



The Princes of Anfall

**THE PRINCES OF ANFALL**

**BY**

**THERESE MacFARLAND**

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## Prologue

A.D. 846

Dylan prayed the others would hurry. Darkness blackened the face of the moon fully but seemed to be losing its hold. A curved sliver of light peaked from behind black wisps of clouds. Dylan scanned the forest edge for any sign of his fellow mages.

She *had* come. Dylan's heart leapt at the sight of her. A dark hood and cloak covered her face and form, but nothing could hide her spirit.

"Gwyneth. I was afraid to hope."

"Well, sir, it seems you may put your fears to rest. Why did you doubt me?" She smiled as she pulled back her hood. "I am before you, and if the Spirit is willing, will be so for many years to come. Where are the others?" She looked at the moon, now a full quarter and waxing quickly.

"I fear they lost courage."

"Nay, here come your brothers and mine, and your cousins, if the darkness does not deceive me. And others I cannot make out." Dylan breathed out deeply in relief.

"Well, brother," Graeham approached Dylan and glanced at the moon. "It seems we must hurry if the maid is correct."

"Aye, I am certain of it. We may be old men and woman when the time is right again. Where is Drummond of Anfall?"

"Behind you." The huge warrior stood with his wife and six children. "Is it not time, Dylan? Look!"

Dylan nodded and motioned for the gathering to assemble. He counted nearly fifty souls—not nearly all of the gifted. Dylan's heart ached for those staying behind, certain this night, this spell, was their only escape. Twenty killed in less than a year, with the promise of more to come. Within another year, the religious zealots of the new movement would kill every one of them, branding them devils. There was no place left to run; their persecutors tracked them everywhere they traveled. Their exceptional features made them easy targets, despite their gifts. Gwyneth's vision gave them their only hope—a place uninhabited, graced by the Spirit, safe for all to worship and practice their arts as they pleased.

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They circled the ancient monolith, now shining in the moonlight. Dylan nodded and Gwyneth led the chant, singing the precise words given to her in the dreams. Others joined in as they learned the song, their voices rising to echo through the woods. Dylan knew many of them had doubts and fears, but he knew also that the Spirit would never mislead Gwyneth. Her faith was absolute. In a matter of moments, they would leave this world forever.

Dylan felt a warm breeze cut through the chill of the night, and he caught Gwyneth's eye. She nodded and smiled. The air within the circle shimmered and cracked with energy, and a tingling coursed through Dylan's hands. A loud thunder-like clap cut through the still night and some lost their grip, falling backwards.

Dylan shook off a brief moment of foggiess and fell to his knees as he took in their surroundings. Gwyneth came to his side and knelt beside him. She bowed her head reverently. "Blessed be the Spirit," she whispered. Dylan kissed her forehead and took in her lovely scent. "Yes, blessed be the Spirit, Gwyneth."

The air was fragrant and very warm. Dylan heard the sound of water close by, as well as animal calls he did not recognize. The moon was full and low on the horizon. Stars filled a cloudless sky in unfamiliar formations. Dylan and Gwyneth rose to check on the others. A few were dazed, but all seemed unharmed.

Drummond wore a broad grin. "Well done, dear Gwyn, well done indeed! A nice bit of land you have found for your kin and kind. A bit warm, but pleasant otherwise. We camp here for tonight. Tomorrow we learn what manner of place the Spirit gifted to us. I sense that there are no others here. I believe you found our kingdom."

Dylan smiled. Drummond intended to take over, as was his due. He watched as his elder clansman extended his jeweled scepter, the symbol of his position and the clan's attachment to the Spirit. He conjured a fire to ward off night creatures and cleared a bit more space of trees and rocks.

"And what will you call your new kingdom, Drummond?" Gwyneth asked, taking Dylan's hand in hers.

"Why, I had not thought of it, lass. Perhaps Anfall will do. The name served my father and his father, so unless there are objections," he looked around at his new clan, "Anfall it will remain."

## Part I. To Tansing

### CHAPTER ONE

Lauren made a break for it, darting into the woods and cursing as her long skirt tangled around her legs and she dropped her satchel. She glanced over her shoulder. Her pursuer closed to within yards. *Brilliant, Lauren, how did you think you'd outrun a warrior on a horse?* Lauren turned to face the stranger.

He was magnificent. Piercing blue eyes surveyed her intently. His dark brows contrasted with long pale golden hair. He had high cheekbones, a strong jaw line, and a very slight depression in his chin. His ears—they were odd, slightly pointed at the top. Lauren took in the rest of him—tall and muscular, with simple clothes of soft, beige suede stretched over strong legs, broad shoulders, and muscular arms. A quiver of arrows and a long bow hung on his back, a jeweled scabbard on his hip. He rode a magnificent white stallion. A sapphire medallion hung on his chest. This was no ordinary warrior, she thought.

*What are you going to do now, Lauren?* She wanted to sit on the ground and cry, but she would never show that kind of weakness in front of a man. *Well, trouble was likely to find you sooner than later. What did you expect?* Lauren thought of the last year, how diligently she worked to keep a low profile as she surveyed the countryside in search of her brother. I avoided the troubled northern lands, she thought, but it seems the north has come to me. She looked again at the stranger's medallion and the three-barred insignia embroidered on his shirt. Could he be a royal? That might explain things, she thought. Rumor was that the royals were obsessed with anything from her land, especially the women. And this one seemed to have plans for her. Her pursuer frowned, a deep furrow between his dark brows. He seemed rather impatient, and Lauren wondered what he expected from her.

"All right, mister. What do you want?" she demanded, stomping her foot in a childish fashion. First surprise, then amusement crossed his face.

"Come over here, girl," he ordered. He spoke quietly, but Lauren knew from his tone that this man was comfortable giving orders. Lauren thought his accent was unusual—not the accent of the Land's southerners. *He sounds like an Aussie.*

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Lauren laughed with false bravado as she folded her arms across her chest. “Like hell I’ll come over there,” she said, closing her eyes and taking in a deep breath. She gathered her energy and stretched her hand towards him. Perspiration beaded on her upper lip. “*Ai nai alanátharin!*” Light poured from her hand in a blue stream.

“Very pretty,” he laughed. He grabbed the energy, formed it into a glowing green ball, and tossed it into the air over her head. The ball exploded into a rainbow of twinkling lights that gently fell to earth around her.

“Oh. Well, I can do that. Anyone can do that.” Lauren’s heart sunk. Her best attempt at magic dashed to the ground effortlessly.

“Oh really?” he chuckled, shaking his head in what looked like pity. “Perhaps everyone can do that in your land. But not around here, sister.” Lauren felt a different heat rise up inside. Fury.

“I’m not your sister!” Lauren clenched her fists.

“No, not yet.” He held her gaze and seemed to wait patiently for her next move. Lauren was terrified and completely at a loss, but she tried to keep her voice calm and steady.

“All right, you’ve made your point, Sir Elf. Tell me what you want? Why have you been after me for days?”

He looked surprised, and Lauren realized her mistake. Now he knew she could read the presence of others.

“Elf?” He raised his brows. Lauren watched anger slowly replace the surprise. He looked furious, eyes flashing and mouth drawn in a severe line. *Great, Lauren, you’re making him angrier by the minute.*

She shook her fist at him. “That’s a rotten thing to do to a woman traveling alone—scaring me like that. I’ve hardly slept at all in days. Have things gotten that tough for you Anfallen that you have to stalk single women?”

“I’m not sure you’re right for my brother. He likes his women a bit sweeter, shall we say? But you do have gifts.” He rubbed his chin, regarding Lauren as if she were a hunk of meat hanging in a butcher’s shop.

“You’re hunting for women for your brother? What’s wrong with him? Is he that damned ugly?”

“We’ll also have to work on that mouth of yours.”

“We won’t be working on anything. Listen, buddy, I’m just trying to find my brother and go home. It’s been a long year, and I’m tired. My feet are killing me. I’m sick to death of this endless heat and working my hands to the bone to get a meal and a lousy cot for the night. And you chasing after me so I can’t do anything without looking over my shoulder...”

“Tim. I know your brother well. Good man.”

*Tim? It must be the heat. He couldn’t mean it.* Lauren felt a little light-headed.

“Did you say that you know Tim? Do you know where he is?” she could barely get out the words. “I’ve looked for him everywhere, back and forth across this godforsaken place...” Lauren’s words rushed out, all the exhaustion and frustration of the last year pouring from her heart. “I thought twice I’d caught up with him, only then... Oh, where is he, please, I need to know!” She started to tear up, despite her efforts to look strong.

“Relax.” He held up his hand in command. She broke down fully. He dismounted and stood close to her. Lauren felt his warmth and strength. *He smells wonderful. What is that scent?* Her thoughts began to wander. With one finger, he lifted her chin to lock eyes with her.

“Relax, breathe deeply,” he whispered. His voice caressed all of her, like a light warm breeze. “Relax,” he repeated. She felt herself drifting, his deep blue eyes pulling her in. He wrapped her in his warmth, and she floated across a calm sea, held in his strong arms...

She could barely whisper her plea. “He’s all I have.”

The stranger looked puzzled. His eyes still burned into her, but they seemed to soften.

“All right Lauren. We’ll find your brother.” His voice was now barely a whisper. *Did he speak at all? Am I reading his mind?*

“You know my name.”

“Lauren Emory of New York City in the Great Lands. Tim Emory’s sister. I am Kasmárin, or Kas to my friends.”

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Lauren took in a quick breath. *The Prince Adept of Anfall—he couldn't be! The King's brother, the greatest wizard in the world.* She struggled to take it in, but he passed his hand gently across her eyes, and sleep finally carried her into a peaceful state.

Kasmárin grabbed her small satchel from the ground and lifted her onto his horse. He turned north, sighing deeply. "Congratulations, Lauren, you're engaged to the King."

Kas reminded himself forcefully that this woman was Luke's. He looked down at her—tall and voluptuous, with a mass of chestnut curls framing a classically beautiful face. Her intelligent green eyes were captivating, although they certainly could flash in a temper, he thought. *The color of emeralds.* Lips tinted red with a woman's potion of some sort, pale skin.

He made his way deeper into the woods as the last glimmers of sunlight disappeared. Kas could hear the rustle of the night creatures in the leaves and see their glowing eyes. On any other night, he would love riding through this part of the land. Giant philodendron vines climbed the palms and blanketed the ground. Sweet fragrances filled the night air, blossoms still giving off their scent from the day's heat.

Kas glanced down again at Lauren and grunted in frustration. This was already going very badly. There was little doubt this girl's brother was dead, and she knew nothing about it. No doubt, he would be the one to tell her, and she would take it hard.

"I get all the crummy jobs these days, don't I Catcher?" He patted his horse absently. Catcher snorted in response.

Kas cursed, thinking this trip South might be another waste. He mulled over the three women brought before his brother in the last year. All Great Landers, none suitable—a woman of significant years with bright orange hair and a voice to crack glass, a girl no more than thirteen, and an attractive young blonde who ran away with their stable master. Now this woman—unsuitable in her own way. No, she wasn't Luke's type, he thought. But would Luke refuse her beauty, her body? He looked again at Lauren's luscious curves, her full hips and bottom, her long pale legs revealed beneath her rumpled dress. *What did she look like under that long dress?* Kas felt the stirrings of heat move in his groin and quickly put the vision aside. He secured his arm around her more tightly, thinking idly that she wouldn't make such a bad wife for someone who could overlook her personality.



Kas tried to concentrate on the tasks that lay ahead at the palace as he made his way back to his companions. Finally, he smelled the sweet fragrance of pipe tobacco on the gentle evening breeze. He prepared for the onslaught.

“Took you long enough, Kas!” Senn, Hunter, and Palin sat around a smoldering campfire, their meal completed and mugs drained. “Let’s see her, Kas, get her down.”

“Quiet, Senn, I don’t want to have to knock her out again. Here, take her down. She has a little cloth bag—Palin, get it from my saddlebag.” The men gently pulled Lauren from Catcher, and Kas dismounted, took Lauren into his arms, and carried her into the tent. “We’ll sleep outside tonight, so grab your gear. And I hope you left food and ale for me!”

Senn whistled softly and comments came from all directions.

“Luke is damned lucky this time, eh?”

“You’re sure that’s her?”

“She’s amazing!”

“That’s your new Queen. She’s a lot more amazing when she’s awake, trust me.” Kas lifted the tent flap and left to tend to his horse. “Won’t you comment on milady’s charms, too, Catcher? Nod once if you think she’s beautiful and twice if you want to marry her yourself.” The horse turned and snorted. Kas cursed under his breath.

Senn approached and went to work on the saddle. “What’s the cursing for? What’s the problem, brother?”

Kas looked at his youngest brother in despair. Senn always read Kas like an open book.

“Senn, she’s Tim Emory’s sister—I felt his energy as soon as I came within a mile of her.” He waited a moment for the information to sink in. “She was serving ale at a tavern in Bansor. When I walked in, I thought I would find Tim. Their energy is nearly identical.”

Senn looked thoughtful. “She does look a bit like him, I guess. She’s something, Tim’s sister. All that hair and white skin and that body—whew, those long legs and holy...”

“Senn,” Kas cut him off. “I know what she looks like, all right? I’ve watched her for days. Show some respect—she’s your new sister-in-law! Nevertheless, that’s not the point. She’s Tim Emory’s sister, and she wants to find him. Get it?”

“She doesn’t know he’s dead? You didn’t tell her?” Senn shook his head, finally understanding the severity of the situation.

“Well, we’re not absolutely sure he’s dead, are we?”

“Horse shit, Kas. Come on, we saw them carry him away, bleeding like an animal at slaughter.” Senn squeezed his eyes shut against the memory. “Anyway, he certainly wouldn’t have lasted long in their hands even if he was alive when they took him.”

They worked in silence for a moment, and Senn suddenly looked up.

“Oh, you idiot, you mean to rescue him, don’t you? And risk your life? You probably mean to risk ours too, don’t you?”

“She’ll be our queen, Luke’s wife. Luke would want us to find Tim—he was our friend, our comrade.” Kas’s words rang false in his own ears. Why *am* I doing this? It’s rash.

“This isn’t like you, Kas. You know I liked Tim. Hell, I loved him. I was closer to him than anyone was. But you should leave this one to Luke. When we get to Anfall, we can put together a force at least. The five of us don’t have a chance.”

“I’m sure Luke would want me to do this. That’s my decision, Senn.” He sighed tiredly. “At least that’s my decision tonight. We’ll talk more in the morning.”

Senn looked up suddenly. “You already told her you would do it. Damn it, I’m right, aren’t I?”

Kas kept working silently.

“Bloody hell, Kas.”

Senn turned away in disgust and walked towards the woods. Kas watched him shimmer into a sleek cat, the shape Senn favored most. Kas brushed Catcher vigorously, thinking that his brother was usually right. This might be a disaster. If Tim was alive, he was a prisoner of the greatest evil in the Land. They would be walking right into that evil.

## CHAPTER TWO

*A girl dressed in a yellow dress and hat chased a small white poodle. Her brother flew a kite with his father. The girl heard the roar of a plane and looked into the sky. The plane tore through her family's apartment building, sending an enormous fireball into the sky. She screamed and ran to her mother, who held her. "It's okay, Lauren, we're all here together."*

Lauren woke sweating and panting from her dream. Well, she thought, that's a new twist on my recurring nightmares. Lauren tried to shift her legs from beneath the weight that pinned them. She looked down towards her legs and saw a cat. No, a panther!

Lauren felt adrenaline course through her body, her muscles tensed, her mouth went dry. She was suddenly very awake and terrified. Lauren wondered if she could extricate herself from the blanket without waking the beast. Her arm shook as she reached towards the blanket to try to pry it away. The cat suddenly opened his eyes and looked sleepily at her. She nearly screamed in shock at the piercing blue human stare. The cat stretched and worked his way up the cot to lay his head next to her chest, kneading the blanket and her dress. His claws were like razors as he extended and contracted them. His huge incisors looked like daggers as he yawned widely. Lauren grew light-headed and thought she might faint. Despite his size, the cat didn't seem to be threatening her in any way. In fact, he looked quite comfortable.

"Nice Kitty," she said, tentatively reaching out to stroke his beautiful black fur. He purred loudly enough to wake the dead and resumed his kneading of the fabric beneath his paws. He closed his eyes and seemed to luxuriate in her touch, rolling from side to side and finally shifting to expose his belly to her nails.

"Well, looks like you don't intend to eat me. At least not now."

She watched the cat nervously as she tried to remember the events of the previous night. Some of it was fuzzy, but one thing was perfectly clear—the Prince Adept of Anfall had captured her. Lauren found his explanation preposterous—hard to imagine King Lucenor of Anfall would marry her. His charms were legendary, and rumor had it that women followed him everywhere. Kasmárin was perfect enough, but Luke reputedly was a god—tall, dark, strong, brave, a skilled warrior, and a complete ladies' man.

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“This can’t be real. I’m dreaming, right?” Lauren scratched the cat’s head, thinking that he seemed real enough. The cat stretched and growled as if to say, “Believe it baby.” He looked at her with his big blue eyes and blinked, nudging his head back under her hand for more attention. Lauren drifted off again, thinking about her brother and whether Prince Kas would actually help her.

Lauren woke again when Kasmárin entered the tent, bright sunlight streaming in behind him. She sat up, pulling the blanket tightly around her.

“Senn!” Kas boomed, smacking the cat on the rump. The cat looked offended and growled at the man. He didn’t move, but made a proud display of cleaning his paws, smoothing his fur with his tongue, and rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. In no hurry, he plopped onto the ground and slowly sauntered outside.

“That won’t happen again.” Kas sounded disgusted.

“It’s all right. He’s beautiful—your pet?” She tried to make out his face, but the blinding sunlight streaming into the tent behind him made it impossible to see anything but his silhouette.

“No, Senn isn’t my *pet*.” His voice was still angry. “Over there are things for washing. And there are clothes suitable for riding.” He pointed to a pile in the corner. There’s a stream at the bottom of the hill. It’s late. Get up.”

He left abruptly. Lauren jumped out of bed and pulled aside the tent flap. “Well, good morning to you too, asshole! I guess the royal family does not have quite the breeding one would expect. Thanks for the hospitality!”

Kas turned around and regarded Lauren in shock for a moment, then laughed heartily.

“Bloody hell, woman! You don’t hold back, do you? Well, perhaps I deserved that.” He turned, shaking his head, still laughing.

Lauren scowled at his back. Grabbing the clothes, soap, and towel, Lauren walked briskly out of the tent, intending to show the great Prince Adept that he didn’t intimidate her. As she passed, she saw Kas near a campfire, arguing angrily with another man, while two more men watched the fight in amusement.

*So, we aren't alone.* All four men saw her and stopped talking immediately, watching her as she worked her way carefully down the steep grassy slope to the stream. She looked back up the hill, checking to make sure the men couldn't see her.

Nervously, she took off her dress and underclothes and stepped into the cool water. Her anxiety gave way under the warmth of sunlight on her skin and the feel of real soap and a soft washcloth.

A year of hell in cumbersome clothes in this unbearable heat, she thought. *What I wouldn't give for a pair of shorts and a tank top.* She wished she could burn her ragged dress.

Lauren took her time drying off, taking in the scenery and wondering how to approach the subject of Tim with the great Prince Adept. She stepped out of the stream and examined the clothes left for her. A woman had picked them out, no doubt. They were practical but attractive—light tan cotton pants, a thin white cotton sleeveless shirt, and beautiful silk undergarments. Lauren picked up the pants and realized immediately they were at least a size too small. She struggled into them, tugging them up and pulling on the fabric to fasten the buttons.

Lauren picked up the bustier and groaned, seeing it was at least two bra sizes too small. The royals were definitely expecting someone more petite. Well, she thought, looking at the transparent white shirt, I can't go without a bra. She squirmed and squeezed the best she could, but a two-inch gap separated the bustier's buttons and buttonholes.

*Now what? Dear God, I can't walk around in that shirt! It's that or the damned dress, Lauren. They're grown men. They've seen breasts before.* She nervously pulled the top over her head, and looked down. *Oh, Lord help me.* Two inches of cleavage and a clear view of everything beneath the thin fabric. Well, she thought, maybe they won't notice.

Taking in a deep breath, Lauren gathered her things. She held her head up high and slowly made her way up the hill, keeping her gaze away from the men. When she reached the group, she finally looked at them. All four were gaping at her, and Kasmárin was beet red, his gaze fixed on her breasts.

"Well, I didn't pick this stuff out" she snapped, hugging the towel to her chest. She busily shoved her dress into her satchel.

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“I guess we have Kas to thank for that,” answered a smiling dark-haired man.

Kas looked away and coughed. “If you need other clothes, I’ll create them for you.”

“You created these? Sewed them yourself? Oh, magic. What a trick.” Kas groaned at her sarcastic tone.

The dark-haired one spoke. “Kas has a bit of a flair for design. He likes things to look nice. And you look *very* nice, by the way.”

He looked a bit like Kas, especially in the eyes, and Lauren suspected he was a younger brother.

“All right, then, if this is what Prince Kasmárin wants me to wear, this is what I’ll wear. Except for this.” She threw the bustier onto the ground in disgust and sat on the grass.

Kas still wouldn’t look at Lauren, and she thought that perhaps she had the upper hand for a moment. The dark-haired man looked amused as he took in Kas’s discomfort. He finally burst into laughter and the other two men joined in.

“Enough!” Kas held up his hand, calling for silence. He took in a deep breath and pointed to a good-looking young man. “This is Palin.”

Palin had flawless skin the color of caramel and beautiful hazel eyes. His long hair fell down his back in an elaborate dark braid, small bells interwoven in the strands. Despite his exotic appearance, Lauren thought he could walk down the streets of the Village and pass for an NYU art student. Palin regarded her intently for a moment, and then looked at the ground. He was clearly very shy.

Lauren liked him immediately. “Pleased to meet you, Palin.”

Palin looked up and nodded, smiling slightly.

“Palin is our cousin. And this is Hunter.” Kas indicated the oldest one, a bearded man with grey hair and pale blue eyes. “He has been with our family for many years.” Lauren suspected that Hunter was probably much older than the 70 or so years he appeared.

“And *this* one,” Kas pointed to the smiling dark-haired man, “is my obnoxious little brother.”

He was gorgeous, breathtakingly handsome like his older brother, but with a more boyish look. He had flowing black hair and olive skin and his brother's deep blue eyes. He was probably close to Lauren's age—in his late twenties. He, like Hunter and Palin, also had the slightly pointed ears that separated them out as Anfallen. She studied him for a moment and he winked at her. And suddenly she recognized his eyes.

"Wait, let me guess. You're a shifter, Senn? And you spent last night in the tent with me?"

Senn laughed and slapped his knee. "See Kas, she's pretty quick, and she has a sense of humor. There's no harm done, she's not upset..."

"Shut up, Senn. You and I will continue our conversation later," Kas promised him, poking him in the chest with one finger.

Lauren surveyed the foursome in amazement. They were, without doubt, the most exceptional looking men she had seen in her life. It wasn't just the odd ears and the long hair. Either these men came from an exceptional gene pool or magic played a role. Even Hunter was still handsome. Lauren felt self-conscious and intimidated, but she was determined not to show it.

"So," Lauren began, "we have the great Wizard of Anfall..."

"Adept," Kas corrected.

"A shape-shifter," Lauren continued, indicating Senn, who grinned, "and...?" she looked at Hunter and Palin.

"I'm a pretty good guide and fairly skilled with the bow," Hunter said, laughing. He indicated Palin with the stem of his pipe as if he were selling him at auction. "And Palin here, he's coming into his own, right lad?"

Palin winced, sighed, and looked back at the ground.

"He's got a bit of the Sense and a bit of the Channel and he can even fly a little."

"Please, Hunter, don't." Palin looked pleadingly at the old man.

"Fly? A little?" Lauren said, "How do you fly a little? That sounds very dangerous."

"Well, it's a bit more like a very, very long hop, actually..."

Kas cut him off. "Stop it, Hunter, you're humiliating him. Palin is a warrior and an adept, leave it at that."

“And King Lucenor? What surprises can I expect from him?”

“He is the King, my dear, a wise and just one! Luke is a brave warrior, a great man,” said Hunter reverently. “You are very lucky.”

“Riiiiight. No gifts...” Lauren said, snickering.

“How dare you criticize the King!” Kas slowly rose and clenched his hands into fists. Lauren suddenly sat upright in fear at the fury in his eyes, narrowed to fiery deep-blue slits. Kas approached her slowly and reached out one arm, hand opened, as if to strangle her. The air around crackled with energy and Lauren thought for a moment he might actually strike her. He stood a foot away, clenching and unclenching his hand. His voice was low and harsh. “What the devil is wrong with you, woman? You’re speaking of the King. *My brother!* You are crossing the line, and trust me, you *do not* want to do that. Apologize immediately!”

“*I’m crossing the line!*” Green fire flashed within the depths of her emerald eyes. “You stalk me, kidnap me, and threaten to take me to marry a man I’ve never met! How dare you criticize *me*? Apologize my *ass!*”

“Kidnap you! Are you insane?” Kas snapped, “You can leave any time! Now might be an especially good one! Luke would never force himself on a woman, as if he needed to...”

Kas broke off with a snort of disgust and turned away. He suddenly turned back and strode to within a foot of her again to finish his tirade.

“We are civilized, evidently more civilized than you Great Landers. Every woman wants to marry Luke, wants to be the Queen of our land, adored by our people. You could be the envy of all of them. Forget it, if that’s how you feel. Good riddance!” He pointed to a path in the woods. “That’s the way back to Bansor.” He picked up her satchel and threw it at her feet.

“Listen my good Elf, I’m sure your brother is the greatest guy in the world, but I don’t know him, and he doesn’t know me. Perhaps if someone would explain why you chose *me* for this great honor, I wouldn’t be so suspicious. Have you considered that I don’t know what the hell is going on here? Well, have you?”

Kasmárin opened his mouth to speak again, but suddenly felt at a loss for words. Lauren looked more beautiful than any woman he had seen in his life. Anger flushed her



cheeks, her hair fluttered about her face and chest in the light breeze, her breasts heaved nearly out of her transparent top with her heavy breaths, her emerald eyes flashed at him. Kas wanted to strangle her. *No, that's not it. But you do want to touch her.* For a moment he fantasized about grabbing her, pulling her to the ground and kissing her till she forgot all of her complaints. *This is no good, Kasmárin. Put it out of your mind.* Kas worked to pull himself together. He wouldn't let this annoying woman get under his skin, no matter how beautiful she was.

Angry and confused, he sat down on a log, rubbing his palms on his forehead. "Lauren, firstly, do not ever, and I mean *ever*, call me an Elf again. I don't know about Elves in the Great Lands, but I assure you, I am not one. Elves are a small, rather timid race of creatures in the southeastern part of the Land. Do I look small and timid to you? Do I?" Lauren shook her head quickly.

"Good. Second, you are not the first, umm, candidate for queen, but we are hopeful you will be the last. You are correct; we assumed that you understood our dilemma. It's clear that you don't, and I will answer all of your questions." Kas reminded himself to be patient. *We need her.* "Your role is to bear an adept child. The adept heir to the throne we desperately need. You seem fairly bright—am I being clear enough for you?"

"It's pretty obvious that your women are capable of bearing fairly extraordinary children without help from Great Landers. Come on, three of the four of you are adepts and you are all stupendous looking—there's no lack of good genes here. You cannot possibly need anything from my fellow Great Landers or me. Or do you kidnap men too?"

Kas breathed in deeply, continuing to calm himself. He heard Senn snort and glanced at his brother in warning. Senn looked away, pretending to survey the landscape.

"Anfallen women are not adepts. Not ever. King Lucenor, the first born of our father, is not an adept, although our father was one. Our enemy comes knocking at our keep on a regular basis, and he is growing stronger, building unholy alliances, recruiting adepts. We need strength, the gifts, and as many strong adepts in the royal family as possible. Thus, we all must mate with Great Lander females." He added under his breath, "May the Spirit help us."

"I heard that!" But a fleeting smile passed across her face.

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Kas saw it and felt a rush of relief, and of something else. She's baiting you, Kas thought. She understands completely. She's simply trying to appear in control. Why, she must feel so helpless.

Lauren nodded. "Okay. I'm sorry about the Elf crack—I really am. I know you aren't an Elf. It's just those ears. And your accent is a little different. In the Great Lands, we expect to find Elves, Fairies, unicorns and whatnot in enchanted places."

"What's a unicorn?" Palin asked, tilting his head in interest.

Lauren turned to Palin. "Well, it's like a horse, but it has a horn sticking from the front of its head, a very pointy horn with a spiral." Lauren made a circular motion near her forehead. "I think they're usually white, and they have some kind of magical powers and only virgins can see them."

Hunter laughed. "That sounds a little far-fetched, my dear, if you don't mind me saying so."

"Enough. We have no unicorns or Fairies, whatever they are. No," Kas held up his hand. "Please don't bother describing those."

Senn grinned. "We do have virgins, although not as many as one might think."

"Shut up, Senn. This is serious." Kas tapped him on the head.

"One more question?"

Kas arched one brow. "Yes?"

"Why do you and Senn have the gifts and not Luke?"

He shrugged. "Why does Senn have black hair, why does Palin have brown skin, why do you have green eyes? When our ancestors called Anfall into being, all had the gifts, except for a few children. Of course, that was over a thousand years ago."

Lauren sighed. "Then it's *true*, our ancestors *did* call Anfall into existence! As children, my mother told us tales of Dylan and Gwyneth, that they were pagans, witches, part of a persecuted few that cast the spell that created the Land. My mother believed that some Anfallen returned to my world and that through the centuries, they taught the gifted how to reach Anfall." Lauren looked far away, as she spoke of her mother. "She would tuck us in at night, singing a tune in a foreign tongue, claiming it was the chant that would take us on the wings of the Spirit to the Land. She would talk about the great rolling Nor River, the majestic palace and people of the House of Anfall, the dangers of the eastern

lands. As we got older, we dismissed her stories as fairy tales.” Lauren shrugged and smiled briefly at the men. “It seems as if she had the stories right after all.”

“It does indeed, lass.” Hunter nodded seriously. He whistled a few notes of the tune that had haunted Lauren her entire life, the one that brought her to Anfall.

The company sat in silence for a moment. Kas regarded Lauren, wondering what it must be like for her, so far away from home. Perhaps it had been like that for Dylan and Gwyneth.

He went back to his explanation. “Well, whatever the reason, the odds have turned against us, and the gifts become increasingly rare.”

Lauren nodded. “I think that means that the gifts are a recessive trait. It’s not so common where I come from to be gifted.”

Kas regarded her and shrugged. “I understand there aren’t many of you, but from our point of view, enough of you seem to figure out how to get here. I wish we could control it a bit more, but then, Anfall is still a safe haven for those tied to the Spirit, as intended. In any case, I’m currently the strongest adept, and my powers aren’t close to those of my ancestors.”

“So, I’m part of a wizard breeding program.”

“No. Your destiny is to marry a king and earn the respect and love of your husband and your people. Does that sound so bad, Lauren? Luke is a noble man, as Hunter said.” Why doesn’t it sound so good to me, Kas wondered. *She’s not right for him.*

“Not much in bed, I hear, but truly noble...”

“Shut up, Senn! That’s the last time I’m going to warn you.”

“Can’t take him anywhere, can you?” Lauren asked tiredly.

“No, you can’t,” said Kas, rolling his eyes.

Senn turned to Lauren and regarded her seriously for the first time. “You sounded like your brother then,” he observed. Kas thought Senn sounded a little sad as he thought of Tim. Yes, he must really miss him.

“You really do know him? You weren’t lying.”

“We all knew him, Lauren, and we thought of him as one of our own,” said Hunter.

“And,” Kas continued, “I said I would help you find him. I will. We will talk about that later. But you” he pointed to Hunter and Palin, “will take her to Anfall palace.

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And Senn, you will decide whether to join them or me. I will not order you to do this. I know you disagree with me.”

Lauren shook her head. “I’m not going to Anfall until we find Tim. No way, that is not part of the deal. You help me find Tim, and then I’ll marry your brother.”

Kas thought quietly for a moment. “I won’t force you to do anything, Lauren. But if you want my help, you will follow all of my directions without question. Is that understood?” She nodded.

“Porridge?” Hunter asked, handing her a bowl.

“Sure, thank you.” She stirred the wooden spoon in the thick mixture, thinking.

“Would someone tell me why you think Tim is dead? You referred to him in the past tense. He’s not dead.”

Kas wasn’t ready to talk about the battle that took Tim. That took his brother. *Hawk, I miss you so much.* “We’ll talk on the road. I’ll tell you everything. Start packing. I’m going to wash up and replenish our water supply. I want to hit Tansing Crossing by nightfall.”

Lauren sat with Hunter and Palin and ate her porridge as Senn began readying the horses.

“My dear,” the old man patted Lauren gently on the back. “These are not easy times for you, I see. But you must trust in the Princes. They are brave and just men. You will see that in time.” She smiled at the well-intentioned Hunter and went back into the tent to gather her meager belongings.

Lauren came out in time to see Kas stride up the hill from the stream. She froze at the sight of him, feeling as if her heart had stopped beating for a moment. His long wet hair glistened in the sun. The sapphire medallion of Anfall bounced on his bare muscular chest. His skin was a golden brown—everywhere—and a light sheen of water clung to his chest and stomach, his strong arms. He wore loose cotton pants instead of his suede britches. They hung inches below his waist, revealing ridges of muscle near his hips.

Lauren took in a quick breath. His pants were damp from the stream and clung to him, exposing rippling thigh muscles. She could barely make out a patch of dark wet hair beneath his pants, of ... *Oh my god, he’s unbelievable.* Her heart raced and heat built between her legs.

Kas suddenly looked up and caught Lauren's stare, holding her gaze. He was braiding strands of hair out of his face, pulling them back with a leather cord.

My god, she thought, even his hands are beautiful. He was all contrasts—dark brows, pale hair, tan skin, bright blue eyes. And his manner was complex as well—overwhelming power radiated from him at all times, coupled with a calm voice, the lithe movements of a natural athlete....

"Oh boy, here we go." Senn snapped his fingers in front of her face. "You have the wrong brother, sister."

"Oh, shut up, Senn."

"I'm hearing that a lot these days."

Lauren flushed and tried to look busy with her little pack of belongings. She wasn't one to gape at men. Well, hadn't been. *I've never seen anyone worth gaping at until now.* No, she thought, don't even think about it. He's way out of your league, and besides, all he cares about is getting you married off to someone else. *What if King Luke looks like that? No, there can't be two of them.*

"Lauren, I said, 'Grab my hand.'" She looked up at Kas. He seemed thirty feet in the air.

"I can't get up there!"

"Here miss." Palin stood next to her with cupped hands, indicating she should step into them. He lifted her up and Kas pulled her onto the horse with one arm. Kas settled her in properly in front of him, handing her small bag to Palin. He nudged Catcher forward, and Lauren immediately felt herself slipping on the saddle.

Kas groaned. "Don't tell me, you don't ride."

"Okay, I won't tell you."

"In a day, you'll feel like a regular warrior. Of course you won't be able to move a muscle, but you'll know how to stay on a horse..."

He chuckled and tightened his grip around her waist.

Lauren didn't answer, thinking only how wonderful his arm felt around her waist, sure that she'd remember the feeling for the rest of her life.

### CHAPTER THREE

They passed hours in silence, leaving Lauren with her thoughts. She had a million questions for Kas, but she didn't think he was in the mood for even one of them. For the thousandth time in the past year, she wished she could talk to her parents.

Lauren squeezed her eyes tightly, calling to mind the picture of her parents as she had last seen them, smiling broadly after opening an anniversary present—a tiny porcelain castle that Tim thought might resemble the palace of Anfall. It had been five years ago. How had the time passed so quickly? The memory still burned in her mind's eye as if it were yesterday. The vision, repeated heartlessly, the destruction of lower Manhattan. The destruction of her family. On the morning of their anniversary, Frank and Marie decided to have breakfast together at “Windows on the World” before Frank went to work a few floors below. Their last meal together.

After weeks, Lauren stopped waiting for her parents to walk through the door. After months, she began to believe they were actually dead. With their parents gone, Lauren knew that it wouldn't be long before Tim would seek out Anfall. He had pleaded with her to go with him, but she wasn't ready.

She went with him in the dark and cold to stand near a battered obelisk buried in the forest near Canterbury. To see the only person on Earth who meant a thing to her disappear into the night air. Four years later, almost to the day, she vanished as well, loneliness and grief finally overriding her fears. On a summer evening, on a cruise ship bound for Bermuda, she closed her eyes and sang the ancient song, as her brother had, as her distant ancestors had when they sung the Land into being.

Lauren tried to put aside her thoughts of home, her parents, and Tim. She looked at the countryside as they rode slowly down the path. The forest was lush and exotic, the river clear and gentle. It was lovely—flowering trees gently showered them with petals; colorful birds called out for attention or in warning to one another. Dragonflies and hummingbirds hovered near the river's edge. The sun warmed her shoulders.

“Hold on, we're descending here.” Kas jarred her out of her thoughts by pulling her close to him and tightening his grip around her waist.

At first, Lauren simply concentrated on her balance, but the Prince held her tightly. She could feel his chest against her back. She looked down at the bare tan arm supporting

her. His breath was hot on her neck, and with each exhale, she felt herself bathed in him. Her nerve endings felt as if they were on fire. He was so compelling, so alive, and so strong. Lauren wanted to squirm out of his embrace, and at the same time, never wanted to be free of his hold. When she thought she wouldn't be able to stand another moment of the closeness, he made it much worse. He rested his chin on the top of her head and his energy filled her to the brim. She began to shiver.

"What's wrong? Are you sick?" Kas asked gruffly. "You can't be cold."

"I'm not cold, no sir, not cold at all."

She heard him breathe in deeply, and she realized he was taking in the scent of her hair and perfume.

"You won't fall."

"No, I'm not afraid of the horse."

"I'm not going to hurt you. I have never hurt a woman in my life."

"No, I don't think you'd hurt me. You all seem like decent enough men. Unusual, but decent."

"Then bloody hell, Lauren, what is it?"

"I'm umn...not really used to being this close to a man." She winced, realizing how naive she sounded.

"You haven't had a man hold you before? Are you telling me that you have never been in a man's arms? How old are you?"

"Of course I've been in a man's arms. I'm not a nun! This is just a little different." *Shut up now, Lauren. He'll think you're a loser.* How could she explain to him that her ability to read minds had always kept her from close relationships, from men? She always knew what they wanted, what they felt and what they didn't feel. Her dating life had been brief, painful, and put aside forever. There wasn't a man on earth she could trust.

"My magic, is that it? You feel a shimmer, a pulse through your body?" He smelled her hair again and Lauren took a deep breath, desperately trying to regain her composure.

"I feel a pulse all right," she muttered quietly. "Look, Kas, may I call you Kas? Maybe it's the magic, I don't know. But you have to know that you're, well, handsome, so

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to speak? I mean, you do understand that women find you more attractive, than say, the average guy on the street?”

“Then why aren’t you happy to be in my arms? You don’t make sense, Lauren.”

“It’s a little uncomfortable, actually. Haven’t you ever felt a little uncomfortable in the company of an attractive woman? I’m not sure I’m being clear.”

“That’s ridiculous. Why would I dislike being around a beautiful woman?”

“Doing okay up there?” Senn called. Lauren jumped at Senn’s question. The last minutes felt like a dream, as if she and Kas were the only two people in the Land. Lauren sighed, glad to be free of the awkward conversation, disappointed the moment was over.

“We’re just fine, Senn,” Kas growled and sat up straight, loosening his hold on Lauren.

“You will like King Lucenor.” He made it sound like an order.

“If you say so, Prince. By the way, what is that scent you all have? I feel like I’m at a Dead concert, surrounded by hippies.”

“A dead concert? Do you mean we smell as if we’re corpses? My hygiene is impeccable.” Kas sounded very offended.

“No, sorry, I didn’t mean that, never mind. A Great Lander reference. You smell wonderful.” *Too wonderful. Sexy. Do you smell like that everywhere?*

“My sister nags us incessantly to wash in her potions. ‘You may act like beasts but you don’t have to smell like them.’ I suppose you smell her herbs and such.”

Senn heard the imitation of their sister and laughed.

Lauren sighed deeply, the spell completely broken. They rode on in silence, approaching a stream that fed into the great Nor. At the confluence, they turned northwest and began riding on the towpath that ran along the flowing waters. The sun bounced off tiny falls and eddies. I could live here, Lauren thought. If I could see Tim, know he was happy, I could live here and never go back.

“Love me tender, love me true, never let me go...” A superb baritone voice broke the still air.

“Kas! Senn is singing again. Make him stop!” complained Palin.

At first, Lauren thought only that Senn had a wonderful voice. Then it hit her. Elvis? Impossible!



Kas groaned. “Knock it off, Senn, no one wants to hear you. Especially *that* awful stuff.”

“I thought you liked Tim’s songs, brother? I bet Lauren knows this one, don’t you?” Lauren nodded.

“Come on everybody!” Senn imitated Tim perfectly, Lauren thought. *They knew him. They knew him very well.* Hunter and Palin sang along with Senn, and Lauren began to tear up. It was ridiculous, and just like Tim to teach these mages an Elvis song. *Oh Tim, I miss you so much.* She wiped away the tears quickly, not wanting Kas to see. She felt a little squeeze of his arm, and wondered if it were too late.

Senn moved from one pop hit to the next, butchering the lyrics to each. Lauren began to laugh and even joined in, correcting them when they went astray. For a short time, she didn’t feel as if she were alone. It had been so long.

“We’ll break here,” Kas announced suddenly, stopping at a little knoll along the river. He jumped off Catcher and pulled Lauren down quickly, leaving her swaying on unsteady legs. She nearly fell, but Senn grabbed her.

“Thanks for the help down, Highness,” Lauren called after Kas.

“Kasmárin is a little edgy these days, Lauren. You shouldn’t take it to heart,” Senn apologized.

Hunter and Palin saw to the horses, leading them down to the water’s edge. Senn began unpacking food and Kas strode into the brush, no doubt to answer Nature’s call. Lauren took off in the opposite direction, still a little wobbly. “Stay close,” Senn called out behind her.

Kas and Lauren returned at the same time. Kas looked at his tiny army, resting on the grass, chewing on bits of bread, cheese, and dried fruit. “Five minutes,” he growled, chugging water. He moved several yards away and leaned against a palm tree.

“The Prince Adept is a bit moody, no? Is he always this way?” Lauren asked loudly, intending for Kas to hear.

Senn gave her a ‘watch it’ look and shook his head ‘don’t.’

“Okay.” She reached for a piece of cheese. “Someone tell me about Tim.”

They all looked to Kas, who lowered his head slightly, granting permission. Hunter pulled at his beard as he looked at Lauren.

“Tim was a good lad; at least he was a lad when he crossed. Older than Palin here, but still young—but you would know that, of course. You’re twenty-seven, twenty-eight? The first time we saw Tim, he was running around a meadow flapping his arms like a bird. He was trying to get back on a horse that had other ideas...” Hunter laughed at the memory. “Luke finally caught the horse and gave Tim a few tips. Straight away, he was one of us, taking to the family pretty well. Tim and Hawk never hit it off for some reason, perhaps it had to do with Jenna,” he shrugged.

“Who are Hawk and Jenna?” Lauren asked.

“Our brother, the third oldest, and our sister, fourth oldest,” Senn replied. “Hawk was always very protective of Jenna, our only sister. I suppose that’s natural. I think he had it in his head that Tim had ideas about Jenna. The Spirit only knows what Jenna thought of that.” He smiled. “She’s a little cold where men are concerned,” he elaborated.

Kas cleared his throat in a clear sign for Senn to shut up once again.

“I liked Tim a lot,” Palin said solemnly. “He was so much fun, teaching us songs and always making us laugh and once, well...” he looked sheepishly at Hunter.

“I know about it, go on...” Hunter smiled.

“He crossed back with us. Senn, Kas, and me. We went to New York.”

“He came back? And he didn’t see me?” she asked sadly.

“You weren’t there—he looked, I promise. He said you might be on a ‘dig’—is that the right word—but he left a flower at your door. Did you get the flower? That was my idea.” She nodded and smiled. “He was afraid you might feel the need to cross if you knew any more, and he didn’t want to influence you.”

