couldn't get it off.” His voice was soft. She strained to hear him over the forest's choir of bugs. “I went to her and told her. She looked at it, and... went crazy, I suppose. She threw herself in the lake and drowned. It was too much for her. Everyone thought seeing her die made a mess of me, but it didn't. It was... it whispers to me. I can feel it, feel its weight at the back of my head. I can hear it. But I can't get rid of it. Whatever it is. Something so horrible she'd rather die than live in its world.”

“You don't know? You've never seen it?”

“No,” he said. “And I won't let anyone else, either. So please don't ask again.”

“Is that why you won't let me touch you? Or do you not like to be touched?”

“Yes. No. I don't know. I've barely felt another human in... nine years? I'm on fire when I touch you. I'm scared, Corliss. I'm really, truly scared. If you left or hated me, that'd be one thing. But I can't have you dying because of me.”

“I'm not human. I'm not going to die.”

“Please, Corliss, please don't.”

“I won't. I promise. I won't try to make you show me again.”

He came back to where she was sitting.

“Thank you,” he said.

“I'm sorry you had to go through that,” she said.

“The world is full of madness and wisdom,” he said. “I've learned nothing is all bad or good.”

“I can't imagine anything good about that,” she said.

“If I had stayed human all those years ago, none of this would have happened. You'd be human, too. I'd be a bastard clan heir and you'd be a kitchen maid. I'd rather be with you in the

woods than have us both at Dorchalt proper, and still worlds apart. And things are changing in the valley, because of us. Or, they will be.”

They both lay back down. When Corliss was almost asleep, Murdoc reached out and slowly took her hand.

“Is this okay?” he asked.

“Yes,” she said. “For as long as you want it to be.”

CHAPTER

Yedda was seventeen. For the past year, she had been a regular member of the guard. She went on patrols without immediate supervision and took shifts at night. She was still in Chilton's squadron. All the new guards were insulted at first that a lesser born under the required age was senior to them. They quickly got over it when they saw how well she worked and how the other adults respected her.

Yedda was reading in her room when the bells began to toll. The chiming started in the bell tower of the morning palace and carried down through the city. The great bell at the top of the guardhouse began to clang with the others.

These were not the short peals that marked the passing of the hours, but a long, unending noise. She set down her book and went into the common room, where Anluan pulled on his coat.

“What is it?”

“I don't know,” he said. “Come find out.”

They went all the way down to the street, other guards spilling out of the building with them. Yedda picked out Chilton's bald brown head in front of them, separated by a mass of bodies. Minutes dragged by, the bells still ringing. Whoever pulled the ropes to make them sing must have been getting tired. At long last the noise quieted and whispers began to run through the crowd.

“Somebody died?” Yedda asked, standing up on her tiptoes and peering as far as she could.

As was common in crowds, rumors began to spread, so that it took a long time for anybody to be certain exactly what the truth was. The first time Yedda heard that the Sovereign Morven of Gillemar had breathed his last, she didn't believe it. After the fifth time she heard the news, she began to accept it was true. She didn't even wait for the royal messenger to travel through the street.

“I'm going back in,” she told Anluan. “It's cold out here.”

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The palace bell rang every hour the next day. During dinner in the guardhouse, a reader recited a lament and read passages from the *Book of Adlen*. At Yedda's table, a handful of guards lingered after the meal.

“The Righardans are going to win,” said Anluan. “Back and forth, those two. Never give any other clans a chance.”

"It could be another Gillemar," said Chilton, wagging his eyebrows. "We've done it twice in a row before."

"How do the trials work?" asked Yedda. "I wasn't born yet last time."

"Ah, baby duck," said Nyla. "I forget how little you are. The trials are lots of fun."

"Don't pretend you remember them," said Chilton. "I was only ten, myself."

"Just answer the question," Yedda said.

Everyone turned to Chilton. He was the highest ranking clansman at their table, though nobody could quite figure out whether he was a first or second cousin of the Gillemar clan. He was always vague about it. What mattered was that he wasn't going to inherit, wasn't an heir, and rarely attended family functions.

"It happens in stages," he said. "A lot of it is just show, truth be told, and bears little weight on the actual decision. Each of the clans have parades where they display their chosen heir. They spend days giving each other fancy gifts and hosting dinner parties for the other heirs. Let's see. There's a horse race, and a deer hunt... general festivities, that sort of thing. It's mostly up to the sovereign's Bound who they want to follow next. They go to all of this, and judge the heirs on their qualities. The heirs all give them gifts; that's why Gillemar and Righardan win so much, probably. The richer you are, the more the Bound like you. Spirits are all greedy for something, especially the older they get. The heirs all have to display their family relics, too, and how well they can wield them. That's a big one. Let's see, what else. There's the day of questions, when the Bound all interrogate the heirs. My favorite is when they lock all the heirs and the Bound into a room without food or water. Whoever comes out alive..."

"Now you're just pulling our legs," said Nyla.

"Alright, I made that one up," Chilton admitted. "Some of it's public, some of it isn't. In a few weeks, give or take, they'll tell us who our next Sovereign is. That's all there is to it."

"Well, I think it's exciting," said Anluan. "I can't wait to see what happens."

"Exciting? The Sovereign died. Have some respect, you little traitor," said Nyla, wrapping her arm around him in a loose headlock. "What was he like, Chilton?"

Anluan peeled her wrist away.

"Morven? I don't really know," Chilton said. "Once you put on that crown, a lot of things change. It's not like he was writing me for lunch. His son, though? Ogden? I like Ogden. He's got a decent head on his shoulders. He'll be the heir."

"Well, I can tell you one change," said Nyla, looking around the table at all of them. "If you think you'll be getting so much as an afternoon off, I pity you."

"None of us will sleep for a month," said Chilton. "You're probably right about that."

-

Nyla's prediction was true. They managed to sleep, but there was no free time. The only people they socialized with were other guards, grunting wearily to each other across the cafeteria tables. Everybody worked double shifts. Most days Yedda was on the street from before dawn until after dusk, with only an hour's break for lunch, and that always at a strange time. She was used to long days, though, and while she would have welcomed a break she managed without

much trouble. She was luckier than the guards with the nighttime shift, working from sunset to sunrise, barely seeing the light of day at all. The commanders were kind enough to keep the night and day shifts mostly separate, since it would have been horrible to try and shift their sleep schedules so rapidly.

They did more escorts than they had ever done before. Every clan member from the lowland, apart from one or two who stayed behind to oversee their land, had come to the city. There were more highborn clan members in the city than could be protected by their own guards.

Most days there was at least *something* to look at. The lesser born were happy to have a reason to celebrate, even if it didn't much matter to them who was on the throne next. A monarch was a monarch, but when else could you see the Bound making their way down the main road? When else did a caravan of gilt carriages push through the crowds, showering the ground with hundreds of copper coins and candies that folk rushed to pick up?

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In only half a week Yedda became impatient for the Bound to pick a new leader. She understood the need for a Sovereign more now than she ever had. It was truly an inhuman city.

The temperature dropped dramatically and they had their first snow in years. Before, a Bound had brought warm breezes from the southern sea. Blacksmiths suddenly found themselves hammering out shovels, which sold faster than they could be produced: the streets needed to be cleared.

Disease, too, seemed worse. Everybody knew someone with a feverish cold. A stomach bug, blessedly brief, took a tour of the city, hopping from one body to the next.

Of course, there were good things. In the way of the Bound, they could not create from nothing, but only pull from somewhere else. As often as not, the lower tiers of the city had been a source of fodder for the clan-folk at the top. The days, inexplicably, seemed to last longer. Those who weren't sick felt like they had more energy. Yedda heard with a pang of guilt that though illness was worse on the third tier, the impoverished lesser born of the first felt healthier than they had in years. She hadn't realized how much she benefited from the Bound. Others had been sick for her own good health.

Yedda caught a few thieves, and dealt with more drunken revelers than was typical. There were no other notable changes in crime.

One day, Chilton assigned her to patrol a parade route. He sent her to the lower half of the third tier's main road. The clans were ready to formally present their candidates for the crown.

A parade of all the clans and their heirs was meant to walk from the first tier up to the morning palace. The captains on duty and the more experienced members of their squadrons traveled with the parade. Other guards lined the main road at intervals, both as a precaution and also to hold the crowd back from the street. The winding main road was cleared of snow and civilians. All other traffic would be kept to the side-roads that day, a burden for shipments and anyone who couldn't travel by stairs. Those who wanted to watch pressed up against the buildings, leaned out windows, or crowded into cross-streets and alleys.

A gray day. Snow fell lightly, making it difficult to see more than a few dozen feet in front of her. The beauty was lost on Yedda, who shivered and stifled a yawn. She suspected she was finally falling victim to the dreaded cold. Anluan had been snuffling the night before. Now her nose was stuffy and running by turns. She stood in the cleared street, pacing up and down the length of two-dozen shop fronts with an eye on the crowd.

A man in a busy alley yelled the price of hot roasted chestnuts and almonds. Yedda had half a mind to stop and buy a little parcel of them just to warm her hands.

Time dragged on. The parade would arrive any moment, she was sure, coming up around the bend of the street. She welcomed it. She could not go home until it passed.

A horn sounded. At first she thought it was part of the parade. Another had gone through the day before, and the noise had been thunderous. But the longer she listened, the more she realized it couldn't be. She heard no cheering or fanfare. No drums. No, she heard a guard's horn blowing, the sound repeated at intervals. The snowfall muffled it.

It came from the second tier, in the direction of the parade. Yedda sprinted down the twisting road, mindful of the wet cobblestones below her feet. If only she had been one of the guards put on a horse for the day! She could only travel so fast with her own two legs.

Before long she was met by a crowd rushing towards her. She made a noise like a hiss and came to a stop, drawing her sword and stepping into her fighter's stance. But the crowd wasn't coming to hurt her. They weren't rioters. They parted around her, giving wide berth to the guard with a live blade. When she realized they were running from, not to, Yedda continued forward. She held her sword out to the side so that if she fell, she wouldn't be in trouble.

The fine carriages of the clans were at a halt. City and clan guards ringed the carriages, weapons drawn. The alley folk had fled, but some on the main street were trapped against the buildings. They huddled away from the spears and swords.

Corpses ringed the carriages, blanketing the ground. Most wore civilian clothes, but Yedda could see a few guards mixed in.

She had to focus to keep breathing. She had stopped running, but her heart wouldn't slow down.

There was a horse on the ground, stuffed with arrows, as if it were a pincushion. More arrows came out of human bodies, or out of the sides of the carriages.

The scene in front of her couldn't possibly be real. Had she ever seen a body before? She couldn't remember, couldn't think. That was right—the clinic—but it was nothing to this.

It had been an ambush. But the majority of the bodies were not stuck with arrows. She could see no blood, no open wounds. They lay still as stones. They pressed unmoving against the cobbles, skin shriveled and loose.

It was the work of a Bound.

There was no other explanation. For a terrifying moment Yedda thought a Bound had attacked the clans. But that was impossible, no. This Bound had acted in *defense* of the heirs. The deaths were merely indiscriminate.

“Clear the path!” Chilton shouted.

Yedda's clenched jaw softened: he was alive. Chilton worked his way out of the knot of carriages. He held a sword in one hand, but the other dangled, useless. An arrow was buried deep

into his shoulder. He saw Yedda, but did not waste the time to greet her. He directed guards, conducting their movements with his sword.

“Anyone on foot, *go*, search the houses, find them! You, and Anluan, help move these bodies. Horsemen, ring the carriages! Ready a charge to the palace!”

The gates to the city were shut. Nobody was to come or go without leave from a monarch. Yedda hoped the order hadn't come too late to stop those responsible from escaping.

She found no weapons when she searched the houses after the riot. Indeed, in some of the apartments directly surrounding the scene, there was almost no sign of life. She made a mental note of which buildings they were, and Chilton filed a request at the city archives for the deeds to them. They had possibly housed the archers responsible for the fight.

The guards called it the parade ambush, but the city folk were talking about it as the flower riot. The reason was not hard to see. When Yedda returned to the scene of the crime the next day, all the bodies had been cleared away, but the street bloomed. A Bound had pulled the life from the guards and civilians around the carriages, but in the way of the Bound there was no death without life. It had gone into the street, into the weeds and seeds that slumbered between the cobbles. Never mind the cold, snowy weather: vivid, thriving plant life covered the block.

The clans continued to hold the sovereign trials from their palaces, with their own guards for protection. There would be no more traveling down to the lower tiers of the city. Clan guards blocked every road and staircase from the third tier up the cliff to the fourth.

None of the clan heirs had died in the attack. It was their servants, guards, and horses that had been hurt.

A number of city guards had lost their lives, but there was little time to mourn. Nyla was among them, and captain Daigre as well. More than one night in a row, Yedda cried herself to sleep. Whenever she closed her eyes she remembered some other moment she'd shared with one of them. By turns, she felt weak and angry. She would have gone a week without rest if she could have caught the traitors who attacked the carriages.

Two captains were dead. Commander Dalton didn't want to give promotions in the middle of the unrest. Instead he divided their squadrons between the surviving leaders. Though Chilton had lost Nyla and two others during the attack, he suddenly found himself the captain of twenty-two guards instead of fifteen, and in charge of patrolling a larger swathe of the city.

CHAPTER

Halfway up the slope, Ulla found a stone and brushed off the few inches of snow that covered it. Beside her the ice-choked stream shivered its way down-mountain.

“Don't you do it,” the smuggler said to her chestnut horse. The animal buckled his front legs as if he might roll. That wouldn't do for the saddle, or the goods inside the bags.

She only intended to stop a short while: not long enough to untack and give the creature freedom. Ulla looped the reins around a barren branch and fished a clay ale bottle from one of the bags.

She wished she could save this bottle to share with Finian, but alcohol was something of a sore point with him these days. Everything he had made, he had sold to the people of Wolfstooth. In the last moments of peace before their war broke loose, he'd cleaned out his brewing supplies. The mountain settlement was dry.

He'd snatched a bottle away just last month, when she'd brought him another supporter. "Not in this house, please," he'd said. "You want to drink, go to the barrack."

"You're kidding," said Ulla.

"I've got a Bound with a drinking problem," said Finian, "and that's the last we'll talk of it. Will you take it away, then, or should I pour this out?"

Ulla had left with a grumble; it was an expensive wine, though she'd paid very little for it. Courtesy of the trade. It was the same situation now, but she wouldn't let any of her goods go to waste.

