

PRISONER

Copyright 2007 Megan Derr  
[www.amasour.com](http://www.amasour.com)  
<http://maderr.livejournal.com>

*To my family*



FOR CROWN. FOR COUNTRY. FOR SWORD.  
-Krian vow



# PROLOGUE

Dieter scrubbed at his face, willing away his exhaustion. The chaos of battle had finally ceased, and his men would shortly be bringing him the last irritant of the evening – the bastard Salharan who had managed to attack their camp at rest. He shoved strands of silver-touched black hair from his eyes, looking up at the dark gray sky. "Stupid bitch," he muttered under his breath. He snapped his head down at the sound of boots squishing in the muddy swamp that their camp had become. "What?" he barked at the private trying not to shake before him.

"G-General, we caught him."

Gray-green eyes flared. "Bring him to me."

"Yes, Sir!" the private turned and beat a retreat. Dieter noted that if they'd moved half so fast in battle, more of them would have lived. It would seem the new recruits were still sorely in need of training. That would be dealt with in a fortnight when they reached the Winter Palace.

He glared once more at the dark sky. "The Winter Princess has sunk her claws deep this season." A few of his officers, gathered to give their reports, muttered soft agreements. Dieter's next words were prevented by the sound of shouting and scrabbling, words shouted in a language usually foreign to their camp. A moment later four men came crashing into the circle, three of them falling to the ground as they reached Dieter.

The prisoner remained standing, sneering contemptuously at the soldiers who had failed to control him.

Dieter stepped forward, grabbed the prisoner by the scruff of his shirt and swung a hard fist into his stomach. The prisoner collapsed, groaning in pain - but did not pass out.

"That's more like it. Now," he glared at his men, "Start talking."

The first soldier nodded, fumbling to straighten his hat as he snapped to attention. "This is the man that led the ambush, General. The others are all dead."

Unadulterated hate clouded the prisoner's face as he looked at Dieter.

Dieter ignored him. "How did he manage to take us so unawares?"

"We don't know, General." The second soldier started to shrug, then realized what he was doing and froze.

Dieter stared at the prisoner through hooded eyes. The man gave the word filthy all new meaning. His dark green military breeches were so covered in muck and grime you couldn't tell their original color unless you knew it ahead of time. His hair was a mystery - perhaps blonde or brown. He'd lost his military jacket, making rank impossible to determine, and his shirt was little more than scraps of cloth barely clinging to his form. But beneath the rags and the mud, muscle rippled and tensed as he moved and strained against the ropes wound down his arm and locked tightly around his wrists. This was no soldier-in-uniform-only.

Of course, the fact that he'd killed a few hundred of Dieter's best had proven that. "Do you have a name, prisoner?" He noticed, almost idly, that the man's amber eyes turned bright gold in anger.

"Prisoner is good enough for you," the man spat. "You may as well kill me, because I'll not tell you a thing."

Dieter smirked. "That remains to be seen." His gaze hardened as he looked at his men. "Do we know anything about him?"

"He lost his jacket struggling against us, but it had the marks of a lieutenant." The third soldier spoke quietly, as if he sensed the General would be displeased and was hoping to escape detection.

Had Dieter felt like moving, he probably would have backhanded him for acting so weak. His vision misted with rage. "A *lieutenant*. The best of my Scarlet is dead now because of a polluted *lieutenant*?" Dieter contemplated landing a few blows, but decided it just wasn't worth expending what energy he had left. "Get out of my sight, all of you. Rest while you can, because tomorrow you're going to wish the Autumn Prince had taken you away!"

The soldiers fled.



Breathing heavily with rage, Dieter grabbed a fistful of the prisoner's filthy hair and forced his head up. "How did you kill so many of my men?"

"I'm polluted, remember?" The prisoner sneered in contempt. "A little pollution is all I need to kill filthy Krians."

Dieter swung out, once more punching him hard in the gut. He glared, enraged, as the prisoner crumpled to the ground and lay still. Using one booted foot, he shoved the prisoner until he lay flat on his stomach. Crouching down, he examined the ropes that bound him. It would not do to injure him overmuch until they could determine a suitable punishment for him. Simply killing him would not suffice. No. This one would pay. Grimacing at the layers of Gods only knew what covering him, he shoved away dirt and scraps of cloth to ensure the prisoner had not suffered serious injury.

His explorations uncovered a strange, unnatural mark at the small of his back. Dieter frowned and wiped away more of the grime, breath hissing between his teeth when he realized what he had uncovered.

Seven thin triangles, shaped around a circle to form a stylized star. Five of the triangles were colored - violet, indigo, blue, green and yellow. Two triangles and the central circle were black. Dieter was torn between annoyance and glee. "That would certainly explain how a mere lieutenant managed to kill so many of my men." Rising to his feet, he called for his officers and began barking orders.

"After all the trouble you've caused," Dieter folded his arms across his chest. "It's good to know you're worth a ransom."

The prisoner shook his head, too exhausted and uncomfortable to offer more of a protest. His arms had had been chained to the ground behind him, forcing him to sit always slightly tilted back, so that the chains wrapped from his neck and down his arms didn't choke him. "They will pay nothing for me."

"If you are going to lie, prisoner, then at least tell a good one. I know a Seven Star when I see one, and I know they will be eager to get you back." Dieter unfolded his arms as an attendant approached with a steaming cup of tea. "But tell my why a Brother of the Seven Star was made a mere lieutenant? Did they think that would keep you from being detected?"

Amber eyes regarded him with hot rage, but it was not the bright gold that Dieter had seen before. The prisoner was growing weaker by

the hour, and the strain had dulled his bright eyes. Dieter realized he almost felt disappointed. "They thought it would get me killed sooner."

"Not very intelligent of them," Dieter said with amusement. He took a sip of his dark tea, deciding to play along with the prisoner. "Why not simply kill you yourselves?"

This time the eyes did turn gold, though only for a moment. Then the prisoner sneered. "Do not think you'll get any information from me."

Dieter smirked. "Think you I need such information from you? The Brotherhood of the Seven Star, the most polluted men in all of Salhara." He knelt to look the prisoner in the face. "Always before they have been leaders, men of power, not mere lieutenants - unless of course we are wrong about your rank."

The prisoner made a motion that would have been a shrug had he been unbound, "You are correct. I am a Lieutenant. Or was."

"Nor did you use the sort of pollution to which I am accustomed." The trend on the battlefield was to use a wide variety of small pollutions – simple spells – rather than waste their drugs on larger, more complicated spells. Yet this one had used those harder spells.

The prisoner gave a vicious smile. "If I'd done that, you would have been able to defend yourselves."

Dieter narrowed his eyes, sorely tempted to backhand him. He rose to his feet. "You're only alive because of my orders."

Giving another of his awkward shrugs, the prisoner tossed his head to stare him in the face. "You'll be killing me soon anyway. What do I care for your threats?"

"It is not my threats of which you should be wary," Dieter said. "It is my promises. And I promise that once the ransom is paid, you will suffer greatly for what you've done."

The prisoner threw his head back and laughed, the sound of it bitter, half wild. "Then I guess I have nothing to fear at all." His eyes were dampened gold. "Never will they pay a ransom for me."

Dieter crushed the missive in one large fist, glowering at everyone and everything within his sight. The soldiers fled, each fearing they would be the one to take the brunt of their General's anger.

The prisoner laughed at him, though he did not sound happy so much as bitterly amused. "I told you so."

"Be silent, prisoner, unless you would care to explain to me why your Brothers do not desire your safe return."

"Because they would rather die than call me Brother." The prisoner slumped over in his chains, no longer seeming to feel the pain caused by his long hours of awkward confinement.

Dieter buried his hand in the man's filthy hair and yanked his head up. "Then what am I to do with you?"

"Kill me."

"No, I think not. All the trouble you've caused, death is too kind a measure." Dieter released him, scowling as he thought.

"General!" A lieutenant approached, touching his right shoulder with his left hand in salute as he snapped to attention. "We are ready to depart."

"Then have the prisoner secured to my horse."

"Yes, General!" The lieutenant saluted again and then barked orders to several nearby grunts.

Several minutes later, Dieter mounted his horse and sneered down at the man chained to the pommel. "I hope you can keep up, Prisoner. If you fall, I will not help you up."

"Think I care?" The prisoner sneered. "At this rate, I will die."

"No, I think not." Dieter gave the orders for his men to march, then continued to speak to the prisoner. "There is too much fight in you. A few days without water and food and you will be begging for the chance to live."

"I would rather die than beg *you* for anything." Gold eyes flared.

Dieter merely laughed, his own gray-green eyes bright with pleasure at the thought of proving the stubborn prisoner so very, very wrong. "We shall see, prisoner, we shall see." He urged his horse to increase its pace; summoning his captains to discuss the routes they would take to get home.

Staying together the length of the journey was foolish - they would be safer if they split into smaller groups. He'd already lost more of the Scarlet than he liked; he would not lose more. Beside him, walking along the uneven, rocky ground, the prisoner ground his teeth to hear information that he could not make use of. Dieter saw the frustration and was pleased. Ordering his men away, he spoke once more to the prisoner. "Thirsty, prisoner? We have been traveling for nearly two hours."

The prisoner said nothing.

Dieter chuckled. "You will beg me before the journey ends."

"I will let death claim me first."

"I do not think so." Dieter watched him for a moment, ordering his thoughts and considering his questions. "How do you know our language?"

Silence.

"Ah, but you are a Brother."

Still the prisoner did not reply.

Dieter laughed, "But no - you said they would rather die than call you Brother. Then why do you bear the mark of the Seven Star?"

"Why would you think I'd tell you?"

"You will eventually. Shall we start with your name?"

"Prisoner will suffice."

Dieter laughed. "So stubborn. I will enjoy watching you crumble. But I grow weary of calling you 'prisoner.' If you will not tell me your name, perhaps I should give you one."

"NO!" the prisoner shouted loud enough to startle most of the assembled men. He lowered his voice, and it was full of hate and a shred of panic. "I will *never* accept a name from *you*. Prisoner is all that you need call me."

Narrowing his eyes, Dieter spoke briefly with his aide before pulling off to the side of the camp. He dismounted and strode up to the prisoner, grasping him by the throat and pressing just hard enough for it to be painful without inhibiting his breathing. "You are my prisoner and I shall call you what I like."

"No," the prisoner snarled, desperate and angry. "I will never respond to anything but prisoner."

Dieter used his other hand to shove filthy, tangled strands of hair from the prisoner's face, forcing his head up for a closer examination. Beneath a sweaty, dirty face amber eyes shone bright with anger - and the slightest bit of fear. Dieter smiled in a way that made most men shiver. "Beraht," he said softly. "Your name is Beraht."

"I do not accept," the prisoner said. "I would rather die."

"I don't believe you," Dieter said. He released the prisoner and mounted his horse once more. "You will grow tired, and hungry and weary. Already you are suffering from the lack of your precious drugs. By the time we reach camp, you will be begging me. If you want to live, accept your new name or tell me your real one."

"Never."

"Attack!" a scout called as he crested the hill and raced toward the traveling army. "Salharan soldiers, take cover!"

Dieter wasted no time giving orders to his troops, but the orders came too little too late to avoid disaster. In mere seconds his army was a mess, and it was all Dieter could do to keep them from being overwhelmed completely. Everywhere around him were the screams and cries of men and horses, the smell of blood and steel and fire, the air thick with fear and anger and hate.

But there was something strange about it all. Dieter fought off attacker after attacker as his mind tried to put together the pieces that were not fitting together as they should.

As he slew yet another foot soldier from atop his mount, he suddenly realized what was odd. They weren't trying to get him.

They were trying to get past him.

Dieter fought with the chains that had been secured to his pommel, then all but threw himself off his horse and shoved the prisoner to the ground as more Salharan foot soldiers attacked. His sword found its mark in the chest of the first, the throat of the second. His third-in-command took out the last as Salharan trumpets sounded a retreat.

"Get me the counts!" Dieter snarled to his second.

Pushing himself to his feet, he yanked the prisoner up hard and shook him. "*Why?*" he raged. "Why are my men dying for you? Why are your own people trying to kill you?" he shook the man hard, over and over until they both were gasping for breath.

The prisoner stared at him with eyes that had darkened with fear. "We have to go. Now."

Dieter narrowed his eyes. "What?"

"Now!" the prisoner screamed. In a burst of strength Dieter hadn't expected, the prisoner grabbed him and turned, using Dieter's own weight to throw the general into the scrubby forest that separated the road from a small, muddy river. Without pause, he grabbed the reins of Dieter's horse and followed the general into the trees.

Dieter struggled to his feet, but before he could the prisoner threw himself on top of the general and held him down as best he could. Dieter continued to struggle, until a thin, high-pitched whining sound filled the air. Until that moment, he had not noticed the stark, unnatural silence. "No..." he whispered. He ceased struggling, and instead began to silently recite the prayers for peace in death.

Above him, still holding the still general down, the prisoner chanted words of his own. Not a prayer, but a spell. One last dose he'd had hidden in his boot, and it was just enough to cast a single spell.

"Protect us."

"They were not Salharan." It wasn't a question, but a statement. Dieter's voice was flat. He cursed himself a thousand times for falling for a trick he should never have let deceive him.

"No," the prisoner said. "I should have realized it sooner."

Dieter shook his head, mind in turmoil. Everyone was dead. Everything was gone.

He glared hatefully at the prisoner. "Why did they want you?"

"I don't know."

"Tell me!" Dieter roared and threw himself at the prisoner, pinning him to the ground

"I don't know!" the prisoner cried, chains rattling as he struggled against Dieter's iron hold. "My own people don't care if I live or die. Why would the Illussor?" He lay still, gasping for breath, amber eyes glazed with pain. "I don't know!"

Dieter let him go with a rough cry. "I should kill you."

"It would be a mercy," the prisoner said bitterly.

"Which is why I will not." He looked pensively at the prisoner, who was examining the food over the fire. "Are you hungry?"

"I will never be hungry enough to accept your name." The prisoner looked at him with an angry frown, and Dieter would swear there was something of a pout to it.

Dieter lifted the roasting meat from the fire. He ate heartily for several minutes, offering the prisoner none. "Why are you so touchy about a simple name? It is not as though it would kill you to be called something other than prisoner. Or you could simply tell me your real name."

"What does it matter!" the prisoner snapped. "I am of no concern to you. At least not important enough that you need my name. A prisoner is all I am, and a prisoner is all I shall be."

Dieter considered him. "You could have escaped, in the time you had after using your damned pollutions."

"Those pollutions saved your life," the prisoner replied.

"You are still my prisoner."

The prisoner hefted his chains and sneered. "So I noticed. Whatever happened to a life for a life?"

"You took the lives of my men, and the rest of them died because the Illussor wanted you. Tell me why I should not let the devils have you?"

"Because though the Krians hate Salhara, they hate the Illussor more. You will not give them what they want - especially if you think I can be used against them."

"You think you can be used to hurt them?"

The prisoner snorted, "No. But they were after me for a reason."

"A reason you claim not to know."

"I speak the truth!" the prisoner shouted, his words echoing off the cave just behind them. "I am rejected by my brothers and my country. I am nameless. I have no purpose."

Dieter stared at him in surprise. "How is a man nameless?"

"None of your business."

"Why did you kill my men, if you have no brother, no country, no purpose?"

"Kill a hundred of my enemies and I shall welcome thee as friend. Kill a thousand of my enemies and I shall welcome thee as brother," the prisoner quoted softly. He looked at Dieter, eyes burning hot gold in the firelight and setting sun. "The blood of the Kria is my only hope."

"Would that I could kill you," Dieter swore. "That is not what the saying means. Sacrificing my men for so selfish a purpose. I will find a fitting punishment if it is the last thing I do."

The prisoner closed his eyes and laughed. "Do your best."

The prisoner was dying.

Dieter had lost track of the days with which he'd been without food or water. At least three as they traveled; one or two after his Scarlet was slaughtered and however many days they had been on the road.

Ever under cover, traveling at night when the Illussor were at their weakest.

Dieter held him close, expression intent as he looked at the man barely conscious in his arms. "Do you really want to die?"

"No..." Pale gold stared weakly at Dieter. "But I will not accept your name. Let me be called prisoner and be content."

"No," Dieter said fiercely. He wished he could explain to them both why it mattered so much. Because the prisoner was right - a name mattered little to him. He shouldn't care whether the man lived or died. He should want him dead, after the massacre of his entire Scarlet.

Except he wanted the strange prisoner, filthy and weak and enemy that he was, to accept the name that Dieter had chosen. On some level, it *mattered*. Dieter had learned long ago to trust such feelings, whether he understood them or not.

"Do you want to die nameless?" he asked desperately, sensing somehow this was the right thing to say. "Unwanted by the people who should be welcoming you as a hero? Alone in the woods in the arms of your enemy?"

A hundred emotions flickered across the prisoner's face, pain and rage and misery flickering like shadows in dying amber eyes.

"You are Beraht," Dieter said firmly. "Accept it."

"You don't understand..." the prisoner whispered, but the rest of his protest died on his lips. He sighed, nodding feebly. "So be it."

"Say it."

"My name is Beraht."



# PART ONE KRIA

*A sword used well will kill its enemies.  
A sword used poorly will kill its wielder.*  
-Krian saying



# CHAPTER ONE

"We lost him." Dressed head to toe in clothing that seemed to blend into the room around him, a man with dark yellow eyes knelt at the foot of a dais, bowing his head at the three men seated there. "I told you not paying the ransom would be a risk."

The man in the middle, tall and thin and gray, spoke in a booming voice that shook the dark stone chamber in which they gathered. His eyes were dark red. "Watch your impertinence. What do you mean we lost him?"

The kneeling man shook his head. "We followed him by tracking his magic. He has used it up. Until he takes another dose, we have lost him."

"Nonsense. Yellow lasts for weeks, and we know he took several vials. He should have the magic in his systems for weeks yet."

"Not if he pushed himself and burned it all off," the man said quietly.

On the rightmost side, a man with deeply tanned skin and dark orange eyes moved restlessly in his seat. "Why do you think such a thing?"

The dark-clothed man motioned to the door. "I have brought a guest who will help explain."

"Bring him in, Tawn," the last man snarled. He was pale and sickly; his hand shook as he raised it to motion the guards to open the doors. His eyes were red, so dark as to appear almost black.

Tawn nodded and rose to his feet, moving with cat-like grace to the doors and vanished into the hallway. He returned a moment later dragging a man whom he threw to the floor as he reached the dais. Gasps filled the room and more than a few of the gathered members stumbled several steps back.

The tall, gray man rose to his feet, voice booming in anger and some fear. "Why have you brought an Illussor into our stronghold?"

Tawn grinned, an expression that made those closest to him shiver, and stepped forward to lift the figure up so that they could see his face.

The Illussor's skin was a pale, almost silvery white in the light of the candelabra that fought off the darkness of the windowless chamber. His hair was the same, shining like fine silver.

The Brothers gasped, breaths hissing out in stunned disbelief.

The Illussor had no eyes.

"How did you manage that?"

Tawn laughed, cold and hard. "This one was unconscious and so did not fall to the Scream cast by his superior. He was too weak to use magic." He turned the Illussor's head, stroking a cheek still crusted with dried blood. "Take out its eyes and it will never cast illusions again." He let the Illussor go, and the blinded man fell back down upon the stones, trembling.

The Trio all nodded, and the sickly man leaned forward in his seat. "Why do we need an Illussor? What can it possibly tell us?"

"We found several of them in a battlefield, amongst a great many dead Krian soldiers. Not just any Kria soldiers..." Tawn paused, brown eyes flaring into a deep gold.

"Get on with it," the tall man spoke.

Tawn smirked. "They were amongst fallen Scarlet."

"*Scarlet?*" the dark-skinned man exclaimed.

"Yes," Tawn said, his voice filled with delight. "Nameless killed at least a hundred of them, and the Illussor Scream wiped out another five hundred or more."

All around the chamber the assembled Brothers murmured quietly amongst themselves.

The sickly old man shook his head slowly back and forth, unable to absorb what he'd been told. "Incredible. General von Adolwulf has

been our greatest threat for years now. To think he and so many of his men were so suddenly done in by a Scream..."

"Yes," the gray-haired man spoke. "He is our nemesis because he is much more clever than that. How did such he fall for an Illussor trap?"

Tawn pulled hard at the Illussor's hair. "That is a question for you to answer, Deceiver. Speak."

The Illussor was trembling, and licked his dry lips before responding. "I am merely a foot soldier. Our orders were to devastate the Scarlet. I know nothing more than that."

"You lie." Tawn pulled harder, until the Illussor cried out in pain. "Speak the truth. There is worse I can do than tear out your eyes."

Shaking in pain and fear, the Illussor never the less shook his head. "I can not tell you what I do not know!"

"You had best tell us something, Illussor." The central man spoke sharply, coldly. "Your life is only as valuable as the information you give us."

The Illussor turned toward the sound of his voice, hissing in pain at Tawn's hold. "You will kill me anyway. And I swear to you, there is nothing I can tell you."

The man with orange eyes motioned impatiently. "Lock him up. He will talk after a few days, when dark and cold and hunger begin to really take their toll."

Tawn nodded and departed the room, dragging the prisoner behind him like a sack.

The Brothers turned to one another, discussing the matter in whispers and mutters. The three men on the dais called them to silence. The sickly one spoke. "The Illussor do not simply kill an army; it is not their way. If it were, we would all be dead by now. Sol, attend!"

A man in the dark gray uniform of the Royal Army stepped forward. His eyes were bright yellow. Though he was only thirty-eight years old, his ash blonde hair was almost completely gray. Combined with his uniform, the man had an austere, almost melancholy air about him. When he stepped forward, the whispering in the room faded. "Yes, my Lord Jaspar?"

"You still have access to Kria?"

"Of course, your Grace." Yellow eyes took on a speculative gleam. "What are your orders?"

"I want to know the fate of the Scarlet, and if they were carrying anything of importance that managed to slip by us."

"Your will be done."

"Excellent," the man said with what could almost be considered glee. On either side of him, his compatriots expressed their own satisfaction. "See that you gather as much information as possible. The Illussor have been behaving oddly for some time now; to massacre the entire Scarlet is a drastic measure. I want to know why they resorted to it."

General Sol bowed low. "Your will be done." Turning sharply, Sol strode from the room to carry out his orders. Behind him, the Brothers continued to argue and suppose.

Outside in the hallway, his respectful mien fell away. He cast his eyes toward the shadow lurking between torches. "How did you happen to be so near that battle, Tawn, yet know nothing of what occurred or why?"

Tawn chuckled and pulled away from the shadows. "What makes you think I know something?"

"You always hold something back. It's a wonder the Brothers have not figured that out yet."

"They're too busy reveling in their Illussor captive."

Sol strode close and caught Tawn by the scruff of the neck. "Desist, Tawn. I've little patience for your games today."

"You never have patience for my games."

"Then why do you persist in playing them?"

Tawn laughed, but it wasn't a pleasant or happy sound. "If you enjoyed them, what would be the point in playing them?"

Sol slammed him against the wall. "Desist, Tawn."

"Yes, yes." Tawn shoved him away and brushed off his shirt. "You need to develop a sense of humor, General Sol. Or should I call you Lord Grau? It's so hard to remember who you are and when."

Sol backhanded him. "I said desist."

"You will pay for hitting me, General."

"Idle threats. We both know that you will not kill me for a long time yet."

Tawn's eyes were bright with anger and barely repressed magic. "And on that day, you will pay for every abuse you've laid upon me. Make no mistake." He stepped back into the shadow, away from Sol's anger.

"So you've said before. Now tell me."

Tawn glared but began to explain. "Shortly before the Illussor attacked, the Scarlet was struck a hard blow by our nameless brother. He took out a hundred men with his own magic, and further damage was done by other soldiers who were killed shortly after the Scarlet began to

fight back. Nameless was captured some minutes later and taken as a personal prisoner of General von Adolwulf. When the Illussor attacked, it slowly became apparent that they were after Nameless. He and the General were not seen after the Scream; it is presumed von Adolwulf was killed. We of course know that nameless lives. No doubt that is why his magic burned out so rapidly. It would have taken every shred he possessed to resist a Scream."

"Why would they want a lousy peasant? I doubt the Illussor know he is a Seven Star." Sol frowned in thought. "Keep searching for him, and when you find him bring him to me in Kria. I will take care of matters from there."

Tawn laughed. "Of course."

Sol did not reply, but turned on his heel to finally escape the dungeon where the Seven Star meetings always took place, up winding stairs until he reached a door of dark, heavy oak. From a heavy ring of keys at his waist, he selected a large, plain iron one. The door opened soundlessly into a large wine room, hidden behind several barrels.

From there he ascended into the kitchens, slipping out the back door and working his way around the white stone palace to the royal gardens. Several minutes and winding hallways later, he was back safe and sound in his own room. He woke his sleeping manservant with a sharp clap to the head. "Pack my things, Dal. We leave this very night for Kria. Where are the cleansers?"

Dal lifted a small leather case from the dresser and opened it, holding out a small glass vial filled with a milky grayish substance. "Here, Lord General."

"Thank you." Sol drank the liquid in one swallow. He swayed for a moment, feeling nauseous, as the cleanser began to take effect.

Dal regarded him politely, blandly, though his pale green eyes were attentive. "Perhaps you should sit down, Lord General?"

"I'll be fine." And several minutes later he seemed to be, though Sol knew he would not feel like eating or drinking much for the next three days while the cleanser finished the job it had only begun.

By the time they reached Kria, he would be nothing more than a familiar face at the royal court, a peasant-turned-noble from unexpected fortune. No sign of his Salharan pollution would remain.

Still far below the palace, Tawn strolled into the small dungeon where his blind Illussor was chained to the wall. "Are you ready to talk now?" He spoke in Illussor, his accent nearly flawless.

"There is nothing I can tell you."

"Let's start with your name."

Despite the blood that caked his face, the dirt and grime that covered him from head to toe, there was steel in the Illussor soldier's voice as he turned his head up toward the sound of Tawn's voice. "No. I know the power that Salharans place in names. All the power to control a man lies in the name he is given. If you want my name, you will be wanting for a long, long time."

"A name only holds power if you are the one to give it - or not give it as it were." Tawn grinned maliciously. "You're awfully stubborn for a blind Illussor. Especially one who spent his journey here trembling and crying."

The Illussor curled his lip in contempt. "Say what you will. But I know that even blind and chained, I am far superior to a man who must drug himself to do his job."

Tawn reached out and kicked him hard in the groin, good mood restored when the Illussor tried to bend over in pain, gasping, unable to cry. "You know nothing about it." He turned to leave. "I'll be back in a few days. In the mean time, I'll leave the guards to teach you manners befitting a blind prisoner."

Nothing but darkness surrounded him. After beating him, the guards had taken the only torch in the room.

Not that he could see it, but he had felt it and taken the meager comfort it offered. Now he sensed there was nothing at all. He could not hear even the shuffling and skittering of the things that thrived in dark, moldy places. The guards hadn't bothered to chain him again. What would be the point?

He cried quietly, the pain coursing throughout his body paling in comparison to the fact that his eyes had been torn out. Nothing but empty holes now, his precious eyes. Not even a strip of cloth to hide his shame.

If only he could die. But suicide was admired only when Screaming and he was no longer capable.

And he wanted revenge against the one they'd called Tawn. He remembered the face, thin and tight, cruel lines etched around the mouth



and sick yellow eyes. The drugs had gone far with that one, but not quite past the point of no return.

The voices though. The ones from the damp room. He bet they were beyond that point. His life he would bet on their eyes being red, or even black.

It made him smile, a dark, unhappy smile but a smile all the same.

The sound of something heavy hitting the floor broke into his black thoughts, followed by a second thump - then the scrape of a key in a rusted door, and a screech as the rusted door was yanked open.

He bit his lip, refusing to speak. Because if he did, he might finally lose control.

A gentle touch on his shoulder. "Are you all right?" A voice he didn't recognize - of course he wouldn't recognize it - spoke softly, barely above a whisper. In Illussor. There was no trace of an accent. "Of course you're not. Are you at least well enough to move?"

"Who..." he licked his lips. "Who are you? What trickery is this?"

"No trickery, Captain."

"How did you know I was a Captain?"

The soft voice laughed, and he thought it the warmest sound he'd heard since his world was ripped away. Who was this voice? It was Salharan, no mistaking that. But why would a Salharan be kind? "You are up to something."

"Yes, but it is something in your favor. Come now, Captain. We've not much time. I've made it look as though your Brethren have come to rescue you, but if we do not depart posthaste my deception will be discovered. I have not your people's gift for tricking the mind - only the eyes. Please, Captain. Come, if you want to live to fight another day."

"Who are you?"

"Later. A name spoken now bodes ill."

"Superstition." But he nodded, and allowed the Salharan with the voice like a summer breeze to help him up. He bit back cries of pain, and tumbled into the stranger.

Strong arms caught him, steadied him, and one slid to his waist to support him. "Can you walk?"

"I will walk."

"Very well." He imagined he heard approval in that voice, and then wondered why he cared if the enemy approved or not. Clearly the darkness was driving him mad more rapidly than he had anticipated. Slowly, painfully, they made their way from the dungeon and up a set of winding stairs. When they emerged, he smelled snow and crisp winter air.

Then he began to shiver, as the cold hit him. But in the next moment a warm, a soft cloak was wrapped around his shoulders and gently clasped at his throat. He touched the cloak pin there, feeling only the cold bite of metal and the hard smoothness of gems. The crunch of boots on snow brought his attention back to his position. He looked toward the sound.

"Come, Captain. We must ride for a while yet before I shall feel we are safe."

"Won't they think it strange when you are gone?"

The warm voice laughed again, and suddenly his bitterness and anguish hit him all over again, as though his eyes were recently torn away and not days and hours gone. Because more than anything at that moment, he wanted to put a face to that voice, that summer laugh.

He never would.

A hand grasped his gently and tucked it into one of those strong arms, and bitterly he realized that for the rest of his life he would be treated as an invalid and not as the soldier he'd been for the past decade. "Careful, Captain. The ground here is treacherous in good weather and the snow makes it deadly even to those with perfect vision."

He allowed himself to be led across the field, until he could smell and hear a horse. A very large horse.

Again with the misery. These things he had not considered, simply because he never thought to leave the dungeon alive. And now that the dungeon was gone, and he was free, he wondered if he was more or less a prisoner than before.

But someone, somewhere, had seen fit to send him a second chance on a summer wind. Whether the wind boded ill or fortune, he would not question now. He let go of the arm that had guided him and reached out to feel the horse. This he had done hundreds of times, morning noon and night. Taking a deep breath he made himself move, and managed to mount the horse.

A moment later the man with the summer voice mounted behind him and took the reins, clicking softly.

Unsettling, to ride when he could not see. He felt he could live for decades and never grow used to his new half-life. His exhaustion hit him hard, abruptly, every fiber of his body screaming in abject pain. Dizzily he wavered in his seat, but then a strong arm wrapped more firmly around his waist, and pressed him back against a wide, massive chest.

"It is hard," he said quietly. "To accept help from one of those who took my eyes."

"I am nothing like *him*." The summer voice took on a winter edge, the contempt and hate so deep it startled him into silence. "You are one more transgression for which he will someday pay. If I thought my apologies worth anything, I would offer them. But for what it's worth, I am not an enemy. I am a comrade."

"Are we safe enough that I might know your name?"

"That is a hard question to answer, actually. A name is a precious thing in Salhara, this of course you know."

"Yes."

"There are two stigma which can be inflicted upon a person to make it clear they are not worthy of anything but the lowest of servitude. One, of course, is to be nameless. In being nameless, a person will do anything to earn a name. Because to be nameless in our society—"

"Is not to exist," he said softly.

"Exactly. But the second stigma is to carry several names."

"Why is that a stigma?"

"Because the only thing as bad as not having an identity is to not know what your true identity is - too many names at once and you no longer know who you are. This is the stigma given to criminals enlisted to help with the war as spies. Spies must have several names, several identities, and given that one of Salhara's greatest enemies is a nation of deception...to be a spy is a contemptible thing."

"So you were once a criminal?"

"No, actually." The summer laugh turned slightly bitter. "My father was, but he went and got himself killed before they could arrest him. I was made to take his punishment."

How curious, this rescuer of his. "So what should I call you? Stranger?"

"The Krians know me as Lord Grau, and it is to that country we journey. I have duties there, and you will also have a chance to recuperate. Your people, or at least the Illussor with whom I communicate, call me Spiegel."

He gasped. "I have heard of you...but most think it an absurd rumor that a Salharan would betray his own to side with the Deceivers."

"It is no lie. And here, Captain Iah Cehka- for of course I know you, though we've never met - I will try to earn your trust. For only my Seven Star brothers know the stigma I carry. The rest of Salhara knows me as General Sol deVry."

Iah nodded slowly, hoping none of his astonishment showed. "I recall you. Gray hair, yellow eyes." Of course he knew that face. Fourth General Sol deVry of the Salhara Royal Army. He didn't appear often on

the battlefield, but he'd stuck in Iah's mind. Silver hair and gold eyes, such a strange contrast. What a relief, a small, silly joy, to have a face to go with his summer voice.

"Polluted eyes."

"I thought Salhara worshipped its artificial magic like most do gods."

"It does," Sol said in a soft voice laced with pain. "I would like to change that. Not all of us are lost to the colors of magic."

Iah felt exhaustion overtaking him again, and allowed himself to relax against the general. Though his mind still rebelled at trusting a Salharan, his instincts were quiet - they feared nothing. Iah was willing to trust them. It was not as though he had a choice, really. "Thank you, General, for rescuing me. I don't know why you did it, but I appreciate it."

"I did it because I will need you. Do you recall why you fought the battle against the Scarlet?"

"Yes," Iah whispered. "It was because General Lysam thought we'd found the Breaker." And the General was dead from Screaming, and they'd gained nothing by it. A wasted death like all the others. But if he thought of his men and his comrades now, he would lose what remained of his control.

"You might have. He was the personal prisoner of General von Adolwulf. He lives still, though I know not where. But Tawn, bastard that he is, will find him and bring him to me. And then you can tell me for certain if he is indeed the Breaker."

Iah refused to believe it was possible, that their goal was as close as that. "Then what?"

"Then we will take him to the Prince, and stars willing he will Break."

## CHAPTER TWO

Beraht woke slowly, wishing desperately to go back to sleep and avoid the ache he could already feel forming in his head. Served him right, burning off that much yellow arcen in one spell.

Of course, if he hadn't he'd be dead but at the moment that really didn't seem like such a terrible idea.

Finally forcing his eyes open, Beraht immediately took in the cloak that covered him. Of heavy black wool, the bottom and top were liberally trimmed with gray wolf fur. He threw it off and clambered to his feet - then regretted it. Stars he hated winter.

Food was cooking on a spit over a small campfire, a bucket of water nearby. Beraht glanced up, noting that the sun was going down. Great, he'd woken just in time for it to get *colder*.

If the cloak hadn't belonged to the bastard General, he'd reassume it and go back to sleep.

Where was von Adolwulf anyway?

He was sorely tempted to run for it. But he had no food, inadequate gear thanks to stupid soldiers taking half his clothes and tearing the rest - stars he was cold - and he had no idea where he was. Except still in Kria.

Surely life couldn't get much worse.

The sound of something coming through the trees and bushes had him spinning around, tensed to put up whatever fight he could.

And there was his other reason for not running away. He wanted von Adolwulf to take his name away. Beraht eyed him warily as the General first moved to fetch his heavy cloak, then moved toward him.

Beraht looked up as he drew close.

And up.

Just how much arcen had he been on? How exhausted had he been the past few days? To not notice the man was a good five inches or more taller than him? He was built like he probably killed the wolf on his cloak with his bare hands.

No wonder they'd told him to go after the Scarlet. How had it *not* turned into a suicidal mission?

Sheer dumb bad luck, that's how. First the Seven Star tattoo, then finding out the Seven Star didn't want him. Then told he had to kill 1000 people - at least - before they'd consider him. Then told it had to be the *Scarlet*.

And now General von Adolwulf was looking at him like he would quite cheerfully like to throw him in the fire.

The feeling was entirely mutual, and the size of a mountain or not the bastard General was going to know that.

"You're finally awake."

"You're very observant."

Beraht wondered how many soldiers in a day got glared at like that. He sobered, recalling suddenly that they no longer had to worry about the General's glares.

Which reminded him - why had the Illussor been after *him*?

Great. So his own people wanted him dead. The Krians wanted him dead. The Illussor wanted him...for something.

The next time death came up as an option he was going to take it.

He didn't bother to fight when von Adolwulf grabbed what was left of his shirt and hauled him close. Looking up was going to give him a crick in the neck eventually, but for now he'd manage.

"You'd do well to remember, *Beraht*, that you are my prisoner. And after what happened to my men, I will not be so kind as to kill you."

Beraht's anger flared anew at the sound of his new, hated name. Damn it, he'd been earning a real name from his Brothers. He would have belonged, would have had a place and a full Star. Instead he was now worse than Nameless and the star at his back would never go past yellow. "It's not my fault!"

"Winter's Tits it's not! Why!" von Adolwulf threw him to the ground. "Why? Why would the Illussor want a worthless Salharan?"

"When you figure it out let me know," Beraht snapped, picking himself up off the ground.

"If I were you, Beraht, I would cease being flippant." The general's eyes were a strange mix of gray and green. Currently they were as hard as stone.

It really was no wonder everyone was terrified of the bastard. Beraht shoved away his own trepidation. Maybe if he angered him enough, von Adolwulf would lose his temper and beat him to death. Not a pleasant way to die, but he would take what he could get. "Sorry, flippant is the only way I know to be. If you don't like it, ignore me or kill me." This time when the General came after him, Beraht braced himself and attempted to fight back, dodging away from the hand that reached out to grasp him.

But fighting without magic was hard to do. Especially against a man who made wild bears look small. Just how far gone had he really been?

Beraht hit the ground with a pained grunt, the breath knocked out of his lungs, unable to see clearly for a second. But when his vision did clear, he saw all too well the anger and pain that filled the General's face.

"My men are dead. All of them. Not through battle defending their homeland or reclaiming lost ground. Not for a cause. But because the Illussor wanted you badly enough they *Screamed*."

"That Scream could have killed us too, you know." But the heat had gone out of his voice, though he wanted it back. Every fiber in his body railed against the man pinning him down.

The Scarlet Wolf. His own men were terrified of him. Salharan soldiers dreaded hearing his name. None of them ever expected to live to see the day after a battle against him.

And now his gray-green eyes were the color of storm-tossed leaves, dark yet bright, full of anger but also pain. If Beraht were a weaker man, he might almost feel sorry for the bastard.

But no one had ever given him sympathy. He'd be damned if he gave it to a General who scared even his own men to death. "If I hadn't still had yellow Arcen in my boot, we'd both be dead. General. So maybe you're angry, but it's not my fault. I'm as ignorant as you."

With a rough, muttered curse the General released him and roughly hauled Beraht to his feet. "Keep your mouth shut," he said,

brutally grabbing Beraht's chin and forcing him to look up. "Do as I say. Try to run and I will cut off your feet."

Beraht narrowed his eyes and dug his nails into the wrist that held him. "General, one day you'll grow sick of me. You'll try to rid yourself of me. But it won't happen. I'll not leave your side until you take away my name. I *refuse* to live quietly with the name you've shamed me with. So don't get your hopes up about cutting off my feet."

The General's grin was nothing less than wolfish when he let go of Beraht, not affected at all by the bloody marks left by Beraht's nails. "Do your worst. The more excuses I have to beat you, the better."

"You don't strike me as the type to need an excuse."

"Think what you like." He turned away, dismissing Beraht entirely to examine their dinner, which had singed slightly. "Come. Eat."

Beraht for a moment thought to refuse, but his stomach growled and he was forced to admit - to himself - that a war, even a private one, could not be waged on an empty stomach. Reluctantly he sat down and accepted what the General gave him, eyeing it warily before biting into meat that, though singed, was the best thing he'd had in months.

"You need clothes."

"Wouldn't you prefer to see me freeze to death slowly?"

"Not until I've paid you back for killing my men."

"The Illussor killed your men." Beraht glared. "I had nothing to do with it."

"You were the motive."

"Unwitting."

"Irrelevant."

"You're every bit the bastard I've always heard you to be."

The General sneered. "Hoping to regain ground with compliments?"

"There is nothing about you worth complimenting."

Not bothering to respond, the General rose to his feet and strode to a set of saddlebags hanging from a tree. Rifling through it, he pulled out a shirt and over tunic.

"Those are far too big for me."

"If you do not put them on, I will do it for you."

Finishing his meat, Beraht threw the stick to the ground and snatched at the clothes held out to him. "Would you like to search me for pollution before I change?"

"I already did," the General said.

Biting off his curses, refusing to let the thrice-cursed Krian see how disconcerting that statement was, Beraht began to change. Von



Adolwulf's clothes were far too large, but they were warmer than his own. If he was going to become a prisoner of Kria, why couldn't it have waited until Spring?

Von Adolwulf put out the fire, and in minutes it was hard to tell anyone had ever made camp there. "Come, we have far to go."

Beraht started to protest, then thought better of it.

The horse was as much a monster as the master. Which reminded him - where had his chains gone? He looked at his wrists, which had partially healed as a side-effect of the protect spell. "Do you miss them?" von Adolwulf asked.

"Don't you?" Beraht replied. "I am not the one who must worry about a knife in my back."

Von Adolwulf laughed. "Are you admitting to cowardice then, Salharan? And I've no need to fear a betrayal from you, *Beraht*. Do I?" He urged his horse forward, pulling up alongside Beraht. "Come. I don't have all day. You can ride the easy way or the hard way."

"So we're not going to drag me around in chains this time?" Beraht said.

"I gave you a chance," von Adolwulf replied. He reached down and grabbed Beraht by his tunic, then hauled him up and over the saddle like most would a sack.

"Let me go!" Beraht said, twisting around in a vain attempt to knock them both down. Von Adolwulf laughed and threw him to the ground. "Would you like to try again? I suggest you do it properly, because my patience is wearing thin. We won't be stopping until we reach the Stone Temple, and that is several hours away."

Beraht grimaced and mounted the horse. Morosely he wondered how many times he would be picking himself up off the ground, as von Adolwulf seemed to delight in throwing him down. He must be sporting more than a dozen bruises; no doubt he'd break something before the journey concluded.

They rode in a silence broken only by the sound of hooves speeding over dirt and grass. Von Adolwulf had chosen to avoid the roads, and so there were not even other people to distract his attention. Nor even any animals.

Winter was falling hard and fast throughout Kria. Only the southern area usually escaped the worst of the weather which fell with lethal force across Kria and most of Illussor. The snow in Salhara was not nearly so bad. It was lighter back home, and for the first time since he'd left it Beraht found himself missing his flat, sandy home.

But after another hour of riding, even those memories could not distract from the pain in his head. Like knives driven into the back of his skull and pushed through to the front. He bit back any sounds that would give away his discomfort and desperately sought for any distraction. It had been a long time since he'd had to live longer than a few hours without arcen easily accessible.

The pain was as bad as he'd been warned. He needed more.

Distraction. He needed distraction. Casting his eyes out, Beraht encountered nothing but brown field and a swiftly approaching forest – the dark, heavy, always green trees not usually found in Salhara. There was something bizarre about a tree that was always green. He'd always liked them.

As they entered the trees, the going grew rougher and despite himself Beraht held fast to the arm heavy around his waist. He looked at it, not quite able to look at the trees rushing toward and at the last past them.

Von Adolwulf was strong. In a handful of days he'd been better acquainted with that strength more than he'd ever wanted. He ached in places he hadn't known were part of his body until Von Adolwulf managed to bruise them. His wrists would not soon forget the chains...nor would his dignity. Even traitors in Salhara did not get carted around in chains. Chains were for slaves; something they'd outlawed years ago, when it grew more and more important that they have able, *willing* soldiers to fight against the Krians – and the Illussor when they showed up.

The arm around his waist held him with no effort. He wondered if von Adolwulf even remembered he was here. Nor did his monster horse appear to notice the extra weight. If he didn't know any better, he'd swear the beast was enjoying itself.

At least the pace and the company, hated as it was, kept him warm. Only the air he breathed in told him how chilly it was – and it was getting colder. Hopefully this temple von Adolwulf had mentioned would prove to be a real shelter. He frowned, flipping through what he knew of Krian geography in this area.

No temple came to mind. So it was insignificant enough even the Krians didn't bother to mark it on a map? He'd never heard of them neglecting such a marker before. At the rate they were traveling, they'd be a hundred miles or more northeast of the Disputed Fields by nightfall.

Of course it was foolish to think that the Krians let their best maps anywhere near their enemies. The ones they had were probably the work of children when compared to what must accompany Krian

generals into the field. How he'd love to get his hands on one of those, rather than the crummy, faded scrap he'd been working with ever since he'd been given his stars-cursed assignment.

The Stone Temple was exactly that. Stone. And a temple. No wonder he'd never seen it noted on any map. It had to be the most boring thing he'd ever seen. That Krian taste for simplicity that more often ran toward painfully dull. Was there a spark of imagination in them anywhere?

Back home temples were pretty things. Fine wood polished to a shine, draped with soft, jewel-tone fabrics. Lit by beeswax candles, filled with candles and the songs of the devout. But here...it smelled damp. And stale. There were no candles, and only moonlight and wind filled the barren, open space. A single statue stood at the far end of the room. Beraht conceded the statue was impressive, eight feet high and depicting a man who looked as though everything amused him greatly. He pondered what little he knew of Krian religion – this would be the Spring Prince? It was not as grand as it could have been. There was not half the design to it that a similar statue back home would have carried.

Still...he had never been in a Krian building before. His experiences were limited to the battlefield and sneaking around at night to do further harm. The only worship he ever saw there was the strange Krian obsession with their swords.

"Krians love their swords more than their gods, I'd say. Maybe divine displeasure is why you travel home a failure every season." He was beginning to enjoy pissing the General off, though only the Stars knew why.

But then von Adolwulf laughed, and Beraht found himself looking briefly between the general and the statue.

"A failure? I think not. Every year I succeed in keeping you thrice-damned Salharans from laying claim to the Regenbogen. Perhaps it's all the time and effort you waste making your shrines look pretty that cost you all that skill on the battlefield." He sneered. "Then again, it's not like you can expect skill from someone so polluted he needs that pollution to function normally."

Beraht returned the sneer. "If I had arcen with me now—"

Steel hissed against leather, and Beraht found himself between cold stone and colder steel. "If you had your drugs with you now, you

still would be dead. Pollution is no substitute for steel, to which many of your dead comrades will attest.”

“That sword didn’t save your men, did it?” Beraht barely had the sentence out before his world spun out from underneath him in a flash of pain. He crumbled, holding his stomach, and watched through watery eyes as von Adolwulf stalked away.

Dieter seethed. He sheathed his sword as he approached the statue of the Autumn Prince, and reached out with one hand to touch the tip of one boot in respect. Killing Beraht would be the easiest recourse. but killing him wouldn’t bring his men back. Hundreds of men, some of the best in Kria, killed by a Scream by the thrice-cursed Illussor.

All because of a Salharan. He spared a brief look over his shoulder at Beraht, who still was on the ground. Dieter sneered. Perhaps his people were mocked for favoring weapons over “magic” but it was steel that had held the Regenbogen decade after decade. The bastard Salharan could not even block a simple gut punch.

Polluted fools.

Dieter drew his cape from his shoulders and reached into a pocket buried by folds of fur. He withdrew a small ring of keys and flipped through several before settling on a small, plain steel key. Touching the boot of his patron god once more, he moved around the statue and fit the key to a hole hidden by the overhanging edge of the pedestal. A soft click was snatched away by the wind.

He contemplated Beraht, who was slowly standing. Pain was quickly masked by anger. Dieter smirked, amused. The last few prisoners taken had not lasted more than a day against ‘Krian brutality.’ Of course, a man who had single-handedly taken out so many of his Scarlet in the span of a few hours was obviously cut from different cloth. But he was a Brother – for all the good that had done him. Dieter’s mood soured further. Returning the keys to his cloak, he stalked toward Beraht and grabbed his arm. “I should leave you up here to suffer in the wind...but any suffering you endure will be at my hand.” He grinned in the way that had sent green soldiers running into walls in their haste to find a door.