“What a place!” Senn laughed. “Well, Kas didn’t take to it much—the people—too many in one place, right Kas? Weather wasn’t so good either. We only stayed nine days or so. But I’ll never forget it.”

“It was horrible.” Kas squeezed his eyes, looking as if he were trying to recall the details of the place. “I hope to never see such ugliness again.”

Lauren thought that crossing to the 21<sup>st</sup> Century must have involved incredible culture shock. She imagined that New York had knocked the wind out of Kas’s sails quickly.

“Do you cross often? I mean, are there many of you in the Great Lands?”

“No, we don’t. It’s not our place. And you have to cross with a Great Lander—we don’t have the ability to do it alone. I take that as a sign we should remain here. In any case, now Luke has ordered that we remain here, with Talinthal always on our doorstep.”

“He spoke about you, Lauren, and your parents. He clearly missed you all,” Hunter smiled and patted her knee.

“Tell me what happened.” She breathed in deeply again, not sure she would ever be ready to hear this.

Kas walked to the group and spoke softly. “Be proud of him. He didn’t have our training, and his gifts weren’t very strong, or focused, but he rode into battle against Talinthal to defend his people. And we had become his people—he lived with us, fought with us. He took an arrow—in the shoulder, in the chest—I’m not sure. One of the Talinthal slung him across his horse and rode off with him. A bit less than two months ago.”

Lauren cried openly. “Didn’t you try to stop him?”

“We were at risk of losing everyone. He was long gone by the time we could have done something.”

“So he’s a captive of Talinthal now?”

“He’s gone from us, Lauren, do you understand?” Hunter said.

She wiped her tears. “No Hunter. Not gone. I feel his energy, and it’s even stronger since we started heading north. Kas believes me, don’t you?” Lauren waited anxiously for his answer.

“Yes. I believe you. If I focus on Tim’s energy, I can feel him too.”

“I will do anything you need me to, I promise...”

Senn turned to Kas, trying to make his case again, “Luke should be the one to do this, Kas. He has the men and it’s his decision.”

“No, Senn.” Kas said in a firm, final tone. “Luke cannot be put at risk—and you know he would go himself. There is another way. We’ll talk about it later. For now, we’ll go on to Tansing Crossing. From there, Palin and Hunter will take the Great Road to Anfall, and the three of us will continue on to Talinthal.”

Hunter shook his head. “No sir. You are *not* sending me home this time. Palin goes too. He is up to it, Kas. It’s all of us, together.”

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Kas stared at his old friend, the man who had become a father to him.

Finally, he nodded.

“Alright. Pack up.” He paused and thought for a second, then added, “Lauren rides with Senn.”

Lauren gathered all of her strength to get back onto a horse. Senn tried to make it as pleasant as possible, encouraging her fledgling riding skills, making small talk, pointing out various animals and flowers. It did little to erase her weariness and growing anxiety over Tim.

*It's too much.* In less than a day, she was engaged to a king, desperately attracted to an unavailable stranger, and had learned that her brother was probably near death. At least riding with Senn wasn't the torture she endured with Kas—she didn't feel the longing and discomfort she had on the first leg of the trip. Now and then Senn would break into song, but no one joined him.

“Senn?”

“Yes?” He continued to hum.

“Is Kas always moody?” She looked at the Prince Adept, riding comfortably up ahead, blonde hair shimmering in the sunlight.

“Kas has weighty matters on his mind right now,” he said thoughtfully. “You see, everyone depends on him. He does most of the work and gets very little of the glory. Is that the phrase? He's never been first, in the eyes of our parents, our people—it's always been about Luke. I don't think anyone fully understands our Prince Adept. Even our father was a little frightened of him.”

“Is there a woman—I mean, is Kas married or engaged?” Lauren said, “Are you married, Senn?”

He guffawed. “Well, dear, that's not quite my style, at least not now. And Kas... it's harder for him. The adept thing and all. Women want him in no uncertain terms, and he's no virgin—far, far from it. But I think he needs someone who understands the pain.”

“Pain?”

“His gifts, Lauren. They're very burdensome. The fate of Anfall rests on his shoulders and has for most of his life. He's healed hundreds, cast protective spells around our lands that have left him ill for weeks. He suffers intense headaches, I think from all the

energy he channels. I have them too, and I don't have a quarter of his strength. If he chose to, he could take us all to Anfall right now, with a snap of his fingers."

"Why doesn't he, then? Would it be too painful?"

"No. He doesn't feel life would be full if he fixed everything with magic."

Lauren thought about the complex man and leaned back tiredly into Senn's chest. She sighed and Senn chuckled.

"You love him very much."

"He's my best friend. Our father died right after I was born. Kas taught me most of what I know. And Hunter. I would die for Kas. But don't tell him, okay?"

In the distance, Lauren could see a thin trail of smoke and noticed that the forest was thinning. A fence appeared, and the towpath gave way to a real road. She wondered if they had reached their destination.

"Tansing Crossing, in time for dinner," Senn said.

## CHAPTER FOUR

A quarter of a mile down the path, a villa appeared, perched on the river's edge near an arched bridge large enough for three horses to ride abreast. The villa cascaded down the hillside, three delicate stories of gleaming white stone. A balcony hung out over the river, and Lauren could barely make out a figure waving to them.

Senn waved back. "I think you'll like our aunt and uncle."

When they approached the villa, Senn helped Lauren down off Catcher. Her legs nearly gave out again. She ached everywhere and wondered how many days of this she would have to endure. Kas surprised her by taking her hand and leading her to the door of the villa. A little girl ran to Kas and jumped into his arms. He picked her up and swung her around, lavishing her brown curls with kisses. When he set her down again, she bounced up to Lauren.

"Hi, I'm Lillie." She curtsied. "Who are you?"

"It's very nice to meet you Lillie. I'm Lauren."

"Grandma, Uncle Luke's new wife is here!"

A striking, dark-skinned woman of middle years stood in the doorway, pinning her hair into place. She had "normal" ears and Lauren wondered where she was from. Smiling at the men, she greeted each with kisses and hugs.

She turned to Lauren. "Goodness, you look an awful lot like Julia Roberts, don't you? Is she still a star? I guess you hear that a lot. Well, come in dear, and make yourself comfortable. It's not much, but it's home." She winked as they entered the exquisite building. "I'm Sara, and this is Kenneth," indicating a graying man who looked a little like the Princes.

"Kenneth is my husband and the Queen Mother's brother."

Lauren nodded slowly. Sara led her by the hand into a large hall with cushioned marble benches and lovely translucent drapes shimmering in the dying sunlight. The room opened onto a full view of the river.

"Oh my," Lauren said, "this is amazing." Murals of impossibly beautiful landscapes graced the walls. Candles burned in crystal holders on golden tables.

Gradually Lauren became aware there were others in the room. Sara introduced her to cousins and grandchildren—twelve in all. She felt lost amongst the greetings, hugs and kisses of the extended family. Sara finally came to her rescue.

“Come here, honey. Let’s get you some privacy and a bath, how does that sound?”

“That sounds like heaven on earth.”

Sara led her up a grand staircase to a lovely little room. But Lauren saw only one thing—a bathroom. A complete bathroom—it even had a bathtub. “How about if I come back in a half hour or so and I’ll bring some fresh clothes with me?”

“God bless you, Sara,” Lauren said weakly.

Sara turned on golden faucets and poured scented powder into the water as fragrant steam rose to fill the room. Then she pulled candles in golden bowls from a cabinet and lit them with a slight flick of her fingers.

She stood and eyed Lauren closely. “I’m not being rude, dear, just trying to think what clothes I might have for you.”

“I guess I’m a little plumper than most women here,” Lauren said self-consciously. “Not very much like Julia Roberts at all. By the way, Sara, where are you from, if you don’t mind me asking? I wondered that I hadn’t yet seen a black woman in the Land. Surely you aren’t alone?”

Sara chuckled. “Where do I start? Firstly, there’s no need to brag about your figure, dear, we can all see you have the most perfect body. Actually, we can see a good deal of it.”

“What?” Lauren was confused, having spent her adult years trying to lose ten pounds. “Kas picked out the clothes. I wouldn’t normally...”

“I’m afraid I’ll have to bolt your door tonight—we have a few single men in the household. Oh, and to answer your question, I was born in Baltimore, but we moved to New York when I was very young. And yes, all of the Great Land’s races are represented here, but in varying proportions. You’ll see as you travel north, and if you ever go west. Enjoy that bath.” She smiled and stepped into the hallway, shutting the door behind her.

Lauren gratefully peeled off the dusty pants, top, and shoes. She slid into the tub. Yes, heaven on earth. She drifted into a near-sleep as the soothing warm water slowly eased the aches and tension from her body.

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She didn't hear the footfalls on the stairway, didn't hear the door open, but heard someone on the threshold take in a shocked breath.

Lauren's eyes shot open and she saw Kas, standing frozen in mid-stride.

"Kas," she managed.

"I'm sorry, I didn't know, I... this is normally my room." He continued staring.

Her long legs were propped on the edge of the tub, and she was fully visible from her belly up. She brought her hands up to cover her breasts, but it was useless.

"I...that's okay, it's not your fault. Let me get a towel." Lauren could feel the heat in her cheeks. *Act sophisticated, Lauren. He's seen naked women before. This is nothing to him.* She looked at him again. "Maybe you need to get the towel for me."

"I think I should leave."

But Kas didn't move a muscle.

He met her eyes and Lauren felt a rush of electricity course through her body, up her legs and down her torso to heat up her core.

"I should leave," he repeated, as he took a step forward.

Lauren closed her eyes against his gaze, afraid to see his expression. *What does he see? He doesn't think I'm hot, that's for sure. I'm an average looking woman. He's a god.*

She opened her eyes to find him a few feet away from the tub, looking down at her, eyes burning as he surveyed her from head to foot. Lauren couldn't cover her breasts any further, and the contact of her hands on her nipples started to take on a new feeling.

A very slight smile spread slowly to his eyes and his mouth curved up as he kneeled near the tub, pulling his long hair behind him so it wouldn't get wet. Lauren gasped, unable to think what to do. *Leave! Kiss me! Oh my god, this is what you look like up close.* His scent, his power, his sexual draw shimmered around him in a faint silver and gold mist.

Lauren watched Kas look at her lips and she closed her eyes, terrified. *He's going to kiss me. I'd never be good enough. Never.*

"I really *should* leave," he laughed lightly. "But for some reason I'm having quite the time making myself do so."



“I...” Lauren couldn’t get the words out. *Don’t leave. You don’t have to kiss me. Just let me look at you.* He sighed deeply and stood back up, smiling more broadly. Lauren saw the evidence of his desire pushing against his thin pants. *What would it be like? Oh my god, look at him.* Her heart beat wildly.

Kas turned quickly at the voices coming down the hallway. He pushed the door closed and turned back to Lauren. Sara’s voice rang out quite clearly, even with the door closed. “...lovely girl, isn’t she lovely, Kenneth? Senn says her magic isn’t strong yet, but it could be. Luke will be pleased.”

*Luke will be pleased.* Lauren watched the statement pierce Kas’s countenance, saw the humor and flirtatiousness vanish.

*Luke.*

The name echoed in the room still. Kas’s face went nearly ashen and he squeezed his eyes shut for a moment. Lauren’s heart fell. She’d never see lust on his face again. Because she was his brother’s betrothed.

“Forgive me, Lauren.” His voice was clipped and formal. “Please forgive me. I have no idea what I was thinking. The journey...I’m a little tired.”

He turned on his heel, slamming the door behind him. She heard an explosive curse and the shuddering bang of his fist hitting the wall just outside the door.

She shivered.

*I saw it. Just for a minute, he wanted me.*

She closed her eyes and tried to recapture the vision of Kas’s blue eyes drilling deeply into hers.

*He wanted me.*

## CHAPTER FIVE

Lauren stayed frozen in the heat of the bathtub, eyes squeezed shut, shaken, desperately trying to capture the moment, the picture, of Kas bending over her, the look on his face, the evidence of his lust.

*If only Sara hadn't mentioned Luke. What would have happened? Would he have kissed me?* She swallowed hard, shaking her head. *Put it away, Lauren, lock it in a box, and throw away the key.*

Sara showed no signs of knowing about Lauren's encounter with Kas when she returned to the room an hour later, bearing a stack of clothing. "I'll let you pick what you like, honey. Something here will suit, I'm sure. Let me take these dirty things and we'll have them washed for you. Ask for anything else you need. You're royalty now!"

Lauren dried herself off and sorted through the clothes, thinking the whole time of Kas. What would he like to see her wear? Kas liked things to look pretty, she remembered Senn's words. Lauren chose a sleeveless dress of the sheerest midnight blue fabric, cut low in both the front and back, with little lacings that wrapped around the whole dress. She combed her hair dry the best she could and stepped in front of the mirror.

"Oh."

Something was different.

Lauren saw a different woman—lovely, even sexy. *Was it the magic of this land? Was it Kas's magic?*

She slipped into simple sandals. After one last look in the mirror and a deep breath, she made her way downstairs.

Lauren was terrified of seeing him again. Of what she would see on his face, what she *wouldn't* see. She followed the sounds of laughter and conversation into a large hall. As she stood in the doorway, silence fell like a thunderclap.

The family sat around a grand marble table, laden with steaming dishes, china, goblets, and candles. *They're discussing me. And they don't know how to cover for it.*

"Thank you Sara," she said, walking into the room with a smile, determined to break the tense silence. "What a wonderful treat—a bubble bath. Good evening, everyone."

*You can do this, Lauren. Make your mother proud. Show grace, manners. These men are royalty, after all.*

Sara indicated a chair next to her, a grateful glimmer in her eyes. "Come, Lauren, here's your seat."

Conversations gradually resumed, and then Kenneth rose, goblet held aloft in one hand.

"This is your official welcome to the family, then, Lauren. We hope you will come to love Anfall and its people."

*"Valaicomin, valaicomin!"* the others responded, drinking in salute.

Lauren looked to Sara for help.

Sara smiled. "It means something like 'here, here,' but with a welcoming aspect," she said, "The old language is used in formal situations, such as ceremonies and prayer."

"Thank you," Lauren said, summoning enough courage to look across the table.

Kas was staring into his goblet as if he were about to tell their fortunes from the dregs of his dark wine.

*He's so intense. Is this the same man with the sexy smile who looked at me as if he wanted to eat me alive? No... that man's gone. Gone forever.*

The guests turned to small talk and to the sublime feast—roasts and vegetables and breads and cheeses of every variety. Servants continually circled, filling goblets and clearing plates. Senn sat to Lauren's right and she took some comfort in his jovial presence. She felt Kas look at her occasionally, but whenever she returned his gaze, he was concentrating on his meal. One of the female servants desperately sought Kas's attention, dipping low to show her cleavage as she poured for him, gently touching his shoulder as she reached for a plate. He glanced up at her and winked at one point, and Lauren felt a flame of jealous anger flare within her.

*So, whatever hussy is at hand. That's what he's really like.*

Lauren turned conspicuously toward Senn, ensuring she had his full attention and that Kas noticed the move. She put her hand on his forearm and laughed loudly at every utterance he made. Senn winked and threw his arm over the back of her chair and Lauren nervously continued her game.

If looks could kill, Senn would have been dead.

## The Princes of Anfall

Kas's anger made the air around him sparkle. Then, he was on his feet, his chair narrowly avoiding being knocked to the floor as he rose.

"I'm sorry, Sara, I'm a little tired from the journey, so I'll leave you all a little early."

And one by one, but skipping Lauren, he hugged and kissed his relatives.

She tried not to gasp when Kas kissed Senn lightly on the lips. He leaned in and whispered something in Senn's ear and Senn snickered. Lauren looked at Senn curiously as Kas left the room.

"What?" Senn said, laughing lightly.

"It still surprises me to see men kiss like that. It's not typical in the Great Lands, at least, not among men who, well, like women."

"Oh, you should have seen Tim the first time he saw that! And I thought he would faint or slug me the first time I kissed him. It's nothing Lauren, not what you think. We're evidently more physical here generally than you are in the Great Lands. Tim came to understand our ways fairly quickly. I'm sure you will too." Senn's eyes clouded over for a moment, and a dark feeling crept into Lauren's heart.

*I'm feeling Senn's pain for Tim right now, not my own. My gifts grow stronger the more I'm with these men.*

"You're playing with fire, *sister*," Senn looked at her. "I shouldn't be helping you."

"What ever do you mean, *brother*," she asked in mock innocence. "I assume brothers and sisters kiss on the lips as well, then? I wish I would have known that a few moments ago."

"Don't toy with him, Lauren," Senn whispered lowly, seriously. "He's responsible for you, for getting you to Luke. We have a long way to go and a difficult task, far more difficult than Kas lets on. Don't make it harder than it already is. Kas is a patient man, but when that patience wears thin, whew.... Anyway, just leave him be."

"He'll need to leave me be too, Senn."

"What do you mean? What's happened?" Senn grabbed her arm.

"Oh, nothing happened." Lauren sighed and Senn arched a brow. "Who is that servant, Senn? The one that was flirting with Kas?"

“Joan? She’s worked here for many years, since she was a little older than Lillie. Joan’s always after Kas, but he’ll only give her a few hours tonight, if you get my drift, and that will be all.”

“You don’t lie very well, Senn. But I know what you’re doing, and it’s admirable. I’ll leave the Prince Adept alone, don’t worry.”

Sara pulled Lauren into conversation about the Great Lands, asking question after question about politics, technology, popular culture, and sports.

“I’m sorry I don’t follow baseball,” Lauren laughed with Sara, a diehard Yankees fan. The rest of the company questioned Lauren for the next hour, hanging onto every word.

Sara finally noticed Lauren’s yawns. “Oh, honey, you look exhausted. It’s all right, let’s get you off to bed.”

Lauren nodded gratefully and bid her goodbyes. She left the room, but instead of walking up to her bedroom, she found herself being pulled into the grand hall and out onto the balcony. Lauren leaned against the marble railing, staring at the moon and the light it cast on the river. The smells of the evening were enchanting, fragrant, mysterious. The haunting sound of an owl broke the silence for a moment and tree frogs joined in a rhythmic chorus in the distance. A large dark cat wandered along the brushes near the water. Lauren chuckled, fairly certain it was Senn, and that he intended to enjoy his evening in the jungle.

“Lauren.”

Her heart leapt. Had she heard him speak? His soft voice seemed to come from within her head. She turned slowly to Kas, seeing only his outline, his face shrouded in shadow. He approached her and stopped about a foot away. He reached out his arm as if to touch her, then dropped it and turned instead to look out at the gently flowing Nor River.

Lauren’s heart beat wildly. Tremors rippled across her bare arms and she rubbed them to calm the sensation.

The air between them sparkled.

She searched desperately for something to say to fill the crushing silence. “Kas, what is that? Why does it happen?”

Lauren nodded to the gold and silver glimmering air.

## The Princes of Anfall

“It’s us,” Kas whispered. “Well, me mostly.” He laughed lightly. “My excess energy escaping into the air. That is, when...” He shook his head.

“What?”

“You know, you may be the only woman to ever confuse me. Never mind that now. I’m not here to flirt. We must work on your powers, Lauren.”

“What?” It was the last thing she expected to hear.

“Tomorrow we’ll begin your training. You have the basics, but you need to know how to enhance and control them. You need focus and faith in yourself, in Senn. And in me.”

“I don’t understand.”

“You’ll need ever bit of your power and will at Talinthal. You’re an important part of Tim’s rescue. I’m not sure why, but it will become clear eventually. You must think this through carefully. It’s risky business. Be certain.” His voice was dark and serious and formal.

“I have to do this, Kas. You know that.”

He nodded. “Goodnight then.” He stood still and looked at her for a moment, and she thought he would speak again.

“Kas, about before...in the room...”

“There’s no ‘before’. That didn’t happen, Lauren. Nothing happened. Forget about it.” He sounded sad and tired. Lauren saw him rub his head, and wondered if he were having one of the headaches Senn spoke about.

“Yes, Highness,” she whispered, “I’ll try to forget about it.”

He looked up quickly and met her eyes.

“But it won’t be easy.”

*Let me help you, Lauren mused gently. Let me ease your pain.*

As if he had heard her and rejected her, Kas quickly walked the length of the balcony and took the steps down to the gardens. She watched him walk down the path towards the Nor, wondering if he sought his brother. He left a faint golden trail in the darkness.

“Goodnight, goodnight, parting is such sweet sorrow...” she quoted softly, making her way to her bedroom. Tears of confusion, hurt, and exhaustion flowed down her cheeks, and she brushed them away impatiently.

“This place makes me want to cry a lot.”

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“You son of a bitch!”

Lauren woke to hear cursing and laughing and clanking right under her window. Every muscle in her body ached from the journey. *Oh God, I can't get on a horse today.* She walked to the window and pulled back the curtain. In the spacious courtyard below, her half-naked traveling companions were practicing their battle skills. Even old Hunter expertly hit a target again and again with his arrows. Palin concentrated fiercely on creating one stream of energy after another and sending it into a tree stump. Sparks flew everywhere and Lauren thought that it might be better if Palin practiced elsewhere.

Senn and Kas lunged, parried, and spun in a ferocious display of swordsmanship. Lauren thought that Kas had a firm grasp on the bout, but at times purposefully gave way to his younger brother's advances. Senn *was* beautiful, Lauren thought, but she couldn't take her eyes off Kas. His bronzed skin gleamed with sweat, his muscles rippled in action. She took in the lower half of his body as well. *Well, there's nothing wrong with your libido.*

Kas pinned Senn to the ground, sword tip at his throat. “Call it, Senn.”

“Not yet, brother!” Senn rolled sideways and Kas's sword sliced a shallow channel across his neck. Lauren took in her breath. Senn laughed and tackled Kas beneath the knees. He went down hard and they both rolled in the dust in a jumble of hair and muscle, laughing and cursing. Finally, Kas gave Senn a hoist upright and they towed off.

Hunter finished his practice and joined them. Kas sat and watched Palin closely, shaking his head in concern. Palin's arm shook as he struggled fiercely to control the direction and force of bolts of energy. The air in the courtyard shimmered and cracked as Palin's misdirected shots bounced off the interior walls and ground. Lauren felt her hair stir in the charged air. Kas called to Palin to correct him. Distracted, the young adept turned at Kas's call and let a green bolt of energy escape his hand.

It struck Kas in the abdomen, and he fell to the ground, unconscious.

## The Princes of Anfall

“Hell!” Senn leaned over his brother, examining his wound, listening for his pulse.

Lauren ran to the courtyard and pushed Hunter aside to see Kas’s gaping wound and seared flesh. “Oh please God, no,” she muttered. Kas was deathly pale and breathing shallowly.

“He’s alive. That’s all that matters.” Senn sounded as if he were reassuring himself. He gently hoisted him onto his shoulder. Sara and Kenneth rushed out and soon the entire household surrounded him.

Kenneth pushed them aside and helped Senn settle Kas in a bedroom. He grabbed a blanket, pressing it on the wound.

“No Ken!” Senn ordered sharply, covered in Kas’s blood. “Don’t try to heal him the way you would someone else.”

“What?” Lauren cried. “We have to stop the bleeding!”

“He will stop the bleeding himself,” Senn snapped. “Stay out of it.”

“But he’s out cold, how can he help himself? He’s not immortal, is he Senn? He could die.”

“No, he’s not immortal. But he won’t die from this wound unless he wants to. I’ve seen him heal worse.”

Sara wiped up blood, crying.

Palin stood in the doorway with Hunter, the two huddled in shock.

Hunter turned Palin away from the sight of the fallen Prince. “Look son, he’ll be fine, I promise.”

Palin shook his head, tears streaming down his face. “You don’t know that, Hunter. I may have killed him. I’d rather be dead than hurt him.”

“Take him out, Hunter. Her, too.” Senn nodded at Lauren.

“I’m not leaving,” Lauren insisted, still sobbing.

“Yes you are, Lauren.” Kenneth grabbed her arm. “Senn will stay with him—it’s best if Kas has quiet now.” Senn shut the door behind him.

They sat in the great hall, no one reaching for the food left on the sideboard. “This can’t happen,” Lauren said, wandering out onto the balcony.

Hunter joined her. “He’s very strong. And even if... if the worst were to happen...” he closed his eyes, pained deeply at the thought, “We’ll get you safely to Luke, I promise.”



"I don't give a damn about Luke, Hunter!" She broke down sobbing in Hunter's arms.

Palin stared at the floor, cringing at Lauren's tears.

"Come on, Palin," said Kenneth. "It was an accident, and everyone knows it. Kas would need you to be strong now. Senn may need your help."

He went to Palin and hugged him. Palin pulled away and ran from the room.

Hours passed without movement from the bedroom. The residents of Tansing Crossing sat, paced, picked at food, paced again, sat again. Lauren wandered back out to the balcony, where she spotted Palin sitting by the river, deep in thought, pulling at blades of grass. *How could it be such a beautiful day? Wouldn't the birds stop signing if the Prince Adept of Anfall were dying?*

"Please God," she prayed, "If he survives, I'll do anything. I'll marry the damned King and I'll bear his little witch children. Just save Kas."

Kenneth startled her out of her thoughts. "You know, Lauren, you do look a bit like your brother. The eyes and hair especially."

"You know Tim well?"

"Of course, he was a frequent guest here. He loved Tansing Crossing."

"I miss him so much. And my parents. Do you know how they died? No, of course not, Tim isn't the sort to share something like that. Always too busy lifting others' spirits."

"Would you like to talk about it?" He put his arm around her and she leaned her head on his broad shoulder.

She couldn't bear any more sadness now.

"No. Tell me about the Queen Mother. Your sister?"

"Margaret? Oh, I generally call her Maggie, and she hates it—too undignified for her. Oh, she's a pip, you'll love her. Well, I hope you'll learn to love her." Kenneth snickered. "Hard to tell how women will get on with one another. She's a tiny woman, stubborn as a mule, very strong, very smart, much smarter than me, I can tell you," he laughed. "She tricked me into marrying my Sara. The best trick anyone ever played on me." He glanced at Sara and she smiled at him.

Still in love, Lauren thought.

## The Princes of Anfall

“The children are Maggie’s life. She dotes on Luke, of course, everyone does. And does her best to run the palace—that’s no small task, as you will see. Well, I suppose that will actually fall to you. Maggie will welcome you gladly, Lauren, don’t worry. And if you have any trouble with her, you call on me,” he winked.

What a good man, what a good family, Lauren thought. There’s so much love here, so much pride. Why were they so open with their feelings, their love for one another? Lauren thought about her own family. She loved her brother fiercely. Enough to come to another world to be with him. Had she ever told Tim she loved him? Yes, once only, the night he crossed.

They moved back into the room and joined the others.

“How long will this go on?” Lauren asked. “Can’t we see how Kas is?”

“He’s fine, considering,” Senn announced as he entered the room.

They barraged Senn with questions and he held up his hand. Senn looked drained, not at all the strong, vibrant young man Lauren was starting to like so well. He was still stripped to the waist, covered in Kas’s dried blood.

“It was...difficult. He needs rest now.”

He looked directly at Lauren.

“I’ll kill anyone who disturbs him, understand? I need to wash and eat, and then I’ll go back to him.” He seemed to take in the tension in the room and took a deep breath himself. “I’m sorry. I’m tired. Try to relax. He’ll be fine in a few days.”

Sara broke down in relief and Kenneth went to her.

Lauren felt breath rush back into her lungs.

Hunter collapsed in a chair and then jumped back up immediately. “Palin!”

“Let me, Hunter,” she said.

Hunter nodded and Lauren ran out of the villa and down to the river bank. Palin heard her approach and stood. She hugged him and said quietly, “It will be okay, Palin. He’s okay.” At first Palin was stiff as a board in her arms, then she felt the tension begin to release, felt him return her hug.

“I’m so sorry, I can’t do anything right, I’ll never channel again...”

“Don’t be silly, that’s not what Kas would want. He doesn’t want you to stop using your gifts, does he?”

“He may now.” Palin smiled weakly.

“No, you mean the world to him. It’s very easy to see. Be strong for him, Palin. You don’t want him to have to worry about you now, do you? Sometimes it’s best to swallow your pride. We all make mistakes. Come in with the others, where you belong.” And they walked to the house arm in arm.

“Senn went back in with him,” Sara told her. Lauren bounded up the steps, Sara calling after her. “Don’t go in there, Lauren!”

“I won’t,” she called behind her. Lauren approached the bedroom quietly. No sound came from the room.

She sat in the hallway near the door, hoping Senn would reappear and let her in. More hours passed and the sunlight streaming in the hallway gave way to darkness. Lauren finally fell asleep and dreamt of Tim and Kas engaging an enemy in battle near a river.

Senn found her in the morning, lying on the marble floor outside the door. He bent down and jiggled her shoulder.

“Lauren,” he called softly. Lauren opened her eyes and looked at Senn. The previous day’s events came flooding back in a second. “Is he okay?” Senn nodded. “Can I go in?”

“For a few minutes. He’s a bit weak. A few minutes, promise?”

She nodded. Straightening out her dress and running her fingers through her hair, she quietly opened the door, peaking around the edge.

“Hello Lauren.” Kas’s voice was different, softer, weaker.

“Hello. You look... well, you actually look amazing... I mean all things considered.” His color was back and he was sitting up. He wore a loose white shirt and a pair of clean pants. There was no blood and he looked freshly washed, even his hair.

“I always look amazing, Lauren, or hadn’t you noticed?” he joked.

Lauren smiled a little. “No, I actually hadn’t noticed.” Kas laughed at the obvious lie.

“Palin? Is Palin okay?”

“Yes, he’ll be fine. He’s trying to be strong. We’re all looking after him.”

Kas nodded, evidently relieved. He shifted and winced in pain.

“Well, what do you want, Lauren?” he said a little gruffly.

“I wanted to make sure you’re fine, that you don’t need anything.”

*I want to take care of you. I want to hold you.*

Kas’s eyes widened and Lauren again nervously wondered if he was reading her.

“As you can see, I’m fine. I only need a bit of rest.”

She nodded and turned to leave. *Don’t cry, don’t you dare cry.* On the threshold, Lauren paused, glancing back at Kas, desperate for some reassurance he would be well. His eyes were closed and he breathed steadily, evidently asleep.

Knowing she should leave, but unable to make herself do so, she tiptoed to Kas’s bedside and knelt on the floor beside him. She kissed his hand gently and looked up at him. His eyes were still closed, and he looked peaceful. Brushing his cheek softly, she caressed his silken hair, touched the ears that looked so oddly delicate on this strong warrior Prince. She continued her gentle caresses, praying fervently for his recovery.

His eyes shot open and she saw for the first time the golden flecks within the bright blue. “Get out,” he rasped. “Leave. Now.”

“Bloody hell!”

Lauren jumped up and looked at Senn, who stood in the middle of the room and pointed towards the door. Lauren rushed out and Senn followed, pulling her brusquely down the stairs and out the front door.

“What the hell was that? What are you thinking!” he yelled, pacing back and forth.

“What are you talking about Senn? I was praying for his recovery!”

“Horse shit!” Senn nearly screamed. “You caressed his ears! I saw it! A man comes back from the grave and you caress his ears?”

Lauren hadn’t imagined the cheerful mage could get so angry.

“Wait, Senn. What’s the big deal? His Princely ears must not be touched? Oh, please, not that nonsense about the Anfallen mages and their special sexual sensitivities?”

“It’s not nonsense.” Sighing, he paced a little forcing himself to calm down. “Our ears, Lauren. These little points...” he indicated his own ears. “They’re very sensitive.”

She looked at him blankly.

He widened his eyes and stared at her, waiting for her to get his drift.

“*Very, very* sensitive. You may as well have thrown the covers back and grabbed his...his...” Senn threw his hands into the air, “or for that matter, taken it into your mouth.”

Lauren felt heat rise to her cheeks. “Oh! Oh Senn, you can’t be serious!”

“*Especially* the gifted. And Kas is the most gifted of us all. Oh damn, Lauren! This is going to be a long, long trip. You are making it hell for him. I’m not a prude, but you’re going to marry our brother. There are some things you simply don’t do. Is this sort of thing okay where you come from? Because I have to tell you, we generally don’t share our betrothed with other men. It’s not going to fly with Luke.”

“Oh Senn, I had no idea, you have to believe me. I would never have done it if I had known.” She broke off, flushing beet red. “You believe me, right?”

He sighed again, pushing his hand through his long black hair. “I guess there’s no way you would know.”

“Explain to him, Senn, please, I’m begging you.”

“Oh great, that won’t be awkward, talking to my brother about his erection. Oh, all right, Lauren. But you owe me one.”

Senn returned to the villa and Lauren plopped down onto the grass near the river, watching it sparkle in the sun, huge dragonflies dancing over the rushes. “Dear God,” she thought, and covered her face with her hands. *What did Kas think?* She had basically attacked him while he was ill. And there was no doubt he was very, very angry about it.

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Kas tried to calm himself. His ears still burned, his sex throbbed, and his skin shimmered with energy. It’s not her fault, he thought, she doesn’t know. *And if that’s what it’s like when she doesn’t know what she’s doing, what would it be like if she did?* He groaned and rolled to his side, casting a spell to block her out. He had moved buildings, healed the near dead, and protected an entire kingdom. But he couldn’t seem to block out this woman.

“Damn it!” Maybe he should force her to go straight to Anfall after all. Or maybe he should get on Catcher and ride as far away from her as possible. Only trouble with that, he moaned again, was that he didn’t want to be away from her. *Hell. It’s simply that I’m responsible for her.*

## The Princes of Anfall

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Lauren spent the rest of the day walking along the river, trying to lose herself in the beauty of the land, but her heart ached. She tried skipping rocks across the river as she had seen boys do, but they skipped once and dropped straight to the bottom. Tired, a bit dirty, and very sweaty, she made her way back to the villa.

Palin was the first to spot her. “We’ve been looking for you—everyone’s worried.”

“Oh, just out for a walk, Palin. It’s a nice day.” *Surely Senn didn’t tell Palin.*

“You’re burnt from the sun, Lauren. Come on.” Palin took her by the hand and walked with her back to the villa.

“Can’t help yourself, can you Lauren? Watch your ears, Palin.” Senn stood with his arms crossed over his chest. “Just kidding, just kidding.” Senn winked.

Lauren looked at him pleadingly. “Well, Senn? Am I allowed in the villa?”

“All is forgiven. I explained to Kas that you’re only an ignorant Great Lander.” He took her other hand and the three climbed the slope to Villa Tansing.

The house now buzzed with activity. Four women tended the gardens, pulling weeds, gathering flowers, and picking ripe vegetables. Nearby a man chopped wood, stopping to brush sweat from his brow and to survey the trio coming up from the river. A young boy and girl swept out the stables and waved to Senn, who whistled out a greeting. The smells of dinner filled the air and Lauren could make out Sara lighting candles in preparation for sundown.

“I love this place,” Lauren said, taking it all in. *It’s magical here. And it has something to do with Kas.*

“We all love it.” said Senn. “You know, Lauren, this is really Kas’s place. That’s why you love it.”

“What do you mean?”

“Never mind.” Senn shook his head, evidently regretting his remark.

Lauren left to freshen up for dinner and assess her sunburn. Sara knocked and entered, this time with a bowl in hand. “For the burn,” she said.

“Is there anything you can’t take care of Sara?” Lauren asked.

“Well, Lauren, I can’t mend a deathly blow to the stomach, I can’t stop my nephews from growing up too quickly and I can’t mend a broken heart. Keep that last one in mind, my dear.”

Lauren started to speak to Sara, but she had already left the room. *“I can’t mend a broken heart.” What is she trying to tell me? My heart isn’t broken.*

Dinner was quieter than the night before. Senn appeared late, having taken food to his brother. “He’s sleeping peacefully,” he said.

“I don’t think he’s asleep, boy.” Kenneth pointed out the window. The sky flared in swirls of green and violet light that pulsed and shifted. Little silver explosions, delicate fireworks, streamed down onto the river, created mirrored ribbons of light against the dark water. The lights parted to expose a full moon, larger than Lauren had ever seen. Streamers of gold fluttered across its surface. As she watched, they turned to silver, then back to gold.

“Oh my,” Lauren exclaimed as the green lights returned. “What is it?”

“Kas letting off some steam. Getting his powers back in order. Being expressive, so to speak,” Hunter explained.

“More like showing off, I’d say,” smirked Senn.

Lauren went out onto the balcony for a better view. Palin joined her.

“If I didn’t love him so much, I’d be jealous,” he said quietly.

Lauren looked at Palin, hoping he would continue to speak.

“I’m not their cousin, you know.”

Lauren watched the fireworks reflected in Palin’s bright hazel eyes.

He turned to Lauren and she put her hand on his arm.

“No, I didn’t know that.”

“I’m an orphan. Margaret found me. At least that’s what they tell me. Found me crying in a cave along the coast. And took me in. The others were children themselves, so she told them I was a long lost cousin. Of course, they know better now, but they always treat me like a brother.”

“I’m an orphan now too, Palin.”

“Maybe that’s why I like you so much, Lauren. You’ll be a good Queen. I wish though...”

## The Princes of Anfall

“What?”

“I wish that you were betrothed to Kas, instead of Luke. Please don’t tell anyone else I said that. Kas is so alone, in a way I can’t explain.”

“So am I, Palin, so am I.”

“Well, you have us now.” He shyly put his arm around her shoulder and the two stood quietly, watching Kas play with the heavens.



## CHAPTER SIX

Lauren woke to another gorgeous day, sun streaming through the sheer curtains. She looked into the courtyard to see a young girl sweeping. No practice today. She resolved to start fresh. She would try her best to stay out of Kas's way, to bury her feelings, whatever they were, and to be a good companion. She wouldn't talk back or cause problems. It was time to concentrate on the task ahead, to think only of Tim. Lauren wondered if Kas would be on his feet. *No, think about Tim.*

The dining room hummed with voices, and Lauren took in a deep breath, hearing Kas's among them. He ate heartily as he spoke to his brother. Lauren felt a rush of relief—he looked so healthy. Kas didn't acknowledge her, but Senn smiled and Sara and the others welcomed her warmly. Lauren filled her plate with bacon and potatoes and a heavenly smelling muffin. She thought she smelled coffee and poured some of the dark brew into her mug. She smelled it for a moment before bringing it towards her mouth. "Is this coffee?" she asked. "Real coffee?"

Sara laughed. "Yes, dear, of course. If I knew you liked it so much, I'd have made some sooner."

"Oh my god, Sara, you *are* a lifesaver." She sipped, savoring every drop, while the others watched her curiously.

"Don't know how you Great Landers drink that awful stuff," Hunter made a face.

Sara laughed. "I'll remember to pack some up for you when you leave. Of course, they have coffee at the palace, at the King's insistence. But it's hard to find south of here."

Well, that was something, thought Lauren. She might not want to marry the King, but she'd have her morning coffee.

Lauren finally found the nerve to look up at Kas. He didn't meet her eyes, but focused on his meal. He surprised her by speaking.

"Your training starts today. Senn will work with you first. Right after breakfast. Eat lightly."

"Yes, Kas," she tried to sound obedient.

At that he looked up, trying to read her. She shut out his probe the best she could and continued with her eating.

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“Good,” he said. “I’m taking Catcher out. Anyone join me?” Everyone rose, including Sara, and made their way to the stable, leaving Senn and Lauren alone.

“Guess I know what I’m doing today,” said Senn glumly. “Sorry, sister, it’s just that a fast ride would feel good right now. Let’s go.”

They entered the courtyard. The stain of Kas’s blood still colored the dirt, and Lauren shook off the feeling the sight put in her gut. *Do what Senn says, to the letter. Be a good girl.*

“So, caressed any ears yet today, sister?” he joked.

“Shut up, Senn.”

“There’s my girl. I only wanted to lighten you up a little, Lauren. Look, don’t try that ‘Yes, Prince Kas’ ‘Yes, Prince Senn’ stuff on me. Be yourself. If you learn nothing else today, learn this: your gifts will stop working the moment you aren’t yourself. For your gifts to grow, you must believe in yourself. Can you understand that at all?”

Lauren smiled, understanding completely.

“Good. Lesson number two. Ready?” he sat down and patted the spot next to him.

“Yep.”

“Look into my eyes. Do you trust me?” he asked.

Lauren took a moment to look into Senn’s gorgeous blue eyes. “Well, yes, I suppose I have to.”

“Not good enough, not by far. You will have to trust me with your life. And Kas. So let’s work on that.”

“How? Trust takes time, experience.”

“Look again. Don’t stop, don’t pull away. You can read, so I’ll let you read me. Go ahead, it’s not very complicated in there,” he laughed.

Lauren stared into Senn’s eyes again, but this time she let herself fall into him. She felt his warmth, his heartbeat, and his spirit. A lovely spirit—lights sparkled and danced playfully, swirling and coalescing, like Kas’s heavenly fireworks.

“Good, Lauren. You’re doing well. Now, look into my mind.”

She pulled back for an instant, shocked at what she saw. Love—it filled him to the brim. It wove in and around every thought she touched. He loved his brothers, especially Kas, he loved food, he loved women. He certainly loved sex! Lauren had to rest for a

moment, tingling at Senn's intense sexuality. She reconnected tentatively. Senn loved music, oh, how he loved music. He would lay down his life for any member of his family. He loved the world and Nature and what he called the Spirit... and... he was starting to care for her. *Me?*

He smiled as it hit her. "That's right."

One tear trickled down her cheek.

"But, you don't even know me."

He gestured with two fingers to his eyes, instructing her to look again. Yes, there it was, he cared for her, and his fondness grew with each day. Senn thought she was funny and beautiful and brave and smart. And he was thrilled she would be his sister-in-law. He wanted her as his friend, always. Senn wanted her to stay in the Land.

"Oh Senn." She cried and he hugged her. "This place makes me cry so much. Why is that?"

"Perhaps that isn't a bad thing, Lauren. Sometimes when long buried feelings surface..." He shrugged. "Well, I'm not smart enough to say."

"You are quite smart, Senn, and I've already told you that you don't lie very well. What is it you want to say to me?"

Senn looked thoughtful and then took Lauren's hand. "You're a pretty easy read, Lauren. You do understand that I can usually hear your thoughts, see your spirit? That Kas can too?"

"Ugh. Yes, I suspected as much." *Does Kas know what I think?*

"No, don't worry so much. We don't pry, it wouldn't be right. But you send out a certain..."

"Vibe?"

"And the vibe doesn't match the truth of how talented you are, how lovely, how strong."

Lauren looked away, and tears poured more freely. "It shows that much? I don't know why it's like that, Senn. My parents were good parents, I was never abused. I just can't seem to feel like I really belong. Like anyone really wants me around."

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“Probably because you’ve belonged here all along. Don’t think too much about it, Lauren, just be you. It’s good enough. I don’t know about in the Great Lands. But at Anfall, you’ll do just fine.”

“Thank you, brother.”

“Lauren,” he pushed her away and lifted her chin to meet his eyes again. “Do you trust me?”

She laughed, wiping away her tears. “Of course, you ass, why wouldn’t I trust you?”

And he laughed with her.

“But Senn, Kas won’t let me in like that. How will I learn to trust him? He doesn’t feel the same about me.”

“We’ll turn to that when we have to,” he said, continuing his lecture.

“Let’s go over the six gifts then. You can channel and sense, or read, as you say. Tim can do the same, and so can we. As far as we know, those are the only gifts the Great Landers share with the Anfallen. I’m one of a few shifters. Kas is the only truly skilled healer in Anfall, although I have a small amount of the gift. I hate healing, Lauren, and so does Kas. It’s nearly more painful than being wounded oneself.”

“Do you heal much?”

“No. Kas does most of it. It can bring me close to death. Never mind that. The Prince Adept is named thusly, my dear, because he is the only true mage, the only one of us who can cast true spells, according to the rituals of the Spirit. That talent has died out completely, except in him. Kas can weave enchantments of protection and harm, gather energy fields and tear them down. He can summon objects at will, and change his environment as it suits him.”

“My God. Does he do much of that, Senn?” Lauren thought how restrained Kas seemed, and couldn’t picture him summoning luxury, women, or treasures for the fun of it.

“Oh, he’s mostly grown out of the fun stuff. When he was a boy, well, he did all manner of odd things—he’d ride through towns, turning houses different colors, planting trees and gardens with a snap of his fingers, clothing beggars and filling their pockets with coin—nothing harmful, ever.”