Besides, it was pretty on the slope. There was a wind, and a lump of snow melting in her left boot, and the beer tasted as cold as the wretched air, but it was beautiful here. This low, most of the trees were not hardy evergreens, but southern varieties that had long ago dropped their leaves. Through the tall trunks she could see a good way down the mountain. White snow, brown wood, and blue-grey sky clear above. Some of the limbs shimmered under the sun, encased in ice and topped with thin lines of snow that balanced wetly until the wind clattered and dusted them away.

She'd gone to the mountains nearly every month of the past year, and watched them sway to the seasons. This, now, might be the last time. Likely enough. She smuggled no refugees, no fugitives. This time all she carried was a letter from Sileas, a letter whose contents would not be very welcome. No, she could wait to arrive. Wait and enjoy her drink.

Her breath fogged. It was quiet and peaceful. Next to her, the horse lowered his head as far as the reins would allow and lipped at the snow.

At last she poured out the bottle's remains and tucked the empty vessel back into the saddle pouch hollow.

"Come on, then," said Ulla. She used the rock as a mounting block: layers of winter clothes rendered her too immobile to mount from the ground. With a press of her ankles she urged the horse up the slope. At least the houses ahead would be comfortable and warm.

Corliss kept the buildings heated in winter and cool in summer. Sileas had sent two dozen fugitives, and Ulla had rounded up some lowland farmers. They spent their time training with weapons, or socializing in Wolfstooth. Whether or not the people there wanted their town overrun with rebels, overrun it was. There was no pretending now who Finian was. The strange wealthy brewer who'd moved up their mountain a few years back was suddenly either hero or warlord, depending how you viewed things.

Ulla preferred this place to the city, truth told, where the bustle was welcome but the company itself was not. Sileas was good enough, for a rich academic sort, but he wasn't worthy of the reverence his followers gave him. He was not humble enough for Ulla's taste, though she believed in what he was doing. This warband, a mix of angry country folk and radical city expatriates, suited her.

Only Finian worried her. She trusted him implicitly, but he was a different man than he'd been, years back, when Sileas named him general.

Sileas thought Finian would come through, when the war came. Ulla couldn't help but wonder if someone else should have been put in his place.

She came into view of the cabins as a dog barked alarm. Birch, welcoming or warning, as was the hound's way.

"Ulla!" someone shouted, opening a door and waving at the rider. Ulla raised her own hand in response. She let her horse into the paddock, unloaded, and entered the large front cabin that served as a meeting place. Others came in after her and gathered around in excitement. They all knew Ulla well: she had brought each of them to Finian and his Bound, smuggled them out of the city and kept them company through the woods and the slopes.

"You're alone?" Finian asked, embracing her. Their hug lasted a long, welcome moment; Ulla shivered out the last of the winter cold and nodded as she stepped back.

"I've brought news only."

"Why? Something's changed?"

"The city's in uproar. The Sovereign's been dead for weeks. The riots have begun."

Everybody in the cabin reeled, some more visibly than others. A few breathed out curses or exclamations of surprise.

They all knew what it meant. They were all sworn to oath.

Ulla fished the much-folded letter out of her pocket and handed it to Finian.

There were detailed instructions on how to proceed. Things were in motion, said Sileas, and it was time for them to come down from the mountains, time for them to honor their oaths.

The last line on the paper was simple, straightforward.

It read: *Wreak havoc. Burn it all.*

CHAPTER

"We start with Duitiel Proper," Finian said definitively, smacking his hand on the table. Everybody who lived with him in the mountains had gathered as best as they could in the small room. "With the trials, it'll be practically unguarded."

"It's too small a target," Ulla argued from the back row of the gathering. "We could do *real* damage to Gillemar or Righardan, before the trials end."

"It's the nearest proper, we'll take it while we can. Once we've started moving, word will spread very quickly."

There was general muttering between them all. At last Ulla raised her hands in defeat.

"If you think it's fine, Finian, do it," said Ulla. "You're in command."

Nobody wanted to harm the common born. The clans were their target. It was three day's walk to Duitiel Proper. They would travel there together, with as much stealth as they could. Thirty-some warriors and two Bound, against a fortress with its relic bound and many guards away in the city. If they couldn't smash Duitiel Proper to rubble, they could at least do serious damage to it.

You're excited.

Of course. We've been waiting for this, thought Corliss.

You should not be so eager to burn, fire-heart. Your lizard will get the best of you if you let him.

I know. I'm not a fool, thought Corliss, though in reality she was hungry for the fires she knew would come. *It's more than that.*

Then what?

My sister. She gave her life for Sileas' revolution, for this moment. And now I'm finally...

Corliss struggled for the words, but she could feel Murdoc's mind closing off to her. He didn't want to talk anymore. She looked at him but his face was blank and flat. Perhaps something else was going on, Corliss thought. Something more important for him to listen to, or his spirit speaking too loudly for him to hear anything else. With a sigh and a pang of jealousy, she wandered outside. If he wanted space, she wasn't going to deny it to him.

The next day they packed the belongings they needed and all the food they could carry. Everybody had at least a knife, and everybody but Corliss and Murdoc carried more serious weapons as well.

Birch followed at Finian's heel. Corliss turned to look at the little cluster of houses one last time as they made their way down the mountain. It was strange to think she had spent the last few years hidden away, waiting for Sileas to summon her. Now the world was her battlefield, and she could move as she wished. Well, as Finian wished. It seemed much the same thing.

Inside her skin, there was a rumbling, a bubbling, a pot with the water rising. For years she had been guarded and measured and told to control herself, to suppress her nature, to burn only a little at a time.

Before her spread the lowland. The trees opened up and left them with pastureland, a quilted landscape of farms and fields.

At long last, she was going to burn.

Duitiel Proper nestled in a thick forest, some miles away from the mountains. A tall wooden fence surrounded the large castle and its attendant buildings. On the wide meadows in front of the walls, Duitiel village made a healthy living supporting the castle and the clan family. Though the town was small, every industry could be found there: a book-binder, a hair-dresser, a flutist and a singer; a jeweler, a cobbler, and many more. For artisans who did not dream of a bustling city life, Duitiel Proper was not a wretched place to live.

The castle had a key weakness in its defenses. The main building was heavy stone with no wide windows in reach of the ground, but the forest gave its defenders poor visibility.

As a smuggler Ulla traveled all over the lowland. She knew Duitiel better than the rest of the group, though she herself said she wasn't an expert.

She led Finian, Corliss, and the others through open fields and paths for two days, then into the dark forest. Going was slow since they didn't follow the paths, but as they approached the proper the risks of being seen grew higher.

Now they all huddled in the woods, a half-hour walk from the fence surrounding the Proper. Murdoc and Ulla had just returned from scouting. They had not made it inside the walls, but the trees here were tall and many-limbed. They climbed as high as they could and had a brief view of the roof-tops.

“You think it’ll burn?” asked Corliss.

“Some. Not the castle, but there were wooden buildings. Stables and the like.” It was Ulla who answered. Murdoc had wandered a little ways off, in search of something resembling solitude.

“We’ll target those first,” said Finian. “Start one at a time, get everyone outside... what about the gate? Is it guarded?”

“Not the back one. Just locked.”

“How considerate of them. I wonder if we can break through it.”

“I’ll handle it,” said Corliss. “I can get you inside.”

“It’s not a good time to experiment,” said Finian.

“It’s a wooden fence,” said Corliss. “How much easier could they make it?”

-

They camped overnight and waited for sunrise to attack. Though night would have given them a nice surprise, Finian argued against attacking in the dark: the castle’s defenders knew the landscape. *They* did not, and would be at a severe disadvantage if they couldn’t see well.

They stirred awake as the forest began to brighten, shaking the cold from their bones. Corliss kept them warm enough to sleep without a fire, but not warm enough to be entirely comfortable: she was saving her strength. She had a fight ahead of her.

Near the fence line, Ulla and two others who were handy with a bow leaped into the trees. They scurried like squirrels with quivers and tightened bows slung over their shoulders. Corliss followed reluctantly. She would have preferred to stay on the ground, but she needed to see the buildings if she was going to start a fire in any of them.

The tall stone castle rose as high as the trees. Clustered around it were shorter wooden buildings. Their arched roofs just poked above the wooden fence. Corliss studied them thoughtfully for a moment. The longest building looked like it might be a stable. She thought she could see the double-doors typical to a horse yard, though it was hard to be certain from her angle. She would start there so they might have a chance to let loose some of the animals before pandemonium and battle took precedence.

She had never started such a large fire. She felt like a child in front of an open toy box full of new delights.

Be careful.

She looked down and for a moment was dizzied by the height. Murdoc leaned against her tree. He didn’t look up to see her. Corliss turned away, back to the buildings, and narrowed her gaze on the long wooden stable.

She pulled heat from the air, from the rising sun, and concentrated it on the lowest part of the building she could see: a section of wall near the roof. Fire liked to go up. She wanted to give it somewhere to go.

For a moment there was nothing. It was cold outside. Then a small flicker of red, a growing spark, a lick of heat. She felt a deep, giddy pleasure. She had started this. To see a flame was more rewarding than to simply warm a room. Unlike the hearth-fires she was used to starting, this fire had ambition, had a future, had fuel. She watched greedily as the flame grew, and for a moment in the tree she swayed away from the trunk.

The motion brought her back to her senses. Corliss tightened her grip, only to realize her fingers were cold and aching. She shivered, teeth chattering for a moment. Had she given the fire some of her own warmth? No matter, it would return to her soon. The boiling sun rose higher in the sky.

Soon there were shouts from the yard below. Corliss wished she could take to the air like a bird to watch. Perhaps she should climb higher. Ulla and the others were twice as high as she was, but Corliss didn't want to be any further from the ground. Besides, she'd have to go down soon.

She waited, letting her body thaw and watching the fire as it grew. It was the most beautiful sight she had ever seen. Soon half the roof was smoking.

Starting the next fire was easier. She chose a small building next to the stable. The heat was already there. She had only to take some from the great fire to start another small one. Corliss waited a few minutes before encouraging the flame to jump again. In the span of a quarter-hour, half the buildings in the castle yard were on fire. Corliss climbed down from the tree as quickly as she could, heart pounding. She almost slipped more than once, but regained herself.

The back gate was still closed. If anyone was fleeing, they left through the front. Finian patted her on the back as she passed him. He'd drawn his sword. So had the others. Only Murdoc appeared weaponless.

There was a handle on the gate. Corliss placed her hand over the metal. She coaxed the fire from the houses to come to her. She only needed a little heat. Fire-warmth crumbled the wood around the lock, and the metal came away in her hand. The door smoldered a little. Corliss pushed it open, and Finian led his group of fighters inside.

She slumped to the ground. Her scaled hands felt the same as ever, but the rest of her body felt as though pins shot through it.

"You've lost some color," said Murdoc, standing over her. Only he and the archers remained with her outside the gate "Can you stand up?"

Corliss nodded, but didn't move. He hesitated for a moment, then took her by the arm and hauled her, stumbling, to her feet.

"You're cold! Are you alright?"

"Just tired."

"You've done your part. Let's hide you so you can rest."

Corliss followed him meekly back into the woods. Behind them, shouts of alarm gave way to screams of pain and terror. There were strange men and women with swords inside the gates, and arrows raining down from above: the Duitiels and their servants panicked.

“We should help,” said Corliss.

You're no help this way. And they do not need us.

-

Murdoc stumbled into the woods, muttering that he'd return when he could. He needed to be away from people, after overfeeling so much violence. Nobody heard him except for Corliss, who heard him in her mind.

They executed the Duitiel guards. They buried their own dead, and threw the Duitiel guards on the burning remains of the outbuildings. The air was full of the stench of burnt meat.

It took them some time to find Corliss, asleep in the woods, and she woke up when they carried her into the Proper to guard her.

Nobody from the village came to see what was happening, though it was inconceivable to think they had not noticed the fires and the screaming. In fear, the villagers hid rather than involve themselves in what seemed like clan business.

Five of their number died during the fighting. A sixth lost her hand, and passed soon after from blood loss, despite their best attempts to bind the wound. There were other injuries, but nothing life threatening. That left the two Bound and twenty-eight, Finian and Ulla among them.

When they searched the castle, they found plenty of servants: kitchen help, scullery maids, and one steward brandishing a knife. There were two young children in rooms fine enough to make them high-ranking Duitiel clan members, and a terrified Duitiel clan born who jumped at Finian swinging a flimsy, decorated sword. *That* killing was fast, but Finian could not bring himself to harm the crying children.

The children and the staff were herded into the great hall.

“Duitiel proper has fallen,” said Finian. “Soon the rest of the valley will as well. You have no masters, no monarchs or heirs. So long as you do not harm any of us, we all swear to protect you. We have come to free you and ourselves.”

None of the servants spoke.

“You're free,” said Finian. “The clan no longer commands you. You can leave if you want to.”

“Are the Duitiels really gone?” one of the men asked.

“From here,” Finian said. “Yes. For now. I'm sure they'll be back before long, but not for good. We're going to put an end to them all.”

“Nobody can beat the clans,” someone said.

“Watch us, then,” said Finian. “We have Bound on our side. We won't stop until every clan has fallen.”

“What will they do to us when they return?” one of the maids wondered aloud, tugging fretfully at her sleeves.

“The other Duitiels? Probably kill you,” said Finian. “Almost certainly, they’ll blame you for the attack. Even if you wrapped us up in chains and waited for them to return, you’d be in trouble. That’s our fault, and I’m sorry for it. So your options are: you can wait for whatever justice the clan dispenses, or you can flee on your own across the lowland, or you can join us. You don’t have to fight if you don’t want to. We need folk with all sorts of talents.”

“Join you for what?” one of the men asked.

“Shut up,” another shot back. “Don’t humor them, Wyndam. They’re killers.”

“So are the clans,” said Ulla, speaking up. She folded her arms across her chest. “It’s time someone stood up to them. You can join us in freeing the lowland, or you can fend for yourselves. Nobody’s forcing your hand.”

“We’re resting for a few hours and then leaving,” said Finian. “We intend to be long gone by the time word reaches the city. If you want to come with us, go get ready. We travel light.”

They gave the same offer to the villagers. Then they returned to the castle. They were all tired, and none of them felt very victorious.

They were in shock, haunted by the silence their dead left behind. There were six pairs of legs too few among them, six faces conspicuously absent.

Corliss slept again while the others worked. Telon, one of the men, left to see how many of the horses he could catch. The others combed through the castle in exhausted silence. This time they were not looking for people, but for goods. The archers stuffed their quivers full of arrows. Almost all of them exchanged their weapons for ones of better make.