Beraht grinned back just as nastily. “We’ll see who suffers, General. By the end, you’ll beg me to be gone.”

“Don’t make me laugh.” He hauled Beraht along, not giving him a chance to find his feet. “And I can always tie you up, *Beraht*.” The Salharan cringed at the sound of Dieter speaking his name, and Dieter

laughed to rub salt in the wound. The Salharan obsession with names was the one thing he'd never been able to understand. One hand strayed to his sword, fingertips touching the hilt briefly. Names were important, but they were not as important as other things. He dragged Beraht behind the statue, and pulled at a scone on the wall.

The wall swung open, revealing a set of spiraling stairs. It was a short flight, the true temple was not all that deep underground.

He heard Beraht mutter something in his native language, and smirked.

Stupid Salharans.

Temples for the Autumn Prince were always underground, a show of respect to the dead buried underground. This particular temple was empty; it took him a couple of minutes to get all the torches lit, but when he did the room was a beauty to behold. Black and red and gold, the colors of the Autumn Prince. And the Scarlet.

Beraht was still muttering to himself in Salharan; it was the first time since he'd encountered him that he'd bothered to speak his native tongue. The temple was warm despite its location, and the numerous torches dispersed the last remnants of what chill had lingered.

They were a hundred and fifteen miles north of Regenbogen, making this the last temple – really more of a refuge – before entering what Kria considered battleground. He grabbed Beraht and all but threw the man deeper into the temple, swinging shut the wooden door that sealed off the stairs. Later he would lock it. "Make yourself at home," he said.

He left Beraht to continue gawking at the temple. It was a medium-sized room, one corner given over to bedding, another to a low table for eating, relaxing. Off the right side would be a room for business – a high table, with maps and other tools for war. Off the left side was a bathing room, though Dieter regretted it did not have a proper bath. But that would come soon enough; if he continued to push home was a little less than two weeks away.

Instead of the three or more it would have taken with his men. He focused on his anger, blocking out all else as he cleaned himself up. They would all pay...after he determined what was going on. It frustrated him that, near as he could tell, Beraht seemed genuinely confused as to why the Illussor had wanted him. There would be few to no clues coming from that quarter.

Dieter scrubbed angrily, until he was red and raw from cleaning. From cedar chests in the corner he drew out clothes left the last time he'd passed through. When he remerged in the main chamber, he was

not surprised to see Beraht out cold amongst the heap of bedding in the far back corner. He stalked across the room and hauled him to his feet, shaking him awake. "Now, now, little prisoner. I don't want you infesting this place with more vermin than absolutely necessary."

"What? Even your vile little brothers can't stand your company?" Yellow eyes flashed with anger. Strange that they were still so bright, when he could tell from the way Beraht had been holding his head that he was suffering severely from withdrawal.

He half shoved, half threw him in the direction of the bathing room. "Get clean. Then maybe I'll let you sleep."

The words hurled at him were uttered in Salharan. Dieter laughed. Settling himself amongst the bedding, tossing aside extraneous pillows, he drew his sword and stared at it in silence. Through his head ran the names of his third-in-command, his assistants, strategists and so many others who would not make it home. All because of a Salharan and the damned Illussor.

And he, who should have been aware of the Illussor trick. But his punishment would come soon enough. Of *that* he had no doubt. He allowed his mind to wander, though one ear was ever on the sounds of Beraht in the other room.

His sword glinted in the light, and for a moment it seemed as though colors shimmered deep within. It was a long sword, old but much cared for. Made with skill. The hilt and pommel were black, and in the bottom of the pommel was set a large, round, blood red stone. Even in his youth, it had been decided he would someday lead the Scarlet. Dieter sheathed it and drew the keys from his cloak before setting both aside. He locked the door and returned to his bed. A few minutes later Beraht emerged.

Clean, he looked almost completely different. Shaven, he looked young. Perhaps thirty, but Dieter wondered if he might be younger. His hair was not as dark a blonde as he'd thought; it was actually quite pale. But the eyes were still as yellow, even dulled with exhaustion. Somewhere he'd found clothes that fit, and his glare dared Dieter to protest his taking them.

As if he cared. "Now you may sleep," he said, and smirked to see the ire that flashed across the man's face. It was like toying with a new recruit. Far too easy. "And I don't suggest attacking me in my sleep."

"You're not worth losing sleep over," Beraht returned. And saying nothing more, he reclaimed his section of bedding and fell almost immediately to sleep.

Dieter sneered at his still form.

Headaches. Exhaustion. Beraht was progressing rapidly through the stages of withdrawal. It would be amusing when he woke up starving in a few hours, with no idea where to find food.

Beraht sat up, instantly awake. The room had been dimmed down from nearly two dozen to only four torches, and he was painfully aware of the fact that they were underground, with no sun and stale air. It was little better than living in a cave. Heathen Krians. As beautiful as the room was, it was still a hole in the ground.

Stars above he was hungry. For something very specific, but he was as likely to find arcen here as he was to get along with his bastard keeper. He stood up, resisting the urge to kick the man who slept only a few steps away...one hand on his sword. Beraht snorted. Krians and their weapons. If he took the sword away, would von Adolwulf snarl or cry?

Probably kill him. Which was an idea to keep in reserve. There was no telling what was in store for him when getting to safety was no longer a priority. Though he had no intention of dying bearing a Krian name, it was possible that there would be no other recourse.

Beraht realized suddenly that he had no idea where to find food. There was no obvious cupboard. They were already in a cellar. Damn it. At least the pain in his head had dulled. Stars he just wanted to go back to sleep.

"Hungry?" An all too smug voice made Beraht start. He hoped the bastard hadn't noticed. Had he been awake the entire time? Probably. One day the tables would be turned, and oh the revenge he would have.

Instead of answering, Beraht curled back up in his bedding. Everything smelled like the trees outside, mixing with dust and some strange powder that he'd determined kept out insects and the like.

Laughter met his silence, and he heard von Adolwulf lay back down. Eventually his breathing evened out. Beraht turned over to his other side and stared at the general's shadowy form.

Shaggy, black, silver-touched hair. Even asleep he dwarfed his surroundings. He slept soundlessly, breaths audible only because there was literally no other sound in the room. Beraht was surprised. A man like von Adolwulf he would have expected to sleep with one eye open...perhaps he did. Could he kill him now?

With what? Beraht snorted softly. If he had arcen, the problem would already be resolved. But without his magic, and suffering from a

lack of it, he doubted he could best von Adolwulf if he had all the weapons and the general was already wounded.

He turned back over. How twisted that his captor was the person he had the least interest in killing. *Names are power. Power of life. Power of death. Do not give a name lightly. Do not take a name lightly. Do not share a name lightly. Do not speak a name lightly.* Beraht choked on a sound that was half laughter, half sob.

Nameless his entire life. Only to be offered a place on the condition he killed. To have even that taken away, forced to take a name bestowed by a Krian.

Not by a parent. Not by a spouse. Not by a brother.

By an enemy.

He curled up tightly, ignoring the pains of both body and mind as best he could, until sleep finally carried him away again.



## CHAPTER THREE

"Lord Grau," an older woman greeted him with a smile. "We were just finishing up."

"Excellent," Sol said, returning the smile. He looked at Iah, who sat quiet and motionless in an old, wooden chair. The cottage wasn't much, but over the years it was probably the place he thought of most fondly. Lying in the woods, just shy of the northern border between Salhara and Kria, it was an ideal place for him to switch identities. He paused to look in the mirror just inside the main cabin, having gone outside to treat his hair.

Rather than gray, it was a dark, nutty brown. His eyes too had been altered with chemicals, dimming their distinctive yellow to a dim, brownish amber. It didn't hurt that treating them thus also gave him a slow look. Lord Grau was an amusement in the Emperor's court, 'endearing' to a few of the kinder women. A lotion, yet another handy trick developed by the clever Mella, darkened his skin. In a few weeks he would not need it, the sun bowing to winter's strength, but for now it would look strange if he did not have tanned skin.

Mella clucked at him. "It's always strange, the way you alter your appearance. You'd think I'd be used to it by now."

"I'm not used to it, Mella. Why should you be? How fair you, Captain?" Sol dropped to one knee and carefully took one of his hands, letting Iah know exactly where he was. He spoke in Iah's language.

"Well enough, all things considered." Iah lifted a hand to his bandaged eyes. "I don't think I'll ever get used to it."

"I would imagine not," Sol replied. He stood slowly, never releasing Iah's hand. "I doubt you find it reassuring," he said teasingly. "But you make for a fine Krian."

Iah laughed sadly. "At least I make for a good something. Certainly I'm not much of an Illussor anymore."

"Now don't say that," Sol said. He tugged Iah up, gently adjusting his clothes so that they fell properly. It had taken him a long time to adjust to Krian clothing; the heavy fabrics and intricate fastenings, everything lined or trimmed in fur. But Iah seemed to wear his long coat fine – perhaps because unlike Salhara, Illussor spent almost as much time buried in the cold as Kria. "When you bring home the Breaker, all will call you a hero." He touched the bandages softly.

"I suppose..." Iah said, then changed the subject. "I would imagine we can't go around calling me Iah, can we?"

Sol hesitated. "No, we cannot."

Iah smiled. "Am I running up against a stigma with names? You shall have to explain it all to me sometime. I fear I do not understand it."

"Names are power. Power of life. Power of death. Do not give a name lightly. Do not take a name lightly. Do not share a name lightly. Do not speak a name lightly," Sol recited. "To give a name is to give a life. To strike a name is to kill a man. Whosoever names you has power over you."

"I still don't really understand."

Sol nodded. "I will explain over dinner, if time permits. For now, more important matters. Do you speak Krian at all?"

"Only battle speech," Iah said. It wasn't unusual for soldiers to pick up a measure of fluency in the language of his enemies. Krian, Salharan and Illussor soldiers alike all managed to learn at least a bit of one another's language.

"Then we will practice on the journey. You will have to be fluent."

Iah smiled. "Or I could be mute."

"That will be our last resort," Sol said. He stood and tugged Iah to his feet. "We will also have to drill you on Krian custom. I don't suppose you know any of that?"

Iah frowned, and his head swayed back and forth in thought. When he realized what he was doing, he stopped, a pang in his chest. *Captain's bobbing like a bird again. We're in for it now!* "They're obsessed with their weapons," he said finally.

Sol threw his head back and laughed. "Obsession is what we would call it. Krians know weapons. How to fight the old way. They take it very seriously."

"Yes," Iah said. He shook his head, recalling things that had never made much sense to him. "I've been told they name their swords. The more absurd rumors state they treat their swords like lovers."

"Sort of," Sol said quietly. "A man names his sword after the person he loves."

Iah grimaced. "How Krian, to call a tool for killing after a beloved."

Sol's voice carried a gentle reprimand. "Krian soldiers go into battle assuming they will die. Like all of us. They call their swords after their 'beloved' so that they'll die with the person they love beside them."

"I have never heard such a thing," Iah said softly, ducking his head.

"Neither had I," Sol said more gently. "It will take us two weeks to reach the Winter Palace. Let us hope we can make you properly Krian by the time we reach it."

Iah nodded.

"Come," Sol took his arm and tucked it into his elbow. "We will eat the dinner Mella has prepared and begin your instruction tonight. By journey's end, you will be as comfortable as a native." He laughed briefly. "Provided of course that you do not get into any fights. If there is one thing even I will not attempt, it is to fight a Krian. Nothing would single me out as foreign faster."

"Of that, I have no doubt."

"Come then," Sol said. His words were not the up and down tones of Illussor, nor the clipped, sharp words of his own country. They were the gruff, rolling words of the Krians, and Sol spoke it as flawlessly as he had Illussor. "Dinner awaits and I'm starving."

He guided Iah into his chair and contemplated the man as he took his own seat. Even blind and uncertain, Iah had an inherent dignity about him. Sol remembered the way he'd trembled during the meeting of the Seven Star. Shock and fear must have been overwhelming, for no one ever dared to take an Illussor captive. For Salhara, who relied so heavily on arcen to perform magic, Illussor was feared as much as despised for its natural magic. And the dreaded spell for which they had come to be

named. Whatever the country had once been called – for that hadn't always been its name – it was lost.

The Salharan in him winced at the idea of a name being not only discarded but forgotten. But Illussor was fitting, so perhaps the stars knew something he didn't. He snorted softly and turned his mind back to Iah.

Strange how complacent the man was...but perhaps it was simply desperation. It was not as though he'd had many options. Still. If it were his eyes, he would not be so calm.

Of course, if Tawn ever tried to attack him it would not end in *his* eyes being harmed. Sol forced himself to relax before his tension relayed itself to Iah. Tawn was a problem he would take care of in time. Likely neither of them would survive the encounter. In the mean time, the bastard was useful.

May his sister forgive him.

Sol closed his eyes, then opened them again. "Thank you, Mella." He smiled at her and indicated for her to go. Mella nodded and departed, leaving the two men alone. Sol switched to Krian, and the language was both strange and familiar on his tongue. He had learned it back when it was frowned upon to have anything to do with the enemy. Before he'd been made a soldier. The Krian language was easy to love – far simpler than the flowery words of the Illussor, and so different from his own. Though he did not love the country, he did not hate it either. Not like he did Salhara. "A bowl of stew is directly in front of you; utensils to the immediate right. A glass of wine to the left and up slightly. Napkin south of the bowl. Bread below the wine glass. If you need anything, you've only to say."

Iah seemed uncertain, and Sol repeated the words again, slowly. Iah nodded, and after he began to eat Sol did likewise.

"You..." Iah spoke slowly, his Illussor accent glaringly apparent. "Know my problem."

"My sister," Sol said. "She fell sick. The fever took her sight." Calmly Sol ate, enjoying the hearty stew made from a lingering deer he had killed the previous day. All too soon such meat would be hard to come by.

"I am sorry. What was her name?" Frustration laced the awkward words, punctuated by the way he fumbled to eat.

Sol took pity and switched to Illussor. "Her name was Ariana." He bit back the bitter words he wanted to speak. The name was a pretty one, even if the giver had proven unworthy. It suited her, he must remember that.

Silence fell, and Sol listened to the wind outside. "It is going to snow," he said in Krian. "We will have to travel quickly, or we will be caught in it." Iah nodded and he continued. "The Winter Princess is ruthless to those who disobey her will."

"What?" Iah asked.

Sol switched back to Illussor. "Do you know anything about Krian religion?"

"They worship the seasons," Iah said after a moment of thought. "I've heard 'Winter Princess' before, along with 'Spring Lord.' But that's all I know."

"The Autumn Prince presides over death. After the dying of all things in autumn, the Winter Princess brings a time of slumber, for things to mourn and heal, until the Spring Prince coaxes Winter from her sadness and she once again brings warmth as the Summer Princess."

"I see..." Iah said, not really seeing at all.

Sol laughed. "All you really need to know is that anything bad can be laid at the feet of Autumn and Winter. All good things are attributed to Spring and Summer. Technically they're the gods and goddesses of the various seasons. I don't think even the Krians know why they call them prince and princess – I would hazard to say its affection, but that doesn't fit at all."

Iah smiled briefly.

"The most common epithet you'll hear is—"

"Tits of the Winter Princess!" Iah said, and the Krian rolled easily off his tongue that time. He laughed. "That phrase I know – my men were rather fond of it. I'm afraid their image of a winter princess is probably not very Krian. And I suppose it is rather more fun to say than "Goddess curse you!"

It surprised Sol when he laughed again. He smiled across the table at his companion, then remembered that Iah could not see him. A familiar pang, and for a moment he saw not Iah but his sister. Dead three years and at the end she may as well have been dead. After her vision had gone, Ariana had given up.

Not that he could blame her.

He watched Iah eat, the confidence that grew with every successful effort.

Strange to have a companion when he was used to working alone. Fitting that the companion was Illussor. And when this journey concluded, he would well and truly find an end. In Illussor. The closest he would ever have to home.

If he didn't die killing Tawn first.

"You still have not said anything about my Krian name." Iah smiled ruefully. "It's strange. I recognized your name, and indeed I would recognize a number of Salharans. But the only Krian I know by name is the General von Adolwulf." He stumbled over the name, native sing-song syllables clashing with the harder Krian.

Sol snorted in amusement. "That is because when the General is around, it is hard to notice anything else. The Scarlet Wolf..." He leaned back in his seat, tapping his spoon against the table as he thought. "I wonder if he is still alive. Tawn voiced doubts; it was a Scream after all..."

"If anyone could survive a Scream, it would be the Wolf of Kria."

"At least we know the Breaker survived."

Iah nodded. He smiled a moment later. "You are still avoiding the matter of giving me a name. As I said before, I would pick one – but my knowledge of Krian names is limited to the Wolf. I think people might notice a resemblance."

"Yes, perhaps." Sol managed a laugh, then fell silent.

"Is it really so hard a thing? To pick a name?"

"A weak name will result in a weak person."

"Ridiculous." Iah reached carefully for his wine glass, fingertips knocking into it enough to jar but not quite spill. He held it in both hands and sipped slowly. "A man is weak or not; his name does not decide that."

Sol did not bother to argue. "I do not want to pick a name that does not suit."

"It will suit."

"Why are you so eager to take up a new name?"

Iah touched the bandages covering his empty sockets. "Perhaps because I no longer feel like myself. It would be nice to be someone else for a little while."

"Erhard," Sol said it heavily, as if they meant something. "Erhard Grau. My cousin, whom I have brought with me after a hunting accident cost him his vision. That will also account for why you may falter and speak slowly – or occasionally not at all."

"Erhard," Iah repeated. He said it a few more times, growing comfortable with the syllables. "And you are Lord Grau?"

"Alban Grau," Sol said. "You will call me Alban, or cousin."

Iah nodded, and he continued to drill Iah on Krian culture, pausing only just long enough for Mella to bring out their dessert when she returned from her walk.

Sleep was not forthcoming. Would he ever grow used to the permanent dark? Every morning he woke up expecting to see the sun. A moment of panic as he realized he couldn't see.

Followed by a wave of grief as he remembered he would never see again.

Only Sol and his summer voice kept the grief from consuming him. Steady, patient – the voice of a teacher or a priest. It was hard to fit it with what he knew of the soldier. Fourth General Sol deVry. Well known for his magical dexterity and the burning yellow, not quite orange of his eyes. Almost but not quite to the point where there would be no escaping the deadly effects of the flower the Salharans called arcen.

Doubts mingled with the fear that kept him awake. Fear for the moment of waking; doubts for his current circumstances. Only days ago he had been telling stories with his men around a campfire.

Then his commander had lost all reason, driving them into battle against five hundred Scarlet. Because he'd sensed the Breaker.

Iah had felt it too, right at the end.

Uncorrupted. Untapped. Pure as forbidden crystal.

Had they really found their Breaker at last? What if the Scream had killed him? How many more years would they have to search for another? What if he lived? Would he agree? Why should a Krian or Salharan agree to help?

But a Salharan *was* helping. And that brought more doubts to the fore. What was Sol's real game? A man who played all sides was conceivably playing more. How did a Salharan General come to know so much about what only a select few Illussor knew? Even he wasn't supposed to know as much as he did.

Iah shuddered and turned his mind off. Too many things. Too much of it wrong. Only the dark to turn to now. He'd never see his sister's face again, or those of his friends. Not their graves, not their families. Never would he see his home.

No more magic. Perhaps there was a blessing there...but better to die an Illussor than to live as...whatever he was now.

This wasn't helping. He hadn't quit when Tawn had ruined his life. He wouldn't quit now.

An owl broke the still night, and Iah pulled his blankets up further. Opposite him, Sol slept soundlessly. The man was as quiet in sleep as he was awake. Iah reached a hand outside the blanket, feeling the heat of the fire. Slowly he sat up, and shifted and turned and fumbled

until his head was near the fire rather than far from it. Feeling the heat of it wash over him, he began to whisper softly all the Krian words he could think of, repeating them until he felt he had a grasp for how it should be properly said.

There was no way anyone would think him Krian, not after only two weeks of study. But he would try, and die doing it if he must. To bring the Breaker to his King. That Esta might smile again, though he would never see it.

So possibly his friends and comrades would not be reviled by his blindness.

And, if he were honest, for that summer voice.

Gradually the words grew slower, and fainter, until Iah fell asleep with Krian words half-formed on his lips.

"Ready, Cousin?" Sol spoke slowly, as if to a child – or a man badly injured in an accident.

"Yes," Iah said. His voice was low, and he pronounced everything slowly. Though their audience was only Mella and Sol's manservant – Dal? – there would be no room for error later. Better to get it right from the beginning. He still felt as though he were sleeping, dreaming, to be preparing for a journey into the heart of Kria. How many times had he heard his comrades and superiors bemoan their inability to breach Kria? None got past the Scarlet Fortress and lived for long.

He did not even begin to understand how Sol fit easily into not only Krian court life but also apparently into Illussor. The man was tricky, no two ways about it. Spiegel. Mirror. Interesting that his countrymen had given their Salharan spy a Krian name. No doubt it was part of the game.

A sharp wind blew up, and Iah felt homesick. In only a month or so the palace would be half-buried in snow. Esta would insist on dragging him out and do her very best to see they froze to death doing things normally reserved for children.

Iah forced the thoughts aside and focused on the tasks at hand. Carefully he held out a hand, quelling the relief that sprang up when Sol gently took it and guided it toward the waiting horse.

He would miss horse-riding, for there was no way he could ever do it solo now. Another pang to be shoved aside for later. There was no time for such things. Sol helped him up, steadying him until Iah felt comfortably settled, then mounted behind him. He spoke rapidly in Krian to Mella; most of the words were lost on Iah. To his left he heard Dal mount his own horse and second later they were off.



"What is the view?" As Sol began to talk in slow, careful Krian, Iah felt himself relax despite the frustration that tried to rise when he was forced to have Sol repeat things. But Sol was patient, and bit by bit he began to understand what was being described.

Snow, with the promise of more from the clouds above. Trees, the sort that were green in winter. Smoke in the distance, from villages and towns. And little more than a shadow, the city where the Krian emperor lived in spring and summer. The land was rolling, up and down and very seldom flat.

"We travel due north for a bit, then we turn and go west. That will take us past the summer palace and on toward the Winter Palace, where we will meet up with the king and his court. If we attempted to go to the summer palace, we would find ourselves very alone." Sol laughed.

Iah smiled, despite himself. "How do you move so easily?" he asked in halting Krian. For three days he'd been studying it, before they finally left the cottage. He had another fourteen to get the hang of it. "In this country?"

"Many years of study," Sol replied. "I studied the languages for years before I become a soldier, and one cannot study a language without learning about the culture. I know enough about a lot that I can get by in many a situation. The skill was enough to make me a Brother of the Seven Star," he spoke levelly, but there was bitterness beneath the calm that Iah could not miss.

"People trust you easily, don't they?"

Sol was silent for a moment, obviously startled. "Yes. I suppose so. Certainly you did not protest as I thought you would."

"I have little choice," Iah said, but he knew that wasn't all of it. Sol inspired trust, even when you didn't want to give it. It would be all too easy for him to fall into doing exactly that. He wondered what would become of his homeland if Sol proved ultimately to be only a loyal Salharan.

After another silence, Sol resumed speaking - in Illussor. It made Iah dizzy, how smoothly he switched between three such different languages. Clearly he'd been blessed with a sharp ear and clever tongue. It was little wonder his magical ability was said to be impressive. "As we're merely minor nobility from the country, having weapons is not expected of us. Not all Krians can be soldiers, after all. That is fortunate for us, as all my skill cannot duplicate the Krian fighting ability. However, on that note, a lack of general knowledge will give us away just as fast. Even the poorest peasant knows the difference between a long sword, a short sword, a dagger, and so on."

"First and foremost, you should always make note of someone's weapon the first time you meet them. Obviously you will not be able to say much -- but you can ask what manner of sword a man bears and the sword's name. Then compliment the name - say it's pretty, strong, anything of that sort."

"All right..." Iah said slowly. He was considered skilled with his short sword - the only kind Illussor bothered with. Like Salhara, they relied more on magic and when many a battle could be won by a brief tricking of the mind...who needed weapons? They were tools. One did not give a name to his hammer or his belt. Yet the Krians named their swords, and obviously treated them with an accord usually reserved for people.

This journey so far was only increasing the strangeness of the Krians. They mocked their neighbors for using magic but named their swords. Iah shook his head. And they said the Illussor suffered problems of the mind.

Which they did, but that was neither here nor there. Iah snorted softly. "So what should I *not* say? It seems that would be more crucial."

A soft laugh. "Yes, indeed. The man to most be pitied, and in a strange way respected, is the man whose sword does not have a name."

Iah nodded, understanding. "A man with no one."

"Exactly. Of late, it has become rather a notorious position in which to be."

"Why is that?" Iah asked, hearing the amusement in Sol's voice.

"Because the most powerful man in the kingdom has not named his sword. Nor has the most infamous man in Kria."

Iah thought for a moment. "The Emperor, of course, and while I know who I think the most infamous man in Kria is, I sincerely doubt Kria agrees."

"On the contrary. The Wolf of Kria is infamous everywhere." Sol's arms tightened around his waist. "Steady," he said, switching to Krian. "Travelers on the road." Iah had already heard the sound of additional horses and voices which were becoming clearer. The words they spoke were nothing like the curses and screams and threats he knew from fighting. These people sounded happy, their words still the rougher sounds of Krian but softer than he was accustomed; smoother. Perhaps because they were completely lacking in fear and anger. Their voices lacked the knowledge that any moment they would die.

"Hale," Sol returned the greetings cast their way. "To town for winter?" He laughed at the reply given by what Iah guessed was an elderly man. The words eluded him. This was the speed at which he

would be expected to speak? He felt a moment of panic – perhaps they should play that he was mute. Was there any real reason to do otherwise? Speaking wouldn't be necessary to identifying the Breaker.

Realization struck him so hard it made him gasp. He felt Sol's arm tense around his waist but barely noticed what else was going on around him.

He *couldn't* identify the Breaker. Without his eyes his magic was dead. There would be no way to tell if the Breaker was present without it. Which meant he was completely useless. How could he have been so stupid?

"Iah?" Sol asked softly, and Iah realized suddenly that it had once again grown quiet. "What's wrong?"

The words lodged in his throat, choking him. Iah forced himself to take a deep breath, but it didn't dispel the misery of realizing that he was really and truly completely useless now. "I can't—I just realized—there's no way for me to identify the Breaker. He could be standing next to me and I'd never know..."

"Nonsense. You rely too much on your magic being controlled by your eyes. Control and source are not the same thing, are they? There is no doubt in my mind that you will be able to sense him."

Iah nodded stiffly, unconvinced.

Mixed into the misery, the fear, was the realization – surprisingly bitter – that if Sol had not thought him useful in identifying the Breaker he would still be in the dark, completely at Tawn's mercy. Surely Sol was not so cold as that.

He was a spy, though, and one who played three sides. A man who, according to the beliefs of his country, did not know who he was. And for the first time the ideology began to make sense. How did you trust a man when no one knew who he really was? Iah desperately forced the insidious thoughts aside. He would do himself no favors by doubting his rescuer now.

But the doubts lingered.

Sol contemplated his companion. Ever since his fears regarding the Breaker, Iah had been silent, withdrawn. Though they'd only been together for just over a week, Sol realized he missed their conversations. It was rare he had anyone but Dal for conversation.

Iah, he'd found, was hard to read. Many emotions and reactions could be anticipated, given what he knew of Iah's situation and of course personal experience with being thrown into deep, murky waters. But outside of that, he had no glimmer of the man's thoughts.

It was more than a little frustrating.

But what had he been expecting? Had there ever been a time when the three countries were not raised to loathe one another? Every year more men went to "private school" and too many families were left crying. Never mind what Tawn had done to Iah's eyes. It was at least as bad as being declared Nameless, if not worse. Of course he would withdraw, as the disorientation faded and his senses returned to full strength.

Sol bit back a sigh and schooled his expression. Master the outward, bury the inward. When he was reasonably certain he had everything under control, he spoke. "Are you feeling unwell, Cousin?" Outside in the hallway were the sounds normal for a busy inn. This time of year everyone from the country was moving into the nearest village or city. Those that could afford it, like Lord Grau, were headed for the Winter Palace. No place in Kria was finer for enduring the seemingly endless cold.

"I am well," Iah said slowly. A knock at the door cut him off before he could say more.

"Come in, come in," Sol said, smiling and chatting with the women who brought in food for them, politely turning down the invitation in their glances. They took it in good grace; there were plenty of other rich men to choose from.

One girl knelt and arranged the food before Iah as Sol had dictated to her earlier. She muttered to herself and fussed over Iah, who started at the unexpected attention. "Poor, poor thing," she said. "Such a waste of a handsome man." She turned to Sol. "Your cousin is very brave, to continue on like this."

"Yes, Erhard is quite brave. He would have made a fine soldier, had he not been his mother's only son."

"Sad, sad," the woman said, and fussed with his hair. The story was a familiar one. At last she stood, shooed by her companion. "Enjoy; tell me what you think of my cooking!"

Iah shook his head slowly. "That was..." he fumbled for the word. "Unexpected."

"They were mourning," Sol said, and laughed. "If you'd been able to see, I doubt they would have let you refuse them."

"I see," Iah said, amused.

Sol smiled briefly. "Your plate is in front of you. Sausage north, potato cakes east, bread to the south. Have you ever had Krian food?"

"No, I haven't. It smells strange, but good."

Sol nodded and began to cut into his own sausage. Everything in Kria was heavier than in Salhara, stronger than anything in Illussor. "It's

very good. Strange, especially as Illussor food tends not to use the spices or the quantities favored by the Krians." He paused. "Except for that spicy dish I refuse to eat. It nearly killed me the first time I had it."

A pause, then Iah burst out laughing, throwing his head back and shaking with amusement. "Kimmi? I have not had that in months. I would have liked to have seen a foreigner try that for the first time!"

Sol caught himself staring and forced his attention back on his food. "I am glad you are laughing, though it is at my expense," he said teasingly. "You have been somber since this morning and it troubled me."

The laughter faded. He missed it. "My mind will not settle," Iah said quietly as he hesitantly began to eat. "This is good," he said, surprised. "A little overwhelming...but I could get used to it."

"Your mind will not settle?" Sol pressed.

Iah played with his fork, then set it carefully down. "It is nothing," he said whisper soft, speaking Illussor.

A clear indication that the discussion was one best not overheard. Discussing food was one thing.

Sol followed the trail of his thoughts easily enough. Nor could he blame him. Sol was not the sort of person to be trusted, least of all by those who employed him. Never mind the man that now knew more about him than any other living individual. Iah didn't trust him.

It was only reasonable. He shouldn't have expected otherwise.

So why had he?



## CHAPTER FOUR

"Lady Esta!" A breathless maid all but fell over in her haste to deliver her message.

Esta smiled at her in the mirror. "A lady walks, Trul."

"That's because if they run, their skirts'll have'em going downside-up."

Laughing, Esta set aside her brush and stood up. "What has you running in here like a cat fleeing the kitchen with a scrap in its mouth?"

"A really tasty scrap," Trul replied. She licked her lips for effect, making Esta shake her head and chuckle. "Rumors have it you're going to be appointed the Grand Lady of the winter ball!"

Esta's amusement died. "I don't want to be the Grand Lady."

Trul rolled her eyes. "But my lady! Everyone knows the prince has his eye on you! Why are you so recalcitrant?"

"Recalcitrant?" Esta quirked a brow. "Have you been slipping into the beds of library boys again, Trul?"

"They're so cute." Trul said, and gave a grand sigh. "You don't know whether to love them or tuck them in and read them stories." She leered. "But they generally make their preference clear."

Esta was forced to laugh. "Trul!" She reprimanded gently. "My delicate ears!"

Trul snorted, then manhandled Esta back into her seat. She grabbed the brush from the dressing table and, completely at odds with her rough mannerisms, began gently to brush out Esta's floor length, white-gold hair. "How did you want it, my lady?"

"Braided and bound. I don't want it getting dirty while I'm out; I won't have time to wash it again before tonight." Esta sighed and began to play with the jewelry spread out across her vanity table. Beautiful, ornate weavings of gold and silver. Gold chain, so delicate in places it looked as though it had been made by a spider of rare ability. Interspersed with silver roses of equal beauty. Her dress for that night would be of frosted pink silk, accented at the raised waist and hem with a slightly darker pink. With her hair decorated with more gold and silver roses, she would make her mark.

And feel utterly nothing for it. She detested the endless parties, and never a man that wanted truly to dance with her. Esta sighed, and studied her face in the mirror.

It was a stern face, but she knew it was also pretty. Features not so delicate as was preferred in women, but the added strength helped lend authority. Her skin was perfect, flawless and fair. Eyes pale blue. She scowled. Behind her Trul chuckled. "Practicing to scare off the men again, my lady?"

"No need," Esta said with a grimace. "They all frighten easily enough anyway, except for the one I want to scare off and he knows all my tricks."

Trul tsked at her. "Only my lady would begrudge having the prince for a friend." She set the brush aside and began to weave the long hair into an intricate braid. Her voice was tart as she continued, "and he's angling for more than that. Yet here you sit scowling!"

"Don't start up again," Esta said tiredly. "Friends do not make for good lovers. He's just too lazy to find someone else. I don't want to be a queen. I would be terrible at it."

An unladylike snort was Trul's only response, her mouth too full of hairpins to reply properly.

Esta frowned and began to toy with bottles of perfume, deliberating on which she would wear that night. Rose, perhaps. Mathis hated her rose perfume.

Honestly, what was he thinking? Her the Grand Lady. She was going to kill him.

Of the five dukedoms that had once existed, only two remained. The other three titles and lands had been reclaimed by the crown. It made sense, then, that the remaining two dukedoms were close to the



royal family. Iah and Esta had been the prince's playmates growing up, alongside Kalan, the only other child of a Duke.

Three boys that had done their very best to torment the only girl in their little group. Later, as the group expanded, they *still* had done their best to torment her. Though somewhere along the way it had been made clear to all the other boys that they were the only three allowed to do so. And when Kalan had drifted off into government and finances, and her brother had taken himself off to fight, Matthias had remained – perhaps not by choice, but he was there all the same. When her father and Iah had both decided to surrender the title, Matthias had seen it went to her.

It was a pity he was trying to ruin a good friendships with something as silly as romance.

So definitely the rose perfume. *That* would make it clear where she stood, as her words seldom had any impact. "I really would make an awful queen."

Trul rolled her eyes. "Yes, my lady." She shoved the last hairpin into place and stood back to admire her handiwork. The braid, done by dividing the hair into seven sections and weaving them slowly together, shortened it by several inches. With judicious use of hairpins and a few ribbons, the mass coiled and looped around the back of her head in an elegant, complicated knot. "You're ready."

"Thank you, Trul." Esta stood up and shook out the skirts of her black riding habit. "Where did I set my jacket?" She smiled as Trul fetched it from the bed, and allowed her maid to help her into it and fasten the gold buttons. "I'll be back before evening bells. Be ready, because I'll have to change in a hurry. Have a quick wash ready, I'm sure I'll need it."

"Of course, of course." Trul shooed her off. "Just see you keep that hair clean!"

Esta laughed as she entered the hallway, nodding politely to a few passing servants. Late afternoon sunlight filtered through the colored glass windows, adding strange patterns to the blue carpet lining the hallway. She hummed the tune to her favorite waltz as she walked.

Passing by a window, she paused. Outside was a glaring lack of green. A few trees clung pathetically to a few of their yellow and orange leaves, but overall everything had turned gray and brown and flat. Clouds filled the distant sky, promising that soon all that barren land would be filled with snow. Once it fell, there would be no going anywhere. It also meant the soldiers would be returning, free until spring forced them back to the battlefield.

Sometimes she wondered why they bothered to continue fighting. More often than not it seemed childish, compulsory. Unfortunately, she knew all too well why it continued, and wished she didn't.

Forcefully resuming her humming, Esta continued through the palace. She ran over all that must be done before that evening, silently offering prayers and wishes for a smooth afternoon.

A familiar voice broke into her mulling. "Esta," Prince Matthias said, and bowed. He smiled.

And despite her ongoing frustrations, Esta had to smile back. "Matthias," she greeted. Then she glared. "My servant is spreading unamusing rumors. I assume, of course, that they *are* merely rumors."

"Of course," Matthias said immediately. "I would never dare to hint that I'm angling to make you the Grand Lady of the Yuletide ball. Not on my life."

Esta glowered. Had they been alone she might have given into the temptation to hit him. Matthias might be the classic idea of royal beauty, and that smile was lethal on the unsuspecting – even occasionally those who should know better. More than once growing up she'd found a frog in her pocket or a snake in her bed. "It had better be a rumor," she replied. "What are you doing about now, anyway? Court shouldn't be out of session yet. They talk longer than that."

"Don't I know it," Matthias said. Around him his retainers chuckled. "I told them I had more urgent matters."

"Like spreading rumors."

Matthias turned and grinned at the nearest of his retainers. Duke Kalan of Ferra had been his friend nearly as long as Esta. "I'm in trouble."

"It's remarkable you noticed for once," Kalan replied. "I told you extra sleep would do wonders."

Laughter filled the hallway. Esta rolled her eyes. "I will leave you men to amuse yourselves. No doubt I will see you this evening."

"Easy journey, Esta." Matthias grabbed her hand as she passed and squeezed it briefly. They shared a look, and Esta squeezed back.

"Stay out of trouble, Matthias." Esta said, and left them.

She encountered no other interruptions on her way to the back of the castle, and the garden was empty - everyone off preparing for the night's festivities. Humming softly, Esta wove her way through the garden to the very back, slipping out a hidden door and locking it behind her. The gold key - one of only three that existed - was slipped back into its hidden pocket in her black riding skirt. From the pocket of her jacket

she pulled out a pair of soft, black gloves. Her fingers trailed lightly along the stone wall as she traveled down a short, set of stairs.

At the bottom was a tunnel. The underground road had taken many men many years to construct. Done in utmost secrecy at the command of Matthias's great-grandfather. From memory and habit Esta lit a torch.

It was damp, and smelled of mold and age and stale air. Not quite as bad as the dungeons she and her friends had sneaked a look at when they were young, but very nearly. Zero light, and no sign beyond the torchlight that the tunnel was ever used. An endless path of shadow. When her mother had first begun to teach her what must be done, Esta had cried the entire four mile journey. Not once in those first trips had she let go of her mother's skirt. She'd been eight.

The fear never died; it merely shifted from fear of the strange to fear of the all too familiar. Every time she did it, she thought *this time I won't be scared*.

And she was always wrong. Humming, Esta forced her feet to move. On and on she walked; the two mile journey always seemed like ten no matter how many times she did.

Usually once a day. Sometimes twice. Always with the hope that each journey would be her last. That someday they would find the Breaker.

But it was a dim hope. After so long, what were the chances?

She continued walking, the unrelenting dark broken only occasionally by torches left burning by the owner of the third key. He did not have access to the door at the tunnel's end, but Matthias had made sure the man was more than capable of taking care of the tunnel. He liked her walking the dark road even less than she did.

The humming shifted between different dance tunes, and mentally she spun around the ballroom on the arm of a mysterious, exotic stranger. Someone different. Exciting. Who liked to dance and didn't care about who her friends were and the power she held. A man who simply wanted to dance and then stroll through the rose garden.

Well, soon enough she would have a suitable dance partner again. Even if she did have to brow beat Iah into it every single time. Her mood cheered as she thought of her brother, who despite his soldiering life never failed to find something to smile about. And who could make her smile no matter what. Every now and then her steps were interrupted by a quick dance step.

By the end of the two mile walk, much of her anxiety had been soothed away. As always, dancing eased everything. Taking a deep breath,

Esta set her torch in a sconce and withdrew a silver key from a second hidden pocket.

The door clicked open, the sound resoundingly loud in the dead silence of the tunnel.

Inside was a room full of pale silver light. Rather, a light was at the center and reflected off the crystal lining the chamber.

The source of the light was a large, round crystal - or at least the object looked crystal. What it actually was no one who could know remembered. So many details had been lost. Holding the crystal in place was a man. He sat, unmoving, in a chair carved from the same rough crystal that lined the chamber. His age was hard to determine. Esta knew he was now twenty-eight.

Five years younger than his brother.

His name had been Benji.

Now he was only Keeper.

His pale green eyes were open but saw nothing. In all but fact, the man once called Benji was dead. Were she to touch him, his skin would be like ice. Esta shivered. Never would she grow used to this-this-

Horror. Abomination. To think—

She turned away, and mentally reprimanded herself. Duties. She had duties. To which she must attend until the solution could be found.

But it still disgusted her, to think of what their ancestors had done. What had continued to be done, until the current King declared enough was enough. Maybe he and Matthias would fix it. At least they were trying.

Until then, she would do as her mother and grandmother had done and care for the Keeper. He did not age; did not move. The crystal that imprisoned him also cared for him. It was Esta's duty to ensure that crystal and Keeper were never disturbed. Never altered.

Esta knelt and clasped her hands together. Her prayers were soft, as musical as her humming had been. They echoed around the chamber, adding a spark of warmth where usually there was only cold light.

She prayed for the Keeper, and all those who had Kept before him. And she prayed for the Breaker to come.

Eventually she stood, and began to move around the chamber, ensuring that all was as it should be. It was neither warm nor cool in the crystal chamber; not exactly pleasant...it simply was. As a child, she had been enchanted by the crystal. Had thought it magical.

And it was, but not magical the way a child thought of the word. There was nothing good here; only necessity. Desperation. Esta wished bitterly that her ancestors had thought a little harder. But she had not

been in their position, so perhaps it was she who erred. Then again, Benji had been a sweet boy and a sweeter man. Now he was merely the newest Keeper.

The last one, the King's brother, had Kept for sixty years. So far Benji had been Keeper for ten years. She hoped there would not have to be an eleventh.

Her humming was somber on her return journey, completely at odds with her ever-increasing pace. She had lingered too long - it must be past evening bell by now.

Ignoring everyone she saw as she reached the palace proper, Esta raced for her room.

"You're late!" Trul howled at her. "Late! Late! Late! What in the world have you been up to?"

"Nothing, nothing. I'm sorry. Come - stop shouting and get me dressed. I'm already late; you needn't make things worse with your scolding."

Trul continued to mutter as they scrambled to get Esta ready. In record time Esta was shaking out the skirts of her gown while Trul arranged her hair.

A knock at the door startled them both. "Answer it," she said, and began to fuss with her own hair.

"Trul, step outside for a few minutes." Matthias's somber voice cut deep, for he was rarely anything but jovial. It was a quality that irked his father's men to no end. They felt he took nothing seriously. Most days, Esta would agree with them.

But she would also be the first to say the King's old retainers and advisors needed to remember how to laugh.

"Matti?" she asked when the door had closed, giving up on her hair and turning to face him. "What's wrong?"

"Essie..."

"Just say it." Esta started to feel sick. There was only so many things that could make Matthias so uncomfortable - miserable, to be more accurate.

"Esta..." Matthias stepped forward and took her hand. "The latest reports from the field have come in."

Esta closed her eyes, holding his hand tight. "Please, no. Iah...he's...is he?" She fisted her other hand to still it's shaking, focusing on the sting of nails in skin to keep from screaming or crying.

"He's missing," Matthias said. "His commander Screamed. No one was left alive, they thought. But Iah was not accounted for. No one knows where he is. By all reports, he was there when the battle started..."

Her mind began to race as she processed the words. Iah wouldn't abandon his men, nor would he back out of a battle. So unless something else was afoot, he'd been in the fight. Which meant he'd gone missing after.

There was no way to tell what had really happened.

Missing. Iah was missing. Possibly dead. Or worse. Oh, Goddess – if that were the only other option, she would almost rather him be dead. She needed more facts. "Who...who were they fighting?"

"Krians. Scarlet."

If her eyes had not already been closed, she would have closed them then. Of course they'd been fighting the Scarlet. This close to winter would they waste their time on any other Krian force? "Why did they Scream?"

"We don't know..." Matthias said. "The report came from a scout sent to search when Iah's troop did not report at the border checkpoint as expected. He found them all dead, and no few Krians with them. Five hundred, roughly. And no sign of the Wolf."

That was strange. Esta's nails dug into Mathias's hand. "Do you think?"

"I doubt it. Whatever happened, I do not think Iah is with the General. Don't worry, Essie. I'll keep pressing for information."

Esta nodded. "Thank you for coming to tell me?"

"Will you be all right?"

"Yes," Esta said, and let him kiss her cheek. "Of course I will."

Matthias frowned at her. "You'll fret all night – or dance yourself sick to avoid fretting."

"Don't go all mother on me. Iah went off to war. I knew this was a possibility." Esta nodded, mostly to herself. "And he's not dead, right? So there's no reason to worry..."

"Why don't you just relax? I'll make your excuses, if you like..."

Esta pulled her hand away and flicked his nose with her fingers. "You most certainly will not! Do I look like a milkmaid, to hide away crying in my room? Get going right this instant so I can finish getting ready."

"Yes, ma'am." Matthias kissed her cheek and slowly limped from the room.

"My lady?" Trul asked as she darted back inside. She immediately set to getting Esta ready, but her movements were automatic. "Is something wrong?"

"My brother is missing," Esta replied. She worried her lower lip.

"Duke Cehka is missing?" Trul drew a sharp breath, and dropped the hairpins she'd been holding.

"He's not a Duke anymore," Esta corrected automatically. "He gave it up, remember?" She sighed, and ignored Trul's questions as memories consumed her attention.

The fight between her brother and father - so fresh in her mind it still seemed as though it had happened only yesterday. Even now her father refused to leave their country estate, unable to bear that both his children had followed in their mother's footsteps.

Duty over all else.

Rescinded by both men, the title had passed to her. Esta didn't want it either, but it only made sense for her to have it. Not once had she ever doubted Iah knew that, though they'd never discussed it.

Esta closed her eyes to ward off tears. Would he come home? Safe? Whole?

*What's wrong, Monkey?*

Everything, Esta thought.

*You're being a silly Monkey. Come on, let's go into town. I'll play a song and you can dance like a good little Monkey - then you'll be happy, I'll be rich and all will be well!*

Esta smiled, and opened her eyes. "Trul, do I any of the lavender perfume left?"

Trul snorted. "I wasn't aware, my lady, that you ever let it run out."

"Shush and fetch it."

*You smell pretty, mama.*

*Come close, Essie, and mama will make you smell pretty too and then papa can admire both his ladies. How do you like that?*

"Here you are, my lady." Trul dabbed the perfume on her, then began on the jewelry. The gold and silver necklace, a matching bracelet on her left wrist, a black ribbon for the war on her right, and a small tiara set on her head.

The gold and silver shone, the last perfect touch to her dress.

Esta touched the necklace.

*Iah, what's that?*

*This? I found it, one day. After a battle.*

*You mean you lifted it off someone.*

*I did not! Anyway, don't you think it's pretty.*

*It has gems.*

*Diamonds are what the white ones are called, and the red one is a...ruby, I think.*

*You can't have that. It's against the rules.*

*It wasn't always. And I only kept it because I knew you'd like it.*

*I don't want it. Gems aren't allowed.*

*But they will be again someday. When we finally find the Breaker.*

*If, Iah.*

*When. Here, hand on to it for me, at least, if you don't want it. Maybe I'll give it to my wife instead someday.*

*You! With a wife! Don't make me laugh.*

*Stranger things have happened.*

*"You're all set, my lady. Best get a move on."*

*"Thank you, Trul. Take the night off, won't you? I shouldn't need any help undoing all this. But don't drink too much."*

*Trul winked at her in the mirror. "I only ever drink just enough, my lady."*

*"Enough to what?" Esta asked.*

*"To get into trouble."*

*Esta sighed. "Get on then. I will see you tomorrow. See I'm awake for breakfast."*

*"Yes, my lady. Don't think too much, hear? All that brooding scares the men away, and if you keep scaring them away you won't have a way to refuse your prince!"*

*"Oh, yes I will." Esta shooed her maid out the door, then locked it and wandered over to the window.*

*The sky was pitch black - no moon, no stars. Perhaps there would be snow as early as tomorrow. Esta made a note to double check that Trul had pulled all her winter wear from storage.*

*Was it cold where Iah was? Did he have a jacket? Somewhere warm to rest? A horse? What was he doing? Thinking? She was going to *kill* him when he returned. And then she was going to hold him and never let go. Stupid brothers. Her eyes burned and Esta forced her thoughts on the people waiting downstairs. She had duties to attend. There would be time for sentiment and fear later.*

*Duty before all else.*



## CHAPTER FIVE

Stars above he hated snow.