“And what’s the sixth gift, then?”

Senn shook his head. “We rarely speak of it. We call it holding. Holding someone’s mind—taking their thoughts and changing them, turning them to do your will. Teren, the Wizard of Talinthal, can hold. He’s used it on our troops before, turning them against their own brothers in the heat of battle. He’s taken women that way too.”

“Kas can’t hold?”

“You know, I’m not sure, because he would never try it. Do you understand, Lauren? He’s that moral.” Senn shook off his seriousness. “And why would he need to? Don’t you find my brother persuasive enough?”

“Seriously, Lauren, Teren is as bad as it gets, and he is our enemy. I don’t want to scare you, but if you’re going to rescue Tim, you’ll need to prepare yourself for Teren. Kas has never defeated him, just held him off.”

Lauren shuddered at the thought that Teren controlled her brother. “How is Kas going to face Teren this time? With just you, me, Palin, and Hunter? This may not be such a good idea, after all, Senn. I don’t think I fully understood until now...”

“Trust Kas. You can’t imagine how determined my brother can be, and how clever he is. He wouldn’t do this without a plan. A very good one.”

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Kas rode Catcher hard, and the others barely kept up with him as they leapt over hedgerows and streams.

“What’s gotten into him?” Hunter asked, breathing deeply.

“I think he’s trying to prove he’s well,” Kenneth mused.

“I think he’s riding like the Wizard of Talinthal is on his heels.” Hunter leaned into his horse, struggling to keep up.

Kas finally slowed his pace and the others came up alongside him.

“So Prince,” Kenneth said in a low voice as he cantered his horse closer to Kas’s, “I hear that you’ve some foolish notion of going to Talinthal?”

“That’s right.”

“Hell, Kas,” Kenneth said with a sigh, “you know Tim is dead.”

“I don’t think so,” Kas said, “All right, Ken, it’s true, I’m committed to taking on Teren, and I can’t tell you why. I would if I knew it myself.”

Kas rubbed his stomach lightly, squeezing his eyes shut.

## The Princes of Anfall

“Are you in pain, lad? It won’t do to push it.”

Kenneth forced Kas to slow the pace even further.

“No, not much. A phantom pain, but I’ve felt worse.”

“Kas, make sure the Wizard isn’t calling you to a trap. He’s powerful enough to do it, right?”

“I’ve thought of that. No, Teren’s not calling me.” Kas sighed. “Uncle, the Spirit sends me dreams every night now. They are...troubling. I believe it’s the Spirit calling me to Talinthal.”

“The Spirit? This does sound serious. Are you sure you want to take Lauren? She’s not very focused and how much help can she be? You’ll put her in danger.”

“I don’t want to take her. But she’s a necessary part of this rescue, the dreams make that clear. If I knew more, I’d tell you.”

“I guess we’ll find out when we get there.”

Kas looked at his Uncle. He didn’t want to offend the brave, kind man, but he couldn’t let it happen.

“No.” He shook his head. “I’m risking too many already. We could all die, and mother would lose two sons, Palin and her new daughter-in-law. You’d ask me to risk her only brother too? Besides, Sara would never forgive me.”

“At least let me ride to Anfall and tell Luke what’s going on?”

“No, he would only put himself at risk. And Teren would jump at the chance if Luke were gone from the Palace.”

They approached the villa and spoke no more about it. After seeing to his horse, Kas entered the courtyard to check on the progress of his pupil and her tutor. Senn and Lauren laughed like children but their mood belied the deadly seriousness of their powers. They threw a ball of energy back and forth, shaping it differently each time, changing its course, its color, its nature. Lauren’s channeling was already four times stronger. She glowed—her energy purer, happier, more sure.

*And she’s more beautiful every time I see her, damn it.* Kas put aside the lust she conjured in him. He watched Lauren closely for any signs of weakness, but found himself noticing instead how her hair gleamed in the sunlight, how her voluptuous body moved in perfect concert with Senn’s, how her green eyes glowed proudly at her accomplishments.

Senn spotted Kas and winked.

“She’s a little slow, but we’re working on it,” he said.

Lauren caught the ball and threw it in the air, where it exploded and showered down over Senn’s head.

Kas turned, smiling to himself. He called over his shoulder, “This afternoon, you learn to ride.”

She stuck her tongue out at him and he added “I saw that.”

“That was very mature, my dear,” Senn laughed.

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It hurt to undress, to lower herself into the tub, even to think.

Lauren cursed Kas over and over.

*He’s punishing me. For touching his ears? For talking back to him? I’m trying, damn it! Lauren, don’t you dare cry again.* He’s trying to break me, like a horse. Ten hours of training! The riding lesson had been the hardest. Damn the man!

Let him walk in and see me naked now!

It would be a different scene this time, damn it.

“Well, you aren’t going to win, *highness*. I’ll show you.”

But how?

Lauren’s mind went blank. How *could* she show up the Prince Adept? He could move mountains. His heart was closed to her... *But his body, that’s another matter altogether.* She hadn’t been wrong about his erection as he watched her in the tub. But what if that had been a fluke? Just a horny man, too long away from women?

*No, he wanted me. And I’m off limits. Well, let him suffer.*

The long white silk dress was innocent enough on the hanger.

Lauren rubbed her newly tanned skin liberally with scented oil. She pulled her hair out of its clips and let it hang down to her waist, pulling a few strands forward to brush her breasts. She applied a little bit of her precious lipstick and stepped into the dress. She knew right away, without looking at the mirror, it was the perfect choice. One strong breeze and she’d be as good as naked. In fact, Lauren wasn’t sure this wasn’t supposed to be a nightgown. Tiny straps held the see-through fabric on her shoulders—the rest hugged her body like a second skin, starting low on her breasts. *Don’t breathe and you’ll be okay.*

## The Princes of Anfall

Lauren stepped in front of the mirror.

*Oh God, do I have the nerve?*

She sat on the bed for a while to make sure everyone would be seated when she arrived at the table—a grand entrance. “I’ll bring you to your knees, Your Highness,” she murmured, “and you’ll beg for me.”

Lauren made her way to the dining room and took her normal seat between Sara and Senn, without looking at the men.

She turned to Sara, who burst into laughter. “Good for you, honey, look at them. I’ve never seen a sorrier bunch.”

Lauren took in the men, staring at her wide-eyed. She found the nerve to look up at Kas. He was smiling serenely, apparently completely unmoved.

“Nice one, Lauren,” said Senn. “Glad you decided to dress for dinner tonight. I believe that is one of Kas’s creations, am I right, brother?”

“Kas’s...creations? He designs clothes? Oh, right.” Lauren remembered the riding outfit. He designs everything around him.

“*That* is a nightdress.” Kas tilted his head sideways, examining Lauren with one brow arched. “I hadn’t quite envisioned it as a dinner gown. But it does have some charm as one.”

Lauren looked down at her plate. Her eyes clouded over and she felt dizzy. Kas stared at her intently, she could feel it. *I’m going to throw up.*

“Well, then,” Kenneth broke in uncertainly, “um, Lauren, why don’t you, umm, tell us about your day.”

“Yes, Lauren.” Kas almost whispered, his soft velvet voice very sultry. “Tell us. How are you making out on Catcher?” He pushed back his chair and propped his feet on the table, ignoring his Aunt’s scolding. Tilting his head forward he looked from beneath his dark brows, his eyes smirking slits of midnight blue. But his gaze was white-hot.

Lauren gasped as she heard his unspoken words. *How badly do you want me, Lauren? Tell us all. Think twice before playing games with me again, my beautiful sister-in-law.*

He knew he was gorgeous, he knew what he did to her and he could turn it on at will.



Lauren wanted to die.

Hunter coughed.

“Why, you should have seen her ride, Kas. She was brilliant, absolutely brilliant,” he lied smoothly.

“That’s right,” added Palin. “Took to it like a natural.”

Lauren tried to pull herself together enough to address Kenneth. “They’re lying, of course.” *Damn, my voice is shaking. Come on, Lauren.* “I fell four times—at least four. But I lived to tell about it, so I guess it could have been worse.” She turned back to Kas, who still held her captive in his gaze. “And you know, I think I like having a large beast between my legs. It’s a shame, really, that there’s not one big enough for me around. Besides Catcher, that is.”

Senn guffawed.

Kas smirked, threw his head back and pierced her with his unspoken comments.

They hit her like slaps.

*Good for you, Lauren. Nice try. Amusing. Would you like to know what you’re missing? I can show you. I think you’ll find me satisfactory. Perhaps beyond what you envision, my dear.*

“Well,” said Senn, “If you can ride Catcher, you can ride any horse.”

“That was the idea,” said Kas to his brother. “Nice work,” he added to Lauren. Then he smiled widely. Lauren’s heart skipped a beat, and she melted. He was staring straight into her eyes, and she couldn’t break the gaze or block him, no matter how hard she tried. All she could think of was how badly she wanted him to touch her, how badly she wanted to touch him. A picture of him fully naked, glorious, hovering inches over her... Her body reacted, heating up, moistening. She stared at his lips, thinking about what it would feel like to have those lips on her mouth, on her body. *He’s putting these thoughts in your head! Isn’t he?* Her breathing quickened and she flushed furiously. She hadn’t seduced him or embarrassed him. Kas was the greatest mage in the land, with full control over every one of his actions and reactions. He was calm and composed, and she was falling apart.

## The Princes of Anfall

Lauren excused herself, using every ounce of strength she had left to stop from running up the stairs. She pulled off the cursed nightdress and pulled on a robe as Sara tapped softly at the door and entered with a plate of food and a goblet of wine.

“Hello, dear. Here’s your dinner.”

“Could I have an entire bottle of that wine, Sara?” Lauren asked.

“That didn’t go the way you intended, did it?” she asked.

Lauren shook her head, tying her hair back and wiping off her lipstick. “He must think I’m a tramp. I’ve never humiliated myself like that, ever. I don’t know what I was thinking.”

“Oh, Lauren, stop it. He doesn’t think you’re a tramp. It was pretty clear you were trying to show him up. I mean, he did lean pretty hard on you today, with all that practice and then Catcher for hours. Kas isn’t cruel, Lauren, far from it. This is a serious mission he’s on and...”

“What?”

“Well, I think maybe you have to put yourself in his shoes. He’s been sent to fetch his brother’s bride. He can’t exactly claim you for his own, can he?”

“He doesn’t feel that way about me.”

“It’s only been a few days, Lauren.”

“Oh, I’m not that naïve, Sara. I know it’s simple lust. I mean, look at him—you’d have to be dead to not feel something around him. It’s a bit more than I’m used to, that’s all. I’m, well...”

“Not that experienced, is that it? And our Kas is quite stunning—overwhelming sometimes. I understand. Actually, dear, even though he’s my nephew, I think I might have some kind of heart failure if he went on like that with me. I’ve never seen that look on his face. I think I’ll have to treat my husband to something special tonight.”

Lauren laughed and hugged Sara. “Well, I suppose that makes me feel a little better. At least I’m not crazy. Well, I may be crazy, but at least you noticed it too.”

“Look, Lauren, he’s been on his own for a long time, too. This family is complicated, hard to explain. One thing is certain—you’ll never get him to betray Luke. Don’t try, honey.”

“I’m not trying, Sara. Okay, well, maybe I thought about it.”

“It was a good try, Lauren,” she said laughing. “A damned good one. Good night dear. Sweet dreams.”

Lauren thought that she hadn’t had sweet dreams in years. They didn’t promise to get better. *I’m falling for a man I can’t have, I’m about to go into the jaws of hell to rescue my brother and I don’t know how to get home.*

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Kas and Senn finished dinner and went onto the balcony for a pipe and mug of ale. Senn chuckled, and Kas finally joined in.

“Well, now,” Senn patted his brother on the back. “Looks like she threw down the gauntlet tonight, eh?”

“Leave it be, Senn. She’s confused. Wouldn’t you be? She’s in another land, she’s been told her brother is dead and she’s exhausted. I think she’s holding up pretty well, all things considered.”

“But that *dress*. I didn’t think it would stay on her body, what there was of it. Well, she’s a beauty, there’s no doubt. But Kas, you really pushed it tonight. I like her. Try to lighten up, okay? She’s not that experienced, at least I don’t think she is. And you really pulled out the sex god stuff. You even had poor Aunt Sara blushing.” He shook his head, laughing.

“Mnnn. I suppose. She started it, of course. You should hear her thoughts, brother. Phew. I’m only human.”

“I heard enough to get the drift.”

“Hopefully Luke will like her but I’m concerned about that.”

“Kas, you know, one day you will have to think about yourself. It’s clear Lauren wants you. How many others like her have you let go by?”

“There haven’t been others like her. And nothing’s clear right now. Remember, she hasn’t met Luke yet? She’ll lose whatever little crush she has on me, if she has one.”

“Oh, she has one all right. A crush, yes, I suppose you could call it that. And you helped it along a bit tonight too. I’m not sure you’re being fair.”

“Well, she’ll have to get over it.”

## The Princes of Anfall

*And so will you, eh brother?* Senn slapped Kas on the back, hoping they weren't headed for disaster. A love triangle was the last thing they needed. Teren would be challenge enough.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

“Go figure, another lovely day.” Lauren sighed as she pulled her thick hair back into a pony tail. The embarrassment of the previous night stung, but she vowed to put it aside. Each time she thought of Kas, she forced herself to think of Tim instead. *Find Tim, and get out of this place.*

She wondered when they would begin their journey to Talinthal. Tansing Crossing enchanted her and she would gladly stay if she knew her brother were safe. *If only he were safe, then she would watch Kas, Senn and the rest ride away from the villa, out of her life forever. Let the royals be damned.* But Lauren knew she was at their mercy for a while longer and would have to make the best of it.

Lauren wandered to the window and saw her companions already at practice. Kas spoke quietly with Palin on a bench under Lauren’s window, then patted the young mage on the back. Lauren smiled despite herself. Palin’s wound cut nearly as deep as the blow to Kas’s abdomen, but Lauren knew Kas would work hard to ensure Palin regained his confidence.

Kas rose, grabbed his sword and walked towards Senn, laughing as he challenged him to another duel. He stopped suddenly in his tracks and turned to look up at Lauren’s window, regarding her seriously for a moment. He nodded formally. Lauren returned his nod. *So, that’s how it will be, then. We’re very civilized, aren’t we? Fine.*

Lauren dressed very modestly and made her way to the breakfast sideboard, taking her meal to the courtyard. She sat on the bench and watched the men practice while she ate. Lauren tried to distance herself from the feelings that washed across her mind and body at the site of Kas, sweaty and near-naked, magnificent. *He’s your brother’s rescuer. Nothing more.* Kas took her aback by suddenly abandoning his match with Senn and sitting next to her on the bench, breathing heavily and wiping sweat and dust from his body.

“How are you today, Lauren?” he asked politely.

“Well, I’m a bit sore in more places than one and somewhat embarrassed by my display last night, for which I apologize. But I’ll survive. I’m tougher than I look.”

“I know that.” Kas looked very serious and Lauren felt a knot of tension tighten in her stomach.

## The Princes of Anfall

“Look, I know you’ve worked hard the last few days to weather all these changes, all the new information we’ve thrown at you. You’ve been great.” Kas concentrated his gaze on Palin as he spoke.

“But?”

“But...”

“What, Kas? Spit it out.”

Kas turned to Lauren and looked into her eyes. She squeezed her eyes shut against his sudden intimacy, his warmth, his scent, his magic. *Think of Tim.*

“Yes, let’s think of Tim. And Talinthal. And Teren. We aren’t prepared, Lauren.” He hesitated. “You aren’t ready, and I have to get you ready very quickly—body, mind, and spirit. Do you understand? You can stay on a horse and that’s a start. You channel well enough. Senn talked to you a bit about trust, about sensing, how to connect with him,” He hesitated again, “with me?”

“Well, we haven’t quite sorted out that trust business, have we?” she said. “I know that’s mostly my fault.”

“Look at me, Lauren,” Kas said, “Open your eyes.”

*Too close—he’s too close.* His lips were less than a foot away. She could see the gold flecks glimmer in those deep blue eyes of his and she shivered a little.

“We have a problem, don’t we?” he said quietly, “Perhaps you feel something for me? No, don’t look away, I’m not trying to embarrass you.”

Kas placed one finger on her chin and turned her to face him. Lauren felt a jolt from his touch and he pulled his finger away suddenly.

“See, you felt that, didn’t you? It’s my magic. It’s not *me*. Do you understand? It’s never about *me*. My power pulls on the very sensitive, the very gifted. You might mistake it for ....you might feel...” Kas shook his head, unwilling or unable to say it.

“I might be falling in love with you.”

His eyes grew wide and he leaned away from her.

“No,” he said uncertainly, “I didn’t mean that, exactly.”

“Of course, it’s exactly what you meant, highness. You needn’t speak to me like a little schoolgirl with a crush on the teacher. It’s insulting. I won’t let it interfere with

anything, with my training, with our mission to save Tim, with your mission to take me to Luke.”

Kas didn’t respond, so Lauren went on. *You’ve nothing to lose Lauren, be honest. Be the brave woman you want to be.* “I do trust you, Kas. I don’t know why. You and Senn, Palin, Hunter, I trust you all. Is that what you needed to hear?”

Kas nodded, still looking into her eyes.

“Good. Let me know when you’re ready for me.” She stood up briskly and turned away from the courtyard. She stopped on the threshold to the villa, feeling his gaze on her back. Lauren turned and folded her arms across her chest. “It’s okay, Kas. I didn’t quite realize it myself until now. I know it’s not mutual. But let’s get one thing straight. It’s not your *magic*. I don’t give a *fuck* about your magic.”

He took in a breath at her curse.

“But if it helps you to think it, highness, be my guest. I never want to discuss it again.”

Without waiting for his reaction, she swept inside.

In her room, Lauren pulled on clothes suitable for training—soft britches, a loose cotton shirt. As she fastened the lacings on her shirt her hands began to shake. *Please God, let it simply be lust. Make it go away. I wish Tim were here.* She threw herself on the bed and cried as she hadn’t since the day her parents died.

A half hour later, Palin appeared at her door.

“I’m your instructor this morning.” He shuffled his feet a bit and Lauren smiled at him, wiping away the remnants of her tears.

“It’s all right, Palin. I know how I must look. And I know you heard it all—Kas and me. It’s history. Now, my friend, what’s today’s lesson?”

They made their way to the empty courtyard.

“Well, miss,” he started.

“Lauren,” she corrected.

“Kas says that we can’t teach you the sword in a short amount of time. Only a few women can handle one. That’s not an insult.”

“No insult taken, Palin. Your swords look very heavy. I wouldn’t have a chance with one. At least not right away. Don’t count me out in the future, though. What then?”

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“The bow. You see, it doesn’t require so much strength. Some, but not too much. But Kas suspects you have a good eye and could help us with a bow. We’ll need to take out some guards.” Palin looked concerned as his hazel eyes surveyed hers.

Lauren hadn’t thought it through—of course, people would die. She shuddered at the thought she might do some of the killing.

Palin nodded.

“You’re reading me, Palin?”

“Not in the way you mean. I simply know that you Great Landers aren’t used to going into battle. At least, from what Tim said, most of you don’t have experience, at least those of you from Manhattan, he said. Tim struggled with the idea too.”

*Tim went into battle with these men.*

Her brother hadn’t ever been in a fistfight, much less a battle. Lauren nodded and concentrated at the task at hand. She grabbed the bow and quiver from Palin.

*I really wish Kas could see this. It’s childish, but just once...*

Palin barely had time to indicate the target. She had a shot off immediately.

Dead center, a perfect bull’s-eye.

“Um, I guess you’ve done this before?” Palin asked, laughing lightly.

Her only answer was to get off three more shots in rapid succession—perfectly.

“Palin, this is child’s play to me. Sorry, I didn’t mean to trick you.” *That bronze medal should have been silver.* It still irked her. Lauren winked at Palin, who looked very confused. “Anything else, or is that it?”

Loud, slow claps came from the courtyard entrance—she knew it was Senn without turning. She knew also that Kas and Hunter were with him.

“Yes, there’s something else,” Kas snapped. He pointed to four straw men with red paint indicating the position of the heart.

Lauren felt momentarily shaken—a target shaped like a person. *Don’t let it get to you. Show him you’re in control.* She didn’t miss her mark once.

“Could you do that to a man, Lauren? You would kill him instantly,” Kas asked.

“I don’t know, Kas,” she answered truthfully. “I guess we’ll find out.”

He left the courtyard.



Lauren pulled her arrows from the targets. “You know, Palin, I forgot how much I love this sport. Well, I suppose it’s no longer a sport. Who would have thought...?” She shook her head in dismay. If her coach could see her now.

Senn approached her and put his hand on her shoulder. “Come walk with me, Lauren. That’s enough showing off.”

In silent agreement they walked down towards the Nor River and turned North along the bank.

“I’m sorry, Lauren. I know you feel bloody awful right now. I hope you can be generous to Kas, even though he’s hurt you.”

“He hasn’t hurt me, Senn. I hurt myself. I don’t know when in the last few days I let it happen. Maybe when he was wounded, maybe as soon as I saw him. It barely matters. I don’t blame him—he’s done nothing wrong.”

“I think you’re covering for him. He flirted a bit, but he didn’t mean to. I guess you caught his fancy.” Senn smiled. “Come on, sister, you must know how pretty you are. Kas is just a man.”

“A man who could have any woman in the world. My world or yours. You’re kind, Senn. Let’s drop the subject.”

“What hurts so much? One man in particular? It shows.”

“I don’t want an analysis right now.”

She reached down to pick irises growing wild along the river bank.

Senn picked more and handed them to her.

“Fair enough. Kas will be more careful in the future. This is a tough job, and he always does his job, no matter what. He won’t make you uncomfortable again, or endanger this mission again.”

“You’ve said all this before, Senn. He sent you to talk to me about his honor and duty and Anfall and Luke. I get it. Let it *be*. *Both* of you.”

“All right. By the way, you’re a better shot than any of us, Kas included. Unless he uses the gifts. No one hits eight targets perfectly in a row at that range.”

She smiled. “I know.”

Lauren spent the rest of the day riding alone, this time on Sara’s gentle mare, Bell. They wandered along the river and Lauren confided all she felt to her new friend as she

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patted her mottled grey neck. “Guess what he said, Bell?” She recounted the day’s events out loud, tears sometimes escaping. Lauren skipped lunch to enjoy the solitude, the beautiful countryside. She finally lay in the luxuriant grass and napped in the sun while Bell munched on an apple.

Palin startled Lauren awake.

“Lauren, we looked everywhere for you. Kas is worried.”

“I doubt that, Palin. Not more training today?”

“No.”

Palin grinned from ear to ear.

“We’re going to Tansing! Kas said we need a night out. I think maybe it was Senn’s idea, but I don’t care. There’s so much to do and see in Tansing—have you been there?”

She shook her head no.

“No, of course, you haven’t been this far north. Well, I guess it’s no Manhattan.”

“I’m sure I’ll love it, Palin.”

Lauren tried to feel enthusiastic but the prospect of a night on the town with the princes brought more anxiety than joy.

Seeking out Sara, Lauren decided to see if there was anything that might make an evening in town more enjoyable.

“Oh, you’ll no doubt go to Kas’ favorite tavern, and for that, you should just wear a comfortable dress, dear. Oh, and wear comfortable shoes. And bring a wrap—it can get chilly by the river at night. And you might want to take a little money—do you have any? Just in case you see something in one of the shops. Ask the boys to take you to The Purple Snail, my favorite. And let’s see...”

“No more, please, Sara!” Lauren laughed. “I’ll need another horse just for my belongings.”

“Horse, dear? You’re going in our carriage, of course.”

“Really? Oh, of course, I forget sometimes that you’re royalty. I’ve only seen two or three carriages in the whole year I’ve been here.”

Lauren turned to the stairs to change, but Sara stopped her.

“Are you all right, dear? I understand you had a tough day.”

“*Again*. You mean a tough day *again*. They all seem like tough days. But I’m getting used to it.”

She hugged Sara.

“I’ll be fine.”

Lauren ran up the stairs and Sara went to her husband’s side. “This isn’t over by a long shot. What do you think?”

Kenneth looked at his wife over his book. “Couldn’t have said it better myself. I just pray they make it to Anfall unharmed. Right now, broken hearts are the least of their problems. Kas knows that too. I suspect he’s going to Tansing to get some help.”

“He’s stalling. I can tell he’s not fully recovered. He wants his gifts to be at full strength before Talinthal. Or they would have moved on by now.”

“That too.”

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Tansing proper filled the horizon just as the sun began setting. A jumble of winding narrow streets sloped down towards the river, where ships and small boats were moored. Fishermen unloaded their catches and others unloaded crates and barrels filled with wares from other towns. Women and children greeted their loved ones.

Tansing harbor was enchanting. Palatial residences hugged the hills high above the town. Like the Hollywood Hills, Lauren laughed to herself. Did the rich always look down on the modest?

“Where to, Kas?” asked Palin, his voice excited.

Kas kept his eyes closed as he answered sternly. “I thought we’d check on our holdings here, perhaps go over some of the accounts with Johan and maybe pick up some supplies for the trip.”

Palin looked crushed and Senn elbowed him in the side. “Don’t be an ass, Palin, he’s joking.”

Kas laughed and opened his eyes, sitting up straight. “We’ll get out at the edge of town so we can give Lauren the tour and then it’s on to The Mooring.”

“What’s The Mooring?” Lauren asked.

“The seediest tavern this side of the Nor,” answered Senn. Kas arched a brow. “Okay, it isn’t seedy at all but I love to say that. It’s something Tim would say.”

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“I can’t wait,” said Lauren, honestly. “Tim went there?” Senn nodded and smiled sadly.

As promised, they stopped at the edge of town and the coachman helped Lauren out. At least two dozen Tansingers surrounded the carriage, peeping up from their deep bows, waiting to see who else was inside. Finally, Senn and Kas stepped out, and the cry of “*Hai na saluanon Anfallen*” went up again and again. Senn and Kas shook hands all around and greeted some of them by name.

“What’s going on?” Lauren asked Hunter.

Hunter looked puzzled by her question.

“What are they saying? Why such a commotion?”

“I don’t get your meaning, Lauren. The greeting means ‘long live the house of Anfall,’ although the ancient language doesn’t quite translate that easily.” He looked at her closely. “Lauren, you’ll have to get used to this, you know.”

Of course, she thought in shock, I’m to be their queen. Well, at least she could be anonymous for a while longer. Then Kas pulled her forward. “I’m glad to have this chance to introduce Lauren Emory, who will be marrying King Lucenor before the month is out.”

Cheers went up and the subjects bowed and curtsied deeply. *Well, enough of anonymity.* Some of the women rushed forward to congratulate Lauren, telling her how lucky she was and how wonderful it would be to have her as Queen. She tried to respond graciously.

Kas extricated the group, refusing countless offers of food and ale. They made their way to a wide street that ended in a stupendous broad plaza, a grand fountain in the center, bordered with open-air restaurants and busy shops. Every restaurateur beckoned them with large menus in hand to their establishments, anxious to have the business of the royals. Kas led them to a small café in the corner of the plaza. They sat under brightly covered umbrellas and waiters fussed over them, bringing ale, tea, and in Lauren’s case, coffee, as well as plates of breads, cheeses, olives, and fruits.

“This is fabulous,” said Lauren happily, “like Rome or Spain or Greece.”

Kas studied her, waiting for more explanation, but she shrugged, “It’s hard to explain.”

“I’m glad you’re enjoying yourself,” Senn said. He leaned in close to her and whispered, “It’s Kas’s way of apologizing for embarrassing you.”

A young girl stood nearby, an arm laden with gold- and silver-toned chains dangling in front of her. Her ragged clothes, bare feet, and dirty face nearly brought tears to Lauren’s eyes. The girl looked hopefully at the royal table. Senn gestured to her, and she scampered to his side.

“Let’s see what you have my dear,” he said kindly, handling the cheap imitation metals. Senn sorted through them and picked out a half dozen, handing the girl some coins. The girl quickly pocketed the money, thrilled at her success.

The girl boldly looked at Kas, who laughed and motioned to her. She approached the great mage more shyly. Kas removed one necklace from her arm—a pewter chain with drops of green glass. He studied the necklace seriously in the candlelight, keeping the child on tenterhooks. Finally, he reached into his pouch and pulled out a single huge gold coin, worth more than the night’s take in all the restaurants lining the square. The girl gasped and snatched the coin, then ran for all she was worth before he changed his mind.

Hunter patted Kas on the back. “You’re generous, my boy.”

Lauren looked at Kas seriously. “Can’t you help the poor in this town? I saw many in the South with little money but I haven’t seen real poverty until tonight.”

“That girl?” Kas smiled and exchanged glances with Senn. “You sound like your brother again. Yes, Luke manages our social programs. But quite often, the poor become again. We try very hard to put our resources into businesses so everyone has work, so there’s no need for help. Good times come and go, largely depending upon the crops. No one goes without food, Lauren. Be careful to distinguish between someone who is poor and someone who wants you to pity them.”

“Ugh. Spoken like a true Republican.” Lauren shook her head and picked up her coffee.

Senn laughed. “Tim said the same. He lectured us endlessly on politics. Finally, he understood that Anfall differs enormously from your home in many ways. No Industrial Revolution, for one thing.”

“What! How can you know, understand, I mean...”

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Kas smirked. “Ah, then, the Land is populated with dim-wits who know how to fish, grow simple crops, and make cheese and ale? Is that how you see us? We’ve made different choices here. You assume your technology is the natural order of things. Look around, Lauren. What use do we have for automobiles? For those machines—computers? We heal with our herbs, and with magic. We fight when we must, with our own hands. Why would we want weapons that kill thousands at a time?”

“Millions,” Lauren corrected. She felt foolish. This man was bright—a solid thinker, who took the well-being of his subjects to heart. *Of course, Lauren, he’s second in line to the throne. They rule millions. Think!* “I’m sorry, I suppose it’s none of my business, anyway.”

Kas looked into his mug. “It will be. The Queen rules as well and has much say in the destiny of Anfall.” Then he looked up and stared into Lauren’s eyes. She felt the heat rise in her stomach to clutch at her throat. Kas held the cheap necklace tightly in his hand for a moment, then reached across the table and opened Lauren’s hand, dropping the necklace into it.

The gesture so surprised Lauren that she didn’t even look at the necklace until Senn tapped on her hand. She held strands of pure gold, laced with exquisite emeralds, at least thirty of them.

“Something to remember Tansing by,” Kas said softly.

Senn studied the necklace. “They’re the color of your eyes, Lauren. Kas got it exactly right. Ever the designer.”

Lauren’s heart pounded in her chest as Kas rose, took the necklace from her hand, and stood behind her. She felt his hands brush her skin as he fastened it around her neck. She shivered at his touch. “Cold again, Lauren?” He laughed lightly.

“Tsk, ts,” Senn scolded his brother for flirting.

“You know, Kas, I think perhaps you’re only a gentleman on the surface.”

Kas arched a brow and returned to his side of the table, draining his mug where he stood. “Perhaps you’re right. Let’s move on.”

Lauren walked along the cobbled streets in a daze, feeling the necklace burn around her neck, laced with the magic Kas used to transform it. Kas ignored her for the next hour, as they moved from wide avenue to narrow lane, Hunter pointing out some of Tansing’s

charming landmarks—a fountain, a statue, an official building, a stately home. They approached the harbor, where lights now twinkled on the water as night fishing boats rocked to and fro. Stars littered a cloudless sky.

The street filled with patrons of the taverns and restaurants that lined the wharf. Lauren examined the carved wooden sign overhead the doorway where Kas and Senn paused. It sported a ship, the insignia of the House of Anfall, and the words 'The Mooring'.

Kas led the way inside. The Mooring barraged Lauren's senses immediately. Instead of the grimy nautical décor she expected, it was a tropical paradise. Riotous colors coated nearly every surface. The walls displayed scenes of turquoise waters, palm trees, and exotic animals. Exquisite ceramic birds and flowers hung from the ceiling. Palm trees grew from the floor and extended to a second storey. Skylights punctured the ceiling, which opened to the balmy night air. It was bright, and cheery and Lauren expected to hear a steel band any moment.

Kas seemed amused by her obvious surprise. "What do you think?"

"It's wonderful! I feel like I'm home. Well, not exactly home, but in a part of my world."

"Good." Kas's voice was gentle and caressed Lauren's skin.

Senn whispered to her, "Good answer. Kas designed every piece of it, floor to ceiling. Tim used to say it was like an island called... can't quite remember the name. But it's a tribute to our North Shore, the loveliest area of our lands. You will see it some day."

"Kas owns a bar?"

"Kas owns a good portion of this town and a good deal of the rest of the kingdom. Luke does too, of course. The rest of us don't fare poorly. You don't seem to have the concept of royalty down very well, Lauren," he laughed, indicating a table on a landing as Kas approached the barkeep to chat. "Kas loves the North so much, he wanted to be able to visit whenever he liked, that is, without magic. The funny part is, from Anfall, you can actually be at the North Shore in about the same time it takes to reach Tansing and this tavern. It's only a little folly of his youth—he was about 10, I think, when he designed this place. You should see the one in Sunara."

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“A chain.” Lauren laughed and shook her head in disbelief. “What’s this obsession with design? Clothes, restaurants, jewelry?”

Senn pulled his arm around her. “He’s complicated. I’m used to the contrasts—it seems normal to me. Fierce warrior, strong as an ox, a gentleman, a son of a bitch, kind and gruff at the same time. And good looking in his own way, I suppose,” he joked.

“And you’re in love with him, of course.”

Lauren looked at Senn. His comment required no answer.

“It’s not getting better for you, is it?” Senn looked down from beneath his coal-black lashes.

“No, Senn, I don’t think so. This afternoon I thought I’d be all right. Now...”

“Are you planning on leaving after Talinthal? Not even tempted to meet Luke? They won’t force you, Lauren.”

“I honestly don’t know. I’m taking this day by day.” She sipped light sweet wine out of a hand-painted flute, turning the glass near a candle to see the light dance off the liquid. Lauren looked at Senn. “How do you make yourself fall out of love, Senn?”

“Don’t know. Never had to do it.” Lauren surveyed her friend’s handsome face. He gave her a hug. “I’ll miss you if you leave, sister.”

“Me too,” she said, but he had already left her to greet some friends.

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Kas saw Lauren sitting alone, Hunter and Palin at a nearby table speaking with Hunter’s relatives. He squeezed his eyes shut, wondering why he felt so uncertain. *Face it, asshole, you don’t trust yourself with your brother’s fiancé. Senn’s right, you’ve been alone too long.* Kas thought about the coming days. Was Lauren up to the challenges ahead? He feared for her, her safety, her sanity. She couldn’t possibly understand the task ahead of them. Perhaps he should chat with her further.

He took the seat next to her.

He tried to ignore the scent of her hair, the vibration that surrounded her, that attacked his senses. *Block her.* He played with the spread of appetizers arranged artfully before them.

“Thank you for the necklace, Kas.” She took a quick sip of wine.

Kas grunted. *Dear God, this isn’t good. I feel like I’m on a date. Get up now.*



Kas drained his mug in disgust, poured more from the pitcher and drained that in equal time.

“I didn’t know you were such a drinker, highness.”

“I can’t get drunk—I think it’s the damned magic. Senn can. It’s pretty funny, actually. Of course, you know him well enough by now to imagine it. Right now I’d gladly trade places with him and get ‘wasted’ as Tim would say.”

“Why?”

Kas didn’t look up. *Because I want to kiss you. That’s why I want to get drunk. So I’ll forget about you. Or so when I kiss you, I won’t remember you’re going to be Luke’s.*

Awkward minutes passed between them before Lauren finally broke the silence.

“Tell me about the tropics,” she said, “Senn said you like the North Shore.”

“All right, that’s a safe enough topic, I suppose.”

He moved his chair closer to hers but continued looking straight ahead. “What do you want to know?”

“Anything,” she answered. *Speak to me, she thought, say anything at all. I want to hear your voice. I want you near me. I know you don’t want me. But touch me, just once.*

Kas felt struck by lightening. He looked up quickly, wondering if she knew her thoughts drifted right into his soul. He began slowly, trying to recover.

“Firstly, it’s warm, very warm. The water is clear and beautiful—you can walk for yards and yards and still be in shallow water. The fish swim right up to you, dancing around your legs.”

Lauren nodded, picturing the Mayan Riviera. *Take me there.*

Kas looked at her directly. She hung on to every word. He couldn’t help but look at her mouth and he saw her look at his. He stared at her mouth as he spoke. His heart pounded. “People live very simply, fishing and making pearl and shell jewelry that they sell in the towns. You can identify the Tanu by the tattoos on their faces and arms.”

Lauren revised her picture to a tiny Pacific isle. *If I could go there with him, just once, be alone with him, touch him.* She closed her eyes, lost in her fantasy.

Kas poured more ale, a dull ache starting in his heart and spreading throughout his body. His need to hear more was overwhelming. His desire was choking him. His voice became softer.

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“There are few dangerous animals, only some wild cats, snakes, and the like. Mostly though, there’s nothing to hurt you—no human enemies. Not much magic. Well, just the magic of Nature. There’s nothing I enjoy more than spending a full day on a North Shore beach until the sun sets.”

Lauren’s fantasy swept across him and he felt the heat rush to his groin, felt the hardness overtake him, the desire make his head swim.

*Lauren pictured them on the beach locked in a desperate embrace. She stroked his back, kissing him wildly, running her hands through his hair and across his face and ears.*

It was too much for Kas. He closed his eyes and crossed the bridge to her mind, showed her he was there.

She gasped when he made the connection and he felt her tentative acceptance, felt his energy course through her. Then he showed her his own fantasy.

*Kas pulled her to the sand, staring into her eyes, whispering his desires, at first gently touching her lips with his. He deepened his kiss, seeking her tongue, exploring all of her. They were joined, body, mind and soul. He kissed her neck and shoulders, then moved to her luscious breasts, brushing his mouth over the smooth skin, teasing her. He ran his hand down the length of her curves and brought it under her dress, pushing aside the obstacle of her lacy silk underwear. His breath was hot in her ear, his voice was angry and harsh.*

*“You’re mine, Lauren. Do you understand? No matter what happens, you were meant for me. Luke may take you from me, but you will still be mine.”*

*All of Lauren responded to his rough touch and she arched and screamed his name, but he silenced her with a hard kiss. He moved on top of her and pressed his hard shaft against her. “Tell me you want this. Tell me you want me in you, Lauren. I have to hear it.”*

*She cried his name as he moved his hand against her swollen wet skin. She whispered into his ear, “Please, Kas, now. I love you, I’m yours.”*

*Kas caught his breath.*

Suddenly, he broke the connection and left the table, shaken, bruised.

“I love you?” *Was that his fantasy or hers? Oh God. Oh no, she would think...she would think that he wanted her to love him.*

Senn saw Kas storm out of the tavern and quickly came to Lauren's side. "Oh, no." He stared at her closely. "What happened, Lauren, did you two fight? This is not good at all."

Senn called Hunter over and whispered, "Look after her, don't let her wander off."

He ran into the street, scanning the darkness for Kas. Senn spotted him and ran to catch up. "Kas, we have to talk."

Kas continued on in silence. Senn pulled at his sleeve and Kas shook him off.

He stopped when he saw his brother's anguished face. He'd rarely seen the likes of it.

"Leave."

"No, Kas, I won't leave. What the hell is going on?"

"Leave now, or..."

"Or what, you'll deck me? Turn me into a tree?"

Kas nearly staggered to the edge of the dock, holding onto a piling as though he were a drowning man and it, a life raft.

"You love her, Kas," Senn said, "Just go away, take her. We'll figure it out. Luke will understand. Hell, he may even be happy for you."

"Senn, I don't love her."

"Okay, then what happened back there?"

"I kissed her. I touched her. I told her," he winced at the memory, "I told her she was mine." He shook his head.

"You kissed her? I didn't see that. Oh, you connected with her? She handled your power?"

"It was amazing, Senn. I've never encountered a gift like hers, except in you."

"So, you feel a connection with her, but you don't love her, is that it?" Senn said slowly, carefully, "Her gifts pull at you?"

Kas snickered. "Nothing that lofty, I'm afraid. The great Prince Adept is scum. I broke an oath and read her without permission, and then I took advantage of what I saw there. I simply wanted her, Senn. It was purely physical. I'm attracted to her, but that's not love."

"So you're upset at yourself?"

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“It’s about the lowest thing I’ve ever done—the worst abuse of my gifts. How do you think I feel? I took advantage of my brother’s betrothed.”

“She’s not going to go through with that wedding, Kas. She’s just trying to rescue Tim, and then she means to bolt. Surely you realize that?”

“But she won’t. She’ll feel trapped by her commitment, her word. And don’t underestimate Luke’s pull. I haven’t seen the woman who could resist him. Besides, as I said, I’m not in love with her. I can’t give her what she wants.”

He paced, fists clenched. “Damn it, Senn, she’ll be hurt beyond belief. I’ve got to let her know it was just a... a mental fling.”

Senn patted his brother on the back. “Come on, let’s get back. I’ll talk to her. But Kas? That’s got to be the end of it, okay? She won’t be able to take much more from you. And, well, she’s Tim’s sister, after all. She deserves our respect.”

Kas rubbed his forehead. “What have I done?”

Senn thought Lauren looked fairly normal when he entered the Mooring, although she wouldn’t make eye contact with anyone in the group. The carriage was brought around and Kas was already inside when he fetched Hunter and Palin.

“A bit of an early night, isn’t it?” Palin asked.

Hunter frowned at him and Palin grunted and looked out the window.

They rode in silence.

Senn sat next to Lauren and she rested her head on his shoulder, eyes closed.

The villa was dark when they entered and they parted ways without a single word.

Lauren methodically changed into her nightclothes and took off her emerald necklace. Still clutching it in her hand, she walked to the door and opened it, feeling Senn’s presence in the hallway.

“You knew I was here?”

“Well, it was predictable one of you would come to talk to me. And since, since tonight in the bar with Kas,” she stammered, “my gifts seem somehow enhanced.”

“That’s to be expected. It’s incredible that you withstood a mind meeting with Kas.”

“He told you what happened and you are here to tell me to get over it. I keep hearing the same thing from all of you. Him, you, Sara. Enough, Senn! Leave me alone.”

“I just wanted to make sure you’re okay, Lauren. I care about you. And Kas is worried that...”

“I don’t give a damn about Kas’s worries right now. I know what I saw, what I felt, what he said, what he felt. He can lie to himself all he wants, but he can’t lie to me anymore.”

Lauren’s strength and conviction were the last things Senn expected. This was no crushed flower.

“The sad part is,” she continued, “he’ll never know how it could be between us. He won’t let himself. And I can’t change that. Or is he just a player, Senn? Is he simply a womanizer and I’m kidding myself?”

“No,” Senn hesitated. “He’s not a womanizer. But he’s not ready to settle down, Lauren. I hate to be the one to say that. But you deserve the truth. And, well, I tried to tell you—he’s always been different, separate from the rest of us. No one has been able to really reach him.”

“You did try to tell me.” She paused. “He still means to help Tim?”

“Of course, he won’t go back on his word.”

“Fine. Talinthal then. Once Tim is safe, I’ll be gone.”

## Part II. To Talinthal

### CHAPTER EIGHT

Kas watched Lauren train every day. Sometimes he'd sit on the bench in the courtyard, guiding Senn on how to coach her. At times he'd watch from his window. Where she had been lovely, she was now stunning—toned and tan, auburn hair kissed by the sun, emerald eyes sparkling with life. Where she had been sarcastic, she was now ruthless. Where she had been unsure, she was completely determined.

*Why, she's out of my league. She's truly fit for a king.* But Senn called it—Lauren would leave as soon as Tim was safe. She would go home to the Great Lands and they would never see her again. *And it's my fault. Because I let my loins think for me.* He had failed Luke, his family, all of Anfall. This gifted woman could have been the consort they needed.

Kas brooded on the riverbank, watching clouds float by, idly reworking their shapes to suit his liking, thinking of Lauren, and what he could have done differently. How he would explain it to Luke, to his mother. How he would forget her.

"That's a great tan you're getting, Kas."

"You're insinuating I should be doing something else?"