Some of the villagers and servants took weapons as well: it seemed they meant to travel with Finian. Nobody fought or challenged him. Perhaps they were scared, knowing there were Bound. Or perhaps, thought Finian, they had lived in hatred of the clans for years. Perhaps that hatred was strong enough to overrule the violence Finian had brought to them.

The fighters picked simple clothes from the laundry rooms, since theirs were blood-splattered, and ate from the kitchen. They destroyed everything that could be destroyed. They hacked mattresses and furniture apart, smashed ceramics, and slashed open a series of Duitiel portraits that had been done on stretched linen. The food they couldn’t carry or give to the villagers they set to spoil. They opened sealed cans and split grain bags for the mice to get at.

Ulla and Finian bundled up the contents of the treasure room. They hauled the bags of jewels, gold, ornaments, and fine antiques into the village streets and dumped them.

“If you aren’t coming with us, at least take some of the spoils,” Ulla said to a man and his daughter coming out of their house, preparing their bags and a horse on which to flee the village. “I promise it’ll all fetch a pretty price.”

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When Corliss woke up, Murdoc turned around in the woods and began to walk swiftly back to the castle. He could feel that something had changed. Her voice in his mind was not entirely familiar.

Fire-heart?

Brother whisper.

Let go of her. Sleep again, lizard. Her body is not yours.

The laugh was low and slow.

Oh, brother whisper, said the spirit. *It is our body. We share it now.*

Corliss changed, and changed quickly. Her eyes were yellow, and her skin was hard. The scales, which had crept down her forearms, now covered her uniformly. They were small, like tiny beads, only noticeable up close. Gloves and a hat would no longer be enough to make her look human. In her mouth, her tongue felt different. Longer, more flexible. She had never felt so comfortable in her own skin. Not within her memory, at least. She felt that she was no longer at war with the spirit.

Corliss stretched, smiling slightly. The air was run through with a smoky smell. She could feel the dying heat of the burned buildings, even from inside the castle; she was sensitive to the warm call of the embers and the fire-eaten beams.

Murdoc was returning, and soon they would leave.

Ulla took one look at Corliss, and her eyes widened.

“Let’s find you a covering,” said Ulla, taking Corliss by the arm and steering her towards the laundry stair. “You can’t go traipsing around the lowland looking like that. You *scream* Bound.”

“We are Bound,” said Corliss, pulling her arm away.

“We? Don’t go feral on us now, little lizard. We’re all proud of you, but the whole world doesn’t need to know you aren’t human. Not while we’re on the run.”

“We shouldn’t be running,” said Corliss. “We can stay here. This is a nice place, a fire place.”

“They’d send whole armies after us if we tried to set up fort,” said Ulla, and opened the door. She pawed through the pile of clothes the rest of them had already gone through, and measured a cloak against Corliss’s height.

“Then whole armies will burn,” said Corliss.

“No,” said Ulla, and dropped the cloak, searching for one of a better fit. “Listen, you don’t have to be human, but you do have to be responsible. The Sovereign’s Bound would snap you up in a heartbeat. If you’re so set on keeping that body, spirit, you have to listen to the human who had it first.”

Ulla shrugged at the piece of fabric she was holding, a cloak in Duitiel green, then wrapped it around Corliss’s shoulders and pinned it together.

“There,” she said, and pulled the hood up over Corliss’s head. “That’s better for traveling, don’t you think? Only, your skin looks even more like fire against that green. This is good wool, a tight weave—it’ll keep you warm. As if you needed help with that.”

Ulla winked and Corliss smiled, pushing the hood off.

“Murdoc is back,” said Corliss. “We hear him. Come on.”

CHAPTER

The fire consumed a dozen houses on the third tier before it was extinguished. It was the third major fire in the span of a week, a week that began with the parade ambush. The fires shared a pattern: they all started in the houses of major public officials.

“We need a new *Sovereign*,” Chilton grumbled as his squadron filed out of the guardhouse for the beginning of another long day. “The Bound should be helping clean up this mess.”

But there was no word yet. The fourth tier stayed sealed off, the streets and houses guarded by the personal forces of the clans. Some of the city guard had been requested to protect the upper tiers as well. General Dawn tried to explain that the instigators would never be caught if she didn't have the guards necessary to patrol the streets. The clan born wouldn't change their minds: it was their right to request guards, and they wanted to feel safe.

The house searches continued. Not even the third tier was safe from inquisition. Dawn extended the hours of the guards yet again. She wanted a guard near each street at every hour. She wanted the lesser born to feel they were being watched.

In the cellar of one house, Yedda found a barrel of oil and piles of rags. Next to them lay a bundle of old swords. She reported the man to Chilton. The house owner was executed without a trial. Yedda watched his body snap to the end of a noose, and felt a shiver run down her spine.

The fires continued.

One week turned into two. In the middle of the night, somebody managed to knock a barrel of tar onto the main road and light it into a blaze without any of the guards in sight to catch who did it. It tumbled down the slope, streaking sparks and hungry flames, and crashed into a stone wall. Nothing was seriously damaged, but it didn't help morale.

In retaliation Dawn ordered the public execution of a large swathe of prisoners, regardless of crime. The jail populations were halved.

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They led the prisoners up the gallows' block on leashes, as if they were dogs. Sileas watched from the crowd. He could not hear the trumpets or the flags snapping in the wind. All he could hear was his own breathing. He studied each face as it was brought to the noose, hoping not to recognize it. Most were strangers. Not all. He had done business with some of them. They were smugglers and thieves and hopeful radicals, poets and frauds and debtors. All of them were his people today.

He cursed himself that he did not know their names.

-

Yedda and Anluan were on duty together, searching houses on the second tier. The house searches were now as much about intimidation as they were about finding the criminals. Enough time had passed that anything suspicious had long ago been well hidden. Nobody expected privacy.

The bells began to ring again, the long, triumphant peal spreading down from the palace through the city.

“I think we have a new Sovereign,” Anluan said, when the bells had continued without pause for more than a minute.

They left the house without a word to its silent inhabitants and made their way to the main road. All of the buildings spilled their human contents onto the street. Evening was coming. Even folk who had changed into sleeping-clothes came outside, wrapped up in robes and winter coats.

The whole city was quiet except the bells. Everyone waited on baited breath to see who had won the throne. The only conversations happened softly. At last, Yedda thought, the turmoil was at an end. The Bound would see to it that the city was set to rights.

It was a long wait in the second tier. Yedda almost considered walking up the main road towards the third, where they would receive the news sooner, but the crowd around them grew steadily thicker. At last a procession cut not twenty feet from where she and Anluan stood. For a moment they were all crushed together as everyone moved out of the way of the line of horses and the small carriages that traveled with them. Yedda and Anluan had the most space to breathe, since the city-folk were reluctant to lean against a member of the guard.

Everything was elaborately adorned with gold and jewels, and heavily armored. Every visible figure in the procession carried a weapon.

“Look,” said Anluan, who was taller. He pointed back in the direction the procession had passed from. Part of it had been left behind. Ceremonial guards on horses surrounded the platform in front of the market square’s statue of Adlen spirit-killer, first father of clans. They didn’t wear the distinct colors of any of the clans, but the mute black of the royal guard who served the Sovereign.

There was a figure making her way onto the platform, also dressed entirely in black. She raised her arms above her head and the crowd slowly turned to face her, the procession forgotten.

“The time of choosing has come and gone. A new Sovereign reigns over us, mighty and pure, the undying legacy of the bond of spirit and humankind!” She was trained to throw her voice, and boomed loudly to cast her words to all of them.

The guards in black set up a cheer, pumping their swords and spears in the air. Yedda and Anluan took it up without reservation, and the rest of the crowd echoed it back. There was a scattering of uncertain applause.

“The Sovereign is bountiful, the Sovereign is wise, the Sovereign is good. The Sovereign is chosen. You bow now to Ogden, son of late Sovereign Morven, the mightiest of the mighty Gillemar clan, guardian of the relic binding of the Stone of Hunger, the spirit-god of time.”

Chilton will be pleased, thought Yedda, and felt a surge of pride for him and his family. Two Gillemar Sovereigns in a row.

When the applause died out, but before the speaker could speak again, there was a shout from the crowd:

“Sovereign of what? Tributes and dead children?”

Yedda looked sharply to the side, trying to figure out who had said it. The voice was faint, but clear. In a crowd of this size, she was surprised she’d heard it at all.

“Lord of drought and famine!” Someone called from the other side. There was a ripple of soft, nervous laughter. Yedda and Anluan looked at each other grimly and put their hands to their sword hilts.

There was silence. One of the mounted guards moved forwards. The crowd parted away from his heavy armored horse.

“Monarch of bribes and dinner-parties!” Someone shouted, voice loud and cracking like a whip. Soon the whole back of the crowd shouted insults. Nobody close to the stand and the guards dared. The horsed guards stopped moving forward, uncertain of how to proceed without an order. One insubordinate they could deal with. They were not prepared for a whole crowd. Some of the lesser born pushed their way through the mass, trying to find shelter inside, terrified of what would happen if they remained on the street.

“Respect your Sovereign. Only the dead talk treason,” the speaker on top of the platform called.

“Only the rich don’t!” someone called back.

Anluan tugged Yedda's shirt to get her attention. He pointed towards the mounted guards and began to break his way through the crowd towards them. Yedda followed. He was right. They didn't want to be in the middle of the crowd if a fight broke out, or if a Bound dispensed justice without careful thought. That was how Nyla had died.

Just then there was a sudden gasping silence, and then a scream, and the whole crowd was shouting. One of the guards by the platform held his sword out to the side, bloody and dripping. All around him the crowd was stirring like a beehive beaten to a swarm. Half the crowd tried to escape. The other half angrily threw themselves forward, toward the body on the ground.

Swords were not good weapons in close quarters, but Anluan and Yedda drew theirs anyway. The lesser born around them moved like a tide, rushing back away from them only to fall towards the weapons again, pushed and shoved by the sway of the massive crowd. Anluan brought his horn to his lips and began to blow. A body slammed into him from behind and he fell. Yedda shouted and for a moment Anluan was swallowed by the crowd. There was a boot on his face; he was being trampled.

It was a mistake on the part of the lesser born. Yedda sliced through their unarmored bodies without hesitation. She knew how to fight with her whole body, and used more than the blade. She sliced open a belly and kicked the body back. Yedda pivoted to face another threat. As soon as Anluan was free she grabbed his arm and hauled him up. He stumbled to his feet. Side by side they inched their way towards the mounted guards. They met with very little resistance.

Nobody wanted to die.

Someone had a blade. Yedda didn't see it until it was too late. It was a thin, flimsy knife. Yedda's metal arm guards offered her some protection. The stab skittered off her arm and buried itself in her hip. With a yell, Yedda took off the head of the woman who had struck her. Oddly enough, she didn't feel pain. It was as though she moved through a dream, watching herself react without any thought or feeling. She kicked her way through the last of the crowd until she and Anluan reached the circle of mounted guards. They were recognized by their uniforms and let into the circle, where they took up guard on either side of the speaker. The statue's platform was ten feet above the ground, but a thin staircase curled around it.

Anluan blew his horn again.

“You're bleeding,” said the speaker.

“I'm fine,” said Yedda. She glanced at Anluan. He breathed heavily. She thought his nose might be broken. Red smeared across the lower half of his face. He held his sword in one shaking hand and clung to his horn with another. Sometimes she forgot he was less trained than she was. At times like this, it was hard to forget.

She looked back to the crowd. The horsemen were reluctant to leave the statue of Adlen spirit-killer where they protected the messenger. The crowd had drawn back, but the violence was far from over. A stone the size of an apple shot out from the crowd and caused one of the horses to rear, striking the air with its legs.

There was a horn blowing behind Yedda. It was not a warning call, but an answer to Anluan's cry. She turned. Five mounted guards bore down from the third tier. They must have left the carriage they guarded on the tier above. Perhaps it had already returned to the palace.

“Get in your carriage,” said Yedda. “We have to get you away from here.”

“And let them have the street?” The speaker said.

“No,” said Yedda. “But you're unarmed, and you're a target. None of us can do our job while we're worried about protecting you.”

The speaker's life might not have been important, but she was a symbol of the Sovereign and the Sovereign's word. She could not be allowed to die.

The speaker nodded and let Yedda and Anluan escort her to the nearby open door of her carriage. Accompanied by three of the mounted guards, her carriage-driver cracked his whip and urged the horses to run back up the twisting road.

Yedda stood on the platform of Adlen's statue.

“This is your last chance,” Yedda shouted. “Disperse! Go home in peace! Or you will be run down!”

Whether or not the crowd heard her, she couldn't tell. But none of them started to flee until the mounted guards organized themselves into a line and charged down the length of the street.

-

Ogden's coronation brought with it a number of changes. In light of the rise of violence, the new Sovereign wanted to be sure he was taken seriously. He decided General Dawn should have done a better job of keeping the streets safe.

He removed her from her position. Instead of promoting Commanders Dalton, Ena, or Guaire, he summoned Chilton to the morning palace for a meeting.

“But I don't want to sit behind a desk,” Chilton complained, when Sovereign Ogden told him he was being given the job. “Not for another half-dozen years at least. I *like* the street.”

“It's not up to you,” said Ogden, handing Chilton the official papers to sign and seal. “It's my decision, and I've made it. I want a government I can trust, cousin. I don't want a Righardan for my General. Not when I can have my own family.”

Ogden took no chances. Behind him, instead of a human servant, stood a Bound. Its tiny, shrunken mouth was thinner than the width of its nose, as if the sides had been sealed over. The Bound wore a necklace of teeth that looked frighteningly human. It had been staring wordlessly at Chilton through the whole meeting.

“Dawn was good at her job,” said Chilton, taking the papers and ignoring the Bound.

“You don't want to contradict me, Chilton,” said Ogden dryly. “I've had a very busy week.”

“Yes, majesty,” said Chilton. “Congratulations on your victory.”

“Oh, stop looking so glum. As soon as things are settled we'll go hunting, how about that?”

“I'll look forward to it. Can I have temporary command of some of the Bound? You've put me in charge of a mess. All anyone can talk about is whether or not there's going to be a revolution.”

There was a low whistling noise from the Bound behind the Sovereign.

“No,” said Ogden. “Enforce a curfew. Arrest whoever you want to. But I need the Bound. You can recruit more guards.”