At least he hated snow in Kria. It was nothing like the snow he knew back home.

Snow in Salhara was soft and fell only briefly. It dusted everything, and usually was gone by the following morning. At worst, it was ankle-deep and lasted a few days. He recalled an ice-storm from when he was a child; but even that had melted away quickly. Snow usually only fell in the northern section of Salhara, so he had seen it only when winter was particularly bad.

Kria was something else entirely. The snow fell thick and heavy; he swore some of the flakes were nearly as large as the tip of his finger. It was a mystery to him how anyone survived in this weather. He shivered, wishing desperately for a fire and a vast quantity of blankets.

Of course, he seemed to be the only one so affected by the weather. He'd swear the bastard and his horse were *enjoying* themselves. That probably shouldn't surprise him. Was von Adolwulf even feeling the cold? It certainly didn't seem like he did. Beraht refused to relax against his captor, the heat that seemed to pour from him was all that kept him from freezing entirely.

Well, that and his cloak. Beraht had secured one of his own, and a great deal more in winter wear besides, from the strange temple they'd rested in for two days. But his cloak, though warm, was nothing like von

Adolwulf's. Where had he obtained it? It was heavy; made from at least two layers of thick wool, the end and shoulders trimmed with what Beraht had realized were at least two or three overlapping rows of wolf fur. It had been made with no small amount of skill. Beraht swore the snow just fell from it.

Maybe it was melting away. The man was certainly enough of a bastard. At least all that rage was good for something.

Beraht hunched his shoulders and glared at the road ahead. Not that he could see it, but he knew it was there.

Or hoped it was, anyway. It was a mystery to him how von Adolwulf knew where they were going. The logical thing would have been to take shelter until the weather cleared. It wasn't like snow lasted forever. Then again, the Krians *and* the Illussor were pretty adamant about calling a halt when the snow started. And though it had been suggested, Salhara had never taken advantage of the opportunity to take the Disputed Lands.

Regenbogen, the Krians called it. Not that they ever did anything with it; just left the miles and miles of field to do as they pleased.

And what they usually pleased was to grow arcen. The flowers were fine – or had been before three countries took to fighting over the land. Stars forbid the Krians do something so crass as negotiate. What did they need the land for? They already had more than they knew what to do with.

He turned his thoughts away from the question that had plagued for years, for dwelling on it never did any good. *What had started the war?* Because the arcen fields had come later. Arcen was hard to grow, for the ground had to be rich and the season just right. The last few seasons had been hard; arcen was not as readily available. The Disputed Lands, even after being ravaged each year, somehow managed to recover over the course of the long Krian winter. If they could drive the Krians out once and for all, the fields would provide them with a reliable place to harvest arcen for years. Whatever was in the soil there, arcen loved it.

Which reminded him quite forcefully that he *still* was feeling the pangs of not having any arcen. The headaches were not as bad as they had been, those he could tolerate. No, it was the crawling sense of needing wanting aching for the tingling burn of arcen in his blood that was slowly driving him mad.

Beraht snorted. Slowly nothing. Between the withdrawal and his intolerable captor, insanity must surely be just a day or so away.

The snow was most definitely not helping. He muttered a few curses under his breath – in Krian, so that von Adolwulf knew exactly

how he felt. Let the man beat him, throw him around, continue to force him on in this abominable weather. The last laugh would be his.

Laughter startled him from his grousing.

"Salharans are soft," von Adolwulf said. "If you think this is bad, wait until winter arrives."

"This *is* winter," Beraht snapped. His voice was eerily loud, because for all that the snow fell in mass quantities around them, there was little noise. Not even a strong wind. Just the relentless fall of soft, thick snow. It muffled their words, but they still seemed loud.

Von Adolwulf laughed again. "Nonsense. This? Is merely the end of autumn. True winter does not begin for nearly another month. We should, in fact, be returning just in time for the festivities."

"Festivities? To celebrate foul weather? How typically Krian."

"Think as you like."

Beraht subsided into silence. On the one hand, an end would mean he didn't have to endure day after day of von Adolwulf's company. On the other – what would happen to him once they reached their destination? Would he be back in chains? Locked in a dungeon? Tortured for information?

He couldn't repress a shudder, and hoped von Adolwulf attributed it to the cold. They'd existed in a sort of stalemate for the past few days. Though he'd said nothing, it was clear that von Adolwulf was more interested in making good time than in torturing his prisoner.

Though he never missed a chance to torment him, either. Just hearing the bastard say his name set his teeth on edge and von Adolwulf knew it. Patience was all it took – one day he'd have the satisfaction of hearing his name rescinded, never to be spoken again. Then von Adolwulf would die, and he would return home to be given a proper name by his Seven Star Brothers.

A name and a place. And more besides, for all the information on the Krians which he would be able to provide. Those thoughts alone made the enduring of the thrice-cursed snow more than bearable.

Well, almost. He'd give a lot for fire and blankets. And something hot to drink.

Ahead of them was a steadily growing darkness, peeking between the flurries. Indistinct, looming. But as they drew closer Beraht realized they were approaching a forest. Only the second he'd seen since their journey had begun. Unlike before, however, these trees were the kind with which he was familiar. Naked, leaves dead and buried in a white grave. But the branches were large enough that the snow was not quite so bad – he could actually see more than unrelenting white.

Not much more, but it was a welcome change.

The silence was worse than ever. They well and truly seemed to be the only living things in the forest. How boring. Perhaps that was von Adolwulf's goal; to torture him with sheer and abject boredom. Even fear of what lay ahead of him could not dissuade the boredom. Better to be doing something than nothing.

Von Adolwulf's arm tightened around his waist, and pulled him close. "What—" Beraht's furiously hissed words were cut off by a gloved hand placed firmly over his mouth.

"Silence," von Adolwulf hissed in his ear. Beraht obeyed, reflexively. It was the tone of a commanding officer – there was no room for argument. He cursed at himself when he realized what he was doing. But when the hand withdrew, he stayed silent. "Don't fall off the horse," von Adolwulf added.

Beraht grit his teeth against a reply, though only because he heard von Adolwulf draw his sword.

None too soon, as shadows came from the snow. Steel sang against steel, breaking the silence of the forest. Then the world erupted into a flurry of movement, and Beraht heard more than saw the sickening sounds of men silenced by a sword.

Then the heat of von Adolwulf was gone as he dismounted, and Beraht realized with a hiss just how warm the man had really been. Stars above, what he would give to be out of the godforsaken cold! He hunched down on the horse's back and watched as von Adolwulf dealt with what remained of...about six men.

The last he didn't kill, though. Beraht felt sorry for him, as von Adolwulf yelled at the man. Though the man tried to yell back, Beraht could see he was far too frightened.

The words were nothing like the stiff, correct Krian he'd been speaking. That, he realized suddenly, von Adolwulf had been using as well. Whatever he was speaking to the bandit was completely different. It wasn't even like the stuff used by the soldiers he used to listen to. They'd spoken roughly, but clearly. Trained soldiers coming from all walks of life, who had settled on a dialect all could understand.

But this...this was guttural and liquid at the same time. Like melting snow or an ice-cold stream. It was completely different from anything he'd ever heard. He couldn't understand what was being said, though he knew von Adolwulf's tone well enough by now to know that he was glad it wasn't him.

He looked on unmoving as von Adolwulf finally killed the man, painting the ground red as he threw the body aside and cleaned his sword.

Beraht eyed the sword. It seemed longer than most, though he couldn't be sure. The one thing he was sure of was that the sword was of exceptional quality – something about it just seemed to declare that. It also shimmered strangely, but most likely that was merely a combination of melted snow and sunlight. Von Adolwulf sheathed his sword and mounted, and in seconds they were continuing as though nothing had happened.

"Bandits?" He was suddenly glaringly aware of how wretched his Krian truly was. He'd learned from the battlefield, from those few comrades who were fluent and willing to teach, and from listening to Krian soldiers as he snuck around their camps committing sabotage and murder. He'd been proud of it, even knowing he was far from skilled. Now he felt the sting of knowing exactly how awful he was. Which shouldn't matter, but was one more slap in the face. On top of that, von Adolwulf had been speaking at his level the entire time. A sly mockery he had not bothered to pick up on 'til now. The bastard had probably been laughing at him the whole time.

"Yes," von Adolwulf replied. His Krian was what Beraht was familiar with; nothing like what he'd spoken to the dead men. "They thought us traveling nobles."

Beraht snorted. "What sort of noble travels alone?"

A sneer entered von Adolwulf's voice. "A real one. They are wealthy enough they need bring nothing but themselves when they travel to the Winter Palace. What sense does it make to travel with wagons and servants in this weather?"

"What sense does it make to *travel* in this weather? Only a stupid Krian would consider this ideal." Beraht gave into impulse and drove his elbows back, dissatisfied to hear only a brief grunt.

Then von Adolwulf grabbed the back of his head, pulling hard and turning it so that they were eye to eye. "I have been generous because of the weather, *Beraht*. Do not think I'll hesitate to beat you senseless if I feel it necessary. While I'm sure you're plenty strong for a Salharan," the words were sneered. "You are little more than a petulant child to me." The hand tightened in his hair, and Beraht choked on a hiss of pain.

"As to the weather – there is no choice. The snow falls so every year, at about this time. The Winter Princess is cold, but she is dependable." Von Adolwulf laughed.

Beraht muttered a few choice curses – in Salharan. He did not relish being tossed into the snow, which he suspected would be von

Adolwulf's next method of warning him. "So why on earth do Krians decide to move now?"

"Most move well before now," von Adolwulf said after a moment. "We are late, not least of all because I am trying to make sure that no one else comes after you." The hand roughly let go of his hair and Beraht resettled his hood. "And for many, if they did not move to the palace the weather would kill them – usually from starvation." A pause. "We cannot all be soft Salharans and enjoy the sun all year long."

"At least it keeps us from turning into blood-thirsty bastards." Beraht realized too late that he should have kept his mouth shut.

Snow was even colder when you landed in a pile of it – and it was only the snow that probably kept him from breaking or twisting something. Von Adolwulf loomed over him. "Bloodthirsty? Krians?" He grabbed Beraht and shook him hard; the world spun around in drunken circles. "Who is it always seeking to steal our land? At least we fight honestly, instead of hiding behind drugs and slinking around in the dark. Bloodthirsty? Perhaps. But at least I am no coward."

"Just a bastard," Beraht hissed, and lashed out to kick von Adolwulf off his feet as he let go. Clearly the cold was shutting down his ability to think, if he'd actually thought that might work. "Let me go!" He thrashed without effect, tangled in his own clothes and pinned by von Adolwulf.

"Behave, Beraht. I would hate to have to tie you up for the rest of the journey. You've been behaving so well." His face said he knew exactly how mad he was making Beraht. "Do you want to travel trussed up and thrown over my saddle like the worthless mongrel you are?"

Beraht snarled a few Salharan curses, which turned into cries of pain as von Adolwulf hauled him roughly to his feet. More bruises. His body was starting to forget what it was like not to have them. "Let me go," he said sullenly.

"Stupid Salharan," von Adolwulf said with one of his hard laughs. He all but threw Beraht back up onto the horse.

The gloomy silence that had existed most of the day returned and Beraht was left alone with his thoughts and a fresh set of pains to endure.

And always the unending white. It was a wonder to him they could still move. But von Adolwulf's horse seemed as unaffected by the weather as his master. Monsters both of them. "How do you even know where we're going?" he asked when the silence grew too grating. If Adolwulf wanted him to shut up, no doubt he'd let him know. "After your little chat with the cold, starving, bandits there was no telling what our direction was."

Von Adolwulf snorted in contempt. "The horse knows."

"Oh, of course. How stupid of me. Trust a horse as equally blinded by the weather as us to know where to go. Too much longer and the snow will be too deep to move."

"Then it is a good thing that we will be stopping soon, isn't it? Give it a little longer, Salharan, and you will see our shelter for the evening."

"Another temple? Or are you going to terrify a farmer's family out of their home?"

Fingers wrapped around his throat and dug in. The leather was cold and stiff, and the hand beneath it was strong. Beraht found it harder to breathe than ever. "I think it would be healthier for you, Beraht, if you kept your mouth shut. Your suffering does not trouble me at all, but I would be willing to bet it troubles you." Von Adolwulf pressed tighter for a moment, then abruptly let go.

Beraht coughed and gasped for air, holding his hand to his throat. Already he could feel the bruises forming. As if the cold did not make it hard enough to breathe, now this. "Bastard."

There was no reply.

Dieter was relieved to see that not all the stores had been depleted. Ludwig was a lazy bastard and he would not have put it past the man to leave the place empty.

The building, two stories and immense, was a resting lodge for soldiers and other large groups traveling westward for the winter. General Ludwig von Eisenberg of the Cobalt army was in charge of protecting the far eastern border, while General Egon von Kortig of the Verdant Army guarded the western. General Heilwig von Dresner of the Saffron Army protected Kaiser Benno and the palace. The Scarlet Army waged the bulk of the war at the south edge, where all three countries intersected. The bulk of the Scarlet, Cobalt and Verdant armies stayed behind in their individual fortresses to continue their duties during the press of winter. Only the Saffron never saw the battlefield, and every winter the Generals were required to attend their Kaiser.

Right now the lodge should be crammed to bursting with the five hundred men who usually returned home with him – something considered a privilege. Instead he had only the man responsible for their deaths to keep him company and a grim homecoming to look forward to. Dieter cast the thought aside as idle and began to prepare to bed down. When they left here in the morning, they would be no more than three days away – and the road heavily traveled, so it would not be as hard a journey as it had been before now.

There would also be people, which he had been avoiding. But it could not be put off forever. Let the bastards come; he'd been waiting far longer than they. "Nothing here will bite you," he jeered, eyeing the way Beraht lingered in the doorway.

Beraht ignored him, save for a few muttered Salharan curses, and wandered inside. It was, in their long journey, the only building that wasn't a hole in the ground or an empty farmhouse. No doubt it irked him to see that the Krians were more civilized than he wanted them to be.

"Make yourself at home, Beraht." Dieter wandered down the hall, past the small rooms for housing soldiers and into one of four special rooms reserved for the generals or whatever lord had decided to stop. He lit the lamps; four of them, scattered around the room.

A proper bed, which was the second thing he most missed about always being on the battlefield. And clean. He was so very tired of being filthy.

The bathing chamber was clean at least – most likely because Ludwig had not troubled himself with something so bothersome as cleanliness. Dieter exited briefly to fetch his erstwhile prisoner, whom he found in one of the smaller bedrooms. "Come," he said, then strode out and stalked back down the hallway.

He heard Beraht follow, and closed the door behind him. "We will stay here tonight. Tomorrow we will reach the capital." A vicious grin. "Are you looking forward to it, Beraht?"

Beraht ignored him. He strode across the room and began to remove his winter gear, hanging up the cloak and gloves and extra layers on various hooks intended for the purpose. Then he sat down on a nearby chair and began the laborious process of removing his high boots.

Dieter shrugged out of his own cumbersome cloak. He valued it nearly as much as his sword, but the thing was heavy. When he'd first begun wearing it, at only sixteen years of age – and he was more than double that now, how tiring – it had been *too* heavy. He'd been forced to damn near freeze to death until he scrounged up something he could wear and fight in.

By eighteen, however, it was perfect, and minimal repair had been required over the years. It had been made by a master of the craft and, like the man who had made his sword, she was no longer alive to make another.

More idle thoughts. Dieter snorted in contempt and unbuckled his sword belt. He carried it with him as he went into the bathing room.

Not a real bathing room, not like the one waiting for him in the palace, but it was better than what he'd endured so far. Discarding his



clothes, which reeked of sweat and dirt and too many days spent on a horse – with a Salharan – and cast them aside. Nobles and soldiers kept all they needed in the stops along the way. Something he had tried to explain to the ignorant prisoner with no avail.

Quickly Dieter scrubbed himself clean, steeling himself against the cold water used to rinse off. Ignoring the chill, he sat at the edge of the cold bath to shave. The small mirror showed that he would need a good night's rest when the journey finally ended.

It was almost impressive that the little Salharan had managed to more or less keep pace. But then again, anger and fear made good motivators and Dieter made sure both persisted in gnawing away at Beraht. Combined with the fact that he did little to keep him confined, the Salharan was no doubt quite off balance.

Dieter intended to keep him that way. It would make for one less problem in the coming days.

At the back of the bathing room was a smaller room used for storing belongings. Several trunks ran the length of three sides. Dieter flipped open one against the back wall and rifled through it for the clothing he needed. Pulling on his underclothes, Dieter then drew on a pair of breeches old enough they fit him perfectly, followed by a white undershirt and then a heavier one of a deep, rich red. Over all this he pulled a sleeveless tunic, black except for fine red trim at the bottom and the crest over his chest – a triad of scarlet and gold leaves.

He reentered the main bedroom. Beraht stood by the window, staring out at the snow. Dieter wondered what he found so fascinating in something he clearly hated. "I don't recommend running."

"The snow is more appealing than your company, but I'm not ready to leave quite yet." Beraht turned to glare at him. "As I've said before – you'll be begging me to leave when I'm done."

"Words are nothing but noisy air when there are no actions to back them up. Would you like to fight me again?" Dieter goaded. "You're getting quite good at living without pollution – you can almost swing a punch correctly."

Beraht twitched but otherwise held still. "When you die, the place where your star should have been will be nothing but an empty space in the sky."

"Then it's a good thing I've no interest in my soul becoming a star," Dieter returned. "Get clean."

Grumbling and muttering, Beraht nevertheless obeyed. Even a Salharan, it seemed, could be taught one or two tricks. All it took was

dumping water on his head a few times. Dieter laughed to himself, then turned his attention to other matters.

How to figure out what the Illussor had been up to trying to take a Salharan...prisoner? Or had it been some sort of rescue attempt? His face clouded as the thought occurred to him. What was the name floated about for the rumored Illussor spy? *Spiegel*. That was it. Could Beraht be Spiegel?

Dieter dismissed the thought in the next instant. No. Excluding how obstinate Beraht had been over the matter of a name, he did not have the temper or control of a spy at all. He could be acting, but Dieter doubted it. The man angered far too easily, and lashed out too quickly for it to be a farce.

He hung his cape on the remaining hooks on the wall, but his boots and sword he carried to the bed – the boots to set beside it and the sword closer to hand.

Outside the world was black. The snow had eased and finally stopped throughout the course of the day. Night fell quickly now; they'd traveled two hours in the dark. Not even the moon had been out to guide them. He'd ensured Drache was well tended and fed before permitting himself rest. Perhaps he could see that he went to a farm, rather than to another soldier, when everything was over.

Dieter's fingers flitted to his sword, and he rubbed a thumb along the red jewel in the pommel. A moment later he rose and stalked from the room.

The kitchen was mostly barren – no one would be coming through here now, so it would not need to be restocked until the snow melted in spring. Only the basics remained, but it was more than enough. Dieter frowned as he came across a heavy, earthen jug. He pulled the cork and smelled – then threw the bottle across the room and watched as it shattered into pieces. The scent of dark wine filled the room, mingling with the lingering smells of fire and roasted meat and too many men.

Taking the food, Dieter grabbed a jug of water and stormed back toward his room.

Beraht was by the window again, hair dripping onto the clothes he had stolen – brown breeches and a too-long green tunic cinched at his hips. How did such a slight man survive so long at war? Snapping him in half wouldn't even be a challenge.

He dropped the food on the table and helped himself. "Hoping to be rescued, Beraht?"

"How further have we to go before we reach this wretched palace of yours" Beraht asked, ignoring the mocking question.

"We are only a day from the Winter Palace."

"Does this palace have a name, or is that giving Krians too much creativity?"

Dieter shrugged. "It is the Winter Palace."

Beraht rolled his eyes. Wandering over to the table, he helped himself to the bread and sausage set out. "I don't suppose you heathens keep wine about this place, do you? That's the least I deserve after all this."

"A prisoner deserves nothing," Dieter said. "You should be grateful that I treat you as well as I do."

"Well? I've got bruises and cuts in thirty different places, all because you think the way to end a conversation is with violence."

Dieter laughed. "It shuts you up, doesn't it? And I will gladly make it fifty if you do not shut up right now." He laughed again when Beraht fell silent.

He let his mind wander for a bit, giving it a chance to clear. Gradually he brought his attention back around to the question of Beraht and the Illussor. It was strange behavior for the Illussor, who seemed to fight for no apparent reason. The war over Regenbogen was between Kria and Salhara. Why the Illussor had gotten involved was a reason lost before his time. They appeared infrequently, and usually only to ensure the war was not getting too close to Illussor territory.

Then again, with their nasty little mind-trick, there was really no telling how often they appeared. So basically he knew nothing useful. No doubt it was something that made sense only to magic-tainted minds.

"What is your etiquette on prisoners? I can't imagine this sort of journey is standard fare, though really you should consider adding it to your repertoire of tortures."

Dieter continued eating, unfazed. He finished a length of sausage before bothering to answer. "Most are given nothing but water and kept bound. I may yet do the same to you, *Beraht*."

"You're just infuriated that I managed to kill so many of Kria's best soldiers – well, supposedly the best."

Dishes and food flew about as Dieter upended the small table and pinned Beraht to the floor with it, resting his weight until he knew the man could barely breathe, and was in excruciating pain. Not quite enough weight to break anything. "How do you like it? Pinned and helpless, your life completely in my control? Feeling angry? Scared? Want to kill me? My men died in their sleep – they had as much chance to save their own lives as you do right now. At least you had some warning. If you killed my men, Salharan filth, it is because you were a coward about

it.” In one smooth move Dieter rose, threw the table aside, then reached down and hauled Beraht to his feet. “Do not doubt for one second that I won’t make you suffer. Every day for the rest of your life, you will regret killing my men as you did.”

Though sore and shaken and gasping for breath, Beraht lashed out to drive the man back. It had no effect. Dieter threw him on the bed. “You keep talking about this suffering – but beyond your usual crass behavior, bloodthirsty Krian, I’ve yet to suffer.”

Dieter threw his head back and laughed. “You don’t think it’s punishing enough to spend the rest of your life as my prisoner, Beraht? To know that until the day you die, you are mine. For the rest of your life, you will be in Kria. Under my control. Bearing the name *I* gave you. I do not understand the Salharan obsession with names, but I know you despise that I named you. That will serve nicely, or at least until I think of something worse.”

He’d expected a fight, but Beraht merely turned away and lay on his stomach in bed, staring out the window on the far side of the room. Dieter sneered at his back, then turned to clean up the mess he’d made of the food. When the table was righted, he blew out the lamps and sat at the table, mulling over events past, present and future.

When he was certain Beraht was fast asleep, he climbed into the empty side of the bed and eventually fell asleep, one hand on his sword.

## CHAPTER SIX

Iah held fast to the arm at his waist, willing, *ordering* himself not to panic.

The noise. Too much of it. So many people. All around, pressing close, shouting and laughing. The smell of smoke, meat, something sweet. Sweat and dirt and far too many others. In the inns, along the road, he'd been able to handle it. The crush of the people at the Winter Palace, however, was overwhelming.

Sol tugged his arm free and then clasped his hand. "It's all right," he said softly in Iah's ear, daring to speak Illussor. "We're nearly through to the palace proper."

Iah nodded, but didn't let go of Sol's hand, as weak it made him feel to need such reassurance.

Who was he, to be reduced to this? Certainly not Iah Cehka. No...for now at least he was Erhard Grau. Was it all right, then, to be weak? What had happened to the man he used to be? Now he felt like a frightened boy.

The noises gradually faded, replaced by the more controlled chaos of what he knew immediately must be the palace. It wasn't simply in the reduction of sound. The air was fresher, laced with the smell of people and food and a bite of frost. But it also carried the scent of flowers; faint traces of perfume.

And something else – blood, Iah realized. Only the faintest bit. He bit back the part of him that wanted to say *Krians, it figures*. Because in the last two weeks he'd learned what he should have already known. That not all Krians were large, looming men with a seemingly natural-born talent to cut down every threat like so much straw.

The women especially had been kind, reminding him so much of Esta in the way they did exactly as they pleased and woe betide the man that dared to order them otherwise. He had always thought women in Kria must be softer, weaker. And he knew from what Sol had been teaching him that very few women held any sort of authority. Currently, only one woman held a position of power and when they felt they were safe, the peasant women of Kria made their opinions of *that woman* quite clear.

If he'd caught Esta talking like that, he would knock her upside the head.

Iah almost laughed, but the vanishing of Sol from behind him killed whatever good mood he'd managed to regain.

But then warm hands reached up to help him dismount, and a summer voice helped him relax. He stood quietly by as 'Lord Grau' began to snap orders to the servants that had appeared to attend him. "You had best make *very* certain that my cousin is escorted with all care and comfort to my chambers. No, I do not want a separate room for him. He is unfamiliar with the palace, he will stay close to me at all times." After that, the Krian became to rapid-fire for him to keep up, and he hoped Sol did not say something which would require his participation.

His Krian was sufficient for amusing peasant women and complimenting their cooking. There was no way he would ever pass muster in the palace. Especially if a soldier wise to the accents of his enemies heard him speak.

Fear began to swallow him, and Iah desperately fought a silent battle against it.

Then abruptly the noise died. Laughter and chatter fell like clothes discarded on the floor. Footsteps broke the silence, but added to the tension that suddenly filled the room. He felt Sol touch his arm, then lips ghosted over his ear as Sol whispered in his ear. "Be silent. For now I will say you cannot speak without difficulty. Around them, do not speak."

Then the servants and other persons in the room began to murmur; words of respect and greeting.

"Good evening," said a noncommittal voice. It sounded slow, bored...but there was menace beneath it. A snake resting in the sun. "...Lord Grau, yes?"

"I am humbled the Lord General recalls me."

"Nonsense," the slow voice said. "Your witticisms always add to the table."

"The Lord General flatters me. I am glad to find you well for another season."

Iah heard the man move. "Yes, yes. Who is this?" Iah forced himself not to freeze, but to relax, act calm.

"Whatever happened to his eyes?" A new voice spoke, and drew close enough Iah could smell her – like honey, and a bit like sweat. Her voice was both appealing and distasteful, like wine that had finally soured.

Sol shifted, as if to cover and protect him. "My cousin suffered a nasty hunting accident. You know how it goes, when peasants trespass on their master's land. I have brought him with me for a change of pace; usually he prefers to whittle his time away in the monastery." He referred to the monastery high in the mountains several miles southeast. Those that had no taste for palace life often went there; as did those whose relatives did not want to be humiliated at court by less than shining family members. The implication was that Grau did not have time to take his cousin to the monastery, and since he could not get there under his own power, Grau was forced to endure him for the winter.

Which meant he would be noted and then immediately dismissed. "He is still a little hard of speech, so I beg your forgiveness for his silence."

"It is no concern," the woman said. And without another word, they walked on.

Sol wasted no time in seeing they were taken to his rooms; a suite on the far end of the east wing.

The room spelled sweet, freshly cleaned. A slight breeze blew through, making the room cool but not chilly. He heard Sol lock the door, then approach him from behind. "Come," Sol said, and led him back toward the door. "Starting from this very spot—" He arranged Iah with his back to the door. "Twenty paces to the window. Ten paces and two to the left will take you to a table. On the north and south ends of it are chairs. Seven paces beyond that is the fireplace; you will feel a bear-fur rug beneath your feet. The rest of the floor is covered in woven rugs. Ten paces and another ten to your right is the bed. To the south of it is a wardrobe and a long mirror on its right side. Against the opposite wall is a small writing desk. Do I need to repeat it?"

"No," Iah said. Taking a deep breath, he counted paces silently as he traversed the room. He fumbled three times, and walked into the wall once. But an hour later, he felt relatively secure about the lay of the room.

It was hard. Every morning he woke up thinking it had all been a bad dream. Every day he lived the nightmare over again. More nightmares when he slept. But giving up was not an option. There was Tawn, and the Breaker...and he could not leave Esta alone. Though she would probably be horrified...all of them. Would he have any friends left? Or would his blindness – the complete absence of his eyes – scare them all away? He clenched his fists and walked the room again, until hands fell upon his shoulders and held him still.

"You are doing wonderfully," assured that summer voice. That voice he ached to trust, but couldn't for too many doubts. He shoved them aside and voiced one of his questions. "The two from earlier?" His Krian was slow, but faster than when he was around Krians.

Sol's hands slid from his shoulder and he guided Iah to sit. "There is wine here, if you want it." He placed Iah's hand on the goblet, then sat down himself. "The man was Ludwig von Eisenberg – the Verdant General. The woman was—"

"The Saffron General," Iah interrupted. He remembered all the names the peasant women had used. "Heilwig..."

"Heilwig von Dresden."

Iah took a sip of wine. It was potent stuff, rich, dark and surprisingly sweet. Nothing like the light, bitter stuff back home, which went so well with the softer Illussor foods. "Is there not a single *good* general?"

"They are all good generals," Sol said levelly. "Whether they are good people or not is something else altogether."

"Shouldn't they be, though?" Iah asked, then laughed at himself. Who was he kidding? War wasn't about nice.

*War isn't about heroics. It's about getting yourself killed for one stupid reason or another. You're not going!*

*Yes, I am. You can't stop me. I won't sit here drinking tea and discussing the weather while the boys I played with are sent away to die.*

*You played with a prince. You're a duke. And you have obligations here.*

*Esta can handle those, you know she can. Mother would let me go!*

*Your mother was a fool. Why do you think she's dead?*

*Take your title back, father. I don't want it. Tomorrow I'm leaving.*

*Then don't come back.*

*Oh, I'll come back. But it'll be either when the war concludes or when it's time to put me beside my foolish mother.*



"There's many who would agree with you. More than a few wonder why he appointed the four he did. Why he drove his father's men into retirement."

"And what do they suggest?"

"No one knows what the Kaiser thinks. He is mercurial, and his favors are dispersed strangely."

Iah took another sip of wine. "Strange how?"

"He seems to be friends with the Verdant General, though most say he is lazy. Egon von Korbit, the Cobalt General, also finds favor though he is little more than a ghost. And of course you are well acquainted with the popular opinion of the Saffron General."

"Yes," Iah said, shaking his head. "Are Krian women always so crude?"

"Only in regards to each other," Sol said dryly.

Iah pushed his wine aside, liking it far too much to trust himself. Now was no time for alcohol. "What about the Wolf? The Kaiser must think highly of notorious general."

"Actually...most say the Kaiser hates the Scarlet General."

"Why?" Iah asked.

"No one knows."

"How can no one know?" Iah asked, and Sol saw him reach once more for his wine. He smiled briefly.

"Perhaps because that would require knowing something about the Wolf. But no one knows anything about him, not really. He was born a peasant, to a well-known and highly skilled sword smith. He signed up for the army and prospered. One winter he came home, and not two days later his parents were brutally murdered. That is all anyone knows about the boy who later became General Dieter von Adolwulf." Sol paused and poured a glass of wine for himself.

Though his work was unsettling – indeed this time more than ever he wondered if he would live to see it through to the end – being in Kria was more relaxing than the strains of Salhara, living constantly under the shadow of the Brotherhood that ruled his country while the King behaved like a good puppet. Here the games were open, easy to play. And he was a minor player, so far as all others were concerned.

His rooms were simple; well appointed but not overdone. The rooms of a minor noble who could afford to play at real nobility – and had no aspirations, so was considered safe by those who would otherwise cut him down as a threat. The room was soft, brown and black and gold. And warm, because he never would get how anyone could stand the merciless cold that seemed to plague both Kria and Illussor.

"Who killed his parents?"

"A question never answered, or at least that I could never learn." Which, he liked to think, meant that no one knew. "But it was a robbery. For peasants, they were rather affluent. As I said, his father was highly regarded as a sword smith. The fond like to say he was the best one in history. Rumors abound, of course. The only thing more interesting than a terrible and frightening general are the stories that theorize what made him so."

Iah began to move his head in that peculiar fashion which meant he was thinking. Like a bird, bobbing on a branch as it contemplated what song it wanted to sing. "So what are you planning?" he asked finally. Sol wondered what he'd really been thinking.

He took a deep swallow of wine, then set his goblet down and strode over to the window, moving aside the tapestry to peer down at the people below. A massive crush, as the lower classes mixed and melded, celebrated and jostled as they prepared for the long winter months ahead. To leave after the really heavy snows fell was nothing less than suicide. Within the castle walls, most of the snow was kept out or to a minimum. And inside was a vast network of interconnected hallways and tunnels.

Very little drove the Krians outside once winter set in.

Sound exploded in the courtyard, and whereas before people had looked busy now they looked frenzied. Sol dropped the tapestry and returned to the table, though he remained standing.

"What's wrong?" Iah asked.

"Soldiers are returning; it looks like the last of them. Minus the Scarlet..." Sol poured another glass of wine and sat down. "There is something about the Krians I have not yet told you."

Iah took a healthy swallow of his own wine. "Because I'm not going to like it."

"No. I still don't like it. In this, it is a blessing you cannot see." He picked up his goblet, then set it down again, rubbing a thumb over one of the small green jewels set below the rim. "The soldiers are dragging several prisoners along with him. Salharan, all of them. The Illussor are lucky they're considered too dangerous to be taken prisoner."

"What?"

Sol sighed. "The winter festivities here are begun in the coliseum. Where every prisoner, every major criminal and whosoever else the Kaiser sees fit are made to fight until there are no more left. It can last for days."

"That's awful. Don't they do enough killing every time the weather warms?"

"It is the way Krians do it. And what do the civilians know of war? They see only that their men die every year because two other countries are trying to steal Krian land. To them, the coliseum is a way to see prisoners and criminals get what they deserve. I'm sure the nobility find it useful for their own reasons in addition to those."

"How do you endure it?" Iah asked.

Sol drank deeply from his goblet. "I don't have a choice." He sat through it, and acted as though he wanted to be there. But forever he would hear the screams for help, the pleas and desperate cries. All in a language which Lord Grau did not understand, but which Sol heard clearly every time he went to sleep.

He stood up again. "There is a case on the table. Large, square. Covered and lined in velvet. It contains all my "inks" and I wanted to show you how they worked.

"Very well."

Sol retrieved the case and brought it to the table. He flipped it open, revealing two neat rows of small, fat bottles of dark blue glass. Around the middle of each was a band of silver. He carefully picked one up and pressed it into Iah's hands. "Feel the band of silver?"

"Yes."

"Hold it tight, then twist hard on the bottom half of the glass."

Iah obeyed and the bottle in his hand became two.

"The one with the silver," Sol said, and touched it. "Is just ink. The other one..."

"Arcen," Iah whispered.

Sol nodded, then rolled his eyes at himself. "Yes." He took the bottle back, reassembled it and replaced it. Taking Iah's hand, he guided him over each of the fourteen bottles. "Five yellow, two orange, two red. Two white. The rest are green, to be used if I must because such weak arcen will not affect me visibly." He left unsaid that green was only weak to someone well and truly addicted; those who used yellow as though it were nothing.

But at least he'd never had to progress to orange. *That* was a fate he would leave to his Brothers. He wanted no part of it. "Hopefully I won't need this for anything other than ink."

Returning the case to the desk, Sol wandered back to the window. Outside the crowd had calmed again, but eager tension was still thick in the air. Another week and the bloodshed would begin.

"Would you like to go downstairs for dinner, or remain up here?"

Iah shrugged. "I suppose I should go downstairs, yes? But..."

"Why not stay up here? Too much at once will not help anything. I doubt much will be occurring tonight, anyway. I'll poke around, make our excuses and we can dine up here. Don't drink too much wine, I'll be back in a short while."

Sol slipped out of the room, absently smoothing his hair down. He severely disliked Krian court wear – so many layers and folds. At least he could get away with not wearing the hose that seemed all the rage. His own clothes were predominantly gray, with a green tunic stitched with the snowflakes of the winter princess – though not the same as those that made up the crest of the Cobalt General.

Around him people milled; the halls of the palace were packed. In a few days everything would settle down, but for now there was little in the way of calm or quiet. All buzzed with excitement, dressed in rainbows of color that would severely confuse most Salharans who were used to the somber blacks of the army broken only by the red and blue of the two Sacred Armies they encountered.

Women, noting his arrival, began to beckon to him. They smiled in welcome and drew him into their fold, murmuring and chatting and feeding Sol all the gossip and information he could need.

Of course the greatest rumor was that of the Scarlet. Scouts, apparently, had found all five hundred of the returning troop dead. No one at the fort knew how or why. An Illussor Scream had killed most of them – the rest slain by Salharan magic.

No one knew what had become of the Wolf. That didn't keep them from making all manner of guesses, most of them bloody and no small part vindictive. Sol shook his head, wondering how a man could excel at being so universally disliked. Didn't it make more sense to be a well-liked general?

But much of Krian politics did not make much sense to him. The Kaiser held all the power, and below him were his council and the generals. There were some that said the generals would hold the power if not for the fact that the Kaiser had purposely chosen men who the people would never accept...and he kept all but three of them gone half the year. With the bulk of their men forced to stay and guard the fortresses.

The Kaiser was not a stupid man. Not entirely.

"Hale! Is that Lord Grau I see?"

Sol looked up. "Hale, Burkhard. You are looking well."

Burkhard smiled and grabbed Sol's hands, shaking them enthusiastically. "And you, my friend. I am glad you're back."

"It is good to be back," Sol said, as he made his farewells to the women and led Burkhard away to a quieter corner. "Tell me all that I've missed. Life in the mountains is so very dull."

"Dull is something I should like to experience, sometime." Burkhard was large. At one point in time he no doubt had been as strong and muscular as so many Krian men were, but time had taken his strength. It had also taken his sword, after his right hand had been too badly damaged to ever hold one again. But rather than despair, as would have been expected, Burkhard had taken up the robes of a monk and given over to dwelling at the fringes of court life.

Like Grau, he was eccentric enough to be tolerated. And as a wounded soldier, he'd earned a degree of respect. "You've not missed much. The fun doesn't start until everyone is around to watch. What good is being a spectacle if there is no one about to see it? They say Heilwig is finding it harder and harder to hold the Kaiser's attention."

"She is getting on in years," Sol replied levelly. "General von Dresden is beautiful, but there are younger women nearly as beautiful and much more easily manipulated."

Burkhard bobbed his head in a quick nod. "Yes. But he's put himself in rather an awkward position by making his mistress a general. One cannot simply fire the leader of the Saffron. Anyway, they say she hasn't quite lost his attention yet."

"Likely to wake up dead if he tries to invite another woman. The Saffron General would never tolerate that." Burkhard laughed. "Now there is a coliseum battle I should like to see!"

Sol laughed with him. "I'm sure many would be right there with you. My money on the Kaiserin; it's always the quiet ones isn't it?"

"Yes," Burkhard agreed. "Speaking of the quiet ones, they say Egon has not left his rooms since arriving."

"Well, it is not as though he ever does much when he is out of them. That man is as invisible as the Wolf is hard to miss."

Burkhard frowned, his good humor vanishing like the sun behind a cloud. "Yes, the Wolf..."

"Presumed dead, yes?" Sol asked quietly.

"Yes."

Sol looked past Burkhard's shoulder at the crowded room. People smiling. Laughing. Joking and playing and happy as anything.

There was no sign anywhere, save in Burkhard's unhappy face, that one of the four generals was dead. He wondered if that would be his fate, the day he finally died. Would anyone notice? Care? General Sol

deVry was seldom seen on the battlefield; most believed his position to be largely for show. Something to keep the traitor's son out of trouble.

What they didn't know wouldn't hurt him.

"Is there no chance he lived?"

Burkhard shrugged. "It was a Scream that did it. How does one survive that? Even the Illussor bastards themselves cannot escape that spell. Which only goes to prove just how mad they all are. I was going to light a candle for him, on the winter eve. Would you like to attend? I won't take much of your time."

Sol nodded. No man, even the Wolf, should be so ignominiously treated. "I will attend; it is the least the Lord General von Adolwulf deserves. Why is there no ceremony being set for him?"

"That is a question for the Kaiser, isn't it?"

"I suppose it is," Sol replied quietly. "Perhaps he is awaiting proof of the General's demise. Did I mishear when someone said his body had not been among the fallen?"

"There is that," Burkhard conceded. "But still – it would take a miracle to survive a scream."

Sol agreed, keeping his amusement to himself. Screams were not impossible to survive.

The trick for which the Illussor had been named was a spell that allowed the caster to trick his opponent for a certain length of time – that length varying according to skill, circumstances and what exactly he wanted the victim to see. When Illussor focused all their ability together, they could do a great deal of damage.

The worst of this being an illusion of death – all the power focused by one person, who literally made everyone on the field believe they were dead. Real enough everyone died, including the caster and all the men whose power he'd drawn. The spell's only give away was the strange, thin cry made by the caster – brought on by the agony of the spell. It was the Krians who had first dubbed it a scream of death. 'Scream' had stuck.

Salharans could survive it with enough warning and sufficient arcen in their system. The only other ones to survive were those who had been unconscious before the Scream was cast.

According to Tawn, Nameless had likely survived – no doubt burning off all his arcen to do so. He sincerely doubted von Adolwulf had been unconscious in the middle of a battle.

And where was Tawn anyway? Surely it wasn't taking the damnable man *this* long to find a lone, arcen-less soldier in Krian land? If

he didn't move it, the man would die simply from the elements. How hard could it really be, especially for Tawn.

He could not wait to be rid of the damnable man. If it cost him his own place, he would ensure Tawn never became a star in the sky. Not that he thought either of them stood a chance anyway, but for his sister he would make triply sure.

"Is there anything of interest going on tonight?"

"Only the usual antics at supper," Burkhard said. "The last of the soldiers arrived today, so tomorrow will be the Solemn Feast. But tonight? Everyone plans to get drunk and start the roof shuffling." He winked. "I'm sure you'll get quite a few offers, my Lord Grau. Are you going to disappointment the ladies again this year?"

Sol laughed. "Unfortunately, I must. My cousin is in no condition to be left alone. His eyes were ruined in a hunting accident and it is hard for him to learn to live in the dark."

"I see," Burkhard said. "Well, bring him out sometime and we'll do what we can to make things more bearable. Until later, my friend. I must be off."

"Farewell," Sol called after him. Rejoining the throng in the main hall, Sol snagged a servant and gave orders for dinner to be brought to his chambers.

Missions for the evening accomplished, he found he was eager to return to his rooms. Unusual. But as he stepped inside, the sound of not one but *two* voices struck him. His good mood instantly turned into one of white hot rage. "Let. Him. Go." He was across the room in a flash, intending to tear Tawn's head from his shoulders.

But Tawn shoved Iah toward him, forcing Sol to focus on catching him. "Well, well. What have we here?"

"Stay out of my business, Tawn, and I'll stay out of yours."

Tawn approached like a snake in the grass, his bright yellow-orange eyes burning. "The Illussor is my business. You stole him from me. I wondered for a moment if it was you, but I thought no, that can't be. Of what use would an Illussor be to my dear brother-in-law?"

Sol heard Iah start. He wanted to make sure Iah was all right, but the last thing he needed was for Tawn to know that he and Iah were not enemies. "Of course I need him!" he snapped. "How else am I to learn why they attacked the Krians to gain our Nameless brother?"

"Indeed," Tawn said. "Still, he is *my* prisoner. The Brothers were none too pleased to see him gone."

"The Brothers will find something else to occupy themselves," Sol said. "I don't suppose you did your job and brought Nameless with you?"

Tawn grinned, an expression that made Sol want to recoil. "No need. He'll be here shortly." And suddenly Tawn began to laugh.

Sol guided Iah to a chair, then took three steps toward Tawn and backhanded him hard. "Enough."

Tawn touched his cheek and glared hatefully. "One day, dear brother-in-law. One day..."

"Yes, but on that day you will also die – and with my name."

"Like Ariana died with mine?"

Sol punched him, satisfied to feel the crunching of Tawn's nose beneath his fist. "You will not speak my sister's name again."

"I'll speak my dead wife's name all I please," Tawn said in a wet voice, holding his broken nose as blood poured from it, soaking the floor, his shirt, tears pouring from his eyes.

"Get out," Sol said. "Make yourself useful and gather information from the Illussor. Or go back home and let the Brothers deal with you. I am done."

Tawn walked stiffly past him and though Sol tensed for an attack, none came. "I'll be back."

Sol waited several more minutes, then strode over to Iah. "Are you all right?" He touched fingers gently to Iah's throat, which was already showing bruises.

"He's your brother-in-law?" Iah said, voice rough.

"Yes," Sol said. He strode over to the window. "He married my sister when they were both twenty-one. He had recently become a Brother, obtaining his Seven Star from his master, who on the surface was merely a lower politician but was really in charge of the Brotherhood's information network. Tawn and I are probably the best spies in Salhara. It is only a matter of time, now, before he realizes what game I play..."

"I told him nothing," Iah said. "He knows only that you took me away and have been keeping me captive for information. He seemed to believe it."

"Hmm..." Sol said noncommittally. "Thank you. I know you've no reason to trust me..."

Iah stood and made his way slowly to the window, fingers reaching out to grasp Sol's sleeve. "Part of me screams not to trust you. After all, you are a Salharan Brother who plays a Krian very well but claims to be working for Illussor. You seem fully capable of belonging to



any of the three countries. And...would you have left me there, if I had not been useful?"

Sol stared at him, then at the hand on his sleeve. He took it, held it fast in his own. "No. I brought you with me to Kria because I knew you could help, but I would have rescued you regardless. Never would I leave someone at Tawn's mercy. He claimed to love my sister, and she loved him. He gave her a new name, and they asked that I be the one to bestow a new name upon him. It was I who named him Tawn deVry, and welcomed him into our small family."

"But not a year later he was too busy to notice her. He left her alone, ignored her. Even when she fell sick, he did not return home. And my sister, despite it, persisted in loving him. She would never accept that he married her solely for the power of the deVry family. Even without the Seven Star, Tawn is a powerful man. After his work in the field, he will take his place as a Minister of Salhara."

"If he'd come home, my sister might have lived. He didn't. She grew worse and worse. When the fever took her sight, she gave up completely. Three weeks after she went blind, she died, and the last thing she said was his name." Sol let go of Iah's hand, when he realized he held it too hard. His words were barely a whisper. "I wish she'd had your strength."

Iah reached out, tentatively, and touched Sol's face, let his fingers linger there. "I am sorry she did not realize her brother was worth living for."

"Thank you," Sol said, and lifted his own hand to touch the one at his cheek.



## CHAPTER SEVEN

Sol sat up, instantly awake. He looked around the room, and wondered what had woken him. Nothing was amiss. Next to him, Iah was asleep – not soundly, he obviously was troubled by nightmares. But he slept.

Perhaps it was simply that which had woken him. Carefully he reached out and laid a hand flat against Iah's chest, stilling his restless movements.

Iah calmed, relaxed, and after several minutes seemed to be more deeply asleep. Sol sighed and slid from the bed. It was late morning, meaning he had slept far too long. Snow was falling, little more than a light dusting – but that would change before long. He glanced up at the sky, making note of the clouds. Not as bad as they could be, but nothing to scoff at either.

Perhaps the snow would hit early, and bury them before the coliseum fights began. Hopefully it would be his last year to endure such a thing. He loved so many things about the Krian culture – but the coliseum he would never learn to even tolerate.

People milled about in the courtyard below. Noblewomen and men alike dressed in layers of color – the close-fitting bright underclothes and flowing tunics and skirts of darker colors. But still so bright, against the relentless gloom of winter. Soldiers and servants milled about in more somber colors.

Iah stirred in bed, and sat up. His hair was up in every direction, the bandages around his eyes somewhat loose. He yawned, then tilted his head slightly to the left in the way that meant he was listening to assess his surroundings. It never failed to awe Sol, how hard Iah worked and how far he'd come.

Ariana had not even tried. She'd merely cried.

"Fair morning," Sol said quietly.

Iah yawned again. "Fair morning."

"As you're awake, I shall go fetch breakfast. This time of day, it's easier than waiting for breakfast to come to us."

He nodded to a servant who already was already looking hassled, dodging two more as they fought to keep their trays and other burdens balanced while they worked around each other.

"Fair morning, Burkhard." He greeted the monk as he entered the kitchens. "Fancy meeting you here."