"Well, Palin and Lauren are training like there's no tomorrow," Senn said from behind him, "and I suppose there is no tomorrow. Perhaps they could use your help."

"You're a fine coach. I'm recovering, remember?"

"Bullshit. You feel sorry for yourself, because you can't have what you want, or at least, you won't let yourself have it. It's not like you to pout. It's making me rather uncomfortable, brother."

"Then leave. Everyone else gets to have an off day, or week, or even year. Don't I deserve to feel lousy once in a while? Oh, no, that's right, only Luke gets to feel anything and get away with it. Oh hell, now I sound like a child." Kas rubbed his forehead and Senn realized that Kas *was* still recovering and that his headaches were back. He lay down next to him in the grass and sent him calming, restorative energy.

"Thanks," Kas mumbled.

"You're right, it isn't fair. And Luke gets the girl, too."

“No, you were right, she’ll leave Anfall. At least I don’t have to be around her every day for the rest of my life. Bloody hell.”

“Not that it ever mattered to you anyway,” Senn said softly.

Kas looked at Senn and smiled. “No, not that it did.”

“You know, Kas? We should have forced Luke to marry the old lady—Matilda. Then we would have avoided all this horse shit.”

He left Kas laughing at the thought of the wonderful, eccentric woman who wore animal-print pants that clashed with her bright orange hair.

Kas slept for an hour in the sun and woke at the approach of his two good friends.

“Sara provided food for an army,” Jaimes reported when Kas finally sat up.

“We’re loaded up, Kas. Anything else?” Cullen asked.

“Are you sure you want to do this? I’m not ordering it, as I said in Tansing. It won’t be pretty. Teren will know we’re coming, unless I can figure out a way to change that. And he’s built a hefty force of adepts—so it’s bound to get ugly.”

“Look, cuz,” said Jaimes, “have you ever known us to do something we didn’t want to do?”

Kas smirked. “Well, let’s see, maybe every other month or so.”

“Move your ass—everyone’s waiting for you. Sooner we get there, the sooner it’s over.” Cullen gave Kas an arm up.

Lauren watched Kas and two huge strangers approach. Anfallen men, clearly, and handsome like the princes, but their skin was deep brown, their eyes as dark as midnight. They wore their hair in elaborate braids and sported intricate tattoos on their huge muscled arms. They wore heavy gold loops in their ears and gold armbands.

“This is a good bit of luck,” Senn observed. “Hmnn, I suppose Kas arranged it at The Mooring.”

“Who are they? I certainly would have remembered seeing them at The Mooring.”

“We call Jaimes and Cullen our cousins, but they are rather distant cousins—our great-grandmother was sister to their great-grandfather, as best we can trace. They live close to the foot of the Sharl Mountains, far to the West. They spend a great deal of time in worship of the Spirit in very elaborate rituals, including rituals that involve hunting. Their women are strong warriors as well. They answer to the royal house and keep the

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West clean of trouble for Luke. Jaimes and Cullen are Anfahuin, sworn protectors of the royal family. They're expert swordsmen, and they use other weapons as well—nasty short blades and spiked clubs.”

“Do they have the gifts?”

“Let's say that you shouldn't worry too much if you find two very large hounds in your tent tonight. But they don't shift often. Their gifts are along the strength of Palin's. They rely more on their skills and physical strength, which you can see they have in abundance. They're devoted to Luke, these two. And they're our friends, of course.”

“They look like pro wrestlers.”

Senn looked a little puzzled. “They wrestle as well, of course, but that's not the most practical aspect of their training. Luke is actually their size, and as strong.”

Lauren noticed the men flanked Kas, already in a protective mode, even at benign Tansing Crossing.

“It would go a long way if you addressed them as ‘sir’ when Kas does the formal introduction. It's the appropriate address for members of the Anfahuin. We even address them that way when we're in public. Only a handful of many hundreds of Anfahuin survive today. Most died riding against Teren. They always form the front line and take the first strikes.”

“They'll fight with us at Talinthal?” she asked.

“Of course. You wouldn't be able to keep them away.”

“And how long for us to get there?”

“That depends on a number of things.” Senn looked uncertain, and Lauren grabbed his hand.

“Tell me. What things, Senn? I have a right to know.”

“Of course you do. The Nor River marks a boundary of sorts. We don't fully control the Eastern lands. The forest, the magic... To be honest, no one has gone where we're going and returned to talk about it.”

“What! Are you serious?”

He winced. “Perhaps I'm making it sound worse than it is. I'm sure Kas has a good plan. Otherwise we wouldn't go.”



“Will he share that plan with the rest of us? It’s tiring to wonder and worry. Tim’s my brother, after all.”

“Yes, of course. We’ll talk tonight. But now, it’s time to say our goodbyes.”

Senn pointed to his Aunt and Uncle and the entire household, waiting to give their blessings on the expedition. Sara was already in tears when Lauren reached her.

“I don’t know what to say, Sara. I can’t find the words to thank you for... for being a friend.”

“Shush. You’re family now, no matter what happens. You are always welcome here, Lauren. Remember that.”

Lauren hugged Sara and Kenneth and hoisted herself onto Bell. “At the very least, I have to return Bell to you.”

“That’s right honey,” said Sara, wiping her tears. “I’ll see you again. You take care of my Bell.”

Kas introduced Jaimes and Cullen to Lauren, and she acknowledged them formally, addressing each as ‘Sir,’ which did seem to please them enormously. Jaimes headed the column and Cullen brought up the rear. Kas and Senn rode side by side, and Lauren rode with Hunter and Palin. Each horse carried bundles of supplies.

Lauren’s heart sank as they wound their way along the riverside towards the lovely arching Nor Bridge. She turned to take in the villa, for perhaps the last time. Senn turned as well and waved to his Aunt and Uncle.

Kas didn’t look back. Hunter broke away from Palin and Lauren to catch up to Kas.

“I think we should take the Nor Road when we reach the split, stay in the open,” Hunter suggested nervously.

“I’d normally agree, Hunter, but we have a little side trip to make first.”

“Kas,” Hunter went on, “begging your pardon, but you can’t be meaning to go into the forest?”

Hunter and Senn waited, but Kas offered nothing more.

Hunter wouldn’t leave it be. “The stories, you and I know they’re true, now, don’t we? She’s there and she’ll kill us, Kas. You can’t mean to take the girl there?”

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“Leave it, Hunter. I know what I’m doing.” Kas wiped sweat from his brow and urged Catcher to pick up the pace.

They hugged the river for a mile, then took a pass to the right at the split, moving Northeast. The woods became thicker and soon Lauren had to pull a cloak around her shoulders, feeling a chill. The forest was quiet. No bird calls, no rustling in the underbrush. Hunter returned to Lauren’s side and she looked at him in concern.

“Hunter? What is this place? It feels wrong somehow.”

“It *is* wrong, my dear” he said in a hushed tone, “This is Anan-kai, the Forest of the Maiden.”

“Go on, Hunter, please.”

“It’s not for me to tell. It’s the history of the Anfallen royal family. I’m not even sure how much of it is true.” He took in a deep breath and said in a louder voice, “But there’s one here who knows the full story of Anan-kai, I’m sure.”

“Go ahead, Hunter, tell your tale,” Kas called back.

Hunter sat upright. Lauren thought he looked inordinately pleased with himself. She caught Senn and Kas exchanging a smile.

“I can’t *stand* this story,” Cullen said.

“Oh you’re a bloody baby, Cullen,” Jaimes spit.

Lauren laughed, thinking only his brother could get away with calling the magnificent warrior a baby.

“Ahem,” Hunter cleared his throat for silence. “Many centuries ago, the King of Anfall fell in love with a girl, a great adept. We call her a witch because, well, why do we call her a witch, Kas?”

“It’s not an insult, Hunter. We distinguish between the old magic and the newer gifts. Witches and wizards could do all manner of things now lost to Anfall. We only have a few gifts now, and not many of us wield them. We call the adepts of ancient times witches and wizards out of honor.”

Hunter nodded. “That’s right, miss. There’s the difference. This witch did not love our old King in return. Her name was Alyssa.

“Well, the King became obsessed with the beautiful witch, trying to force her into a match by using his own powerful magic. He would be a wizard then, right Kas, and not simply an adept, so to speak?”

“Tell the story, Hunter,” Senn laughed.

“Well, Alyssa was too strong willed to be forced into any situation like that. And besides, she had the help of the man she loved. His name was Kasmárin and he was the King’s youngest brother.” He paused for dramatic effect and looked at Lauren, who was hanging on his every word.

“Another Kasmárin?”

“Our Kas looks like Alyssa’s lover, right Hunter?” Palin asked.

Kas groaned and shook his head. “No more than you look like the ancient Prince of the West, for whom you are named. It doesn’t work that way.”

“Well, let’s say we don’t know one way or the other, shall we?” Hunter said impatiently. “In any case, Alyssa and Kasmárin ran off together. It’s said that they never, well, begging your pardon, Lauren, did the um, lovemaking, so to speak. She was young and wanted a marriage before the event, so they went in search of a home and the proper time. That’s why she’s called the Maiden, if you get my drift.”

“Yes, Hunter. She was a virgin—I get your drift.” Lauren laughed.

“The King was furious that his brother stole Alyssa away from him. He fell into a dark bitter state with thoughts only of revenge. His reign turned evil. He stole women and land, depleted the royal coffers and even killed some of his loyal servants and subjects. Others fled South. But of course none of this helped him forget the girl and he went after the couple. Legend says that they settled in this here forest, where a great battle ensued between the three—the King against Alyssa and Kasmárin. The King won the battle, killing Kasmárin. But he couldn’t force Alyssa to love him and he cursed her to an endless life of solitude.” Hunter looked around at the bleak woods. He brought his voice to a dramatic whisper. “And it is said that to this day, the Maiden lives in these woods, alone, grieving for her lost love, consumed with hate for the King.” He finished with a sweeping gesture of his hand, immensely satisfied with his presentation.

“That was well done, Hunter,” Lauren said after a bit. “You had me believing it.” She tried to shake off the shivers Hunter’s story had sent through her body.

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“That’s not all, Lauren,” said Palin. “The wizard returned to Anfall, where a third brother had taken over the crown in his absence. That third brother, Sennsárin, drove the mad wizard out of Anfall. The madman settled north of here, in Talinthal. His name is Teren, and he still lives at Talinthal Keep. And he is more evil than in ancient days. We have fought him. We have seen him with our own eyes, Lauren. Hunter didn’t make it up.”

Senn took up the tale of his namesake. “The House of Anfall as we know it now is descended from that third brother, Sennsárin. We’ve struggled to retain the Land against Teren for all the time since. Teren has the ability to shape others’ ideas and use them for his purposes. He has recruited many adepts and has a large army.”

“He killed Hawk,” Kas added in a low tone.

“Your brother Hawk!” Lauren gasped.

“Hawthorne could have been of the brotherhood,” Cullen boasted. “He was fearless in battle, slicing through Teren’s men as I’ve never seen another warrior do. He died riding after the zombie who took your brother. He could have pulled back with the rest of us, but he didn’t.”

“Why didn’t you tell me this before! Kas? I’m sorry. Oh Kas, Senn, I’m so very sorry.”

“Lauren, it’s not your fault.” Senn approached her. “It’s not Tim’s fault. We knew you would take it this way, so we didn’t talk about it. Hawk died as he lived, bravely. He chose his time and the Spirit accepted him—he’s joined our father and his father in their great house. Don’t feel sad for him. Look at me. Do you understand?”

“Yes, I understand, only too well. The rest of your family—your mother and Jenna—are they all right?”

“It’s harder on them. Well, maybe it seems harder, I don’t know. Anfallen men are a little hesitant to show grief.”

“I thought you said Hawk and Tim didn’t get along well, didn’t you?” Senn nodded. “Then why of all people would Hawk be the one to go after Tim?”

“Tim was Anfallen, family.” Kas said. “He still is.”

“So you’ve already lost a brother because of Tim and now you’re risking your own lives for him.”

“It was part of a bargain, Lauren. Or have you forgotten?” Kas seemed angry.

“You can’t mean to tell me that you would risk these men to save my brother so I’d marry Luke.”

“No, you’re right. I want to save Tim. And I want to kill Teren.” It was the first time Kas announced aloud his intention to slay the wizard.

Lauren nodded in satisfaction but then realized that it didn’t change anything. They were all going into danger and Kas still wanted her to marry Luke.

“And is Alyssa still alive? Is that part of the story true?” Palin asked, trying to shift the subject.

Hunter replied, “I have the feeling Kas intends to find out. No one has survived to tell that they’ve seen her. It’s said that Alyssa turned mad in her grief and destroys anyone who approaches her.”

A chill ran down Lauren’s spine. A mad witch and an evil wizard stood between Kas and Tim. And Kas intended to defeat them—for her? For Luke? God, please don’t let Tim suffer, she prayed. Perhaps he would be better off dead. Perhaps they should turn to Anfall.

They rode deeper into the woods and at noon broke for lunch near a small stream. Despite the hour, it looked like dusk.

“Senn.” Kas motioned to his brother and Senn shifted and disappeared into the forest. Jaimes and Cullen kept guard, scanning the trees, arrows ready.

Lauren became anxious for Senn, but he returned intact after what seemed an eternity.

He plopped down next to her and she petted him.

“That’s not a cat, you know?” said Cullen. “I mean, you’re petting Senn.”

Lauren laughed. “I know, Cullen. I’m used to it now. We’re good friends, this cat and I.” She caught something flash in Kas’s eyes—jealousy? Her heart rushed with hope for a moment. Then she turned away, cutting off her feelings and his gaze. Senn stood up to his full human height and approached Kas.

“We’re okay. Nothing at all—unless there’s a spell I’m unable to pick up. The place does give me the creeps, though Kas. Way too quiet.”

“I feel magic nearby, but nothing threatening.”

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The air suddenly grew cooler and Lauren felt lightheaded and slightly nauseous. “Hunter, is this witch responsible for how... ” she struggled to find the right words, “for how *diseased* this forest seems?”

“Well, it gives me the creeps a little, Lauren, but I wouldn’t call it diseased.”

“I would,” said Palin.

Senn nodded. “Only the gifted can feel it. Hunter doesn’t. The magic is twisted here. I think it has to do with the battle fought in these parts.”

“No,” Kas corrected. “It’s the spell Teren cast upon the Maiden and the whole of Anan-kai. Everyone with gifts can feel it. Teren’s spell of loneliness.”

“As if you need a spell for that,” Lauren mumbled.

Kas looked at her and she held his gaze.

“Can’t you undo Teren’s spell, highness?” She made a wiggling motion with her fingers. “Fill the forest with joy and love?”

Senn gave her a warning glance and Palin whispered, “Teren is very strong, Lauren. Kas has tried to break him before. It is not his fault.”

“Oh, well...” Lauren said, chagrined, “I wasn’t trying to insult him.” Now, she felt terrible. *You told Kas that you held him blameless for not wanting you, Lauren. You were insulting him, on purpose. And he’s risking his life to save your brother.*

They mounted and resumed their journey slowly. The woods grew colder still, and a light breeze stirred the leaves around the horses’ feet.

Jaimes suddenly cried out as his horse reared up.

A hideous apparition, a skeleton dripping rotted flesh and blood, shimmered before them. Lauren reacted first, drawing her bow and aiming an arrow at the skeleton.

It passed right through the ghost.

Kas yelled, “Lauren, no! Stop.”

She watched in horror as the bloody apparition approached Kas.

“Turn back, Anfallen,” the skeleton hissed. “You are not welcome here.”

“Please tell the Maiden that we mean her no harm,” he bowed his head. “I must speak with her and will not leave Anan-kai.”

“She will see you dead before you lay eyes on her. My form is your fate. I sought to pass through Anan-kai as well,” he laughed and let out a horrible, screeching wail.

“Nevertheless, I shall see her. Teren holds one of our own and I mean to retrieve him. And destroy Teren in the process.”

The apparition hesitated. “I will convey your intention, Prince. You are wasting your time and will die for your efforts. But the Maiden will decide.”

He was gone.

“We’ll break here,” Kas announced.

Lauren pulled alongside Kas.

“Break? Turn back, you mean! Kas, this isn’t right, there aren’t enough of us. This witch will kill us and if she doesn’t, Teren certainly will. Senn was right, we should go to Anfall and get more help. I was wrong, I didn’t realize. I’m sorry. Please don’t put everyone in danger.”

She tugged at his arm and made him look at her.

“Lauren,” he sighed. “I know you don’t have a single reason to trust me. But I know that we will survive Anan-kai. I have seen it. Past that, I’m not sure. We’re destined for Talinthall, you and I. That destiny has pulled at me since the moment we met.”

He took her hand in both of his. “I am sorry, for everything, Lauren. You deserve better. But I will make it up to you, or die trying. We will find Tim, and I will see you safely installed at Anfall.”

*“And if I don’t want to go to Anfall, Kas, what then?”* She sent out the thought, not wanting the others to hear. He looked taken aback.

*“You’re quite powerful now, Lauren. I won’t force you to marry Luke. That has to be your decision.”*

*“The man I want doesn’t want me. His brother can’t have me. It’s very simple.”*

*“I’ll respect your wishes, Lauren. Please respect my guidance—I know how to get to Tim.”*

Lauren abruptly broke off contact, nodded and rode back to her place with Hunter and Palin.

Senn put his hand on Kas’s back. “What was that about?”

“Fuck!” He spat and cursed again under his breath. “I don’t know what to do about her, Senn. She claims she’ll never marry Luke. I’ve failed. I could cast and make

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her love him, but that would make me no better than Teren.” He sighed and rubbed his forehead. “At least I won’t have to watch the woman I love marry my brother...”

“Excuse me?” Senn laughed. “The woman you *love*? Oh, that was a bit of a slip!”

Kas looked at him in horror. “Shut up, Senn, that’s not what I meant!”

“You know something, Kas? Every time someone tells me to shut up, it’s because I’ve hit the nail on the head. This time is no different.” Senn said, with a smirk.

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Lauren came back from washing in a stream close by, stunned to see all the men, except for Hunter, holding hands in a circle around a small fire. The sight brought stories of covens in the woods to mind and Lauren felt incredible power radiating from them.

*“Join us.”*

Kas extended his hand and Lauren took her place between him and Jaimes.

*“No questions. Feel.”*

She focused and felt the spell Kas cast. Protection—each would feel a break in the circle if an enemy attacked during the night. Energy coursed from Kas’s hand into her body and Jaimes pulled it from her. It circled the group again and again, building force with each loop. Lauren heard the faint sound of singing, an ancient tune, not unlike the one that brought her to Anfall. But none of this group was singing. When Kas broke the cycle, they stood in silence for a moment, needing to rebalance from the intense energy.

Kas looked at Lauren and spoke softly. “You and Palin are to make sure Hunter is taken care of if our circle is attacked.”

“Sure you can handle that, dear?” Hunter laughed. “I guess after that display with your bow, you can take care of an old man.”

“Yeah, that helped a lot, Hunter. Count on me to shoot through ghosts. And you know darned well you don’t need any help from us.”

“You are generous, Lauren.”

Lauren stood and began unpacking provisions to create a meal for the group.

They watched in rapt anticipation.

“Don’t expect me to cook for you the whole way, boys. I’m simply not in the mood for dried pork tonight after Sara’s wonderful meals,” she lied.



She wanted to contribute in a little way, feeling responsible for this dangerous mission. A pot simmered over the fire in no time, filled with wild rice, smoked fowl, mushrooms, and precious spices.

“Leave it to Sara to pack entire meals.”

The men turned towards readying their horses for the night but asked repeatedly if dinner was ready.

They finally rewarded Lauren with groans of satisfaction as they quickly drained their bowls.

“Okay, the cook doesn’t have to clean up,” announced Senn, handing his bowl to Palin.

“Hey, that’s not fair. I always get the dirty work,” Palin complained.

“We were all the youngest once,” laughed Hunter. “Come on, I’ll help you carry these to the stream.”

Lauren noticed that Cullen followed behind to keep an eye on the old man and the young adept.

“Well, milady, Luke will be happy that his new bride is not only beautiful, but she can cook,” Jaimes bowed gallantly.

Lauren failed to look pleased and Jaimes raised his brows in puzzlement.

Senn rescued her. “It’s all a bit new to Lauren, Jaimes. This being engaged to a king business.”

Lauren turned as she heard what had to be Kas, returning to camp. She tried hard not to stare at him as he came into the circle of light cast by the flickering fire.

Stripped to the waist, skin still gleaming with moisture from the stream, his arm muscles taut as he dried his face and rung out his wet hair. Kas glanced briefly at Lauren as he moved closer to the fire to finish drying off, running his fingers through his hair. His pendant sparkled in the firelight against his bare chest. Lauren turned away from him, reaching into her pocket to wrap her fingers around the enchanted emerald necklace.

The very sight of him hurt.

It’s no use, she thought. I can’t even pretend not to want him.

Senn sat near her and put both his arms around her, nuzzling his nose in her hair.

“Thanks for not saying the obvious again, Senn.”

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“You bet, sister.” He kissed her forehead.

“Time to talk,” said Kas aloud. But Lauren heard the thought and felt the flash of jealousy underneath directed her way. *“You’re mine.”*

Senn didn’t catch the words but he felt Kas’s anger and pulled away from Lauren.

Lauren watched Kas fasten his cloak around his bare shoulders, paying no attention to her or anyone else. *I imagined it. I’m hearing what I want to hear.* She took a spot across from Kas. Senn sat to her one side, Palin to the other.

Lauren studied Cullen and Jaimes curiously as they held hands. She leaned in close to Senn and whispered for an explanation.

“It’s common for Anfallen brothers to be physical. And these brothers are very, very close, like Kas and I. Well, you’re a twin, you must understand?”

Lauren nodded uncertainly. A vision of Kas and Senn brushed past her consciousness and she flushed.

“Interested in brothers, then, Lauren? I’m not sure Jaimes and Cullen would accommodate, given you’re betrothed to their lord, but if it’s brothers you’re looking for...” He looked away innocently.

Lauren punched him on the arm, the color in her face intensifying. Senn had spoken loudly enough for everyone to hear.

Kas glared at him, annoyed. *No, he’s furious.*

*“You’re mine!”*

Again. Lauren hadn’t imagined it! Senn moved further away, and Lauren wondered if he had heard it too.

“It’s time to discuss what will happen in the next days. At least, what I believe will happen,” Kas began, gazing into the fire. “You’ve guessed that I intend to find Alyssa. She’s essential to this plan. If she consents and I’m counting on her hatred of the wizard to ensure that she does, she’ll create a diversion, allowing us to rescue Tim. If we draw Teren away from Talinthal, we’ll have a chance. That will leave us with several dozen guards.”

“The main army is to the East, raiding on Melsor’s lands. The keep is charmed and I’m sure I’ll have to break spells to allow us inside. No doubt most of the guards are adepts.” Kas looked from comrade to comrade, making eye contact with each. He looked back into the fire.

“You will need all your gifts, and more. This is for Tim but this is also for Anfall.” He looked up again. “We have a chance to destroy Teren as well, or at least diminish his power. He relies upon the *Anthla-ma*, the Anfall scepter of ancient Kasmárin, and Drummond of Anfall before him, to channel and to distort other’s gifts. Without this scepter, he is weaker than me, weaker even than Senn. This scepter was in our family from the beginning of time, until Teren was driven out. I intend to take it back.”

Kas drew shapes in the dirt and they knew he it was a plan of Talinthal. He marked X’s in the soil and circled one room.

“These,” he indicated the X’s, “are Teren’s guards. And this,” he looked at Lauren, “is where Teren holds Tim.”

Then he drew more X’s in the areas surrounding the keep. “There are scouts everywhere in the Talinthal forest.”

“How do you plan to get the scepter?” Senn asked.

“When Teren realizes Alyssa has deceived him, he will return to Talinthal to find his guards dead, his keep unguarded and his captive gone. I will be the only one he finds.”

“No!” cried Lauren. “You can’t face him alone like that, even if we get that far.”

“He won’t be alone,” said Senn, shaking his head.

“No, he won’t,” added Jaimes.

“Aye,” said Cullen.

Kas shut his eyes, praying the others would survive his plan. He had known they would refuse to leave him.

“Palin and Hunter will take Tim on to Anfall.”

Palin started to object but Kas held up his hand. “You must be kept out of danger. You’re essential to the survival of Anfall, Palin. I know that’s hard for you to understand right now. Hunter, you must be with me on this.”

“As you say, my Prince,” he swore, understanding that Kas was seeing the future.

“As we draw closer, we will discuss the details of our attack on Talinthal. But we have to see the Maiden first.”

“May the Spirit help us,” Hunter closed his eyes and prayed solemnly.

“We will need the Spirit greatly in the coming days, Hunter.” Kas looked at Lauren intently. “And we will need one another.”

CHAPTER NINE

Kas glanced at Lauren, who tossed and turned on the bumpy ground and pulled her thin cloak tightly around her shoulders to keep out the night chill. He wanted to comfort her but no longer trusted himself to get close to her. Occasionally he felt her tentative probe as she called to him, either knowingly or in a dream state. *Put her aside. This challenge is far too important for silly distractions.* And that's what Lauren is, he thought. A silly distraction—not his love, not even his lover. He groaned at the thought of being her lover. The night in Tansing, her fantasy, his fantasy—they burned through him every waking moment. He felt the intense throbbing begin as he pictured her naked beneath him, caressing his sex, attacking his mouth, begging him to fill her, again and again...

"Brother, you're lighting up the sky. We're all trying to sleep."

Senn tapped him on the shoulder and pointed through the trees.

Green and violet mists glowed overhead and little stars exploded and twinkled.

He cursed and pulled his cloak over his head.

The lights disappeared.

Senn smiled and sat near his brother.

"Stop it, Senn," Kas mumbled from beneath his cloak.

"Stop what? Just on guard duty. I'm guarding."

"You're trying to read my mind and it's pathetic."

"It certainly is." Senn snickered.

Kas turned quickly and glared at him with such power that it sent Senn falling back to the ground.

"Ow! That was pretty nasty."

Senn sat up, brushing leaves and twigs off his shoulders. "Since you're awake, I'd like to ask you a question."

"Mnnn. How unusual."

"I was thinking about Lauren... about how she doesn't want Luke and *you* don't want her..."

Kas sat upright and regarded Senn curiously.

"Go on." His voice was dark.

Senn took in a deep breath. “Well, you’ve seen how well she and I get on. Sometimes I get the feeling she’s rather *fond* of me, in a *special* way. What do you think? A good match? I certainly love the look of her.”

“You’re *not* serious. Oh, I get it. Forget it, I’m not biting. Go ahead, then, have her for yourself.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“Yes, bloody well do that,” Kas sneered at Senn’s back as he shimmered into his beloved cat form. “And I’ll kill you” he added softly.

Senn sauntered over to Lauren, settling down next to her legs.

Lauren woke to the luxurious feeling of being held warmly in the arms of a strong man. Still dreaming, she thought, shifting her weight to press more closely against him. Then she felt the undeniable proof that the man was very aware of her and that hard proof was pressing into her back. Lauren rolled quickly to find herself eye to eye with Senn.

“It’s not what you think, Lauren, I promise.” Senn’s eyes twinkled mischievously. “Well, part of me has a mind of its own—sorry about that. But I’m working for the greater good of Anfall, honestly.” He gave her a sudden little kiss on the cheek, looking past her.

Lauren blushed furiously. “I can’t imagine what you’re doing, Senn. If this is your idea of a good time, taking advantage of a sleeping woman...”

“Oh, it was enjoyable, that’s true. But it’s about to get very, very painful.” Senn closed his eyes. “Hang on to your hat. Four, three, two...”

Kas practically lifted Senn off the ground with one arm. “You son of a bitch, what do you think you’re doing!”

“I thought we discussed this last night, Kas. If you don’t want her...”

“Do you want him, Lauren?”

She saw pain in Kas’s eyes and the raw fury in his rasping voice. He didn’t wait for her answer but turned back to Senn.

“If you ever touch her again, I swear I’ll kill you.”

“And why shouldn’t I, Kas? She’s not marrying Luke...”

Lauren stood and put her hands on her hips. “How dare you, both of you! I’m not a damned mail-order bride. You can’t exchange me or give me away!”

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Kas exploded with a voice that stirred the leaves on the trees, sparks of anger flickering around him. “She’s *mine*, you son of a bitch.”

He didn’t use magic. Just a well placed right hook. Senn hit the ground with a thud, out cold.

Hunter cursed and ran to Senn, trying to slap him awake as Kas stormed off into the woods.

Lauren stood in shock with the rest of the party, who looked from her to Senn in amazement.

Palin finally spoke.

“Hey, well, this is hmnn...”

“Oh, shut up Palin.”

Lauren ran after Kas, calling his name. She caught up with him on the bank of the stream and she stumbled down to his side, nearly crashing into him.

“Kas.”

He didn’t turn to her, but stood like a statue, frozen in mid-stride.

“Kas, look at me, please.”

He didn’t turn. “Tell me you didn’t invite Senn to bed you, Lauren. I’ll leave you alone, if you tell me that. He would never force himself on a woman. Did you invite him?” Kas clenched his fists.

Lauren moved closer and touched his arm.

The contact nearly slammed her backwards to the ground and she pulled away.

He pulsed with energy. “Don’t touch me again, Lauren. Not unless you want me to touch you back. And if I do that, you won’t forget it.” His voice was a growl.

“Is that a threat...”

“Or a promise? You decide.”

Lauren’s heart skipped a beat. Her heart pounded furiously in her chest. *Oh, God, help me. What should I do?* Turn away from him, complete the mission, ignore the man she desired more than air, more than food and water. Her need was crushing.

She could barely get the words out. “There’s no one for me but you. And you know it. It’s really cruel that you’re making me tell you again. You don’t want me but you don’t want anyone else to have me. Is that it, Kas? Please look at me.”

Kas turned suddenly and Lauren stepped back at what she saw. His blue eyes flashed with gold and smoldered with anger and lust. He clenched his teeth so tightly his jaw muscle twitched. Lauren saw the pulse in his neck.

“That’s right.”

Kas moved in and grabbed Lauren’s wrists so tightly she cried out. “I don’t want another fucking soul to lay his hands on you.” He pulled her into his chest and tilted her chin up, staring at her lips. “And I don’t want you.”

He crushed her mouth with his and Lauren’s world spun away in a dizzy swirl of stars and fireworks. Heat rushed through her entire body and every one of his thoughts, every bit of his desire, flooded into her consciousness. Lauren’s legs started to give out as he plunged into her mouth with his tongue, bit on her lips, sucked on her tongue. He tasted of sweet dark spices and wild honey and magic. His scent enveloped her soul. Lauren clutched at his braids and he held her head with both hands, devouring her completely, kissing her cheeks, her eyes, her ears. Tears of relief, fear, and joy trickled down her cheeks.

Lauren felt heat build between her legs and the ache in her heart spread to make her pulse and push against his hard sex. She reached to caress his cheeks and ears, stroking them in rhythm with his kisses. Kas moaned lowly and pulled her tighter, pressing himself against her. He began hot whispers that scorched her.

*“Sai na lathagapamou. Neisen nor alanforien, Lauren.”*

“What...Kas...”

Kas pulled back gasping and looked into her eyes. “May the Spirit forgive me. May all of Anfall forgive me.” He picked her up in his arms and kissed her fiercely as he carried her up the bank of the stream, gently laying her on a patch of soft moss. Kas leaned in over her, his eyes clouded in lust. “Say it again,” he hissed. “Tell me you’re mine. Tell me how much you want me. Say it, Lauren.”

He pressed his lips on hers as he repeated his words in the ancient tongue.

Lauren struggled to get the words out, not willing to give up his lips. Her hands dug into his back and pulled on his silken hair. He kissed and bit her neck and ears and she moaned his name aloud, not understanding the words that followed her cry. Lauren heard her voice as if from far away.

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“*De moi sagapathomoi. Fe-na mortanuatheiren.* Kas, help me. I can’t...” She heard his intake of breath and saw a tear trace a crooked path down his cheek. “What’s going on?”

“Magic, Lauren. You are magic. You pledged your undying love for me in the ancient tongue. The Spirit speaks for you. I’ll have you, utterly. And I’ll fucking have you now, my dear.”

Kas’s eyes opened wide in surprise and ecstasy as she reached her hand into his pants to rub him. “Lauren, you’re killing me...” Kas panted as he ripped her dress from her shoulders, exposing her breasts to the morning air. He stared at her beauty and brought both hands onto her breasts, cupping their fullness and pinching her dark nipples. “How does that feel, Lauren? Tell me, damn it.” Lauren squirmed and arched beneath his calloused fingers as darts of electricity surged to her wet folds. Before she could answer, he lowered his head to her mouth and brushed her lips, then quickly moved them to suck on one breast as he squeezed the other.

“Oh my God, Kas! Please stop. I can’t...” Lauren thought she might explode from the heat. He unbuttoned his pants and freed himself to her caresses. Lauren took in a quick breath at the amazing sight of him—huge, hard, glistening wetness escaping from the tip. She moved her hand in a hard rhythm and Kas cried out.

“Stop Lauren. It will be over soon if you don’t stop. Oh by the Spirit, don’t...” Lauren rolled on top of him and brushed her breasts against his mouth before sliding down the length of his torso. She ran her hands under his shirt and brought his sex into her mouth, licking the moisture off the tip, rubbing it back and forth across her lips. She looked up tentatively into his eyes. He stared at her in bliss.

“I’ve not done this before Kas. Tell me if it’s wrong.”

“Oh, I wish you wouldn’t have told me that!” Kas fell back to the ground as she sucked and rubbed. He grabbed her head and pushed himself into her mouth slightly. “I’m going to...”

“Yes, I want you to. Please, Kas, let go for me,” she said, and he cried out and thrust in and out of her lips as she sucked the hot liquid. Kas shook and sparks flew from his body, setting the air around them shimmering in silver light.



He caught his breath finally and pushed her to the ground, where he held her tightly to his chest and rocked back and forth. “Lauren...” She looked at him nervously and he laughed. “What’s that look for?”

“Was that okay? I’m not quite sure what...”

“Shhh.” Kas silenced her with a deep kiss that started the heat all over again. “Bloody hell, I can taste it in your mouth. It makes me feel...I never... You can’t possibly need me to tell you how fantastic that was... Lauren, it hasn’t been like that since I was fifteen.” He laughed lightly and kissed her again.

“Oh. I don’t have anything to compare it with.”

Kas pushed her away and looked into her eyes, and she turned away from his burning gaze. “Woman, don’t try to fool me. I’m the Adept, remember? It’s okay, everyone has a past.”

“Not everyone, Kas.” Lauren shook a little in his embrace and felt his hold tighten a bit. *Now he won’t want me. I can’t possibly give him what he needs. I don’t know what, how...*

Kas shook slightly and Lauren realized her thoughts may as well be screamed from a mountain top. She felt his shake increase and turned back to look at him. He was laughing!

“I’m sorry! It’s too funny, too beautiful!” His eyes literally twinkled with gold light.

“I’m glad you think it’s funny. It hasn’t been much fun for me, damn it.” Lauren felt a stab of pain cut through her gut and the tears threaten to pour onto his brown chest and golden hair.

“You’ve never felt *this* before?” Kas’s eyes closed to near slits and a smirk crossed his lips as he brought his hand under her dress and pushed the bit of silk lace aside. She gasped as his thumb circled and dipped into the wetness pouring from her folds. “Well, have you felt it?”

“Yes.”

“I suppose that would be a bit much to expect,” he laughed lightly as he continued his sweet torture. Lauren arched and moved under his hand and moaned he pushed two fingers inside.

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“But...just from myself...not anyone...” she moaned again, forgetting her embarrassment, shocked by the incredible sensations pouring through her body.

“Oh! That’s even better! I’d give anything to see that. Will you do that for me? Will you?”

“ess..”

Kas laughed and ripped her dress completely to the seam, exposing her entire body. “Bloody hell. I never imagined. Well, I imagined, but...” he shook his head. “You’re the most beautiful woman I’ve ever seen.” He ripped off her silken underwear and without any indication of what he would do, brought his mouth quickly onto her mound. Lauren screamed out as his hot tongue lapped at her, circled her, darted in and out of her. His rhythmic caresses finally made her world crumble away in tiny magical lights. She groaned his name when he brought his mouth onto hers and she tasted herself on his lips. Kas pulled her into his arms and whispered words she couldn’t understand, didn’t need to. *He wants me. For now, at least.*

“Kas, don’t you want to, you know? Have sex?”

“Probably more than I want to eat or drink or breathe or walk. Yes. But not here, not now. It will be the first?” Lauren nodded and he squeezed his eyes shut. “It must be perfect for you. For me. I’ll make it perfect.” He kissed her forehead.

“What if there isn’t a next time, Kas? What if the witch, or Teren...”

He put a finger to her lips. “I’ve seen beyond the coming days, Lauren. I believe we will survive to finish what we started here. May the Spirit help me, I pray so.”

They lay together in the weak sunlight for minutes in silence.

“I guess I have a lot of explaining to do to the King,” Kas sighed. “Fortunately, he’s a fairly good sport. At least I hope he is. Because he’ll never have you. No other man will have you, ever. Understand?”

While it wasn’t a declaration of undying love, Lauren thought it was a start.

“An evil wizard captured my brother, we’re looking for a mad witch, and I’m alone in another realm. But I almost feel happy.”

Kas smiled. “Good. You should be.”

Lauren laughed at his ego, but realized this wasn’t the time to goad him. What a bind with his family—*would Luke be okay?*

Kas helped her up from the ground, pulling twigs and leaves from her hair. He held her for a moment and then helped her wrap her cloak around her torn dress. He grabbed her hand and led her back to the camp. *He's treating me like a child, like his possession.* And she smiled, realizing she liked the feeling. Kas suddenly stopped.

"Senn tricked me?"

Lauren nodded.

"Well, then, he deserved the punch."

Senn laughed out loud as the couple approached. He held his sore jaw. "Well, well, well," he said, "this trip is getting more interesting all the time."

Kas and Lauren stopped as Palin clapped and Hunter laughed. James and Cullen looked shocked.

"Well, Kas," Senn smiled the best he could, "that was quite a fireworks display you just treated us to." Lauren looked at the ground and pulled her cloak tighter.

"Sorry, brother," Kas said and Senn slapped his brother on the back, harder than necessary.

"Boys," Hunter warned, laughing.

"All right, show's over. Pack it up." Kas tried to sound gruff, but his entire demeanor had changed.

"Whoa, whoa, *back it up*, you mean," said Cullen. "We've known you both since birth. *You*," he pointed to Senn, "don't sleep with your brother's women, although they may be the only ones you don't touch. Nor do *you*, Kasmárin. You realize that Luke won't be happy about marrying a girl who has been with two of his brothers?"

"No one has 'been with' me, Cullen," Lauren said, trying to control her embarrassment. "But you may as well know now that I'm not marrying the King."

"Well I would hope not," said James.

"I'll explain," Senn said, drawing the men aside.

"Good luck," laughed Hunter. He pulled at his beard in thought and approached Kas. "What will happen, Kas? I mean, I know Luke won't kill you but the family may not be very pleased to accept Lauren into the family this way."

"Into the family?" he asked.

"Well, when you marry her, I mean."

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“Marry her? Marry her?” He looked at Hunter as if he were speaking a foreign language, then wandered off to pack up his things.

Senn grabbed Lauren’s hand and squeezed it. “Hunter, Kas just realized he doesn’t dislike Lauren. Give him a day to realize he likes her and another to realize he’s in love with her. In about a week, he’ll want to marry her. My brother’s a bit dense where these things are concerned.”

“I don’t want to be around when this is all explained to Luke,” Hunter said.

“Don’t worry,” answered Senn. “It will probably be my job—it usually is.”

He gathered up his things, holding onto his swollen jaw.

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“We are closing in on her,” Kas whispered after some hours of riding.

At times he’d hear a warning: *Turn back, Prince of Anfall*. But he also heard something else in the voice—hope. The Maiden hoped he would have the courage to face her, to face Teren. He would feed her hopes. The forest became even bleaker as the day drew on, and the men surveyed their surroundings, touching their weapons for security.

Kas held up his hand and they halted.

“On foot from here.” He gestured to Senn and Palin.

“Me?” asked Palin.

“Yes, Palin. She asked for you.”

Palin looked terror-stricken. Lauren wanted to object, but she knew it was useless.

“The rest of you, stay together, no matter what. Do not leave this spot.”

Palin looked sick as he joined Senn and Kas. Cullen and Jaimes saw to their horses and the trio disappeared into the woods. Lauren wanted to cry out to Kas, hurt that he had no special goodbye for her. She sat by Hunter, who looked so alone without Palin at his side.

“Kas and Senn will take care of him, Hunter.”

“I know, dear, I know,” Hunter said quietly, “But who will take care of Kas and Senn?”

## CHAPTER TEN

The decaying corpse blocked their path. “This is your last chance, Prince.”

“*You* are our only chance, Maiden,” Kas replied.

A lovely young woman shimmered into clarity. She smiled and bowed her head in acknowledgement.

Palin took in a breath. “You are Alyssa? The Maiden? You’re young! And beautiful!”

The Maiden smiled at Palin, almost shyly. “I am very gratified to hear you say so, Prince Palin.”

“Oh, I’m not a prince, Maiden.”

Senn elbowed Kas, and they exchanged a glance.

Alyssa kept her gaze on Palin and barely acknowledged Kas and Senn. She looked younger than Palin, and Kas after actually seeing her, thought that the legends erred in a number of respects.

Alyssa’s long, straight chestnut brown hair was parted in the middle and hung in a shimmering waterfall to her waist. Her eyes were violet-blue and she wore a glistening gown that matched their color exactly. A gold torc encircled her neck. The hood of her cloak was pushed down around her shoulders.

Why, Kas thought, she’s simply lovely. The kind of girl that might wander along the stalls of a festival faire and not stand out, except for her simple beauty. *Neither mad nor evil.*

“Oh, Highness,” Alyssa curtsied very slightly at Kas, “I certainly hope I have not become mad but in my isolation, it is quite difficult to be sure.” She laughed lightly and dimples sprung to life around her sweet mouth.

Palin’s voice shook. “Lady? Is this the way you truly look? Or have you cast a spell to stay young?”

“I’m very ancient, Palin, but I have always looked like this. That is, since I attained eighteen years. Of course I looked quite different as a little girl.” She giggled again, sounding nearly like a child.

Senn looked stunned and began to speak to her, but she turned suddenly and walked down the path. They followed as she led them to a small grey stone house nestled

in the middle of a clearing. A grey mist swirled around it and the three men instantly felt the charm on the place. They entered the tiny building to find an enormous, nearly palatial interior. Senn ran his hand over exquisitely carved wooden tables and chairs, examined intricate tapestries that covered the walls.

“A thousand years provides time enough for many hobbies, Prince Sennsárin. I have used no magic to furnish my home. Well, except for the illusion of its size.”

Alyssa smiled again and gestured proudly to carvings decorating the ceiling and doors.

“Beautiful,” Senn observed. “Of course, our Kas is the true designer among us, but I think you quite outstrip him in this area, among others. Pardon me for saying so, Milady, but you don’t provoke much fear. Legend tells us of the Maiden who kills all entering Anan-kai uninvited.”

“They died because Anan-kai is poisoned and they could not survive its magic. I did not kill them. Another did. I did warn you that Anan-kai will kill you too.”

“We won’t stay long,” Kas said. “And you will protect us from harm.”

“Oh really, my great Prince? And why would I do that, if indeed I could?” Her smile disappeared and her tone and bearing made her suddenly imposing. *Remember, Kas, she’s a thousand years old, a powerful witch.*

“*Ha noi anthamoiranan, ha nai sennmalor, ha nas lathangoran,*” Kas intoned, his hands held to his forehead in a ritual gesture. “The slayer, the protector and the companion. At your service.” He bowed, deeply.

“What’s this, Kas?” asked Senn.

“The rest of the story. Kasmárin used his dying breathe to cast his own spell. It would one day bring three to her door who would provide his revenge.”

Alyssa brushed a single tear off her cheek.

“I’m one of the three?” Palin asked. “Am I the rescuer, or...”

Alyssa smiled at the young man and held her hand before his eyes.

He felt warmth envelop him and a vision filled all of his senses.