“We have been. Dawn saw to that. But I can't train them all overnight.”

“Well, figure it out. It's your job now.”

“Give me the money to train our youth, then, and we can prevent this from happening again.”

“My father wanted your girl to prove herself first. I'll follow his wish.”

“She has. She's a more than capable guard.”

“I don't doubt she's skilled. But can you prove she's extraordinary? Stop bothering me about this. For the same fee you could hire mercenaries, already trained.”

“Mercenaries wouldn't be loyal. They follow money; they can be bought out. We saved her life. She'd do anything for this country.”

“Out, Chilton. I've told you my decision.”

Chilton left feeling more than a little annoyed.

As Ogden suggested, Chilton ordered a curfew put in place. Anyone on the streets after the ninth evening bell would be questioned or arrested. He also issued an order that suspicious behavior was grounds for arrest, and that the guards could use their own discretion.

As to why the Sovereign would not put the Bound to work, the answer quickly became clear. Though the city had not been informed, an interesting bit of news had surfaced during the Sovereign trials.

The Dorchalt clan did not control an inanimate binding. They had tried to replace their relic in the years since Corliss broke the knife, but had not succeeded. When the time came for them to display their relic's power, the Dorchalt family was nowhere to be found. Rather than admit their loss, they had fled for the mountains, and wisely. There was no life for a fallen clan in the valley, only violence.

As Sovereign, Ogden declared the former Dorchalt clan lands were now under Gillemar rule.

No sooner had he made this declaration but the monarchs of Righardan, Aiteach, and Duitiel rose up in protest. No, they said. His status as Sovereign did not give him claim to the Dorchalt lands. The resources of the Dorchalt clan should be split between all of them. Nobody wanted to see the already mighty Gillemar clan gain even more wealth and power.

But Ogden was Sovereign. Without regard for the threats and protests of the other clans around him, he ordered his clan kin to take control of Dorchalt proper, escorted by three of his seven Bound.

CHAPTER

“Sileas of Righardan, first cousin to the Righardan clan. Is that your proper name and title?”

The Justice peered at him over the arrest papers she held.

“Yes, your ladyship.”

“I don’t appreciate your tone. Arresting officer?”

“I am,” said Yedda. “Officer Yedda, fourth squad.”

“My memory’s not that bad, Yedda,” said the Justice dryly. “You’ve brought a clan noble before me. I trust you have good reason.”

“Arrest on search. We had sufficient suspicion to hold him, and we’ve found a number of connections between him and the others we’ve caught.”

“What ‘sufficient suspicion?’”

“These,” said Yedda, and stepped forward to hand the Justice a thin stack of papers. She winced as she did so. The knife wound she’d gotten when Ogden was pronounced Sovereign was healing well, but still gave her pain, especially when she tugged it by moving too fast.

“Revolutionary writings. He’s likely the author of that wretched song that’s been going around—the one about the Sovereign and the pig. We found lines and rough drafts of it scrawled on many of his papers. A full house, of more than simply servants; he’s been harboring all sorts of odd folk. We also found enough supplies to open a bed-house, a clinic, and an armory, as well as the most treasonous collection of books in the whole valley, and a set of letters written in code. We haven’t broken it yet. There’s more in the report, but it’s speculation; that’s the bulk of it.”

“What have you got to say for yourself?” The Justice asked, putting all the papers in front of her and looking at Sileas.

“I’m a rich man. I have odd tastes. You don’t have proof of any crimes.”

“Guardsperson Yedda has just given me plenty of proof. Have you brought any witnesses to your character?”

“No, your ladyship, I have not.”

“Couldn’t get them to come?”

“I’m an innocent man.”

“It doesn’t look that way.”

“You should speak with my cousin, the monarch Artair of Righardan.”

“You failed bring him with you. Is he aware of your work?”

“What work?”

“Did you act alone? Is the Righardan clan behind you?”
“I’m not a rebel, your ladyship. Neither is my family.”
“We’ll see. Cronin, prepare a message for the Sovereign.”

CHAPTER

“You wanted to see me?”

Yedda stood in the doorway to the General’s office. Unlike Dawn, Chilton preferred to stay among his workforce in the guardhouse.

He was seated behind a very busy desk covered in stacks of reports and records. Chilton looked up and wiped the ink off the nib of his pen.

“An hour ago,” he said. “Where were you?”

“Processing another rebel. If you’d rather I make meetings than do my job...”

“Stop,” he said tiredly, waving a hand at her. “Just take a seat.”

She settled gratefully into the chair. There had been no chance to eat or change. The sweat on her uniform had dried, but the clothes still clung stiffly to her. Her very bones ached.

Chilton leaned forward and wet his lips, holding the pen between two fingers of each hand. He met her eyes briefly, then looked down at his hands and the pen.

“The lowland is a mess,” he said. “And Ogden isn’t doing anything about it—he’s too busy arguing with the monarchs about Dorchalt. Well, North Gillemar. Whatever he’s calling it these days.”

“What else is new?” Yedda said.

“People are saying this valley has fallen apart.”

Yedda shrugged, with a heavy sigh.

“Well... hasn’t it? A little, anyways?”

“We haven’t seen anything yet,” said Chilton. “We’re headed for civil war, and nobody wants to talk about it. Ogden’s at the Righardan’s throats about this rebellion. Thinks they could *all* be involved.”

“Is that why you called me in here? To talk? No offense, Chilton, but I’m hungry. I haven’t bathed.”

“I’m taking you off the streets,” said Chilton.

“What?” Yedda sat up straighter, her body gone tense. She reached out and put a hand on his desk. “You can’t be serious.”

“I am.”

“No. Why?”

“Because I need you in the lowland,” said Chilton. “This... this *mess* with Duitiel proper... you’re going to clean it up. You have to stop it before it happens again.”

“Me? Shouldn’t you send a captain?”

“We’ve lost too many leaders,” Chilton said. “I won’t take any more away when this city is just getting back on its feet. No, Yedda. You would have been promoted sooner or later anyway. This is a chance for you to prove yourself. You *need* to prove yourself. I need you to.”

“By *myself*? I haven’t left the city in years.”

“No, of course not. You’ll have command of other guards: half a squadron. I can’t give you *command* of Duitiel guards, but you’ll work alongside whatever the clan can spare. And you have your brains, and your training. Better yet, my mule-brained cousin of a Sovereign finally relented. You’ll be handler of one of his Bound.”

“Sir,” said Yedda, her voice soft. “I’m honored, I truly am. But I’m not sure I can do this. It’s too much.”

“It’s probably safer than the city,” said Chilton. “Some backwater lowland rebellion... they won’t see you coming. It’s a disgrace on the Duitiels, to have left their Proper so unguarded. We’re stretched thin here. Very thin. So, I need you to take care of this, or there’s no telling what will happen, only it won’t be good.”

“But why can’t...” Yedda trailed off, searching for another solution.

“Don’t complain,” said Chilton. “I thought I taught you not to question an order.”

“When do I go?”

“The day after tomorrow,” he said. “We’ll send you with what we can. Horses, weapons, money.”

“And a Bound,” she said. “Which one?”

“Yes, and a Bound. I don’t know yet. He’s loathe to part with any of them. First thing tomorrow, you’ll need to report to the Morning palace. They’ll get you sorted out. We’ll prepare everything else in the afternoon, talk strategy and the like. Go on, eat. Get a good night’s sleep. It might be awhile before you can again.”



CHAPTER

Three men guarded the entrance to the farmhouse. Finian and Murdoc slowed their horses as they approached. They halted in front of the iron grating.

“Turn your horses,” one of the warriors inside said, “or we’ll shoot.”

“I don’t want to fight,” Finian answered, raising his empty hands. “I came to speak to the farm master.”

“He won’t be having words with the likes of you,” the man said. “Go on, then. Get.”

Finian dismounted and unbuckled his sword belt.

“We aren’t bandits,” he said. “The man I ride with is of clan lineage, a Dorc halt heir; just look at his horse. Give us an audience, then we’ll be on our way.”

The men on the other side of the gate huddled together for a moment, their voices low. One of them broke off from the group and began to jog up to the big house.

“Pass your sword through the gate, hilt-first,” said the guard who’d done all the talking.

-

“I’m impressed, master Croswin,” said Finian, seated in the parlor across from a bearded man and his guards. “You’ve done well, for a common born.”

“I work hard,” the man said.

“We all do. How much land do you sit on?”

The man narrowed his eyes and snorted.

“I don’t take kindly to scavengers,” he said. “What do you want?”

“You must pay tribute out your nose to the Duitiels,” Finian said. “I expect you’re sick of paying the clan? We’re here to help you pick your side.”

“Pick my side?”

“It’s war in the lowland, if you hadn’t heard,” said Finian. His tone was light and conversational, but he met Croswin’s eyes with an uncompromising gaze. Murdoc kept his eyes trained on the floor, counting his breaths to keep them steady.

“I want no part in that,” said Croswin.

“Understandably. But you’ll have a part in it, regardless. You’d be a fool to side with the Duitiels. You’re dung to them. We all are. They’re far away, and busy.”

“I won’t be threatened in my own house,” said Croswin. “Remove them.”

The guards behind Croswin advanced.

“Easy,” said Finian. “I’m armed.”

Murdoc let out a gasp of air, and wrenched up his head. His weak and watering eyes squinted in the dull light of the parlor. His jaw clenched.

The guards stumbled back. One fell to his knees. The other leveled his sword at Croswin, threatening his own master.

“I think that’s enough,” Finian said, and Murdoc turned away. “My friend is Bound. Will you cross me again?”

“You’ve made your point,” Croswin said. He had not moved an inch from his chair, but he watched his guards now instead of the strangers. One of the men still held his sword a foot from Croswin’s neck, and was babbling apologies.

“I didn’t come to fight,” said Finian. “I came here for your loyalty.”

“I know how this works. What do you want?”

“You’ve misunderstood. I’m no bandit. You’ll be rewarded, when this war is over. Murdoc, tell Corliss to bring the others inside. We’ll be staying here tonight.”

-

Finian’s steadily growing force made camp where they could. They laid their sleeping-rolls in the parlor and the study, packed the entry hall, and took over a small dusty servant’s quarter that had been empty for more than one generation.

That night Finian held office in Croswin’s dining room, lit by candles and a tall fireplace. After a strained dinner, Croswin and his family retired to their chambers.

Finian and Ulla sat side by side at the table. The rebel named Telon had spent the afternoon taking stock of the land, and joined them to share his findings.

“The storehouse could feed us for two weeks,” Telon said. “Nothing to harvest, but he’s got a half-dozen cattle.”

Without warning, the sleepy fire in the hearth roared to life. Telon stopped talking as Corliss entered.

The scaly Bound slid into the seat next to Finian, the closest open spot to the flame. In her hands was a small bottle of cooking oil. She drank from it as if it were fine wine. She looked about the room with unblinking eyes.

“Any horses?” Ulla asked Telon.

“No good riders. Plow animals. I saw at least three carts and gear, so they’re trained to drive. We could use a cart for supplies, though it’ll limit us to roads.”

“That’s a thought,” said Finian. “Thank you, Telon. You can leave if you want to.”

Telon left briskly, avoiding Corliss’ gaze as he did.

“You’d better add some wood if you want to keep that blaze going,” said Ulla.

“We know how to feed a fire,” Corliss said.

“Did you want something?” Finian asked.

“You shouldn’t have taken Murdoc today,” said Corliss.

“I needed him.”

“You could have taken us instead.”

“You don’t look human,” said Finian. “They wouldn’t have let you in without a fight. What’s the problem?”

“The boy is too weak for my brother spirit,” said Corliss. “They must be allowed to rest. You have them work too much.”

“Well, you can settle down, then,” said Finian. “Wyndam was here a moment ago; he says the road behind us looks clear. With good blessing, we’ll be able to rest a day or so.”

“You are always so afraid of hunters,” said Corliss. “We should build a nest somewhere, Finian. An army cannot always be running.”

“We’re not an army yet,” said Ulla, when Finian remained silent. “We’d all like to stop running, Corliss, but it’s too dangerous.”

“You’ve heard Murdoc’s listenings,” said Corliss. “You know the clans fight amongst themselves. This is our time of strength. We cannot build while we run. And what friends will find us if we do not keep a steady home? You complain our force is small. Let us grow it.”

There was a long silence in which only the blazing fire spoke, crackling as it heated the pockets of air and sap in the wood.

“Well, she’s got a point,” Ulla muttered. “We’ve been on the lookout since Duitiel proper, and there’s no sign of anything yet.”

“We can’t afford to let down our guard,” said Finian. “And this farmhouse is hardly protected. The walls are wood, and the gate is barely as tall as I am! Even if we *do* stop, this is no place to build our camp.”

“Then find us a place,” said Corliss. Getting up from the chair, she selected a log from the wood-bucket and tossed it into the blaze. Oil-bottle in hand, the Bound left the room.

“You look ill,” Ulla noted softly.

“That child used to be so different,” Finian said. “What happened to her?”

“She’s not a child anymore. She’s a Bound. She has been for some time.”

“I don’t need to be reminded, Ulla,” said Finian. “I just thought we’d have more time. I didn’t think it would start this early.”

“She isn’t feral yet,” said Ulla, placing a hand over his. “And at least she’s got an honest hunger. Oil isn’t so hard to come by.”

“I can’t watch this happen,” said Finian. “I can’t keep losing people.”

“Perhaps you should have thought about that before you decided to go to war.”

-

The next morning, Finian supervised the loading of Croswin's storehouse into the carts Telon found. One of the carts came with the rebels, full of provisions for the road. The others were sent different ways, with two drivers apiece. Tied to these carts were short lines of Croswin's cattle. They were in search of the farming villages and towns that speckled the landscape.

"Food, medicines, and cloth for the people. Don't give it all away in one place, mind. Tell them what we're doing in peaceful words. If they're of a mind to join us, point them south," Finian said.

CHAPTER

The road to the final fifth tier was blocked by a yellow marble wall. White and crystal opals alternated along the gate's surface. The crystal opals caught sunlight and reflected it in flecks of a dozen brilliant colors.

The guards in front of the gate expected Yedda. They stood like statues as the gates swung inward.

A wide avenue lay in front of her, lined with flowering hedges. It led to the gargantuan morning palace. The front doors were more than a dozen feet tall, a dark iron-banded wood that yawned a deep contrast against the pale stone walls.

A short, shallow set of stairs led up to the doors. A figure dressed entirely in black, the uniform of the royal guard, lounged on the steps. He rose and walked towards her, meeting her halfway with a hand extended.