Burkhard laughed around a bite of bread smothered in cheese. "And the same to you, Lord Grau. How does the morning find you?"

"Rested. I always detest returning to my estate in the spring, because it is nowhere near as wickedly comfortable as the Winter Palace."

"Wicked indeed," Burkhard said with a snort. "You're about the only one who doesn't get up to wickedness."

Sol laughed and snatched a tray, then began to pile it with food from the trays readied to be carried out to refill the buffet in the main dining hall. He nibbled on a piece of soft, white cheese as he fetched tea and cups. "Don't tell me you're truly a man of the cloth now, Burkhard?"

"Don't be ridiculous. It's just at least I know how to be circumspect. These young ones run around naked between rooms, I swear it. There's not even any sport to it, nowadays."

"You're just old-fashioned, Burkhard. Should find a young miss to show you the modern ways."

Burkhard bit viciously into his bread. "These modern ways are more likely to kill a man than war. Give me mind tricks and pollution to deal with any day."

Sol nipped a bit of sausage and said nothing.

"They're saying we'll have nearly a 1000 for the fights."

"That's an impressive number." Normally the coliseum kept the numbers to about 700 – most simply didn't live long enough to reach the coliseum. Most from neglect, abuse, illness. But more than a few from suicide. Sol suddenly didn't feel so hungry. "Is there a special occasion?"

Burkhard shrugged his wide, bony shoulders. "Not that I'm aware of." He paused to tear into a sausage.

Sol nodded and lifted the finished tray.

"You're going to offend the servants, *Lord* Grau, if you keep doing that yourself."

"I'm a country bumpkin," Sol said with a smile. "I'm not used to all the laziness of the palace, as hard as I try to adjust."

"I see." Burkhard chewed his sausage slowly, and downed it with a swallow of water. "I'm sure the ladies would love to teach you."

Sol looked at him. "If I didn't know any better, Burkhard, I would swear you're trying to push me toward the women."

"Well, it's true there's one that's asked me to make a concerted effort on her behalf."

"No," Sol said, stifling a groan. "Forget it. I'm not interested. And as I said before, this season I've my cousin to take care of. What sort of man leaves a relative in need to go sneaking into a lady's bedchamber?"

"Wouldn't say lady, exactly..." Burkhard muttered. Then he nodded. "Very well, I'll let her know you're already taken." He winked. "Though I thought even in the country they frowned upon being with one's cousin."

Sol rolled his eyes and turned to leave. Burkhard's laughter followed him out. From the kitchens, he turned right to go down the smaller corridors, avoiding the more populated main hallways. But even here people busted about – mostly servants.

Nearly colliding with two particularly harried servants, he still managed to make it to the stairs successfully. But halfway up, he couldn't avoid a young nobleman running like his nether-regions were on fire, sending the tray flying and Sol tumbling, rolling back down the stairs.

Silence fell, then exploded again as he was barraged with apologies and voices asking if he was all right. Sol started to reply, then stopped at the last moment. He went cold.

He'd almost answered in Salharan. What was wrong with him? Well, it didn't help his head felt like he'd overdosed on red arcen *and* alcohol and been woken up at roll call the next morning. "I'm fine," he managed, letting them pick him up and brush him off.

"I'm so sorry!" The young man exclaimed. "I was running late! Are you all right, my lord?"

"I'm fine, I'm fine," Sol reassured gruffly. He turned to a servant. "Would you see that breakfast is brought to my room? For two, please."

"At once, Lord Graul!" Three servants dashed away. Sol shook his head, then thought better of it. He was too old to be falling down staircases. "If you will pardon me, lad, I think I should like to try the stairs again."

The man smiled sheepishly. "I'll be sure to stay off them until you've reached the top, my lord."

"Thank you," Sol said, and smiled briefly.

But barely had he started to climb than a frenzy erupted from the main courtyard. "Tits of the Winter Princess!" Sol swore. "Beg pardon, ladies," he said absently. "What is going on now?"

He shoved past the crowd that had appeared seemingly from nowhere, gaining some height by climbing up on the edge of the marble stairs leading from the palace proper to the main courtyard. "By the Summer Princess..." he barely remembered to say instead of his own exclamations. "No wonder Tawn laughed."

For riding in as though he owned the place, head held high, black cloak a blot of darkness amongst the bright nobles, was the Wolf of Kria himself. What he felt or thought was impossible to gauge. Sol shook his head and looked again. It wasn't the knock of his head against stairs and floor. The Scarlet General was well and truly alive. Iah had been right – if anyone could survive a Scream, it would be the Wolf.

But it wasn't upon the General his eyes lingered. It was the man riding in front of him.

Pale hair, eyes bright yellow even at a distance, and the scowl that never seemed to leave his face. The nameless Brother of the Seven Star.

General von Adolwulf dismounted, sneering as the people jammed in the courtyard backed away. "How nice to see my people missed me," he said, then threw his head back and laughed.

"Von Adolwulf!" A voice cut through the noise, killing it, from high above. Sol looked up, just barely able to see Kaiser Benno on the balcony above. Gray hair though he was only in his mid-forties, but his eyes were as sharp as they'd been when he was a young man who never missed his mark when hunting.

Rumors whispered that lately he preferred the blood of the coliseum. Perhaps that was why the numbers were so much higher this year.

"Kaiser," von Adolwulf replied, and held his right hand, curled in a fist, to his left shoulder in a salute.

"You're alive."

"So it would seem."

They spoke levelly, politely, and the General accorded the Kaiser every measure of respect. But only a fool would miss the fine tension resting the surface. A man famed for his twenty years of service – ten of them as the Scarlet General though all had railed against a man of twenty-six being given such a position.

He had held it, flourished, had held the Regenbogen better than anyone.

Yet no one mourned when he'd been thought dead. No one was happy to see him returned to life.

Why? The question itched at Sol. It mattered not at all to his mission, but still the question burned. Why did a man fight for a country that hated him? A Kaiser that hated him?

And for what reason did a Kaiser keep a man he was rumored to despise so close? Give him power? Why not simply kill him?

The silence stretched a second too long, then the Kaiser's voice boomed out. "Welcome our Scarlet General home!" And the courtyard flooded with cheers and welcomes, but the enthusiasm was stale. Sol could see von Adolwulf was laughing. Then he turned and grasped nameless, sitting silently in the saddle. Whatever he said, Sol could not make it out, it infuriated nameless. Von Adolwulf dragged him from the saddle, nearly letting nameless hit the ground, laughing harder at what were probably curses being hurled up at him.

Not that making him angry was hard to do, Sol recalled.

The crowd parted to let the General and his prisoner – for it was obvious that the Salharan could be nothing else – pass by. His wrists were bound tightly together in front of him, and he stumbled as von Adolwulf dragged him along.

He finally fell as he climbed the stairs. Sol started to help him, then froze, realizing his near error. A Krian civilian would never do such a thing.

Von Adolwulf spun around and stooped, hauling nameless back up. His voice just barely reached Sol's ears as he spoke to his prisoner. "Come, Beraht. We do not want to keep the emperor waiting."

"Yes, we do," was the muttered reply, and then the pair was gone.

The courtyard once more was overwhelmed by the sound of too many voices speaking at once, but emptied quickly as the witnesses fled to share their exciting news with those who had decided to sleep late or eat breakfast.

Sol barely noticed. His mind replied what he'd heard over and over again.

Nameless...had a name. A Krian name. He'd allowed someone to name him. And it was pretty obvious who had done it.

Why in the stars had he allowed the Wolf to give him a name?

Sol felt sick just thinking about it. At least all his names had been given by people he cared about – the Illussor who had rescued him, and were his contacts there. His sister had helped him develop Lord Grau. And his parents had given him his first and dearest name. The one he wished he fit.

But to give someone like the General that much power...Sol thought he would have rather died. He shook his head, storing the thoughts away for later. It wasn't important right now. The Breaker was important, and he'd just walked right past him.

He would have to figure out how to get in contact with him, and bring Iah close enough to tell him if namele—no...if *Beraht* was indeed their Breaker. Head hurting, both from his fall and all the problems suddenly thrown at him, Sol turned and went back to his room.

Dieter sneered at everyone who worked up the nerve to look at him, smirking when they nearly tripped over themselves in their haste to look away.

Caught in the act, every last one of them. He hadn't expected anything less where he was concerned, but the bastards could be wearing some acknowledgment of the loss of his men. *They* weren't hated, they deserved some measure of respect.

Sometimes....

Dieter killed the thought before it could blossom and hauled Beraht forward, resting a hand on his shoulder nearly hard enough to bruise. "You'd do well to trust me when I say you'll be better served by keeping your mouth shut. No one here will be as kind to you as I've been."

"Kind?" Beraht repeated. "I wasn't aware such a word existed in Krian."

"You should," Dieter replied. "You speak it well enough, especially for a filthy Salharan."

Beraht glared. "Fine talk from someone who only speaks his own language."

Dieter laughed, and then they were stepping through the heavy doors into the Kaiser's private chambers.



"General," the Kaiser greeted. On his left was a slender woman in a deep blue skirt and undershirt, overlaid with a dark yellow tunic. Her hair was pulled loosely back, falling softly around her face in a style clearly reminiscent of the statues of the Summer Princess. A stylized sunburst was embroidered with orange thread across the front of her tunic.

On his right were two men. One nearly as large as Dieter, with light brown hair and sharp, narrow blue eyes. He wore dark green with a lighter shade for his tunic, the ivy crest of the Spring Prince stitched in palest green across his chest. The man beside him was dressed in gray and blue, the intricate snowflakes of the Winter Princess across the front of his tunic.

His comrades in arms. Dieter managed not to laugh. He threw Beraht to the ground and bent over in a bow, fist over his heart. "Kaiser. I apologize for my late arrival."

"From what I hear, Lord General, there is a great deal for which you must apologize." Away from his people, the Kaiser's hatred was clear in his voice and the cold way he regarded his returned General. "But first explain why you are dragging around this sad looking mongrel? Salharan, yes? Did he have a traitorous whore for a mother? He almost looks Illussor."

Dieter didn't let his surprise register. "I wouldn't know, Kaiser. This is the man responsible for killing my men. He is my prisoner."

"No, I don't think he is." The Kaiser motioned Heilwig forward; she was moving almost before he'd finished the move. "Take the prisoner, and whatever else he has. General, you are suspended until we can determine your level of responsibility in the events that cost me five hundred of my best soldiers."

The sound of steel against leather was shockingly loud as Dieter drew his sword. Then three more swords were drawn, and three generals faced down one.

Dieter stepped forward, in front of Beraht. "Back away, bitch. And the rest of you. Do you think you stand a chance against me? Sheep to kill a Wolf?" He laughed. "I think not. The prisoner is mine. You cannot touch *anything* of mine until I am dead."

"That can be arranged," Heilwig hissed, bringing her sword up in a quick arc.

But it was blocked almost without effort by Dieter, who knocked it away and then grabbed her by the throat of her tunic. "Whores belong in the bedroom," he hissed. "They do not hold swords." He sent her

stumbling back, then turned to face the remaining two. "Cease. Do you really need to do his work for him?"

"You are treading thin ice, General." But the Kaiser did not seem troubled.

"And it's been breaking beneath me for twenty years," Dieter said. He sheathed his sword. "The prisoner is mine." His fingers lingered on the hilt of his sword. "And it will be mine even when I'm dead."

The Kaiser looked at him hatefully. "Get out. You're suspended until further notice. Be grateful, General, that I don't simply kill you outright."

Dieter said nothing, merely picked Beraht up and strode from the room, his dark cape whirling around him like an angry shadow.

Silence fell wherever he walked, only to burst into noise once he was gone.

Things never changed.

He stifled a sigh as he finally reached his rooms, which he was glad to see had been prepared for him. Recently, but prepared all the same. The servants, at least, knew what they were doing.

"So your own king hates you?" Beraht threw his head back and laughed. "My, my, how interesting."

Dieter threw him to the floor.

Beraht continued to laugh. "Not returning a hero? And suspended?"

"Be grateful," Dieter said. "That I fought to keep you."

"Why should I?" Beraht asked, picking himself up. "And when will you untie me?"

"When you shut your mouth," Dieter snapped. Ignoring him, he strode across the room to his wardrobe. A large hook was affixed to the wall beside; sturdy enough that it held his cloak with no complaint.

His room was simple. Rugs scattered across the floor, all black. So too the hangings over the wall, and the bedcovers. Even the bed itself was carved from a dark wood, blackish-red in the light of the fire and three lamps. The only spot of color was the banner on the wall, red with the triad of leaves of the Autumn Prince stitched in a blazon of orange, red, and gold.

Hanging his cloak up, Dieter sat to remove his high boots and then threw his sword on the bed, then strode through the door way just past the wardrobe.

A proper bathing room. Not the much better public rooms on the ground floor of the palace, but nearly so. If he'd earned nothing else, he'd earned the right to his own bath. Dieter threw his clothes in the

corner and began to scrub off, relishing the hot water readied for rinsing. His hair was washed three times, until he was convinced it was well and truly clean.

Then he moved to the bath in the middle of the room and slid into the near-scalding water, permitting himself to close his eyes for a brief second.

He opened them again and stared up at the ceiling, striving not to linger too long on any one thought.

"So tell me, General – how do you plan to make me suffer my entire life when it's pretty obvious you're not going to have one of your own for much longer."

Dieter laughed. "By leaving you here to survive without me. If you think I am brutal, Beraht, wait until I am dead. Now leave me in peace."

"Untie me."

"When I'm done."

They glared at each other.

Dieter hefted himself out of the tub and strode back into his room, pulling a dagger quickly from within his wardrobe. Turning back around, he sliced the ropes binding Beraht's wrists – then shoved him backwards into the bath.

He slid back into the water, laughing as Beraht struggled up and out. "I hate you," Beraht spat.

"Do you think I care?" Dieter said. "Hate matters little to me. Now bathe properly or get out and leave me in peace." He watched Beraht leave, then settled back down and this time allowed his thoughts to focus.

Suspended. The first move had been made. Benno was still trying to get what he wanted without having to kill him.

After so many years, he was finally falling through the ice. That would make it more difficult to figure out why the Illussor had been after Beraht.

*Did he have a traitorous whore for a mother? He almost looks Illussor.*

How had he not seen it? He'd thought Beraht's hair surprisingly pale. Dieter frowned. But if his mother had dallied with an Illussor soldier, what of it? He would not be the first such child.

But perhaps that explained why he was able to so easily kill his men. Dieter did not deny the level of skill required to execute such a skillful shadow attack. That still did not explain why all his men had died for the sake of one enemy.

Or why the enemy had Screamed. Why risk killing the man they were after?

Questions and questions, and not enough time to acquire the answers. It was tiring. Twenty years he had been walking along the fragile ice, and now it was cracking too quickly for him to even avenge his men.

Dieter climbed out of the bath and dressed before the heat of the bath could fade completely. All black, and his crest in red. If no one else mourned his men, at least he would. "You're looking a little wet. You should get a bath, the water is quite hot."

Beraht glared at him. "I'm really going to enjoy watching the way your people loathe and despise you."

"It gets rather boring," Dieter replied. "But I guess you don't have much else to do with your time."

"Even if I did, I would put it aside for the chance to watch you get your comeuppance."

Dieter yanked him from his seat and caught his jaw with his other hand, squeezing tight. "Your mouth will be the death of you, Salharan. If you are hoping that your mockery will leave a mark, you may as well give up. The only one who will be bearing marks is you, and you will have many of them if you do not shut up." He let Beraht go, and watched as he stood up.

The man was up and down more often than anyone he could remember. He almost admired the tenacity – everyone else broke so easily. At times it even seemed that Beraht was not scared of him, though other times he saw the man struggle not to recoil.

"Get washed. If you're going to continue to plague me—"

"No one said you had to take me prisoner."

"Then you will at least be clean. I can still send you to the dungeons. They do not come with fires and hot baths and blankets. Nor food, really."

Mention of blankets had Beraht flicking his eyes toward the one bed in the room. "You are not making me sleep with you again."

Dieter laughed. "You are welcome to sleep on the floor."

Beraht stormed off to bathe, and Dieter went into the hall and caught a passing servant. "See that clothes are fetched for my prisoner." He considered the servant. "About your size. Taller, more slender. Also have food brought – and if I so much as glimpse a jug of wine, it will be smashed across your head. Be quick." He let the man go and watched him run off.

He moved to the bed and retrieved his sword, then removed a bundle from a chest at the foot of his bed. Sitting on the floor beside the fire, he began to clean sword, sheath and belt.

A knock at the door interrupted him, and he barked for the servants to enter, not looking up from his work.

"Dieter?"

His head jerked up. "Burkhard?"

"You really are alive!"

Dieter returned to cleaning his sheath. "Yes."

"I am glad."

"Surely you're not so hard pressed for companions, Burkhard, that you would come to me? What do you want?"

Burkhard sat down and regarded him with a frown. "I'm glad you're alive."

"So you said. I don't see what good it does you." Dieter finished cleaning his belt and packed the supplies away. Standing, he returned them to the chest and then picked up his sword from where it lay beside the fire. He stared at it, bending it so the fire set off the shimmering from deep within. With a barley-restrained snarl, he sheathed it. The firelight lingered on the blood-red stone in the pommel, making it burn and glow.

"Why must you always be this way?" Burkhard asked with a weary sigh.

Dieter shot him a scathing look. "Be what way? I am what I am. Whatever it is you are hoping to find, old man, you are looking in the wrong place."

"You didn't have to become this."

"Get out. I have enough to handle without the ramblings of an old cripple."

Burkhard's face tightened, and he stood stiffly. "As you like, Dieter."

"I do have a request that might amuse you," Dieter said as he reached the door.

"What might that be?" Burkhard asked cautiously.

Dieter saw movement from the corner of his eyes. "My prisoner. I will be busy in the coming days. I want you to show him around, acquaint him with the palace."

"What?" Burkhard strode back over to the fireplace. "He's a *prisoner*. Prisoners don't get 'shown around,' Dieter."

"This one does. By my order and I don't give a damn if Benno himself tries to countermand it. Until I'm dead, he is mine. I want you to show him around, make him familiar."

"Why?"

Dieter grinned. "I want to make him Krian. You will help me."

"As you like, Dieter." Burkhard shook his head. "You and your mad schemes."

"They have always worked."

"Yes," Burkhard said. "I suppose they have. Very well, I will come by tomorrow and show him around. But if he tries to escape, it is not on my head."

"He has a tendency to be mouthy, but he won't run. If he gets too out of line, let me know."

"Very well. Will I see you at lunch or dinner?"

Dieter shook his head. "Maybe lunch tomorrow. For now I intend only to sleep."

Burkhard laughed. "Until tomorrow then." He sketched a brief bow and then was gone.

"You want to make me Krian?" Beraht laughed. "I'll kill myself first."

"No, you won't. *Beraht*." Dieter said it slowly, with emphasis. Like the name was precious, except for the cold, mocking undertone. "Nor will you kill me. Should I die, you will still carry my name, won't you?" He laughed.

A knock at the door and he stalked to open it, startling the servants badly enough they nearly dropped their burdens. He saw Beraht run back into the bathing room, obviously chased there by modesty.

Food was set up on a table tucked against the wall left of the fireplace. Dieter sat and began to help himself. The tea, when he poured it, was dark, strong and sweet. Exactly as he liked it. Despite his efforts to stay awake, and the revitalizing tea, Dieter felt his eyes grow heavy.

Beraht, when he finally reemerged in black breeches and a red tunic – Dieter was amused – that nearly fit him, he looked as tired as Dieter felt. His pale hair was wet, and clung tightly to his head. He sat down with a thump at the table and began to eat without enthusiasm. "You're not going to make me Krian."

"But you'll never be Salharan again either. Best get used to this place, because you will never leave it."

"After your king kills you, there will be little to keep me here."

Dieter laughed.

Beraht subsided into a sullen silence. When he finished eating, he shoved away from the table and crossed over to the bed. He climbed into the right side, glaring as Dieter smirked.

"So you decided against the floor then?"

"As you said, I've no interest in dying. Not until you take my name away, and not until I see you broken."

Dieter shrugged. "Then you may go wait with the rest of them and live a life of disappointment. No man will ever 'break' me, least of all a filthy Salharan."

"Yet you sleep with me."

"There is an old story, in Kria, about two men. Bitter, bitter enemies, and one day they found their fighting had driven them to the coldest parts of the country. They found an old house, and between them their cloaks were sufficient for warmth – but only if they shared. Neither wanted the other to die of cold, because then they would lose the privilege of killing the other. So they called a truce for one night. When they woke the next morning, they continued to fight."

Beraht rolled his eyes. "How very depressing that my life has become the Krian concept of a good story." He turned over, putting his back to Dieter.

"I would not expect a weak Salharan to understand."

A soft snore was Beraht's only reply. Dieter swallowed the last of his tea and then extinguished the lamps. Then he locked the door and retrieved his sword. He climbed into bed, sword beside him, but as tired as he was it was still some time before sleep finally claimed him.





## CHAPTER EIGHT

"Esta, I have no idea what you're talking about."

Esta folded her arms across her chest. Her quite lovely chest, which was entirely too visible in her pale blue gown. Matthias frowned. "If you're going to lie, Prince, you had better find someone else to play the fool. Because I know all your tricks."

"Yes, that's rather annoying of you." Matthias grinned, grateful that his desk was between them. "But honestly, I swear it. I said no such thing. I probably just made a joke about it, and everyone blew it out of proportion."

Esta turned away, tossing a last warning glare over her shoulder. "If you don't kill it, Matthias, you are going to find yourself doing without me entirely for the yuletide ball."

"Yes, Duchess." Matthias shook his head as she left.

Stubborn girl.

"Your courtship leaves much to be desired." Kalan said from where he'd been leaning against the wall. "Honestly. I think the frogs have us in enough trouble. Why do you always have to go enraging her further?"

Matthias rolled his eyes. "I seriously doubt she's holding boyish pranks against us. And it's fun. She wouldn't take me seriously if I was nice."

"Clearly you know even less about women than I thought. And I don't think she's taking you seriously now. But I forget you see things very selectively where she's concerned." Kalan pushed off the wall and strode over to the desk. "Flowers will get you a lot further than whatever it is you're doing now. And you could have tried asking her to be the Grand Lady."

"No," Matthias replied slowly, as if he spoke to a simpleton. "Flowers would be thrown back at me, with the water dumped over my head to finish. And if I'd asked she could have said no."

"She's saying no anyway," Kalan pointed out.

Matthias grinned. "Yeah, but her weakness is duty. By the time of the ball she'll feel obligated. She'll ignore me for the first hour or two, but she always caves. Just watch. I might not know women much, but I know Esta."

"It's your neck," Kalan said, and dropped the matter. He strolled to the door and locked it, then locked the room adjoining the small private office to Matthias's bedroom.

"So what news do you have for me? Something of interest, I hope."

"Interesting, indeed." Kalan said. He stood in front of the desk and crossed his arms, a stark contrast to the prince. Where Matthias was handsome, Kalan was severe. Hard lines, dark hair and eyes. "Spiegel sent a missive to his border contacts."

Matthias's brows went up, and he set the papers he'd been perusing aside. He began to toy idly with a letter opener. "He's not been heard from for awhile."

Kalan shrugged. "I'm sure he plays a delicate game, if he is indeed Salharan. It still unsettles me to work with a man I've never seen, but he has never once given me reason to doubt him."

"What has your Spiegel to say?"

"That he has found the Breaker."

Matthias dropped the letter opener. "What!"

Kalan repeated himself. "He says he is working on bringing him to us, but it will take time."

"Where are they?"

"He didn't say. And there's something else."

"What?"

"Spiegel says he's got an Illussor with him...do you want to guess who?"

Matthias was silent a moment, then drew a sharp breath as realization dawned. "Iah!"

"Right the first time," Kalan said with a smile. "So it looks like there will be someone to help Esta kill you at Yuletide after all."

Instead of laughing, however, Matthias frowned. He picked the letter opener up again. It was silver, imprinted with the King's Eye. "How can an Illussor hide undetected in Kria? Even for Iah, that would be impossible."

Kalan shrugged. "Spiegel does not give me details, for it is details which get people killed. But obviously they are managing."

Matthias did not look convinced. "I do not like trusting the fate of my country to a man who by all rights should be our enemy."

"We should be grateful he is not, and stop questioning. Too many questions leads to unhappy answers."

"But if we ask too few, we will learn the answers we need too late!" Matthias's face clouded, as he thought of his brother.

Dead in all but fact. Nothing but a power source. Alone and cold below the ground. If he had only pressed harder, perhaps Benji would not be lost.

"We did the best we could," Kalan said softly. His expression matched Matthias's. "It was Benji's choice. All we can do is keep our promise. Be grateful, at least, that your father knew it had to end. Think of where we would be if it was only us."

Matthias nodded stiffly.

"And Spiegel aside, we have always needed the enemy to save us."

"That doesn't mean I have to like it." Matthias rubbed his forehead. "Though I shall probably have to turn to my enemies for after the Breaking as well."

Kalan shrugged. "I think everyone would agree that at some point the enmity has to end. Shouldn't peace be our ultimate goal?"

"Yes, Duke." Matthias smiled. "You have made your point." He turned to look out the window, at the falling snow. White filled the world. "Send men to all the border crossings. When Spiegel crosses, I want him escorted here with all due haste."

"Yes, Highness." Kalan responded. "I suppose we should be getting on with business, then."

Matthias made a face and stood. "They'll come and find us, else." He grabbed his jacket from the back of the chair and slid it on, smoothing down the dark blue fabric and fastening the silver frogs. Adjusting the silver-trimmed cuffs, Matthias combed his fingers through his hair and then slowly limped around the desk to join Kalan.

"Cold getting to you?" Kalan asked idly.

"Yes," Matthias said. He grimaced at his leg, but said nothing more.

Boys' games, climbing what they should not be climbing. A stupid dare, a stupid cliff. The only intelligent thing he'd done that day was somehow manage to break the worst of his fall and that had been dumb luck.

It had saved his life, but not his leg. Esta had flayed him alive for a day straight. Afterwards, she'd ignored all of them – even Iah – for a solid week.

After that, they'd stopped playing games. Kalan had begun to move toward the road that was even now taking him toward becoming the Minister of the Treasury. Iah, only a few years after the incident, had surrendered his title to join the army.

He's settled to his own duties. Watched his brother die, watched his wither, his father wither, his mother die...a friend gone to war, with so many other men. Kalan developing an edge he'd never had growing up.

Esta, who strove to dance her misery away. While he could only watch.

If inviting the enemy in was what it took to put everything back the way it should be, then he would do so.

"We can't tell Esta, can we?" Mathias asked.

The question was rhetorical, but Kalan answered anyway. He looked bored as they walked, picking imaginary lint from his jacket. Any who saw them would assume the prince and his closest friend were discussing the tedious things which royalty must discuss. "No. Do you want to see what would happen to her, should something go awry? Her burdens are enough. Better to think Iah quite likely dead than to tell her he is alive...only to have to break the bad news a second time."

"I hope he's all right."

Kalan shrugged, but his dark grey eyes revealed his worry. "It's Iah. That bastard always had uncanny luck. Do you remember the time we ran off to the lake?"

"Yes!" Matthias laughed. "Father sent the guard to find us, and we all got dragged home half-naked and soaking wet – and Iah was there in his bedroom. Perfectly dry and looking as though he and his damnable book hadn't moved all night. He never did tell us how he did it."

Kalan grinned. "Exactly. So there's no reason to worry. Leave it to Iah to wind up crossing paths with Spiegel. Uncanny luck."

"You do have a point." Matthias smiled, but it faded as they reached the Hall of Ministry. Where most of the castle was done in soft,

welcoming colors, decorated with colored glass or bright paintings, the Hall of Ministry was a study in stern. Browns and creams, accented with gold. Austere paintings of past kings and ministers were the only decoration.

The Twelve Ministers of Illussor had long ago decided that the heir and his companion were buffoons destined to ruin the kingdom.

He and Kalan, the only two in their circle of friends to move toward politics – he never got why Kalan did it willingly – had decided at about the same time that the Ministers needed to develop a sense of humor.

Stalemate had been called when the King grew too weak to keep up with all his duties. If not for the restrictions that limited the use of magic inside the castle, he had no doubt something unpleasant would have occurred long ago.

Their retirement couldn't come soon enough. And minus a few, he had their replacements all set – getting them appointed by popular vote shouldn't be a problem either.

But he'd let the nobles play those games by themselves. His favoritism extended only to one, and Kalan had earned that partiality thrice over. "So how will it play out today?"

Kalan drummed his fingers against his cheek. "The usual. We say one thing and they disagree out of spite. It's no way to run a country."

"They're just pissy because we're winning the debate to cut back participation in the war." Matthias sighed and took his seat at the head of the table. The Ministers had not yet shown. He was long used to the blatant show of disrespect.

That was all right. When they woke up one morning no longer capable of using their magic, they would be as quick as everyone else to listen to the only ones who seemed to understand what was going on.

Because only a select few understood what the Breaker truly was. Even fewer knew that they were searching for something. Anyone with Illussor magic would feel the presence of the Breaker, but they wouldn't understand what they felt.

Soldiers appointed the task of searching for the Breaker knew only that they must find him – at all costs. Matthias found it harder and harder to sleep with each man that died looking for someone that may or may not exist.

But now it seemed all the sacrifice had been worth it. He hoped those who had died agreed.

He hoped his people would forgive him.

"Tawn."

Tawn sketched a bow, and said nothing.

"What happened to you?"

His yellow eyes smoldered with anger. He lifted fingers to touch his nose but stopped just short of doing so. It still hurt too much, as did the bruises around his eyes. "A family quarrel," he managed, voice awkward and ridiculous.

The three men gathered around a large, heavy oak table chuckled. "So what news does Brother Sol have for us?"

Tawn bit back a curse and forced himself to speak, hating the sound of his voice. "He bid me tell you that there is little information to be had from the Krians about the fate of the Scarlet. But you'll be pleased to know that General Dieter von Adolwulf, though alive, has been suspended."

The men looked at each other. "That's interesting," said the man with his back to a massive fire place. He did not appear to be bothered by his close proximity to the flames. "A drastic move, to suspend their best general. Even if he did err..." Even sitting, his height was obvious. So too his severe thinness; almost as if he were starving. His eyes were dark red, skin pale.

To his left was a man who could not sit still, as if he expected to have to run at any moment. His skin was unusually dark, and it made his orange eyes eerily bright. He laughed. "How fortuitous for us."

"Yes," Tawn agreed. "With Von Adolwulf out of the picture, and I've no doubt he will be, the disputed lands will be easily taken."

The last man sneered, but the motion dissolved into a coughing fit. He dabbed his lips with a folded cloth; it came away spotted with red, and the simple motion sent his hands to trembling. He was pale, sickly, and his eyes looked black. "Don't be hasty, Ormin. We still have three other Generals to contend with. The Cobalt and Verdant are nothing to be sneered at."

"No, but the Lady General von Dresden might be bought." Tawn laughed, a sound that made even the men at the table shudder. "She seeks to be favored anew. Come spring, do not be surprised if von Dresden is sent to watch the Western border, while the Verdant General is sent south to the Disputed Lands."

Ormin closed his orange eyes, bowing his head in thought. "Yes, I could see them playing it that way. The Cobalt General is too good at watching the Eastern border. We cannot get men through there without paying too high a price."

"DeVry has no trouble."

"The General has his father's skills."

Tawn glowered at the mention of Sol.

"So it would seem our patience is at last paying off."

"We shall see," the old, sickly man said. He started coughing again.

Tawn hid a smirk. "Do my lords have orders?"

"You play the humble servant poorly, Tawn." The man with red eyes looked at him in contempt. "And you have not finished your report. Do that, while you feel like pretending to be meek."

"Yes, Lord Tiad." A pause. "What would you like me to report?"

"Tawn!" The sickly man managed to say.

"Lord Jaspar." Tawn bowed again, yellow-brown eyes flashing. "As I said, Sol has nothing to report on the fate of the Scarlet. He says answers will be best found at the source. The Krians know as much as we about the Deceivers."

Jaspar grimaced. "No one knows anything!"

Tiad shrugged. "What do you expect from a country of people you cannot look in the eye?"

Tawn started to sneer, but thought better of it as pain lanced through his face. "Eye contact is not required to bespell a victim. Only eyes are required, and if you sneak up from behind...well, they never know what hit them and destroy their eyes, do they?" His eyes burned bright yellow.

Jaspar gave a raspy laugh. "The arcen has you well and strong doesn't it, Brother Tawn? Or did your brother get your ire up and now you've no one upon whom to vent it."

"I am as I have always been, Lord Jaspar." Tawn said "Ever your humble servant."

Tiad grunted. "Enough, Tawn. And speaking of Deceivers – did you ever reacquire our missing captive?"

"No, my lords. Be it his brothers or a traitor in the ranks who took him, I have not yet located him."

The men exchanged murmurs. "It's a pity," Ormin said at last. "That we cannot get anyone into Illussor. Everything we've tried has failed miserably."

"At least they've failed just as frequently. They have illusions, but arcen is nothing to sneer at."

Tawn laughed softly to himself, regarding the men before him with contempt they did not notice. He would have their position someday, but he would not be them. Arcen was a tool; these men had allowed it to become the master. As he watched, they began to twitch and tire and grow irritable. And they'd only been without a dose for an hour.

Jaspar would not live much longer. The arcen was killing him as surely as it had once made him the strongest mage in the country.

The mighty were falling.

"I can get into Illussor," he declared, breaking into their nattering.

Ormin laughed at him. "Ridiculous. Even with cleansers, one look at your eyes would give you away. Arcen stains, Tawn. Especially when you go too far, which you have done."

"Am I not a deVry?" Tawn asked, baring his teeth. "And I've more skills besides. Let me try. At worst, I die."

"You're too valuable to lose, Tawn." Tiad laughed. "But you are deVry, that's true. The equal of your brother, easily. Though you could stand to learn a thing or two about obedience from him."

"Obedience is for those who cannot think for themselves. I do what my Brothers need; there is no cause for complaint."

Jaspar waved him off. "Be gone. If you want to tackle the Illussor, go ahead. But you are wasting your time and skill. Such foolishness will not get you the positions I know you are angling for, Tawn. I am not dead yet, and age has not made me stupid. Nor does thirty four make you wise."

"Perhaps," Tawn said. "My Lords." He gave a brief bow, then turned on his heel and departed.

The hallway was dark. Few torches lit the western wing of the castle; the myriad guests preferred their identities be as hard to discern as possible.

Tawn blended easily into the wavering shadows cast by flickering torchlight. The faintest shreds of whispering voices reached his ears, but he brushed them aside.

His finger hovered just in front of his nose, eyes flashing bright yellow before settling to smoldering amber. He remembered the pain, and all the blood. Even now it hurt every time the wind rose up. "Bastard," he hissed.

*Sol.*



Though he should have been on guard. Well, he'd have the last laugh. Sol was up to something. The bastard was always up to something. Absurdly accurate, the things said about deVrys and scheming. And the man was far too cozy in his Krian skin to be trusted. Next he'd be using a sword.

But Sol was the least of his concerns. Illussor was his destination now. They were the only problem still remaining. By next winter the Krians would be finished, ruined from the inside out.

Unless von Adolwulf managed to survive. Tawn smirked, recalling all that he had overheard.

Unlikely. The Scarlet General would be dead in a matter of weeks, if not days. Salhara had been trying to kill him for more than a decade, with no success. Spell after spell had failed, for reasons both expected and incomprehensible. But it little mattered now, for his own Kaiser was arranging his death.

Tawn laughed, making a nearby guard jump. He strode from the castle and into the courtyard where his horse waited, everything packed and ready to go.

Illussor was the last threat. A reclusive country that seemed to fight the war for no clear reason. And they had wanted Nameless. Tawn threw his head back and laughed. No – they had wanted Beraht.

He was going to find out why. One eye at a time.



## CHAPTER NINE

Von Adolwulf was hot. Beraht supposed he really shouldn't be surprised – the man raged while he was awake, it seemed perfectly in keeping with him to be hot while he slept as well.

Throwing off the blankets, Beraht slid out of bed and enjoyed the chill dominating the room. Padding over the window, he pulled back the tapestry.

Night. Pitch black. Not a single star to be seen. He couldn't see anything beyond what little was revealed by the torches scattered about the castle. Soldiers on duty. A man who walked like he was guilty of something.

A dog shuffled through the courtyard, no doubt looking for scraps or something equally interesting.

No stars. No shadowed faces slinking through carefully darkened corridors looking for men who would do whatever was asked if the price was right. Men who were dying, unable or unwilling to give up the very thing that was killing them. Jaspar, who was only fifty but looked twice that on a good day. Ormin and Tiad would not be far behind him. Beraht slid down the wall and stretched his legs out, letting his hands lie in his lap. He lifted one to touch the skin just beneath his eyes. Yellow, he knew. Bright yellow. Too much further and he would need arcen simply to function.

Beraht curled his hands into fists. The need clawed at his mind still, a deep ache in his body for a burn of which it had long been deprived. Better than anything alcohol could do, and sweeter than the finest dessert. It was said after a point even sex became bland alongside it. But the need was fighting a losing battle, because in the heart of Kria he was as likely to find arcen as he was another Salharan.

He felt empty without it. Like some piece of him had been cut away. A voice whispered that it was a dead limb best lost, but Beraht shoved the words ruthlessly aside. Without arcen he was nothing. No longer a soldier. No longer a Brother.

And with his name given by an enemy, no longer truly Salharan.

*Did he have a traitorous whore for a mother? He almost looks Illussor.*

Beraht snorted at the thought. Absurd. He'd purposely forgotten most of his childhood, but he remembered the village. Far to the east, near the coast. Nowhere near the Disputed Lands, or any of the other borders.

And pale hair wasn't unique to the Illussor. Only their strange eyes, flashing like mirrors whenever they used magic.

Similar, he'd noticed before, to the way arcen-eyes seemed to glow. But Illussor eye color didn't change with addiction. If he ever wanted to recall the true color of his eyes he would have to never touch arcen again.

But he'd always liked them arcen-touched. Arcen-tainted, some said. Those with homes. Those with families. Those who weren't made to kill to earn a name. Beraht drew one leg up against his chest and propped his chin on it.

The room grew uncomfortably cold as his overheated body finally cooled. Beraht didn't move.

So von Adolwulf planned to leave him here to rot. It sounded much like what the Brothers would do. Except for the part where the Brothers would have him screaming in pain right now. Which left him to wonder morosely what von Adolwulf was plotting.

Stars above, why hadn't he just stayed in the village?

Because he hadn't wanted to be Nameless. He'd begged and pleaded and worked until his hands bled, hoping to earn a Name. It had taken him a year to reach the capital, to join the army. Because they would give him clothes, food, a place...but not a name. Four other nameless he'd known, then. All of them dead now. Two in the war.

Curse the stars and damn them too. May they all fall to the earth and die.

He was starting to shiver. Despite the thick tapestry – though could you call it that when it was black and nothing more? – a steady draft slunk into the room and chilled everything it touched.

Stars, how did the Krians endure this year after year? The gloom was enough to drive a man insane, if the cold didn't simply kill him first. Only Krians would consider this home. Surely the Illussor didn't have it this bad?

On the bright side, if things got too unbearable he could simply go outside and freeze to death. It probably wouldn't take long.

Beraht looked murderously toward the bed. But that wouldn't be an option until he was nameless again. He'd spent his whole life trying to obtain a name – one that meant something to someone.

He killed the thought before it grew strong enough to send him plummeting back into the misery that had gotten him here in the first place.

Reluctantly he stood. Freezing to death was an option for the future, not the present. Grimacing at von Adolwulf's back, Beraht slid back under blankets that were now invitingly warm.

"Were you debating between attacking me and jumping out the window?"

Beraht started, and immediately resented von Adolwulf for it. "Neither. Were you hoping for an excuse to beat me again?"

"I was hoping to sleep a night without interruption." Von Adolwulf sat up, little more than a slightly different shade of dark in the black room. "Perhaps I should have made you sleep on the floor."

"You're welcome to move there yourself," Beraht said. "Pardon me for finding this entire situation a little too awkward to sleep well." He rolled over and tugged the blankets up over his head. Already it was getting too hot again. "Too hot. Too cold. Can't you damned Krians learn the art of a comfortable medium?"

"Perhaps Salharans are simply weak." Von Adolwulf turned away.

Beraht made a face at what he thought was von Adolwulf's back. "At least we don't sleep with our swords in place of lovers."

"You have no idea what you're talking about, Salharan. And it is no different than taking an extra dose of arcen before bedding down. Now shut up or you will find yourself sleeping on the floor. Naked."

Beraht started to reply – then for once thought better of it. If there was one thing that had been made clear ever since his capture, it was that von Adolwulf did not make idle threats.

Come morning, he found the blankets were not too horrible a thing to have. "Why is it so damned cold!"

Von Adolwulf laughed at him. "Weak Salharan."

"This from the man who keeps five blankets on his bed."

"Makes it harder to determine where exactly I am."

Beraht mulled over that. "How very sad that you feel threatened in your own home. I'd feel sorry for you, but I've no doubt you deserve it." He threw back the blankets, determined, and immediately regretted it. Stars how did they do it? It would take a lot more than anyone could – or would – give him to make him live in a country like this for the rest of his life. He stalked across the room to the table, and sat down to pull on the boots that were all that remained of his own belongings.

There was a knock at the door. Von Adolwulf moved to open it, and stood back to admit the old man from the night before. Burkhard, he recalled.

"Good morning, Dieter." Burkhard dared a smile, which von Adolwulf did not return. "I was surprised you summoned me. Feeling rested?"

Von Adolwulf nodded. "Take him. Do whatever you feel. No one is to touch him. If you have problems," he turned and looked at Beraht as he spoke. "Send for me."

Beraht ignored them both and finished lacing up his knee-high boots. "So what tortures are planned for me today?"

"A tour." Burkhard eyed him pensively, then turned back to Dieter. "Are you sure this is a good idea?"

"I'm sure it's a better idea not to question my orders," Dieter replied. He lifted his cloak from the wall and swung it over his shoulders, then stalked across the room. Beraht didn't struggle when von Adolwulf grabbed his chin and forced his face up, though his grip was hard enough he could already feel bruises forming.

He barely noticed them anymore. "So what are my orders?"

"Behave," von Adolwulf said. "Or I'll give you a taste of what being a prisoner normally means."

Beraht grunted as von Adolwulf roughly let him go. "So what does one do, exactly, when one is a suspended and universally hated general?" He smirked as Dieter stiffened, but it turned to a frown when he realized no other reaction was forthcoming. "Bastard," he muttered softly in Salharan.

The door slammed as von Adolwulf left.

"So," Beraht said into the silence, regarding his keeper with disinterest. He looked religious, but there was a definite look of old soldier about him, right down to the nasty scar that spelled out quite neatly why he was no longer in the army "Is this where you show me around like a good little lackey and then we take me to the 'special' room and I get thrashed to a bloody pulp?"

Burkhard regarded him coolly. Beraht felt suddenly like a green recruit who had succeeded in pissing off his Captain. He'd done it rather often. "The General—"

"Suspended General."

"Has ordered you're not to be harmed. I will carry out his orders."

Beraht snorted but said nothing. The game was all too familiar. Unfortunately his last beating had been Salharan in nature. A magic trouncing was, he imagined, quite a bit different from a Krian beating.

"Come along...do you have a name, Salharan?"

He flinched. "Beraht," he said. Lying was not something one did with names.

"Beraht." Burkhard considered him, and again Beraht felt as though he were a fresh recruit under the eye of his Captain. "I see."

Beraht didn't bother to ask 'see what.' Burkhard wouldn't be forthcoming for answers. "So what am I to see first, Burkhard?"

"Your Krian isn't bad for a Salharan," Burkhard said, ignoring the question. "Where did you learn to speak it?"

"War," Beraht said.

Burkhard nodded. "Come. I want a good breakfast if I am to be forced to this ridiculous task. The Autumn Prince had best remember this when my leaf falls from the tree..."

Stifling a sigh of his own, Beraht followed him out into the hall.

He glared at every single person who stared at them. Most looked away. A few started toward their swords before a gesture from Burkhard stilled them. If he was going to be forced to endure this ridiculous form of torture, then he was going to make sure everyone suffered with him. Though he was secretly relieved when they bypassed the too-crowded dining hall and went straight into the kitchens.

He had to give von Adolwulf credit. However begrudgingly. This was torture. He hoped the bastard was suffering just as miserably wherever he was. A plate was set before him at the table and Beraht made himself eat.

The food he'd eaten while they'd traveled had not been terribly appetizing. But if there was one thing all soldiers had in common no matter what their country of origin, it was bad food.

This wasn't bad. A little heavy on the seasonings, but heartier than Salharan fare. He guessed even Krians couldn't screw everything up.

"Lord Grau!" Burkhard crowed. "Fair morning!"

Beraht looked up and watched the new arrival with mild interest. Just how common was it for the gentry to visit the kitchens directly? But a longer look said this one wasn't true nobility – he looked more like a country bumpkin. Though so far as he knew, they didn't visit the kitchens either if servants were available to do the hard work for them.

He listened to their conversation, but the Krian they spoke was too fast for him to keep up with. And, he realized, it was still nothing like what he'd heard von Adolwulf speak to the bandit. Perhaps that was something crude, used only by bandits and bastards. He bit hard into a piece of bread, surprised to find that it was slightly sweet.

Lord Grau said something which set Burkhard laughing. Grau turned to him. "Do my eyes deceive me, Burkhard, or is that Lord General von Adolwulf's prisoner?"

"Your eyes read right. Dieter bid me show him around." Burkhard shrugged. "I couldn't tell you why."

"One never knows what the Wolf is thinking," Grau said. "So what are you planning to do?"

Burkhard shrugged. "Show him around. Feels a bit silly, but orders are orders." He thought a moment. "Perhaps to the yards. Show him the Krian steel that always defeats Salharan pollution."

Beraht bit back a reply.

Lord Grau laughed. "Just be careful not to show him too much, Burkhard. If he slips away, he'll take our secrets with him." He snapped his fingers suddenly. "How could I forget? Is it true they've suspended the Lord General von Adolwulf?"

Burkhard's face clouded. "Yes."

"I am sorry for you," Grau said gently. "For whatever reason, I know you do not hate the man. I'm sure he'll be reinstated. Where would the Regenbogen be without the Scarlet Wolf?"

"That is true," Burkhard agreed, but his voice was full of doubt.

Beraht tried to keep his mouth shut and failed. "It would be given to those who would actually use it, instead of being soaked in blood because the Krians are too damn greedy to share what they don't use."

Burkhard eyed him. "It is our land."

"Che," Beraht said, and fell silent.



A crash broke off whatever remained of the argument. Burkhard spun around, then immediately rushed over to help the maid who had dropped her burden all across the kitchen.

Beraht noticed Lord Grau wander near and help himself to a small hunk of soft, white cheese. He focused on his plate.

"You have a name, Brother."

The Salharan words made Beraht choke, and he quickly picked up a nearby glass of water to avoid anyone noticing. He flicked his eyes toward Grau, and they widened in shock to notice the telltale burn behind brown eyes.

Arcen. Just the slightest bit. Probably only a sip. Enough to upset a maid's tray from across the room. And then he burned with shame, to realize that a Brother had discovered his shame. "Yes," he said softly, looking at his food.

"Why?"

"I did not want to die." He tore a piece of bread into small shreds. "Who?"

A barely audible laugh. "I am offended, lieutenant. You once fought beneath my banner."

Beraht nearly choked on his food again. "General deVry!" he hissed.

"Yes," Sol answered. "And we've much to discuss. But later." He finished filling two plates with food as Burkhard returned to them. "Good luck, Burkhard." Grau clapped him on the shoulder. "Be steady. Spring always follows winter."

Burkhard stared at Beraht, who glared back. "Yes, but I sense this winter is going to be especially long."

"You have no idea," Beraht muttered, and went back to eating.

His mind was racing however. What was General deVry doing here? He was a spy?

But suddenly it made sense. The deVry family was in disgrace ever since the General's father had been found guilty of treason. And he'd known deVry was a Seven Star. Of course they would put him to such work – who better to shame than a man who already suffered?

Seven to watch the house. Seven to watch the field. Seven to watch the neighbors.