*He was grown, as tall and strong as Kas, a gifted warrior and adept. Kinsmen looked to him for wisdom, help, and protection. And by his side, his lovely wife, with long*

*hair and violet-blue eyes, tended the sick and created beauty everywhere she went. A child—a stunning boy, grew into the ruler of the north shore...*

Palin looked dizzy and held onto Kas's arm for support. Neither Kas nor Senn indicated they had shared the vision.

However, Kas patted the young man's arm.

"I get the general gist of things, Palin."

"Alyssa?" Palin's voice sounded distant, "I don't understand. Is this my dream, or your dream, or a foretelling?"

"It is your choice, Palin. No one will force you. You have time and several challenges to meet first in any case." She smiled. "You see, I have carried this vision with me for a long time, so it does not seem so odd to me. You are not a stranger, none of you are. Yes, Kasmárin, for a thousand years I've watched this clearing for you. Welcome."

Alyssa set to preparing refreshments for her visitors, brewing tea and slicing bread and cheese.

Palin never took his eyes off the Maiden.

"I suppose this means I'm the protector?" Senn snorted. "What a surprise."

"All right, then Prince Kasmárin," Alyssa placed her palms down on the table. "Shall we get right to it? Tell me your plan for rescuing your lover's brother. It must be a very, very good plan, or you certainly will die, all of you."

Kas nodded, solemnly. "It's very simple and you are the only one who can say whether or not it will work. You, Maiden, must draw Teren away from Talinthal. Then we'll be free to clear the keep of his guards. Teren's army is a fortnight away, at least last we knew, and we'll be long gone by then."

"Can you still call to him?" Senn asked.

Alyssa nodded. "The thought sickens me, but I can. He may see through the ruse."

"No, I don't think so," Kas said. "We fought Teren, as recently as six weeks ago. Madder than ever. His ego will be his undoing. The challenge will be to keep you safe when he answers your call."

"That is not the greatest concern."

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“Nevertheless, you will not leave Anan-kai, Alyssa. He cannot harm you here, correct? Then you will call to him, but you will make it appear as if you are somewhere outside Anan-kai. Is that possible?”

Alyssa looked thoughtful and slowly acknowledged that she understood how Kas’s plan would unfold. She stared at the table for a moment, and then closed her eyes, reaching out for Kas’s hand.

“I fear for you, Kasmárin. You mean to take back the Anthla-ma, the scepter of Anfall?”

“Yes.”

“And the woman, you understand you need her to accomplish this?” She looked at Kas and sent him an image of Lauren at Talinthal.

“Yes, I understand now that she’s fated to help destroy Teren, not to marry Luke.” Kas sighed. *If only I’d known that earlier, I would have saved her heartache.*

“You don’t look as if you know whether to be happy or sad about that, brother,” said Senn. “I thought you might lose her to Luke, but not to Teren. I’m afraid for her Kas; she’s simply not powerful enough to face him.”

“Lauren’s destiny is Anfall, not Luke. I can’t change that.”

Alyssa stood and the men rose. “Yes, Lauren is for Anfall. And I will do what I can to ensure the safety of your kinsmen.” She moved to Kas and put her hand on his chest, over his heart. “But you are wrong about one thing. This woman *will* marry the King.”

Kas stood in shocked silence. A knife cut into his stomach and his heart ached in a way he hadn’t thought possible. *She’ll marry Luke? She doesn’t really love me? Or...am I to die in this battle?*

“Bloody hell! Begging your pardon, Maiden.” She nodded to Senn.

“Are you sure? Lauren and Kas, well, they’re obviously in love, although he’s not convinced of it yet.”

“Quite sure, Sennsárin.”

Kas held up his hand as his heart raced, desperately trying to change the subject before he lost hold of his emotions in front of the others. “Maiden, you agree to travel with us to the border between Anan-kai and Talinthal?”



“Yes, the closer I move to Teren, the more aware of my presence he will be. Give me tonight to gather my strength, to spend a night in the house that has been my refuge for a thousand years.”

“We’ll leave you alone, then, and see you at first light.” The three bowed and headed towards camp.

Palin looked back, but Alyssa had shut the door.

Senn put his arm around the young man. “She showed you a future and she’s in it? Already made up your mind, haven’t you, Palin?”

“Oh, yes, I have.”

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Lauren kicked at pebbles in the dirt, Hunter paced, and Cullen and Jaimes surveyed the woods.

“Hello!” Cullen cried out. “All three, back in one piece!”

Lauren turned quickly, forcing herself not to jump into Kas’s arms. She let out a sigh of relief.

“Well, Kas, alive and well it seems! The witch, is she real?” Hunter asked.

“She’s very real, very powerful, and ready to destroy Teren.” Kas answered.

“She made no attempts to harm you?” asked Cullen. “Is she a horrid hag?”

“She’s the loveliest woman ever,” announced Palin proudly. He suddenly looked sheepish at his own pronouncement.

“What spell did she cast on the boy?” Hunter seemed concerned.

“Oh, the usual one women cast on men, Hunter.” Senn laughed. “She put it in his head that he loves her.” He snapped his fingers. “Done!”

Kas described their visit to the Maiden in detail as the others listened in amazement. At one point Lauren interrupted Kas. “Does Alyssa know anything about Tim?”

Kas barely looked at Lauren. “Only that he is at Talinthal. Or at least, that’s all she mentioned. We can discuss more of this tomorrow. Everyone get some sleep.”

Lauren looked at Kas but he turned his back to her as he made preparations to turn in for the night. *What’s wrong? Has he forgotten me?* Her heart caught in her throat. She

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had sworn her love for him openly, literally laying herself bare before him, opened her soul. And he couldn't look at her? It can't be, she thought, tears welling up.

She tried to put Kas out of her mind long enough to pray for Tim's wellbeing. But before she could finish her prayers for her brother's safety and Kas's love, deep sleep overwhelmed her.

Kas gazed up at the little bit of sky clear through the trees. His light spell lulled his friends quickly into a deep slumber. Emotions and thoughts were too high, and sleep was the only healing he could offer.

Kas spent the full night planning his attack on Teren.

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In the morning, the Prince's entourage made its way back to the clearing where Alyssa's house had been.

"I don't understand, Kas," said Palin. "This is the spot, there's no doubt."

"You are right," Alyssa answered. She stood at the edge of the clearing, holding a small satchel. The group dismounted and bowed to her.

"All these greetings in the space of two days! A veritable crowd after decades alone!"

Lauren approached the Maiden and curtsied. "I am Lauren Emory and I'm thrilled to have the company of another woman."

"As am I, Lauren. I think you have had great grief and loneliness in your life as well? Well, we will talk of these things and more, woman to woman," she nodded towards the men.

"Oh, I'm not sure I like the way this is shaping up," Senn whispered to Kas.

"They aren't conspiring against us, Senn."

"Not yet, they aren't. I don't understand how a man five years older than me can know so little about women."

"Alyssa," Kas approached her, "would you like a horse of your own, or would you prefer to ride with one of us?"

"Oh, of course, I did not prepare properly! I ride superbly." She spoke to Kas but had a charming smile for Palin, who stared at her in constant awe.

Kas walked toward the woods and grabbed the reins of an invisible horse, pulling it into the sunlight, where it took form.

“Perfect, thank you,” Alyssa nodded.

Palin was at her side to help her onto the young grey stallion. “I shall call you Simon, if you don’t mind.” She whispered something into his ear and the horse snorted back.

Although Kas knew that Alyssa was aware of everyone’s identity, he took time to introduce Hunter, Cullen, and Jaimes.

She graciously commented to each in the party. “The Knighthood is more ancient than I,” she told Cullen and Jaimes. As they rode north, she regaled them with stories of knights and battles of old and creatures they were sure had been fairy tales.

“Alyssa, since you have been with us, it seems that Anan-kai has lost some of its... dreariness?” Lauren asked. Sunshine was breaking through the trees and birds greeted the dawn.

“Anan-kai was never dreary, was it?” Kas asked.

“It is dreary to those who fear it. Teren’s favorite magic is to instill dread in others. That is his poison. You no longer fear me, so you no longer fear Anan-kai.”

“We have nothing to fear but fear itself,” Lauren quoted.

“That is very well put, Lauren.”

“Oh, I can’t take credit for that. But I think I’m beginning to understand it.”

They enjoyed the brightness that Alyssa brought with her. She wasn’t hesitant to use her gifts, creating a sumptuous feast for lunch with a gesture of her hand, carrying on a conversation with her horse, summoning a chorus of small animals to sing to the group.

“Why don’t you ever do nice things for us like this, Kas?” Hunter joked.

“Kasmárin’s gifts are not to be used in a frivolous manner, are they Prince?” Alyssa winked to Lauren and she laughed.

“We’re halfway to the border,” Alyssa announced as they stopped for the evening.

No one replied. Everyone’s mood became more serious as they made nighttime preparations. Alyssa provided another feast and they ate in silence.

As night fell, Senn turned to Kas. “What do you want us to do? And when?”

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Kas smoked a pipe and gazed into the campfire as he had done each night on the trip.

Lauren thought how burdened he seemed. She ached to touch him, hold him, comfort him.

“We will go to the edge of Anan-kai. In the night, Alyssa will call to Teren, and he will come to her. Senn, Cullen, and Jaimes stay with Alyssa. The rest of us go to the fortress.

“We’ll have to take out the guards—using weapons *and* magic. Find Tim, free him. By the time Teren realizes he’s been tricked, Tim, Hunter and Palin will be out of harm’s way, off to Anfall. The rest of us will be left to deal with Teren’s return to the keep. And he’ll be mighty angry if we make it that far.”

Kas looked up. “Lauren and I will channel together against him. The rest of you may be able to help, I don’t know. By the time the army returns, Luke will be able to take them out without a problem.

“Once we kill Teren, Alyssa will be able to leave Anan-kai?” Palin asked.

The Maiden smiled. “Yes. I know the way to the palace of Anfall.”

“There’s one more thing,” Kas continued, looking into Lauren’s eyes.

“Lauren, I don’t know what shape Tim will be in when we find him. We both feel he’s alive, but I’m sure he’s under a spell. He may not even know you. He could be badly wounded, or sick.”

She nodded. “I’ve thought of that.”

“This is it, then—the last chance to back out. I’ll blame no one.” He waited, just in case. No one said anything, so he continued. “All right then, time for sleep. We’ll ride early to make it to Talinthall by nightfall.”

They prepared their simple beds as Kas kicked the fire to embers.

He looked at Lauren and she saw something new in his eyes. It wasn’t anger, and it wasn’t lust. She reached out to him, but he blocked her thoughts. *I’ve lost him already*, she thought in confusion.

Kas lay awake for the second night in a row, but his thoughts were for Lauren alone. She would marry Luke, Alyssa had seen it. He felt a crushing weight on his chest. *I’m in love with her. Or something quite close to it.*

“Kas?” Senn sat next to him. “Will this work?”

“I don’t know.”

“Look, brother, I know you better than anyone. Look at me, damn it.” Kas turned to face Senn, who saw the wound Kas carried.

“She’s in love with you. Whatever Alyssa saw was confused. She’s not marrying Luke.”

“I want her, Senn. You were right, I want her badly. But I can’t change fate because I want a lover. Or maybe I wanted to be first for a change,” he laughed weakly. “That’s pathetic.”

“You are first in her eyes, Kas.” He hesitated. “And you’re first in mine, brother. You always have been. I love Luke but there are many times I wished you were king. There, I said it, may the Spirit forgive me.”

Kas nearly scolded Senn for the sentiment, but stopped himself. “So have I. I wouldn’t admit that to anyone else but you.” He rolled away from Senn and pulled his blanket around his shoulders, wondering where he’d be without Senn.

Senn stood and watched Kas feign sleep for a moment.

“I love you too. Goodnight.”

And when he shifted this last night before the great battle, he chose to climb a tree above his brother’s blanket, keeping one eye on the Prince Adept.

They all awoke to Senn’s singing—a rhythmic tune in the ancient tongue. Lauren thought the song was unusual, and the others joined in as soon as they woke. Alyssa saw her puzzlement.

“The song of Anfallen warriors. They prepare for battle.”

She went to Palin, helping him braid his hair in the elaborate manner of the Anfahuin.

Kas sharpened his sword on a stone as Cullen worked on his long blonde locks. Jaimes prepared Senn’s hair.

Lauren thought that it was a bizarre display, but kept her thoughts to herself.

“It’s a very ancient ritual, Lauren. I saw it long ago. My own Kas...” she broke off.

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Lauren gasped as Kas pierced the skin on his chest with his sword. He smeared blood across his forehead. The others followed suit, either cutting their arms or palms.

“Aren’t the men of Anfall beautiful?” asked Alyssa.

“Yes, he is. He is the most beautiful man in any world,” Lauren replied.

Kas heard her and glanced up. His eyes were wild and he looked as if he were lost in a passion she couldn’t understand. Their song grew and Lauren wanted to understand more of the ancient tongue. It stirred an ancient memory in her soul.

“Alyssa, do women prepare for battle as well?” Lauren’s voice shook with fear. *I’m going into battle.*

Alyssa studied her new friend and indicated for her to sit as she took her place behind her and began braiding her hair. The men watched Lauren pull out her small knife and cut her forearm, never flinching.

“The women of Anfall are beautiful as well,” Kas said. “And you are the most beautiful of them all.”

To everyone’s amazement, he walked to Lauren and pulled her to her feet. He bent over and kissed her passionately. Her knees buckled and Alyssa had to catch her as Kas released her and walked away.

“He cares deeply for you,” said Alyssa.

“Then why did he just kiss me goodbye?” Lauren asked, tears slipping from her eyes.

The singing continued as they broke camp and stopped only when they all mounted their horses. The men didn’t speak on the trail.

At one point, Lauren asked Alyssa for an explanation of the silence.

Alyssa gave her a pitying look. “Why, they prepare to kill or be killed. As do I. We pray to the Spirit for our immortal souls.”

Lauren did her best not to lose heart as she saw the fortress of Talinthal for the first time.

It was jet black, shrouded in a deep reddish mist, perched high on a cliff of grey rock. The sky overhead loomed dark and crackled with energy, sending bolts to the plain below, striking the parapets of the keep.

She shuddered. “If there’s a Hell, it must look like Talinthal.”

Hunter looked at her solemnly. "Lauren, Talinthal is the ancient word for Hell."

"Then Teren must be the devil himself." Lauren hugged her arms across her chest.

Senn came up behind Lauren and looked out at Talinthal plain over her shoulder. "Bloody hell," she heard his curse, and for the first time, the happy mage's voice shook with dread. The others moved to the edge of the precipice and stared in silence at the impenetrable fortress.

"That's where Tim is held? How could anything live in that terrible place? Dear God, have mercy on him." Tears began to stream down her cheeks.

"Have mercy on us all," Cullen added. Lauren heard Jaimes praying softly next to his brother.

Alyssa reached for Lauren's hand, and Lauren felt her tremble. "A thousand years of madness turned in on itself. That is what you see before you."

Lauren looked at Kas. "We'll never survive, Prince. Your visions are false. We won't make it across that plain, let alone destroy the man inside that fortress."

Kas closed his eyes and extended his palm to the plain below. "If I'm to die in battle, then let it be here, and let it be for Anfall and the Anthla-ma."

Lauren reached for his hand and squeezed it. *Then let me die with you, Prince, for you and for Tim. Because there's no one left for me in the world.*

### III. To Anfall

#### CHAPTER ELEVEN

Tim woke in a fog, a piercing pain in his chest, a crushing pounding in his head.

Dimly, slowly, he remembered the torture of seven weeks of fever, the endless nightmares of his parents burnt alive, foggy dreams that Teren held his sister prisoner, tortured and raped her.

*No, just a dream. She's in New York, she must be.*

But a thread of doubt wove through his muddled thoughts.

Tim gradually grew more aware of his surroundings. He tried to move his head, but the pain stilled his efforts. Even though the dim light of his cell hurt his eyes, he forced himself to keep them open, terrified of the horror that sleep would bring.

He recalled what details he could of the battle that had sealed his fate. The warnings of his brother Anfallen warriors to stay behind echoed in his ears.

"I love you Tim, but you aren't much of a warrior or mage, you know. This battle isn't a dress rehearsal. We almost lost you last time." The memory of Senn pleading with him made him shiver.

Senn, Kas, Luke, Palin, Hunter—alive? Or fallen, like Hawk?

Tears streamed down Tim's cheeks at the memory of Hawk, pierced through the heart with a spear. Big Hawk, the slowest of the brothers, always wary of Tim's growing affection for Jenna.

*Yet he died trying to rescue me,* Tim thought in anguish.

At least no more would die trying to free him from Talinthall and Tim felt some small relief at the thought. They must think him long dead. He might as well be dead. He knew he couldn't free himself from the keep—he could barely move, nourished only by Teren's twisted magic—just enough to keep him alive.

*But you're coming out of it,* a voice deep inside him whispered.

He forced himself to push down the pain and sit upright. It dawned on him that he was thinking somewhat coherently, that the fog was lifting slightly.

*Lauren and Kas!*

That's not possible. An illusion, a deception of your illness. Lauren is far away. Hopefully Kas is too.



Still, Tim tossed anxiously, fearing Lauren could be in the Land, could be in danger.

*Oh Kas, don't bring her here!*

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"Did you hear that! Did you?" Lauren grabbed Kas's arm, looking into his eyes, hope shining from her. "He's alive!"

Kas nodded. "Let's hope Teren didn't hear him."

The others look confused.

"Tim is conscious, communicating with me," he explained.

Senn gasped. "Tell him to *stop!* Teren *will* hear it."

Kas nodded, closing his eyes, sending Tim a warning and reassuring him that Lauren was safe.

"This waiting is torture," said Cullen.

They sat at the edge of Anan-kai, waiting for nightfall. Alyssa paced, her arms across her chest as if to shield herself from the pain she would face.

Lauren approached the Maiden and hugged her. "Can I help you in any way, Alyssa?"

"You already have, Lauren. I have hope of freedom. For a thousand years I had none."

"Will you marry Palin if this all works out?"

The idea of the ancient witch and her young awkward friend filled Lauren with a happy amusement.

"Not for a while," Alyssa said, "and only if he desires it."

"Oh I think he desires it right now," Lauren said, laughing lightly.

"And you, Lauren?" Alyssa said, looking at her as though grateful for the distraction of the conversation, "Will you fulfill your destiny and marry the king?"

"I won't marry Luke, Alyssa."

"And Kasmárin? What of him?"

"What of him?" Lauren said, "He wants me, he doesn't want me—it's destroying me."

Alyssa took Lauren's hand.

## The Princes of Anfall

"I've thought of nothing else, save Tim's rescue," Lauren said softly, "It's too painful—I won't live like this, begging for a glance, a touch, a word..." She sighed. "A kiss."

"No, do not beg for those things," Alyssa said softly, patting her hand.

"It's time, Maiden," Kas called, pointing to the sun's quick journey beneath the horizon. Only a sliver of blood red remained.

"Give me strength," Alyssa whispered.

Kas approached Alyssa, took both her hands in his and held them to his chest. He closed his eyes.

Alyssa began a chant in the ancient tongue.

"*Teren! Nafthan hai loimei. Arlasamon, arlasamon.*" A tear rolled down her cheek.

Senn translated for Lauren softly, "Teren, I am nothing without you. Come to me, come to me."

Lauren shivered. Alyssa must be courageous indeed.

Kas pointed to the plain beneath them, where an apparition appeared. It was the Maiden, standing with arms spread towards Talinthal. They turned back in wonder to see the true Alyssa still standing near them, eyes closed, chanting.

"She's done it. Look!" Kas pointed to the projection Alyssa had created. A thin red mist enveloped her in the darkness. "Teren has heard her, found her. He's coming. Time for us to move out."

A breeze stirred up, whirring like cicadas to a piercing volume.

"Kas, how can we protect her against Teren?" Cullen called out loudly. "He'll be furious when he learns he's been tricked."

"He can't enter Anan-kai again, Kasmárin saw to that with his dying breath. Do *not* let her step out of the forest. He will kill her if she does."

Senn, Jaimes and Cullen moved closer to Alyssa.

"Are you ready?"

Kas turned to Palin, Hunter, and Lauren. Lauren reached for Bell's reins, but Kas took them from her and tied them to a tree.

"No, we're not taking the horses."

“That distance on foot?” Lauren looked down at the vast rocky plain. “Teren will be back at Talinthal by the time we reach it!”

Hunter tapped her on the shoulder and indicated Kas with his eyes, wiggling his fingers.

“Casting, Kas? Won’t Teren feel your energy?”

“I don’t think so. He’ll be too wrapped up in finding Alyssa. At least that’s what I’m counting on.”

Kas embraced Jaimes and Cullen, then stood before Senn.

“Whatever happens, look after every one of them? Here and at home, Senn.”

“I’ll see you soon, big brother,” Senn embraced him and kissed him quickly, then whispered something into his ear Lauren couldn’t catch.

Lauren stood on tiptoe and kissed Senn on the cheek. She smiled weakly at Jaimes and Cullen and looked toward Alyssa, who still stood in a trance.

“Okay, Highness, take us to Tim.”

They joined hands and closed their eyes. Lauren felt warmth emanate from the ground, a shimmer that spread throughout her.

In an instant, Teren’s dark keep loomed directly above them.

“Why down here?” Lauren asked.

“We can’t knock at the front door or appear in the main hall without knowing what we face. Remember the plan? The cliffs are laced with guards, as is the keep. We’ll take it slowly from here. Prepare your weapons.”

Lauren’s blood turned to ice water.

They wound their way toward the back of the keep, a steep incline leading up from the base of the promontory of rock. A foul smelling sludge coated the defensive outer walls. It was dark and slippery and Lauren had to make sure she followed Kas’s steps exactly. *God help me.* Lauren’s legs began to shake and Kas turned and looked at her.

“I feel your fear.” He looked angry.

“No kidding, Kas! I feel like I’m breaking into the Wicked Witch of the West’s castle. Except there’s no Scarecrow or Tin Man or....” Lauren brushed away the tears. “Never mind.”

## The Princes of Anfall

“They’ll smell your fear.” Kas put his palm on Lauren’s forehead and forced a vision to fill her mind and heart.

*Tim, riding next to Lauren, joyfully telling stories and laughing. Senn and Kas following behind, Senn singing loudly and Kas holding a young boy in front of him on his saddle. Her child. Kas’s son? Luke’s?*

Lauren felt a rush of peace, of contentment.

“Will that happen? Who is that boy?”

“It’s one possible future. Tim is there. Without your courage, it cannot happen that way.”

“Aye, Lauren,” Hunter put in. “Courage for Tim and for Anfall.”

Palin nodded.

Kas turned suddenly and struck the first guard with a small dart of blue light before the others saw him. Hunter threw a knife at a second and missed but before the guard could get his shot off, Lauren pierced his heart with her arrow. She stood in shock, all her momentary peace torn away.

Kas turned to her. “Good shot. Are you all right?”

Lauren nodded slowly. “Courage, you say? Is that what courage does?”

“He would have killed us, Lauren. He would have slain every one of us and Tim would sit forever in his prison.”

They resumed the climb and Lauren forced herself to count each footfall and with each one to silently say Tim’s name. Kas stopped and pointed to a jutting rock overhead, indicating with hand motions that guards stood atop it and that he would sneak up behind them. They waited. A few seconds later they heard muffled cries. Hunter clasped his hand over Lauren’s mouth, afraid she would cry out to Kas.

He returned and urged them on.

They reached a sheer rock face, which Kas scaled easily. However, the others couldn’t get up alone.

Kas motioned for the men to give Lauren a hoist and he reached for her hands, pulling her into the air effortlessly. She landed in his arms. He looked at her in the dark and Lauren felt his need, his deep longing.

“Kas...you *do* care for me, just a bit?”

Kas pulled her close and she held him tightly.

“Lauren, I won’t hold you again. You’re lost to me.” He clutched her in a possessive embrace.

“Why, please just tell me why. You’re killing me. Why can’t we be together? Senn says Luke won’t care.” Lauren reached to his cheek and caressed it softly. “Kas, I love you.”

He groaned and kissed her as if his very life depended upon her. When he pulled away, he whispered in her ear, “The Maiden foretold our futures, Lauren. You’re fated to marry the King. And all the magic in the world won’t change that destiny. When we escape Talinthal, I’ll leave.” Kas was breathless and Lauren saw the gold in his blue eyes glow in the darkness. “Tell me again that it’s me. That you’ll remember.”

Lauren shook her head, unable to speak, unwilling to believe Kas’s words.

Kas pushed her away and Lauren felt the life drain out of her.

“Will you help us now?” Hunter hissed from below.

Kas pulled Hunter and Palin onto the ledge.

“Be alert and very quiet.”

Kas led them further up the hillside, until they were close enough to see the location of the guards along the outer wall of the keep. He held up his hand and several of them, the ones who were not adepts, slumped to the ground in a deep sleep.

“They’ll know we’re here now,” Kas was whispering. “There’s the entrance, a guard at each side. Palin take the right, Hunter the left. Lauren, stay close behind me. Move at my pace.”

There was no answer from her and he turned to see her, face buried in her hands, sobbing silently, pain enveloping her like a shroud.

“Lauren,” he grabbed her shoulders. “This is it. Tim is in there and we are walking into hell. Focus.” He squeezed her arm and he saw her come to life. “That’s my girl. You can do this, you will do this. I have seen it. Think only of reaching Tim.”

He turned toward Palin and Hunter. “Go.”

They ran to the keep wall and hugged it, inching along to within feet of the entrance. Kas gave the signal and Hunter and Palin shot the guards.

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Kas and Lauren ran into the entrance, jumping over the dead guards into the dark hallway. Kas snuffed out the torches burning on dark slippery walls and grabbed Lauren's hand, pulling her to a narrow stairwell. He motioned for the three to stay put as he quietly crept up the stairs.

*Come up, now, quietly.*

Only Lauren heard Kas's call and she motioned to Hunter and Palin. Two dead guards lay at Kas's feet.

"Now the inner wall. Two each side. Left," he pointed to Hunter and Palin. "Right," he pointed to Lauren, locking eyes with her. "Lauren, you go low, I go high. No magic."

Lauren crept forward, squatting as low as she could, holding her bow sideways. Her arm shook in fear but she hit her mark when Kas gave the signal. Three other guards fell to her companions arrows. The entrance opened to a second stairwell, this one curving and steep.

Kas motioned for the men to stay at the base of the stairs and keep guard. "Palin, channel if you must."

He took Lauren's hand and they climbed the stairs.

Tim was so close that Lauren could feel the beat of his heart.

Kas edged the door open, holding Lauren back until he could see how bad Tim was. It was dark and the room was dank and smelled of death.

Tim saw Kas and cried out to him.

Lauren pushed past Kas and ran to her brother's bedside, holding him fiercely.

The twins cried together.

"Lauren! My God, what are you doing here?" He pulled her into his embrace again, crying on her shoulder. He suddenly looked up.

"Kas, you have to get out. Teren will kill you if he finds you here."

"He's not here, Tim." Kas grasped his friend's hand. "But we don't have much time. Can you walk?"

"I don't know," Tim's voice shook and he was deathly pale.

Just get him out of here so you can take care of him, she thought.

Tim pushed himself to a sitting position and swayed.

Kas grasped Tim's head and pulled him to his chest, holding him like a baby. Tim felt his entire body tingle and grow warm. Energy returned to his limbs and his mind grew clearer. He looked at Kas with brighter eyes and nodded. Kas and Lauren helped him stand.

My God, he's so thin, Lauren thought.

*Lauren, no negative thoughts now. No fear. Count on me. You're doing a spectacular job. But it's not over.*

She looked at Kas and nodded and Kas lifted Tim over his broad shoulder. He carried him down the stairs, where Hunter and Palin were unharmed, keeping guard. They smiled when they saw Tim.

"Take him, hold him closely. Get him to Anfall. You're going back to Anan-kai, the fast way."

Lauren went to kiss her brother but the three were gone in a shimmer of blue light, and she was left alone with Kas in the black fortress.

"What now?"

"We wait for Teren's return."

"Sitting in Hell, waiting for the Devil to show up."

"That about sums it up." Kas grabbed Lauren's hand and held it to his lips. "Tell me one more time," he whispered tiredly, squeezing his eyes shut.

"I love you."

## CHAPTER TWELVE

Senn felt Teren before he saw him. A slight breeze stirred the dirt around their feet. Alyssa began to sway. Senn held her, watching her projection on the plain below. A single horseman approached the apparition. Both Teren and his enormous horse wore black armor. A deep blood-red mist glowed around them and shrouded the rider's face.

Alyssa shivered and cried and Senn was at a loss how to help her.

"Bloody hell," Cullen cursed, pointing at the scene below. The horseman howled at the sky and destroyed the apparition with a red ball of fire. Alyssa fell to the ground and Senn bent over her.

Teren's voice filled the plain. "Traitor! Whore! Where are you? Why did you call to me? I have waited twenty lifetimes for your call."

His wail tore through Anan-kai, stirring the leaves and sending a foul stench across the plain.

Teren looked up and Senn realized they had been spotted.

"Steady boys. Remember, he can't hurt her here."

"Can he hurt *us* here?" Jaimes asked. "Senn, let's move it!"

"Right." He hoisted Alyssa on his shoulder and charged into the woods, the brothers following. Alyssa struggled to break free, kicking at Senn and pounding her fists on his back.

"Let me go to him. I need to be with him. Stay away from me. Kasmárin help me! Palin!"

She screamed in terror and Senn thought she must be enduring the unbearable.

"Help me," Senn cried to the brothers. "She's trying to escape his spell but it's not working. Help me fight it."

They locked minds with Senn and pulled at Alyssa with all their might.

Teren howled, sensing he was losing her again.

"Fight it, Alyssa! Think of Kasmárin, what Teren did to him! Think of your future with Palin! He's waiting for you." She fell limp and Senn ran like the wind.

Teren slipped to the ground, pounding his fists in the dirt, crying tears of blood and poison.

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Hunter and Palin surveyed their position—back at the edge of Anan-kai.

Senn and the brothers were gone, as was Alyssa.

All of the horses were still tethered where they had been left.

Palin helped Tim to the ground and leaned him against a broad tree trunk. He threw his cloak around his friend and hugged him. Hunter brought him water and a bit of bread. Tim nodded weakly.

“Drink just a little, boy. Your stomach won’t handle much. Just a bit at a time.”

“I’m okay. Thank you, thank you both.” Tears slipped out and he brushed them away quickly. “Why didn’t Lauren and Kas come with us?”

Hunter and Palin were silent.

“The Anthla-ma,” Tim whispered in horror. “Kas intends to destroy Teren and retrieve the scepter?”

They nodded.

“And how did Lauren get mixed up in this?”

“It’s a long story, lad. Best if she tells you, or at least wait for a more relaxed time. We must get to Anfall. I don’t know where Teren is or what has happened to the others—by that I mean Senn, Cullen, Jaimes, and Alyssa.”

“The Maiden? I don’t understand.”

Hunter cursed. “Relax, Tim, I think it’s going as planned but I can’t be sure. In any case, you are out of that hell. Do you think you can ride?”

Tim stood and took the reins of Jaimes’ horse.

“No! You’re in no shape for that. I meant can you ride with one of us?”

“Yes, I’m feeling better by the minute. But I don’t want to leave Lauren at Talinthal.” He drew a deep, shuddering breath, “I won’t.”

“You must,” answered Palin. “Kas’s orders. We have to do exactly what he said, understand? I’m afraid it will all fall apart if we change things. Don’t let all of Lauren’s sacrifices to save you be for nothing. She’s come a long way to make this happen. Kas will protect her.”

“The lad’s right, Tim. Kas hasn’t been wrong once.”

“Dear God, help them both. I don’t think he has a chance against Teren.”

“He does with Lauren.”

## The Princes of Anfall

Tim looked at Hunter in surprise.

“Lauren? She’s a very weak adept, Hunter, no stronger than me.”

“She’s about as strong as there is in the Land, with the exception of Kas and Senn,” Palin said.

“It can’t be.” Tim shook his head. “The Lauren I remember was insecure, sweet...”

“She’s five years older, Tim.” Hunter lifted him on his horse and swung up behind him. He motioned for Palin to head towards Anfall. “She’s learned to channel well. And she’s an amazing shot, but you probably know that—she didn’t learn that skill here. She’s very strong-willed—the Spirit knows that nothing was going to stop her from rescuing you.”

“And she’s in love with Kas,” Palin added.

“That’s a detail that could have been left out, Palin,” Hunter scolded.

“Well, he should know. Especially since she’s supposed to marry Luke.”

Tim looked dazed.

“Maybe I’m not quite well yet,” he muttered. “Marry Luke, in love with Kas? How long has she been here?”

“Well, she’s been in the Land looking for you for about a year,” Hunter answered. “And we met her, let’s see, about two weeks ago it would be.”

“All this happened in two weeks?” Tim took a deep breath.

“Let’s get away from Anan-kai and Talinthal. Once we cross the Nor, we’ll rest for a while and I’ll tell you anything you want to know,” Hunter said, “Try to sleep now, Tim.”

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“Now what?” asked Jaimes.

“Now we walk,” answered Senn.

“Are you well, Maiden?” asked Jaimes, touching her arm. The woman was very pale and still shaking. He threw his cloak around her shoulders and rubbed her arms.

“Thank you, sir, I will mend. No, Senn, don’t ask what happened, please.”

“Well,” Cullen said, “At least we’re away from him. But Senn, where should we go? If we leave Anan-kai for Anfall, Teren will get Alyssa, and us. If we go to Talinthal,

the same will happen. Aren't we stuck waiting in Anan-kai to see if Kas manages to kill Teren?"

"I can't wait for that. I must be with Kas. Alyssa is safe now, and she can return home until this is over, right?"

She nodded.

"I think you both should stay with her."

"Well, Prince, you are in charge here by all rights," Alyssa said, "but I must disagree with you in this case. I will be fine by myself. One little snap of my fingers and I am home, safe and sound as when you found me. Nothing will harm me there and the brothers are not needed, although I am eternally grateful to have had their protection to this point."

"Maiden, are you sure?" Jaimes asked.

"This was Kas's intention. He has seen all the details correctly to this point. I suggest we keep to his plan."

"She right." Cullen turned to Senn. "We're coming with you."

Senn nodded. "I don't know if we'll make it in time to help Kas—Teren has made it back there by now."

Alyssa laughed softly. "And you think the great Prince Adept can accomplish something that the witch of Anan-kai cannot? I will send you there, now."

Before they could answer, she sent them on their way with a snap of her fingers.

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She stood alone in the quiet forest, more tired than she had been willing to admit to her protectors. With the last bit of strength to channel, she summoned her horse from the mist, and started her ride home.

"Well, Simon," she patted the young horse's neck, "I did it. What do you think of that?"

Alyssa vowed to never tell the others what had transpired with the Wizard. She closed her heart against the memory. He had violated her with his twisted magic, forcing her to feel every detail of his passion. She felt as if she would never be able to rid herself of his stench.

*Palin, oh Palin, will you have me now? A Maiden no more...*

## The Princes of Anfall

No, she would have to tell Palin. She shook her head, tears welling up. I love the boy, she thought in amazement. I've seen him for so long in my mind's eye, I've fallen in love. She smiled, thinking of the confusion on the young man's face as he saw the vision of their union. And then she smiled more broadly, thinking of the passion she had seen in his eyes. Perhaps he *would* forgive her after all. The Spirit would not send her a weakling.

Now the young warrior needed to survive Teren.

*Oh, Anfall, I have been as strong as I can, but I can neither protect myself or you from Teren's evil. May the Spirit do so,* she prayed, thinking of the terrors that still awaited them.

In a thousand years, Teren's madness had flourished.

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Hunter, Tim, and Palin skirted the edge of the forest for as long as possible, knowing that the plain of Talinthal was dangerous, even at this distance from the keep. Tim took in some more water and bread as they rode.

Palin felt edgy, his sense of dread growing stronger each minute.

We're riding away from danger—what is this feeling?

*It's Hunter!*

"Hunter?" he looked at the old man.

Hunter didn't look at Palin, but spoke into the night as if to an apparition before them. "You don't have to be an adept, lad, to know that things are going to change in Anfall."

His voice was weak and Palin realized quickly that the old man was ill.

"Do you know, Palin, I remember very clearly the day Margaret brought you to Anfall. I thought that the Spirit gifted you to us. Ah, such a perfect baby. Another boy to raise, perhaps one I could claim as my own this time, I thought. But everyone fell in love with you right away, and I never got the chance to call you my son. Aye, you're far too young to be my son, of course! But if I had a son, lad. . ." He hesitated, drawing a deep breath and clutching his fist to his chest.

"Hunter? Please, what is it?" Palin cried.

The old man ignored him, or didn't hear him. He stopped riding.

“I wish I could speak with Kas once more. And Luke and Senn. Tell them I love them. You’ll do that for me, won’t you? And Palin, don’t weep for long. Remember how much I love you. I’m going to be with my father, and his father. They smile at me now. Ah, and Hawthorne smiles, so pleased, all of them. Pleased with me. Why, I won’t see all of you again. Immortals, Hawk, you are certain? I love you, son.”

He slumped forward and Palin ran to him, pulling him down off the horse.

Tim woke in time to understand Hunter was gone.

He knelt by the old man’s side and looked at Palin.

“His heart gave out, Palin. Not even Kas could have helped him. I’m so sorry.”

“I knew it would happen someday. Just not like this. He looked a little tired on this trip, and I worried that with everything going on. . .” Palin broke down, sobbing and hugging the man who had been his only father.

Tim put his arm around Palin and drew him to his chest, letting him weep. Tim wept with him.

It was Hunter, who had been one of the most beloved and respected of the King’s friends, who had earned himself an honored place alongside them in the life he’d just laid to rest, as well as in the undying lands of that life beyond death. Dear Hunter, Tim thought, a simple man, a fighter, a man without magic, yet he’d earned the most love and respect of all of them.

*You will be missed, my friend.*

It was thus that King Lucenor and his men rode up to the sad scene—Tim Emory and Palin, in the moonlight, bent over the still body of Hunter.

Putting aside his shock at seeing Tim Emory alive, Luke brought his hands up over his face three times in the Anfallen gesture of respect and mourning.

Silently, his men, including his Uncle Kenneth, did the same.

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Kas drew in a sudden deep breath and closed his eyes. *Hunter*. He had begged his old friend to stay behind this trip. Kas sensed Hunter’s failing health, but he knew it would be better for him to die the warrior than to fade away in a sick bed. Hunter would be pleased at his part in their mission. Palin would be devastated. Kas felt his own pain, and brought his hands up to cover his face.

## The Princes of Anfall

“What is it?” Lauren grabbed his arm.

Kas just put his finger to his lips. “Later.”

They hid behind a huge black column supporting the vaulted ceiling of the main hall of Talinthal.

Lauren studied the ceiling’s paintings—disturbing images of humans and demons locked in unholy embraces, naked women besieged by clawed hands, men tortured with hideous devices. Lauren gasped when she realized that the women all resembled Alyssa and the men all looked similar—no doubt the ancient Kasmárin. She shook as the scenes took hold of her. Kas pulled her chin down and shook his head in warning. Lauren put her head on his shoulder, and he caressed her hair.

She wondered if they were waiting to die.

“Lauren, Tim is safe. You can leave now.”

She looked into his eyes, falling into the deep blue, swimming in his ocean.

“I could no sooner leave you now than I could abandon Tim.” There’s nothing left without you anyway, she added to herself.

Kas put his arm around her, trying to ward off the deep chill of Talinthal.

“He’s close now. No magic. Speak aloud only.”

Lauren nodded, feeling Teren’s approach—a thin veil of dark mist closing around her heart.

*Kas?* The call came silently.

*Here!* Senn.

Relief washed over them.

Senn quietly made his way along the hall, pillar to pillar. Cullen and Jaimes followed closely. Kas grasped Senn’s arm and they regarded one another.

“Speak—no magic,” Kas ordered.

“Alyssa is safe. Teren?”

“Soon.”

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“Luke!” Palin embraced the King and greeted Kenneth.

Luke approached Tim and hugged him.

“I am happy to see you alive, little brother. It seems we have traded one precious life for another. A natural death, then?”

Luke knelt before the body of Hunter and folded the old man’s arms across his chest. He motioned to his men, and two lifted Hunter onto a horse.

“Take him back and wait for our return,” he instructed the two soldiers. “You too, the both of you. Go with them.”

Palin shook his head, but Tim pulled at his arm. “Do as Luke says, Palin. This day is over for us.”

Luke put his arm around Palin’s shoulder. “We will attend to your grief, Palin. But I need for you to be strong now. First, tell all that’s transpired. I know part of Kas’s plan from Kenneth. Tell me what you know.”

Palin, exhausted, turned to Kenneth. “You weren’t supposed to do this, Uncle Ken. Kas didn’t want to put you at risk, Luke. Who’s guarding Anfall?”

Luke and Kenneth exchanged a glance of surprise at the force in Palin’s voice.

“Half my army guards Anfall, Palin, with Bruce at the head. I’m not an idiot.”

Palin nodded sheepishly. “Well, Kas didn’t want you anywhere near Teren. He said we couldn’t afford to lose our king. Anfall loses heart without you and without you at Anfall, Teren wins.”

“Anfall loses heart without Kas, my good man. This fool’s mission—finding a Great Lander so I can sire an adept.” Luke spit at the ground. “Imagine, our greatest power away on a servant’s errand. It won’t do any good if we’re all killed in the process, will it?”

Kenneth shook his head. “No, Luke, Kas felt a call to Talinthal—he said as much. He felt a call to his own destiny.”

“Well if we kill Teren now, then they’ll be no need for magic babies.” Luke’s tone was harsh and Kenneth thought better of arguing further. “Now, back to the details, quickly, Palin. Where’s Sennsárin?”

Palin explained Kas’s full plot, eliciting shock with his story of Alyssa.

“And the witch lured Teren away from Talinthal?”

“Hours ago. Teren knows by now Alyssa tricked him.”

“And Kas is at the keep, a sitting duck? Some plan. Who has the girl?”

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Tim spoke up. “The girl is Lauren, my sister. And she’s with Kas at Talinthal.”

“Bloody hell! I’m marrying your sister?”

“Evidently. It came as a surprise to me too.”

Luke rubbed his forehead, beginning to pace. “Teren’s army?”

“Still at Melsor it would seem,” answered Palin. “Only a few guarded the keep. We took out most of them.”

Luke looked at Palin carefully. The boy seemed to have aged years in a few weeks.

“Teren called his army back, no doubt—Melsor isn’t far. All right, you’re off to Anfall. Palin, you’re in charge in our absence. Listen to Bruce’s counsel but assume command.”

Palin looked completely taken aback. Tim slapped Palin on the back. “Come on, brother. Let’s go home.”

“And you help him, Tim. But see that Jenna nurses you back to health,” he winked.

Tim blushed.

“You look pretty bad, Tim. A shave, a shower, a good meal, and a week’s rest. *Do not* keep that beard and mustache.”

“Yes, Majesty.” Tim smiled and bowed.

Luke smiled in return and pulled Tim into his huge arms for a final hug. He turned to Palin. “Remember, a good leader never questions his instincts.”

With that Luke held up hand, cased in a shining gauntlet that captured the moonlight and motioned his forces forward across the Talinthal plain.

“So now, we may lose our King along with the rest.” Palin sighed. “Hunter, intercede for us. Ask the Spirit for mercy, my father.”

Tears claimed Palin again as they turned West towards Anfall.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Lauren reached into her pocket, wrapping her fingers around her emerald necklace, which grew warm against her side. Teren must be close, she thought. The darkness of his magical power was affecting even something as simple as Kas's enchanted gift.

Jaimes and Cullen huddled behind the next pillar.

Kas drew the plan for them in the air, indicating that Teren would enter by the front door of the keep. Jaimes and Cullen would distract him. Kas, Senn and Lauren would act as one force, channeling all of their energy into the dark lord.

They would have only one chance.

The great doors of the hall swung open.

Kas quickly held up his hand in warning.

Lauren gaped in wonder at the massive warrior.

"Shit!" Kas cursed under his breath.

"That must be Luke?" Lauren asked.

"Damn it, this is not good," Senn said, "What the hell is he doing here?"

He ran to the King. "Get down, you idiot."

Luke scowled at him but Senn pulled the larger man behind a pillar.

Kas looked furious. "Luke, where are your men?"