"Yedda," he said. "I'm Commander Guaire. Are you ready to meet your Bound?"

"Yes. It's an honor to meet you," said Yedda.

Guaire was responsible for overseeing the Sovereign's protection and the handling of the Bound. He'd held the post for a dozen years. To Yedda, he was more legend than man.

He gave her a brief smile and turned away. Yedda followed. The path opened just before the staircase, as if enveloping the palace; the avenue ran along the tall stone walls in either direction. Guaire followed it to a smaller entry door and showed Yedda inside.

The great front hall of the morning palace was enormous. Far to the side Yedda could see the grand entry doors they had passed by; both entrances led to the hall. The ceiling was tall and vaulted. Rows of chandeliers and windows lit the room. The walls were covered in tapestries. Gold and silver had been wrapped around some of the threads so that the highlights of the tapestries sparkled in the light. At the end of the hall long stairs marched up to a landing on which two tall-backed gold thrones sat. Both were empty.

Yedda's eyes were as wide as dinner plates, but Guaire did not slow down or look around. They crossed to the back of the entry hall, behind the thrones, and exited into a corridor. Some of the doors they passed were windowed or open. Passing them, Yedda did her best to peer inside. She caught glimpses of sitting rooms and bookshelves, potted trees, bubbling fountains. The

palace was large and grand, but very empty. In one room two long haired figures sat at harps. They did not look up as she passed, but Yedda was certain they were the most beautiful people she had seen, almost inhuman.

Guaire moved with a gentle grace, never using more force than he needed to, even when opening doors or gesturing. If Yedda had seen him out of uniform and on the street, she would not have thought he was a fighter. An acrobat perhaps, or a dancer, but his gracefulness did not seem capable of violence. By his reputation and esteemed job, she knew better.

They exited into a series of gated courtyards, walking past mosaic walls and shaped hedges. At last they emerged in a small garden ringed with leafless saplings. They stopped and Yedda looked around. For a moment she thought they were alone. Then she noticed the Bound perched on the roof.

“Bosimun, meet Yedda,” Guaire said softly.

Bosimun was a Bound with a bird-like manner. Its boney, spindled body looked like it had been stretched disproportionately tall and thin. Its narrow lips protruded under a hooked, beakish nose. Enormous brown-and-white feathered wings sprouted up from its back.

It hopped down to the ground. The drop was twice Yedda’s height, but its wings caught the wind and lowered it gently.

Her mother once told her Bound were gods trapped in human bodies. Chilton talked about them as if they were nothing but weapons. Either way, they deserved respect. Yedda bowed. Bosimun craned its head back and to the side, watching her out of one wary eye.

“She’s going to be your new handler,” said Guaire. “You’ll take orders from her as you do from me.”

“Why?” Bosimun wanted to know.

“She’s going to the lowland. The Sovereign wants you to go with her.”

Bosimun stalked the perimeter of the courtyard, circling Yedda with its eyes locked on her.

“Don’t move,” said Guaire. “Let it get a sense for you.”

Bosimun stopped after a full loop. It said nothing and did not look at Yedda. The Bound began to act as if it were alone, scratching the ground with a toe.

Guaire reached into his pocket and took out a little bag. He shook out a salt rock the size of his smallest fingernail. Bosimun looked up suddenly, its body tensing and focusing on Guaire. The commander handed the salt to Yedda.

“Tell it to do something,” said Guaire. “The salt is the reward. That’s what it works for.”

“Do something? Like what?”

“Anything you want,” said Guaire. “Bow, or fly a loop, or raise the wind. But never give it salt it hasn’t earned.”

Bosimun spread its wings out, shadowing Guaire and Yedda. It stood tall and loomed over her.

“Don’t let it intimidate you,” said Guaire. “It’s loyal, and agreeable about its job. But it’s still Bound. Don’t forget. You’re its handler, not its friend.”

“You want this?” Yedda asked, holding out her palm. Bosimun lunged for it and she closed her hand.

“Give me one of your feathers,” said Yedda. Without hesitation, Bosimun plucked a long feather from its wing and handed it to her.

“Thank you,” said Yedda, and let it take the salt.

“Good,” said Guaire. “I think it’ll listen to you fine.”

-

Chilton let Yedda have some say in which guards she took. She was allowed six warriors other than herself. She picked Anluan for comfort, since she knew he would respect her as a captain. She didn’t want to be alone with unfamiliar guards older than herself, all of them angry at her superior rank. For the rest of her small troop, Chilton helped her to select guards who could handle a horse and knew a variety of weapons. Combat in the city was almost always a matter of close quarters, but the lowland would be different. Yedda wanted fighters who could shoot a bow.

They left in the morning. Spring was coming, but it was still bitterly cold in the city. The rising sun turned the stones pearly and pink. All seven guards rode. Chilton had signed out a handful of horses from the stable, and Yedda had bought the rest out of the allowance he’d given her for the assignment. There was still a little leftover for food and bribes, but what hadn’t gone to horses had mostly gone to gear: sleeping rolls and waxed cloth to keep off rain, sturdy leather bags to hold rations and other necessities.

At the city gate a shadow crossed overhead. The Bound landed in front of them, causing Yedda’s horse to stamp and throw his head.

“Bosimun,” said Yedda, gathering her reins tighter. “I wondered when you’d join us.”

“Where do we travel?” it asked.

The Bound’s eyes would not meet hers, but stared lower. At first Yedda thought Bosimun was studying her horse, but then she remembered the pouches of salt she wore on her belt. Could it smell that on her?

“Duitiel Proper, unless we find fighting along the way,” she said.

Duitiel forces had taken back the Proper since the rebels attacked it, and Yedda hoped to pick up a trail from there. She also intended to ask the Duitiels to lend her their guards.

“Then there we fly,” said the Bound.

“Don’t head straight,” said Yedda. “It’ll take us two or three days, I think. You’d best scan the area for trouble. If you see anything, look for us and let me know. We won’t leave the main road unless something strange draws us off it.”

“Agreed,” said the Bound, but it did not leap back into the air. It blocked the road, shifting from foot to foot and peering at her. With a sigh Yedda reached into her belt pouch and drew out a small cube of salt. She held it in an outstretched hand. The Bound stalked forward and removed it from her with a delicate gesture. Eyes closed, it placed the salt on its tongue. Bosimun lowered into a crouch and jumped up from the ground. Its wings snapped open and carried it higher, sending a gust of air into the guards.

Yedda’s horse half-reared in protest, turning on his hind legs as he did so. She cursed under her breath and kept her seat by pinching her legs together, spurring the mount forwards as

he came back to all fours. Her guards followed her outside the wall and into the lowland. Above them, Bosimun wheeled in graceful patterns against the sky, shrinking into the blue-gray morning. Yedda kept to the front of her order, grateful that none of them could see her cheeks reddening. She would have to talk to Bosimun about how it acted around the horses. At least she had managed to keep her seat.

CHAPTER

Gillemar Proper was a half-hour's walk from the sea. The countryside it sat on was riddled with rivers and marshlands.

The black stone castle rose from an island on the middle of a lake, joined to the mainland by a series of bridges shooting out like spokes on a wheel. Gillemar village was on the mainland. Only clanfolk and their immediate servants lived on the island.

Further inland, the Gillemar land was fertile and agriculturally rich. Though the farms prospered, much of their economic strength came from foreign trade. The southernmost clan controlled the waterways, linking the mountain-circled valley with the distant outer world.

"What a wet place this is," Corliss muttered distastefully as they approached the township.

Their forces had swelled as they traveled south to Gillemar. Most were unarmed except for kitchen knives and farming tools, though there were a few swords and spears and bows scattered among them. They were less an army and more a large, mobile, angry village. They camped in farmer's fields at night and marched by day—strolled was more accurate, Finian had thought in frustration more than once, strolled and stopped to rest more than was necessary. But still, they had made it south with very little trouble.

No guards found them. There had been some unpleasant business with the larger farms, the big plots of land owned by clan cousins or the odd wealthy common born. Two days before reaching Gillemar proper, he'd actually had to kill one of the farm masters at such a place. The farm master had been a brute, as they often were. Sometimes he thought the common born who managed to make a living clung to their wealth even more ruthlessly than the clans. Most of the man's servants had chosen to come with Finian afterward. He'd given one of his better speeches, about freedom and justice and how they were going to liberate the lowland. By the end there was cheering and clapping.

They had spent the night there and restocked their supplies. Then they had been off again at their slow pace.

Now they halted before the jewel of the lowland, the Gillemar country palace: homeland of the Sovereign and the richest clan. Finian stopped them on the lip of a squat ridge. They looked down a brief slant to the township, the bridges, and the castle beyond.

His heart didn't race. It went still. He felt as though his mind lifted out of his body and watched them all from above, himself and Ulla on horses at the front, Corliss and Murdoc mounted and off to the side. A proud rabble behind them, barely armed, never trained.

"Nervous?" Ulla asked. He glanced over. She looked straight ahead and gripped her reins in too tight a hand.

“Are you?” said Finian.

“Storming the palace,” said Ulla in a deceptively light voice. “Nothing to worry about. Aren’t you going to give a speech?”

“Should I?” asked Finian.

“You’re the general,” said Ulla with a shrug. “We could all use one.”

For a long moment Finian sat still and looked out over the castle. It was a peaceful day. Spring had just reached the southland. Early yellow flowers budded up among the grasses. There was a cool, light breeze that tugged gently at the Gillemar flag: a rust orange field behind an arching blue fish.

Finian turned his horse to face the common born who followed him. Their chattered conversations fell silent one by one. The only noise was from the wind in the trees and a solitary chirping bird. He struck one of his arms out behind him.

“You’re looking at your new home,” said Finian.

CHAPTER

Duitiel proper had been attacked half a month ago. It was still in a state of disarray. The wreckage from ruined buildings and walls was heaped a little ways off from the great stone building. Construction on new stables and storehouses was underway. Next to the framework of new buildings were orderly piles of logs and stones. From a distance, Yedda could see servants laboring on the buildings.

She had read the report, but it was different in person. It was amazing that a band of rebels had overcome clan guards. They left very little behind them but bodies.

To the right of the proper was a long line of dull, white stones. They resolved into shape only when Yedda was close to the entryway. A steward had come out of the building to greet them, but Yedda only nodded in response, her gaze fixed in horror.

The white stones were not stones, but skulls picked clean of flesh by fire. They could not have been the rebels. Those had left before Duitiel’s guards returned home from the city. Only a few rebels had died, the report had said: not enough to account for all these skulls. What she looked at must have been from the bodies left behind, the victims of the attack. Was it commemorative, this long line of human heads? She had never seen anything so grim. The Duitiel picked an odd way to honor their dead.

“Your horse, captain,” the steward repeated impatiently, and Yedda realized he had been speaking the whole time. She shook her head a little and slipped off of her mount, handing over the reins.

“Thank you,” said Yedda. “Forgive me, it’s been a long ride.”

“You will understand if your guards escort their own mounts. We are short on staff. The heir awaits you inside. Your guards will be shown to their quarters.”

“Of course,” said Yedda. “You had word of our coming?”

The steward pointed to the roof of the Proper. Far above them, Bosimun was a winged speck watching the proceedings below. It had not been there when they approached.

“Good,” was all that Yedda said. She moved to take her bags from the horse.

“No need, captain,” said the steward. “They will be brought to your room.”

A serving maid inside took her to the clan heir’s study. It was more of a lounge than its name implied. There were few papers or books in the room. Most of the space was taken up by low couches and tables. Few of them matched. Yedda guessed that they had been assembled from different rooms in the Proper. The rebels had destroyed much of the castle's furnishings.

The heir was Newell, a young man dressed in simple finely made clothes. He had the beginnings of a beard, and wore his dark brown hair clipped short. Newell looked out the window, but turned when Yedda entered the room.

“Welcome, captain,” said Newell. “I’m glad the city saw fit to send you.”

If he was surprised by her young age, he was thoughtful enough to say nothing.

“Thank you, Newell,” said Yedda. “I’m sorry for your losses.”

“Thank you. What are your plans?”

“To pick up the trail here,” said Yedda. “We’ll sniff out wherever they’re hiding.”

“Will you reconsider? We could use you here. There’s a good deal of rebuilding to be done.”

“My guards aren’t carpenters, heir Newell,” said Yedda. “For that matter, neither are yours.”

“Rebuilding is no laughing matter,” he said, lowering himself onto one of the couches.

“Of course it isn’t,” said Yedda, “but if we don’t put an end to this, perhaps they’ll just burn it down again.”

“Therein lies my fear,” said Newell.

“Give me command of your forces. We’ll sweep the lowland and put an end to this.”

“Please, captain, sit down. Tell me, what am I to do if the rebels return and all my guards are missing?”

“Would you rather stay holed up while your lands are ransacked?” Yedda did not sit.

“I’d rather keep one stronghold than lose everything,” he said.

“It’s a necessary risk,” Yedda pleaded.

“You’re even younger than I am,” Newell said. “What do *you* know of war?”

“I was raised by the guard,” said Yedda. “The current General was my tutor since I was eleven. You’d do well to trust me if you’d see your safety restored.”

Newell raised an eyebrow and sighed.

“You know, I always knew I’d lose the trials,” he said. “I never imagined losing my province as well.”

“None of us expected this,” said Yedda. “You aren’t alone in that.”

“Won’t you sit? I’m tired of all this ceremony. It feels like yesterday I was still just the monarch’s son.”

Yedda obliged, taking a seat opposite him. The couch was so low that she had to extend her legs in front of her rather than bend them at the knee.

“I know the future is uncertain,” said Yedda. “This winter taught us that, all of us. I haven’t lost what you’ve lost, but I’ve seen my friends killed. If you want to do right by your people, you have to help me end this. The strength of this castle won’t matter if the whole lowland falls. We need to put out the fire before we can start to rebuild.”

She fell into silence. Newell ran a finger across his lips, lost in thought. Moments lapsed into a minute, then two. More than once Yedda almost spoke, uncomfortable in the pause. She fought against the urge.

“Well,” he said at last, and shook his head. “Perhaps there’s wisdom in that.”

“The only promise I can make,” said Yedda carefully, “is that I will stop at nothing—that I will do everything in my power to see justice through. Newell, how much that power means is up to you. I’ve got six other guards from the city, well-trained, and a Sovereign’s Bound. You have substantial guards here. Send some of them with me when I go.”