Except General Sol deVry had always appeared to be one of the seven on the field. But such deception would be perfectly in keeping with the Brothers. His shoulders hunched unconsciously. A painful reminder that he wasn't a Brother. He'd known they'd only sent him off to die and

take as many Scarlet as possible with him. Which had only made him determined to prove them all wrong.

Another hard dose of reality. Beraht shoved away what remained of his food. "Well, keeper. How about those yards?"

"Dieter was right," Burkhard said slowly. "You have a mouth on you."

"Just tell him to beat me," Beraht said. He found suddenly he was beyond caring. Let von Adolwulf do whatever he wanted.

Because unwanted he might be, but General deVry had just made his presence known. And said they had much to discuss. Which meant he was going to do something to help. He hoped.

"I will, be assured." Burkhard finished his own plate and then led the way from the kitchen. "This way." He led the way through the halls, and Beraht continued to glare people down.

Though he really should remember that without arcen, he had no real idea how to fight. Minimal practice with a short sword would be little more than a joke against a Krian soldier. Stars, even the nobles could probably fight better than he.

Not once since he'd left home had he felt so inadequate. Even among the Brothers, it was acknowledged he knew his way around magic. Who else could have killed so many Scarlet alone! In one night! And with a single dose of yellow. He hadn't needed to stray anywhere near orange.

The clash of steel against steel, mingling with shouts and cries, broke into his reverie. Burkhard lead the way down an smaller hallway and then out onto a balcony encircling a large, dirt-packed ring below. It was massive, easily the size of the grand hall and then some.

Men fought. Practicing. Though it didn't really look much different from the battlefield.

Though it was nice not to be on the receiving end of it. Krians. Was there a season they didn't spend fighting? "So you stop fighting in the winter to...come home and fight some more?"

Burkhard looked at him in disbelief and contempt. "Surely even the polluted have to practice their artificial tricks?"

"Strange," Beraht said. "That wound on your hand doesn't look artificial. More like a light knife spell."

"You are lucky, Salharan, that I would rather die than disobey the Lord General."

"Suspended Lord General," Beraht corrected. He leaned his elbows on the railing and watched the fighting, feeling the angry eyes

glaring at his back. "Speaking of the Wolf – I'm surprised he's not here beating them all into the ground."

"That's because he could beat them all into the ground," Burkhard said. "No one will fight him anymore. They get tired of losing."

Beraht sneered. "Then they should get better."

"We've all tried," Burkhard said. "But Dieter and his nameless sword have no equal."

"Nameless sword?" Beraht asked absently, fascinated despite himself by the display below. Vulgar, most Salharans would have called it. Physical brutality was for animals, peasants too poor to afford even violet arcan. It was crude, primitive. Uncultured. And yet, he had to admit, these men almost made it look like an art form. It had never seemed so when the sword was coming at your head, but high and safe it was hard not to admit. Then his words struck him. "Krians name their swords?" He stifled a laugh. Somehow he wasn't surprised. "You really do treat your swords like lovers, don't you? Too busy fighting to bother with a flesh and blood lover?"

Burkhard looked as though he wanted nothing more than to throw Beraht over the balcony. But he didn't move, and a minute later his face had resumed its blank, polite mien. "Swords are not lovers – they are named after them. So that when we die with sword in hand, we do not die alone."

Beraht started to say something snide, then stopped. He nodded and turned back to watching the soldiers below. And realized that he was noticing the swords now. Who would have thought the bloody Krians were so idiotically romantic?

And Dieter with a nameless sword. He could have guessed that. How had they not beaten him in the decades he'd been a soldier, Beraht suddenly wondered. The man was proving to be painfully predictable.

Good to know for later.

"So what's my next lesson, keeper?" Beraht asked. "Shall we go to the library and brush up on my Krian history? Study a few wars?" Then Beraht stopped, and realized what else might be in the library.

Maps. Krian maps. He wondered if they extended into Salhara and Illussor – the countries had not communicated beyond war for more decades than anyone could remember. So how outdated would the maps be?

Salharan maps were hideous things. People relied on magic to travel, and much territory was forbidden to the general public. The most detailed maps in Salhara all revolved around the Disputed Lands. He'd had one, but it had been ruined along with his clothes. The Krians who'd

caught him had sneered at it. Beraht still felt the sting, for he'd worked hard at adding to it and making it almost presentable.

"What has taken your mind, Salharan?" Burkhard interrupted. He was looking quizzically at Beraht.

"Nothing," Beraht replied. Then chanced it. The worst that could be said was no, and he was already racking up beatings. What was one more? "Krians are famous for their maps," he said.

Burkhard looked surprised. "You've an interest in maps?"

"Yes," Beraht said, feeling uncomfortable. Suddenly it felt too much like he was cooperating with his enemies.

"Then if you will behave, Beraht, I will show you a few maps. There can be no harm in one or two of them."

Beraht thought for a moment. He was cooperating with the enemies. But he supposed there was little harm in going along peacefully until deVry arranged to help him escape. Besides, if he seemed to be enjoying himself, it would anger Dieter. So this plan was definitely looking toward the stars. "Agreed," he said at last.

Looking mildly disbelieving, but eager for an easy solution to the problem of the Salharan prisoner, Burkhard led him from the balcony and downstairs to the ground level of the palace. He turned away from the front and toward the back, out a door there and across a massive lawn. Snow made the stone path slick, forcing Beraht to walk slowly.

Burkhard realized he was losing his prisoner and slowed down.

"What is that?" Beraht asked. He pointed his head toward a large, round building. It had no roof.

"The coliseum," Burkhard replied. "Kaiser Benno announced last night that the winter fights were to be postponed a bit, as a few pertinent trials have yet to be concluded." He made a face. "They take forever deciding things." He slid his eyes toward Beraht. "You should be grateful the Scarlet General is the one who captured you."

"Why's that?"

"Because normally all prisoners of war go straight to the coliseum. Many of your comrades have killed themselves the night before a fight."

"Naturally," Beraht said contemptuously. "Far better than being reduced to something so barbaric."

Burkhard did not look apologetic. "And it's perfectly all right to keep a country obedient by drugging them."

"You know nothing about arcen," Beraht snapped.

"You know nothing about Kria."

Beraht curled his lip but said nothing more. Behaving was proving more difficult than he'd anticipated. "Why would I want to get to know a country who thinks killing is a form of entertainment?"

"At least I do not have to drug myself to do my job."

"No, clearly you murder for the fun of it!"

Burkhard started to reply, but his eyes fixed on something past Beraht's shoulder. Beraht turned.

A man was approaching, dressed in blue with snowflakes stitched in a line across his chest. Beraht thought a moment for the Cobalt General's name. Egon von Kortig. His hair was dark brown and slightly too long; though his age showed in the lines of his face, there was no gray in his hair. Beraht thought briefly of von Adolwulf, who by contrast was relatively young but had silver at his temples.

It was almost interesting.

"Burkhard, what you are doing with the Salharan prisoner?"

"Fair morning, Lord General." Burkhard sketched a bow. "Lord General von Adolwulf bid me guide him around the palace."

Egon lifted a brow. The affectation made him look a bit ridiculous. Beraht held his tongue. "I do not think the Kaiser would approve of a prisoner of war being *shown around*. Take him to the cells where he belongs."

"Lord General," Burkhard said. "I'm afraid the General's orders were quite explicit. I am to give the prisoner a tour, no matter what anyone else says. Nor is he to be so much as touched by any but the Lord General himself."

"General von Adolwulf has been suspended. He is in no position to be giving orders. Now take the prisoner to the dungeons or you will find yourself joining him."

Beraht caught sight of a black shadow from the corner of his eye. He turned to watch as Dieter approached. His eyes flicked briefly to the building from which he was clearly coming. A temple of some sort.

"Beraht," Dieter greeted. "How much trouble have you caused so far?" He looked at Burkhard, acting as though Egon were not there. "What has he done?"

"He is mouthy, as you warned, but nothing more than that."

Egon stepped forward, grabbing hold of Beraht's shoulder. "What is this prisoner doing out, Dieter?"

"That is my affair, not yours."

"He's a prisoner."

"No," Dieter said, gray-green eyes taking on an edge Beraht was far too familiar with. "He is *my* prisoner. Let him go or you will find yourself missing an arm."

Egon let go of Beraht – by shoving him roughly into Dieter. "Is he really your prisoner? I wonder."

Dieter caught him, then set him aside. "You will watch your words, von Kortig." Dieter's hand moved to his sword. "Do not question my actions when your greatest moment was winning the Cobalt seat simply because all the real candidates were dead."

Beraht rolled his eyes.

Egon was less than amused, and his hand strayed toward his own sword. "I will not hear those words from a man—"

"Who was made a general when he was half your age? And has done a better job of it? Draw your sword, Egon. Go ahead." Dieter grinned.

Like a wolf, Beraht thought. A mad wolf. Stars he wished he'd never been given a Seven Star. Or that the Brothers had chosen to kill him and pass it to someone else. Anything but this whole ridiculous situation.

"I won't feel guilty about taking every last one of you with me."

Egon let go of his sword, and threw his head back laughing. "Of course, how stupid of me. I'm wasting my time. The Kaiser will deal with you soon enough. I do believe your trial has been arranged for the day after tomorrow. We will see you there."

"Trial?" Beraht asked into the silence. "Barbarians actually bother with those?"

Dieter grabbed him by the throat and hauled him close. And up – the toes of his boots only just brushed the ground. "Do you want to be locked in the dungeons, Beraht? I warned you about behaving."

"He started it," Beraht ground out. "I was doing fine until he came along and decided to start bellowing orders."

"Burkhard?" Dieter asked.

"It's true," the monk replied.

Dieter let him go with a teeth-rattling shake.

At least, Beraht noted, he hadn't thrown him on the ground. He grit his teeth and stayed silent.

"Where are you going?" Dieter asked Burkhard.

"To the Grand Library," Burkhard said. "We agreed that if he behaved, I would show him some of our maps."

Dieter nodded. "Fine. Have him back before the dinner hour."

"What am I," Beraht asked. "A maiden being escorted around by a suitor before being returned to her father?" He met the glares sent his way with a scowl of his own. "Honestly. The greatest torture of being in Kria is the sheer idiocy of the place."

Burkhard looked as though he would like nothing more than to cuff him soundly upside the head. "Keep up the mockery, Salharan, and you can always go to the Coliseum."

"Whatever," Beraht snapped.

Dieter spared him a warning look, then abruptly turned on his heel to head back toward the castle. They watched him go. "So what *does* a suspended General do all day?"

"Normally," Burkhard said. "He would wake before dawn and train with his men in the yard. They eat breakfast afterwards, while everyone else is practicing. Then he normally rides his horse, if weather permits. Then there are the meetings he would normally have with his own advisors and strategists. The war does not stop just because the snow halts the fighting. But now that he's suspended and his men dead?" Burkhard shrugged. "He was probably lighting candles for the dead soldiers. No one mentioned them at the Solemn Banquet you slept through."

Beraht frowned. "I'm guessing that's something to honor dead soldiers?"

"Yes."

"So why did no one acknowledge their deaths? Because of the Scarlet Wolf?"

"To insult him, yes."

Beraht thought on that. "Why does the Kaiser hate him?"

"Why do you care?" Burkhard challenged.

"Because I am trying to make sense of the stupidity that seems to run rampant in Kria. A king should not hate his generals or the generals their king. It does not make for a peaceful country. Salharan Generals are regarded as heroes." Puppets, perhaps, but the common people didn't know that. The Seven Star weren't that stupid – countries needed heroes.

Burkhard turned away and resumed walking. "If you insist on regarding us as stupid, I have nothing to say to you."

Beraht muttered under his breath in Salharan, but otherwise kept his thoughts to himself.





## CHAPTER TEN

Iah woke up muffling a cry. It had become reflexive. He reached up to touch the bandages covering his face, and shuddered.

Would the nightmares ever stop? He didn't know which was worse – the dreams of happier times, when he could see, or reliving the moment when his eyes had been ripped out.

He'd screamed and screamed. Most of the journey after that was nothing but a jumbled recollection of sounds and smells. Nothing had ever been so terrifying; not even his first battle, and after that he had not slept more than a handful of hours in a week.

The room was chilly; probably the fire had died to embers. Iah huddled back down under the blankets and wished he could go back to sleep.

Back home, he'd always gotten up and read by candlelight. Or gone for a walk. Occasionally Esta had the same problem and they would sneak down to the kitchen to raid it for sweets and, still in their night clothes, hole up in the library reading aloud to each other.

He buried his face in the pillow. What would he do now? Lay and torment himself with waking nightmares? Torture himself with memories? He would never see again. Why could his mind not accept that?

Something touched his shoulder, and Iah jumped.

"What's wrong?" Sol asked, his voice heavy with sleep.

Iah tensed, and shrugged the hand away as he sat up. 'This was not the time to be taken in by that summer-breeze voice. He'd just do or say something stupid. "Nothing. I'm fine."

"Nightmares? Sol asked, ever patient. Only with Tawn had he ever seemed to lose his tireless calm.

Iah nodded, then hoped Sol couldn't see it in the dark.

The hand touched his shoulder again. "They will fade with time."

"I hope so." The words slipped out before he could catch them.

Cold air bit his skin as Sol threw the covers back and slid out of bed. "Where are you going?"

"Would you like to go for a walk?" Sol asked. "I've been meaning to show you around the palace. We're awake, we may as well do it. It will also be a good opportunity for me to determine the best way for us to accidentally encounter von Adolwulf and Beraht. I have a few ideas, but it's so hard to test their merits during the day..."

Iah laughed softly. "Does your mind ever stop working?"

"No," Sol said with a sigh. "It's the only reason I'm still alive."

Somehow Iah doubted that. He'd heard the women as they'd traveled. And though the picture was not as clear as he would have liked, he remembered a handsome man. Not by Illussor standards, which favored a softer, more elegant appearance. But for a Salharan, Iah had thought he wasn't bad. At least until the fighting had commenced.

Silver hair and unnatural gold eyes, made brighter by the gray Salharan uniform. A vaguely melancholy air, he remembered thinking before they'd been dragged into the fight.

Iah wondered what he would have done if he had encountered him in direct combat, and been struck by that voice like a summer breeze. Most likely he would be dead. There was no doubt in his mind that voice was a large part of Sol's success and survival. "Why not? Though we will have a hard time explaining our midnight traipsing should we come across anyone else."

Sol gave an amused snort. "I think not. The favored sport of winter is bedroom switching. Believe me, no one wants to admit to seeing anyone, because no one wishes to be seen."

"I see," Iah said, and laughed. "Then by all means let us go for a walk." Though he still hoped they encountered no one. His Krian had come a long way since his first lessons, but he still would not fool a native unless he could convince them he was dimwitted. Which probably wouldn't be hard.

He slid out of bed, shivering, and climbed quickly into the tunic and shirt he'd stripped off before going to bed. His boots were next, and

he combed his hair, hoping it did not look too awful. Another thing he would never see again. Not that he was given to looking into mirrors frequently, but... Iah shoved the thoughts away, replacing them with what he was about to do. It was plenty distracting.

"Come," Sol said softly, tucking Iah's hand into his elbow. He led the way slowly, allowing Iah to count paces and indicating turns and other changes as they went.

His mind reeled with the new information, but Iah stowed it fiercely away. Should something go wrong, he would have to know his way as much as possible. He did not even want to dwell on what the worst could be.

They walked on, and the near-perfect silence of the castle was eerie. Even trapped in his room all day, Iah heard thousands of sounds and there were at least as many smells. Steel, blood, sweat, so many different foods. Snow and ice, fire and smoke.

But now they all seemed dulled, and he could hear hardly a thing at all. Perhaps it was not a good night for people to be about. His head jerked up as he caught a whisper of sound. "What was that?" he said, slowing to a halt.

"What was what?" Sol asked.

"I heard something," Iah said, and reflexively turned to follow the sound.

Sol yanked him back. "Wall," he said.

Iah felt his cheeks heat, and ducked his head.

"This way," Sol said calmly. "Three paces from the last turn. Two doors. One left, leading to the north wing. The right leads to the practice yards."

"Right," Iah said.

Sol led the way right. "You're right," he said a moment later. "I can hear it too now. Someone is in the yard." They kept walking.

The smells grew stronger – sweat, and dirt. Blood and the tang of metal. The smell of a great many people, though he could hear there was only one at the moment.

Lips brushed his ear. "Von Adolwulf," Sol breathed. "Be quiet."

Iah nodded, and pulled away so that Sol did not feel him shiver. He strained to hear the man in the courtyard below. But he heard only the rush of sword cutting air, boots on hard-packed dirt.

The Wolf himself. Iah shook his head. His waking world was stranger than any dream.

Sol tugged at his hand, pulled him away, back to the main hallway. "Come," Sol said. "If he is here..." A trace of excitement laced his ever-calm voice.

"You want to go to his room," Iah said. "Is that a good idea?"

"It is an opportunity we cannot ignore. Come, cousin." He could hear the laughter as Sol said the last.

"Yes, cousin." Iah replied.

Sol laughed softly, and increased their pace as he led the way through what seemed a maze of hallways and rooms. His hand was warm, rough with calluses. Iah held tight.

"Here we are," Sol said several minutes later. "Unless von Adolwulf has moved recently, which I doubt."

Iah felt his heart speed up, as a familiar ache spread through his mind. Like the pain that came when a numb limb began to regain feeling. A sharp, stinging tingle in his mind.

He could still do it. It almost made him want to sob with relief. His feet moved before his mind could catch up, hands coming up to meet the door that blocked his way.

Kept him from the Breaker on the other side of it. He turned his head toward where he could hear Sol. "It's him," he whispered. Then realized he'd spoken Illussor.

Sol nodded, and spoke Krian. "Good. Let's go."

They turned to go, and Sol faltered to a stop.

Iah felt and heard it as Sol was yanked away. Heard his muffled cry of pain.

"Well, well." The Wolf's voice was deep, rough. Cold. A winter breeze through the last of autumn's leaves. "What have we here?"

"Lord General," Sol said desperately in Krian. "I apologize for disturbing you."

"Save it," Dieter replied. "Tell me what you're doing."

Iah froze – the Wolf was speaking in Illussor. *Fluent* Illussor.

Dieter laughed. "I do believe I've caught a couple of spies."

Iah heard Sol hit the ground with a pained grunt. He tried to back away as heavy footsteps approached him. Then he was all but lifted in the air, shoved into a wall. Iah swore. He wasn't even going to try speaking. "You're Illussor," Dieter said. Iah began to twist and fight as fingers began to rip away the bandages. Dieter slammed him against the wall again. Iah's head cracked against stone, and he held still.

"Tits of the Winter Princess..." Dieter said and let him go. "Who did this?"

Iah didn't reply, and started to shake as the cold air struck where his eyes had once been.

"A Salharan," Sol said.

Dieter threw Iah aside. He landed hard on top of Sol, who wrapped a steadying arm around his shoulders as he maneuvered them up.

Then Sol was yanked away again.

"You're not fooling anyone," Dieter said. This time he spoke Salharan. "Next time you choose to take a midnight stroll, make certain the arcen is well and truly gone from your polluted body. Your eyes hold a shine." He threw Sol back down. "Stay away from my room or you will find yourself where you do not want to be."

Sol picked them up off the floor. "You're not..."

"What do I care?" Dieter said, still speaking Salharan. "Just do not touch what is mine. Now go or I will cease to be tolerant."

Iah heard him vanish into his room, then tugged hard at Sol's sleeve. "Let's go."

"Yes," Sol agreed. He had the tone to his voice, like summer dampened by the first winds of autumn, that meant his mind was racing to adjust his schemes to account for the incident. They were back in their room in minutes, no time spared for Iah to learn the way. "That was not expected." He sounded angry. "I was certain he had not heard or seen us."

Iah shrugged. "I told you we should not have done it."

"Yes," Sol conceded. "But I'm more troubled by his reaction."

His boots hit the floor with soft thumps. Iah bent to arrange them for the morning, then stripped off his tunic and shirt. In undershirt and breeches, he counted paces to the desk and sat. From a drawer he pulled out fresh bandages.

Muttering to himself, Sol approached and took over the task of rewrapping Iah's eyes. "I am sorry."

"There is no need," Iah replied, though he did not relish that ever happening again. It had felt as though he'd been laid bare for all to see. He stood and climbed into bed, crawling to his side. Sleep now did not seem such elusive prey. "Sleep," he told Sol. "Fret about it in the morning."

Sol sighed. "You're right. I still cannot believe..." he descended into muttering as he readied for bed and slid under the blankets next to Iah. "I hope I did not just ruin our mission."

"I guess we'll see in the morning," Iah said peaceably. "Nothing we can do now, unless you want to go and try to kill the Wolf."

"Forget it," Sol said. "The man is about my age and not so much taller, and I am no featherweight but he threw me around like a dog with a rabbit in its jaws. I do not envy Beraht his proximity to the man." Iah felt him shift, and fingers touched his hand where it was curled into his pillow. "I apologize for quite possibly ruining everything."

Iah turned his hand to grasp Sol's. "You didn't. And even if you did, I'm sure you'll think of a way to fix it come morning. Trust the Goddess, or your stars, or whatever. And thank you for taking me for a walk." With that he withdrew his fingers and turned over, heart knocking against his ribs. "Good night," he whispered, asleep even as Sol replied.

Sol watched the sunrise. All night he'd been awake, and not a single solution had presented itself. Nor had sleep.

He'd let eagerness get the better of him, and that single slip had ruined everything. How long before someone came for them?

And why in the stars' names had he never known the General was fluent in three languages? Sol let his head drop to thud against the stone of the window. He thought back through everything he'd observed during his winters here. The rare encounter on the battlefield. Nowhere could he find a missed indication that Dieter spoke anything more than Krian. It was known he had a handful of translators for Illussor and Salharan each.

It was no damn wonder the man infuriated everyone.

Why hadn't Dieter killed them? Sol lifted his head again.

The General was currently suspended. His trial was up before the court in another day or so. If he was fortunate, he would be cleared of all charges and reinstated. Worst, he would be executed.

Sol frowned at the rising sun. If the Kaiser really hated Dieter as much as it was said, then would he use this as a chance to kill him? Why not simply kill him sooner? Sol's hands clenched into fists. What was he missing? There was something...

...But there wasn't. The Scarlet General was easily the best of the four. If the people didn't fear falling beneath the Kaiser's wrath, Sol did not doubt Dieter would be incredibly popular. A skilled soldier, and a successful, seasoned general at only thirty-six. Even with the blemish from letting his men die so carelessly in an ambush he was far superior to the older generals, who had gone stale in their stations while Dieter flourished.

It made no sense. Or whatever sense existed was not to be found.

So Dieter would likely die. But surely locating two spies right in their midst would have earned him some manner of favor?

Though perhaps not. People were already infuriated with the way he treated Beraht. Suddenly identifying Lord Grau as a spy would not go over well, even when it was proved to be true and he got thrown into the coliseum with the rest.

But still. It was not in the Wolf's nature to let spies live. Sol had heard of him killing for less.

He turned away from the window and moved to the desk. His ink case lay open, and Sol traced the bands of silver around the dark blue glass which hid the colors of the "ink" inside. The case clicked softly as he shut it.

No more arcen, not even to reach the Breaker. He touched his throat, feeling the bruises there. There was no doubt in his mind that he had lived simply because Dieter permitted it. He'd seen the man on the battlefield, and training with his soldiers, but this was his first real encounter with him.

Sol sighed, sick of thinking on Dieter. But the man was holding the Breaker prisoner – to get to Beraht he would have to get through Dieter. Thanks to his haste last night, that had become impossible rather than merely difficult.

At least Iah had definitively identified Beraht as the Breaker. He'd known Iah could do it. Sol looked toward the bed and smiled faintly at Iah, who remained dead to the world.

Captain Iah Cehka. Sol had made himself somewhat familiar with many of the prominent Illussor soldiers, sensing the information would prove useful someday when he crossed into Illussor never to leave it again. He had not expected the information to be useful in quite this way. He wondered what sort of life awaited Iah's return. Or if he'd ever see him again after they parted ways.

Sol frowned at the strange thought.

The sun was up, the day begun. He had best fetch breakfast. Until his hand was forced, he would act like everything was perfectly normal. The kitchens now were his best chance to speak with Beraht again. Unless Dieter had mentioned something to Burkhard.

Slipping on his tunic and pulling on his boots, Sol cast one last look at the bed and then strode from the room, locking it behind him.

The early hour meant the castle was still quiet. But if he knew anything about Dieter, then he and Beraht were already awake.

He permitted a small sigh of relief as he proved to be correct upon entering the kitchen. Beraht sat at the table, eating slowly. Sol noticed a bruise on his right cheek. "Fair morning, prisoner."

Beraht didn't look up. "And you."

Food was not at all appealing, not while his stomach was heavy with worry. But Sol snagged a piece of the soft, white cheese he'd long been fond of and forced himself to eat at least that. After a night without sleep, he could not afford to starve as well.

"Where is your keeper?"

Beraht finally looked up, licking butter from his fingers. "He was called away by another monk. Something about the dungeons and dead people. They speak too fast for me to catch it all."

"What?" Sol frowned, and stored the information away for later. "Well, this works out for us. Why are you here? And named?"

"I am named because I did not want to die nameless," Beraht said, expression mutinous. "I will make him take it back."

Sol doubted it. "What is he planning on doing with you?"

"He wants me to spend the rest of my life here. A peculiar sort of revenge, wouldn't you say?"

"I would certainly rather die than spend the rest of my life among my enemies," Sol replied. "But I would not count on your living long."

Beraht looked at him like he was an idiot. "I never assumed such a thing. It's more a matter of waiting to see *how* these infernal Krians will finally kill me."

"Has it escaped you, *Beraht*, what our Brothers will do to you should you return with a Krian name?"

"No," Beraht said, his ire vanishing like an extinguished candle. "Wherever I go, someone is waiting to kill me."

Sol took a deep breath and let it out slowly. His mistake had lost him any time for persuading Beraht slowly. And if he didn't agree, then he would simply find a way to kidnap him. When he spoke, his voice was barely above a whisper. And he spoke Salharan. "Have you ever wondered why the Illussor are in this war?"

"What?" Beraht looked at him. "Why are you asking me that?"

"They're in it," Sol continued, ignoring him. "Because they're searching for someone." And he began to explain.

Beraht listened in silence, food forgotten in front of him. When Sol finished he picked up his teacup and downed the contents, grimacing slightly at the taste of cold tea. He stared at Sol. "You're a traitor."

"Yes." Sol said it levelly, but his eyes flickered behind the drugs that made them brown.



"If I turned you in, they'd forgive my name." Beraht stared into his empty teacup. "Then again, probably not."

"You cannot tell me you feel any loyalty to men who declared you would not be worthy of a name until you murdered a thousand men."

"More than that die every day on the battlefield," Beraht said. "The only difference was that I did it in the dark while they slept. I'm not proud of it, but it's what I did."

"You know it's different," Sol said sharply. "Why do you think Dieter hates you so much? For all that he is feared and despised the Wolf had never been accused of cowardice. He fights honestly, if nothing else."

Beraht slammed his cup down. "I am not a coward!" His words rang through the kitchen. Thankfully no one was about.

An oddity Sol needed to look into. He half wondered if it was a trap, but they would have been taken long before now if that were the case. And Beraht would have warned him. "I never said you were," he said. "But if you come with me, you can be something more than you have been so far."

"You're insane," Beraht said. "There's no way I'm this Breaker you speak of."

"Iah confirmed it last night," Sol replied. "And if you do not come willingly—"

"By force, I know." Beraht touched the bruise on his cheek. "So I can stay here and die in Kria – either by beating, freezing to death, or in that star forsaken coliseum I keep hearing about. Or I could somehow make my way back to Salhara, stars willing, and turn you in to earn myself a painless death for daring to give a Krian power over me. My last option is to turn traitor and save an enemy that will, in all likelihood, hate me for both being foreign and taking away the only edge they have over both Kria and Salhara. Choice, choices, choices."

Sol looked at him in disapproval. "You are not the only who has had a rough life."

"Rough?" Beraht laughed bitterly. "You have no idea."

"Nor do I care," Sol said ruthlessly. "But I am offering you a chance to start fresh – and possibly become a hero, though reaching that point will be difficult."

Beraht shrugged. "Difficult is all I know." He sighed, resting his head across folded arms. After a moment he sat back up. "How do I know you're not testing me or something?"

"Don't insult me," Sol said.

"How long have you been a traitor?"

"Since my Brothers left me for dead and a poor Illussor family pulled me from a river and brought me back to life."

Beraht stared at him for several minutes. "Fine. Why not? It's not as though I've anything to lose."

"That was easier than I had thought."

"You're persuasive, Sol deVry. Have you never heard your soldiers when they talk about your bewitching voice?"

Sol blinked. "No."

Beraht laughed. "So how are we getting out of here?"

"I am still working on that. But expect word from me in—"

"Prisoner!" A guard bellowed as several burst into the kitchen.

Beraht stood up, backing away. "Get away from me!" he snapped as the men in saffron uniforms bared down on him. "You're not allowed to touch me."

"Von Adolwulf has ordered no one touch him," Sol shouted over the commotion. "And sworn to kill whoever does."

A guard laughed nastily. "The Scarlet General has been placed under arrest and is currently about to stand trial. His orders are null and void."

Sol swore. "Why? His trial is not for some time yet."

The guards did not bother to answer him, merely subdued the struggling Beraht and dragged him from the room.

Sol stormed from the kitchen and snagged the first person he saw – the man who had knocked him down the stairs. "What is all this commotion about General von Adolwulf being arrested?"

"Haven't you heard yet?" the man asked. "Five prisoners died in the night – two from the cold, another Salharan killed himself. The last two apparently decided to start early and wound up killing each other. So that's five trials that were dropped, and they moved the Scarlet General into the available spot. The Kaiser had him arrested."

Sol thanked the man and then bolted up the stairs, mind awhirl. Arresting Dieter wouldn't have been necessary – the Kaiser was rubbing salt in the wound. Beraht was no doubt intended to be another blow.

Stars curse them all! He should have just dosed on red arcen and taken them all away when he'd had the chance. Now he had a mess on his hands.

If the trial went poorly, it was all too possible that Beraht would die right alongside Dieter.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Beraht swore, using every vulgar, offensive word in three languages that he could think of. He didn't shut up until a soldier back handed him. Now he had matching bruises.

At least Dieter's bruise he'd almost deserved.

He looked around. They'd been muttering about a trial, so he had expected a courtroom. Something similar in nature if not exactly like the ones he'd been in – more than he liked to recall – back in Salhara.

Instead they were back in the room he remembered from his first encounter with the Kaiser.

Only this time, Dieter was on the floor with him and looked as though someone had tried to give him a backhand or two. Beraht looked toward the guards that had taken him, then dismissed them. They hadn't been the ones to take in the Scarlet General – and he doubted Dieter had cooperated. He shifted his gaze to the two men and one woman assembled around the Kaiser. The Cobalt general was nursing a bloody nose and the Verdant General held his right arm oddly.

Beraht ducked his head before they caught him laughing. How sad and amusing that five people who should be comrades so clearly loathed each other. This was the country they'd been fighting? How did they keep losing?

Perhaps because of the man beside him, he conceded reluctantly.

Which didn't explain at all why they were probably going to kill him. Beraht alongside him, no doubt. He hoped Sol was working on a few miracles to get him out of this.

"Scarlet General Dieter von Adolwulf," the Kaiser said once the soldiers had departed. "You are being tried for neglecting your troops."

Dieter laughed. "You could have at least given me a real trial, Kaiser. Surely even I have earned that much."

"You earn what I say you have earned, von Adolwulf. Stand up."

Dieter stood. Beraht noticed suddenly that he still had his sword. Strange. "Why are we even bothering with this?" Dieter asked. "We both know, Kaiser, that you're just arranging a legitimate way to kill me. Do it already."

"So eager to die, von Adolwulf?" The Kaiser asked. "Don't you realize I'm doing you a favor, by giving you a private trial with only your peers to judge you?"

"My peers?" Dieter repeated. "Where do I see any such thing? In a whore who slept her way to the top? A man too lazy to even practice with his troops in the morning? A man who gave up living except for the occasional malicious torture of peasants "trespassing" onto Krian land? A King who murders in cold blood? I see no peers here. My peers were the men you claim I neglected. Which I did not. Illussor tricks got the better of me. We were miles away from the Regenbogen, snow was eminent and the winter stalemate had been called two weeks prior. My men had just suffered significant loses because of a Salharan shadow killer. The Illussor used all that to their advantage. I did the best I could, but even you cannot defend against a Scream."

The Kaiser knocked the words aside. "And yet you live. How did you survive a Scream and not your men?"

"I do not know, Kaiser."

Beraht started at his words, but said nothing.

"I rather figured." The Kaiser motioned toward Beraht. "Bring him to me," he commanded, and Heilwig moved forward. Beraht stiffened, but when Dieter did nothing he muttered curses in Salharan and cooperated.

The tension in the air was not unlike what he felt before he began slipping into tents to ensure soldiers never woke from their slumber. Except this time he knew he was the sleeper.

"And his sword," the Kaiser said, motioning for Ludwig to take it.

Dieter drew his sword, warding them all back. Then he burst out laughing, startling them all. "Do you think you can simply take it, now

that you have me where you want me?" he asked. His gray-green eyes, normally pale, darkened with anger.

A deep anger, Beraht realized. An old anger. He knew it all too well. Had always buried his own with arcen.

"Killing me will not make this sword yours," Dieter said. "It was made for me, it was given to me. It is *mine*." He began to laugh again, but there was a dark, sad sound to it. Beraht realized it was the only sound in the room. Around him, the generals looked as confused and wary as he.

The Kaiser however did not seem fazed in the slightest. "You are being sent to the coliseum. As of now you are exactly as you began – a filthy, worthless peasant."

Dieter only laughed harder – then stopped, and his hard eyes locked on the Kaiser as he sheathed his sword. "You're a fool."

"I am Kaiser."

"You are still a fool. Did you think I didn't know, all this time?" He sneered at the Kaiser's expression. "You did, didn't you?" Dieter's laugh was like cracking ice. "I was there. Up above, trying to sleep off too much wine. I watched you kill them. Murder the man who loved you. Watched as you looked for the sword that was not yours to take."

The silence in the room deepened, and the Kaiser's face took on a murderous look. But he said nothing.

Dieter continued. "Did his promises mean nothing to you? Why did you stop trusting him?"

"Because he *lied*," the Kaiser snapped, his temper shattering. "He married that bitch. Then there was *you*."

Dieter's laugh made Beraht shiver. Behind him he felt Heilwig do the same. What in the stars names was going on?

"He never lied," Dieter said. "My father loved you. More than anyone or anything. Do you think my mother mattered? Do you think I mattered?" He threw his head back and laughed again. "Benno, he promised to make you the best sword in the world."

"And he gave it to you!" The Kaiser's voice shook the room as he shouted. His eyes were wide with anger and hate.

"Wrong," Dieter snarled back. "My sword is only part of the gift my father was creating for you. Kaiser, *I* was the sword my father intended for you. It was the sole reason I existed. Who do you think first called me Wolf? My soldiers? Nay – they knew it from my home. My father said I was to be a wolf for the Kaiser, one wolf that would be better than ten thousand dogs." He drew his sword again, holding it up for the Kaiser to see. "*This* was meant only for me to serve you, as the finest blade Meinrad ever made. All for his Kaiser." Dieter lowered the

sword. "All my life, that's what I was raised to be. And I did it. For my father. Only to come home and watch you murder him." He sneered. "Did you lose your nerve after that? Or did you develop a taste for prolonged torture? Twenty years now I've waited for you to kill me."

A silence fell briefly. Then Dieter spoke again. "Leaving me to die in the coliseum will not make this sword yours. Nor will it undo that you murdered him for it."

Beraht forced his brain to start working. Then realized he'd failed. Nothing was making sense, except for the part where the Kaiser had been the one to murder Dieter's parents.

For a *sword*.

Before he could force his brain to function properly the Kaiser and two generals attacked Dieter. He would not have thought anyone capable of defeating him, but they seemed to be succeeding. Then he realized Dieter wasn't fighting back.

The Scarlet General fell to the ground unconscious. Beraht watched as the Kaiser resumed his seat, Dieter's sword in his lap. He stroked the blade, which shimmered oddly in the light.

Something snapped in Beraht's mind. Stars take them all, Krians made no sense. His eyes burned bright yellow as he faced the Kaiser. He began to struggle, wanting to do something. Anything. "All of it...the hatred, the fear, that he's going to die...murder...all of it over a *sword*?"

"Silence, prisoner," Heilwig said behind him. There was a flash of pain at the back of his head, and then the world went black.

When he woke, everything was still black. Beraht realized it was night. Slowly the light from the fireplace across the room filtered into his awareness, and he began to take in other small details of the room.

The door opened, and the smell of (sulfur?) filled the room as someone struck a match and lit a lamp. Light flared, spilling over what turned out to be a familiar face.

"Burkhard?" Beraht asked.

"You're awake," Burkhard replied. "I was coming to check on you."

"Where?"

"You're in the Kaiser's rooms. He's not letting you out of his sight."

Beraht shook his head. "Where's that bastard?"

Burkhard looked at him in surprise. "Dieter's been taken to the coliseum dungeons. The fights begin tomorrow."

"Why am I in here?" Beraht asked, and slowly sat up. Was anyone in this wretched country capable of not leaving bruises? Before long his body would not even notice the aches.

"A prize," Burkhard said tiredly. "I would imagine the Kaiser is loath to let you out of his sight." He held out a cup, then stood to light more lamps. "Drink."

Beraht obeyed, mind still too clogged with questions and pain to muster the energy for anything else. Tea. Dark, sweet. "Why?"

"Why what?" The lamps revealed a small room with two windows, both heavily covered. Black and orange, a painting on the wall of a figure who reminded Beraht of the Kaiser. It was also chilly. Beraht wanted nothing more than to find a bed and stay in it for a very long time.

"Why is he dying because of a sword?"

Burkhard froze, then relaxed. But his hand shook slightly as he picked up a tray of food and brought it over to the table near Beraht.

Beraht took a seat. He didn't touch the food, but continued to sip his tea. What the hell had that bitch hit him with? It felt like he'd overdosed on new color arcan or had too many bottles of wine.

"No one knows why the Kaiser hates Dieter. Or why he's taken his sword."

"That's a lie!" Beraht snapped, regretting it. "You stupid Krians! Why are you letting him kill a man who should be a hero to you? Stars! I hate the man – your country should not. I want to know what sort of stupidity drives people to kill a man over a star forsaken sword!" He rubbed his aching head, feeling the large knot at the back of it. The next time he saw her, he was going to return the favor.

"No one knows," Burkhard repeated quietly. "No one ever knew about the Kaiser and Dieter's father."

Beraht sent him a nasty look. "You do. Why am I not surprised? You're not a very good liar, Krian."

"I've deceived everyone else. If you recognize a liar, Salharan, it is only because you know your own kind."

"Like I said – you're a lousy liar."

They glared at each other in silence a moment. When Burkhard finally spoke, his voice was heavy, weary. "I was the Kaiser's watchdog. I made sure the way was clear, and ensured no one noticed his absence at night."

"It couldn't have been that interesting that the Kaiser was having an affair. Certainly everyone knows about him and Heilwig."

Burkhard looked at him like he was idiot. "It is one thing to have an affair with a woman who is just barely removed from the royal lines. It is quite another to love a peasant, famous sword smith or not. And a man on top of that."

"Is that illegal here?" Beraht asked.

"Yes," Burkhard replied. "But that doesn't mean it doesn't happen."

Beraht nodded in agreement. "It's the same in Salhara." He frowned. "I still don't see what a stupid sword has to do with anything."

"You need to learn to speak less and listen more. How a man your age has lived so long with a mouth like that..."

"This mouth can cast magic faster than you can draw a sword, that's how." Beraht finished his tea and set the cup down with a bang. He folded his arms across his chest in hopes of keeping some warmth in, and glowered across the table at Burkhard. "Stop lecturing me and finish your star-forsaken story."

Burkhard glared back. "You are the one who asked the question, Salharan. So listen to your answer before I decided I'm no longer in the mood to humor you."

Beraht remained silent, and with a grunt of approval Burkhard continued. "Dieter's father, Meinrad, was a master sword smith. The best in the country, the best there has been in years. He met the Kaiser one summer while he was fresh out of his apprenticeship. Every winter afterwards, when Meinrad traveled in from the mountains, the two continued their affair. I heard the Kaiser say only once that they loved each other, and I have no doubt it was true. Then one winter, Meinrad arrived with a wife. They fought, but things seemed to repair. It all flared up again when the following winter Meinrad arrived with a child. Again, I thought they repaired things. And I learned that Meinrad had promised to make the Kaiser the finest sword in the world. He said nothing would ever compare. But it would take many, many years to complete. And so the years passed, and their affair continued. Then, one year, he made a sword." He looked at Beraht, hand tight around the goblet of wine in his hand. "I think even you might be able to appreciate the beauty of Dieter's sword."

"Yes," Beraht said quietly. "What makes it shimmer?"

"You noticed that," Burkhard said. He drained his goblet and refilled it. "No one knows – and I mean that. The secret died with Meinrad. No one knows how he did it, only that it makes the sword...special. It has no equal." He banged his empty goblet down on the table. "A blade fit for a king. And Meinrad gave it to a worthless



peasant, a fresh soldier who could not even bear the weight of the cloak his mother made him.”

Beraht blinked, stared.

“But I still don’t get it – why kill him. If they had been lovers for so long...surely the Kaiser should have known or realized *something*.”

“Only Dieter could say for certain what happened. The night of the murder, the Kaiser ordered me to stay in his room. He went to the small house just outside the palace proper where Meinrad and his family lived. Though he’d commanded me to remain, I followed him. I did not go near enough the house to see exactly how events played out.” Burkhard stood. “But I saw the Kaiser leave, and not long after I found Dieter, half-crazed with anger and grief. Nothing I said seemed to reach him. It never has. They’ve hated each other ever since, and it has turned both of them into something they never should have been.”

He motioned to a bundle by the door. “Clothes for you, altered so that you do not look so ridiculous. The Kaiser wants his new prize to *look* like a prize. Though I’ve no doubt he will kill you once Dieter is dead. Or perhaps he’ll kill you first.” Burkhard shrugged. “It’s hard to say.”

Beraht said nothing, merely sat and frowned at the table until he heard Burkhard leave.

All he had to do was bide his time until Sol could get them out of here. Surely in the chaos of the coliseum and its new, special contender, escaping should not be so hard.

Slowly Beraht stood, and began to change into his new clothes. Burkhard was right, they did fit. And they were far nicer than anything a prisoner should so much as be looking at.

Sol slammed his fist against the wall, then let his forehead join it. “I’ve lost. Well and truly lost. Even had I not messed up last night, there was no way to prevent this short of attempting to kill Dieter in his sleep and take Beraht away. Which is what I should have done!”

“We would never have made it from the castle.”

“Yes, we would have. That’s what red arcen is for.”

Iah stood and walked slowly toward him. He reached up, hands landing tentatively on Sol’s shoulder, moving up until he reached Sol’s hair – which he then yanked on. Hard.

“Damn it!” Sol jerked his hand away.

"I do not know much about arcen, but I know that your eyes are yellow. Which means you have not progressed far enough to take red so lightly. Am I correct?"

Sol nodded. "Yes. But I would probably manage just fine."

"There is no sense in doing something stupid and potentially fatal."

"Life is fatal."

Iah yanked his hair again. "And what would happen to the Breaker, if you got yourself killed? Be logical, cautious. Like you normally are. All this red arcen nonsense is not you."

"Stop pulling my hair."

"It's how my sister made me behave," Iah said with a soft smile. "If she was really mad, she'd drag me around by the ear. Just wait until you meet her. I'm sure in no time she'll be doing the same to you. I think she'd do it to Matti if he didn't have his own unique ways of getting her back."

Sol laughed. "Your sister sounds like a woman that rules her household with an iron fist."

"Steel, really. Nor does it hurt that Matti lets her get away with everything."

"Matti is...her husband?"

Iah went still, then started laughing so hard he had to lean against Sol to keep his balance. He grinned. "You had better hope I don't tell her you said that. She's been dodging his attempts to make her exactly that ever since he was old enough to notice she was a woman."

Sol smiled down at Iah, reaching up without thought to brush away the hair covering his face – then caught himself and dropped his hand. "And what lady awaits your return?"

"None." Iah's smile faded. "My sister, of course. My friends. But even if I had a lover waiting for me, they would not want me now." He pulled away and stepped back toward the table. "Now that you've calmed down, I bet you'll think of a solution."

"Thank you," Sol said. He leaned against the wall and crossed his arms over his chest. His eyes slid shut as he began to think. "Dieter has been arrested. He's set to fight first in the coliseum tomorrow. They say he's going to fight until death."

"As opposed to what?" Iah asked.

Sol opened his eyes. "Normal coliseum battles are done in numbers – one against two, then three against four, so on until there are only two opponents left. The one who lives is cleared of all charges and set free – should a Salharan ever win a fight, it's rumored the Kaiser will

have him escorted to the border. But Salharans never win. How could we?" He shook his head, displeased that he'd allowed his thoughts to wander.

"So they're going to exhaust him to death?" Iah's lips curled.

"Yes," Sol replied. He continued listing what information he had. "The Kaiser has Beraht under lock and key. Burkhard tends him, as he's already familiar with the prisoner."

Iah frowned, fingers drumming against the table. "What does Beraht matter to the Kaiser?"

"Something that was Dieter's. More importantly, Beraht was important for exacting revenge for the needless deaths of his men. So he is taking both Dieter's sword and his revenge." Sol closed his eyes again. "Which means unless we bribe Burkhard, there's no getting anywhere near Beraht. And there is no bribing Burkhard. He's a good man, but he has no love for either Salhara or Kria. I have no doubt he would turn us in."

"There must be some way to reach Beraht."

Sol dropped his arms and pushed off the wall. He strode over to the window. "None that I can think of." Outside the snow was thick on the ground. For travel to be possible, they would have to leave no later than tomorrow night. They had less than a day to find a way to rescue Beraht.

"Your arcen can't get him out?"

"I could try," Sol said. "But it is unlikely. Right in the heart of Kria? In winter? There are too many things which could go wrong. I do not want to use more arcen than I absolutely have to before we're well away from here." He paused. "Though perhaps we have finally reached that point."

Iah's head began bobbing. Sol smiled, and wondered how he'd acquired the strange habit. "So we can't get Beraht out."

"No."

"Is there at least some way we could get arcen and a message to him? Arrange to meet somewhere? Surely there must be a servant or someone we can bribe."

Sol shook his head. "No. How would a servant take it, to be asked to take a message to a prisoner from a Krian -- and a prisoner of the former General and now of the Kaiser."

"I see your point. Then we are at an impasse."

"Perhaps there will be an opportunity in the coliseum," Sol mused aloud. "It's always so crowded, chaotic...surely there must be an opening there."

Iah shook his head. "Not unless you've got a seat right next to the Kaiser. "And I can't imagine a country bumpkin and his pathetic blind cousin will be anywhere near him." He shuddered against being amongst such a crowd, overwhelmed and disoriented. "And I would get lost. There's no way we would get out of there even if we could get close enough."

"No..." Sol said slowly, and he felt the prickling in his mind that meant it had latched onto something. A second later it struck him. "The prisoners!"

"What?" Iah said. "What do you mean?"

"Von Adolwulf! He's a special enough prisoner! He can do it."

Iah tilted his head. "If I could see," he said, "My eyes would tell you you're an idiot."

Sol was surprised into laughter, and smiled at Iah. Before he'd realized it, he'd cupped Iah's chin in one hand – then he hastily let go, and wondered what in the stars' names he'd been trying to do.

"Even pretending I know what you're talking about – why would the Wolf help us?"

"Revenge?" Sol suggested. "I don't know. But I have to try. He can get the arcen and a message to Beraht if I can convince him to do so."

Iah smiled, and reached out a hand. Sol took it. Iah held it tight to reassure him. "If anyone can convince the Wolf to do something, it would be you."