"Surrounding the keep. I think Teren's army is returning. They'll surround them and attack as they move east. I'm alone here."

"Bloody hell, Luke. You don't belong here and you know it."

Luke shook Kas's arm off and regarded Lauren.

"Hello."

He sized Lauren up quickly and seemed to dismiss her as unimpressive and unimportant. "Your brother is fine," he added as an afterthought, looking pleased with himself for his manners.

Lauren was speechless. The stories were true—the man was perfection. Perhaps a little stupid, storming into their enemy's keep alone, but nevertheless, perfect. His luxurious long black hair was pulled back into a queue high on his head. His eyes were

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deep, deep brown, nearly black. Luke's face was chiseled smooth perfection. His body seemed chiseled as well. And he was massive, a good foot taller than his brothers.

"He's like a Roman god," Lauren breathed.

Kas watched Lauren carefully as she stared at his brother.

Senn gave Kas a sympathetic look.

"Leave, now," Kas ordered and Luke lifted his brows in surprise.

"I give the orders, brother."

"Not today, you don't. Your sword is useless here, Luke. Please," he softened his tone. "Don't do this. Anfall needs you."

"It needs you a hell of a lot more, Prince. I may not be able to see into the future or hold back warriors with a wave of my hand but I know what's what. But we'll speak of that later."

"Too late," Senn growled as Lauren was swept with a sense of dark energy, an immediate foreboding of impending doom.

Teren was home.

The stench of death preceded him.

The doors to the chamber crashed open with a resounding bang and the dark lord of Talinthal thundered into the hall.

Lauren gasped.

Teren's massive black horse was covered in black armor to match his rider's. Flames flickered from the horse's nostrils. His hooves clanked on the stone floor, echoing throughout the hall. A sickening pulse of red light circled horse and rider.

Teren wailed at the enemy he felt within his walls.

He regarded his fallen guards and urged his horse to kick them into bloody heaps.

Lauren shook in terror.

Teren dwarfed even Luke. His skin was waxy and pale as a corpse. His eyes glowed blood red. One long white braid hung from the crown of his bare head. He held a weapon in each hand—in his right, a black sword engraved with red symbols. In his left, the Anthla-ma, the scepter of Anfall.

"Anfall! Prepare to die!"

The scepter pulsed and glowed in the presence of the Anfallen warriors and as it grew white hot, Teren dropped it to the ground. Its jewels glowed and the gold and silver shimmered in the dark keep.

Kas forced himself to hold back. *The scepter belongs to me*, he thought in wonder, *not to Anfall, but to me alone*.

“I will defeat him and I will live to tell about it,” he said aloud.

Teren continued to wail and his horse stomped the floor, shaking statues to the ground. Lauren held her hands over her ears.

Kas signaled to Senn, Jaimes and Cullen and shook Lauren to her senses. He pointed to his eyes and closed them.

Lauren and Senn touched Kas’s mind and watched in awe as Kas created a wave of pure, glittering energy unlike anything either of them had imagined possible. They joined their minds to his and the wave grew in size and power.

The image of their wave swept across the Land, washing away all evil in its path, including the mounted Wizard.

Lauren shook, feeling dizzy with the strength of the vision she was sharing with Kas and Senn. Part of her wanted to break away from it, to keep from collapsing... she wove on her feet but felt Kas steady her with one solid, strong arm.

Senn held up his hand and signaled for Jaimes and Cullen to be ready with their attack. Silently, he counted off on his fingers—five, four, three, two. . .

The knights assaulted Teren with a bright blue stream of magic. It merely bounced off his armor, slamming into the brothers and sending Jaimes and Cullen sliding across the hall floor.

The distraction lasted only a moment but it was all Kas needed. He unleashed his wave and a flood of white light rolled towards Teren. It crashed into his horse, knocking it to the ground. Teren rolled for a moment and then rose, scorched but alive.

Kas’s heart fell. Teren used the scepter to protect himself.

Luke drew his sword, prepared to do useless battle, but Senn pulled him back and threw himself between the King and Teren.

“No, don’t!” Kas yelled.

Luke pushed Senn away and stood before the wizard, sword drawn.

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Teren laughed loudly and placed the scepter against a pillar, prepared to do mortal combat.

“King of Anfall! What a brave little man you are! No gifts, no power, no use to anyone. Of course I’ll fight you man to man.”

Luke rushed forward and brought his sword down on Teren’s leg.

Teren didn’t flinch, swinging his sword around in a figure eight at a lightening pace. “Is that all you have, King? Surely you can do better? Or perhaps one of your brothers would like a try.”

Luke tried again, feinting and weaving to avoid Teren’s blows but losing ground quickly. Senn channeled in Teren’s direction but Teren merely held up his hand and the bolt bounced back, slicing through Senn.

Kas’s fury rolled up, his eyes burning with hatred.

“You shouldn’t have done that, Teren. The scepter will no longer protect you. Prepare to die.” Kas closed his eyes. A funnel cloud of white light poured from his outstretched hand, spinning and growing larger until it filled all of the great hall. The Anfallen held onto the pillars and Luke held Senn against the wind. The cloud enveloped Teren, who was lifted off his feet and beaten against the wall and the pillars.

*Do it now, Lauren. Get it. You can do it.*

Lauren heard Kas through the fury and didn’t hesitate.

She ran as fast as she could, sliding near the feet of the wizard. He tried to reach for her, but he was thrown back against the wall.

Lauren scooped up the scepter and threw it to Kas. She looked down at the seared flesh of her palm, barely able to take in the experience of holding the Anthla-ma, even for a moment. The scepter held a vision of all the past and all the future of the Land.

Kas looked at Senn and released Teren from his attack. The wizard scrambled for the door, sliding and scratching his way forward.

“Kas, hurry. Senn’s in bad shape,” Luke called to him.

Kas ran to Senn and knelt beside him. Looking down at his brother's battered and bloodied body, he shook his head, horrified. “I don’t know, I don’t know,” he whispered.

Lauren tried to get to the two of them but Jaimes held her back. “You can’t help him, girl,” he said, pulling her close to him, “Leave it to the Prince.”

Luke looked up at Kas.

The Prince was glowing, head to toe, throbbing in time with the undulations of the scepter in his hand. He closed his eyes and chanted in the ancient tongue, repeating the same phrases again and again.

Senn's breath began to come easier, but it was shallow and he still looked as if he hovered near death.

"You may not win this battle, Kas," Luke whispered.

"I may not," he answered. "We have to get him out of this place. There's too much evil lurking here. See to your men, Luke. I'm taking him to Anfall, the fast way."

He looked around to the brothers and Lauren.

"Come."

They quickly gathered around him and Senn. Lauren's face paled and she gasped softly when she saw the extent of his wounds.

"Love," Kas whispered, "Send him love, Lauren."

She closed her eyes and pictured the healthy, happy, impetuous man who had become her true friend. "Senn, I love you. Please hang on."

Luke glanced a last time at Senn and Kas before he left to gather his men.

Kas closed his eyes and carried them across the Nor to Anfall, gently cradling Senn in his arms.

"I love you too, brother. Come back to me."

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Jenna and her mother, Margaret, looked towards the Nor River from the outer wall of Anfall keep. Bruce was by their side, discussing his concerns about the small number of men left at Anfall. “We’ve only a handful of adepts, including myself.”

“Never mind, Bruce.” Jenna paced. “Luke knows what he’s doing. They’ll return promptly.”

“It’s bad. I can feel it. Something has gone horribly wrong.”

“No, mother. They’ll be here, I know it.”

They spotted the small entourage on the crest of the hill that sloped up to the keep walls. Five men on horseback, but one of them was prone across the saddle, critically or fatally wounded.

“Who is it, can you see?” asked Jenna. The three ran into the courtyard and ordered the guards to open the outer gate. Two soldiers rode in with Tim, Palin and the lifeless body of Hunter.

Jenna, Margaret, and Bruce stood in shocked silence. They had never expected to see Tim alive again, nor were they prepared to see Hunter dead.

Jenna embraced Tim, barely able to believe he was in her arms.

She forced herself to break away from him and she turned to Palin.

“Dear Palin.” She hugged and cried with him.

“What happened?”

“His heart, he died a natural death.”

Margaret gathered both men into her embrace and then turned to the slain man who had practically raised her sons. Bruce, Margaret, and Jenna kneeled by his side, chanting their grief.

I’ve gotten back two sons and lost my dear friend, Margaret thought. What would be next?

Before the thought was completed, five materialized beside them—Kas, the knights Jaimes and Cullen and an unfamiliar girl, no doubt the Great Lander.

In Kas’s arms was the limp body of Senn. The women rushed to him and Kas motioned them away. He was still shimmering from his battle with the dark wizard. Kas held the scepter Anthla-ma in his hand, and all knew Teren was defeated.

“Where is Luke?”

“On his way, unharmed.”

The women sighed in relief.

Kas carried Senn into the palace, everyone following closely.

He turned. “No.” They heard the determination in his command.

Palin ventured to break the silence. “He really won the scepter? Kas defeated Teren?”

“Yes, Palin.” Jaimes answered. He and Cullen tried to answer the questions that were coming quickly.

“Then Alyssa is freed.”

“Alyssa?” asked Jenna in confusion.

“The Maiden of Anan-kai. I’m going to marry her.”

Tim and Lauren found one another in the confusion and hugged fiercely.

“Tim, Hunter is dead?”

“Yes. Did you know him well, Lauren?”

“No, not well. But I liked him immensely.”

“And who is this?!” Jenna exclaimed.

“That’s Lauren,” Palin answered. “Remember, that’s how this all started?”

“Tim’s sister,” Jaimes tried.

“Luke’s new wife, maybe. Maybe not, though. There’s something else going on...” Cullen said.

“Never mind any of that now,” the Queen Mother said. “Tim’s alive, Kas, Luke and Palin are safe. Jaimes and Cullen are here. Our army is intact. We will see to the burial of our honored friend. And we will pray for Sennsárin. Everyone inside.”

Lauren was so exhausted that she barely noticed the grandeur of the Palace of Anfall until she had been in its great hall for hours. The cloud of shock gradually lifted and she was able to take it in. Tim took her hand and pointed out the general plan of the keep and the details that were so dear to him.

Where Talinthal had been black and dreary, Anfall was its polar opposite. White, airy, and opulent, like the villa of Tansing Crossing, only a hundred-fold. White marble, fluttering transparent white curtains, white candles and white flowers graced the tables.

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Lauren felt as if she had joined the gods of ancient times on Mount Olympus.

They sat around a fireplace located in the center of an octagonal room. Slender curved pillars supported a ceiling that was covered in gold, silver, and bronze. The walls shimmered in the sunlight that poured through many stained-glass windows.

“So this is what where fairy tales come from,” Lauren said to Tim.

“My reaction exactly. Hold on, though, it gets better. Wait until you see the rest of the house, the gardens, the pools, the countryside.”

She hugged her brother again, not able to get enough of him. To have actually found him and rescued him—she was having trouble taking in the reality of his presence. Tim looked unwell, she thought. Even so, he had grown in the years since she had seen him. Nearly as muscular as the Anfallen now, but a bit shorter. He sported their long hair and braids, along with a newly grown beard and mustache. His green eyes matched Lauren’s.

“You look like a hippie, Tim,” Lauren said, “I can’t get over the hair. And you’re all muscular.” She squeezed one of his arms.

“You thought I looked thin back at Talinthal.”

“Just drawn, I guess. You really look quite good.”

“And you look much more beautiful than I remember, Lauren. Something’s changed for you.”

“I will thank Kas for the rest of my life for you, Tim.”

“So will I, trust me. It was horrible, I can’t begin to explain...” he stopped himself.

“We’ll have time. You need to rest now.”

She turned to Margaret. “Madam? Your Majesty? Is there a place I can take my brother to rest?”

“No Lauren, relax, don’t bother with that now,” Tim said, slightly embarrassed.

“Absolutely,” Margaret said, standing. “Timothy, go to your room. Jenna, take him there and make sure he has what he needs.”

Tim winced at that. “I’m glad Luke wasn’t here to hear that,” he muttered at Lauren as he stood. He looked over at Jenna with a slight smile.

Watching him, Lauren realized that Hawk’s concern about his sister in Tim’s company was entirely founded.



“We’ll have time, Tim,” she said, “go now and rest.”

She hugged her brother and sat back down as he and Jenna left. “Thanks very much, your Majesty.”

“Margaret. My name is Margaret.”

Jaimes and Cullen kept to themselves and spoke quietly only to one another. Lauren supposed they were anxious about Luke’s return.

Palin sat by himself, absorbed in his grief.

They waited for some word from Kas and feared for the worst. The feeling was too familiar to Lauren and she closed her eyes and prayed.

“No news is good news,” Margaret announced, reading everyone’s thoughts.

Lauren surveyed the older woman as closely as she could without being rude.

Margaret was the mother of the man she loved, the mother of the King, of Senn. For all intents and purposes, she had been her brother’s mother for the last five years. She was small of stature, nearly the Maiden’s size. Her dark hair fell only to her neck in tight spirals. There were a few shocks of silver but the Queen mother looked at least ten years younger than she had to be. Her eyes were hard, though and Lauren felt very intimidated by the woman.

By contrast, Princess Jenna was tall and fair and she most resembled Kas.

Tim was completely taken with her, it was obvious.

Lauren laughed to herself that brother and sister should fall in love with brother and sister. She wondered if Tim would manage to win Jenna. She somehow thought it would be a long haul.

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“I will lead you to your room.”

It was not too long before Jenna had returned and Lauren was grateful to be given the opportunity to take her leave at last. Apparently Jenna had decided that dealing with Lauren was her responsibility, because while she seemed grateful that Tim was alright, she approached Lauren with little more than a business-like attitude that was grating on the nerves at times.

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Jenna lead Lauren at such a brisk walk through the amazing palace that had Lauren giving up on finding her bearings. The place was a maze of gardens, fountains, rooms within rooms, balconies, and staircases.

Finally Jenna threw open a door to a room not unlike the Lauren had occupied at Tansing Crossing.

"I think you'll find everything you need," she said curtly, "Rest and relax. I'll take you to Timothy later. You will want to freshen up as Luke may return at any time and you will want to look your best. There is clothing in the closet. Some of it may suit your fancy. Not much of it will fit properly, though. If you need anything else, you must simply ring this bell and a maid will attend to you."

"Thanks."

Jenna was already out the door.

"Bitch," Lauren mumbled, hoping she didn't have her brother's hearing as well.

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Luke rode back weary and worried about Senn. The army had done its job. He had surrounded Teren's forces, which had already suffered from their foray into Melsor. Luke's men had butchered every last Talinthal soldier and lost no one in the process.

His thoughts wandered from Senn to the horrible battle with Teren to the amazing retrieval of the Anthla-ma. And this girl, Lauren. She wasn't much to his liking. She was pretty and shapely enough, but he had found her warrior's blood-paint a bit much. And she had some connection with Kas. Two of a kind, he thought.

His uncle interrupted his thoughts. "Luke, I'll be heading south now, by your leave. Sara will be sick over me. I want to stay to attend Hunter's funeral and help with Senn anyway I can, but I have to collect my wife first. We'll come back in a day or so, hopefully in time for the funeral."

The King grabbed his uncle by the arm. "Kenneth, you are not to come to Anfall until I send for you. I will pay your respects at Hunter's funeral and send word of Senn. Go home, and give my love to my aunt."

"I'm proud of you, boy." Luke nodded and his Uncle took the Great Road south to Tansing Crossing.

Luke turned to his lieutenant. "I'm a simple man, aren't I, John?"

“Simple, sir? Not sure what you mean by that. Wouldn’t especially describe you as such.”

“I mean, I like to fight, I like to eat and I like women who aren’t complicated. I don’t have the gifts and I don’t want them.”

“Yes, I suppose that’s simple. That would describe most of us, wouldn’t it?”

“Not my brothers! Well, Hawk was more like me. But Kasmárin and Sennsárin. Bloody hell. I don’t understand them. Never have, never will. Love them, die for them, sure. Understand them?”

“It’s the magic sir. Sets them apart a bit, so to speak.”

“John, they went all the way to Bansor to fetch an adept for me to marry.”

“Another one?”

Luke laughed. “Yes, another one. Much prettier than the rest, with a good deal of character I think.”

“But not for you sir?”

“Well, it’s probably a bit soon to tell. We didn’t meet under the best circumstances. I suppose I should give it a try, and I really don’t want to hurt the boys—they’ve worked so damned hard to find me a wife. Honestly, I’d like nothing better than to take some men west into the Sharl Mountains and do some exploring rather than get all mixed up in this marriage nonsense. Anyway, nothing matters right now but Sennsárin.”

“Aye. That’s true. You know, Sire, you’ve talked about the Sharl for a long time. What’s keeping you now that Teren isn’t around to mess things up?”

“Not much, actually. Except Senn. We’ll see.”

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After a nap and a private meal, Lauren spent most of her day with Tim. He’d drift in and out of sleep but when he was awake he looked better. It was magical to be with him, to catch up on five years, especially the last one.

“So tell me about your time with Senn and Kas. I heard something about you marrying Luke and being in love with Kas. What’s up with that, Lauren? I don’t get it.”

“Why don’t you tell me about Jenna first?” she replied.

He frowned and she laughed. “Okay, that wasn’t fair. But we will get back to her.”

## The Princes of Anfall

Lauren recounted her crossing, the year looking for Tim, and all the details of the time since she first felt Kas following her. She left out any mention of being in love.

“Tim, I don’t really understand this whole ‘having my adept baby’ thing. It seems that if Luke wants a wife, he should just take one from the endless pool of eligible women here. Kas is powerful enough for the whole family. Aren’t his children going to be good enough to guard the house? Especially with Teren gone?”

“That’s just it, Lauren. *Kas* is powerful enough. You don’t understand this family. To them, Luke is a god. Kas is a wildcard. They pull him out when they need him and shove him back in the deck when Luke is around. It’s really unfair. I think it has something to do with their father, who also wasn’t an adept. Jenna and Margaret dote on Luke. They love Kas but they don’t know how to handle him. Kas will have adept babies galore, I’m sure. But Luke needs to marry first—none of them can marry until the King does—it’s just the rule of the Land.”

“Senn said something like that but it still seems weird.”

“They’re obsessed with bringing the gifts back into the family. And yet they don’t treat Kas with the respect he deserves. At least I don’t think so. Hang around long enough and you’ll understand.”

“Well, Tim, that’s just it. I’m not going to hang around.”

He looked stunned.

“I’m so sorry. I came to find you, nearly killed myself finding you and now I’m going to turn around and go home. Once I’m convinced you are okay. And Senn, well I guess I’m not going to be able to change what happens to him. He’s my friend, though, Tim. I know it doesn’t make sense that in such a short time I could care about these people this way.”

“It makes perfect sense to me. Remember, I’ve been here five years?”

“I know you’re staying. But I’m going home.”

“Going home to what? Living in a crappy walk-up with no friends, no boyfriend, writing a boring dissertation? How can you even consider that after being here? I mean, look around—if it’s not paradise, it’s pretty close. And your gifts, you can use them here. Really use them. Lauren, you’ve gotten incredibly strong—just think of what you could do!”

“You don’t understand, Tim.”

“It’s Kas. Then it’s true? There’s something there?”

“Not enough.”

“Oh, Lauren, I’m sorry, baby.” He pulled her towards him and hugged her.

“I just want to go home and forget I ever came here. Maybe you’ll come and visit me?”

He hugged her tighter. “You’ve got it. I would have come before, I even did once, but I was always afraid you’d feel like you had to cross with me. Lauren, look at me.”

She met his familiar eyes and warm smile.

“I love you. I don’t know how to thank you for saving my life.”

“No, thank Kas and Senn and the rest.”

“No, Lauren. You. It wouldn’t have happened without you. I was in hell, and you are my angel. I hope you won’t regret coming here—always remember that you gave me back my life.”

“I’d do it again. I’d do it a thousand times. Just maybe a little differently,” she laughed a little. “Okay, so I haven’t forgotten about Jenna. Give.”

“Ugh. Not now.”

“Now.”

“There’s not much to tell. Nothing’s happened. I’ve never had this problem with women. I’m like a teenager around her, staring, stuttering. She’s an ice maiden, Lauren, I swear. And it doesn’t matter, I still want her. How sick is that?”

“I think we should form our own self-help group.”

“Great Landers who love the royal family of Anfall too much?”

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Lauren finally found her room by asking half-dozen servants for directions. She washed and changed and sat on her bed, feeling alone and lost without Tim’s company. Her thoughts were with Senn and Kas and she intended to find them when her door flew open.

It was Margaret, and she looked fierce.

“Lauren, Kas needs you. Now!”

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Lauren nodded and pulled a robe around her nightdress. She followed the small woman, having trouble keeping up with her.

Margaret talked the whole way.

“I don’t know what you can do that I can’t but Kas won’t have anyone else in the room. I’m afraid Senn is taking a turn for the worse. Teren’s poison is in him, I know that’s it.”

She turned suddenly and grabbed Lauren by the shoulders.

“I can’t lose him, do you understand? I can’t lose another son,” Margaret said, tension and anguish filling her voice.

Lauren was terrified. “You won’t.”

Margaret nodded towards a door guarded by two men. Jenna stood in the hallway with Bruce.

“He yelled for you, Lauren,” Bruce said. “Go in.”

She took a deep breath and stepped inside the dark room. A single candle burned on a small table near the bed.

Kas lay on the bed and held his brother in his arms.

“I’m losing him,” he whispered.

“No, no you’re not.”

Lauren rushed over and took Senn’s hand.

It was ice cold.

Kas looked pale as well.

“I don’t know if you can heal, Lauren. Senn is the only other I know who can and he can’t do much. He can’t help himself right now. But we have to try. It will hurt, do you understand?”

“I don’t care. What do I need to do?”

“Lie on the other side of him and listen to me.”

Lauren went to the other side of the bed and held Senn. She could see the rise and fall of his chest but she sensed that only Kas’s magic was making him breathe. She closed her eyes.

Pure, white energy.

Kas was pouring white light into Senn.

She focused all her strength and tried to imitate him. She made the connection to Senn and cried out in pain.

Kas looked into her eyes, and she tried again. It was excruciating, but she held on, trying to match Kas's force.

Kas shuddered and breathed deeply.

Tears flowed down Lauren's face from the pain that radiated through her limbs and pulsed in her head.

*Put the pain aside. Put your body aside. You have pure energy within you. Let go of fear. Let it flow freely.*

She fought to do as he bid her, her thoughts echoing Kas's instructions, struggling with the strength of what she had to do to help Senn.

Finally, the pain started to subside.

Senn began to stir.

With that, Lauren and Kas became stronger.

*Stay with me Lauren. A little longer now. Everything you have.*

Lauren was shaking, thinking about nothing but Senn. She saw into his mind and his spirit, taken back to the day he had invited her to read him. Senn had asked her to trust him. He had shown all of himself, the amazing love he had for the world and everything in it.

She tried to give him back all the love she had within her.

"I love you Senn," she said aloud. "You are amazing, my friend. Your spirit fills me with joy and I need you in my life. Don't leave me. I've lost too much. I can't lose you now. Kas can't lose you. You are all he has, the only one who understands him. Come back to us. Come back, Senn. We're waiting for you."

Senn's eyes fluttered open briefly. "Hello Lauren. Hello brother."

He closed his eyes again and fell into a deep sleep.

He was breathing normally and color was coming back into his face.

Kas collapsed in relief and Lauren passed out.

Kas kicked open the door, carrying Lauren in his arms.

"My god, what happened?" cried Bruce. "Is she alright? Senn?"

"He'll be okay. She's fine, just drained. Mother, sit with Senn until I return."

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He carried Lauren to her room and gently deposited her on the bed.

He looked down at the exhausted woman and wanted nothing more than to lie next to her, hold her, and sleep.

Instead he kissed her on the forehead and left.

When he returned to Senn's room, his mother was sitting on the bed, holding his brother's hand to her face. Jenna was standing nearby.

"He has a bit of color," Margaret whispered.

Kas nodded.

"I don't know how he'll be when he comes out of it but I think he'll regain most of his strength. We'll see."

"The girl helped you? She's a healer?" Jenna asked.

"Yes."

Margaret bowed her head. "Please thank her for us."

"Thank her yourself, mother. She would have pushed herself to the brink of death to save him. She is the reason we have Anthla-ma back. Teren is finished because of her. You can thank her in person. Call for me if Senn changes, whether for the better or the worse."

He left the room quickly and Jenna looked at her mother, puzzled. "What's gotten into him?"

"I'm not sure. I have the sense that his battle with Teren was quite difficult—it must have been, of course. And then healing Senn, in this state. I'm sure he's exhausted. And, well, I think our Kas may be struggling with something else."

"He seems, different somehow. Distant. Bitter?"

Margaret turned to her fourth son and caressed his beautiful face. "Kas has carried the family on his back since he was a boy. It's my fault—I never cherished the boys as I ought to have. I was absorbed with your father and then with Luke, because he is so like his father."

"I never felt abandoned by you."

"You're my daughter, Jenna. It's different. Men compete for their father's affection and approval. Without a father, well, I'm not sure what happens. Dear Hunter tried his



best. But it wasn't enough. Yes, bitter is the right word. He'll leave us soon, I can feel it. As soon as Senn is well."

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Kas slept fitfully for an hour, then started awake thinking of Senn. He reached out to probe Senn's consciousness.

His brother's energy grew stronger by the moment and Kas sighed in deep relief. His greatest fear, that of losing his dearest friend, slipped away slowly and the tension that clutched at his heart slipped away with it. He hadn't known, until the moment he thought he would lose Senn, what that loss would mean to him. *I don't want to care this way, not about Senn, or Luke, or...* He tried to push Lauren's image aside. Useless. Kas cursed in frustration. "Where's your magic now, Prince?"

Lauren as the mistress of the keep? Luke's new wife? Directing servants, planning parties, decorating and the other things his mother tended to?

He snickered. Not bloody likely.

Kas returned to bed, tossing and turning for hours.

Luke and Lauren—the picture of them together, locked in a kiss, locked in an embrace, stabbed into him like a knife. *She'll leave, she won't do it.* Kas growled. *You're a fool. Anfall is safe, Senn is safe, Tim is home and you're throwing a jealous fit.*

He finally gave up on sleep and sat near the window, rubbing his hands across the Anthla-ma, feeling its power and light.

He heard the lightest tap on the door and his heart leapt. *Lauren.*

"Come."

Lauren quietly stepped into his room and shut the door behind her. Only moonlight lit the huge suite.

Kas's eyes adjusted to the low light and he took her in. She looked tired but more beautiful than in his fantasies. Her emerald eyes shimmered in the moonlight. He could feel her heart pounding in nervousness and anticipation.

"We've had too much contact, Lauren. I can hear all of your thoughts."

"What does it matter? I don't care, Kas—indulge yourself."

Kas stifled a gasp at the tone to her voice, the thoughts that poured from her, her appraisal of him. She didn't try to hide her interest in his body and he followed her eyes to his chest, his stomach, and lower.

“Lauren,” he whispered, “watch your thoughts, I’m warning you.”

“Here are my thoughts, Highness, you can have them out loud. You’re a god. I’m overwhelmed by your power, by your magic, your strength, your courage. You have the most exquisite face and body I’ve ever seen. Your hair looks like white gold in the moonlight, your skin looks like velvet. I want to touch your chest, your arms, your face, your...your ears.” She laughed lightly and squeezed her eyes shut. Kas heard what she wouldn’t say aloud. *I want to kiss every inch of you. I want to make you call my name.*

Kas groaned. A pounding lashed through his body, through his sex.

“I came to say goodbye. I’m leaving in the morning.” Lauren looked down at the floor.

“You didn’t come to say goodbye. Look at me. Don’t lie, Lauren, it doesn’t work, remember? You’ve wanted me since the moment I followed you into the woods. The very first moment you saw me. And on the road, and at Tansing Crossing and in Anan-kai, and every moment since then.” *And I’ve wanted you. Desperately, more than I thought possible.*

“And you? What do you want Kas?”

He turned from her and looked out the window. “What I want is inconsequential. You would have made a good lover. But you’ve been a great companion and you’re a great adept. Thank you for my brother’s life.”

“Likewise.”

Kas faced her again. He shrugged. “And now, you won’t be my lover, or my friend, or my companion. You’re Luke’s, or no one’s—your choice.” *You would have made a good wife.* A pain welled up and filled his heart and he pushed it down.

Lauren trembled and took one step towards him.

“Why are you so angry at me, Kas? It’s not my fault. I didn’t ask for any of this.”

“I honestly don’t know why I’m angry at you.”

“So you think I’d be a good lover. That would never be enough for me and of course that’s why you’ve turned away from me.”

“Then why are you here? To torture me or yourself? Because, my dear, you are out of your league when it comes to torture. I’ve endured all sorts recently and I can dish it out.” Lauren stepped back as Kas pulled his hair away from his face and sat down. He

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threw one leg over the side of the armchair and ran his hand down his chest slowly, stopping as his hand slid under his low-cut pants. *Don't leave, Lauren. Spirit, just once, let me have all of her.* "You'd better leave now. Before I take advantage of you. And that's all it would be, Lauren."

He could tell he frightened her, mystified her, excited her, hurt her deeply. Her eyes widened and she licked her lips slightly.

"Lauren, why are you here?" he repeated darkly, tilting his head down and narrowing his eyes.

She closed her eyes. *To finish what we started. To have you once before I leave. To have you as my first. To torture myself. To make you remember me. Can you give me that?* "Can you, Kas?"

"Will you go to Luke? Tell me, will you ever be with him? Swear!"

"Does it really matter to you?"

"Yes, damn it, it matters in a million ways, some I don't understand myself."

Lauren's voice was a mere whisper. "It's your ego. I wish it had something to do with me, but it doesn't, does it? Well, I'm leaving. He'll never touch me. I swear." Kas shuddered and his skin began to glisten. The air in the room warmed, shimmered, sparkled. He pulled the fabric of his pants away to expose his desire to her. They locked eyes and magic sealed their fate. They shared every sensation.

Lauren looked stunned. "I guess I am out of my league."

"Take off your robe." He didn't approach her.

Lauren unfastened her robe slowly and let it slip to the ground, revealing a transparent white gown. Kas touched himself again in challenge and Lauren gasped and arched, feeling his need.

"I *am* out of my league, highness. However, there's something I have that you can't take from me. No one ever wanted you like this. No one will ever love you the way I do. And you can take that to the goddamned bank."

Lauren unbuttoned her gown, but not as he expected. After opening the garment a bit, she brought her hand to her neck and began caressing herself. He caught his breath as she caressed her breasts, playing with her nipples beneath the fabric, groaning in excitement. She pulled the sides of the gown open to reveal her white skin.

“I’ve thought of this constantly, Kas. You naked, like this. Oh, that shocks you? What do I care what you think now? Sitting behind a pillar, waiting for the devil himself to kill me, I thought of having you.”

“Come here.”

But she didn’t. She slid her hand down her belly, past her mound, and began caressing her inner thighs. She toyed with the silken hair between her legs and when she brought her fingers to her moist folds, she hissed and breathed in quickly.

“Come here I said.” Kas stood and slid his pants to the floor. Lauren walked to him and let her gown drop to the floor. He reached out to kiss her, but she dropped to her knees before him.

“Lauren? What are you doing?”

“Kneeling before the great Prince of Anfall, whom I worship.”

She caressed him with her fingers, slowly stroking the length of him. Kas took in a sharp breath and grabbed onto her hair. His hands were on fire. Lauren looked up to see him gazing down at her, eyes burning. He cried her name as she brought her mouth around him, caressing him with her tongue, sucking and teasing.

“Is this good, highness? What’s your pleasure?”

“You’re killing me.” Kas gasped and his legs started to shake. “Kill me, Lauren. Put me out of my fucking misery.” *Don’t stop. Don’t ever stop.*

“It’s not good? I’m sorry.”

“It’s good. Damn, it’s very, very good. Please don’t stop. But I want to make you feel... Ooohhh... I’m so selfish. I’ve never been this...” He moaned again and the thrill pounded through his entire body as he filled Lauren’s mouth. Lauren moaned with him.

Kas fell to his knees and held Lauren’s head, looking deeply into her eyes. “Lauren, you can’t be a virgin. It’s simply not possible.” She nodded and smiled slightly and Kas felt a different fist around his heart. Her green eyes glowed and her hair smelled of flowers and her mouth curved slightly up because she knew she had pleased him and... *It hurts. How did I let this happen?*

“What?” Lauren looked at him oddly and he shook his head.

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“It’s nothing. I... I just need to make love to you until it stops hurting. How long will that take, Lauren? A lifetime?” Kas brushed away the tear that escaped down her cheek and she reached to his cheek.

Kas stood, pulled Lauren to her feet, and led her to the bed.

“Is this what you want? Be sure, Lauren, because you can’t have this moment again.” *Please let it be me. I need this so badly. You’re pathetic, Kasmárin, pathetic.*

Lauren smiled and nodded and Kas’s heart broke. He was sure all of Anfall must have heard the tear rip through him.

“You asked for it.” He smiled darkly and hovered inches above her, his arm muscles bulging. Lauren ran her hands along them and sighed as his hair cascaded onto her breasts.

“You’re too hard to be with, Kas. Do you know how beautiful you are? Yes, of course you do. Do you remember when we rode together, and I told you how difficult it was for me to be so close to someone so gorgeous?”

He shook his head in dismay. “Enough talk.” *Please say more, say it again. Tell me I’m the one. Say it again.*

Lauren took in a quick breath and he realized his mistake—his guard down, his heart aching, his thoughts fell into the air.

Kas attacked every inch of Lauren’s smooth body with his hands and his mouth as she spoke her heart to him. He began at her neck, kissing her and nipping at the flesh, at her earlobes, whispering promises and threats into her ears in the ancient tongue. She arched and squirmed under him and reached to hold him, but he pinned her hands over her head.

“Oh my God, Kas, please!”

“What, Lauren, what? Tell me what you want. Who you want it from. Tell me!” he hissed. He brought his mouth to her breasts. Lauren begged him to stop, begged him to continue.

His hand moved to her mound, pressing firmly, and then circling until she opened her legs to reveal her soaking folds.

“You’re teasing me.” She looked into his eyes.

“Yes, I am.” He smiled and moved to the end of the bed. Lauren could barely think, but she realized what he intended.

“No, Kas, you can’t.”

“Oh, Lauren, trust me, I can.”

He held her hands down again as she tried to push him away. He brought his mouth down on her, flicking his hot tongue across her, sucking and circling and teasing until he released her hands and she pulled his head in closer.

“This is impossible. Impossible... Please, I can’t take any more!”

Kas sucked rhythmically until Lauren screamed in pleasure, wrapping her hands in his long hair, writhing in waves of bliss. Lauren finally opened her eyes and found Kas lying next to her, propped on one arm, studying her face.

“Oh my God, Kas. I never imagined.”

He held her neck with one hand and propped himself up with the other, holding her gaze. Specks of gold and silver flashed in his eyes and his skin glowed in the moonlight.

“This may hurt. Be very sure, Lauren.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me. For chrissakes, Kas, don’t stop now.” She rolled him onto his back and he looked at her in shock.

“No, honey, not like this.”

“Shut up. This is what I’ve pictured. It’s my time, highness. Let me have it.” Lauren brought her mouth down on his and Kas’s world melted away. Lauren rubbed his sex as she kissed him, devoured his warm, spicy mouth. His body burned, his sex was hot in her hand.

Lauren broke away from the kiss and brought her hand to her folds, rubbing herself for him to see.

“Bloody hell, woman. Now, or I’m finished.” Lauren lowered herself slowly onto his tip and moved down enough to swallow it. Kas groaned and squeezed her hips.

“Now you tell me, Kas, you tell me. I’m the one. Say it.”

“*Arlasomoi, lathagamoï Lauren, salaflen me dthenslamon hoi me...*” Kas cried out as she lowered herself onto him, taking him in to her tightness, squeezing the juice of his soul into her own body. “You’re the one. May the Spirit help me, you’re the one.” Lauren moaned as she rode Kas’s shaft, fire building inside, exploding inside. They cried

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together as he filled her again and she collapsed on his chest. He throbbed still and rocked her back and forth, shaking, shimmering in the moonlight.

Lauren cried, and Kas ignored a single tear of his own.

“You’re magic, Lauren. The most amazing woman in this Land, or any other.”

She turned away and sat on the edge of the bed.

*No! Oh no, it’s real.*

Lauren stood. “Now I’ll say goodbye.” She dressed with her back towards him.

“I love you. Don’t forget me, Kas. Don’t ever forget me. Promise?”

He didn’t speak, and she stood still for a moment, then walked away from him without turning around. She opened the door and step into the hallway. Kas squeezed his eyes shut and heard the door close.

“I promise, Lauren.”



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

By the time Kas rose again, it was midday. He looked to the crest of hill in the east and saw Luke and his men. He sighed with relief. He picked up the jeweled scepter, feeling it call to him. *This is mine at least.* He would take it with him when he left. And he would leave, as soon as Senn was on his feet.

Palin tapped gently on the door and entered.

Kas pulled him into his arms. "Palin, how are you?"

"Will Senn really survive?"

"Yes, brother, Senn will survive. And no doubt live for many years to drive us all insane."

He smiled and laughed, his heart a little lighter at the thought.

Palin broke down in tears and turned away, obviously embarrassed at his outburst.

"I'm so sorry, Palin. You've lost your father and I've lost one of my dearest friends."

"We'll bury him at sundown. I thought maybe you would stand with me."

"Of course, you're my brother. You understand that, don't you?"

"I'm beginning to." Palin plopped down on Kas's bed, toying with the questions in his head.

Kas watched as Palin pulled a long auburn hair from a pillowcase. He winced and turned towards the window.

"It's a lot to take in," Palin said, "Things are changing so quickly. Hunter. Luke putting me in charge for a while, having Tim back, and...."

"Alyssa. It's overwhelming."

"Do you really think she's mine? I feel like I dreamt that part." His eyes were red from crying.

Palin was losing faith that things could work out for him, Kas realized, exhaustion and grief taking their toll.

"Palin, do you remember our accident, when I was hurt?"

"Of course." He shook his head in dismay.

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“No, that’s not what I mean. Do you remember that you were strong afterwards because you had to be?”

Palin nodded. “Lauren said it would help me grow. Become a man. I feel like a child.”

Kas sighed and nodded his head. “I’ve watched you grow in the days since and I’ve been proud of you. Everyone sees it. You’ve felt it, haven’t you?”

“I’m still frightened, confused.”

“We’re all frightened and confused, Palin. Of evil and death and losing someone we love. That’s part of life. But we go on and do our best.”

“I suppose.”

“Think about what you’ve been through these last weeks, how brave you’ve been. You’ve rescued a friend, defeated a wizard and been a leader to your people. Aren’t you good enough to take care of one little maiden?” Kas smirked. “And aren’t you looking forward to bedding her, Palin? It’s quite natural—I can read your thoughts.”

“Some little maiden. I won’t be... enough, I suppose. I’m not even a member of the royal family, or a knight, or a warrior. And I’m certainly not the experienced lover my *brothers* are.”

Palin shrugged as he smoothed the covers of the bed, pulling another auburn hair away.

“Nonsense. You’ve been a royal since the day my mother brought you home. Like a gift from the Spirit.”

“Hunter said the same thing.”

“Don’t worry about the Maiden, Palin. She’s just a girl who wants a chance to love and be loved. That shouldn’t be such a bad job, eh brother? She’s rather sweet and very pretty. And she is a *maiden* after all. So your lack of experience won’t be much of an issue.”

“Isn’t that all Lauren is, Kas? A girl wanting to love and be loved?”

Palin smirked as Kas’s mouth dropped open.

“It’s not that simple.”

"I think you're wrong," the young man said, "I think it is *just* that simple. And you know what? I think you want her as much as she wants you. And, and—" he began to stammer.

"Go ahead," Kas said quietly.

"I think you'd be an ass to let her go to Luke. A real ass. I don't think you will, either. You'll take her away with you. That's what I'd do."

"Is it now? You'd take the King's new bride and run away with her?" he laughed.

"Yes, I would."

Palin looked into Kas's eyes, not laughing at all.

"Well, your little Maiden foretold our futures and Lauren will marry the king. So I'm afraid you're wrong."

He looked out the window at Luke and his troops. *Please Spirit, let Alyssa be wrong. I'd rather never lay eyes on her again than see her in his arms.* She swore.

"Let's get downstairs and greet our King properly. We'll honor Hunter and celebrate our victory. And then, Palin, you can go fetch your Maiden."

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Lauren woke to a pounding in her head. She thought she would scream if it didn't stop. Then she realized someone was beating down her door and she sat up.

"What is it?"

Princess Jenna threw the door open. "Get up, Lauren. Get dressed, quickly. Luke returns with his troops and you must be downstairs to greet him. And, Lauren?"

"Yes?"

"I must thank you."

Lauren simply nodded.

"No, you must listen. You saved Senn. You saved your brother, and well, I'm fairly fond of him too—he's one of our family."

Lauren smiled to herself, hoping that the ice maiden might have some warmth for Tim after all.

"And, I hope you'll be happy here. We owe you a great deal."

"I have my brother back. If Senn is healed, that will be all the reward I need."

"Well, one of my brothers approaches with his army. Hurry up."

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The men stood to one side of the massive courtyard. Hunter's flower-strewn bier occupied the other half. Lauren saw from her window that Margaret, Jenna and some other women were gathering near the inner door of the keep. She squinted to see the approach of the King and his men and found herself proud of his victory. The people of Anfall lined the roadway and threw flowers before the returning army.

They should be doing this for Kas, she thought.

He's the real hero.

Lauren dressed quickly and ventured out of her room, asking the way to Senn's room. She found it guarded by one of the Anfahuin.

"Sir?" she asked. "Just a minute with him."

"You are Lauren, the healer? The King's new bride?"

"Yes, I am. Can I enter?"

"Of course." The knight smiled and bowed.

Lauren gently pried the door open and went to Senn's bedside. His bright eyes opened and he reached for her face.

"Hey sister."

"Hey brother. Welcome back."

"Well, I'm not sure I'm really back yet."

He sounded so weak and looked so young. "Take it easy, Senn. I just wanted to check up on you."

"I know what you did for me."

She hugged him.

"So, Luke returns from battle?" he asked.

"Yes. They're all out there to greet him. I suppose I'm in trouble with Jenna now for not being there."

Senn laughed weakly. "It's hard not to be in trouble with Jenna. Look, Lauren, I've said this before, but you can stay. Luke won't force himself on you—this isn't Talinthal. Stay with us, stay with Tim."

"No can do, Senn."

"I know what I saw in the sky last night, Lauren. Those were Kas's fireworks and I think a few of your own?"

She blushed and he smiled.

“Things change, Lauren. Kas may open up, you may stop caring, who knows? Why not give it a little time?”

“When you’re better, we’ll talk about it. Rest.”

She pulled a blanket around him and tucked him in like a child, leaning in to kiss his forehead. He fell back into a deep sleep in seconds.

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“Where is she, Kas?” Palin whispered. “This is going to look really bad.”

Kas didn’t answer.

“Get her.” His mother’s order was clipped.

“Bloody hell. Can’t someone else go?” She glared at Kas.

Kas ran into the keep, knowing exactly where to find Lauren. He was taking the stairs to Senn’s wing, two at a time, when he almost knocked her off her feet. Kas caught Lauren and held her arm. A shot went through his whole body at the contact. Kas looked at her lips. *Hours. It’s been a few hours and it feels like years.*

Don’t touch her, it’s over, he thought, shielding himself from the icy hand that began to squeeze on his heart at the sight of her.

“You’re going to bruise my arm,” she snapped. Kas felt her longing wash over him. *No, it had been only hours. It felt like minutes.*

“Go ahead, Lauren, kiss me. It’s what you want.” *Why so nasty to her, Kasmárin? Don’t hurt her further.*

“Stop that, it’s not fair.”

“Why weren’t you out to greet your new husband? That’s not very loyal of you, Lauren.” Kas couldn’t get control of his emotions or erase the bitter, catty tone from his voice.

“I wanted to see Senn.”

“Maybe. And maybe you came looking for me one last time?”

He picked her chin up so that she was forced to look into his eyes. *Remember, Lauren. You’ll never forget me.*

“I can’t take any more. Don’t do this to me. I’ve given you everything I have. Now I’m going home.”