“I can’t give you all of them,” said Newell. “This palace and its people still need protection.”

“Of course,” said Yedda. “I’m not asking you to leave yourself entirely undefended. Just help me to end this as quickly as I can.”

There was another long stretch of silence. Yedda could feel sweat gathering on her palms even though it wasn’t hot. She took to counting her breaths, focusing on slowing them down, while Newell thought. She wanted to shake him and tell him to just say yes.

“I’ll lend you a squadron,” said Newell. “But if haven’t picked up a trail in a week, they’ll have to return. I can’t waste them on a goose-chase.”

“A week? The lowland isn’t so small as that.”

“I’ve made my decision,” said Newell.

“What about supplies, then?”

“We were raided, remember. We have very little here, captain. And I have lesser born to feed, along with my family.”

“Of course,” said Yedda tightly.

“We’ll give you supper tonight, and foodstuffs for the road tomorrow. You’ll leave in the morning?”

“Yes. We will.”

“Then you’d better relax for the rest of the afternoon. I have to oversee the work, but will you be my dinner-guest this evening?”

“I’d be honored,” said Yedda. “Thank you.”

CHAPTER

Finian’s forces entered Gillemar village unchecked, but by the time they’d passed the outlying houses the bell-tower on top of the Proper pealed a warning.

The village streets were empty. It was midday and all the workers busied about their jobs.

The rebels arrived at the lip of a bridge to find three armored guards blocking its passage. The bridge spanned a few dozen feet before the island began. Boats were tied on either side of the bank.

“Put down your weapons and leave alive,” said Finian loudly. “This land belongs to the people now.”

The guards were silent and well-trained. They lowered their pole arms blade-first and took steady fighting stances. They were arrayed in a tight formation, the middle guard tucked a

little behind the first two. There was no room to pass them on the bridge. Fighters would have to be funneled into them and their weapons. Doubtlessly these guards were better trained than the gang of villagers and city folk who followed Finian. Certainly they were better armed and armored.

Finian pointed to the boats with his sword, and a few of his followers scrambled down the steeply sloped bank to the unguarded small crafts, designed for fishing or transporting goods. Volleys of arrows began to spray down on them from the palace. They were at the end of the bow's reaches, but the Gillemar archers had the advantage that they were shooting down. Only a handful of arrows fell short into the water. Too many made their mark, rendering one fighter immobile as the other common born retreated, not without wounds. Arrows sprouted from thighs and arms, from a shoulder, from the forequarters of Finian's horse. The whole force moved back a span. The arrows fell short, then ceased.

"Archers!" shouted Finian, dismounting swiftly as his horse reared and swayed, threatening to trample the fighters beside him. "In front. Clear the bridge!"

The guards on the bridge died easily, stuffed with arrows, but the banks on the far side were rapidly filling with warriors as the bell on top of the palace kept tolling.

"How many guards do they *have*?" Finian asked Ulla in horror.

"Get your head together," she said sharply. "This isn't a time to panic, general!"

"Corliss," said Finian loudly. The Bound pushed back her hood to reveal her red, scaled skin.

"It's too far," she said, eyes narrowed on the palace. "We can make them sweat, but all we can burn is the bridge. Or the boats."

"No, none of that," said Finian. "We need a way to get you closer, then."

"We could rush it," said Ulla.

"No. We fall back to the village," Finian shouted, so his troops could hear. "Take the houses. Don't harm anyone inside."

CHAPTER

Yedda stood alone before the line of skulls. Around her rang the sounds of hammers and shouting workers, broken by an occasional horse's whinny. Some of her guards were kind enough to volunteer for the afternoon, and joined Duitiel's servants in their work. The others rested, playing cards or dice in the village's little tavern. Only she stood before the memorial to the dead.

It was strange perspective. She stood so tall above them that all she saw were the crack-lined tops and the holes of the eyes. The skulls watched nothing, thought nothing. She counted them carefully; twice to be sure she had the number right. Twenty-three. Twenty-three lives she had to avenge. Twenty-three empty skulls of people she would never meet, servants and guards. Perhaps even Colton's head was among them. Two of the skulls at the end of the line were smaller than the others, with the primary teeth still coming in. That chilled her. They had belonged to young children.

She would remember the skulls. She would remember each one of them, though they were nearly all the same now. She would think about them as she chased down the rebels, and she would kill the rebels one by one, the way they killed the people whose last remains sat before her in a line of bodiless heads. Such cruelty did not deserve to live in the world. She would never let them win. She would draw her final breaths making sure they could never walk again, never kill again.

This was why she had become a guard, she thought. She hadn't known it at eleven when Chilton saved her from the jails, but here was the reason before her. It was well and good to break up a tavern fight or catch a thief, but before her now was an unspeakable horror, and she was going to stop it. She was going to avenge these deaths. She was going to make Chilton proud.

In resolution, Yedda nodded to herself, her lips drawn tight. She wanted to leap onto her horse and dash off on her hunt, but she knew better. This could be their last stopping point with beds and hot food for some time. There was no true sense in leaving before morning. The insurgents already had an enormous start on them.

"Guardsperson," a voice said. She looked to the side to find a man in the Duitiel guard's uniform, his sleeves green under a long studded leather chest piece. "Captain, I'm sorry. I didn't see the triangles."

"That's alright," said Yedda, and turned back to the skulls.

"You're the one commanding tomorrow, then? Slade, captain of Duitiel guard." He extended a hand to her. She shook it.

"You're riding with us?" Yedda asked.

"Yes, I'll head those of us who accompany you. It'll be a merry hunt."

"You could call it that," said Yedda.

"Studying the evidence?" He joked, with a nod to the skulls. "There isn't much to learn from those. I don't think they can talk anymore."

"I'm reminding myself why we're doing this," she said. She wanted to reprimand him for joking. It left a sour taste in her mouth. But she was in no hurry to insult the man who would be commanding alongside her when she didn't even know him.

"Sizing up the enemy?"

"Yes. Who would kill a child?"

"Pardon?"

"Those," said Yedda, pointing. "They were too young to be victims."

"Oh," said Slade. "Perhaps we need a sign. They weren't victims."

"What do you mean?"

"They were rebels, or the family of rebels," he explained, stuffing his hands into his pockets. "Clan heir Newell had them executed."

"No," said Yedda. "The report I was given said the rebels had fled by the time he—you all—arrived from the city."

"The main force," he agreed. "These are Newell's examples, the village-folk who let it happen without a fight."

"That's not very funny," she said.

“It isn’t meant to be,” he responded. “Treason is as serious in the lowland as it is in the city, captain. Our Proper might not have fallen had they bothered to resist.”

CHAPTER

Carthorses burst down the Gillemar streets, three wooden coaches rattling behind them on the cobblestone. The open bodies of the coaches were filled with common born, crouching down to avoid being shot.

In the house closest to the bridge, Finian and Telon watched through the window with baited breath. They had come up with the plan as quickly as they could, not wanting to give the Gillemars time to advance.

If things went sour, Finian and Telon could block the bridge for a minute or two more and give the others a head start on escape. Those who had not wanted to fight stood with them, watching with nervous eyes.

The two foremost carts came up on either side of the bridge. Arrows rained down on them.

The cart drivers whipped the horses forward and swung them sharply sideways against the shoreline. All the humans jumped from the cart. The drivers released the horses as quickly as they could, taking cover after behind the wall of the cart. They now had two makeshift walls on either lip of the bridge, giving them some arrow-cover.

Finian hissed as one of the drivers was shot in the neck and went down. She’d managed to release the horse in time. The creature was unfortunately wounded, but they needed the carts to stay in place, not go jolting off after a frightened beast.

The remaining cart had a covered bed. This, they sent down the bridge. The wooden structure was just wide enough to allow the cartwheels to rattle across. Where the first Gillemar guards had been shot down, the carriage stopped long enough for two passengers to leap out and push the bodies into the water. Then they followed, diving into the lake: disappearing under the surface was a faster escape from arrows than trying to climb back into the cart. One of them was shot in the leg. Finian wondered if the diver would make it back to shore.

The cart jolted forward again. The horse was barely in a state to move, but with the driver’s relentless whip the beast made its painful way forward. Finian felt some regret for this, but he’d rather put the animal in torment than his own troops. It was imperative that the cart made it across the lake intact. Its cargo was precious: Corliss and Murdoc, surrounded by those few of his followers who actually knew how to fight. Ulla among them.

On Finian’s shore, pairs of common born took turns leaving the safety of their abandoned carts. They cut the ropes on the smaller boats, and rocked them over to form protective shells. In small groups under the turned boats they kicked their way across the lake, sharpened rakes and knives in hand. Those who couldn’t swim floated, clinging to the seats of the upturned watercraft. The wooden pods, painted vivid colors, slowly migrated across the lake towards the castle. They began to look like pincushions from the arrows, but those swimming under them remained unpierced. With luck, Corliss and Murdoc could cause enough destruction that the swimming rebels would arrive in relative safety and climb up the shore without being cut down.

The cart Corliss rode in had come to a halt not far from the end of the bridge, the horse spent and wounded beyond running, collapsing onto its front knees. The rest of the body buckled and followed. The driver had died already, or was dying, riddled with arrows.

There was a slit in the front of the cart between its walls and its roof. Peering through this, Corliss saw a half-dozen Gillemar guards approaching the cart at a jog. She pulled the heat from half of them and shoved it into the others. Three guards froze solid, limbs stiffening. Their inertia carried them forward, tipping them onto the ground. They were dead before they were horizontal. The other three died with agonizing screams, their bodies charred and their armor melted.

Not all of the Gillemar guards had seen a Bound's work. Certainly none of them had fought a Bound before. The guards on the shore stopped, uncertain whether to fight or to run. Training stopped them from retreating. Fear stopped them from advancing. Only the archers on top of the palace walls were unaffected. They kept shooting as Finian's troops left the cart, Murdoc and Corliss with them. The first upturned boat reached the shore and common born emerged from the lake, rushing up the slope with wordless screams and battle cries. The arrows slowed as the rebels pushed their way into the Gillemar lines, making each shot a risk between hitting enemy and friend.

"We did it," said Telon with wonder. "We're taking Gillemar palace. Finian, we're doing it."

"I know," he said, his voice fierce. "This is it."

Unseen by either of them, a new figure emerged on the rooftop wielding a hooked sword. It was no ordinary weapon. The blade itself had not been used for centuries.

Perhaps things would have gone differently, if they had reached Gillemar a few days before. But with Ogden's coronation, there was a new Gillemar heir. The relic sword had been returned to the proper, and to him. Gillemar's bound was home.

Ulla and Corliss were next to Murdoc. They heard him screech, a terrified and inhuman wail; he heard the sword awaken, and knew who had come. Corliss turned to look at Murdoc in horror, and then could not look away.

Across the battlefield, from the shoreline to the lip of the palace, nobody moved. They stood with weapons raised, faces agonized or blank, knives half-submerged or blocking a strike.

On top of the castle wall, the archers once again took aim.

CHAPTER

"Hey, Yedda," said Anluan softly, necking his horse up towards hers. "Are you alright? You look halfway to death."

"I'm fine," she said.

"Are you sure?"

"I didn't sleep well, is all. Leave it be."

"Nervous about going to battle?"

"I said leave it, Anluan. I'm fine."

"There's no need to snap," he muttered, and fell back into line.

They headed in a southerly way from the Proper. The surviving witnesses of the attack had seen the rebels leave in that direction. Yedda wondered if they'd been executed after divulging the information, or if some had been allowed to live. Slade and the Duitiel guards rode in front, since they knew the land and its people best. Yedda was happy to give Slade command. Her head ached. She could barely think straight.

By mid-morning they'd reached a sparse village. Most of the houses were ramshackle and in disrepair. The people were worryingly thin and bug-eyed. They wore old clothes, holey or patched a dozen times.

"What happened here?" Yedda asked Anluan softly. "They look like they're starving."

"I thought you were born in the lowland," said Anluan, looking at her with surprise. Anluan was a lowlander by birth as well, but not lesser born. His clan family oversaw a large swath of Aiteach farmland.

"I lived in Duitiel Proper. I was born on a farm, but I don't remember much."

"The Propers are different. Clans live there. Monarchs."

"You mean this is normal? Doesn't that bother you?"

He shrugged. "Sure. But it can't be helped."

The head invited them into her house. Only Yedda and Slade went inside. They were offered cups of mint water. Two young children sat against the wall, watching them with wide eyes.

With a little questioning, Yedda discovered a large band of armed strangers had passed through, headed south. The guards were traveling in the right direction.

"I said not to go," the head explained nervously. "I said it was asking trouble, to join up with the likes of them, talking treason and what not. But I couldn't stop them, could I?"

"Thank you for your time," said Yedda. They left the house.

"How do you want them treated?" Slade asked Yedda.

"Who, the villagers?"

"Aye," he said. "They harbored rebels. If many of them joined, you can bet the rest are treason-minded, too."

"Lay off. We don't have time for that. We'll keep moving."

"It's your command," he said with a shrug, evidently not agreeing. "Listen, captain, I don't know how things are in the city, but you should be tougher with these lowland lesser born. They'll lie blind to you if they can, and spit on any good you do them."

"Thank you, captain Slade," Yedda said. "I'll take that under advisement."

They rode on, a line of horses and leather-armed warriors with swords and loose-strung bows to hand.

When they stopped for lunch, Slade started them on a lively song. None of the city guards knew it; it was a Duitiel folk tune. They all picked up the chorus quickly enough, though Yedda barely mumbled along. Her tongue felt leaden, and her mind like mush.

"Not a singer?" Slade asked her, friendly, a handful of dried figs in his outstretched hand.

"Not really," said Yedda, taking one of them with a shrug. "We should mount up. I want to get further before we stop."

"All a-horse," Slade shouted to his guard. "You heard the captain. Break is over."

CHAPTER

Murdoc. MURDOC!

Corliss couldn't look away from the pale Bound. An arrow sliced through the air and buried itself deep into his shoulder. He could have been a statue, if it weren't for the light wind tossing the ends of his hair.

Murdoc, wake up. You have to move. You have to end this.

Murdoc. Brother whisper.

Wake up.

His eyes flickered. Hers did not, but stayed frozen on his face, on the long twig sprouting from his collar with blood slow blooming around it.

Calm down, Fire-heart. We are too tired to reach so far. You must burn. We will help you.

He stopped speaking and closed his eyes. Another arrow flew past Corliss' vision. If it hit him, it was too low for her locked eyes to see.