"Thank you," Sol said, and squeezed his hand briefly before letting go. He hesitated a moment, then shook his head in confusion and turned away. From the case on the desk he pulled out one of the small ink bottles and twisted off the bottom half. Opening one of the desk drawers, he pulled out a bag of what turned out to be small, glass vials. Easily concealed in a boot or belt. He poured arcen into one. It was thick and red, like fresh-spilled blood. Such a small amount would give Beraht nearly three times the power of a normal dose of yellow, and not do more than make him headachy and tired for going two colors higher than his body was accustomed.

Restoring the red arcen, he withdrew another bottle and took a sip from the yellow arcen in it. It tasted sweet. Not quite sugar, but not quite like honey. A strange burning, thrumming in between. Viscous traces lingered on his lips and he licked it away. Felt it spread through his system, richer and deeper than anything alcohol could do. Start a tingling in his mind, stir powers not available until the arcen bid them wake.

Only a sip, but it would be enough to help him get through to Dieter. Not enough for anyone but the sharpest to notice, and even they would have to look a third time to be sure. By then he would be gone, forgotten. He restored the bottle and closed the case. "I'll be back," he told Iah. "Lock the door, let no one in." From the wardrobe he pulled a heavy, fur-trimmed cloak. The hood was deep; he pulled it up over his head, burying his face in shadow.

"Of course."

Sol hesitated, feeling as though there was something left undone. But he could not figure out what. Stifling a frustrated sigh, he left the room, locking it behind him.



## CHAPTER TWELVE

The wind was bitter, and carried the type of deep, damp cold that settled in your bones and didn't want to let go. Sol pulled his cloak more tightly closed and walked on, head down.

There were stars in the sky, which mean the clear weather would probably hold a while longer. He hoped so – if it snowed they were dead. If his plans did not go awry this time, then they would have to run immediately. There was no room for delay. Stars delay the snow for just a few more days.

He reached the coliseum without incident. It was old; older, some said, than even the palace. Built from dark gray stone, with room for every last person dwelling within the castle walls. Men had been working tirelessly to keep it free of snow; readying it for tomorrow. They went for hours each day; as long as there was daylight by which to see. The first few days would see lots of killing; the days after that would see lots of fighting first.

Except with the unexpected addition of Dieter von Adolwulf to the contenders, the style of combat had changed. Dieter would fight contenders until he died or killed them all. One after the other; there would be no break in between.

Sol moved quietly, slowly, as he made his way below the coliseum to the cages. He bypassed the first several rows of cells. Dieter would not be so easily accessed. Men stirred at the sound of a visitor, but no one said anything.

Somewhere a man was praying, and it made Sol feel sick because the prayers were Salharan. It would be so easy...and it would ruin everything. "Forgive me, brother," he whispered soundlessly to himself.

It was dark below the coliseum. The torches set at corners and throughout the hallways only seemed to make it worse. Sol walked on. At the farthest end of the cells were a set of rooms – pitch black closets for those prisoners who refused to get along with the others until the fighting began.

Though occasionally it was also to protect a contender from his cellmates.

Sol slowed as the guards noticed him.

"You!" One of them barked. "No one is allowed down here."

From deep in his hood, Sol's eyes flared sunlight yellow. The guards dropped to the hard-packed floor. His eyes dimmed but continued to shine slightly, like a cloud-covered sun, as he struggled to arrange the men as though they'd fallen asleep on duty. When they woke, they either would not recall his visit or would not be willing to admit to what had occurred. Even if they did, they would not be believed. A Salharan running free in the palace? Using arcen to see von Adolwulf?

Ridiculous.

Sol allowed himself a slight smirk, feeling much better than he had since botching everything the night before. Now was his chance to make up for it. The smirk faded as worries reclaimed his mind. Would he be able to convince Dieter to help?

He grabbed a torch from the wall, and a softly muttered spell and the lock clicked open. He shoved the heavy door open, hinges creaking loudly in the unhappy silence of the cells. It creaked again as he shut it.

Moonlight spilled down into the cell from a small window, the only source of fresh air and light. Dieter was little more than a shadow beneath it. Sol set the torch into a sconce on the wall.

The added light revealed that Dieter was in undershirt, breeches and boots. His hands were in manacles, and even in the dark Sol could see the cuts and dried blood that testified to the fact that Dieter had not gone quietly to his fate. A cut ran the length of one cheek, and his bottom lip was split, bloody.

"If you have come to have your say," Dieter said. "I have already killed two for attempting to harm me. Did you want to be the third?"

Sol pushed his hood back. "I have no plans to kill you, Lord General."

Dieter stared at him for moment, then laughed. The sound was as cold as the air in the room. "General?" The words were Salharan.



Accented but comfortable. "There is no General in this room. What do you want, Lord Grau? What is your real name?"

"Sol deVry," Sol said, and sat down next to Dieter on the small wooden bench. It creaked under him, and he stood again, opting to lean against the wall.

He realized he'd surprised Dieter, enough that the shock registered briefly on his implacable face. "General deVry. That would certainly explain why we so seldom are gifted with your presence on the battlefield." Dieter laughed, in genuine amusement rather than bitterness. "I am impressed, General. All this time...well played." Dieter nodded his head in concession. "What brings you to see me? You do not strike me as one who would take petty revenge here."

"I need your help," Sol said, getting straight to the point. "I need Beraht. Why did you name him?"

"The Salharan obsession with names never fails to amuse me," Dieter said.

Sol regarded him coldly. "And how would you like it, General, if I told you what the name of your sword was and gave you no choice but to accept that name?"

"I would kill you."

"For us, death seals the name forever."

Dieter sneered. "Which just goes to show how stupid Salharans really are. He had plenty of opportunity to avoid the name I gave him. He made his choice."

"A choice forced upon him."

"He is neither the first nor the last to be forced to make unhappy decisions. Is this why you came? To lecture me on violating a Salharan's honor by giving him a Krian name?" Dieter looked at him with tolerant amusement.

Sol cursed himself, thoroughly annoyed. Where had his focus gone? It would be a relief when they reached Illussor and he could finally stop. His edge was clearly dulling. "No," he replied. "As I said, I need your help."

"I cannot imagine why, or how, I can help you."

"Beraht," Sol said. "We need you to get to Beraht for us."

Dieter merely lifted his brows.

"What do you know about the Illussor?"

"Eighty years ago they did not have magic such as they do now. No one knows the method by which they acquired it. But like the Salharans, it shows in the eyes. Like sunlight on metal. Unlike your

people, they do not seem to require drugs. Nor does it prove deadly over time."

"That's where you're wrong," Sol said. "It is killing them. Slowly. Very few so far have noticed anything. And it comes at a price much higher than anything arcen demands."

Dieter shrugged. "Then I guess that will be one less problem for Kria to deal with. And why does a Salharan General care about the fate of the Illussor?"

Sol was silent.

A moment later Dieter's laughter filtered through the room again. "A traitor. How long have you been working against your own countrymen?"

"Since they left me to rot and the Illussor saved me," Sol said quietly. "I do not hate my country, but I was never happy there. Not all of us like what we must do to survive. There is nothing I long for more than the day I never have to touch arcen again."

Dieter did not look convinced. "You are the first Salharan I have met to say such a thing. Certainly your Brother—" Sol started when he realized Dieter used the word reserved for the Seven Star Brothers "Is too fond of the stuff."

"It's all he's ever had, I think," Sol shook his head, bewildered. "How did you know I was a Brother? I gave no indication of it. There was no evidence that I even knew Beraht was."

"Your eyes," Dieter said. "The shine a deeper yellow than normal soldiers."

Sol conceded the point with a nod. "Because I am slowly advancing toward orange. You are the first Krian I've known to note the nuances of the colors."

"I do not know much," Dieter said. He leaned back against the wall, and Sol noticed for the first time how exhausted Dieter look. How still and...not quite defeated, but almost. It did not look natural for him, and while he knew he should be relieved this man would no longer be around to dominate the battlefield...he should not be going out this way. What was it the Krians said? His leaf should fall from the tree; instead it was being ripped away. "But one should know his enemies better than his friends." He switched back to the matter at hand. "So you want me to help you get Beraht? Never mind that's impossible – for what purpose and why should I?"

Sol slid down to sit on the ground, wanting to be more comfortable while he began to explain. "A hundred or so years ago, the Illussor had magic that was sufficient, but nothing like it is now. They

were the equal of the Salharans, and now they are far superior. If we've survived encounters with them it is only because we know enough tricks to avoid the worst of what they can do."

"Shadow killers," Dieter said scathingly.

"Salhara does what it must. I did not come here to argue with you over the rights and wrongs of the war. The Illussor found a way to make their magic stronger, including giving them a trick that changed even what they are now called."

Dieter nodded. Though he'd fought the illusions all his soldiering life, there had been a time when that trick did not exist. Back when the Illussor fought only to keep their own hold on the Regenbogen – a part Kria took over shortly before the Illussor displayed the skill that gave them their new name.

"It was meant to only last for a few years, through one generation. Something to give Illussor an edge they desperately needed, back when the war had a clearer purpose. But it didn't die with the soldier who had it. They passed it on to their children. So too the others who acquired it – royalty and a handful of nobles. And now it has somehow spread to the entire nation. What was meant to be limited to a few has become something upon which the entire country is dependant."

Sol breathed out on a slow sigh. "It is beginning to kill some of them. Headaches, at first, and only in the very old or very young. No one has made the connection to magic except those who know its deepest secrets. In order to stop it, to get rid of the magic and keep it from killing the Illussor, they need a Breaker."

"A Breaker," Dieter repeated.

"Yes." Sol looked up at him. "Someone of uncorrupted Illussor blood. Who does not have the magic that the rest of the Illussor possess. He's the only one who can break that which gives Illussor its magic."

"Beraht," Dieter said. "The Kaiser was the one to notice he looked half Illussor."

Sol nodded. "I did not notice it either, until I learned he was the Breaker."

"And you came here hoping to find him? But how did you know I had him?"

"I didn't. I came here to learn what had happened to the Scarlet. A Brother was supposed to find Beraht and bring him to me – ostensibly to learn why the Illussor attacked the Scarlet to get to a Salharan. My comrade does not know the game I play."

Dieter laughed. "And you want me to help you get your Breaker out of the Kaiser's claws? Is that it? I don't see how."

Sol stood up and pulled the small glass vial from where he'd stowed it in his belt. In the weak light of torch and moon, the liquid inside looked black. "Give him this," Sol said. "And tell him to meet us at the crossroads a mile beyond the castle. He'll manage the rest."

"Arcen," Dieter said, sneering in contempt. "How do you propose I get it to him?" He lifted his hands, bound by heavy manacles. Already they were making his wrists raw. "I have less access than you."

"So you'll help?" Sol asked in disbelief laced with hope.

Dieter snorted. "No. I'm merely curious as to what you're planning. Why should I? It matters little to me what becomes of the lot of you. Twenty years I did my duties and more. I have ceased to care. Nor will I turn traitor with my last moments. He will not get that satisfaction."

"You'll stay loyal to a country that has done nothing but betray you? Why?"

"If you think such logic will sway me, Sol deVry, you are mistaken."

Sol held the vial tight, mind racing for something that would sway the stubborn general. "Is this the revenge you wanted for Beraht?"

Dieter, for once, did not come back with a scathing reply. "The coliseum I did not anticipate. I should have. Beraht was meant to die with me in a formal execution. It has been done before, with soldiers and the prisoners they claim for personal vengeance."

"So you're perfectly willing to leave him to whatever the Kaiser devises? Knowing full well he'll take out on Beraht what he could not inflict upon you?"

"He will kill him."

"Yes, but only after he does what?" Sol pressed, sensing he'd gained the advantage. "It's unacceptable for him to kill your men in their beds but you can leave him to suffer the tortures you always avoided?"

Dieter glared. "Do not preach to me, Salharan. A man who plays three sides has no right to lecture anyone. Nor is it my duty to help you with your treachery. Let the Illussor take care of their own problems. How weak that they need two Salharans to rescue them from a mess of their own devising."

"How weak that you're content to sit here and let everyone suffer when you could help. Did you spend your whole life hating one man that you can't see past that?"

Chains rattled as Dieter shifted, nearly standing up. He calmed himself at the last, and sat back on the small, creaking bench. "You have no idea what you're talking about."

Sol realized he finally had a chance to ask the question that had burned from the moment he realized the situation. "Why the hatred? It makes no sense. I've never been able to learn the reason. Why does he hate you?"

Dieter laughed again. It was slow, tired, and sad. "Do you know, Sol deVry, that you are the first one to ever ask me? No one ever dared question. Too scared that by not hating the Wolf, they would turn the Kaiser's hatred their way – and they have not the protection of being the Scarlet General. The Kaiser hates me because he was jealous. He thought I took what belonged to him."

"I see," Sol said, not really seeing at all. But he had indulged himself as much as he would permit. "Is there no way I can convince you to help us? What would it cost you to do so?"

"What would it gain me?"

Sol set the vial down on the bench and drew his hood up. He was done. There was nothing more he could really say. "A life not completely wasted. If you choose, give it to him when you say goodbye." The torch he left, unable to bring himself to take it away. The door creaked as it opened and closed, and then Sol was leaving as quietly as he had come.

The wind howled as he made his way back across the field to the palace, deeper, colder, snatching at his cloak, whipping the hood away. After the third time, Sol gave up keeping it up. Only the howling wind offered any sound; perhaps in anticipation of the next morning, everyone had bedded for sleep. If there were games afoot, they were quietly played.

But he was not the only one up, Sol realized as he reached the top of the stairs and turned down the hallway to his room. He nodded politely to Burkhard. "Fair evening, Burkhard. Can't sleep?"

"Yes. And yourself?"

"I think the walk took the energy out of me. The cold saps it. My bed sounds good right about now. So I will see you in the morning." Sol smiled, nodded a good night, and continued on his way.

He didn't see Burkhard stop and turn around, eyes wide and body rippling with shock.

Sol knocked softly on his door, and at Iah's demand for identity offered his in Salharan. When the door opened he smiled at Iah, reaching out a hand to greet him with a touch on the shoulder.

"How did it go?" Iah asked, stepping back to let him in.

The sound of boot scraping stone was the only warning he had, and Sol turned just in time to avoid the dagger that would have been fatal.

Burkhard's eyes were dark, feverish with hate. "Salharan!"

Biting down hard against a scream of pain, Sol wrenched free, the dagger still in his shoulder, and grabbed hard, shoving Iah aside and throwing himself and Burkhard into the room. "Lock the door!" he snapped, speaking in Krian.

"You're Salharan." Burkhard picked himself up. "Your eyes. How did I never notice them?"

Sol swore. He'd thought the glow past, the tiny sip of magic used up by the evening's tricks. His edge really was gone. With a rough cry he wrenched the dagger from his shoulder, holding it tightly as Burkhard approached. "Burkhard, stop! Please! I don't—"

"You've lied. All this time! I called you friend."

"I am—" Sol dodged away, holding the dagger close, reluctant to go that far. His shoulder burned with agony, and he could feel the blood soaking through his clothes, making them sticky. He fell for a feint, and the punch sent him reeling, tripping. Reaching out to catch himself on a chair, he instead only sent it crashing to the ground with him. The dagger went skittering away, and then his world was a blur of fists and angry words as he tried to block Burkhard's assault.

Even considered vulgar for a Salharan, he was woefully inadequate for a Krian. Sol continued to struggle, but the wound in his shoulder worked against him.

And he did not want to resort to arcen.

Then Burkhard stilled above him, eyes wide. He collapsed on top of Sol, who struggled for a moment before throwing him off.

There was a dagger in his back. Holding his shoulder, Sol struggled to his feet and crossed the room to where Iah stood. "Thank you," he murmured, and held Iah in a loose embrace.

"You're bleeding," Iah said. His fingers sought and found the wound at Sol's shoulder, as he turned his face up. He frowned.

"A minor wound," Sol said, and slid his arm from around Iah shoulders, holding his hand over Iah's own on his wound, letting Iah feel as he cast a spell to close the gash. "I'll be fine." He made to pull away.

Iah wouldn't let him. "You should be more careful."

"I know," Sol said quietly, fingers reaching up of their own accord to touch Iah's cheek. "I'm sorry. Thank you for saving me."

Iah leaned closer, and Sol tried not to notice how he smelled – like soap and wine, but also fresh, like the beginning of spring. "It's funny," Iah said, voice unsteady. "I was raised as a Duke, and even when I gave that up I was quickly promoted to Captain. I've been in command of others for as long as I can remember. People lean on me. I don't like that for the rest of my life, I will have to lean on others." He tilted his

head a bit more, leaned in a little closer. "But I don't mind leaning on you. As terrified as I am of being blind, it scares me more that I almost lost you."

Sol drew a breath. "Iah..." Before he could say anything more, Iah had closed the remaining space between them, kissing him with an assurance he rarely showed for anything else. He tasted liked mulled wine, dark and spiced, laden with cloves. But there was something else too, a lighter flavor. Something that was Iah. Sol opened his mouth to take the kiss deeper, hand sliding down Iah's spine before wrapping around his waist.

Perhaps Burkhard had killed him, and this was a dying dream. His life was not one that permitted such things. "Sol..." The voice that whispered his name, breathing against his mouth, sounded real enough. "I hope I didn't just offend you..."

"No, Iah." Sol dared to lean down and take a second kiss, this one softer, slower. "It is...unexpected. Certainly nothing to which I'm entitled."

Iah laughed. "Things seldom happen because they should. More often, it's only the things that *shouldn't* happen which do."

"True enough." Sol let him go, before he lost his focus completely. "I have to take care of Burkhard, and make plans for tomorrow."

"Of course." Iah cocked his head, frowning. "What will you do with him?"

Sol folded his arms and thought, looking at Burkhard's body. It hurt. Lord Grau had counted Burkhard a friend. He'd never wished the man ill. Had hoped he'd live to a ripe old age. And now he was dead, had died feeling betrayed. Sol wondered if he'd be the last. Warily he moved to the desk, and took a large dose of yellow arcen. As sweet as it was, he loathed it. Moving back toward Burkhard, he began working.

A spell to transfer; one of the harder spells. It would be easier if he used red, but that was one thing he did not want to do until he had absolutely no other choice. His eyes were yellow, he did not want to see them turn to orange...slowly to red.

He had given red arcen to Dieter, but Beraht would need the additional power to get out. And one small dose would not have disastrous effects.

Sol steeled himself, then cast the spell. Focused on the body, and on the field between palace, library, cathedral and coliseum. Several minutes later, the body vanished. Gasping, tumbling forward, Sol took a long, slow breath and then forced himself up. "They will find him in the

morning," he said aloud. "And think he was involved in some quarrel. It is not unheard of. There will be no way of knowing we were involved. Now I must pack our things, because our best chance to slip away will be when everyone departs for the coliseum first thing in the morning. We will be spending most of the day out in the cold.

Though he guessed he shouldn't have been, Sol was still surprised when Iah stepped close to embrace him. "I'm sorry," he said. "I know Burkhard was a friend of yours here."

"Yes," Sol said, allowing himself to hold Iah briefly. It was a foreign feeling, and one the Salharan in him screamed was wrong...but he had not felt Salharan for a very long time. One more strike against him in that it did not matter overmuch. "Let me pack...and then I guess we had best talk."

Iah smiled sadly. "I wish I could see you."

"I'm not much to look upon. My sister used to tell me to stop walking around like some sort of grave keeper. My Brothers used to jeer that I was poorly named."

"I don't think so," Iah said. "You have eyes like the sun. Gray hair. Silver and gold. It's a prized combination in Illussor."

Sol stroked his cheek briefly, lightly. "You honor me."

Iah leaned up and stole a quick kiss. "Pack."

"Yes, Captain."

Iah laughed, then slowly made his way to bed to get out of Sol's way.

Sol set to work, packing up their few belongings into saddlebags which he would take down to their horse in the morning. He would also have to see a horse was made ready for Beraht...assuming the man escaped.

In all the upheaval, he'd forgotten that his attempts to persuade Dieter had not necessarily succeeded. Would they be racing toward the Illussor border tomorrow with the Breaker? Or without him?

He shoved the worries aside. There was nothing he could do now. If they failed, he had tried his best. There was always the red arcen. One full dose and he could manage a great many strong spells. The jump from yellow to red would likely overstrain his heart, but not before he ensured that Iah and Beraht were safely on their way. He would make sure Beraht took care of Iah.

How quickly his priorities had changed. Shaking his head at himself, bemused, Sol sat at the desk and began to transfer the arcen from the small ink bottles to the corked vials. Tomorrow morning he would disperse them among his person, with several set aside to give to



Beraht. There was no way they would make it to Illussor without some sort of edge. Especially if things went wrong and they were followed.

Clothes packed. Arcen moved. Boots by the bed. Sol crossed the room and added more wood to the fire. The light of it made his yellow eyes look orange, added to the glow that lingered in them.

He would have to remember to treat his eyes in the morning. Though after the dose he had taken to get rid of Burkhard's body, he doubted there was any way to really hide the glow. He would simply have to be careful.

Locking the door, checking once more that all was ready for tomorrow, Sol allowed himself to declare all finished. It was late; dawn was only a handful of hours away. He sat to pull off his high boots, and set them to be easily grabbed in the morning. Finally he extinguished the lamps, and climbed into bed where Iah waited.



## CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Dieter shivered despite himself. The room was cold – warmer than it had been all night but cold all the same.

In less than an hour he was going to die in a place he had always despised. He didn't know why he'd expected anything less of the Kaiser. A soldier's death? Dieter laughed silently at himself.

Voices outside. Faint. Even so he could hear the fear in them. Over the course of the night he'd had no less than six visits. Sleep had not been option.

Three men had died. Only the sly cat with the yellow eyes had not tried to attack him. His mind still reeled with the knowledge that the innocuous Lord Grau was really a Salharan General – and a Seven Star Brother. It was further evidence of Salharan stupidity that they'd allowed themselves to lose someone as skillful as Sol deVry. A pity he wasn't Krian; the war would have ended years ago.

Though speaking of visitors, Dieter was surprised Burkhard had not come to say goodbye. He'd been trying to get the man off his back for years...it only figured he succeeded now. It little mattered.

Keys rattled and the door protested being opened yet again as the guards stepped inside.

Dieter looked down at the glass vial in his hand – then threw it up and out the window above him.

He stood up as the men approached, smirking at the way two froze and the third stumbled back. A fourth lingered outside, waiting until he had no choice but to do the duty assigned him. Contemptible. If he'd caught a Scarlet acting as the Saffron did, he would have cuffed the man and drilled him until he no longer feared anything except being made to do more drills.

Dieter allowed them to lead him out, through the halls that were eerily silent. The night before, plenty had jeered as the former Scarlet General joined them in their fate. But after the third body had been carried out by trembling comrades, they'd stopped. It was bad enough some of them would be facing him come morning. Better not to make it personal. Dieter bit back the urge to laugh.

The guards led him none too gently up the ground level...and out into the coliseum proper. But rather than leave him, they continued to march him across it.

Thousand upon thousands filled the seats. Those few who did not spend the winter months in the palace still fought to make it to the coliseum if they could. And they had, racing all the more as the rumors of the Wolf's fate spread.

Yet all was silent. Nothing stirred, no one spoke. Only the wind blew, making everyone not dressed against it shiver. But otherwise there was only silence. Deeper, somehow, than the silence that dominated the coliseum when it was empty. Dieter resisted another urge to laugh, make them jump, wonder if his mind had finally snapped. Were they starting to feel guilty? He doubted it.

On the far side of the arena, two soldiers moved forward to unlock a door, and then Dieter was led up the stairs beyond it to the landing where the Kaiser sat. Around him were the remaining three Generals, dressed in their formal uniforms. The colors seemed garish in the coliseum, and far too bright for the winter weather.

Immediately to the Kaiser's right was Beraht. Dressed in court finery. Dieter nearly laughed. His idiot prisoner must be dying from the effort it took not to lash out at something. He wore brown and pale gold, the colors drawing out what now seemed his glaringly obvious Illussor heritage. Dieter was still confounded he'd missed it. At least he knew why the Illussor had been after him, and why his men had died.

At least it had not been a stupid reason, though he thought it plenty idiotic.

Someone had combed Beraht's hair. He almost looked civilized. Dieter wonder if he was the only one who noticed the murderous rage that made his eyes shine like a summer sun at midday. The first time

Beraht had been thrown at his feet, those eyes had blazed the same way. Dieter didn't think it was entirely because of the arcen.

The Kaiser looked bored as he spoke, but his voice carried a smug undertone. "So, Dieter. Have you any last words? Requests? Apologies?"

Dieter said nothing, at last dragging his eyes to the man he wanted to kill more than anything. But wouldn't, because death was not nearly so pleasing as watching Benno live with himself. He could see the hate, hotter and stronger than ever now that Benno was aware how much Dieter had always known. What Dieter had told him.

His sword was unsheathed, point to the ground, Benno's hand tight around the hilt. Like some sort of cane. Dieter curled his lip in contempt but remained silent.

"Nothing to say at all, Dieter?"

He ignored him. If Benno thought he'd crack...but Benno had always been a fool. Dieter remained silent.

"How unlike you," Benno continued to goad him. Across the coliseum, the dead silence remained unbroken. All listened to Benno speak, though only those nearest him could understand what he said. "No parting shots for your Kaiser?" His hand moved, and light caught the sword he held. "Perhaps if you ask nicely enough, I'll let you die with your sword."

Dieter still said nothing. His eyes spoke his hatred plenty, the gray-green of them dark rather than light. Even with his split lip, the abrasions on his face and arms, clothes torn from fighting in confined quarters, he was the most intimidating man on the dais. The generals touched their swords, made sure they were loose in their scabbards even though they had done so as Dieter climbed the stairs.

He wasn't stupid. The Kaiser had no intention of giving his sword back. It wasn't enough that he was killing Dieter – he wanted Dieter to die humiliated and completely alone.

The Kaiser began to look annoyed at Dieter's continued silence. "Well, if the prisoner is not interested in begging for mercy, I see no reason to keep my people waiting." He smiled mockingly. "Though of course I won't send you off without a proper farewell. The Lady Heilwig has said she would kiss you goodbye."

Heilwig, from the way she jumped, had clearly been unaware she'd volunteered for any such thing.

"Of course if there's a different lady you've in mind, do say so. You are, my former General, entitled to that much." His smiled grated. Dieter wanted nothing more than to smash it.

He wasn't going to give Benno the satisfaction of seeing him snap.

"We haven't got all day. Declare your choice or none at all." He bared his teeth. "There are lots of men to get through."

Dieter smirked, ever so faintly, and moved faster than anyone had thought would be possible after his night of cold and attempted beatings. Chains clinked and rattled as he grabbed Beraht's shirt, jerked him close and kissed him hard. He used Beraht's surprise to force his mouth open, press the kiss deep, hands holding him in place despite the manacles. The cut on his lip opened again but Dieter didn't stop.

Beraht struggled, muttering Salharan curses into Dieter's mouth – then he froze, yellow eyes going wide and then sliding shut.

Dieter laughed as Beraht began to kiss him back.

Beraht shuddered, mind reeling as he pressed *closer* to Dieter, fingers digging into the smooth fabric of his shirt, the cold metal of the cuffs biting into his skin. But he pressed closer, kissed hard, tongue fighting with Dieter's, sweeping his mouth, searching for every last trace of arcen he could get.

Red arcen. He'd never had it, but he knew that's what it was. Bitter and sweet. Like dark tea with too much honey. Mixed with it was the tang of Dieter's blood.

Where had the stars cursed bastard obtained red arcen?

Sol?

But why?

Beraht's mind tried to formulate thoughts, but it was overwhelmed into silence by his burning need for the arcen Dieter was giving him. He kissed him until his lips were bruised and raw. He licked them, tasting arcen and blood.

Then he began to feel it. The thrumming burn of arcen in his system, the too-fast beating of his heart as it dealt with a level of power to which it had not carefully been made accustomed. He pulled away with a gasp, locking onto the gray-green eyes watching him so intently.

"Meet him at the crossroads," Dieter said against his mouth.

In Salharan.

Beraht was going to kill him.

"A mile north of the castle." Then Dieter shoved him away, stumbling back, falling hard on his back beside the Kaiser.

Dieter laughed at the horrified looks on the Kaiser and the people around him. "Goodbye," he said, and descended into the arena without a backward glance. Beraht watched him go, debating the merits of wasting arcen just to give the bloody bastard a parting shot.

But that bastard had also just saved his life. Had given him arcen. Freedom.

Why?

Probably just to infuriate him. Beraht glowered at the spot where Dieter had been when he realized that Dieter had freed him – but not stricken his name. Which meant when Dieter died, he'd be stuck with the name the rest of his life.

Fine. Whatever. It wasn't like he was going back to Salhara anyway. No one in Illussor would know how bad it was and Sol was in no position to deride him. Beraht twisted to get his hands under him, leverage himself up. His eyes caught on Dieter's sword as he struggled, caught by the strange, deep, rainbow shimmer. It was familiar somehow. Shock rippled through him as he suddenly realized why.

*Arcen*

Dieter's sword had been made with arcen. Beraht took a closer look as he pretended to struggle to stand up.

The way it shimmered from deep within. How the shimmering exploded when the sun hit it. Like light on fine crushed glass. Dieter's father had put arcen powder in the steel. Beraht choked on a laugh as he finally stood up. How had he not noticed before? He couldn't wait to see the expression on his face when he told Dieter his sword was polluted.

Except he wouldn't get to tell Dieter that.

Beraht frowned and stared down into the arena.

What had Burkhard told him? That Dieter would not be leaving the arena. One by one opponents would come out to face him. To live, Dieter would have to kill every last one of the thousands of prisoners in the cages below. Impossible. Beraht grimaced. His own skill was in killing men while they slept. Fair play was for men who could afford to obey the rules. But at least he was fighting a war.

This was just brutal.

He watched as Dieter was given a sword – it looked like a toy next to the sword currently in the emperor's possession. Far too small, and Beraht doubted it was up to the challenge. How cowardly could one man get? At least when he killed, he did it mercifully. He'd never made anyone suffer.

"Enjoying yourself, prisoner?"

Beraht stiffened and moved away from the fingers that touched his hip. "What is there to enjoy about barbarism? Krians are as uncivilized bastards."

"Salharans are simply weak." The Kaiser reached out to touch him again, amused by the way Beraht seemed to shy away. Beraht

carefully did not look at him, uncertain of the effect the red arcen would have had on his eyes.

Though he doubted anyone would notice. The one man who would immediately note the change had been the one to feed it to him. Beraht's lips were sore; Dieter kissed as brutally as he did everything else. There were no soft edges to him.

Dieter did not seem to react as the first prisoner was presented to him.

With a cry born of fear and panic, the ragged man in grungy clothes charged Dieter.

He was killed swiftly, immediately. Had not even lasted a minute.

"At least we are not bloodthirsty," Beraht said, finally responding to the Kaiser's earlier comment. "Why, after sending your men to die most of the year, do you bring them home and inflict more deaths upon your people? Anyone watching this will be doomed to remain on earth. They will never be stars in the sky."

The Kaiser laughed tolerantly. "I would rather be in the earth than high in the sky. I will leave the stars to flighty Salharans." A pause as he watched Dieter kill a fourth and fifth man. "He's rather boring, really. I was expecting more of my Scarlet Wolf."

Beraht's mouth moved before he could think to stop it. "Wolves kill cleanly. Torture is a human thing. And near as I can tell, Dieter was never your Wolf even though he was meant to be. But I guess that's your fault."

He swore he saw stars as his head knocked hard against the ground. A fresh bruise on top of the knot that was still healing.

What was it with Krians that they thought the solution to everything was to throw him to the ground with as much force as possible? Beraht picked himself up, in pain but pleased that he'd angered the Kaiser.

Down in the ring, Dieter killed another one. Beraht wondered why he bothered. Wouldn't it be easier just to die?

But that, he had to admit, wouldn't be Dieter.

His movements – powerful, strong, confident, precise – weren't as graceful as usual. When he'd killed the bandits, he'd moved...almost liquidly. A deadly dance. He glanced sideways at the sword in the Kaiser's hand.

*Swords are not lovers – they are named after them. So that when we die with sword in hand, we do not die alone.*

Beraht looked again at Dieter's sword. The Kaiser held it like a lover, but also like a man who knew it was his only because he'd stolen it.



Beraht turned away as the arcen thrummed in his blood, knowing it would make his eyes glow. Even the Kaiser would not be able to miss it this close.

He watched Dieter, who was up to...eleven? Twelve? Beraht had lost count. Was he tiring? It was hard to tell.

*So that when we die with sword in hand, we do not die alone.*

Stars refuse them all!! Beraht forced his mind on his escape. With red arcen, it should be easy enough. Vanishing from here, grabbing what supplies he could and then steal a horse. Everyone was in the coliseum – they would not know where he had gone until too late. All he had to do was focus, cast the spell and be gone.

But he didn't move. Metal shimmered at the corner of his eye.

Dieter cut down the fifteenth man. Weak, all of them. From hunger. Fear. Hate. Despair. They weren't even trying, just throwing themselves at him. Salharans, mostly. A few Krians who had never learned how to properly wield a sword. Young, reckless, probably caught doing the stupid things young men always did. Some were more deadly, but the reality of the coliseum had rendered them unable to make the most of their skills. He wondered what they thought now that they were the ones in the ring.

He cut another one down, moving away from the crowd of bodies at his feet. The sword in his hand was repugnant. Balance poor, too short, too light. Mostly likely made by an apprentice too concerned with looks to not the less visible merits of a sword. It was a mockery. A final sting.

Another man charged him, screaming Salharan prayers for mercy. Dieter stepped to the side and slashed the man's throat open. Moved and waited for the next one. He was not tired yet, but he was beginning to feel it. And killing was tiring work anyway.

No doubt the real fighters were being held back until *he* was no longer a challenge.

Dieter dodged a half-hearted lunge and then cut the man down. He looked briefly toward the arena – and was shocked to see Beraht was still there. That he hadn't heard an uproar he took to mean Beraht had slipped away without being noticed. Why was he still there?

The arcen burned in his system, fouler than alcohol. This was what the Salharans fought them for? A field to make a drug that made his whole body feel as though it suffered from some strange fever?

It made his head ache, and he had only a bit of it in his system. Tits of the Winter Princess, the stuff was foul. No wonder the Salharans wee such idiots.

Dieter killed another one, this time catching the edge of a sword on his arm. He swore and examined the cut. Bloody but shallow. But it meant he was tiring. As if it mattered. He didn't even know why he was bothering to kill them all.

Though the way they seemed mostly to just run *at* his poor excuse for the sword, it would be hard to get them to kill him. He remembered the jeers that had greeted his arrival the night before, as the Krians locked in cages realized who had joined them in the dark. The guards. Those who had tried to beat the humbled general.

The next man died quickly, unable to so much as scream

Dieter knelt to clean his sword on the man's filthy tunic. When he stood again, his next opponent was walking toward him.

He stood. This one was a Krian soldier, in the bedraggled remains of a Verdant uniform. He couldn't be much more than twenty. "So what did you do?"

"Protested what my Lord General did to prisoners," the young soldier said. "He shipped me off for insubordination."

Dieter grunted in acknowledgement. A serious crime, especially during times of war. Most simply killed the soldier in question...but Ludwig would find this more effective a way to keep his other soldiers obedient. That was what the coliseum was for, after all. "So what do you want?"

"I want to fight, Lord General. No one ever gave me the chance. You'll kill me, but at least my mother will see me go down fighting."

Dieter hefted his pathetic sword. "You would have done better under my command than his."

"I was scared, Lord General, of the Scarlet Wolf." The man smiled weakly. "I learned too late maybe that was a reason to press forward." He shrugged. "Perhaps in Spring I will be a stronger leaf on a new tree."

For reply, Dieter lifted his sword and motioned for the man to attack.

The fight did not last long, but it lasted long enough.

Dieter cleaned his sword on the same shirt he'd used before, and cast a glance toward the Kaiser.

The Kaiser watched him, he knew. And the way he sat said he was displeased by something.

Beraht was still by his side. What was wrong with the damnable man that he remained? Was he too stupid to take freedom even when it was shoved down his throat?

Dieter touched his lip, which still bled. Every time it started to close up, he tore it open anew. And it wasn't cold enough for the blood to freeze.

The next man came out at a dead run, sword at the ready. Dieter blocked his first swing, steel crashing against steel. The sound was jarring, loud – even when he'd fought the soldier, the fight had not been in earnest. Nothing like this.

Here was a man, finally, who wanted to kill him. Not that he'd succeed, but at least now he could see an end.

Dieter shoved him back, reached out to kick the man's knee and lunged forward as he fell.

Well that had been a disappointment.

He wiped sweat from his brow, grateful that it was at least cold. This would be pure agony in the heat. How many had he killed so far? He'd lost count.

The next man was worth considering. Massive, easily his equal in size. Dark skin, bronzed by the sun. Strange wounds in his ears, as if something had been torn from them – gold hoops, or jewels, Dieter guessed. A man from the coast. Dieter wondered who he'd angered or killed to be forced all the way up the river to the Kria Coliseum.

He swung hard, jarring Dieter's arms. The skill of a man of the sea and a sword just enough better than Dieter's own to be problematic. Dieter slid his sword away, shoving hard forward. But the man recovered quickly, coming in with an upward swing.

The fight began in earnest. Though Dieter was matched in skill, he could not compete in weaponry. His sword was too short, too poor, to give him the leverage he needed to fight a man of his own skill.

He pressed on, just barely keeping even. But he was already tired, and exhausting quickly. But it didn't matter. Nothing mattered. Just the fight. He would go down fighting. Down proudly.

Another hard downward blow jolted his tired arms, and Dieter faltered. He grit his teeth and then screamed as he drove the man back, but he was getting slower and the other man had been waiting all day.

It would be easy to just give up, let go – if he did it right, he would even die quickly, almost painlessly. But...

That wasn't what he wanted. All his life he'd been waiting to die. But not like this.

And he wished—

Steel crashed, drowned out by voices suddenly screaming themselves hoarse as they began, finally, to cheer enthusiastically for whomever they had chosen to favor. The screams were indistinct, but Dieter thought he would have heard his name if someone called it.

No one did.

He faltered, slipped to one knee in the dirt, could not raise his head, sword barely lifted up in time to block the blow coming down hard—

And the sound of sword against sword was different. The ring of steel was familiar. True.

He realized the sword in his grasp fit. Was not what it had been. The man above him had stopped moving. Dieter looked up.

His sword.

Dieter looked at the man above him, who was just as bewildered – then surged up, driving the other man back, lunging forward, sword arcing – and his opponent fell.

He spun around and looked to where Beraht was on the ledge, throwing himself down into the arena. "Tits of the Winter Princess!" his voice boomed across the arena, startling more than a few into a silence that spread – then erupted again into chaos.

Beraht ran for dear life, dropping the manacles broken by magic to the ground as he did so.

Vanishing had not worked. His body didn't like the red arcan; already his head was throbbing; he couldn't use the harder spells correctly. He had to get away until his body settled enough for him to try again.

Why had he helped the bastard? Stupid. If he had just left, he wouldn't be in this mess.

He ran toward Dieter, barely managing a weak spell to protect him from the worst damage of the arrows he kept expecting to feel in his back.

Then he realized Dieter was running toward him as well, and heard his shout. Typical. He did the bastard a favor and got called a fool. Stars take them all.

When he and Dieter met near the middle, Beraht wasn't surprised to find himself being throttled. "What are you doing, Beraht? Are you that stupid?" Dieter's head turned at the sound of the gates being lifted. Prisoners released en masse.

Beraht swore. "Shut up. I'm already sorry I did it, don't make me kill you myself." The world tilted, spun, and he fell forward, caught

roughly by Dieter. "Arcen," he gasped, feeling his heart beating too fast in his chest.

"We have to get out of here," Dieter said.

"You don't say?" Beraht snapped. Taking a deep breath, ignoring the protests of his body, holding reluctantly to Dieter's tunic to avoid toppling, he whispered the words that would take them away.

Then they vanished.

It took several minutes, in the crowd of men released into the arena, for the crowd to realize that the Scarlet Wolf and his Salharan prisoner were gone. When it was confirmed, the entirety of the coliseum heard the Kaiser's scream of rage. Those closest saw the way he held his hand. It looked as though it had been burned.

Beraht swore as he crashed yet again to the floor. Two weeks with no arcen and he was acting like a kid with his first sip of green. Pathetic. He stood up, limbs shaking with the effects of red arcen.

"Why are we in my room?" Dieter asked.

"You're welcome," Beraht muttered. "It's the room I'm most familiar with. Easier to transfer to."

Dieter looked at him. "Don't ever do that again. By the Autumn Prince, how do you make it a lifetime using that stuff?"

"The same way you build a life with that sword – no choice. Do you know how to say thank you?"

"I did not ask you to save me, Beraht."

Beraht opened his mouth, then realized something. He burst out laughing. "You're an outcast now! Just like me!" He backed away. "Don't hit me – we have to get out of here. Unless you're really in that much of a hurry to die."

Dieter grabbed him by the scruff of his shirt. "Do not get too confident, Beraht."

"Whatever. What do we need?"

"Winter gear. It is going to be far colder than you or that sly cat realizes. This weather is merely a calm."

Beraht grinned, riding arcen and adrenaline. "That's what arcen is for."

"I am not so foolish as to trust to your drugs." Dieter looked at him in contempt, then yanked open his wardrobe and began to yank things out of it. He threw them at Beraht. "Dress. Bundle the majority of it. We will have to procure food; I doubt your general packed enough for four, if even three. Wait here." Dieter vanished.

Beraht washed off quickly, eager to be rid of the smells clogging his nose – blood, sweat, and worst the cloying, sickly-sweet smell of

Heilwig's perfume from when she'd grabbed him and the equally wretched stuff the Kaiser wore. Like half-rotted fruit. He scrubbed quickly and dressed even more rapidly.

He sat down to put his boots on and realized he no longer had them. They'd been taken away when he'd been given the clothes ordered by the Kaiser. His curses filled the room, and he was still swearing when Dieter returned.

Dieter threw a pair of boots at him. "Too big, as you're so wretchedly weak and thin, but they're better for the conditions we'll be traveling in. He didn't wait for a reply, but set to packing away the food he'd stolen from the kitchen.

Beraht examined the black, knee high boots. They were larger, more cumbersome – because they were lined, he realized as he pulled one on. With fur. The bottom had an unusual, jagged tread.

For walking in snow and ice, he realized. He laced them up quickly, knotting the laces securely. They certainly wouldn't be coming off anytime soon. The fit wasn't all that bad. He tugged on an over shirt and short tunic – both far too big, but belting them down helped. All black; he was starting to look as grim as his companion. He packed away the rest of the clothing thrown at him, arranging it carefully in a set of saddlebags, doing his best to balance the weight.

"Here," Dieter threw something else at him. "Stow it."

Beraht bit back a retort and obeyed.

Dieter finished bandaging his arm, then pulled on his clothes, and finished by wrapping his sword belt around his waist. He sheathed his sword, then looked toward the empty hook on the wall beside the wardrobe.

"There," Beraht pointed toward the table. Where Dieter's cloak lay half in a chair, half on the floor. "Burkhard took it from the Kaiser's room."

Dieter said nothing, merely crossed the room and swung the immense, heavy cloak up and over his shoulders.

He looked almost exactly as he had the day Beraht had met him. "Ready?" he asked. Dieter nodded, and carrying their bags they made their way from the room.

The palace was empty save for a few stray servants who were quick to duck into hallways.

In the stables, Dieter made immediately for his own horse.

"We're not sharing again, are we?"

"No," Dieter said scathingly. "Take that one." He pointed to a horse directly across from his own. "I assume you know how to manage a horse."

"A horse, yes. These monsters? No." They were huge. Beraht examined the one Dieter had indicated. Dark brown, hair the same. It was just as high and massive as Dieter's. Krian horses were bred for war and the cold.

Dieter sneered at him. "He'll only hurt you if you're timid, Beraht."

Beraht met the challenge in his voice, opening the stall door and leading the horse out. "What's his name?" he asked, petting the horse's nose before setting to work readying him fit for travel.

"Krone."

"Crown?"

Then Dieter gave one of his wolfish smiles. "The Kaiser's horse."

Beraht laughed in response, and with only minor struggle mounted the enormous horse.

Dieter swung his own horse around and led the way out of the stable.

There were guards at the gate, but Beraht knocked them out before Dieter could reach for his sword. He returned the glare shot his way, and let Dieter get down to open the gates.

Minutes later they were free of the palace and racing for the crossroads in the distance.





## CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Sol tensed as he heard not one but two horses thundering toward them. He had seen them from a distance, and thought they must be soldiers sent out on a mission – but as they drew closer he recognized both shapes.

Beraht of course by his pale hair – how they had all thought him pure Salharan Sol still wondered.

But beside him was the unmistakable form of Dieter. Sol motioned his own horse forward, out of the small copse of trees hiding him from sight. He watched as the men approached. "This is an interesting development."

"You'll have to ask Beraht," Dieter said. "It was his idea."

Beraht looked as if he'd much rather kill Dieter. "I only meant to return your damned sword! I didn't expect the red arcen to be this difficult." His hands fisted tightly on the reigns. "Shouldn't we be going?"

"Yes," Sol agreed. His arm tightened around Iah's waist. "We can discuss this later." What in the stars' names were they going to do with Dieter? *That* had not been a possibility in any of his plans. "Come, our best bet is to follow the river." He turned his horse.

"If you want to get caught," Dieter said, not moving. "With daylight, we'll be too easily spotted. And the river runs a direct course to the borders. Are we in a hurry?"

Sol bit back a retort. "Shouldn't we be?"

"If they have waited this long for their damnable Breaker," Dieter said, "They can wait a few extra days. The river is more expedient, but the forest is a better choice."

Beraht nodded in agreement, surprising Sol. His eyes were distant, as if he was seeing something no one else could. "Through the forest, west almost to the Salhara border, then straight down. Pass into Salhara just west of the Regenbogen. Then we curve back north, up through Illussor to Fallhara."

"Exactly," Dieter said, and Sol realized he was just as surprised.

"That will nearly triple the journey."

"Yes," Dieter agreed. He turned his horse around. "But it's better than going by the river."

Sol nodded, stifling any arguments. Let the native guide them. He slid a look toward Beraht as they raced off. "How did you come to know the lay of the land so well?"

"Maps," Beraht said. "Burkhard let me see some of the Krian maps."

"I see," Sol said, and fell silent. Burkhard...he looked at Dieter back. He wondered if anyone had told him the man was dead. Sol stifled a sigh. Something would have to be said when they broke camp. Burkhard had, he knew, been fond of the general. Dieter would not be pleased to hear how and why he had died.

Fingers brushed against the back of his hand, tangled with his reassuringly. "Don't worry about it," Iah said. "Not right now."

Sol nodded and held more tightly to Iah's waist, his other hand tight on the reigns. Traveling would be easier if Iah had his own horse, but that wasn't a possibility. And he didn't mind, really.

He glanced toward the castle, where it seemed no one had yet raised an alarm. But they wouldn't, not yet – assuming Beraht had simply vanished, they would have no way of knowing where they'd gone. No one would notice anything until they returned to the castle, which would take them a few minutes. Longer still to notice who else was missing, and that there were four men missing, not two.

Sol's eyes flicked to the unmistakable red jewel in the hilt of Dieter's sword, where it occasionally peeked from beneath Dieter's cloak. What in the stars' names had occurred?

How had they wound up with a fourth member? By the stars, what was he supposed to do with the man? Sol sighed and shoved the thoughts away for later. Their escape was plenty demanding enough.

Dieter slowed after they'd been in the forest for some time.

"What's wrong?" Sol asked. He followed Dieter's gaze upward.

"Snow," Dieter said. "We're going to get hit hard before too much longer."

Sol looked up at the sky again.

"The sky is perfectly clear," Beraht said. "How can it snow when there are no clouds?"

Dieter didn't bother to reply, speaking to Sol instead. "We have to travel quickly. Can your horse travel hard with the extra burden?"

"Yes," Sol said.

"We can always take turns," Dieter said. "If it begins to tire. Make sure your heavier gear is easily accessed. The temperature will drop quickly. We will be traveling until dark, and if we press hard enough there is a place to stay for a night." Without another word, he once more took off.

Iah laughed softly as they followed after him. "He certainly knows how to take command, doesn't he?"

"Apparently," Sol said, unable to resist a soft laugh of his own. Even over the horses and the wind, he could hear Beraht shooting curses at Dieter, who seemed not to notice.