Kas studied her from head to toe, trying to memorize every detail of her. Then he released his grip.

Lauren closed her eyes.

“Downstairs now. Don’t shame us in front of our King.”

Lauren followed Kas into the courtyard and stood with Tim.

“What’s wrong, Lauren?” he asked her softly.

“I can’t do this, Tim.”

“Don’t cry, please, not now.”

Lauren looked at Kas, but he stared straight ahead.

Cheers went up for the King as he entered the courtyard. His family rushed to greet him. Lauren thought she’d be sick as she swayed on unsteady feet. The King walked right past her into the hallway, not even glancing in her direction. Lauren saw Jenna cast a quick look at her. She motioned for her to join them.

“Come on Lauren, I’ll stay with you. We’ve got to go in.” Tim put his arm around her and guided her inside.

“No. I’ll stay for Hunter’s funeral. Senn’s better. I leave tonight. You have to help me, Tim. I don’t know how to leave—where to leave.”

Tim nodded. “I understand. I want more time with you, but I don’t want to see you hurt like this. Leave it until morning. We shouldn’t make the journey at night and I could use some more rest.”

“Of course, you should rest. I’m sorry. Where do I make the cross?”

“At Tansing Crossing.”

“Tansing Crossing! I thought the name referred to the river crossing, the Nor bridge.”

“That too.” He smiled. “It’s the only spot. I bet you’ll just love it there.”

“I already do. Damn it, I love everything about this place.”

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Everyone noticed that Lauren was missing but Tim explained that she was still exhausted from healing Senn, convincing no one with the half-truth. Luke was jovial, happy at Senn’s recovery. He gave a brief description of their battle and was filled in on the whole story of Tim’s rescue and Alyssa’s struggle with Teren. He never asked about

Lauren. The day wore on with stories and two meals and a break for rest. As sundown approached, the family began funeral preparations.

Tim went to Lauren's room and woke her.

"It's time for Hunter's funeral."

They assembled in the courtyard, Palin and Kas at the front near Hunter's bier. Palin held a torch. Kas began a chant older than Anfall. The others joined in and the cry went to the Spirit to accept Hunter into his father's house.

"We give you our father, our friend, our teacher," Kas extended both hands to the sky. "I never heard cruelty from this man's mouth. I never heard a lie that wasn't meant to be a kindness. I never saw him accept credit for his accomplishments. He asked for nothing and gave everything. He taught me that gifts are nothing, that magic is nothing, that power is nothing. He taught me that friendship, bravery, loyalty and love are the only magic we have. We cannot repay the debt we owe him, we can only try to be like him."

Palin held the torch to the bier and the mourners watched the flames reach the stars. One at a time they hugged Palin. Margaret and Jenna cried openly and Luke comforted them. Tim and Lauren held hands and watched as Kas walked inside. Bruce stayed with Palin and talked with him until the worst moments of his grief passed.

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Kas stood on the balcony that extended from his room, still praying for Hunter, for Palin, and for Senn.

"Spirit, guide me," he prayed aloud. My family is free of Teren's evil, he thought humbly, free to live in peace and prosperity. The lands would prosper. Its citizens wouldn't live in fear of raids. *And I can leave Anfall. For the first time in my life, everyone will be safe without me.* He could go anywhere, do anything. Except, Kas thought, have the thing he wanted most in the world. *I won't watch her leave, I won't stay to see her with Luke.*

*Senn, when it's time, come to me.* Kas sent the thought on the night air and felt Senn's agreement.

Kas gathered a few things and went to the stable. Catcher greeted him warmly and nuzzled at his hand, begging for the apple Kas always brought before a journey. Kas felt

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better the further away from Anfall keep they rode. It will be all right, he thought. As long as I don't think about anything at all, I'm fine.

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Senn sat up when Luke entered.

"Hello Sennsárin."

"Hello Majesty."

They embraced. Luke was hesitant, and Senn looked at him curiously.

"What, Luke?"

"Kas? What's going on, Senn? He's like a stranger. He's not even come to me. I'm not sure what to do, but I'm afraid to go anywhere near him. Was he damaged by this battle with Teren?"

Senn thought for a moment. "Yes. You've known enough battles, known pain and fear."

Luke shook his head. "Not like that. I don't understand Kas very well, and it's my fault—I've never really tried. I'm afraid it might be too late now—he seems bitter, angry."

"Look, you became king before I was born. You taught yourself to rule. We've all done our best without a father."

"You don't remember him, Senn and I don't mean disrespect to him. But he wasn't that great a father. He was ill as long as I knew him. I don't think I would have learned anything from him had he survived. It must have been really hard on Mother."

"I know. She's done her best but she's been depressed for years now. It's made Jenna cold. What I'm trying to say is that we've all done our best and I think we've done a good job. Especially you. It's not your fault that Kas is a loner."

"He wants to be King."

Senn breathed in quickly and shook his head.

"Of course, don't deny it. He always wanted to be King. It used to infuriate me. Now I wonder why I didn't see it sooner. He's meant to rule and I'm meant to fight. We've been struggling against our destinies for half our lives. What a shame."

Senn looked at Luke expectantly.

Luke nodded.

"I'll tell them tomorrow."



“Going on that trip, finally?”

“I may, I may indeed.”

“And I may join you, brother? If...”

“If Kas lets you, you mean. You wouldn’t last a week away from him. We’ll see.”

Luke smiled. “One more thing—the woman. What happened?”

“They fell in love. From about, oh, I’d say the first day. Of course Kas wouldn’t admit that he cares for her, just that he’d like to bed her.”

Luke laughed. “Well, I guess that gets me off the hook. What a lot of horseshit that marriage business is. Fortunately with Teren gone, we can forget it. Kas can have the wizard babies. You can too, boy. It was only Mother’s way of keeping me around. There’s no rule about me marrying first and everyone knows it.”

Senn nodded. “I know.”

“Join us tomorrow if you can, Senn. I need you with me.”

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Lauren drifted in and out of troubled sleep. How could she leave Tim? How could she leave Anfall and Senn and Palin? Every time she thought of Kas, the pain overwhelmed her and she broke down. The last thing on her mind was King Luke. Until he opened her door.

“Luke!” she sat up quickly and pulled her blanket around her neck. Surely he couldn’t mean to meet his new bride like this? “I mean, King Lucenor. Sire. What the hell *am* I supposed to call you? You’re all so informal.”

“You can call me Luke. And may I call you Lauren?” he smirked.

She nodded, mesmerized by his size, his looks. It was like looking into the face of a beautiful tiger. She could appreciate his beauty but didn’t want to get too close.

“How about if I turn my back and you climb out of bed into more clothing. And I promise not to peek?”

Lauren laughed lightly and pulled on her robe. “Okay, Luke. What is it you want?”

He raised his brows in surprise. “Well, I suppose it’s time we at least had a few words, don’t you think?”

“I suppose so. What about?”

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“I’m glad Tim is alive and well. He has become family to us but you understand that now.”

“Thank you for caring for him for all these years. He’s all I have in the world.”

“Then of course there’s a wedding to plan.”

Lauren’s heart stopped.

“I thought so. Not the giddy bride-to-be, are you?”

*Just stall, Lauren. You’re leaving anyway.*

“May I sit, Lauren?” he asked.

“Please.”

“How about we have a little honest talk?” He held her gaze and her hand, knowing that he could wield a little magic with his charisma, even without the gifts.

“All right.”

“We’re not going to get married, are we?”

Lauren stared at him stupidly.

“Lauren, we’re not getting married. I’m telling you, I’m not asking.”

“You don’t want to marry me?” Her heart raced with the tiger so close. But he seemed so gentle. Where was the mighty King?

“You don’t sound particularly hurt. At least humor my pride a little.”

“Of course there isn’t a woman in the world who doesn’t want to marry you.”

“Except one.”

Lauren winced and squeezed her eyes shut. “Except one.”

“Because she’s in love with my brother.”

“Because she’s in love with your brother,” Lauren whispered.

Luke stood and began pacing.

“Please don’t be angry, Luke. Kas didn’t have anything to do with it. He doesn’t even want me, well, maybe he wanted me physically but he doesn’t want more than that. He certainly doesn’t want to marry me. And well it was only once really that we. . .”

“He had you!” Luke boomed, pounding one fist into the other hand.

*The tiger.* Lauren squeezed his hand and pleaded. “Oh, I started it—I went to him, honestly! Don’t take it out on him, please! He was torn up about it. He never wanted to betray you. You’re all he ever talked about. Kas loves you and respects you so much.”

Luke laughed loudly, barely able to get a word out.

“I’m kidding Lauren, relax! Look, dear, I don’t even know you. What kind of pathetic creature would I be if I were upset that you fell in love with the most wonderful man in the land before you ever met me? I love Kas. How could I blame you for loving him? I’ve been hoping for years that someone would get to him. Just never thought it would be my new bride!”

Lauren smiled, a weight falling away. “So you really aren’t upset?”

“I’m really not upset. I’m a little worried that Kas has been torn up over this but I’ll speak with him. Now, are you planning on running away in the middle of the night, or something silly like that?”

Lauren felt embarrassed. “At first light.”

“And you weren’t running away with Kas, I suppose?”

“No, going home.”

“I see. Well there’s no need for that now, is there?”

“I don’t know. I don’t know what he wants.”

“Well, I suppose I’ll leave that to you to find out. For now, try to get some sleep and stop worrying. You’ve done enough, little queen. You have my eternal thanks. My kingdom is blessed because you crossed into it. I’ll never be able to repay you.”

“You already have, Luke. You are a wonderful man, just like your brothers said. Like Hunter said.”

He bent over and kissed her on the forehead. “Too many worries. Let them go. Things are going to pick up around here.” He smiled and left her room.

Lauren had no idea what to do, but for once, she had someone to talk to. She quietly went in search of Tim’s room.

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Luke greeted his family and guests at the breakfast table, but Kas, Tim and Lauren were absent, and Luke wondered if that was a good sign or a bad one.

“All right. Any business to clean up before I begin?”

Palin cleared his throat. “Well, yes, I have some business.”

“Yes, Palin, take the knights to get your little witch bride and bring her back, that’s fine.”

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“She can stay here?”

“I don’t think we could stop her if we wanted to now, could we? She’d turn us into frogs and whatnot. And we don’t want to turn her away. Alyssa helped save us and she’s been alone long enough. I may even go with you to see Anan-kai for myself. I’m in an adventurous mood. Now you just have to stop that crying you’ve been prone to recently. We’re going to work on that. You’re royalty and a grown man.”

“Two weddings to plan,” smiled Jenna and she reached and grabbed Palin’s hand, giving it a squeeze.

“Not exactly two weddings. Well not yet in any case.”

“What do you mean?” Margaret clutched Bruce’s arm.

“I’ll get to that, Mother,” Luke continued, frowning. “Thanks to Kas, we are free today for the first, well second, day in a thousand years. I hope you all understand what Anfall owes him. I know what I owe him. Because we are free, I am free.”

“No, Luke, please.” His mother reached out to him.

“No Luke, please what?” Senn stood in the doorway, and everyone rushed to hug him.

“It’s too soon for you to be up, Senn.” His mother scolded him.

“No, it’s just perfect,” Luke said. “Senn knows what he can and can’t do. Besides, little brother, you’re looking pretty good, all things considered.”

“Don’t I always?”

“I was telling them that I’m free thanks to Kas.”

Luke looked around the table. He took off the Signet ring of Anfall, the symbol of his rule and handed it to Senn. “You know what to do with this.”

Senn nodded. “Where is Kas?”

“We’ll find him. I’m hoping he’s off with Lauren, where he belongs.”

Senn smiled broadly. “I think I’ll enjoy this duty.”

Margaret looked despondent. She wrung her hands and tears began to fall down her cheeks. “Please, Luke, don’t do this. It’s essential to the peace that you remain in power.”

“Essential to what peace, Mother? Of course it’s not. Just a little fluke of nature that Kas was born second. I never wanted this, he always wanted it. I only wanted to lead

the army. I hope Bruce won't mind sharing that duty with me when I'm around. And then there's something else."

"Not that damned Sharl Mountain thing again, Luke?" Jenna stood, knocking her chair over. "There is no hidden kingdom. It's a fairy story father told you."

"Is it? Like the story of the witch Alyssa. Is it a fairy story, mother?"

She shook her head. "I don't know. I truly don't."

Luke spoke gently. "Yes you do. You just won't tell us because you're afraid of losing us like you lost Father. You'll never lose me, Mother. The worst is over. We must honor Father and Hawk and Hunter by moving on and living fully. You know that's what they'd want of us." He pulled the little woman to him and hugged her tightly.

"Well, I aim to find out about Sharl. I hope when Jaimes and Cullen return with Palin, they'll join me and some of my men."

"Aye, we're in." Cullen smiled and the brothers both bowed their heads.

"There's no wizard knocking down my door, there's nothing in my way. Anfall will have its rightful king. Someone just needs to figure out where he is. Senn, if you're up to it, I think it might be a good idea to find him before he bolts. If I know my brother, he'll bolt pretty quickly."

"I know where to find him. I don't know whether he'll return, though, Luke. The gifted are a bit odd that way." Senn winked.

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Kas loved the way the foliage changed as he headed North. It always lifted his spirits to see thick jungle thin out to scrub, dotted with palm trees. The soil became sandy. Small houses dotted the road. They were more shelters against the sun than true houses, open on two sides to the air. Hammocks hung between trees and monkeys swung from vine to vine, chattering amicably.

Some of the locals who were out cooking or hanging their washing came to the roadside to greet their Prince and Kas knew most of them by name. The familiarity and peace of Tanu would heal him, he was sure. By tomorrow afternoon he would be installed in his seaside hideaway and would sleep the day away on the beach, the turquoise water lapping at his toes. He stripped off his shirt and pulled his hair back as the sun rose and the temperature with it.

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Kas thought his family would know by now that he was missing and would probably send the brother knights after him. Or maybe they would understand, give him time. He just needed time. Lauren would go home, life would return to normal and he could enjoy himself. He laughed to himself. *You're a horrible liar, even when you're only lying to yourself.*

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Tim slept after a full night up with Lauren, who stalled for another day, hoping against hope that with Luke's blessing, Kas might decide he wanted her in his life. She had fallen asleep at Tim's side and now made her way to her room to wash up before venturing downstairs.

Jenna entered without knocking.

"This is your fault."

"What?"

"Luke is abdicating to Kas. And he's leaving for the Sharl Mountains. I suppose he'll even take Tim with him."

"Abdicating? Why! And how is that my fault?"

"You don't want to marry him and you've convinced him that Kas should be King."

"No one could convince that man of anything, Jenna, and you know it."

"Well, it's too late. You're not getting either of my brothers. Luke will leave and Kas is already gone."

"Gone?" Lauren's heart sank. "Gone where?"

"North of course, to be with his woman."

Lauren sat in silent shock. She felt a rushing in her ears and thought she might be sick.

"His woman?" She whispered.

"What did you think, Lauren? Kas was going to marry you? He'd no sooner tie himself to one woman than give up his gifts. There are women in every corner of the kingdom, but he's gone to be with Mirana. They have a child, an adept."

"You're lying. Senn would have told me. I asked him if Kas was married."

"He's not married! You don't really know him at all."

“No, I guess I don’t.”

Jenna left and Lauren sat on the edge of her bed for a moment, the impossible sinking in. She had just been a roll in the hay. He was like every man she had ever known. The only difference was that they had saved a kingdom together.

Lauren roused Tim from his sleep. “It’s time, Tim, we’re leaving.” He tried to focus.

“I thought you were going to speak with Kas.”

“I did. It’s not happening. Please hurry, I want to leave now.”

“I’m sorry, honey. Let me get my things.”

“I’ll get some food and meet you at the stable. No one will stop me, I’m sure. They’ll be happy to see me go.”

“You’re wrong.” It was Senn, who had been looking for the twins.

“Senn.” Lauren ran to him. “How are you?”

“What’s this about leaving?”

“It didn’t work out with Kas.” She wouldn’t humiliate herself by discussing this Mirana woman.

“I don’t believe that.” Senn held her by the shoulders and looked into her eyes.

“I’ll miss you, Senn. Please come and see me. Remember how much fun you had in Manhattan? Please, promise me you’ll come.” Tears poured from her eyes and she clutched desperately at Senn.

“Don’t do this. I know you’re wrong. Trust me here, Lauren, this is the worst mistake you could make.”

“Where is he Senn? Is he in Tanu?”

“Yes, I’m pretty sure that’s where he is. That’s where he goes.”

“I’m leaving. Hug me, brother. I love you.”

Senn pulled her close and despite his efforts, a few tears escaped down his cheek. “I’ll come to see you.”

He watched as Lauren and Tim took the Great Road south towards Tansing Crossing. Senn saddled up and headed north to retrieve their new king. Kas wouldn’t get much of a vacation.

## IV. To Key West

### CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Lauren found it more painful to see Tansing Crossing again than it had been to leave it. “It so beautiful, Tim.” She sighed at the sight of the exquisite white Nor Bridge, the sunlight bouncing off the water, the smell of freesia and fruit blossoms on the breeze.

Sara and Kenneth rushed from the balcony to greet the twins when they saw their approach.

“I brought Bell back to you, Sara.”

“Oh Lauren, what are you doing here? Come here, Timothy, I can’t believe my eyes. When Ken told me you had been saved, it was one of the happiest days of my life.”

Kenneth studied the pair. “What’s happened, Lauren?”

“It’s time to go home.”

Sara shook her head sadly. “I don’t know how it could come to this. I really had hoped you two would work out. And Tim, are you leaving?”

“No, I’m afraid Anfall is in my blood, Aunt Sara. But I’ll check up on Lauren from time to time.”

“And Sennsárin, what news? I assume he is well, or you wouldn’t have left him.”

“He’s well, Sara,” Tim answered. “He’s going to be fine.”

“And Palin?”

“He’s better. Hunter’s funeral was difficult but Kas led a beautiful service and Bruce is by his side always. And of course he has his Maiden to think of.”

“Well, hopefully you two can stay a while and visit?”

Lauren gazed around the beautiful villa. She remembered every moment she had spent there—the details strong and intense. *I fell in love here.* This is where I learned my gifts, she thought, where Kas nearly died. I got to know Senn, Palin and Hunter here. I strolled along this river and rode Kas’s horse. This is where I learned who I really am. *And Kas still occupies every corner.*

“I’m leaving right now. Where do I go, Tim?”



“Wherever you want. The whole place is enchanted, from the river to the road. If you feel for it, you’ll see the area that shimmers. Just click your heels together three times,” he laughed lightly.

“Very funny. Unfortunately, I feel like I’m leaving home instead of going home.”

“Then don’t do it, Lauren. We’ll find a way. You can stay here at the villa.”

“If it’s wrong, I’ll come back. But I need time at least. I don’t know how much.” She looked into Tim’s eyes and took his hand. “I don’t know how I can say goodbye to you again, Tim. I love you.”

“Then let’s not say goodbye. I don’t know when I’ll come, but I will. Where will you be?”

“I’m not sure. Not New York. There’s always Tillie, I suppose.”

“Tillie? Is she still running the bar?” Tim laughed.

“As far as I know.”

“All right then. I’ll look for you at Tillie’s. If you don’t stay there, leave a message in New York at the University or at Martin’s.”

Lauren kissed Sara and Kenneth and Tim. She closed her eyes and began to chant, but she needn’t have bothered. Her powers were such now that the mere thought of the Great Land took her there. And she appeared right where she intended to go, except perhaps a few feet off.

A blaring horn brought her out of her stupor. She stood in the middle of Duval Street in Key West. That’s convenient, she thought. She might even remember where Tillie’s place was. But first, she needed some modern clothes, noting the stares she was getting. She pulled money and a credit card she prayed still worked out of her satchel and walked into the nearest shop, where she bought a pair of shorts, a tank top, sandals and some underwear. *That’s all I have in the world.*

*And an emerald necklace from a magic kingdom.*

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The Maiden spent two days in mixed elation and agony, free of Teren. She knew the second he lost the scepter, the source of much of his power. *I’m free to leave Anan-kai.* But she couldn’t bring herself to leave. What would Palin think of her now, no longer a virgin? The royals—they’d dismiss her. Alyssa closed her eyes, desperately trying to

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summon the vision of her union with Palin, the one that nourished her through the years. No longer. Her only consolation, lost.

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*Go to her. She needs you.*

“Kas?” Palin asked aloud.

*Go now.*

Kas’s voice shimmered in the air around him. Palin took a deep breath and went to Luke.

“Yes?”

“It’s time to go to Alyssa. Kas says so.”

“Kas is communicating with you? Well, at least our new king maintains some interest in the family. Good sign. All right, then, Palin, I’ll go with you. Grab the knights. We’ll do this the right way.”

Luke called Bruce to his side, putting him in charge.

“How long before Senn and Kas return?” Bruce asked.

“I’m not sure. I think maybe that depends a lot on Senn’s persuasive powers. I’ll bet a week. We’ll be back with the girl in about the same time, I suppose.”

“And Lauren and Tim crossed already?”

“Your guess is better than mine, Bruce. You’ll feel it before I hear about it. My suspicion is that Tim won’t leave—you’ll get your second lieutenant back, I’m fairly sure.”

“I count on him.”

“It’s nice to have another Great Lander around isn’t it?”

“Especially another New Yorker. I get to talk about the Yankees.” Luke smiled with him, not understanding at all what he meant, but now used to his odd references.

Luke joined the knights and Palin at the stables. Palin’s heart was in his throat as they took the road south to the Nor Bridge, to cross to Anan-kai once again. He prayed it wasn’t a dream. Luke pulled alongside Palin and motioned the others to fall back.

“Palin, I’m going to tell you a little story. It might be difficult, but you deserve the truth, and you’re certainly mature enough to handle it and understand. I’ve no doubt Alyssa knows about you and I want you to hear it from me.”

Luke took a deep breath, praying his mother would forgive him.

“Margaret is my mother,” Palin whispered.

Luke looked shocked. “She told you?”

“No. I realized what you were going to say. I’m not sure how. Maybe my gifts are growing. Or maybe I’ve always known somehow.”

“Amazing. Well, do you know more?”

“No, just that.”

“I’ll tell you what I know, then. It was maybe 17, no it had to be 18 years ago. My father had been dead for a few years and I was about Senn’s age. Mother’s depression grew worse since Senn’s birth, which was shortly before Father’s death. Everyone worried about her, and Sara convinced her to go with her and Kenneth to Tanu to recuperate. Hunter and I took care of the younger ones. They were gone most of a year, although we’d visit occasionally.”

“Mother grieved for Father but he had been so sick, I think she was partly relieved when he died and felt guilty about that. It’s hard to know because she won’t discuss it. Anyway, in Tanu there was a man, a Great Lander, living on his own. I don’t know the details of their relationship in Tanu, except for one. You. Mother brought you home. She told the children something about you being a long lost cousin and told a few that she had found you in a cave by the sea—she was so confused, she couldn’t even keep her stories straight. It’s really very sad, because none of us would have minded. We loved you right away. Especially Hunter, of course.”

Tears streamed down’s Palin’s face and he relied on his horse to guide him. “She’s never treated me like a son.”

“No. Try and forgive her, Palin. She’s had a very tough time and she did take care of you. She loves you but she’s ashamed of the affair.”

“How is it an affair if your Father died?”

Luke shrugged. “She’s loaded down with guilt. I know it doesn’t make sense.”

“And the man?”

Luke was silent and looked straight ahead.

“Bruce. It can’t be. We barely talk, he...” Palin stopped himself, thinking suddenly of how much attention Bruce paid to his training, telling him he would be a great

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general someday. He felt Bruce watching him closely many times and thought he was just interested in another of his young warriors.

“He came to Anfall about a year after you. A military man at home, a general I think—it didn’t take long for us to realize he’d be a great asset to the house as I was still a boy, unable to lead the troops.”

“And, do they, are they still a couple?”

Luke smiled. “That’s my guess. Haven’t you noticed that he’s always at her side, even when there’s no reason for him to be? Doesn’t he act like a father?”

Palin thought about it.

“I’m really your brother? At least partly?”

“Not partly. And Kas and Senn are your brothers and Jenna is your sister. So you see, you aren’t an orphan. You’re royalty. Come to think of it, once Kas is king, you’ll be fourth in line to the crown.” He smiled. “And now we’re going to fetch the Prince’s bride.”

“I’m a Prince.”

“Now don’t get all cocky on us.”

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Kas ran his toes through the sand, letting the sun toast his naked body. *Stop it. Why are you doing this to yourself?* He pictured her on the beach, naked in his arms, caressing him, kissing him, rolling with him until he was on top of her, loving her, making her wild. It will never happen. *She was perfection. Their one night was perfection.* No, near perfect, he corrected. For it to be perfect, he would love her for days, in every way possible, exploring every inch of her body, her being. He would make her his slave, become hers. He would watch her wake up in the morning and make love to her, bring her food, whisper to her in the middle of the night, hold her and tell her his deepest, darkest secrets, his fantasies. He would share his magic.

*He would marry her.*

What had he done? Gone out of his way to convince her he could never love her. *I didn't know I could. Did I? Or did I not let myself?* Too late, she would never want him now.

And she wasn't in Anfall.

Kas felt her drift far away from him, from the Land. She wouldn't marry Luke, but it wasn't any consolation. It had never been about Luke. He had always known deep in his heart that Luke wouldn't care. If only he hadn't listened to the Maiden. It had always been about him, his inability to need anyone.

Kas pulled Lauren's little sapphire necklace out his pocket and held it to the sun.

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Alyssa felt them coming. Thrilled and terrified, she ran to her mirror, arranging her hair and pinching her cheeks. She didn't have time to change in the normal fashion, so she conjured a pretty dress that complemented her lithe figure. She fastened on an opal necklace and dabbed a bit of scented oil behind her ears.

"Please Spirit, help me," she begged.

King Lucenor! Four warriors to collect a girl, she thought. Alyssa dared not look at Palin, afraid what she might see. The men dismounted and she bowed to one knee before the King.

"Oh, what's this! Milady, please, get up!" Luke helped her to her feet.

"Welcome to my home, Majesty. I am your servant."

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“Goodness. The witch of Anan-kai on her knees before me?” he bowed and the others followed suit. “I am honored to be in your presence. I want to thank you personally for giving us our kingdom, giving me my brothers.”

“Sennsárin is well then,” she commented. “I am relieved, although I sensed as much. And the elder, Hunter, I mourn his passing with you.” She ventured a look at the knights.

“Sirs, I am happy to see you again. Majesty, these men helped save my life.”

Jaimes simply bowed his head, but Cullen said, “It’s good to see you looking so well, Alyssa. May I even say so lovely.”

“Thank you.” She smiled.

There was no way around it. “Prince, welcome back to my home.”

“Maiden, I waited for you. When you didn’t come, well, I didn’t know what to think. So here I am.”

“Well, Palin, there is something I must explain. Can we have a private word?”

Luke prodded Palin and the pair went inside.

“They really are kind of cute together aren’t they?” he asked the brothers.

They laughed.

“Never thought I’d end up calling the witch of Anan-kai ‘cute’.”

Palin sat at Alyssa’s table, trembling, sure she would reject him.

She shared the same fear.

They regarded one another.

She stood to prepare some tea.

“Alyssa, sit down, please. Put me out of my agony and tell me what you need to say. I’ll accept whatever it is.”

“Palin, I have to tell you what happened with Teren.” She looked down at the table. “It is why I haven’t come to you.”

He looked puzzled. “Teren’s gone. You can leave the forest now.”

“I know that. Before he returned to Talinthall, though, before Kas took Anthla-ma, Teren found me. He entered my mind.”

“I’m sorry. It’s over, please don’t cry. I can take care of you. He won’t hurt you again.”

She was shaking now. “You don’t understand. He entered my mind and took me, physically. He took my innocence, Palin. I’m no longer a virgin.”

Palin was stunned. He couldn’t find words and couldn’t meet Alyssa’s eyes.

“Say something, Palin. You understand that I didn’t go to him willingly. Please tell me you believe me.”

He reached across the table and took her hand. “I’m so sorry, Alyssa. What can I do to help you? I feel so useless. I should have been there with you, should have killed him with my bare hands.”

“I understand that you expected a maid, I mean, if you had an interest in marrying me, which I thought you did.”

“I wanted to marry you. I haven’t been able to think of anything else since the moment I saw you, even before you showed me your vision. Are you telling me now that you don’t want me? I’m a Prince, but I guess you know that. I’m growing up quickly and Luke even entrusted the keep to me in his absence. I’d die to save you. Can you give me a chance?”

“I think that can be arranged,” she ran to his arms, crying.

He held her for a moment. Then they separated enough for him to gently kiss her on the forehead. She stood on tiptoes to kiss his lips tentatively. Palin pulled her tighter and intensified the kiss.

“I’ve loved you for a thousand years, Prince.”

“I’ve loved you just as long. Let’s go home, Alyssa. They’re all waiting for you.”

The couple went outside, hand in hand.

“That’s better,” said Luke. “Ready? Don’t you want to bring anything?”

“Why, no, I can acquire anything I like at anytime.”

“She means magic, Luke,” Cullen put in helpfully. “She’s not shy about using it.”

“Where were you when we needed you?” Luke laughed.

“Well, actually, I was right here, of course, captive in Anan-kai.”

“Yes, yes, of course, I didn’t really mean it as an insult, just a figure of speech. What I mean to say is that it will be wonderful to have such a talented witch with us. Kas isn’t prone to using his gifts for everyday sorts of things, so we’re not used to it.”

“I noticed that about Kas. Are he and Lauren together yet?”

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“No, Alyssa. You told him that she would marry the King and it kept them apart.”  
Palin shook his head.

“Oh, no! We will have to fix that. It’s clear now that you don’t intend to be King, nor to marry Lauren, am I correct?”

“Correct.”

“And you have abdicated to Kas?” Luke nodded.

“Well, then, I suppose Lauren is going to marry Kas after all.”

“Someone should have told them that,” said Palin. “I know Lauren intends to leave, and Kas took off this morning. Lauren may be back in the Great Lands already.”

“Well, we’ll see about that.” She turned to Luke. “I’m looking forward to meeting the rest of your family. Will your mother and sister accept me?”

“You saved our kingdom, milady. You saved my mother’s world, her sons, her house. You will be welcomed. Besides, you’re going to marry our Prince someday, right? My mother loves weddings and she’s been dying to plan one. Wait until my sister gets involved. Come to think of it, it might be a very good time to put together that expedition to Sharl.”

She smiled and turned to look at her grey stone house. It vanished before them.

“Sire, may I bring a horse of my own along? Kas made him for me and I’ve come to like him very much.”

“Whatever you like, my dear.”

Alyssa whistled and Simon shimmered back into existence.

“Let’s cross at Tansing Crossing, shall we?” Luke said, “I’d like to visit with Sara and Kenneth. It won’t be out of our way.”

“It would be my pleasure to take us there,” Alyssa offered.

“Why the hell not?” Luke laughed. And found himself on the east side of the Nor Bridge.

“More visitors, Sara!” Kenneth called. “It looks like a very interesting group this time.” Tim and Sara joined Kenneth at the balcony. Tim laughed and ran down to meet them.



Sara turned to her husband. “Is that the witch of Anan-kai? She’s a girl. Look at Palin, all puffed up. You know, dear, I think our lad knows he’s a Prince. I’m sure of it. Imagine that, our Palin, courting the Maiden. This *has* been quite a month.”

Kenneth laughed and pulled his wife to him. “I love you, Sara. You really keep me grounded.”

“Well, hold onto your hat, because we’re about to meet the witch.”

The men handed their reins off to the stable boys and Tim ran to his friends.

He bowed to Alyssa.

She smiled and gestured for him to rise.

“Hello Timothy. I’m afraid I’m too late to see your sister, aren’t I? What a shame. Well, we’ll be together again, there’s no doubt of that.”

Alyssa looked at the breathtaking villa. Birds fluttered from tree to tree in the fruit garden, butterflies and dragonflies hovered by the river, sparkling fountains shimmered in the sunlight. But the villa itself—it was the loveliest building she had ever seen.

Sara and Kenneth bowed to the young witch and she curtsied in response.

“You are welcome here, Maiden. Now and forever,” Kenneth said graciously.

“I cannot thank you enough. Although I think I’ve had enough of ‘forever’. You might reconsider that offer, sir, for this must be the house of the Spirit himself. There can be no other explanation. I would like to be here often. Can we come here, Palin?”

“Of course. I visit Aunt Sara and Uncle Kenneth a lot. Everyone loves it. I guess it’s partly that Kas really knows how to design things. Whatever he does ends up magical.”

Tim laughed. “I never knew Kas designed Tansing Crossing.”

“Of course. I think he was about twelve or so.” Luke shook his head. “My poor parents, they didn’t know what to do with him. He wasn’t any trouble, really, he just did the oddest things. Taverns, bridges,” he pointed to the Nor Bridge, “fortresses.”

“The palace of Anfall?”

“Of course. He ordered everyone out of the keep one day. We all thought it was some sort of game. Before our eyes, a grey stone monster was turned into the white palace we live in.” He laughed at the memory.

## The Princes of Anfall

“And to think I was proud of my little house in the woods. Does the Queen Mother and your brother come here too, madam?” Alyssa asked Sara.

There was silence. Luke eyed the sky, busily looking for something to fix his gaze on. Palin planted himself before the King. “Luke. Did you leave something out of my story?”

“I forgot. Honestly, I forgot!”

Palin turned to Sara. “Aunt Sara? Is Bruce your brother?”

“Yes honey. Margaret doesn’t much like it when we bring up the whole family tree business. It’s rather strange, because it seems that everyone pretty much knows everything by now. Bruce and I crossed to Anfall together. I met Kenneth here and Bruce decided to keep traveling North, seeking out the beautiful shore we heard about.”

“And Bruce is really my father?”

She smiled at Luke and brushed her nephew’s cheek. “Yes, Palin, he really is your father.”

Jaimes and Cullen looked at one another, shaking their heads in confusion. “Am I related to anyone?” asked Cullen.

Sara laughed. “Well, dear, I’m sure you’re both related to someone.”

Palin smiled widely. “So you really are my aunt and uncle. I mean, you are my mother’s brother and you are my father’s sister?”

“Never really thought about it much, but of course, that’s the way it is,” Kenneth said.

“I think I need to sit down.” And Palin plopped down in the grass, right where he had stood. They all joined him, sitting on the grass or on benches that graced the garden.

“Sara?”

“Yes Palin?”

“That means you’re an adept. You’ve never shown it.”

“Of course. Bruce and I grew up in the same city as Tim and Lauren. Well, a different borough, but pretty much the same. You’re a lot like Bruce, really. Except of course you have your mother’s ears.”

Alyssa put her arm around Palin. “That’s the end of the surprises, Palin, I promise.”

“I’m so glad. They’ve been nice ones, really. But enough is enough. I’m going to have a long chat with my parents when I get home.”

“On second thought, you do realize that you’re probably all related to me somehow. . .” Alyssa mused.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

The sun began its descent into the turquoise sea. Kas hadn't moved from his spot all day.

"Ouch! Stop that right now!" A coconut hit him squarely on the chest. He looked overhead at the blue-eyed monkey grinning down at him.

"Go home, Senn. I'm not in the mood."

"You're never in the mood, Kas." Senn jumped down from the tree and sat next to his brother. "As a matter of fact, you are nothing but one big bad mood these days."

"It's been a trying few weeks." He looked at Senn. "How are you feeling?"

"Not one-hundred percent." Senn coughed dramatically. "I really could use your help. I think it might be best if you come home now and take care of me."

Kas punched him in the arm and realized he was actually quite happy to see his brother. They watched the sunset together in silence for a few minutes.

"Come on, let's get something to eat." Kas wrapped a thin Tanu sarong around his waist and they made their way up the beach to Kas's house. Mirana hugged Senn in greeting and set food on the table.

"You look as lovely as ever, Mirana. It's good to see you."

"You're looking a bit thin, Sennsárin."

"Well, if it's your fish and rice tonight, I won't look thin tomorrow."

"Of course, Senn, what else on his first night back?" She lit a candle and placed it on the table.

"Anything else before I head out, Kas?"

"No, thanks, we'll be fine. Please give my love to Jason and Eddie."

"I'll bring Eddie over tomorrow to see you—he's asks for you all the time. Jason's out late fishing tonight but I'll tell him you say hello. Oh, and boys, I meant to tell you, I think maybe Jason's found a new lady friend. It's been a few years since Lalla died and I'm hoping he's ready. The boy could use a mother."

The old lady made her way down the stairs slowly and headed home to care for her grandchild.

"Bring them all around tomorrow, Mirana."

"Goodnight."

Senn and Kas ate the woman's fabulous dish and drank cold pale ale from tall glasses.

"I always forget how wonderful Tanu is until I'm here. I understand why you come here, Kas."

Kas was quiet, listening to the gentle tide lap up onto the beach.

"She's gone, Kas."

"I know." He pulled her necklace out of his pocket and put it on the table. "This is all I have left of her."

"She gave that necklace to you?"

"No, it slipped off her neck that last night. I kept it."

"She gave it to you." Senn sighed deeply. He reached into his pocket and pulled out the Anfall ring. He placed it on the table next to the necklace.

Kas looked at the ring and then up at Senn.

"Is Luke okay? What's going on?"

"Luke is better than I've ever seen him, actually. He's planning a trip—you know, *the trip*, to Sharl. He's really going to do it, Kas."

"He's going to leave Anfall without a King to go searching for a lost city?"

"No. You know that's not what I said." Senn tapped on the ring. "I didn't come for a friendly little getaway, Kas."

"Just while he's away?"

"No."

Kas stared at the ring, stunned. King. King of Anfall.

"Not just so he can take this trip?"

"He's sick of it. You know how your gifts have been a curse as well? He's nearly forty and been king for most of his life. He's seen more battles than most men twice his age. He's sick of all these adept women being pushed at him. He wants his freedom." Senn hesitated.

"And what?"

"He wants you to be King. He does, Kas. It's right, we all know it. You know it. Especially after Teren, after the scepter."

"Mother?"

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“She doesn’t want him to go away. He’ll smooth that over. She misses you, Kas. She’s never meant to hurt you. You’ve hurt her now. She needs you.”

“She has Bruce. And Jenna.”

“Come on, Kas, you’re avoiding the issue.”

Senn watched as Kas played with the ring, its sapphire glowing in the candlelight. “I wonder why sapphires? I always liked emeralds.”

“I don’t know. We’ll have to ask the Maiden. I suppose you could change the stone if you wanted. Hell, you can pretty much do anything you want. Who’s strong enough to stop you?”

Senn took in a breath as Kas put the ring on. He didn’t expect it to come this easily. Senn reached for his brother’s hand and held it to the light. Kas wore a huge emerald where the sapphire had been.

Kas looked at him and grinned. “Couldn’t help myself.”

“Well, you always were the designer.” Senn leaned back in his chair and drained his glass. “Any orders sire?”

“Yes, Prince Sennsárin. Stay here with me a few days. I want to see to Marina and her family. I want some time to relax, to think. But I want you here. Okay?”

“May your will be done, brother. Get me some more ale, will you? You’re not much of a host.”

Marina and her family stopped by early the next morning, Marina to prepare breakfast and Eddie to play with his favorite “Uncle” Senn.

Jason was short, like most of the people of Tanu. He sported a dazzling array of tattoos and earrings. The brothers greeted him and his friend.

“This is Emillie. Emillie, these are Kasmárin and Sennsárin.” Emillie looked terrified and could only manage a quick curtsy.

“Emillee, come here, quick. Look at this school.” Eddie was absorbed with the creatures circling his feet.

“I think you have a fine fisherman in the making there, Jason.”

Senn patted him on the back and went to play with Eddie.

Eddie clapped and laughed when Senn became a big black grouper and nibbled at his feet. The boy splashed around screaming.

“Make Senn go away,” he giggled.

Emillee looked as if she would faint, not having seen a shifter before.

Jason looked sheepish. “I’m thinking of marrying her, Kas. What do you think?”

“That sounds like the best thing I’ve ever heard out of your mouth. How about a wedding present?”

“No, nothing. We don’t lack for anything.”

“I know. But it would make me feel good. Your mother takes such good care of me when I’m here and she never takes money. I thought maybe you could use a house.”

“A house? Well, we’ll need a bigger place but I can build a house, Kas.”

“I can do it a lot faster, Jason.” Kas pointed down the beach and Jason followed his gaze.

“Spirit almighty, where did that come from?”

A luxurious complex of cabanas graced the curve of the beach.

“He really can’t resist a design opportunity, Jason.” Senn wrung out his hair as he walked up the beach.

Jason shook his head in amazement and then took Kas’s hand and held it to his forehead in the Tanu sign of respect. He ran to Emillie and pointed at the house. She looked up at Kas and smiled shyly and the couple ran down the beach to examine their new home.

“You may have to let go of some of that sweetness as King, brother.”

“He’s a good man. It’s been tough since Lalla died. I’m glad he’s found someone.”

“Speaking of which. . .”

“Don’t. Not now, Senn. Maybe later. Let’s go for a swim.”

“I just did!”

“Well, you’re going for another.”

“Oh no, you’re going to be an insufferable king. You were a bossy enough Prince.”

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Lauren barely left her room and when she did, it was only to buy more clothes or grab a quick dinner. The *Pink House* was a good refuge. Even though the renovated

## The Princes of Anfall

Conch house sat near the busiest street in town, its internal courtyard was quiet, a tiny paradise of gardens, fountains, pools and the occasional parrot dropping in to say ‘hello.’ It actually said ‘*hola*,’ and a number of other phrases and Lauren supposed the innkeeper worked endlessly to teach the parrot to speak. All things considered, Lauren thought, this was about the best place she could be right now.

She tried not to let her thoughts drift to Anfall more than four or five times per hour, and almost succeeded. Her room was clean and simple. From her window she could watch tourists saunter up and down the street. It seemed to Lauren that in little Key West, everything was too big for its setting—the tourists bought, ate and drank too much; the big hotels by the water looked oversized and garish; even the sunsets were larger than life. She thought that many of the ‘colorful’ natives were transplants, not natives at all. No matter. The place was happy, happier than New York would be this time of year, certainly.

“Can I get you anything sweetheart?”

Robert managed the *Pink House*. He was as overstated as everything else in Key West, but she couldn’t have asked for a nicer host. A Jamaican transplant.

Lauren loved listening to his accent.

“I’m fine, Robert, thanks very much.”

“Thinking of staying on for a while? I wouldn’t mind putting you down for another week in the book, no problem. I need to work out the scheduling. The season is starting and I’m getting calls for reservations—it’s the breakfasts, you know? People have heard about them and it makes them look us up.”

He fluttered about, picking up empty coffee cups and plates. “Don’t want to be pushy, honey, just need to know. And there’s always Calloway House across the street—they take longer term guests as well.”

He stopped and put his hands on his hips, looking at the beauty reclining by the pool, wondering what she was doing here alone. She had arrived with no suitcase, no purse, just a funny little bag and an odd dress. And that necklace—it was real, he was sure.

“Oh, Robert, I’m sorry. Of course you need to know.” Lauren thought for a moment. She’d put it off long enough. “Robert, do you know if a bar named Tillie’s is still around?”



He laughed out loud. “Tillie’s? Well, sweetheart, why don’t you ask if the Caribbean is still here? Of course Tillie’s is still around. Honey, I get half my noise complaints on nights my guests have been to Tillie’s. Right down the end of Duval, all the way.”

“And does Tillie still run it?”

“Is the Pope Catholic?”

She nodded. “Well, then, Robert, what’s your policy on long-term guests?”

He eyed her curiously. “How long-term? I’ve only ever had one.

“How about if I stayed through the summer? That would be about six months. I could pay you monthly, in advance. How would that be?”

Robert thought for a second. Her room would bring in good money for a few months, but then as the season waned... And of course, he really liked Lauren. She certainly wasn’t trouble.

“Deal.” He shook her hand. “I’ll cut you a break, not charge weekend rates, and keep breakfast coming. But honey, you’ve got to lay off that coffee—you’re going to have a breakdown taking in all that caffeine.”

“Robert, you’re a blessing, honestly.”

Robert saw her relief and knew his inn served as her refuge.

*What are you running from, little lady? A romance gone bad?* He’d have to ask around, see if there were any straight guys he could fix her up with.