An arrow bit into her side, but in her unmoving state pain had no meaning. She felt the metal tip cut between her hard scales, pushing her insides apart as it entered her torso. Her parted skin closed around the thin arrow shaft.

Her mind was clearer than it had ever been. That was Murdoc's doing.

She had to do something about the archers. She could not move, but she could still burn. She would have to do it without seeing her target. Lucky she had gained power since the attack on Duitiel proper. She had transformed, come into herself. Become more spirit than human, given herself to the ancient power that ruled her body. And that power was made of heat, controlled the cold, owned the energy like a limb.

If she concentrated, really concentrated, she could *feel* the warm presence of the bodies on the roof-top. They were hotter than the air around them. Hotter than the sun-warmed stone. Little parcels of warmth. Little unlit fires, ready to burn, ready to ignite.

She didn't have the strength. It was too much power, from the ground to the unseen rooftop. There were a dozen archers, all scattered, and the hottest thing around them the stones. And nothing colder than the spring air. There was no yawning cavern to tuck the heat away in, and no blistering presence to pull it from.

But the ancient spirit inside of her, the power made of heat—*that* was strong enough, if it wasn't being shackled by the girl.

Her eyes were still stuck on Murdoc. An arrow ripped through his ear closest to her, leaving nothing behind it but a bloody mess on the side of his head. She knew what she had to do.

The human named Corliss was dead. Staring at Murdoc was Dol, the ancient spirit, the father of fire, living in a body that once belonged to a child.

On top of the Gillemar palace, eleven archers danced, their bodies burning in unimaginable pain. As it died, the twelfth body dropped the sword it had held.

The battlefield came back to life. Rebels dropped dead, bled out from arrows. Murdoc slumped onto the ground.

The ground crackled as it froze. Ice misted over the top of the lake.

-

Eleven of them, including Finian and Telon, had remained on the far side of the lake. Those eleven were the only ones unharmed.

Fewer than half the rebels died in the battle itself, but over half were dead within a few hours of the fighting's end, their wounds too serious to be fixed. Those who had little more than bruises or shallow scrapes worked hard to clean and bandage the more severely wounded. Finian felt relieved to see Ulla up and around (her arm was bandaged, but she was lively), though he couldn't share the same joy for Corliss or Finian, nor many of his other folk.

They quickly realized the arrowheads were not well attached to the shafts. The only way to remove the bolts was to first widen the wound, twisting the arrow inside of the flesh or prodding around it with a knife. The Gillemar servants helped wordlessly. Finian couldn't tell if they did so out of fear or gratitude. He was too exhausted to puzzle it out, and accepted the bandages and medicinal ointments they provided without question. Many of the wounds were quickly infected. Corliss healed the fastest. Its body burned out infection and the scales sealed themselves back together.

They attended the living before they attended the dead. The great hall had been turned into an infirmary, since it was the only room large enough—besides, perhaps, the kitchen—on the ground floor of the palace. It was a cavernous space. Tall hearths alternated with structural sculpted columns down the center of the room. It was so long it would take a minute to walk the length of it. They put the wounded on the tables and laid the dead on the ground by the walls, covered by blankets.

“Do you have a graveyard?” Finian asked at last, his voice flat with exhaustion. “We need to put them somewhere else.”

“We give them to the marsh,” the woman he'd asked answered. There was blood on her hands from the wounds she'd been washing. “A cart can take them out. The ground swallows 'em. How it's always been done.”

“No.” The voice was faint, but clearly Murdoc's. He lay on his side a few bodies down, wounded ear up, head propped by a bundle of fabric. There was a bandage around his head, a thick wad of cloth covering where his ear had been. His shirt had been removed to cut the arrow from his collar; his shoulder was covered in bandages as well. Though the bandages were thick, he was beginning to bleed through.

“Someone has to deal with Corliss,” said Murdoc. “Don't waste bodies in the marsh. Feed it.”

“Feed *it*?” Finian echoed, moving closer so the wounded Bound didn't have to speak as loudly.

“It needs something to burn,” said Murdoc. “Before it starts to burn the living.”

“Where is she?” asked Finian.

“Under the kitchens,” said Murdoc.

-

The ovens of the kitchen were all lit. An open door revealed a staircase downwards.

“Corliss?” Finian called. There was no answer. There was a light somewhere at the end of the stairs, and the passage was warm, warmer than the kitchens themselves. Birch wouldn’t go any further, but growled at the top of the steps.

Finian descended alone. Sweat beaded under his arms and in the small of his back.

The storeroom was large and windowless, lined with shelves. Corliss was a torch. The Bound’s body glowed.

“It’s like an oven,” Finian said when he entered, but the Bound didn’t turn to face him. On the floor beside it were glass bottles and wooden casks. Finian thought he knew what had been in them. The stone floor gleamed slick against the red light Corliss cast. Cooking oil, or animal fat.

“We could use you out there,” said Finian again.

“Our job is done,” said Corliss. It took a swig from the bottle in its hand, and when it exhaled its breath came out in fire. A bundle of dried chamomile, hanging from the ceiling, lit. Red fire traced along its stems like poison coursing through a vein, leaving nothing behind but crisp char and soft ash.

“There are bodies,” said Finian. “They deserve a funeral. Won’t you burn them for us?”

“Yes,” said Corliss. “We will burn.”

“Come upstairs, then,” said Finian. “We’ll gather them together for you. The dead. The living are off-limits.” He could taste the smoke in the air. He struggled to breathe.

The Bound didn’t answer. It pawed for a bottle at the back of the shelf. A bag of pea flour hit the ground and rose in a cloud.

“I’ll see you up there, then,” said Finian.

CHAPTER

“They weren’t human, not all of them,” said master Croswin. He entertained the guards in his front parlor. A servant offered Yedda, Slade, and Anluan honey-drizzled oat rolls and water.

“The leader kept saying I had to choose sides. Little man. More like a snake than a fighter.”

“So you helped them?” Slade asked, disgust on his face. Yedda and Anluan ate; he did not. “You’ve got guards, fences—you didn’t even fight?”

“You didn’t listen,” said Croswin. “There were Bound with them. I didn’t have a choice. They robbed me blind.”

“Bound? With the rebels?” Slade asked.

“Aye. A sickly lad who nearly made my guards turn against me, and a... a girl, I suppose, as lizard as human. She lit fires with nothing more than a flick of her eye.”

Something tickled at the back of Yedda’s mind. A loose fire spirit, lost or Bound to a young child—a young child gone missing—Yedda herself, imprisoned for releasing a spirit—a

bodiless voice that had called out to her, told her what to do, commanded her. A hand lightly touched her shoulder snapped her back to reality. She looked over. The hand was Anluan's. She shook her head.

"He's telling the truth," said Yedda. "Come on, let's go."

"Captain Yedda," said Slade. "May I speak to you? Alone?"

They left Anluan with Croswin in the room, retiring to the empty hall.

"You're young. I understand this is your first command," said Slade, not unkindly.

"What of it?"

"You're far too lax," said Slade. "First the village. Now here. It's your woman's heart, likely. But I've seen you spar; you have the makings of a great guard. You need to toughen up."

"Toughen up? Slade, we're wasting time. We know which way they went."

"There's a gashed wound all across the lowland! You want to run along without sewing it up."

"We'll return his property if we find it. There's nothing else we can do."

Slade pounded his fist against the wall of the hallway.

"Return it? Captain, this is ridiculous. He did nothing to stop the rebels. He should be punished."

"You heard him, Slade. There were Bound. You *saw* what the rebels did to the Proper."

"You can't tell me you believe that? He didn't even send a messenger to the city or the proper. Croswin was complicit. It's a lie!"

"He didn't take their side."

"He didn't take ours, either. This man should be arrested, at best. Put before a court."

"You're barbaric," said Yedda. "All you know is power, Slade. You wouldn't recognize justice if it slapped you in the face. What are you going to do, kill all the farmers?"

"If we need to, yes. I'll do what it takes."

"Then who will farm? Get your head out of your dung hole! A country is made up of more than the people who rule it. We have bigger things to worry about than this man."

"It is our sworn duty to uphold the law of the clans," said Slade. "Where does *your* allegiance lie, guardsperson?"

"I was sent from the morning city to see this mess set to rights. *You* were assigned to follow me and to follow my orders."

"These are Duitiel lands. This is not your territory."

"Are *you* a traitor? Even Duitiel bows to the Sovereign. I serve a master superior to yours, if that's all the reason you'll listen to. You'd better ready your horse, Slade. Whether you like it or not, we're moving on."

For a moment all she heard was Slade's breathing, heavy and angry. His lips were drawn tight.

"I'm keeping my eye on you," he said. He turned on his heel and strode past her, out of the house. Yedda took a moment to herself in the hallway, letting her anger burn down a little before she returned to the parlor.

"Thank you for your time, master Croswin," said Yedda. "If we can return your property, we will. Anluan, let's go. We've got a lot of ground to cover."

Yedda stopped on the front porch for a half second, squinting in confusion. All the horses were tacked, and all of them mounted except for Anluan and hers. They pointed to the gate as if leaving. The exit was blocked by Bosimun, spreading its enormous feathered wings.

“What’s going on?” Yedda asked, raising her voice the same way she’d heard Chilton and Dalton do so many times before. “Bosimun, what’s wrong?”

“This person tries to leave without you,” the Bound said. “He says you will catch up. That your guards should follow *him* now.”

“You said we were in a hurry,” Slade said. “I was trying to speed things up.”

“Our current pace was fine,” said Yedda, making her way slowly and deliberately down the steps and towards her horse. Anluan followed. “Thank you, Bosimun. You’ve saved me the trouble of having to chase down my own guards, as well as the rebels. Captain Slade, I appreciate your ambition. In the future, you have my permission to be a little *less* ambitious.”

There was a scattering of chuckles from the city guards.

Yedda took hold of her gelding’s mane, planted a foot in the stirrup, and swung herself into the saddle. She moved her horse to the gate, where Bosimun folded its wings, and tossed it the remains of one of her salt-pouches. It jumped up and caught the bag in mid-air, wheeling above them. Slade’s horse startled. Yedda was prepared, and kept a steady seat on hers, keeping him moving with his feet close to ground.

“Move out,” said Yedda, and pressed her mount into a trot down the southern-pointing road. Slade was still struggling to regain control of his horse. Yedda was at the front of the line: nobody could see her face. She allowed herself a triumphant smile, even unprofessional as it was.

CHAPTER

Bonfire rose to swallow the piled bodies. The blaze swept to half the height of Gillemar proper, then died down, its fuel gone. A chill blew through all of them, the lake-top cracking frozen once again. Finian shivered and rubbed his arms to warm them, teeth chattering.

He’d gotten through half the words he wanted to say, thanking the dead and honoring their passing, before Corliss decided it was enough and lit them ablaze. The Gillemar survivors and his own troops—those well enough to join them outside—stood and watched without a word.

The Bound was feral, spoiled, gone rotten like fruit. He’d always known that she would, one day, but he’d never brought himself to imagine it. He had never separated the spirit from the child. He’d never looked at her and really imagined what it would be like to know she wasn’t there. But it had happened. Unarguably, *it* had happened.

It was an abominable truth. If only Rowena never came to the city, if she’d just stayed at Dorchalt Proper, none of this would have happened. Finian would probably still be in the city, running Sileas’ black market and plotting a distant revolution. He would not have so many dead to burn.

It was convenient they were saying farewell to the dead. Nobody looked twice at the tears on his face. They could be falling for anyone.

We do not think she has to die.

Once Finian would have startled at Murdoc's voice in his head. Now he simply closed his eyes and imagined the sick Bound lying in the great hall, slowly bleeding out his bandages.

It's going to kill everyone, Finian thought. You know it's true, Murdoc. I love her as much as you do, but there's no other choice. Don't warn her. It.

No. Give us a chance to fix it. Let us try.

And what if you fail, and it knows? None of us will be able to do it then. It's too strong. All I have is surprise.

Have you forgotten what we are? What we can do? Do you trust your human wisdom over the endless spaces we hold to command?

Bring it to us, Finian. Let us do what we can to set this right.

-

"We want to speak to it alone, Bound to Bound," said Murdoc, when Finian finally got Corliss into the great hall turned infirmary. Murdoc's breath was short and rapid.

"We can hardly ask all the wounded to move," Finian protested.

"You carry us, Finian. Take us somewhere private. One of the upstairs chambers."

Telon was sitting in the infirmary with Ena, one of those wounded in the fighting.

"A hand?" Finian begged. Telon nodded and helped Finian lift Murdoc. They carried him on a sheet turned into a litter.

Corliss trailed behind. They brought him up the first flight of stairs, and insisted on stopping there. They were both out of breath.

There was a bedchamber. They propped Murdoc up in the silk-shrouded bed, his back against the headboard. He had chills, and shook from it.

"Fine," said Murdoc. "Leave us."

Telon and Finian hurried away, closing the door behind them.

"What do you want, brother whisper? Why have you called us here?"

"To talk."

We do not need closed doors to speak.

"Stop that," Murdoc wheezed. "We're going to talk, like people do."

People? "We are more than people."

"You cheated that human out of her body," said Murdoc.

"No more than you stole from the boy."

"We've lived here an age. It's time for us to go."

The bed began to smolder.

"What will you do? Kill us? You'll be alone."

The bed cooled.

"Thought not," said Murdoc, smugly. "So, you still have something to live for. That's good."

“We have many things to live for,” said Corliss.

“Like what?”

“Rowena. All these fires burn for her.”

“Rowena’s dead.”

“But not avenged.”

“What do you care? You aren’t Corliss anymore.”

“So long as we wear her body, a little of her is still us.”

“Is it? Then it’s time to tell you: they lied about Rowena’s death.”

“They? Who?”

“You know Rowena was a guard. Finian had you taken captive so he could make demands of her. She fought to protect you. She died. This isn’t Rowena’s revolution. You’re just a puppet. They killed your family and stole you away, and raised you alone in the mountains, telling you what you needed to hear. You didn’t have to be alone.”

Corliss howled, its yellow eyes gone red. Smoke billowed from its mouth.

“Easy,” said Murdoc. **Easy.** “Are you Corliss, or aren’t you? What does a spirit care for a human life?”

“We care,” said Corliss, “that we have been *tricked*.”

“Fire-heart,” said Murdoc, “It was we who gave you that body in the first place. Now give it back.”

“We do not answer to you.”

All answer to us in time. Leave the human. Go home. This world is not for you.