Several hours later they stopped for a short break. Sol unpacked food from his bags after they cared for the horses. He pressed some into Iah's hands, and then dispersed the rest. Brushing snow from a rock, he sat down and looked at Beraht. "So explain."

Beraht made a face but obeyed. "I gave him his sword...but the arcen wasn't working right." He closed his mouth, then grimaced and started speaking again. "I wasn't using the arcen correctly. The jump from yellow to red arcen was nastier than I expected. I wasted some of it transferring the sword." Beraht grinned, suddenly looking far too pleased with himself. "Which reminds me..."

"What?" Sol asked warily, not liking the look on his face.

They all looked at Beraht like he'd gone insane when he threw his head back and laughed. Beraht set his food aside and stood, stalking over to Dieter. "Let me see your sword?"

"Why?"

"Because."

Dieter glared at him a moment, but drew his sword. Even beneath the clouds that Sol had sourly noticed were gathering, it shimmered. Not just on the surface, but from deep within. "Look at it," Beraht said, motioning Sol to come closer. "Does it remind you of anything?"

Sol tilted his head as he examined the sword. Compared to the short swords Salharans used only when they had to – generally against

Illussor, who used no weapons at all – it was massive. Long, with a sharp double edge and he doubted he could hold it without humiliating himself. Yet he'd seen Dieter wield it like it weighed nothing, as if swordsmanship was a game easily mastered.

The way it shimmered...swords didn't do that. So many colors, pale, faint. Like there was something in the metal itself. Colors like that... "Arcen!" he said, as realization struck him.

"What?" Dieter said in a dangerous tone.

Beraht laughed at him. "Your sword had arcen in it."

"My sword does not have arcen."

"Yes, it does." Sol said quietly, staring in amazement at the deep, rainbow shimmer. "How strange. I never would have thought to use it thus..."

Dieter sheathed his sword. "Get away."

"A little miffed to know you're as pollution-reliant as the rest of us?" Beraht taunted.

Sol backed away. If Beraht wanted to be stupid, let him. He resumed his seat and watched, somewhat amused, as Dieter grabbed Beraht and then threw him face first into the snow.

"The Breaker has a death wish," Iah said softly.

"Apparently," Sol replied. He ate quickly, enjoying the brief respite from horseback. Something told him such breaks would become fewer as they went along.

Dieter reached into the snow and hauled Beraht up, then shoved him toward his horse. "It's time to go."

"You do remember that you weren't invited on this journey, right?" Beraht retrieved his food and began to finish it.

"You do remember you're the one responsible for my being here?"

Beraht was silent as he mounted his horse.

"Is this hostility between you two going to be a problem?" Sol asked.

"No," Dieter said. "Because if he persists in aggravating me, he'll be too busy recovering from a dunking in the river to annoy me further."

Sol waited for Beraht's retort – and looked at him when he stayed silent. Lifting a brow, he merely helped Iah mount and then followed Dieter and Beraht from the clearing.

An hour later the snow began to fall. In earnest. Dieter halted them again and ordered they done heavier gear. "What do the clouds look like?" Iah asked.

"Heavy," Dieter answered.

Iah nodded. "Then we have to ride hard. Our only chance is to reach the border as quickly as possible." He drew the cloak Sol gave him tightly around his shoulders, pulling the hood up far enough it hid the bandages on his face. "Let's hope the temperature doesn't drop further."

"It won't," Dieter said. "Not yet. It will snow for days first."

Sol noticed that while the rest of them put on the cumbersome gear for harsh weather, Dieter merely pulled up the hood of his cloak. "I keep forgetting, Iah, that you're as accustomed to this abysmal weather as Dieter."

Iah laughed. "It's not that awful. Winter is the best time of year."

"Snow and cold are wretched," Beraht disagreed. "Give me summer any day, even if I have to spend it fighting." He urged his horse onward, leaving the rest to catch up.

Sol hung back, both to avoid the argument he could already hear mounting and to guard the rear. He doubted they were being followed, or that they would encounter anyone – especially if the weather continued to worsen, as Dieter and Iah seemed sure it would. But at least the snow had forced them to a slower pace. It gave him room to think.

Once they reached Illussor, everything was out of his hands. His plans ran to getting Iah and Beraht to Illussor.

He was still amazed it had all worked with only a few minor problems. It would have been much preferable if Burkhard had not died...but at least his had been the only lost life. What would happen after they reached Illussor?

Sol had always imagined he would hand the Breaker over and then vanish to the hills of Illussor, to settle somewhere and leave his soldering life behind for good. In reality, he knew, it would never be that simple. There was still much work to do.

There was still the matter of Tawn, for one. Sol realized he'd not thought about his brother-in-law for some time. But he doubted Tawn had forgotten him, not after the way Sol had broken his nose. *That* had felt good. Perhaps that was how the Krians often felt when accomplishing something. Much different than the fading of arcen as spell after spell was cast, leaving only pain and irritability when the rush was gone.

But there was an end to the road he was on, and it was getting close enough to see. What surprised him about that end was Iah. Unconsciously his arm tightened around Iah's waist.

"What are you thinking about?" Iah asked. "Does your mind ever stop?"

"No," Sol replied with a laugh. "I don't think it does. But I was dwelling on what will happen after we reach Illussor. My plans only stretched to reaching it."

Iah laughed. "I'm not surprised. But our arrival is easy enough to predict – my sister will attack me and then proceed to not let me out of her sight. Matti and Kalan will harass me. Matti will probably declare you some sort of hero and Kalan will try to drag you into his own schemes – you know, it didn't even occur to me until now that the two of you are a bit alike in that. Always plotting. It's why he'll be Minister of Finances someday."

A thought struck Sol. "When you say Matti..."

"Prince Matthias," Iah said. "We grew up together. Kalan is the Duke of Ferra. His lands border mine, in the southern plains of Illussor. Well, they used to be my lands." Iah shook his head. "I bet Esta will try to make me take the title back. So will Matti, since he's still scheming to make her his Queen. But..." He shrugged, and Sol could see his head fall. "I'm not exactly fit for leading anymore, am I?"

Sol curved his arm around Iah's waist, fingers splaying to stroke his side through the layers of cloth and fur. "Nonsense. Eyesight does not a leader make. The three that lead the Seven Star Brother cannot even leave their seats without great effort. But their minds, for all that they are filled with the need for arcen, are dangerously sharp." He laughed suddenly. "Besides, who would dare disobey the brother of a soon-to-be queen?"

"There is that," Iah said, and Sol was relieved to hear the smile in his voice. "And...I'll have you..."

"Yes," Sol said after a moment, still surprised by what he was finding with Iah. "You will."

"Good."

Beraht shivered. Would the cold never stop? The nastiest Salharan winter looked like spring next to this abysmal weather. Stars he would give anything to be warm right now. Instead the world was drowning in white. Too much like his first journey in the stuff. At least he wasn't riding with the bastard this time.

Though, he had to admit, that had been a lot warmer. He could just see Dieter ahead of him, through the snow. A dark massive shape. If he was suffering at all, it didn't show.

Stars what had he been thinking? Why had he done it? He frowned over his own behavior. He'd been watching Dieter fight...if you could call it that. It had looked like Dieter wasn't even trying, really. Even with that soldier...Beraht wondered what that had been about.

After that fight, he'd really meant to run and leave Dieter to the stars. Who stayed around for twenty years working for the man who killed his parents? An idiot, that's who.

Clearly the arcen had been warping his brain in all new ways, if he'd thought giving Dieter his damned sword back had been a good idea. All it did was make the man more insufferable and now he was stuck with him!

Maybe he'd get himself killed in this damnable snow. Beraht huddled down further into his clothes. Boots, cloak, both lined with fur. Even his clothes were made with heavy wool, trimmed with dark fur, and his leather gloves were lined with fur softer than any he'd ever felt. He was *still* freezing. How did Kria and Illussor endure it?

Beraht thought he knew. It was no wonder emotions ran so high in the palace. How many of those dead prisoners were dirty secrets being got rid of? He remembered the way the Kaiser had kept touching him, each touch longer than the one before it. It would seem Kria frowned upon that sort of thing about as much as Salhara did – only in the daylight.

He touched his fingers to his lips, which were half-frozen with cold but still sore. Bruised. The bastard had better not get too out of line or he'd have no qualms bring up *that* little incident. Who would have thought the bastard even knew how to kiss? He didn't seem the type to attract suitors or pay for whores. Then again, his father had apparently been the king's favorite bedmate. So who knew.

Why was he even thinking about it? Stars he could not wait to get to Illussor and do whatever it was he had to do there.

Breaker. He was going to destroy the Illussor ability to use magic.

He was half Illussor. Ridiculous. He couldn't be. But Beraht thought on his hair, fine and pale. And his eyes had not been terribly dark either, before the arcen took them over and buried the natural color. But how had he wound up in a remote coastal village, nearly as far from the Disputed Lands as was possible?

A question that would never be answered. If his parents were alive...well, probably they wouldn't have abandoned him. Beraht turned his thoughts elsewhere.

What would he do in Illussor, after he played hero? Assuming it didn't kill him. Beraht snorted at the idea of anyone regarding him as a hero. He hunched down further in the saddle, holding tightly as he let the horse lead. Stars knew he had very little grasp of where they were. He could picture maps all day but it would only go so far.

If all went as everyone was apparently planning...where would he go? He'd always worked for Salhara. Of late for the Brothers. He doubted most of Illussor would be terribly happy with him. So he'd have to go. What would he do if he stayed anyway? His Illussor wasn't bad, but it wasn't great. Illussor was hard to learn, and he'd only managed most of what he knew from reluctant tutors and carefully sneaking around Illussor camps when he could. It had always been something of a miracle that he survived those trips.

Though...was that because he was the Breaker? Sol had said they could sense his...uncorrupted magic. Which made no sense, because he'd never *had* Illussor magic. Surely he would have noticed an ability like that? All he'd ever had was arcen.

Which still thrummed in his blood. Beraht knew he was getting dangerously close to the point of no return. Knew it because he didn't care. The arcen was trying to take over. He shuddered, thinking of the three men who led the Seven Star. Did he really want to become that?

But when the arcen was there he didn't feel so... His thoughts were interrupted as his horse came to a rough halt alongside Dieter. "What's going on?"

"We're stopping," Dieter said. He dismounted and led them through the deep snow to what turned out to be a barn.

How the stars did he see all this stuff? Between the snow and the darkening sky, it was impossible for Beraht to see anything – even seeing his own hand was becoming a feat. He started to make a comment about animals and seeing in the dark, but suddenly felt too tired.

They wasted no time bedding down the horses, Iah standing with the bags while the other three worked. Then Dieter led them back out into the snow, and they followed him in a tight line, clinging to one another's cloaks, through the snow and wind until they reached a house that seemed farther away than it really was.

It was dark. Cold and empty. In the entryway, a large sunken area slightly apart from the rest of the house, Dieter shrugged out of his cloak and stamped the snow from his boots. He combed snow from his hair, then stepped into the house proper. The others followed suite, Sol assisting Iah as needed.

Beraht gathered up wood stacked by the door and lit a fire with a softly muttered word. He heard Dieter behind him, and steeled himself for insult, knowing he was being sneered at. But Dieter said nothing, merely traveling around the house to light the few lanterns. Three in all, and with the fire they managed to fill the large, one-roomed cabin with a warm, friendly light.



Warmth. Beraht thought he could die happy. He stayed by the fire until the sounds of food being brought out drew his attention, and even then he was reluctant to leave the fireside. But his stomach grumbled, and finally Beraht moved to join the others. He sat down next to Dieter, directly across from...Beraht frowned, searching for the name.

Iah. That was it. "So you're Illussor?" he said into the silence.

"Yes," Iah said. He turned his head in Beraht's direction. "It is an honor to meet you. I did not think I would live to see the day..."

Beraht grunted. "I don't know about that. So what does 'uncorrupted magic' mean? Sol didn't really explain that."

"It's like..." Iah began to move his head back and forth. Peculiar. Like a bird who didn't know how to hold still. "Arcen flowers, I guess. That's the easiest way to explain it to you."

"You mean before they're turned into a drug," Beraht said.

"Yes."

"Interesting." Beraht mulled over that as he ate the bread, cheese and dried meat that was probably going to be all they ate for the length of the journey. He tried not to grimace. "I don't suppose our hosts left some form of alcohol for us?"

Sol laughed. "Trying to warm up still?"

"I saw you shivering," Beraht retorted. He stood up and went to explore the meager kitchen area himself. And crowed a victory when he found a heavy earthen jug full of what smelled like a potent if somewhat crude wine. "Does anyone want to indulge with me?"

"Why not?" Sol asked. Beside him Iah agreed.

Beraht eyed Dieter. "What about you, Wolf with the arcen sword?"

"Did you want to wear that wine, Beraht?"

It still made him twitch, the way Dieter said his name. Damn the man he knew it too. Like...Beraht didn't know what. But he didn't like it. "So is that a no?" he asked, unclenching his teeth.

"I don't drink," Dieter said. He moved to go tend the fire. Probably didn't trust the magic that had started it, Beraht thought resentfully. He slammed down the cups he'd dug out of a cupboard and filled them nearly to the brim.

He downed it in one swallow. He watched Sol help Iah as he refilled his cup. "What happened to your eyes?"

Iah stiffened, then slowly relaxed.

Sol shot him a warning look. "You need to learn tact, Lieutenant."

"My apologies, General." Beraht muttered into his wine. "It was just a question."

"Tawn happened," Sol said after several minutes.

Beraht winced.

"I..." Iah frowned, fingers moving restlessly on his cup of wine.

"To be honest, I'm surprised it hasn't been done before. It's horrible from my perspective, but from a Salharan or Krian perspective..."

Dieter startled all of them when he replied. "It has been done before. I beat six of my men nearly to death for doing it. Von Kortig may seem idle, a 'ghost' as most call him, but amongst the soldiers it's well known he has a taste for torture. More than a few of his victims have been blinded Illussor."

"The Salharans, I guess, never thought of it." Sol frowned pensively. "Until Tawn. Safer to kill them outright."

Dieter remained by the fire. "Who is this Tawn?"

"A Brother," Sol said. "As good as I at playing games, and with a taste for more brutal methods. Not unlike von Kortig, I suppose. Do not be surprised if we see him at some point...there are personal matters between he and I that need to be resolved."

Dieter said nothing.

Beraht raised his brows but did not ask. He had known that Sol deVry and his brother in law were not close friends, but he had not known they were hostile. Something in Sol's face told him his questions would not be taken well. Not that he particularly cared. The Brothers were the real ruling body in Salhara, but that didn't mean they got along. Hostility generally seemed to be the preferred state of things.

Whatever. He didn't have to worry about it anymore; not until the Seven Star learned they were traitors and came for their stars. He swore he could feel it burn on his back, and wondered if the empty spaces had started to fill in. The mark was passed along when a bearer died; no other way. Given, through a spell, to whomever the Brothers chose. His Captain had given Beraht his star. Beraht had thought it would mean he finally had a place to really belong. Something better than the army.

As usual, he'd been horrifically wrong but had continued to press anyway. Now he was in a cabin with a Salharan traitor, a blind Illussor and a man he longed to shove off a cliff. Beraht downed the remains of his wine, and considered pouring a third. But too much and tomorrow would be more of an agony than it was already looking to be. "So where are we all sleeping?"

"Perhaps the thin-blooded Salharans should take the bed," Dieter said, looking directly at him.

Beraht considered pitching his cup at Dieter's head. "So long as I don't have to sleep with you again. You put off more heat than a house caught on fire in the middle of summer."

"Too cold, too hot – is nothing good enough for you? If you insist, then by all means take the floor." Dieter stood and stalked across the room to the kitchen area. Stripping off his tunic and shirts, he then ripped off the blood-soaked bandages on his arm. From a saddlebag in the kitchen, he drew out fresh bandages and rewrapped the wound.

"Does that need stitches?" Sol asked.

"No," Dieter said. "A night's rest will suffice." He pulled his clothes back on, then grabbed his cloak from by the door and sat by the fire with it over his shoulders. The thing had to be soaking wet, but Dieter acted like it was dry and comfortable. They watched in silence as he drew his sword and began meticulously to clean it.

"Che," Beraht said, stifling a yawn. Enough with the waking world. It was time to sleep. The bed in the corner was neatly made, covered in a heavy, hand-made quilt and probably had a few more blankets beneath it. At the foot was folded another blanket. Grabbing the spare blanket, Beraht stretched out by the fire. He ignored Dieter, who continued to work on his sword. He was nearly asleep when he heard the others move, saw the room go dark as the lamps were extinguished, leaving only the crackling fire to provide light. The bed creaked as Sol and Iah lay down.

Dieter lay out on the floor beside him, all but buried by his cloak, though Beraht could just see where one hand lay on his sword. He turned his head the other way and fell almost immediately to sleep.



# PART TWO

## ILLUSSOR

*A man with a sword has a means to stay alive.*  
*A man with a named sword has a reason to stay alive.*  
-Krian saying



## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

"Esta!" Trul was bellowing her name even as the door slammed open. "You must come!"

"What in the world..." Esta looked up with a frown. She'd worked hard to earn a small space of free time and had been quite happy to spend it reading. It figured a crisis would crop up.

Trul grabbed her hands and hauled her up. *"It's your brother."*

Esta was running almost before she had her slippers properly on her feet. She gathered her silk skirts high and barreled through the hallways, nearly falling down the grand staircase. Matthias caught her as she reached the grand hallway. "Essie."

"Where is he?" Esta looked wildly around, then bolted from Matthias as four men entered the palace. She'd recognize him anywhere. "Iah!"

"Esta?" And the voice was his, and Esta wanted to cry.

But as she reached him, she stumbled to a halt. "Iah...what..." She stared in horror at her brother, as his appearance finally struck her. Several days growth on his face, hair a mess, and he smelled a fright. Clearly they'd been traveling hard; you could hardly tell the true color of his silver-white hair. But the bandages. On his eyes. Oh goddess. "What happened, Iah?"

An awkward silence fell. At last Iah spoke, voice faint with dread, misery. "They're gone, Essie. I don't...I can't see anymore. Not ever."

"Oh, Iah..." Esta threw herself into her brother's arms and held on for dear life. "Are you okay otherwise?" she asked at last, wiping her eyes. Resuming her usual calm as much as she could.

"I'm fine, Essie." Iah settled his hands on her shoulders awkwardly, then followed the line of her neck up to her cheek, touching it softly. "I missed you, little sister. Are you well?"

Esta threw her arms around his neck and hugged him again. "You're alive, I'm fine." She finally stepped aside so that everyone else could greet him, but did not let go of his left hand.

"Iah," Matthias said. "It looks like you've got quite a story to tell. Don't think this will get you out of taking your title back. Your sister has been absolutely intolerable as a Duchess. I demand you take it away from her."

"Matti," Iah said with a grin. "She's glaring at you, isn't she?"

"Isn't she always?" Matthias stooped to embrace him briefly. "I'm glad you're back, safe and...well, mostly sound. It could have been worse."

"Where is Kalan?" Iah asked, gripping Matthias's shoulder briefly in acknowledgement of his words.

"Here," Kalan said, stepping forward. "I was terrified of the blue dress that came streaking down the stairs. Those dresses are dead frightening when they get going. Oh, she's glaring at me now."

Iah shook his head and held fast when Kalan gripped his arm in greeting. "Have you two done nothing but torment her while I've been gone?"

"Isn't that what you asked us to do?" Kalan asked with wide-eyed innocence. "Oh! I shouldn't have said that in front of her." He danced away before she could hit him.

Esta still clung to her brother as he began to greet others, but allowed her own attention to wander toward the men who had walked in with him. They all were filthy, clearly exhausted. She caught the eye of the Housekeeper and gave her a slight nod. The woman vanished to start preparing rooms.

The first man, standing on her brother's other side, was clearly Salharan. His eyes burned dark yellow and he watched the room like a wary cat. Dark gray hair, lithe but obviously strong. A strange contrast to his eyes. Like silver and gold. He wasn't pretty, or even really handsome, but he caught the eye all the same. There was a melancholy air about him. She slid her eyes toward the next man.

He towered. Massive and dark, a wildness about him that wasn't helped at all by the fur on his cloak. Wolf fur, she thought. His hair was



silver at the temples, but otherwise he didn't look all that old. Perhaps only a few years older than Matthias, who was thirty. He wore a sword, she realized a moment later, eyes going wide. A sword. It was huge. How did he wear it so lightly? There was a jewel in the top of it. A real jewel, as dark as blood. Pretty. Why was it on a sword? Why was there a Krian in the palace?

She set the question aside for later and looked toward the last man. Felt her heart speed up. He was...handsome, even when filthy. His eyes were bright yellow. Like the sun. Different from the other Salharan. Currently those yellow eyes were looking nervously around the grand hall, as though he were expecting some trap to spring. That wouldn't do. Esta squeezed her brother's hand and then let go. "Enough, Matthias. Can't you see they're exhausted? Let them all rest and tomorrow you can pester them with questions. Iah is home, that is all that matters for now. Give them a chance to recover; it's amazing they made it through the snow."

Matthias grinned. "Yes, Duchess. Your will is my command."

Esta ignored him and clapped her hands briskly, dismissing everyone gathered and summoning servants to send scurrying off with orders. When the hall was empty, she turned to her brother. "Now, Iah. Who are your companions?"

Iah hesitated, lifting his hand. Esta watched as the gray-haired man took it, and realized he was letting Iah know where he was. She kept back a worried frown. Iah – blind! How was she supposed to manage that? She'd never...Esta stopped. Later. Now was not the time.

"This is Sol deVry, formerly of the Salharan Royal Army."

Sol sketched a bow. His eyes wandered the room and alighted on Kalan, who looked back at him in question. "Spiegel, perhaps, might sound more familiar to you."

Kalan broke into a grin. He surged forward to clasp Sol's arm. "Are you really? It is a pleasure to finally meet you! I wondered which one of you was..."

Esta looked at them. Something else to investigate later. Iah continued the introductions. "The other Salharan is Beraht..." Esta watched the way Matthias and Kalan turned to look at Beraht. So that was his name. But it was a Krian name...strange. Something was going on that she did not understand.

She forced herself to remain silent. Tomorrow Kalan, Matthias and Iah were all going to feel her wrath for obviously being kept out of whatever was going on. Not now.

"And the last..." Iah hesitated a moment. "Dieter von Adolwulf, formerly—"

"The Wolf!" Matthias exclaimed. "Never say so!" He stared at Dieter as if he had not noticed him until then. "Are you really the Scarlet Wolf? Obviously you're Krian. Why are you here?"

"Matthias!" Esta snapped, hands on her hips so their trembling would not show. The Wolf? That could be a problem. "Didn't I say it could wait until tomorrow? It's late. Or late enough for them, I'm sure. Get back to work, I'm sure you've been slouching off. That goes for you too, Kalan."

They all jumped when Dieter laughed. He looked at Esta. "Are you a Duchess or a Queen?"

For a moment the group was quiet – and then every Illussor except Esta began to laugh.

"Dieter," Iah said. "You've just made yourself one more enemy."

"Then I guess the world is not so different here," Dieter said.

Esta ignored him, and eyed Matthias and Kalan until they wisely shut up. She saw the Housekeeper appear in the doorway from the corner of her eye. Thank goodness. "Come along," she said, polite but cool. "I will show you to your rooms. Baths have also been drawn for you." She smiled at Beraht, then took her brother's arm and began to walk.

Iah tripped as they hit the stairs. "Oh!" Esta bit her lip. "Iah—"

"It's all right," Iah said, but she could see he was humiliated. "It takes getting used to."

"Duchess," Sol stepped forward. "Allow me to help? I am used to assisting him."

She blinked, the nodded slowly. Wow. Perhaps he did not look like much, but that voice was positively entrancing when he wanted it to be. She had not noticed before, when he spoke to Kalan. "Very well. I am sorry, Iah."

"Don't be. It's all right, Essie." She saw him visibly relax as Sol took his arm, and walked alongside them. Listening to what Sol said and watching what he did.

"Twelve stairs more, Iah." Sol said quietly. "And I'm sure you must know the turns."

"By sight," Iah replied. "Better tell me."

Esta gathered her skirts and increased her pace to lead the way, mind whirling. Iah blind...were they really gone? Couldn't he be fixed? She chastised herself. There was nothing to be *fixed*.

But poor Iah...

"This way, gentleman," She said briskly, knowing exactly which rooms would have been prepared. Her brother slept in the east wing,

closer to where the soldiers trained. He had moved there after the fight with their father, not wanting to stay in the suite of rooms allotted to the Cehka family. Even if their father hadn't been to the palace for more than a decade. She opened the first door, two away from Iah's, and took a quick look around. Brown, maroon. Heavily masculine. "My Lord von Adolwulf," she said with a half-bow. "If this room pleases?"

Dieter nodded. "Thank you."

"Of course. Relax, rest. If you need anything at all, you've only to pull that cord and a servant will come immediately. Should there be a problem, have me summoned at once." She pointed to a door. "That leads to the room next door, though of course it's locked right now. It's intended for those who arrive with families." Turning, she led the rest of the group out and went to the next door.

The next room was predominantly blue, a variety of shades against dark wood. She beamed at Beraht, wishing suddenly she could get him to smile. He looked like a man who spent all his time frowning. "Is this all right?"

Beraht looked around the room. "Yes...thank you."

"You're welcome," Esta said with another smile. "If you need anything at all, just have me summoned. Food should be arriving shortly." Beraht barely seemed to notice the words, though he nodded absently.

Esta murmured a good night and then led the way to her brother's room. "Lord Sol, your room—"

"He's staying with me, Essie."

"What?" Esta blinked. Then the words registered. She took a second look at her brother and the man still holding his arm. Too much was going on in one small evening. He'd been lost. Found, but not whole. Now apparently he'd brought home a Salharan lover. "Very well. But I want the full story in the morning. You've no idea how badly I want to drag you to the library and pepper you with questions, Iah."

"I can hear it in your voice, Essie." Iah said with a laugh. "I promise tomorrow I will answer as many questions as I possibly can. Even the ones for which you can't beat answers out of Matti and Kal, because even blind I can see you're seething."

Esta smiled and kissed his cheek. She nodded to Sol, giving him a more hesitant smile. This man hadn't won her approval yet. But he did take care of Iah, that was obvious, so he had a chance. He seemed to sense this, and returned her gesture with the same. "Goodnight, Duchess. Thank you."

"Goodnight." She turned and strode down the hall, head aching with a million new thoughts and problems.

Iah sighed as the door closed behind them. "She's upset."

"I would imagine so," Sol replied quietly. "Your sister looks as though she carries a lot on her shoulders."

"She does," Iah whispered. "And now I don't know how much of it I can take back. It was never fair of me to put it all on her. But at least...well, if Beraht succeeds, the worst of her burdens will end."

Sol's arms came up around him, tugging him close. Iah clung to his tunic, comforted despite the fact that they both smelled wretched. Lips brushed his forehead, and he felt a small thrill. "Yes, but if she is going to be Queen – and even an idiot can see that is the Prince's goal – then she will have many more. I do not think she will break. And did I not promise to help you?"

"Yes..." Iah said with a smile, and pulled away. It faded slightly as he recalled the help recently given. "Thank you, by the way, for helping at the stairs. It's awful, thinking you know your home only to realize you don't know it at all."

Sol stroked his cheek. "You are quick to learn. By the end of the week, you will no longer need me."

"That's not true." He pressed a quick kiss to Sol's palm, then let it go. "I don't know about you, but I could use a bath."

"I certainly would not mind being clean again," Sol said with a laugh, taking Iah's hand. Iah let himself be led to what was clearly the fireplace and let Sol strip him, settle him into a large bathtub. He rested his head against the back of it, sighing in relief. The water smelled scented, something that smelled like the pine forests.

His room, on the other hand, smelled slightly stale. Iah sighed. Though he'd always returned every winter, it felt like he'd been gone a lifetime. In a way, he did not even feel like he was home. Esta had smelled like lavender...their mother's perfume. Which meant she was upset. Otherwise she wore lilies, or rose when she was angry with Matthias. Of course she'd been upset; she'd probably thought him dead.

He heard Sol moving around the room, and smiled. Ever restless, Sol. He was in motion even when he held perfectly still. "There's plenty of room for two," he said. "If you want." He tried not to let his uncertainty show. Beyond the night Burkhard had died, they'd not been together. The soft kiss from a moment ago was the first display Sol had made since they'd left. Which only made sense, of course.

Was he only clinging to Sol because he literally had nothing else? Iah frowned at the thought. No. Definitely not. He refused to think that. Surely Sol would have pointed such a thing out to him?

Then he heard clothes hit the floor, and felt as Sol climbed into the tub, feet toward Iah's head.

Well, that wouldn't do. Iah moved, shifted until he could rest his head against Sol's shoulder, not caring one whit for the water that splashed onto the carpeted floor. He slid a hand across Sol's chest, feeling a pang that he would never see the man who was now his lover. At least he had some idea, and that voice. Always that voice, which had first drawn him out of the worst of the dark.

Sometimes that day seemed far away. Other times it felt as though it had happened only days ago.

An arm came up, sliding up his wet skin, almost tickling.

"I wish I wasn't so tired," Iah said. "Here we are finally alone and I'm too exhausted to take advantage of it."

Sol's chuckle rumbled in his chest. "I was beginning to think everything a figment of my imagination. I'm glad it was not."

"Me too," Iah said. He sat up slightly, hands sliding along the edge of the tub, searching for the small shelf that would hold soap, cloths for cleaning. "Let's get rid of the smell of horse and go to bed. Maybe I can take advantage in the morning before Esta attacks us." His hands knocked against what sounded like several glass bottles, and he heard the bar of soap drop into the tub.

Sol laughed and retrieved the soap, then proceeded to wash them both.

When they finally made it to bed, Iah thought it the softest, most splendid thing he'd ever felt. It smelled clean, nothing like horse or dust or cold ground. He heard Sol put out the lights and reached out as he climbed into bed, tugging him close. His fingers sought and found Sol's face, enjoying the soft-rough feel of his skin, and then leaned in to kiss him.

It was as wonderful as it had been the first time, and Iah was glad, so very happy, that he'd risked it and taken that first step. Sol tasted warm, like the summer that filled his voice. He'd had a handful of lovers in his life, and a few adventures in town, but no one had ever felt quite like this. Iah hoped he wasn't just clinging to the only person that seemed not to be bothered by his blindness.

Goddess he hoped.

Sol broke the kiss, then leaned back in for a second. But finally he pulled away, and Iah could almost feel the stubbornness in him. "Sleep," he said.

Iah started to protest, suddenly wanting very much *not* to sleep – but the protest came out a yawn and with a brief laugh he conceded defeat. Settling into the blankets and against Sol, breathing in the sent of home and the man beside him, Iah allowed sleep to take him.

Esta glared at her brother, who had buried his face against Sol's shoulder to muffle his laughter. It could be ignored – for the moment. She turned to address the other two men in the room. "So *when* were we going to tell me what was going on?" No one replied, which meant they at least knew they were in trouble.

Kalan dared to speak. "As soon as we were certain—"

"Certain?" Esta repeated. "So I'm not good enough to include while things are uncertain? Hmm..." She folded her arms across her chest and tapped her foot. "Too weak, am I?"

"Now they're in trouble," she heard Iah say.

She narrowed her eyes at him. "Don't think I can't see you over there, Iah. And just because you can't see me doesn't mean I'm not here to smack you."

"Yes, ma'am." Iah said quickly.

Esta wasn't fooled by the contrite tone. "So what exactly is going on? Why am I housing two Salharans and a Krian?"

Matthias answered her. "The Salharans I can explain. Sol has been a spy for quite some time...Beraht...Essie, he's our Breaker."

Silence. Esta looked toward Beraht, who sat quietly in a green chair in the corner. Sunlight streamed into the breakfast room from a wide window. Beneath it was a table laden with food – but she wasn't letting anyone eat until she was satisfied. Oh, no. Let them suffer. Beraht cleaned up was a fine sight. If she didn't know any better, she would swear he looked almost Illussor. "Don't play with me, Matthias. Especially about this. I'd feel it if he was the Breaker."

"That's the arcen," Beraht said. His eyes were nearly as bright as the sunlight flooding the room. "Near as we can tell, it...blocks whatever it is you guys can sense. Wait until it's flushed from my system in a few days." He fell silent, and returned to gazing out the window.

Esta blinked furiously, fisting her hands tightly in her dress. She looked to Matthias. "Is he really then?"

"Yes, Essie." Matthias smiled at her.

Crossing the room, Esta stooped and embraced Beraht, who froze. "I'm so glad you're here. Thank you."

"S-sure," Beraht replied, still and tense in her arms. She stood and smoothed her skirts, catching Matthias's frown in the corner of her eye. Didn't like the hug, did he? Well, served him right for keeping secrets. She beamed at Beraht. "You've no idea how much it means to have you here. Will you really help us?"

Beraht shrugged. "Why not?"

Smiling at him again, knowing Matthias was seething, Esta whirled around and planted her hands on her hips. "So the other one is the spy?"

"Sol," Iah corrected gently. "And he is the one who ensured the Breaker made it here. Without him, I would still be in a Salharan dungeon and Beraht would be dead."

Esta nodded, then remembered her brother couldn't see the gesture. "Yes, Iah. No insult was intended." She shifted, folded her arms across her chest. "Just when were we going to tell me all this?"

"We were going to send you a note," Kalan said. "From very far away."

She glared at him until Kalan slunk down in his seat.

"So explain the Krian."

"Dieter," Iah said again.

Esta sighed. "Dieter, then. Why is he here? Is he really *the* Wolf? Why is he not here this morning?"

"Oh, he's the Wolf all right," Beraht said, glaring out the window. "I'm sure he's just licking his wounds."

Matthias snorted. "Perhaps unlike the rest of us he knew to avoid the bloodshed."

"If you make one more comment," Esta said with a patient smile. "Bloodshed will be the least of your concerns."

"Yes, ma'am."

"Back to the Krian."

Sol laughed softly. "Beraht is the one responsible for Dieter's presence here. It was...a fluke, I suppose. No doubt he wonders why he is not in chains."

"Should be..." Esta only just heard Beraht's muttering. "The man is a menace."

"How so?" Esta asked sharply.

Sol frowned at Beraht. "You are out of line."

"At least you don't beat me for it."

"Perhaps I should."

Esta watched the exchange in silence, uncertain of the undercurrents she could feel running beneath it. "Is the Wolf going to be a problem?"

"No, he's not." Matthias spoke firmly. "Let me speak with him. Though I would appreciate any support you could lend me later, Esta. Perhaps you don't think you're in charge around here, but everyone else disagrees."

"What are you scheming?"

"You're going to yell at me either way, so I think I'll just keep my silence."

Esta looked at him. "Oh, really."

"Yes, really. And there's nothing you can do about it." Matthias stood up, brushing out his dark green coat. "In fact, I think I'll go make my first move now. Kalan can stand in for me, so far as punishment goes." He crossed the room and took one of Esta's hands. "And we would have told you, Esta. But it was hard enough for us – we didn't want to get your hopes up too, if something went wrong." He ducked his head and kissed her cheek, then fled the room.

Esta glared at his back, then turned back to face the rest of the room, daring them to speak. "I suppose you must be hungry," she said ungraciously. "You may eat."

"Thank you, Queen." Kalan grinned. "I mean Duchess."

"Except you." Esta ignored his litany of protests as she helped herself, and then took the seat nearest Beraht's, sharing the small table between them. "So were you in the Salharan army?"

"Yes." Beraht glanced at her briefly, then went back to his food, sucking on a small piece of orange melon.

"What was your rank?"

"...Lieutenant," Beraht replied after a moment. "I really don't think you want to ask any more questions...Duchess."

"Esta, please." Esta nibbled for a moment on a bit of pastry smothered in honey and nuts. "I really am grateful you're willing to help us..." She set the food aside. "I really never thought we'd find a Breaker..."

Beraht frowned. "Breaker, Breaker – what's so rare. I seriously doubt my father was the first one to get a little too friendly with a foreign woman."

"Probably not," Kalan interrupted. "But you're the first one we've located. And if you're right about the arcen blocking your Illussor magic—"



"I don't have Illussor magic," Beraht interrupted. "You can bet if I did that bastard never would have gotten the better of me."

Sol glared at him. "Watch your language."

"No," Beraht said resentfully.

Esta laughed. "Don't fuss over me."

"Yeah, she uses language worse than that all the time."

"You are asking for it," Esta said frostily. Kalan didn't seem perturbed. She sniffed and went back to Beraht. "To whom were you referring?"

Beraht muttered something beneath his breath, then bit down on another slice of melon hard, as if he were pretending it was something else. "The bastard who named me."

"Dieter," Iah said. "His name is Dieter."

"I'm Salharan," Beraht replied scathingly. "I know what his name is."

"Ah," Esta said. Her mind tumbled over what she knew of Salharan custom, which was little. "Names are important, yes? And they change with marriage and all...How did you acquire a Krian name?"

Beraht choked on one of the honey-covered pastries. "It's not important!" He looked almost desperate as he stared at her. "Please, it's trivial. Let's not ruin breakfast by discussing something so boring."

Esta snapped her head around as she heard Iah snickering. "I will yank your hair out of your head if you do not begin to act your age. Or perhaps I'll yank Sol's hair out..."

"You're feisty this morning," Iah complained. "Did you get enough sleep?"

"Not as much as you'll get, darling brother, if you do not be quiet."

Iah muttered something under his breath, then wisely fell silent.

Esta nodded, frowned at Kalan for good measure, then went back to Beraht. "Would you like a tour after breakfast?" She asked, smiling as though she hadn't just been threatening her brother bodily harm.

Beraht smiled back, slowly, hesitantly, but a smile all the same. "Sure, Duchess. Why not?"

"Marvelous."



## CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Matthias nodded and murmured to people as he walked, smiling at everyone who bowed or curtsied. But the motions were entirely automatic; even his feet moved by habit more than by thought. His attention was only for his destination, and how he would make his idea work.

Because now that he'd thought of it, he wasn't sure what to do if it didn't work.

The only wolves he'd ever seen were dead ones. The Wolf in his castle now was something else altogether. He'd only gotten a few glances last night, but that was all it took to see why so many people feared him. Even, it was said, his own soldiers.

Matthias caught a servant as she exited the Wolf's room. "Is he there?"

"Yes, Highness." The girl bobbed a hasty nod, eyes flitting back toward the door, back to the prince, then to the floor.

"Is all well?"

"Y-yes, Highness." She did the eye thing again.

Matthias frowned. "Then what's wrong?"

She looked up, and he realized it wasn't fear as he'd thought – it was fear mixed with hate. "My father died fighting him, Highness..."

"Of course," Matthias said. "If it troubles you, then have another girl tend him. I've given permission, if anyone challenges you."

The girl bobbed her head and started to go, shoulders sagging with relief.

"But Beki—" He caught her eyes as she turned back to him. "Remember that your father killed Krians just as he has Illussor."

Beki nodded, but it was a stiff gesture and she neglected to curtsy as she fled.

Matthias sighed. At least she hadn't tried anything foolish. He made a note to speak with Esta later on the matter – she always dealt with those sorts of things far better than he. He knocked on the door, then pushed it open.

At first it looked as though the room was empty – then he saw Dieter by the window, and wondered how he'd missed the man. Perhaps because he held so still. "Even at my craziest," he said. "I never thought I would be welcoming the Wolf into my palace."

Dieter turned away from the window, and regarded him in silence.

Matthias stared back. More than a few tales abounded about this man. A hulking brute with red eyes and an insatiable lust for blood. A terrifying monster who did not understand the concept of mercy. A hard, cold general who bore the mark of the Krian's god of death, whose own men feared him.

Quite a bit different from a man who was simply large when compared to the Illussor tendency toward slenderness. His skin was weathered by a life spent outdoors, no doubt he was well-branded with marks of war. If Matthias ever felt suicidal he would call those pale, gray-green eyes pretty. Never had he been so painfully aware of his own pampered life in the palace – certainly it wasn't easy to be the crown prince, but he bet it was nothing like what this man had lived through.

"I doubt you are half so confused as I," Dieter said.

Matthias laughed. "Does that mean you will not elaborate on the reasons for your being here? Your companions seemed somewhat reticent."

Dieter grinned, and Matthias could not help but think it wolfish. He was starting to sound like the soldiers. "That is because none of them really wanted me along – unexpected events forced our hands."

"No one is going to tell me, are they?"

"It is a boring story, Highness. Did you come here for a purpose, or merely to gauge how much trouble I am going to be?"

"A purpose. Esta might think all I do is laze about the palace, but that's only because I don't raise a ruckus the way she does." Matthias motioned him forward. "Having you here is already upsetting a great many people; I'm sure I don't have to elaborate on why."

Dieter shrugged. "What is your purpose?"

"Given all I've heard, I expected something a bit different than quiet compliance."

"I'm a soldier," Dieter replied, as if that explained everything.

Perhaps it did. "Come with me," he said. "There are things I would like to show you, before I make my proposal." He glanced at the sword hanging at Dieter's hip. "You're welcome to wear that, though I'd prefer you not draw it if you do not absolutely have to."

Dieter's face flickered with anger for a moment, then it was blank again. "I fight soldiers, not civilians."

"Of course. I meant no offense." Matthias said carefully. "I meant simply that seeing you is enough to terrify. Not that you would hurt anyone, though I hear plenty of stories about the rampaging beast you can be."

There seemed to be no reply forthcoming.

Matthias sighed. Talking to Dieter was much like talking to his father – except his father was silent from listlessness. Dieter seemed more like bottled fury...a wolf in a cage. Matthias mentally rolled his eyes at himself. It really was all too easy to associate the man with the beast. "Come." He led the way from the room, painfully aware of his inadequacies next to the man beside him.

He led the way through the castle, tempted briefly to use the quartz in his pocket to mask them – but Dieter proved far more useful at ensuring they were undisturbed. Matthias lost count after the tenth person to suddenly find a different hallway to be in.

It was almost funny. Well, people would have time to become accustomed. If Kria, for whatever reason, had been stupid enough to lose their Wolf he was not going to give them a chance to take him back.

Out the back door of the palace, through the garden and the hidden door at the end of it. No one was about, for which Matthias was grateful. Ordering people out of the garden was always awkward.

The stairs were as dark as ever, the smell of damp and mildew and smoke from the torches pungent. He led the way mostly from memory. After so many visits, he did not require light. The tunnel was still ominous, and if it bothered him he winced to think what it must do to Esta. He still wished he'd been able to take that duty from her – but Esta held it as dear as her mother and grandmother. It was their burden. He walked the length of the tunnel from memory; he had not used a torch to light the way since they'd taken his brother to his death.

Matthias sighed softly, limping alongside Dieter – embarrassed but grateful that he kept pace without comment. What he would give to

have the Wolf's strength...he shoved the dangerous thought aside. Dwelling on past mistakes did no good. Better to focus on the ones that could be fixed.

They had the Breaker, and now hopefully he could take care of the last remaining loose end of that problem.

"So what dirty secret is kept here?"

Matthias laughed ruefully. "However did you guess? And you'll see in a bit – but I will tell you it is why we need your friend Beraht."

"Beraht is no friend of mine," Dieter said coldly.

"My apologies then," Matthias said, and bit down on his curiosity. "Should I keep you two separated? I had not realized it was genuine antagonism."

"If you want to keep the peace, sew his mouth shut." Dieter's voice was cool, but Matthias could hear an underlying...frustration beneath it.

They continued on in silence for several minutes. There was no indication as to when and where the tunnel ended – more than once he had nearly walked into the door, too absorbed in the rhythm of walking to realize that he should stop. By now, though, his feet knew when to halt. Matthias pulled his keys out and swung the door open.

He hated the room, not least of all because it was his little brother who occupied it. Dead but not; lost forever to anchoring and spreading the magic that was killing the people it had been intended to help.

Matthias reached out a hand to touch his brother, but stopped just short of doing so. It would achieve nothing. He let his hand drop, then spread his arms to indicate the room. "Welcome to the Crystal Chamber."

"Breath of the Autumn Prince..." Dieter said. "What is this?"

"Do you know why our three countries fight over the Regenbogen?"

Dieter shrugged his immense shoulders, the jacket found and hastily fitted for him barely enduring the movement. "I fight to keep it in Kria's possession. Salhara wants it for its arcen-rich fields. No one knows why Illussor wants it."

"It belonged to Illussor once," Matthias said. "Kria took it from us nearly a century ago – I could not tell you why, but I know from records that it used to belong to Illussor. Back when that was not our name..." He frowned, staring at a section of crystal on the far wall. If not for the corpse-like figure in the center, the crystal and strange light flooding the room might have been beautiful...as it was, it only gave him

nightmares. "But these days, we fight mostly to keep the rest of you out of our country and to search for the Breaker – though few realize that, and those that do understand very little of what or why."

He was surprised when Dieter nodded. "You do not intend to tell them why until after the deed is done."

"Yes – mostly because of the council. They already dislike me; I do not need them undermining me further."

"Why do they dislike you?" Dieter asked, folding his arms.

Matthias shrugged. "I am not my father and that makes them uncomfortable. He grinned. "Not that it matters – they'll be cleaned out soon enough. Not having magic will set them on their ears, and they'll have no choice but to listen to me. Which brings us back around to my intended purpose for you." He motioned to his brother. "When the Breaker shatters the spell in this room, my people will have no magic. At all. Even before the Crystal Chamber, we had some. Like Salhara, it is our way of life. Kria is different. Your country has always eschewed magic, for whatever reasons."

The look Dieter gave him made Matthias feel like he was back in the nursery with a tutor whose patience had been sorely tried. "Magic is lazy and weak. It allows a man to rely on outside sources to do his work for him."

"I see," Matthias said. "I disagree, but that is neither here nor there. What matters is that I'm about to strip my people of something they've always had." He motioned to his leg. "I will be crippling them. Which means that should we become involved in yet more fighting – which I am hoping to avoid – my men will have no idea what to do."

Comprehension flashed in Dieter's eyes. "You are insane."

"Royalty is often accused of being so – but I am egotistical enough to say that I do not think a sane man would rule a country."

Dieter grunted. "Then you are stupid – if one serving girl does not bother to hide her hatred of me, I do not think setting me to train your soldiers is a very good idea. You are either indeed quite stupid or desperate."

"Desperate, I assure you." Matthias smiled, feeling tired. "I have been struggling over how to help my country relearn to live, and the lives of my soldiers and those living closest to the border have been high on my list of worries. I'm not stupid – people hate you. According to all my reports and every last far-fetched story heard from soldiers, you are all too good at what you do. The Scarlet Wolf. The Bloody Wolf. The Wolf of Kria. More often than not, you are simply the Wolf." His smile turned suddenly into a grin. "Though I often hear far more colorful names for

you as well. While I'm not looking forward to the headaches that are forthcoming for doing this, I would be even stupider to let a war no one understands keep me from gaining the General that has ever so neatly fallen right into my lap."

Matthias paused, and stared at his brother. "I could go abroad for teachers; goddess only knows those coastal bastards know how to use a sword..." He looked back at Dieter, pale eyes intent. "But Kria has turned combat into an art. You are, by some strange chance, here when I most need one such as you. I assume your country no longer has need of you...or at least I doubt they still hold your loyalty..."

"No, they do not." Dieter's voice said he would not elaborate.

"Then whatever I can do to convince you to help me, I will do it. You've only to say."

Gray-green eyes watched him, pale and muted in the strange light of the chamber. "What should a soldier think of a king so eager to hire an enemy? What should a king think of a man so willing to betray his own country?"

Matthias grinned. "I wouldn't know – I'm neither a soldier nor a king. I'm a scheming prince who must do the best he can. Anyway, it's obvious Iah trusts you. That's enough for me. Though I do wish someone would tell me *why* you're here..."

"I will help," Dieter said. "At worst, I will simply be put to death again. But if you want my assistance, you must allow me to do things my way."

Matthias looked at him, then at his sword, then back up. "I have no idea how to even hold that thing. Swords to me are an exotic weapon used by an enemy with a peculiar taste for blood." He sighed. "I'm pretty sure you just told me I'll be getting more headaches, but so be it." His lips twitched. "I'll use them to explain away my bouts of insanity."

"If this stunt does not dethrone you for insanity, Highness, nothing will."

"You may as well call me Matthias."

Dieter looked at the man frozen in the center of the chamber. "So what is this?"