Shouldn’t be too hard. She was exquisite—like a buxom Julia Roberts, he thought, already imagining how he’d describe her to his straight male friends.

In the morning, Lauren forced herself to leave Robert’s safe compound. She walked down Duval Street, the shops and restaurants still closed, only a few older early risers going for their morning walk. Not much had changed in the seven years since she had been here. Maybe things were a little tackier, but not by much. She slowed her mission down by stopping for a bagel and coffee at a chain shop that was open. Lauren loitered over her newspaper, happy at least to have access to all the coffee she could ever want. She laughed, thinking what a java junkie she’d become in the last few days.

With no excuses left, she walked the final block to Tillie’s. Yep, there it was, not a single noticeable change. In Lauren’s youth, Tillie’s had provided her with a mistaken

image of what a pirate ship looked like. In adulthood, it simply looked absurd. But Lauren imagined that the tourists didn't mind the décor at all. Tillie had always said the pirate theme was a tribute to a past lover, a famous treasure-hunter who had found a ship filled with Spanish booty. Everyone knew she'd made up the fantasy and started believing it herself. She had been alone for thirty years, a widow almost as soon as she was married. Vietnam took her love, but nothing ever dampened her unsinkable spirit.

Nautical bric-brac covered every foot of the façade of Tillie's bar. Lauren stepped inside, a bit surprised to find the door open.

"We don't open til 11:00," came the call from a back room.

"Why the hell not?" Lauren called back.

"Listen, lady," Tillie mumbled as she came into the bar, carrying boxes stacked nearly to the top of her head. "Don't mean to be rude, but the door is. . ."

"Hi Tillie."

Tillie dropped the boxes, bottles shattering as they hit the floor, and ran to Lauren.

"Oh my God, girl! What a surprise. Is Tim with you? No? Well I am damned pleased to see you." She brushed her hand across Lauren's face. "You look more like your mamma everyday." She sighed.

"How are you Tillie? You look great." Lauren meant it. She knew Tillie was in her late sixties, nearly ten years older than Lauren's father, but she didn't look a day over fifty. Well, some of her did.

Tillie's piled her flaming orange hair high atop her head in sprayed poofs. She wore shorts that revealed too much leg on a woman her age but Lauren had to admit Tillie almost pulled it off. She wore her own bar's T-shirt, black with a neon green palm-tree underneath the words "Tillie's—The Best Dammed Bar in the World." Lauren's father had tried to get her to change her logo several times, especially when she complained about lack of souvenir sales. But Tillie always argued that it *was* the best damned bar in the world and nothing would make her say otherwise.

"I'm all a mess right now but I wasn't expecting you. Come on home, let's get you settled in. I hope you can stay a while this time?"

"I have a room Tillie. I didn't want to put you out."

Her Aunt looked hurt. "Put me out?"

“I’m staying through the summer, at least. I know you rent those rooms out and you can get a lot more for them than I could pay,” she lied. She wanted her solitude at times and she’d never get it at Tillie’s guesthouse next to the bar.

“Six months!” She clapped her hands. “What are you going to do for six months, Lauren? Why aren’t you in grad school or on a dig or something? What’s going on? Are you okay?”

“Everything is fine. I’m not sure I want to finish grad school just yet. I decided to take some time to think about it, that’s all. This seemed like the perfect place to think.”

Tillie nodded and smiled. “Good, then. My God, this is wonderful, sweetheart. You’ve made my day. No, you’ve made my year. Come on, let’s get home and we can catch up.”

Lauren looked around the bar as she helped Tillie clean up the mess from the broken bottles. The place looked like a poor man’s imitation of The Mooring, Kas’s tropical drinkery. She smiled at the memory.

Maybe someday it wouldn’t hurt so much.

## CHAPTER TWENTY

Jenna ran to gather her mother and Bruce. “They’re back!”

“Kas and Senn?” Bruce ran out of the hall.

“No, Luke and the rest.”

Margaret and Bruce stood in the doorway, not sure what to do, as Jenna ran to hug Luke, Tim, Palin, Jaimes and Cullen. “That was fast!”

“We stopped at Tansing Crossing to pick up Tim and visit for a little while with Sara and Kenneth. Mother, Bruce, please come meet our guest.”

Luke gently led the Maiden forward.

Luke was relieved when his mother and Jenna curtsied and Bruce bowed.

“You are certainly welcome in our home, Lady. You are welcome to our family as well. I am grateful for what you have done for our household. Your household. I suppose it’s been yours for a thousand years and you’ve just loaned it to us.” Margaret smiled nervously.

“It certainly did not look like this when I left it,” Alyssa laughed.

She regarded the exquisite white marble building, enveloped in gardens and pools, fountains and statues.

“Paradise. Kasmárin has quite a touch, indeed.”

She turned to her hosts. “Thank you for your formal greeting, Madam. It warms my heart. If it would not be too inconvenient, I would like a private word with you.”

Margaret looked shaken by the request. “Of course.”

“And if General Bruce would not mind joining us as well?”

He nodded, unable to speak.

Palin started forward but Luke pulled him back. “She’s not going to change them into hares, Palin.”

Bruce led them to a small comfortable room off the main hallway. Servants brought refreshments, Bruce shut the door behind them and sat.

“I have come to ask for permission to marry your son.”

Bruce and Margaret eyed one another and then turned to the Maiden.

“Come again?” Bruce asked.

“Palin. Your son. I want to marry him.”

Bruce sighed. "Well, I can understand that you know all manner of things, Lady, including Palin's heritage." He grabbed his love's hand, seeing that she looked a bit pale. "But I don't understand why the greatest witch in the world would need our permission. Surely you need to talk to Palin about this, not us."

"No, Sir, it is your choice. You see, if I marry Palin, I will be sworn to do everything in my power to make him happy. I will not pretend that he is an orphan, when he is a legitimate part of this family. A Prince, in fact. I will not stand by and see him shunned by his parents. And of course, you should know that he is aware that you are his parents."

"Oh no." Margaret began to cry.

Bruce hugged her. "It's okay, honey."

"Yes, it is okay," the Maiden continued. "Palin is thrilled. But you two must be thrilled as well. He senses you are ashamed of him, Madam. It will break his heart and that man's heart has been broken enough of late."

The Queen Mother suddenly stood. "I am not ashamed of Palin. How could any mother be ashamed to have him for a son?"

She sat back down, looking terribly weary. "And I'm not ashamed of Bruce. He has been my one true love, a faithful and loving man."

"But you are ashamed of having abandoned your grief for your husband. And for having fallen in love soon after his death." Alyssa said, "It really wasn't so soon, was it? You pushed away your children because you felt so guilty. How unfair you have been to Bruce and Palin, Madam, with all due respect."

She saw she had hit her target and knew the tears would come more strongly now. When they did, she hugged her.

"Look into my eyes, young one," Alyssa said to Margaret. "You are free of guilt. You are free of shame. The Spirit wants you to love and be loved. Let go, Margaret, and love your man and your son."

"But what will my children think? They'll hate me."

The witch winked at Bruce. "Majesty, you have very intelligent children. They sorted this all out years ago. They know that Bruce is your lover and that Palin is your son. They have waited many years for you to admit it. It is time. It is your choice, of course.

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Please let me know your decision. I will marry Palin if you are able to claim him as your own.”

Alyssa commented to Bruce before leaving, “Your sister sends her greetings.”

Bruce held his love in his arms, crying now himself. “What do you want to do, dear? I’ll do whatever you want.”

Alyssa looked at the man who had loved and supported her through every difficult moment of the last twenty-four years. “Well, I suppose it’s time we married, Bruce. That is, if you want me.”

He laughed squeezed her hand.

“What’s going on?” Palin asked Alyssa when she rejoined the group.

“We’ll find out, I suppose,” she indicated Bruce and Margaret, who stood in the doorway.

Palin looked up at the couple, not sure what to say.

His mother held out her arms and he rushed to her.

He began to weep. “Luke keeps telling me to stop crying, and I can’t seem to follow his orders.”

“I think I’ll forgive you this one last time,” Luke laughed. “You make me want to cry myself this time, boy.”

“Palin,” Bruce put his hand on his son’s shoulder. “I have a favor to ask.” He took a deep breath. “Will you forgive me? And will you stand with me when I marry your mother?”

“Well, can you beat that?” asked Cullen.

“You’re something else, Alyssa, if you don’t mind me saying so,” Jaimes said to the witch.

“I do not mind at all, sir. Thank you very much.”

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Kas and Senn walked for miles along the North Shore beach, stopping occasionally for a cooling swim or a glass of ale at a seaside cabana.

“I’m thinking of going with Luke to the Sharl. What do you think?”

Kas raised his brows. “I suppose it’s up to you. You’re always up for a trip, aren’t you?”

“Well, unless you need me around or something.”

Kas stopped and turned to Senn. “Do what you want, Senn, I don’t care.”

Senn’s blue eyes turned misty and Kas thought he might actually cry. Damn, why did he do this? Lauren, he thought, I did the same thing. Pushed her away when I wanted to pull her in.

“Is it going to be a very long trip?”

“I don’t know, who cares?”

Senn dove into the sea, keeping his human body but swimming like a fish. Kas watched his brother, thinking that he couldn’t imagine his world without him. And all Senn had asked for was a sign that he was needed.

Senn emerged a half-hour later and plopped on the beach. He placed a handful of pearls on the sand. Kas picked them up and rolled them around in his palm. He began placing them in lines on the sand.

“Luke.” He pointed to one. “Me.” He pointed to a second.

He placed two next to Luke. “I suppose as King I get to say who goes and who stays, don’t I? So, Jaimes and Cullen can go with Luke. I have the feeling Palin and Alyssa will go, too. I don’t think Palin knows that yet.” He placed two pearls in Luke’s pile. “Of course, Jenna, Mother and Bruce will stay behind. Tim, hmnn. What do you think?”

Senn looked up, thinking this was unusual behavior for Kas.

“He’ll go.”

“Yep, things aren’t going to heat up with Jenna for a long time, if ever. He’ll go.”

Kas divided the rest equally. “The army will have to be split, we can’t leave Anfall completely unprotected.”

“You can protect Anfall alone.”

“I don’t want to do it alone. I don’t expect any trouble but what kind of King would I be to let the entire army go off? In any case, I’m not immortal.” A far-off voice whispered through his brain. *Not immortal, not yet.*

Kas held one beautiful deep purple pearl between his fingers and placed it between the piles. Senn stared at it.

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“I’ll never order you to do anything you don’t want to do, Senn. You’re the only one I can say that about.”

“What do you want for yourself, Kas? The world is in your hands. What do you want to do with it?”

*Why is this so excruciating?* Teren’s magic hadn’t been as painful. Kas swallowed and closed his eyes.

“I suppose that I want four things. I want peace, no more bloodshed. I want adventure, not the kind that Luke wants but to explore every inch of Anfall, fixing whatever needs fixing and making it more beautiful now that Teren’s out of the way. I want Lauren. But I can’t have her. And I want you by my side, always. I can’t imagine what it would be like without you there. Not that you aren’t a pain in the ass all the time.”

Kas remembered being embarrassed only a very few times in his life. This was one of them.

Senn moved his pearl to Kas’s pile.

Kas stood abruptly and dove into the water, leaving Senn to work very hard on not crying. Senn thought desperately of how to get Lauren back.

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“Teren!” Kas awoke with a start, his heart pounding in his chest.

“Teren’s gone, Kas, you’re dreaming. Go back to sleep.” Senn rolled over.

“He’s approaching Anfall. Teren is alive, Senn. Not powerful, but alive. And he’s looking for Alyssa.”

“Bloody hell! Well, he won’t be a match for her now.”

“We’ve got to get there. It may not be that simple.”

“Why not just send us there, then?”

“This is for Palin to fix. I’ve seen a challenge for Palin, the one that pushes his confidence to the brink. This is it.”

They packed and saddled up quickly, hitting the road at a fast pace.

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Luke was amazed at how normal everything seemed at the keep. Servants moved to and fro, readying rooms for the new arrivals. The family had finished a fabulous lunch at which the witch regaled the knights with more stories of olden days. The brothers never



seemed to get enough of ancient stories. The women retired to a parlor and he heard squeals and laughter and talk of dresses and flowers and the like.

The men worked out after breakfast. Bruce was putting some young recruits through their paces with Tim's help. Palin worked on his swordplay with Jaimes and Cullen. Jenna, their one female warrior, joined in the training after hours of wedding planning.

"It's too much even for me," she laughed. "You should see them, they're in their glory. Mother really likes the Maiden. Well, it's impossible not to."

"Agreed," Luke said.

"I wish Senn and Kas would get here."

"They won't be long now. I wish Lauren were here to greet Kas. I'd like to see everyone settled before I leave." Luke saw Jenna's concerned expression. "What is it Jenna? The trip? I'll be fine, please don't worry, you know I can handle myself."

"Well, I'll miss you but I was thinking about Kas."

"What about him?"

She began to cry. "Luke, I think I ruined his life."

"How could you ruin his life?"

"I was angry, try to understand. I thought he was pushing you to abdicate. I didn't want you to leave. And I thought she might take Tim away somehow. I know how stupid that sounds now."

"What did you do, Jenna?"

"I told Lauren that Kas had a woman in Tanu. I told her that Kas only wanted her for sex."

"Oh, hell, Jenna! That's pretty cruel. She must have been heartbroken. No wonder she left so suddenly. Well listen to me, sister. The second he comes riding in through those gates, you have to tell him what you did. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, I know Luke. Please don't be angry."

He glared at her and went to Tim.

"She did what? Oh shit," Tim said with a groan. "I don't know what I see in that woman." He glared in her direction.

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Luke smiled despite the seriousness of the situation. At least that was out in the open.

“We’re going to have to convince him to get her, Tim. Can you find her?”

“I think so. But honestly, Luke, she may be so hurt that by the time we get there she won’t want him anymore. When women get hurt, they can shut down. And my sister will shut down, trust me.”

“No, she won’t shut Kas out. She can’t. This has to work out. I will see my brother happy for once in his life, if I have to go there myself and get her.”

“But you can’t go, you know that.”

He nodded, sighing heavily.

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Alyssa took in a quick breath and dropped the bolts of fabric she carried.

“What is it dear?” Margaret reached out to steady her.

“I thought I felt something. Evil. I can’t describe it, it was almost as if Teren...”

“Oh, you’ve been through too much. Let me get you some tea. I think it’s all the stress catching up with you. Come on, dear, how about taking a little rest?”

Margaret led the girl to her room and saw her safely settled in. She went out into the courtyard to watch the men in their training. This is what it is to live in a happy household, she thought. Why did I wait so long? She looked at Palin proudly. Beautiful Palin, her baby. Once Kas and Senn were back, she could rest and relax for the first time in her life. She closed her eyes and thanked the Spirit for the miracle of the witch of Anan-kai.

A scream pierced the keep.

“Alyssa!” Palin ran inside, rushing to her room. The door was locked and he kicked at it. Jaimes threw his shoulder into the door and it shattered.

They crashed into the witch's room and froze at the scene that greeted them.

Teren held a knife to Alyssa’s throat.

Blood dripped from his mouth and his eyes. His clothing was filthy, bloody, and in tatters. His flesh looked seared and ready to fall off the bone.

Jaimes asked, “Why doesn’t she just kill him!”

“Quiet,” Palin breathed.

Alyssa's fear of Teren was obstructing her powers. She had tried to tell him about her ordeal but he hadn't understood her trauma. He thought frantically of what he could do. They couldn't channel without hurting her. He slipped back behind the group, instructing them to do nothing and to remain quiet. He motioned for Cullen to give him his bow and arrows.

Teren hissed and spat. "She's mine. She's going to hell with me." His eyes darted from warrior to warrior, as though worried that his enemy Kasmárin would appear, wielding the Anthla-ma.

Palin whispered his plan to the others. He hid behind the huge body of Cullen. He closed his eyes and reached out to his beloved.

*When I give the signal, turn your head away from the knife and drop to the floor. It will have to be quick. It may nick you but it won't kill you. Trust me. I love you.*

He felt her acknowledgement.

He aimed.

*Three, two, one, drop!*

As Alyssa slumped, angling herself away from the blade of Teren's knife, Palin let his arrow fly. It cut the air and slammed into Teren before the evil wizard could react. Black blood seeped down his clothing and he slid to the floor, next to Alyssa.

Palin ran to the weeping woman, cradling her in his arms, whispering his love for her. Teren's body began to glow and slowly faded into nothing, drawn to Hell, his bloody rags left behind on the floor.

Kas made it to the doorway in time to see the Wizard die.

The Anthla-ma sparked in his hand, a consciousness filling it. He heard the voice of the Spirit.

*You may have your peace now, King of Anfall.*

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

“I should have known,” Kas said.

Luke patted his brother on the back. “Let is go, Kas, it’s over.”

Kas nodded and smiled suddenly. “Palin was magnificent, wasn’t he?”

Luke was taken back by his brother’s broad grin. “Yes, he was.”

Luke picked up Kas’s hand, examining the ring of Anfall.

“Well, it seems to fit you well enough. But an emerald? Really, Kas, do you have to change everything around you?”

Kas shrugged. “I guess it’s my one flaw.”

“You’ll be a good King. Thank you.”

They hugged and Kas didn’t know how to respond.

“Now, I think sister Jenna wants to speak with you, isn’t that right?”

Jenna looked sick. She nodded.

“Kas, I did a horrible thing.” He sat down, knowing instantly what that horrible thing had been.

“You sent her away.”

“Yes. I told her there was someone else. I told her you had a child. That you only wanted her for sex.”

Kas shut his eyes and rubbed his hands on his forehead.

“Oh, Jenna.”

“I’m so sorry, Kas. I was confused.” It was no use. No excuse would ever be enough.

“Well, it’s not entirely your fault. I could have told her that I wanted her. I had a million chances. She begged me for more.”

“Send Tim to get her! Kas, bring her back, it’s not too late.”

“No, she’ll be hurt beyond belief. She hates me now. I hate myself.”

“You are an ass, Kas.” Palin entered the room from having settled Alyssa into a nap. “I didn’t think it was possible to be smarter than you, but I am.”

“An ass, Palin?”

“An ass. A chicken. What did you tell me?” he poked at Kas’s chest. “What did you tell me about getting Alyssa. About her only wanting to love and to be loved?”

“It’s not the same.”

“It’s exactly the same.”

Tim ran his hand through his hair. “Kas, I have to agree. I know my sister, and she’s spent her whole life waiting for a man to truly love her. You have a chance. It’s not a lock, she’s pretty hurt. But a chance.”

“Kas isn’t much for taking chances, Tim,” Senn said. “He’s really good at slaying Wizards and changing the world, but going out and getting what he wants. . . no, I don’t think so. Too risky.”

“Shut up, Senn.”

“No, I won’t shut up this time. Listen, idiot. We’re going to cross and find her. If she doesn’t want you, well then tough, you’ll have to get over it. But I’m not going to sit around while you pine your damned life away wondering if she would have come back with you. And I’m not going for you. I’ll go with you, though. Tim, will you do this?”

“Of course.”

Margaret sat on the armrest of Kas’s chair. She put her arm around him and kissed his cheek. “Son, you are the bravest man I have ever known. I want you to know how much I love you, how much I’ve always loved you. You will be a great King.” She looked up at Luke, and he nodded, knowing what she wanted to say. “You will be the greatest King Anfall has ever known.” Kas looked at his mother as if he had imagined hearing her words. She nodded and kissed him again.

He looked around at the gathering and smiled. “Yes, I think I will.” He laughed, kissed his mother and hugged the former king. “Just kidding, brother,” he whispered in his ear.

“No you aren’t. And I’m happy you aren’t.”

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Lauren spent the morning with Tillie, catching up as much as she could without discussing her journey to a Land that Tillie wouldn’t believe in. She went home at midday to freshen up, promising to return to the bar in the evening. She arrived at the bar near sundown, and the tourist area was in full swing. Lauren stopped to watch street performers begin their shows, juggling, showing off performing cats, eating fire.

## The Princes of Anfall

Tillie's couldn't have been situated more perfectly. As Lauren entered the crowded bar, she saw a sign in Tillie's marginally readable handwriting. "Help Wanted. Attractive female waitress. Seasonal." Lauren tore down the sign, wondering what the law would have to say about Tillie's employment practices.

"Hello dear. Get some rest?"

Lauren held out the sign for Tillie to see, then balled it up and threw it into the trashcan behind the bar. "If I'm attractive enough, I'd like a job. When do I start?"

Tillie laughed and clapped her hands together. "This very minute. Go in the back, and put on a tee-shirt. One of the small strappy kind. I mean really small, Lauren. And roll those shorts up, for God's sake, you look like an old lady."

Lauren laughed and went to change. She could hear the band's sound check and was fairly certain it would start with Jimmy Buffet tunes and basically stay with them all night.

Tillie came into the back room and wolf-whistled. "Well, this is better than I hoped for. You'll get rich on tips, that's for sure."

"I'm not really into showing my breasts for money, Aunt Tillie."

"Then do it for me, dear. It's been a slow season so far."

They grabbed boxes and took them out front, loading the souvenir shelf with cheap glasses and Tiki mugs. "Okay, go out and light the torches, Lauren. Then it's the rounds. Have you done this before? I should have asked. Well, it's pretty simple. Here, take a pad in case you can't remember the orders. Barry will help you if you get in trouble. Sheila will be here any minute and you can sort out who gets what part of the floor. But cover for each other. Let me know if Sheila sneaks out for too many cigarette breaks, okay?"

It was a great night. Lauren was exhausted, sick to death of Jimmy Buffet songs, her feet were burning, her legs ached, her ass had been pinched at least five times and she was \$200 richer. She fell sound to sleep as soon as she hit the bed.

In the middle of the night, she woke to the feeling that she was back in Anfall. She looked around the room and remembered where she was and why she was here. Sobbing a little, she fell back into a deep sleep, dreaming of being on a beach with Kas in her arms.

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Tim groaned. “You’re going to have to do something about the ears, boys. The hair’s okay, just pull it back into a pony tail, but get rid of the ears. What did you do in New York?”

Senn wiggled his fingers.

“Oh, well do that again.”

Kas sighed and the men suddenly sported very average looking human ears.

“Okay, now the clothes. We look like we’re going to a science fiction convention or something.” Kas didn’t understand the reference, but knew what to do. He took a look out the window of their hotel and examined what the men were wearing.

“Ridiculous looking stuff.”

Tim found himself in baggy shorts and a polo shirt with deck shoes.

“Well, all right I guess. Not quite my style.”

Senn was in shorts and a pornographic T-shirt that said ‘Spring Break, Cancun 2004’.

Tim laughed hysterically. “Oh my God, that’s perfect! Kas, I wish you could understand how perfect that shirt is. Oh, never mind, it would take too long.”

Kas wore a black silk T-shirt and worn jeans.

“That’s just not fair, Kas. We’re the single ones and you’ve got us looking like dorks and then you go and get all, all, GQ looking.”

“I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about, Tim. I just picked out what I saw. If you don’t like it, go shopping.”

He winked at Senn.

“Well, I look like a hippie who’s taken up yachting.”

“Like I said. . .”

“Never mind. Now get rid of some of the braids. They’re really unusual looking.”

“Forget it. This is it. People will just have to think we’re odd looking. We’re from out of town, remember? Looking for a good time?”

Tim calmed down, realizing how difficult this was for Kas. Kas hadn’t crawled to anyone in his life and he was going to have to go down on his belly, with no guarantees he wouldn’t get his ass kicked.

## The Princes of Anfall

“All right, boys, I’m going to go scout out the situation. I’m pretty sure it was her going into the bar but I’ll check it out. Be back up in a half hour or so.”

“So, doing okay?” Senn briefly rubbed Kas’s back.

“It’s nice here, Senn. It’s really nice.”

Their room looked out onto the Caribbean side of the island and the sun was just beginning to set the sky on fire. They stood on the balcony, drinking cold beer and eating salsa and chips. Kas pointed to the poolside bar, where Senn’s Great Land counterpart was sporting the Cancun tee-shirt. He had long black hair in a pony tail as well.

“I’m better looking than that.”

“Well, yes, you are. Actually, you’re better looking than anyone here, it seems. Except for me.”

“Don’t start. You’re really getting vain, Kas. Honestly, this whole king business is going to your head.”

Kas smirked.

“I know how insecure you feel, brother. I wish I could help. It’s in the Spirit’s hands.”

Tim returned as promised, breathless. “She’s there, waiting tables. Funny, she said once she’d never do that again.”

“That’s where I first saw her. She was waiting tables in a hole in Bansor. You should have seen the men. They had never seen anything like her, nor will again, I suppose. The funny thing is, I’m not sure she understands how beautiful she is. She told me once that she was, well, intimidated by me, as if I were more special than she is.”

“No, she doesn’t think she’s beautiful, never has,” Tim agreed. “My sister had this problem, you have to understand. Everyone isn’t quite as, well, noble here as they are in the Land. Lauren always thought there was something wrong with her because guys wanted to lay her, but didn’t want to marry her. She just didn’t understand that it wasn’t about her at all, it was the guys she kept picking.”

Kas winced, thinking he had done the same thing to her.

“Then with the gifts, it made it so much worse. She tried to stop herself but she’d listen to their thoughts and they usually weren’t about love and marriage. There was one guy, she had it really bad for him. Well, never mind, you get the idea.”



“I would gladly kill all of them, right now.”

Senn and Tim looked at Kas in surprise.

“At least I was her first. She came to me and I was the first.”

“Whoa, brother, that’s way more information than I needed about my sister, thanks very much.”

“Of course, maybe she’s with someone else now, maybe out of spite...”

“For God’s sake, Kas, it’s been three days. You’re losing it. Now let’s get back to the plan. She’s with good old Aunt Tillie and we’ll have to figure out whether to bring her in on this.”

“Tillie?” Kas asked.

“Matilda Mathieson, my father’s sister. Her maiden name was Emory.”

Senn and Kas laughed.

“Matilda is your Aunt?”

They saw Tim’s confused look. Then he shook his head.

“No way.”

“Way, as you would say, brother. She and Hunter. . .”

Tim put his hands over his ears.

“Stop it. I can’t stand anymore. I had no idea. Aunt Tillie, good God. Well, I guess it makes some kind of sense.”

“We like her a lot. It’ll be fun to see her.”

“Well, for God’s sake, don’t let her see you before I get a chance to talk to her.”

“Let’s go.”

Kas’s heart felt as if it were going to burst. This is what she went through, he thought. This is what it’s like to be in love and not know if your love is returned.

They made their way down a street that ran into Duval and approached Tillie’s.

Kas read the sign aloud, “‘The best damned bar in the world.’ Tim, honestly, this can’t be the best bar in your world.”

“Look, you guys, just saunter over there and blend in. Well, blend in the best you can.” Tim pointed to a rail along the waterside where couples stood, taking in the sunset, taking photos. “In a few minutes, come sit at one of these outside tables.”

Tim pushed the door open and walked right up to Tillie. “Hey babe, wanna dance?”

## The Princes of Anfall

“Listen, kid—” She turned to look at him.

“Timothy!” She lavished him with kisses and he thought she would squeeze the air out of him. “What are you doing here? Do you know Lauren’s here? Of course you do!”

“Yes, I’ve come to find her. And there’s a lot of catching up you and I have to do. I understand that you’ve taken a fairly long trip in recent years.”

She looked at him questioningly. “I don’t know what you mean, honey?”

“I’ll catch up with you later, okay?” He kissed her on the cheek and headed for the back room. It was empty and he came back out to Tillie. “Where’s Lauren?”

“She was feeling kinda funny, so she went home to rest for a while.”

“Oh no. Where’s home?”

“Tim, what’s going on? Something’s not right here and I’m not sure I like it.”

“Why don’t you sit down, Tillie. I have a lot to tell you. Better yet, do you have time to meet some old friends of mine?”

She nodded. He led her outside.

“Oh my Lord.” Tim had to support her when she saw Kas and Senn.

“What the hell? Well, come here you gorgeous hunks of flesh and give Tillie a hug and a kiss.”

The brothers laughed and greeted Tillie.

“Okay, Tim, well the jig is up, I suppose, eh boys? So you know I’ve crossed and I know you have. Once your parents were gone, eh? We both bolted. And Lauren?”

“Sit down, Tillie. As I said, we have a lot of catching up to do.”

Tillie was mesmerized by the stories Tim, Kas and Senn told of the past month. And she cried when they told her that Hunter had died.

“The witch of Anan-kai, marrying Palin? And Margaret and Bruce, eh? Sly ones, those two. I never knew. But you, Kas, shacking up with my Lauren? I can’t get over it.”

“I’m afraid she may be over it, Tillie. I may have lost my chance.”

Tillie thought for a while.

“Well, something has been wrong. I suspected it might be a guy but I was going to give her time to tell me about it herself.”

“Where is she, Tillie?”

“Right now? Well, I suppose she’s with Robert at his *Pink House*.”

“Let’s go,” Kas said, standing abruptly.

Senn ran after him and Tim followed, calling to Tillie over his shoulder, “We’ll be back after seeing Lauren, I promise.”

Kas paced in the room, and Tim and Senn couldn’t calm him down.

“Three days and she’s with Robert in his pink house? Three days it took her to get over me. She promised, she told me she’d never, ever forget me. Look at how long forever turned out to be!”

“Kas, you’re going to start a fire,” Senn indicated the little sparks coming off him.

He sat on the bed and rubbed his head.

“Kas,” Tim said. “You’re overreacting. It’s because you’re all nervous about this. Robert is just a friend, I’m sure. Let me check it out and I’ll let you know, okay?”

Kas looked up and nodded. “Be honest with me, Timothy.”

“I will. One hour, give me an hour.”

Lauren sat in the courtyard, lounging in a chair, sipping one of Robert’s superb daiquiris. She wasn’t sure what had come over her at Tillie’s. The first panic attack she had ever had. The night before had gone so well, she had actually been looking forward to work. But once she got to the bar, she felt completely terrified.

Robert sat in the chair next to her.

“What is it, baby? You look like you saw a ghost.”

“I feel like I did, Robert. I don’t know what came over me. Just tired, I guess.”

“Who is he, Lauren? The guy you’re running from?”

Lauren looked at Robert. “I’m not running anymore, Robert. Actually, I never was. He just didn’t want me, or couldn’t want me, or something.”

“Well, sweetheart, there are many lovely fishes in the sea, but I know that’s no consolation now.”

“No, it will be a while before this one stops hurting.”

He sighed and rose to greet a new arrival who was ringing the desk bell.

“Can I help you?” Robert grinned from behind the front desk.

“Yes. I’d like to visit my sister, Lauren, who’s out in your courtyard. Would you mind if I join her?”

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“Well, you even look a bit alike. Let me get you a drink—she’s right through there.”

“Hey baby.” Tim stood before her.

“My God!” She jumped up and hugged him. “It’s so good to see you. I didn’t expect you this soon!”

“It’s good to see you. I see you’ve settled in nicely at Tillie’s.” He laughed, indicating her tight tank top.

“You should see the tips I make, thank you very much.” She laughed and then froze.

“No.”

“Yes.”

“Why did you bring him here? Can’t he get laid back at Anfall? Are you all trying to kill me?”

“It’s not like that, Lauren. There was a misunderstanding. Give him a chance to explain.”

“No, I can’t see him again. I can’t, Tim. It will kill me, don’t you get it? I can barely sleep. There’s not a minute I don’t think about him. I still love him. Still? I love him more than I ever did.”

Robert came by with Tim’s drink and left the twins to their discussion, although Lauren suspected her host was trying delicately to eavesdrop.

“Nice place, here. You picked out a great place to hide out.”

“How dare you, Tim. You know what I was up against.”

“I know, I know, I’m sorry. Can’t you just talk to him, listen to his explanation?”

“No. Don’t do this to me. I may have done some stupid things in my life, Tim, but I grew up a lot in the last month. I found out that I’m strong and gifted and well, even sexy, although that’s a little uncomfortable to discuss with you. And I learned that even the most wonderful, complicated, exquisite man on any world isn’t worth the time of day if he’s not available.”

“Talking about me again?” Senn smiled.

“Senn!” Lauren was stunned, not sure whether to be angry or thrilled. She hugged her handsome friend.

“So they sent out the big guns to get me, eh?”

Senn just smiled. “I’ve missed you, even after a few days.”

Lauren began to weep.

Senn hugged her again and let her get out the tears that she had been shedding alone. He rubbed her head and patted her back.

“I’m glad to see you looking so well, Senn, I really am,” she managed through her sobs.

“Come back with us, Lauren. You don’t know what’s gone on. You see, Kas is King.”

“What do you mean? What happened to Luke?”

“He gave the crown to Kas. That doesn’t matter right now. What matters is that you understand me.” He pulled her chin up so that he could hold her eyes. “Lauren, you have to trust me.”

“Don’t pull that on me, Senn. We’re in my land now and I don’t trust one of you.” Despite her pain and confusion, she started laughing. “Love the T-shirt Senn.”

Tim started laughing again. “It’s perfect, isn’t it?”

She nodded.

“Someone’s going to have to explain this to me,” Senn said, “Even though I’m not sure I want to hear it. Look, Lauren, I’m going to ask you for this favor once and then I’ll leave you alone.”

Lauren knew she was done for. This man would ask something in the name of their friendship and she wouldn’t be able to refuse him.

Robert interrupted with another drink. “Lauren, are you going to have more handsome men come around, because if so, I’ll throw a party tonight?”

“No,” she laughed, “this should be it, Robert, thanks. At least this had better be it...”

She looked at Tim and Senn.

“All right, Senn. What do you want me to do?”

Senn sighed, nodding in relief. “Five minutes, Lauren. If he can’t convince you in five minutes, we’ll leave you alone forever. I know he broke your heart. I know he shut

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you out. He's never known how to do anything else. But he's come all this way, left his kingdom, to beg for forgiveness. Can't you understand how hard this is for him?"

"He lied to me."

"He never lied to you."

"He has a woman and a child."

"Jenna lied to you. Marina is about 80 years old and she has a darling grandson. We were with them just two days ago."

She looked into his eyes. He was telling the truth. She shook off the hope that had started to take hold.

"He just wants a mistress."

"Come on. You know he doesn't need to go through all this to find a mistress. You have to see him. The rest is for him to tell you. I can't do this for the both of you."

She stood and he took her hand.

"By the way, Lauren, because Luke abdicated the throne to Kas, it is possible to marry the King. I think it's more than possible, it's damned likely."

Senn and Tim led Lauren back down Duval Street. Lauren was in a trance, not able to believe that this was happening.

Kas paced along the dock. His hair was loose and he was running his hands through it nervously. He was rehearsing what he would say to her.

They spotted him as they approached Tillie's and Lauren froze.

"He's a god. Look at him, Senn. I never had a chance, did I?"

"He tried to look nice for you tonight, I think. It was kind of pathetic. He kept looking in the mirror, straightening his shirt. He even put on some kind of Great Lander scent. I've never seen anything like it. Don't be stubborn, Lauren, you'll both just die miserable and make the rest of us miserable with you."

Kas heard his brother's voice and looked up.

Her long hair fluttered in the evening breeze. Her legs and arms were bare and she looked incredible. He couldn't take his eyes off her face, her exquisite face. Her green eyes penetrated his heart. He looked at the ring of Anfall and realized that he had changed it to match her eyes.

She's a goddess, he thought. I never had a chance.

*Lauren. Please.*

He wasn't sending his thoughts on purpose. The emotion was flooding out of him, for all with the gift to hear. Lauren took a few steps closer.

*I didn't understand what was going on, I've never felt like this before. I didn't know Jenna lied to you, I thought that you were fated for Luke. I was so angry about that. I couldn't tell you, I didn't know.*

Senn shook his head. "Bloody hell, Kas, tell her. For once in your life, take what's yours."

*I love you, Lauren. "I love you."*

Lauren began to cry. She ran to him and he lifted her into his arms. He smothered her with kisses—her mouth, her eyes, her cheeks.

"I love you, Lauren. I love you so much. Please love me. I can't go on without you. You promised, you said you'd never forget. You promised you were mine. I'm King now, do you understand? Do you remember the vision Alyssa had? I'm the King, I'm the one. You're supposed to marry me."

She put her finger over his mouth to quiet him. Tears flowed freely down her cheeks. He was panting and she placed her hand on his chest.

"Let's go home, Kas. Take me home."

He squeezed her tightly and spun her around.

"Well, doesn't that beat all?" Tillie stood in the doorway of the bar, watching the scene unfold, wiping tears away. "My Lauren and my Kas, a couple. Why, Tim, she'll be Queen!"

"That's right. I'll be the Queen's brother. That's something, isn't it?"

"Let's leave right now, before anything has a chance to go wrong. Where do we cross, Tim?" Senn asked.

Tillie answered. "About ten yards thataway. Right outside my door—that's actually the southernmost point of this country—the marker way off..."

"Oh, Kas, I have my necklace to get," she pulled on his sleeve.

He closed his eyes and dropped the emeralds into her hand.

"And I need to leave some money for Robert."

"Show me Robert."

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Lauren pictured the *Pink House* and her room there and the man who had been kind to her.

Kas filled her dresser drawers with gold coins and showed her the vision.

She laughed. "That will do nicely."

He kissed her, unable to believe the feeling of having her in his arms again.

"All right you two, get a room," laughed Tim.

"Come on, everyone hold hands."

"Tillie, what are you doing?"

"Yeehaw—I'm traveling!"

"Are you sure?" She winked at Kas and they crossed.

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Sara and Kenneth looked down from the balcony at the new arrivals. "Well, doesn't that beat all? And isn't that Tillie with them?"

"Sure is. But what the hell are they wearing?"

"Oh, I get to see what's in style these days back in the U.S. It all looks pretty awful, actually. Except for Kas of course, he's gorgeous as usual."

Kenneth laughed and hugged his wife. "I have the feeling we have another wedding to attend."

"I wonder what we should get them?" Sara said thoughtfully as she leaned over the railing. "You always time it just right," she called down to the group approaching the villa, "Dinner's almost on the table."



**V. To Tanu****CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO**

The King's wedding was a modest affair, all things considered. The Queen Mother had many plans for the day, including an invitation to the entire kingdom.

"Please, Margaret," Lauren had taken her hand. "I know that this is important to you, but I really want this to be small."

"All right, dear. You pretty much get what you want now."

"I want you to be happy, especially happy that Kas is marrying me."

"Lauren, there's one thing you'll learn for yourself one day, when you have children. If you make my son happy, I'll love you as my own. And trust me, I've never seen Kas this happy."

Lauren hugged her new mother-in-law and new sister-in-law.

Jenna was crying and Lauren knew that she couldn't let go of her guilt.

"Jenna, stop it. If you didn't love your brothers, you wouldn't have done what you did. And if you hadn't done what you did, Kas might never have understood that he really wanted me in his life. Besides, my brother's in love with you and I can't have him thinking I've upset you."

Jenna first looked stunned, then slowly she smiled. "Are you just making that up, Lauren? Trying to get back at me? About Tim, I mean."

"Nope. It's true. You didn't hear it from me, though."

"I'm in love with him. But please don't tell him. I want to see him work for this."

They laughed and hugged one another.

"All right, girls, it's time to look at fabric."

The Maiden appeared with a dress in her arms. It was studded with diamonds and pearls, made of a fabric none had ever seen—it moved and shimmered with the air.

"It looks enchanted, dear, did you make it?" Margaret held it up to Lauren and gasped. "Why, it's perfection."

"It's a dress my mother made, quite a while back, of course. And yes, it is enchanted. It is for the Queen of Anfall only and I have waited for many years to summon it for Lauren."

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Luke performed a short ceremony on the balcony of Tansing Crossing at sunset. The location had been Lauren's choice.

Senn stood with Kas, who was dressed in a long fitted white and silver coat suited for a king. He wore the ancient golden torc of Anfall for the first time.

When Kas took Lauren's hands into his own and looked into her eyes, promising to love her forever, he heard a voice whisper to him.

*You can have it all, King. Peace, adventure, your love and your brother. Do not waste a moment of your life, of the gifts I give you. This is just the beginning for you. You must learn to be my servant.*

He bowed his head to the Spirit, understanding that his full calling was not yet clear. *You will reveal my destiny in your own time, Spirit, and I will wait patiently.*

Lauren looked at her new husband, promising to be his. And she thought of her parents, and how much she would have loved for them to see her.

"They see you Lauren and they are very happy for you," Kas said, "The Spirit has told me so."

She cried in happiness, as did every woman present.

As the evening drew on, Kas became anxious for the festivities to be over.

Lauren was gorgeous a bride as there ever was but he wanted desperately for her to be out of that enchanted dress and in his arms. She had insisted that they not make love until after the wedding and he had nearly gone out of his mind these last few days.

They feasted the evening away. Tillie and Tim led them in silly American songs and wedding dances.

Senn, a little drunk, proclaimed enough toasts for ten couples.

Kas sat back, his arms folded across his chest, smoking a pipe, laughing at the group.

"I've never seen you like this." Luke pulled a chair up next to him.

"Like what, Prince?" Kas joked.

"I'm happy for you Kas."

"I owe it to you."

"All debts are paid in full, brother. I love you. Have a great honeymoon but don't stay too long. I'm not getting any younger and I'm ready for my trip."

“A week. Just give me a week alone with her.”

“A week, let’s see,” he rubbed his chin. “All right.”

Kas stood and took Lauren’s hand.

It was time, past time, and everyone was quiet.

“Thank you all. You have helped make this the greatest day of my life. Of both our lives.”

Lauren smiled up at him.

“Mother, Bruce, Tim, Palin, Jaimes, Cullen, Kenneth, Sara, Tillie, Alyssa, Jenna, Luke—thank you all.”

He looked at each in turn. He looked at the sky and they all knew he was greeting Hunter silently.

“We’ll return in a week. I love you all.”

Senn leaned back in his chair, playing with a piece of cake, one eyebrow arched.

Kas pulled Lauren up. “We aren’t going to ride or take the carriage?”

“No honey, I don’t have that kind of time.”

They all laughed.

He looked over his shoulder at Senn. “Well, hurry up.”

“What do you mean, hurry up?”

“Get over here, you ass. I don’t have all night.”

“I’m not coming on your honeymoon, Kas.”

“Somebody’s got to stand guard,” he said. “After all, I’m the king. You’ll stay with Marina, keep her out of our hair.”

Senn looked at Lauren questioningly.

“It was my idea, brother,” she laughed.

“You’re not a very good liar, sister.”

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Within five minutes of their arrival, Kas had Lauren stripped and was crying out her name as he exploded inside of her.

“I love you, Kas.”

“My gorgeous Queen. I’m sorry, that was a bit quick. I’ll be gentler this time.”

He kissed her.

## The Princes of Anfall

“This time? More than once?”

She reached down to feel his hard sex ready as it had been minutes ago. “My God, Kas, how long will this go on?” she laughed.

“All week, honey, all week. Actually, I’m going to try for the rest of our lives. We’ll see.”

He kissed her gently again. “By the way, Lauren, you know that we’re having a baby, don’t you?”

She laughed. “I was about to tell you. I should have known you’d already sense it. Are you happy?”

He looked at her in awe, rubbing her belly. “I am the happiest man there ever was, in this world or any other.”

“Kas?”

“Hmnn?”

“I don’t want you to be gentle this time.”

“What?”

“You heard me, Your Majesty.”

She rolled over and pinned his arms to the bed. She knew he was letting her hold him down but it didn’t spoil the fun.

Senn and Marina sat on the porch of her cabana, watching the fireworks light up the starry sky.

“Ain’t love grand?” she said. He laughed and held his glass up in a final wedding toast to his King and Queen.

“It sure is, Marina. I’m thinking that it’s time for me to find my own wife.”

“Oh my, Sennsárin. You’re joking, right?”

She didn’t get an answer.

Senn leaned back in his chair, eyes closed.

“Senn?”

“Hmnn?”

“Sing that song I like, will you?”

“What song’s that, Marina?”

“The one about the man who’s left his home in Georgia and gone to sit at the dock of a bay. The one with the whistling.”

Senn sang Tim’s favorite song, wondering if he was getting the words right.

Lauren held her husband, the father of her baby. She stroked his hair, looked into his gorgeous eyes and said a prayer of thanks.

From far off, she thought she heard Senn singing an Otis Redding tune. How could her life be this wonderful?