“I am owed. My true body has been stolen from me, by humans. The debt is not repaid.”

Human lives are fragile things. That was lifetimes ago to them. How long can this body hold you? You are eating it from the inside out. And soon, you will start again, with a new human. How many lives have you swallowed already, yesterday or today?

And what of you, dream-whisper? Are you leaving with us? Will he have his body back?

Corliss walked to the bed and climbed onto it. It pulled Murdoc forward by the shoulders and lifted his hair to the side. He did not resist. For the first time, it saw the one part of him that was truly Bound, the one part of his body that had changed in answer to the spirit riding him.

Protruding from the base of his neck was a bug’s body, long and round as a tube. Hard, shiny black segments marched up his neck, pairs of thin legs arching out. At the top, where his hair began, there was a perfect human face. It was no larger than a thumbnail.

Have you seen enough?

The voice was in its head, but as the words sounded, the lips on the tiny face moved.

Corliss saw the stars wheeling in the sky, an endless space stretching out, out, out. Corliss felt currents of thought ripple across the Proper, across the clan land, across the valley.

It intimately understood why the boy’s maid had drowned herself. The stars all rushed in, and it was come undone, but rather than unravel the person, what came undone were the clasps between spirit and human. The stars all sang and swallowed the embers. What had rose horribly inside the human plummeted back down, like a stone thrown into the air only to pause and return.

Corliss let go of Murdoc and slowly backed away from him. He fell against the headboard.

Corliss collapsed, too, onto the hard floor.

CHAPTER

“Murdoc?” Corliss asked. When he didn’t answer, Corliss reached out and touched his arm lightly. He groaned. “Murdoc, wake up.”

“Hm,” he said.

They were still alone in the bedchamber. It was morning of the next day. Nobody had come upstairs to check on them.

“Are you human?” Corliss asked, self-conscious of being hollow and strange, like a cup empty of water, uncertain now of what was meant to fill it.

“Yes,” he said. “I think I am.”

“Murdoc,” Corliss said. “The back of your neck...”

“That’s right,” he said in wonder. “You’re still alive. Did you see it?”

“I think so,” Corliss said. “Unless I was dreaming. It was odd enough to be a dream.”

“Do I want to know?” he asked.

“I’m not sure you’d believe me. May I?” Corliss extended a trembling arm to his head.

“Careful,” he said. “Slowly.”

He cried out softly when Corliss pulled him forward.

“It’s fine. Go ahead.”

The bug was still there, but smaller, as if it had died and dried out. When Corliss gently reached out, it crumbled to dust like a charred husk. There was a shallow hollow in his neck where the creature had grown from, wet with blood but not dripping.

Silently, Corliss lowered him back down to the bed.

“It’s gone. No more voice, Murdoc. You can go anywhere you want.”

“I want to go to the ocean,” he said.

Corliss laughed. “We can do that.”

“Right now,” said Murdoc. “I’ve never seen it.”

“Don’t you think you should rest? You aren’t well.”

“I’m not,” said Murdoc. “I’m going to die. I want to see the ocean first.”

“You’re not going to die,” said Corliss. “You’re going to rest, and get well, and live to old age.”

“I’ve got infections,” he said. “Those arrows poisoned my blood. Look at me, Corliss.”

“You’re wrong. You have to be.”

“I’m not,” he said. “I’ve known since it happened. I’ve known since I was more than human. It’s fine, Corliss. I don’t mind. I get to die human. Just take me to the ocean. It isn’t far from here.”

CHAPTER

The village was empty. The common born had moved inside the castle, tending to the wounded or simply claiming better quarters now that they were without a ruler. Others had left, fleeing the retribution they thought the clans would eventually bring.

Beside the main bridge to Gillemar island were turned-over carts. Arrows littered the ground and stuck out from the carts.

Behind Yedda, Slade cursed.

“Two Propers destroyed,” said Yedda. “That’s some power.”

“What do you wish of us?” Bosimun asked, lighting on the roof of a nearby house.

“Nothing,” said Yedda. She brought her guard’s horn to her lips and blew three long, steady blasts.

A figure emerged from the palace doors, across the lake.

“Do the Gillemars still hold power here?” Yedda shouted.

The figure shook its head no.

“I desire to meet with whoever does. Who is your leader?”

The figure vanished inside.

“Do we attack?” Anluan wanted to know.

“No. Not yet. Let’s see if they’ll agree to a meeting first. Riley, Arden, see if you can find anyone in the village. I want to know what happened here.”

-

“Warriors,” Telon said. Ulla and Finian stood in the entry hall with him. They had all come to the sound of the horn. “Across the bridge. Armed to the teeth, and a Bound with them.”

“In uniform?” Finian asked.

“Yes. Guards. From the city, and from Duitiel.”

“How many?”

“Twenty, perhaps.”

“Should I sound a call to arms?” Ulla asked.

“No,” said Finian. “No, don’t. Dung.”

“What? Are we just giving up?” asked Telon.

“I don’t know,” said Finian. With his back against the wall, he slid down to the ground and sighed, rocking his head in his hands. “What else can we do?”

“We can fight,” said Ulla, crouching down next to him. “That’s what we agreed to do, Finian.”

“But we’ll lose,” he said. “You know we will. We’ve lost too many people, lost or injured them already. Corliss and Murdoc are gone.”

“We have the Gillemar sword,” Ulla said.

“They have a Sovereign’s Bound,” Telon reminded her. “At least one. And living, not inside a stick or a scrap of metal.”

“None of us are trained to use that sword,” said Finian. “You know how wrong that could...how badly...”

There was a tense silence between them.

“If we don’t surrender, they’ll kill us,” said Finian. “And then they’ll kill all the servants, and the injured fighters.”

“If we do surrender, they’ll probably still kill us,” Ulla said. “We’ve committed treason tenfold.”

“A hundred fold,” said Finian, and laughed dryly, shaking his head. “If only we had more time. Time to rebuild our strength.”

“So what are we going to do?” Telon asked.

“I still say fight. To the death,” said Ulla.

“No. I’m going to surrender and see how much of the blame I can take,” said Finian. “Maybe they’ll believe you’re my prisoners. Maybe I can keep you all alive.”

“One rebel, holding all of us in a castle?” Ulla asked. “They won’t believe you.”

“How’s that different from the clans?” Finian said. “It’s the best I’ve got.”

“You’re going to need accomplices,” Ulla said, and put her hand on one of his knees.

“So... if you’re doing this, I’ll surrender with you.”

“No,” said Finian, removing her hand. “I don’t want to see you executed, Ulla.”

“Then close your eyes,” she said. She stood up and offered him a hand.

“Curse it,” said Telon. “I’m coming too.”

“There’s no need,” Finian said.

“I have the right,” he said. “If it might help save everyone else inside, I’d like to do what I can.”

“Fine,” said Finian. “But there’s something I have to do first.”

The Gillemar sword was in his bag. He carried the whole thing out through one of the palace’s back doors, not wanting to touch the weapon and unleash the spirit’s power.

“You’re going to use that thing?” Telon wanted to know, following him with Ulla.

“No,” said Finian. “I’m going to make sure nobody uses it again.”

He hurled it as far as he could into the lake.

“Come on,” said Finian, beginning to walk around the wide palace. “Let’s put an end to this.”

-

At the end of the bridge they met with a squadron of guards on horseback. Their leader was a woman who met each of their eyes evenly.

“You’re the leaders here?” Yedda asked.

“I am,” said Finian.

“What happened to the Gillemars?”

“There was a fight.”

“I see. Are any of you Bound?”

“No,” said Finian. “We’re human.”

“And are there any Bound inside?”

“No,” said Finian. “Only humans.”

“We’re going to search the castle. Anluan, Taig, Slade, take them captive. Don’t hurt anyone unless I say to. Come on, then, we’ll all cross the bridge together.”

-

The great hall was smoky, and crowded once everyone was inside. They’d searched the palace, and unless there were some very clever hiding spots, they’d found and herded everyone here. The air smelled like rot and recent death, a sour and overpowering stench. Yedda breathed through her mouth rather than her nose.

She studied every face in the room. She would bet her teeth these were the rebels. The fighting had been recent. They did not bow before the guards or beg for help the way she would expect servants to.

She knew what her orders were. She should order most of them executed. The leaders should be taken to the capital to be questioned and publicly hung. They looked at her defiantly, their mouths hard and silent.

“Alright,” she said. “It looks like the rebels left.”

“What?” said Slade, incredulous.

“You were there, Slade. You heard what master Crosswin said. The rebels had Bound with them. Do you see any lizard people? These are just humans, servants. The rebels must have moved on.”

“No,” said Slade. “Yedda, I’ve let you get away with poor leadership, but this is blatant mutiny. These are rebels! We’ve been tracking them since Duitiel proper—you can’t tell me you really believe these people are innocent!”

“They had a Bound with them,” reasoned Yedda. “Anluan, do you see any Bound?”

Anluan shook his head.

“All I see are lesser born.”

“Then the Bound were a lie,” reasoned Slade. “Or were hidden, or died! That doesn’t mean all these people are loyal. They must be questioned, at least.”

“Were there rebels here?” Yedda asked the crowd. There was some muttering, a few heads nodding.

“Did they leave?” She asked. More nods, more enthusiastic this time.

“Aye,” someone responded loudly.

“You,” said Yedda, pointing to Finian. “Did you see which way they went?”

“North, north-west?” he said, as if uncertain. “Towards the Aiteach border, I think. A whole rabble of them.”

“See?” Yedda said, to Slade. “This place is like any other we’ve been to. Let’s get back on the road, captain. We’ve got a lot of ground to cover.”

“No,” he said. “I won’t let this happen.”

“Careful,” said Yedda. “It’s treason to disobey your commanding officer. You can be hung for that, you know.”

CHAPTER

It didn't take long for the little boat to float its way to the beach. Corliss used the paddles to get them out of the lake and into the river. Then the current took over. All Corliss had to do was keep more or less in the middle. The river was broad and slow moving.

The river ended in a delta, splitting into a fan of channels around bodies of sediment. To the right they could see the outline of the port town trading hub. Corliss took the leftmost route, keeping far from it.

At the beach, Corliss rowed to the bank and vaulted out. She slogged through the sandy, shallow water and pulled the boat onto the shore, back straining. The boat was small, but heavy with Murdoc in it. The nose of the boat faced the ocean shore.

"Oh," was all he said for a long while. Behind them were thick trees and beach-grasses, but ahead and to either side stretched an infinity of sand and water. From the shallower parts of the sea, past the breaking of the waves, tall stones rose out of the ocean. Large shipping and fishing boats were moored in the distance outside the port. Seabirds wheeled overhead.

"It's something," Corliss managed, feeling wordless and impossibly small.

"Sit with me," he said, and Corliss joined him in the boat. They took each other's hands.

At last the sun began to set.

"There's hair on your head," Murdoc said idly. He was looking at Corliss, not at the water. Corliss reached up. Between the fine scales were tiny, fuzzy hairs so short they were only just noticeable, nothing but a dusting.

"You're turning human again," he said. "I bet you ten-to-one those scales are going to peel off someday soon, too."

"You might be right," Corliss said. "I wonder how I'll look."

"Me, too," said Murdoc, and closed his eyes. There was silence inside his head, a great, vast, unknowing silence that had not been with him since childhood.

He smiled. All he could hear was the ocean, beating against the shore.

-

The sun set to the right and silhouetted spurs of land jutting into the water. Light gleamed red where the tide retreated. The shore turned pearly, then silver, then dark. Corliss did not move until the ocean was a black beast crashing on the coast, and the moon a crescent among scattered stars, all chased and flickering beneath shreds of windswept cloud.

Corliss reached over to Murdoc. His body was still and cold.

Corliss pushed the boat into the river, and waded with it in the current until the sea tugged it away. Corliss scrubbed at the flaking, itchy scales, then waded back to shore with folded arms.

EPILOGUE

For days the spirit rested, curled in the shadowed corner of the room. It had not shed its shell in a dozen years, and the new skin was soft and pliable. At last it stretched, its hundred legs

waving and tapping on the ground. The dream whisper scuttled from the room and slipped down the stairs, keeping always to the shadowed side of the hall.

There was work to be done. The boy had been a good vessel. It was time to pick a new host.

It knew the minds of all the rebels downstairs, knew them well. It had tasted them again and again as it rode the boy: caught their thoughts like cobwebbed insects, felt their feelings breeze over it like a scent carried by the wind.

Its vessel must be stable, able to resist the wheeling of the stars and unending vertigo. The vessel must have battled horror, faced itself. Found strength, and known where to find more. It scuttled under the great wooden doors and down the pebbled bank to the river moat, where the two humans sat talking of the future. It ran past Finian, and with a sudden rush onto Ulla: legs whisking up the woman's arm, across a shoulder-blade, and onto her neck as she thrashed and pummeled at herself. Finian sprang to his feet.

The dream whisper settled, and had half-tangled into her mind when her fingers at last closed around the body of the spirit and ripped it off, threw it down to the ground. Ulla's free hand closed around a stone, and she smashed the rock against the spirit. She ground the stone into its crackling shell.

She stood beside Finian and stared down with shaking hands as the air darkened, condensed, and pulled into the small gray stone.

"The face," said Finian. "That face... *it's...*"

Ulla crouched slowly and picked up the stone.

The night sky blinked open, and the stars wheeled, and she could hear a hundred voices in her head, a hundred voices like fluttering fabrics before her that she could reach out and stroke, change, clasp, caress, and she dropped the stone. She turned and fell to her knees, shuddering, on the brink of convulsions. Finian grabbed her by the shoulders and she stopped, slumped back against him.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

Ulla nodded and measured her breaths, then turned to look at the strange bug's body and the gray stone, for all the world like the shattered rocks that surrounded it. And—yet—so different.

"Murdoc's dead," she said with certainty, and realized as she said it that she had felt his death, seen Corliss through his eyes, in the memory locked into the stone and the creature who now lived within it. "And Corliss... she isn't Bound anymore. She's alive. On the beach."

Their eyes locked, and held.

"Go," she said.

The rowboats they'd used in the fighting still sat there, pulled a few feet up the shore.

"Yes," he said, "I have to. Will you come?"

"I can't. The stone... I saw... there's something I have to do."

"Will you still be here?"

"As long as it's safe, I'll wait."

"I'll find you," said Finian.

She watched him go, and kept her eyes on the water even once his boat was out of sight.

The sword still sat at the bottom of the lake. If they were going to win the war, Ulla thought, they needed a way to get it back.