"He's all that's left of my younger brother. His name was – is – Benji. The royal line has always borne the burden of providing Keepers. The magic is strongest in us. Do you know anything about Illussor magic?"

"Only that it's supremely annoying and cowardly."

Matthias winced. "Our powers include manipulation, yes, but that's not the primary focus of our powers. You will not see it here, as



the palace renders most people incapable – ironic when the source of that magic lies here. Anyway...the power behind those abilities relies heavily on our minds. We are...linked, I suppose you could say. When it's strong enough we can even read each other's thoughts. That is how we muster the energy for a Scream – all the power goes to one person. Even before we became the Illussor that is how we functioned. It is through that ability that we were able to create all this...it is through the Keeper, Benji, that the power created in this chamber is sent to everyone else."

He shifted his weight, both legs getting sore from the effort of standing so long. Unfortunately, there would be no chance to rest when he got back. Matthias stifled a sigh. "It was only meant to last a generation or so, and primarily just in soldiers. But it spread further and deeper than anyone meant or realized until too late. Nor can we simply stop it – we've grown used to it. To take it away would be like ripping off a limb."

Dieter nodded. "What you have to do is break the limb, and let it heal itself."

"Exactly." Matthias paused, then smiled. "If this works out, you want to join the council? There should be a spot for Minister of War opening up in a few more years."

"Politicians try my patience."

Matthias nodded. "Shall we head back? And I'll warn you now – don't stand too close to Esta when I tell her what's going on."

Dieter nodded.

Everything was different. Slightly surreal. What did a man do when he found himself alive long after he was supposed to be dead? Dieter curled his fingers around the hilt of his sword, thumb stroking across the red jewel in the pommel.

Apparently he got himself hired to train lifelong enemies to fight properly.

He wondered how soon they would kill him, after he sent the first dozen or so to the healers. Dieter looked up from a snow-filled courtyard that was both familiar and different. Familiar because of the snow and cold, and the way a handful of people braved it simply to make their journey shorter – servants, most likely, who had no time to take the long way around the castle.

Across the unending snow beyond the castle, he knew, was Kria. Miles and days away. Where a Kaiser no doubt plotted all new ways to torture and kill him for the new set of humiliations. Let the bastard rot. Dieter was finished with him. He had, despite the sour taste the methods left in his mouth, had the last laugh.

But his men...less than a thousand Scarlet left now. He wondered if the Kaiser would simply disband them...or punish them in his stead. Dieter glowered at his reflection, then turned sharply away from the window. His hand still gripped his sword, and he forced himself to let go.

Why was he here?

Because of that damned idiot.

Dieter snarled and turned his thoughts elsewhere. How did one train men who did not even know how to hold a sword? Did they know anything about fighting normally?

Tits of the Winter Princess, they would not even know how to make such things. Dieter could feel his head begin to ache. Never again would he complain of recruits fresh from the farm and their mother's milk. There were Krian boys on those farms now who knew more about swordsmanship than a full-grown Illussor.

The coliseum had been easier to deal with than this.

He turned back to the window, one thought after another hammering at his brain until he wanted to break something.

Preferably Beraht, but that would have to wait until the Breaker – Dieter snorted – did his job.

A knock at the door broke his musings. "Enter!"

Expecting another skittish, angry serving girl, Dieter was surprised to see Sol enter with a dinner tray.

"I snitched it from the kitchen – probably for the best, from all I heard down there."

Dieter looked at him. "Can't stop prowling, cat?"

"Cat?" Sol repeated. He started to laugh, but then sobered. "There was something I wanted to talk to you about. I wanted to do it much sooner, but it did not seem like a good idea to bring it up while we traveled. The going was rough without adding to the tension."

"What?" Dieter said, sitting down but ignoring the food.

"Burkhard," Sol said heavily, still standing. "After I spoke with you in the dungeon, I encountered him in the hallway. My eyes gave me away. We fought – Iah killed him. I wanted to say I'm sorry. I know he was something of a friend – at least he always thought highly of you."

Dieter grunted. "He thought highly of what he thought I should be. He was a soldier, he fought, he died." He looked Sol in the eyes. "He hated Salharans – it was they who ruined his hand. With magic. No doubt he was glad to die trying to kill one." A shake of his head. "He would be less pleased to know he actually died when a blind Illussor stabbed him in the back."

Sol nodded. "I am sorry all the same."

"It comes with the territory, as they say."

"Yet you hold Beraht in great resentment for following the dictates of his territory."

Dieter's eyes darkened. "There is no excuse for slinking around in the dark killing men while they sleep. It is the behavior of cowards. My men always fought fairly, if brutally. Anyone who did otherwise I dealt with. Do not try to defend him to me."

"He saved your life."

"I saved his first, and my one life does not forgive the hundred that died without being given a chance to defend themselves."

Sol frowned. "Does it irk you more that your men are dead, or that he got the better of you?"

Dieter slammed a fist down on the table, rattling the food hard enough that the goblet of water on it spilled over. "Soldiers die. Men win. Others lose. I lost. But it wasn't fairly. The winter halt had already been called. We were three days gone from the Regenbogen. *My men died in their sleep believing they were safe.* Do not justify his actions."

"He has his reasons." Sol held up his hands to ward off Dieter's tirade. "I'm not defending him. Until recently I barely knew the man. I don't really care if you get along or not. But you keep harping on fair, Scarlet Wolf. Your own country fears and hates you, and they do it without understanding. Do you think it's fair then to turn around and hate Beraht without understanding?"

"Get out."

Sol nodded and left.

Dieter glanced at his food, half of which had turned soggy from the overturned water. Muttering an oath, he stood and strode from the room.

People avoided him as he walked the halls. He wasn't even going to begin noting how poorly defensible the whole place was. Taking the palace would be all too easy to do. Dieter memorized the layout as he went, frowning as he pondered where he would most likely find Beraht.

"General Dieter."

Dieter eyed the man who had called his name. "You are the Duke."

"Kalan, please. What brings you out of hiding?"

"I'm searching for Beraht."

Kalan rolled his eyes. "Esta dragged him out to the gardens. She keeps it up, Matthias is going to start pitching fits."

Dieter said nothing, merely nodded and continued on his way. The gardens he remembered.

Once there, locating Beraht was easy enough. He stalked toward them, waiting until Esta had finished speaking.

"What do you want?" Beraht asked.

"To speak with you," Dieter said, biting back whatever else he wanted to say.

Esta smiled politely. "Then I guess I had better leave you men to talk." She winked. "No fighting, all right?" Laughing at her own joke, she strolled from the garden, voice fading as she caught a passing servant in the hallway.

"What?" Beraht snapped. "Did you need someone to beat?"

Dieter tamped down on his ire. Would that he'd just killed the damn man when he had the chance. "Why did you kill my men?"

"You really are here to beat me up."

"If I wanted to beat you, I would not have to ask asinine questions to find a reason." Dieter glared, wishing he'd just stayed in his damn room.

"Why do you care?"

"Just answer the question."

Beraht looked as though he wanted to do no such thing, but did anyway. "No choice. Men like me are good only for one thing – everyone else's dirty work. If I hadn't become a shadow killer, and later gone after your men that night, I'd be dead now."

"So it's all right to kill a hundred to spare one?"

"It wasn't that simple!" Beraht snapped. "The Brotherhood is all I have – had. If I hadn't done what they wanted, I would have died slowly, painfully, and Nameless." His eyes were a hot, bright yellow. "I'm sure that means nothing to a Krian bastard, but I can assure you to die nameless is far worse than losing a damnable sword. It's like never existing." Beraht looked away. "They said if I killed a hundred Scarlet, they would let me live. If I killed a thousand, they would give me a name."

Dieter looked at him in contempt. "Name yourself. I do not understand this obsession with names you people have."

"I wouldn't expect you to understand. Even if you're universally hated, you have a name. Someone gave it to you. Thought you were important enough to identify. You have no idea what it's like to spend your entire life as nothing."

"Bah," Dieter replied. "You know nothing. Take a name for yourself, if one is so important. All you do is make excuses for cowardice."

"What would you know!" Beraht raged. "People hold you in awe as much as they fear you! You have power, you have a place, you have an identity!" His hands were clenched into fists, trembling in rage. "You come down here to ask me questions, only to turn around and mock me! I don't want to be told I'm a coward by a man who decided the best way to deal with everything was to be hated. Isn't that cowardice? You could have been anyone and anything, and you chose to let the world hate you. The easy way out."

Dieter snapped, and wrapped his hand around Beraht's throat. "Do not pretend to understand what drives me."

Beraht lashed out, using his legs when Dieter pinned his arms to the stone wall as he slammed Beraht against it. "Then do not pretend to understand me. You chose to be a bastard, I chose to kill your men in their sleep. Live with it."

He squeezed until Beraht began to find it hard to breathe, then threw him down. "I do not know why I bothered, as it seems I was right after all. Go back to your flirtations; I won't trouble you again."

"Bastard," Beraht hissed. "You're nothing but a stars cursed bastard."

Dieter laughed coldly. "I am called that all the time – yet it is the one thing I am most definitely not. My father did not love my mother, but he did marry her."

"I guess he wanted his precious little gift to the Kaiser to be perfect," Beraht said.

Dieter stopped halfway across the garden, but then continued walking. He didn't stop until he was back in his room, and spent the rest of the night staring at the snow beyond the window.



## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Tawn wiped a smear of blood from his cheek with a scrap of shirt. He stared idly at the bodies on the floor as he dropped the scrap on the floor. The floor was wet and stained in several places; the room reeked of blood and sweat and excrement. Before long the bodies would start to smell as well. Four men lay unmoving against the far wall, a fifth at his feet. All were covered in blood, most of it coming from the empty sockets where their eyes had been.

One eye lay before the fireplace. His last throw had fallen a bit short – it was that which finally made the last Illussor talk.

Five Illussor in total, taken one by one. Strange, he'd thought, that so many would be camped out along the border. At least twice what was normal for the time of year.

Almost as if they were waiting for something. Or someone.

Three someones, he had learned. And four had shown up.

Interesting, interesting. Tawn couldn't wait to see the expressions on the faces of his Brothers when he told them their favorite servant was a traitor, as was their newest member – the silly toy soldier they had sent to die that his Star be placed where they wanted.

A brief detour through Kria and five Illussor officers told quite an interesting tale.

He had known his brother-in-law was a traitor – he was too much a schemer to be that compliant – but he had underestimated him.

Tawn touched his nose. His only flaw. One he was fast overcoming. Twice now Sol had gotten the better of him; there would not be a third.

Sol a traitor and Beraht along with him. Tawn laughed aloud, thinking of how he'd taken a Krian name. So he'd been a traitor from the start. He'd have to finally get around to letting that detail slip.

But not yet. The Brothers would know of events when he chose to tell them. Or maybe he'd let them go ahead and die. No...he wanted to see their faces when he told them about Sol and Beraht. All the Brothers would be assembling soon, wouldn't they? Except for two. Tawn laughed.

He reached into his thigh-high boot and pulled out a small, corked glass vial. In the firelight the arcen burned like liquid fire; a thick dark orange. He pulled the cork and tossed it on to the eyeless corpse at his feet and tipped the vile back.

It burned like hot honey, with just a hint of bitterness as it slid down his throat. His tongue flicked out to get all the arcen from the vial that he could. Then it too was dropped onto the corpse, and he stepped over the bodies toward the door.

Scheming, scheming. So much to do...and plenty of winter left in which to do it. Tawn paused before a mirror, combing his hair with his fingers. The last Deceiver had been a bit feistier than his brothers.

He'd reminded Tawn of the first Illussor he'd captured. That one had been fun. Screaming, shaking, crying...but not dying. Not giving up. Even amongst all the Brothers, that one had tried to be strong.

Then Sol had stolen him. He wondered now how long Sol had been playing the traitor. Tawn turned away from the mirror and frowned at the room.

Hovel, really. Stone and wood to make a tidy little lookout while winter locked everyone up. How tiring it must be, to be so controlled by the weather. It was the greatest weakness of Kria and Illussor.

Though apparently Illussor had an even greater weakness. And thanks to a personal feud, Kria's greatest strength was now skulking around the Deceiver capital. He wondered if the Krian Kaiser knew where his Wolf had gone.

Tawn grinned. He pulled his hood up, shadowing his face and the fire-orange of his eyes. Too far gone now. They'd never be yellow again.

But he would not let himself be completely seduced. No...he was still the master, and arcen his slave.

He turned back to the mirror and made sure his face was clean. His tongue flicked out to catch a bit of blood he'd missed. Next he fixed his clothes, smoothing the dark brown wool back to order. They smelled



of arcen and blood and winter, but he didn't think the Kaiser would complain.

With a few muttered words, Tawn left the watch post.

He appeared in a dark chamber. Only the fire provided light; enough to dispel the gloom but not reveal the figures in the bed opposite.

Two of them, one a woman to judge by the moans. The other a man. Tawn's eyes flickered orange like the flames of the fire behind him, wordlessly casting a spell to let him see more clearly. Yes, a woman.

Orange was fun. Everything was so easy. He couldn't wait to see what red would do for him.

"Good evening, Kaiser." His Krian, he knew, was perfect. Flawless. Not a trace of an accent. He was not Sol's equal – he was far superior.

The woman froze, cursed. "And Lady General Heilwig?"

"Who the devil?" Her voice snapped out across the room like a whip.

Tawn laughed. "I thought the phrase was something about Tits and a Princess."

Heilwig climbed off the Kaiser and dropped to the floor, then stood with sword in hand. She moved to attack—

—and dropped with a curtly spoken word. Tawn stepped over her and approached the bed. "Good evening, Kaiser."

"Salharan," the Kaiser said. "What is the meaning of this?"

Tawn stepped back and bowed. "I've come to speak with you about a matter of some concern to both of us."

Kaiser Benno swung his legs over the side of the bed and snatched up his clothes from where they lay on the floor. He frowned as his tunic stuck and yanked hard, jarring Heilwig's body. She didn't stir. "I have nothing to discuss with a filthy Salharan."

"Not even if that something has to do with a certain General and the men who helped him escape?"

Benno's head snapped up. "Where is he?"

"Then I guess we have much to discuss?" Tawn smirked, then moved to a table and helped himself to a goblet and the untouched jug of wine there. It was rich, dark, quite fine. But nothing like arcen.

"Talk!" Benno snapped, sitting down and waiting impatiently for Tawn to obey.

Amused, Tawn complied. "Several weeks ago you lost your Wolf, yes?"

Benno said nothing.

"At the same time, I believe it was noted that a Krian by the name of Alden Grau also vanished."

"Yes," Benno said. "But we could not find a connection – Grau is just a poor country noble."

Tawn threw his head back and laughed. "How easily tricked, you stupid Krians!"

"Do not test me."

"Or you'll what?" Tawn set his wine down and moved toward Benno. He bent over the Kaiser, planting his arms on the rests to pin him down, and grinned. "Try to attack me like your slut on the floor? Look at my eyes, Kaiser." Arcen triggered dormant abilities; contorted others. Forced the body to do things. One side-affect was the alteration of the eyes – often temporary, but prolonged use and stronger colors made it permanent. After a month of using orange, his eyes were forever stained the color of glowing embers. "My magic could kill you with a word. Stupid of you not to have your sword near to hand." He pushed off the chair, rising back to his full height. "And here I was always told you Krians slept with your swords more often than your lovers."

He returned to his wine. "Anyway – Grau was no Krian. He was a....comrade. Or so I thought."

"Salharan?"

Tawn laughed. "Who else could have given arcen to the Salharan slave your Wolf brought home? What was his name? Ah, yes. Beraht. Do you begin to see what they were doing right in front of your face?"

Benno glared into the fire, face clouded with rage. Hate. "Where are they now?"

"Ah, that's where it truly gets interesting." Tawn finished his wine and leaned against the table, folding his arms. "They're in Illussor."

"What?" Benno demanded after a moment of silence. "Impossible. The Illussor have nothing to do with anyone but themselves unless they deign to join the war bleeding slowly into their lands."

Tawn laughed again, a chilling sound. "I am still gathering the details, but I did learn one very important fact from the men I interrogated."

"Which is?" Benno leaned forward in his seat, the anger in his face mixing with hunger.

"The Illussor, it would seem, are going to be suffering mightily soon. I interrogated five. The first four had little to say – mostly they begged to die." Tawn grimaced. "But the last one apparently was privy to special information. Hand-picked by the Duke of Ferra to watch for three men who would be attempting to cross the border – two Salharans

and an injured Illussor. Apparently one of those Salharans – Beraht I'd imagine – is quite instrumental to the Illussor. I believe the word was 'Breaker'. Apparently he is going to cause quite the upheaval in Illussor."

Benno frowned.

"What manner of upheaval?" Benno sat back in his seat, crossing one leg so that the ankle lay across the knee of the other.

Tawn grinned. "They are going to lose their magic. Why such information was trusted to a mere soldier, I could not tell you."

"More than a mere soldier."

"Most likely." Tawn shrugged. "I care not. Suffice to say Illussor will soon be quite vulnerable."

"Yes..." Benno regarded him. "Why are you telling me this, Salharan? What game are you playing?"

"Only the usual one."

"What do you want from me then?"

Tawn stood up. "You can attack Illussor with ease. Do so, and do whatever you want with it. Salhara has no need, and you Krians seem to like your space."

"And you want?"

"The Disputed Lands."

"I figured." Benno leaned forward again, eyes reflecting the firelight. "Is that all?"

"Land for fifty miles to the south and east of it. Plenty of room for arcen."

Benno nodded. "You are not finished."

"A treaty. No more hostilities between us – I will be too busy doing other things to deal with Krians."

Benno laughed. "You are powerful, Salharan, but I doubt you are so powerful as to be allowed to make these sorts of arrangements."

"We will see. And if you try to betray me, you will see just how powerful I can be. Kaiser."

"Do not try to intimidate me, Salharan. If your pollutions could kill so easily, there would be no war."

Tawn's laugh spread through the room like ice freezing over a lake. "Perhaps, Kaiser, we wanted the war as much as you did. They're useful, yes, for keeping people under control? Attack Illussor before winter ends."

"I do not need you to tell me how to go to war, Salharan."

"No?" Tawn asked. "I wasn't sure, as until now you've had the Wolf doing it for you. What do you think it will be like to fight against him? You should ask all those prisoners you have – but they're all dead

by now, aren't they? Hmm..." He didn't move when Benno stood and strode toward him.

And vanished just as the Kaiser reached out to grab him.

He reappeared in a village some miles away from the Winter Palace, just across the river to the west of it. Tawn held a hand to his chest, willing his heart to slow down, stop aching. It wouldn't, though, not for a while yet. His entire body burned, ached from the inside out. Even breathing deeply was going to be somewhat trying for a few hours.

Too much. Too soon. He laughed. The Kaiser was more right than Tawn had any intention of letting him know – killing a man instantly wasn't so easy. Only with red, and his body wasn't ready for more than a very small dose of that. Right now, high on orange, even that might finally overstress his heart. And he would have to take more Orange, soon. All the long-distance transporting had drained the new vial and taxed his body. It had been worth it. By now he could transport to the Winter Palace, nearly anywhere in Salhara, and five of the ten watch stations along the Illussor border.

The town was quiet. Everyone had gone elsewhere for the winter – these small villages simply could not last. Tawn had laughed to hear the stories of the days when the villagers had tried it. Horrible, fascinating stories. He wondered if people really did resort to eating each other when food ran out. Surely not. How vulgar. Shouldn't people who lived in this wretched country with its miserable weather know how to avoid falling into such dire straights?

But they were Krian. Their brains were obsessed with steel.

Tawn entered the stable at the edge of town and went to his horse in the furthest stall. Halfway there, he found himself on the floor.

Dizzy. Nearly blacked out. *Stars take it.* He would have to slow down. How bothersome. But pushing himself to red too fast would prove even more of a nuisance – he had no plans to let the arcen kill him. Not quickly. Not slowly. *He* was in charge.

Forcing himself up, willing away the lingering dizziness, Tawn readied his horse and led it from the stable. Best to return home for a few days. His arcen supply was running low, and he would have to give the fools some sort of report before they began to grow suspicious.

But what to tell them? Certainly not the truth. There would have to be a fine balance.

How satisfying that would be; to be given the order to kill the traitor at all costs. But really – who trusted a man who came from a family of traitors? Did those fools think that they were special? Too

powerful for betrayal to touch them? The Seven Star Brothers existed for treachery and underhandedness; ruling the country from the shadows.

Tawn laughed as he mounted and rode out of town. He hated Sol with a passion, but the man was proving useful. There was nothing for him to engineer; Sol had done it all. All Tawn had to do was inform the appropriate parties to set his own plans into action.

Illussor would fall to Kria, the Regenbogen would go to Salhara, and in due course Salhara and the Seven Star to him.

Gingerly Tawn reached up to touch his nose, which still did not feel quite right. Nor did it look quite right. But Sol would pay soon – very soon. He'd kill that little blind Illussor right in front of his face, maybe get him to scream like he had before. It wasn't hard to figure out why Sol had latched on to the pathetic thing. Then he'd leave Sol to die a very slow death.

Maybe whisper about Ariana while he watched him die. Stupid woman. And her brother so much worse. Tawn's hand clenched the reins. Bastard. Maybe he'd pretend to exchange the Illussor's life for the striking of his name. He was tired of it. Sol was not worthy of naming him. But it had been necessary to obtain the deVry surname. Soon he would be the only member of the family left. Then he would move on to stronger names, better names, and the deVry name would cease to exist.

And by dying in Illussor, the bastard would not be able to rot in the ground beside his sister. Tawn grinned.

He held a hand to his chest, feeling the slowed beating of his heart. Nearly a normal rhythm now. Perhaps another hour or so and he would be all right to transport.

"Is everyone assembled?" Ormin asked, dark orange eyes skimming over the shadowy figures of the Seven Star Brothers. "We are missing two, three if you count Nameless."

Beside him, in the center of the raised dais, Jaspar gave one of his weak, raspy laughs. "Nameless? He is still missing."

The doors creaked open as a man in muted brown wool and high brown leather boots crept into the room.

"Brother Tawn, you are late." Tiad's red eyes flashed with ire.

Tawn bowed. "Apologies. I have been pushing myself with arcen; transporting took some time. But I come with...interesting news. I assure you it will excuse my tardiness." He rose to his full height and smirked.

Jaspar's red-black eyes flickered, like lantern light on a dark lake. The doors clicked, locking the nineteen Brothers into the chamber. "What is this news, Tawn? And why do I sense it has to do with our missing General? Did you finally succeed in killing him? I warned you about letting personal matters interfere with business."

"I haven't touched him," Tawn said. "It's hard to reach him, in fact, because I transport somewhere I've never been."

Ormin lifted a brow. "And where is that?"

"Illussor. Unless I'm mistaken – and my informants were most forthcoming after they lost their eyes – he and Beraht are assisting the Illussor King."

Whispers exploded around the room. On the dais, the three men sat it an angry silence.

"We should have seen it coming," Tiad said at last. "His family has never been anything but trouble. We executed his father for traitorous dealings!"

Jaspar scoffed. "His father was killed for consorting with those coastal heathens. He smuggled arcen. Just like half the people in that part of the country. That's a far cry from running away to Illussor. Is there some new Deception involved here?"

"No," Tawn said.

"Wait," Ormin interrupted. "Who is this Beraht?"

Tawn threw his head back and laughed until he was ordered three times to cease. "Beraht was once nameless; for reasons unknown he allowed the Wolf to name him. And he is also in Illussor, along with the prisoner I first brought here, who was rescued by Sol deVry."

"How long has Sol been a traitor?" Tiad asked.

Jaspar's long, thin fingers stroked the dark wood of his chair. Even at a cursory glance it was easy to pick out the way those fingers shook, trembled. "When did our Brother Sol go missing? Do you remember that?"

Ormin nodded slowly. Around the room the whispers resumed, rising occasionally into full clarity before ebbing back into whispers. "We thought him dead. He claimed a river dragged him off and he was rescued by Salharan villagers. We checked into everything. There was no call to doubt his story. He bears the scars of the injuries – they would have taken months to heal, even with arcen."

"That still is several months in which he could have been doing other things. I guess now we will never know."

"Why should we believe you, Brother Tawn?" Jaspar said. "I think everyone here knows of the hostility that exists between you and

your brother. Without him here to defend himself – you could be playing any game. You are as sly as every deVry to ever come into the world.”

Tiad rubbed his chin thoughtfully. "But that would explain Sol's absence, and his lack of reports. He is not normally so remiss – indeed I know no one more thorough. Yet not a word, and other reports state that there was quite the upheaval in Kria some time ago.”

"Yes," Tawn said. "The Wolf was sentenced to die. Sol and Beraht helped him escape, and now they hide in Illussor. To what purpose, I know not." He hid a smirk.

The three men shared a look. Jaspar pulled a large vial from the depths of his cumbersome robes. His hands shook almost to hard to hold it, but a moment later they stilled and he was able to drink the thick, dark, near-black red liquid inside it. Stowing it, he finally looked at Tawn again. "What are you scheming?"

"I merely gather the information," Tawn said. "It's your job to put it all together.”

"Cease playing games.”

Tawn laughed. "No one ever likes to play. You're all so impatient. But I do have one last bit of information for you, from Kria.”

"Which is?"

"The Kaiser is planning to attack Illussor. I have no doubt he wants his General back – or dead.”

"Yes," Ormin said. "I would imagine so. Without the Scarlet Wolf, I do not think they'll hold the Disputed Lands. The other three Generals would not last long, I think.”

"The Cobalt may," Tiad said. "He likes to get his hands dirty. We've lost more than a few along the border to the games he is purported to play." His red eyes slid over Tawn. "But again, Tawn, why should we believe you? It's absurd, that the Krians would attempt to attack the Illussor. Magic in such quantities would crush the Krians – and it is still winter. Neither country stirs unless absolutely necessary.”

Tawn smirked. "As I said, the Kaiser desperately wants his General back. And for some reason, he believes he'll have an edge." He said nothing as his Brothers regarded him.

"What edge?"

"I couldn't say. After I reported to my Brothers, I was hoping to gain permission to go deeper into Illussor.”

Jaspar laughed. "I admire your ambition, Tawn. That alone, I think, keeps you from being a traitor. Though I don't wonder if you're going for personal reasons as well. It must chafe that he's outwitted you.”

Tawn said nothing, but he remembered the pain of every insult. Every punch. Every backhand. The broken nose. All the insults and humiliations while in court or on the battlefield. The melancholy Sol deVry was known for his quiet, complacent manner – except in battle and when he addressed his brother-in-law. "We've never denied we hate each other. Some differences cannot be reconciled. I will address that matter while I am there, yes. It is my right after his last insult. But I am a Seven Star Brother. My loyalty runs red."

"Indeed," Jasper asked. "Never mind. Go take care of the traitors, find out what the Krians are thinking. If they actually succeed in taking Illussor...that will make things far too easy for us."

Tawn folded over in a lazy bow. "I will need more arcen."

"Is the need beginning to claw at you, Tawn?" Ormin asked with a mocking smile. "So easy to use, isn't it? Like having wishes granted."

"I control the arcen."

"Yes," Tiad said. "That's what we all used to say. Be careful, Brother. Arcen does not consume – it seduces."

Tawn remained silent.

"Fetch it," Jasper said. At his words, one of the shadowy figures in the room ducked away, a hidden door clicking open as he left. Jasper eyed Tawn. "Use it wisely. This time of year, I need not remind you how precious arcen is. Especially the colors you require. Let us hope that come this spring we finally take those damnable Disputed Lands. Our fields are more and more reluctant every year to take to arcen."

Beside him Tiad swore softly; around the room voices murmured their agreement. Arcen did not like Salharan land, and each year it grew more difficult to grow. The territory the Krians called the Regenbogen always flooded with arcen flowers in spring. But the Krians destroyed them almost immediately. And the warring began all over again.

The man who had vanished before reappeared, and handed a small, flat box to Jasper before rejoining the shadows surrounding the dais. Jasper held it out to Tawn. "You may have this."

It was about half the size of Tawn's hand, made of black leather and silver fastenings. He opened it, nodding approval. Five vials – three of dark orange and two of bright red. Especially thick, he could tell at a glance. Concentrated arcen; any thicker and it would have to be chewed.

Arcen flowers changed color with age. The youngest buds were dark violet, and with each stage of growth the color shifted, rising through the colors of the rainbow. Violet arcen was the easiest to make – the flowers at that point were numerous, healthy. It was only as they aged that they began to weaken in the Salharan soil. Yellow, orange and



especially red were hard to come by. No one outside the brotherhood could come by it without a license that was nearly impossible to get and for a great deal of money – fortunes had been lost to the addiction that came with the stronger colors. Up to green, there was no addiction. While in yellow, it could be fought. Orange was the point of no return.

"Though if you wanted Tawn...you could have this...one sip would equal everything in that case and more." Jasper reached into his cloak again and withdrew another vial. He held it up – in the meager light of the chamber, it looked black. Even under a good light it would appear black. Only under direct sunlight did the deep red become apparent.

Black arcen. Made from the deep red petals of an arcen flower on the verge of dying. Illegal. Anyone caught with it was put immediately to death. If drinking the black arcen didn't kill them first. It was, though he hated to admit it, a sign of Jasper's strength that he could drink the stuff with aplomb.

At least for now. At some point his heart would simply give out – or explode. "Thank you but no."

Jasper laughed and returned the vial to his robe. "There will come a day, Tawn, unless you stop now."

Tawn said nothing, merely emptied the case and threw it aside. The vials were tucked away into special compartments in his thigh-high boots. "If my Brothers are done with me, I have business to which I must attend."

"Then by all means go," Tiad said. "Bring us their Stars, that we might acquire new Brothers."

"As you command," Tawn said, and left the room laughing.



## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Beraht woke with a start, and spent several confused minutes trying to figure out where he was.

Illussor. His bedroom. After he'd finally convinced Esta to let them stop. She'd been deadly determined to teach him every last dance she knew – and then Sol had actually taught them a few Salharan dances.

That had been embarrassing. But when would he have ever learned how to dance? He wasn't like Esta or Sol or even that bastard. Ballroom dancing was something nobles learned, not nameless peasants.

Beraht shoved the stupid thoughts aside. It was...he looked out the window. Black save for the faintest bits of moonlight. It was far too late at night or early in the morning to be awake, let alone thinking about his idiotic dancing lessons. Cold. It must have been that which woke him – sometime in the night he'd thrown his blankets off. Why in the stars had he done an idiotic thing like that? He climbed out of bed to retrieve the quilts that had wound up on the floor; by the time he had everything back on the bed, he was almost hot from the exertion.

Sleep refused to return even after he'd returned to the warm blankets. He stared out the window across the way, seeing not much more than the black sky. He turned over and stared at the wall.

His mind wandered from one thought to another but refused to land on anything – not even thinking about his current situation or mulling over the bastard's treatment from a few days ago. Stars take him anyway.

Why couldn't he sleep?

Irritably Beraht threw off the blankets and climbed out of bed. Maybe something to drink. That had always helped when he'd been too wound up to sleep in camp. But he really didn't feel like walking the distance to the kitchens...and he hated to wake a servant for such a thing. It still didn't sit well with him, ordering servants around. And he'd kill anyone that forced him to wake up at such a hideous hour simply to fetch a drink.

Beraht played with the fire, the littlest bit of arcen left in his system enough to stoke it. Lately he had been getting strange looks – Esta had explained the Illussor were beginning to feel his raw magic. Uncorrupt, they called it. Pure, Dieter liked to say in his sneering, grating tone that said quite clearly he thought Beraht the exact opposite.

Stars damn the man anyway.

With a snarl of frustration, Beraht returned to bed, shutting his eyes and willing himself to sleep. It wasn't working. Something had him wound up, too tense to relax.

But what? If it wasn't the cold which had woken him, what was it? He'd noticed nothing remiss when he'd woken, except the lack of blankets. Perhaps he was losing his mind. What was he doing here, anyway? He was an unwanted Salharan with a Krian name given by a man who hated him for trying to scrape out an existence.

Whatever.

He wasn't the sort that did things like save people...then again, destroying the magic upon which an entire country relied was exactly the sort of thing he did. Though never quite on that scale.

Beraht sought desperately for something else to think about. Esta. She was pretty. And fun. Nor did she seem to mind that her "hero" – he snorted – was a Salharan peasant and soldier with a Krian name. At least she didn't know why he had it.

Was it so hard for that bloody bastard to understand? Who enjoyed killing men in their sleep? Certainly not him. But it had been the only way. He was useless with open combat; his skills had always been in sneaking around. A skill born of a desperate need for food...clothes...whatever a scrawny kid with no name could get his hands on.

How many times had he seen the looks in the eyes of those few other nameless? A look that begged and screamed for existence. No one had ever given it to them. And a nameless could not give what he didn't have.

Now he was stuck with a Krian name. What existence was there in that? He was still no one. A Breaker...but that only until he did it. Assuming he lived, he would be back to nothing. There was no welcome for someone who ruined lives that way. No wonder they couldn't use an Illussor for the job, never mind the claim that they couldn't find one.

Much easier to blame it all on a Salharan. But Esta had never struck him as that harsh...then again he'd been half in love with the Captain who had, when he died, made his nameless lieutenant a Seven Star Brother. He'd been convinced that meant he was worth something.

Only to find out he was simply the most expedient, secure way to return the Seven Star Mark to the Brothers.

Beraht buried his head in his pillow. Stirring up things he'd like to forget was *not* going to improve his chances of going back to sleep.

But wrestling with the unhappy thoughts proved exhausting, and he did not even notice when he drifted off several minutes later.

*Beraht.*

This time, he did not wake up with a start. He murmured softly, turned toward the soft voice. It was both near and far...almost intimate, though he could not determine why.

*Beraht. Come.*

He moved slowly, sliding out of bed and putting his boots on. Still asleep, though his eyes were open. Beraht put on his clothes, boots. Then he left the room.

Behind him another door opened, a figure stepping out. Beraht didn't notice, but continued to walk slowly, stiffly, following the sound of the near-far voice calling to him. Through the castle, down the stairs, out through the garden.

From the pocket of his jacket he pulled a key given to him by Matthias only the day before. He had been given strict instructions not to go down unless Matthias or Esta were with him...but they also wanted him to have access, should anything happen.

He continued to walk, traveling the dark stairs and darker underground tunnel as though he had done so all his life. His movements were slow, heavy, dominated by the fact that he was still asleep.

If he'd been awake, he would have noticed the figure behind him. But asleep, he would not have noticed even a man standing right in front of him. He walked on, slow but unhesitating. The door at the end made him pause, as he fumbled in his jacket for the second key Matthias had trusted to him.

A minute later he opened it, and walked into the Crystal Chamber.

*Beraht.*

*...You are Benji.*

*Yes. I'm so glad you've come to see me.*

*See you? What for?*

*To make me stronger.*

Beraht frowned in his sleep. Something...wasn't...right...but what? *Stronger?*

*Yes. That's what this chamber is for – it amplifies the power of the Illussor. They only put in one...but this room...it could handle more. Should handle more. Don't you want to help?*

He was helping. But not like this. What was wrong? Sleeping and waking began to war in his mind, but that voice, which some part of him realized was in his head, kept him sleeping. Beraht struggled to wake...then fell back into sleeping.

*They don't need more power.*

*Sure they do. It's why they made this. For power. We could be stronger than everyone. Better. Something. Someone.*

*Someone...*

*Come. Be my brother. We can make the Illussor brighter than ever.*

Beraht struggled for an argument, but could find none. What could be wrong with making everyone stronger? That sounded better than making them weaker. Of what use was weakness?

None.

He reached out a hand toward the small crystal held by the too-still hands of the Keeper. One touch was all it would take, and—

Pain exploded in his head, and Beraht saw stars through the tears of pain blurring his vision. He held his head in his hands, muttering every curse he could think of.

Then it dawned on him he didn't know what was going on. Cautiously he opened his eyes – and gaped. Two things immediately struck his vision.

He was in the Crystal Chamber. Dieter was glaring at him.

Well, if Dieter was angry things couldn't be too wrong. "Why are we down here?"

"As you're the one who woke me up and then decided to take a stroll, I think it would make more sense if I asked *you* that." Dieter's arms hung at his side, loose but clearly the man was all too ready to grab him and throw.

Which, Beraht realized, was exactly what the bastard had done. "I think you damn near split my head open. Do you know how to be gentle?"

"Gentle?" Dieter sneered. "You were about to ruin everything. If you'd touched that," he motioned behind him to Benji, and the perfect, round crystal held in his hands. "Like you were about to, everything would have been worse. I don't know much about what's going on, but I understand that much. Tits of the Winter Princess, Beraht! What were you thinking?"

"I wasn't," Beraht said with a frown, ignoring Dieter's snort. "I was asleep...I think...I don't remember anymore. Though that might be more from being thrown into a wall."

Dieter sneered and stalked toward him, yanking Beraht forward. "Your head is fine – at least, you're no worse than usual. If I hadn't done so, right now you'd be responsible for something far worse than ridding these people of magic. Though why everyone is so upset about that, I will not understand."

"You've never had magic," Beraht snapped. "You don't understand anything about it."

"Is there something special about it?" Dieter asked. He sank his hand into Beraht's hair and yanked his head back so Beraht was forced to look up at him. His other hand rested on his head around his eye, finger and thumb opening his eye wide. "The way it makes your heart beat too fast? Your muscles ache? The bitter taste? Or is it the warmth? The way it burns and makes you forget that you use it to hurt and kill? Or do you enjoy the headaches and hunger and restlessness that come when you haven't had any? Do you look forward to the day it will eventually kill you? I've never seen it, but I've heard of it. That all victims of arcen die with black eyes, and no one can tell if the red pouring from their bodies is blood or arcen."

Beraht fought a shudder, but he knew by the gleam in those gray-green eyes that Dieter had noticed. Damn the man. How did a man who eschewed it know so much? But it didn't surprise him. "Let me go."

Dieter did so. "And are the Illussor any better? This—" he motioned to the room. "Seems even worse than your country's addiction. Krians may be good at war...but we were never guilty of such things as the rest of you."

"And how is that confounded coliseum any better?" Beraht demanded

"I never once said I approved of the coliseum," Dieter said coolly. "But that is still a far cry from what the Salharans and Illussor do."

Beraht turned away. "Whatever. You play high and mighty all you want – you're as terrible as the rest of us. The only difference is that

you're famous for it – in three countries." He strode out of the chamber before Dieter could kill him.

He heard Dieter's steps, and waited for the inevitable blow.

But none came. Dieter fell alongside him, though in the dark tunnel Beraht could not really see him. Stars he hated this place. Could they have designed anything more eerie? Then again if he'd been a sneak thief or someone intent on ruining the Illussor, he'd think twice about this tunnel. He doubted he'd be willing to come down here completely alone. Even the darkest night wasn't as black as this. The torches were all but dead; whoever maintained them would not be checking them for some time yet.

Beraht shivered and realized that he was cold. Again. Stars he hated these cold countries!

Dieter led the way out and locked the door behind them. Beraht yawned as they walked, barely noticing anything but the utter still of the palace. Had he really sleep walked all the way down to the Crystal Chamber? Stars, he hoped it didn't happen again.

He continued on toward his own room when Dieter stopped at his own door – but a hand around his arm yanked him back. "No," Dieter said.

"Stars refuse you!" Beraht snapped. "I would like to go to sleep. If you want to continue bickering—"

Dieter shoved him inside and locked his door. "You can't be trusted not to wander off again," he said. "You'll stay here where I can watch you until everything is finished."

"I don't think so," Beraht said. "I don't need you watching over me."

"Because you did so well sleeping by yourself."

Beraht resisted the urge to hit him. He wasn't feeling quite that stupid yet. "I'm not your prisoner anymore – I'm not sleeping any closer to you than I absolutely have to. Even next door is more than I can stand."

"Feel threatened even through a wall, Beraht?"

"Stop saying my name!" Beraht snapped. Then he flinched, as his own word struck him. It wasn't his name. It had been forced upon him. He wasn't Beraht. Feeling sick, anxious to get *away* from the man staring at him with those too-sharp eyes, Beraht turned to flee—Dieter grabbed him and hauled him back.

"You're not going anywhere. Not unless you're one hundred percent positive that won't happen again. Is that what you want to tell



the people who have decided you're some damned hero? Tell Esta? That you ruined their lives by sleepwalking?"

Beraht tried to pull away. "Then lock the damn door – and if I really wanted, I'm sure I could get out of here."

"If walking around in your room wakes me up, what makes you think I'd sleep through your trying to escape here?" Dieter smirked as he removed his sword and belt, then shucked his jacket. "Surely you're used to sleeping with me by now, *Beraht*."

"No one gets used to you," Beraht snapped. "I am not staying here." But he hadn't even finished turning around when Dieter snatched him back again – and this time kept moving, using his momentum to throw Beraht into bed.

"Stay there," Dieter said. "If you try to leave again, I'll tie you down."

Beraht glared hatefully, though when he sat up it was only to remove his boots – which he threw at Dieter. He seethed all the more when both were caught. "I hate you."

"You say that like I care." Dieter waited until he was satisfied Beraht wasn't going anywhere, then moved to the table near the fire and picked up a book.

Unable to muster further energy to keep protesting, Beraht tamped down on his rage until he could find a way to get Dieter back and closed his eyes, determined to go to sleep. And not wake up with the back of his head banging against crystal. Stars that had hurt. His head still ached...

Dieter looked up as the air in the room changed – the anger had faded. He stood up and glanced at the bed, where Beraht had fallen asleep somewhere in the pile of blankets. As expected. The idiot could sleep just about anywhere, once he stopped getting in a snit about it. Salharans got so touchy about where they slept – did it matter so long as they were warm and rested?

He went back to the fire and picked up his book. Illussor history – he had been hoping to find some small period of time when they had used some form of weaponry. Anything that might have devolved and which he could use to teach them proper combat. No such luck.

So it looked as though it would be harder even than getting Beraht to shut up and stand still. But that aside, the Illussor had an interesting history. It was a pity they'd chosen to rely so heavily on magic.

Then again, he thought with a trace of amusement, if they'd gone the other route it was possible Kria would have a real problem on their hands rather than a continuing annoyance.

The problem of knowing how to fight aside, all the practice in the world would not solve the dilemma of having no weapons nor anyone to make them. Craftsmen worked for years, if not a lifetime, to master their skills. He doubted anything of the necessary caliber existed in Illussor – at least not anyone that would be willing to step forward.

He closed his book with a snap and stared into the fire. Nothing he could do about it now. Even leaving the castle to explore other possibilities was not an option – there were more than a few Illussor who would gladly put the full force of their abilities forward to kill the Wolf of Kria.

It made him tired. Was there—

Dieter killed the thought. It was a waste of time. He stood up and set the book aside, then strode to the window. How were his men? Had the Kaiser ordered them killed? Would he force them to do something to make up for his betrayal?

Not that the Kaiser knew where he was, which was a relief, but he would accuse Dieter of betrayal all the same.

Movement from the bed. Dieter turned sharply around, and watched as Beraht began to talk in that low voice he had been using earlier. He wondered how furious Beraht would be to learn that not only was he walking in his sleep, but talking. That little jewel of information would be saved until it could be used to full effect.

It was that nonsense again. Dieter moved toward the door, blocking it. He almost laughed as the sleep-walking Beraht went straight to where his boots had landed after Dieter had caught and dropped them. Then Beraht was walking toward the door, and stumbled to a halt when there proved to be an obstacle.

Dieter reached out and shook him hard by the shoulders. He grinned the moment realization returned to Beraht's face.

"Shut up," Beraht snarled, swinging out to catch Dieter on the chest, jerking away when Dieter caught his wrist and held fast. "I hate you. Stars, can't I get one good night's sleep?" He rubbed his face. "Why can't we just get it over with?"

"You might try asking them in the morning," Dieter said, and shoved him back toward the bed. This time he followed, sliding in the side nearest the window. Already he could see the faint, hazy gray that meant day was rapidly approaching.

He stifled a sigh. If necessary he was more than capable of going without sleep – but he didn't think babysitting an idiot counted as necessary. Dieter tugged the quilt up and closed his eyes; on top the blankets, his fingers curled around the hilt of his sword propped nearby. A few hours sleep was better than none, and tomorrow he fully intended to find a place he could practice – only so much was accomplished practicing in his room. Surely there must be a spare room of significant size around this place somewhere.

Dieter felt himself sliding into sleep when a sound woke him. He sat up and saw Beraht was talking in his sleep again. Why now? Why had this problem never cropped up before? Neither Matthias nor the others had mentioned something like this might occur...so what was causing it? All he knew from Beraht's strange mutterings was that Benji apparently wanted him to make things 'strong' which, to Dieter's mind, meant worse.

He caught Beraht as he tried to leave the bed, dragging him down and pinning him there when the sleeping Beraht began to struggle. He cracked Beraht once, hard, on the face with his open palm.

Beraht's yellow eyes changed from a distant, hazy gleaming to a full on bright yellow glow. "I'm not sure what I hate more," he said. "That this keeps happening or that you're somehow involved."

"If you want to ruin things," Dieter said, letting him go and returning to his side of the bed, "Next time don't wake me up while you're doing it."

Beraht muttered something under his breath, then spoke more clearly. "Since when do you care, anyway? Shouldn't it be right up there with revenge for you? Letting me ruin everything?"

"Why should I make an entire country suffer for my revenge? I know I'm a bastard, but even I have my limits." Dieter shot him a scathing look.

"Meaning, you have no where else to go and these guys really will kill you."

Dieter looked at him. "So the Kaiser was just pretending to kill me?"

"I think he sort of wanted you to win, actually. Probably just to torture you more." Beraht made a face. "I would to, if I were him. What else do you do after you kill the man you've hated his entire life?"

Dieter laughed. "I'm sure he'll find someone else to hate."

"And what about you?" Beraht asked suddenly, as if something just struck him. "What do you do now?"

Dieter rolled over and lay down. "Fight. Teach men how to fight. Only the country has changed."

Beraht made a face at his back and then climbed out of bed. "I'm not going back to sleep. So far you've slammed my head into a wall, damn near shaken me to death, then pinned me down and attempted to break the bones in my face. I really don't want to know what's next." He frowned at the table near the fireplace, which held only a book and a pitcher and cup of water. "Don't you ever have anything like wine handy?"

"I don't drink," Dieter said irritably from the bed. He sat up slowly. "And you will most certainly sleep, because I do not feel like going an entire night without sleep."

Beraht glared back. "Then sleep. No one is stopping you. Only your stubborn determination to be as obnoxious and irritating as humanly possible. Stars curse you! I'm going to find some wine. It's about the only thing that will knock me out and keep me from killing you."

"Stay here," Dieter said, climbing from the bed and stalking toward Beraht, grabbing the man close and hauling him back to the bed. "You're not going anywhere except to sleep."

"So you can wake me up again when I try for a fourth time to do whatever it is Benji is trying to get me to do?" Beraht struggled away. "No, thank you. I'll just stay awake."

Dieter held tighter, voice taunting. "You'll just doze off."

"Stars refuse you!" Beraht said, and started to fight and swing and kick. "Let me go! Stars above! You drive me insane!" He continued to struggle even when Dieter held him pinned to the ground. His eyes blazed sunshine-yellow. "I wish I'd just had the nerve to go to your tent that night. If I'd killed *you* in your sleep, we'd all be better off!"

Dieter roughly let him go, standing and striding over to the bed. "Then you should have let me die in the coliseum. Live with your mistake. *Beraht*." With that he climbed into bed, and Beraht could tell a few minutes later that he was fast asleep. It was the only time Dieter didn't seem as much like the beast he was called after.

Muttering a handful of curses – barely noticing as he switched fluidly between three languages – Beraht turned to the fire and muttered a quick, angry word. The dying flames sprung back to life and began to ward off the chill creeping into the room. Yanking off his jacket and shirt, dressed only in breeches, Beraht climbed into bed.

Just to stay warm. And because there really wasn't anywhere else to go.

So whatever. Fine. He'd find a way to get revenge in the morning. But what was wrong with him? Beraht shook his head. Tomorrow. He was too tired to deal with it now.

Though he was also scared to fall asleep again. Morning couldn't come soon enough. How ironic that before when he'd wanted to fall asleep, he'd only been able to stay awake but now that he wanted to stay awake, all he could do was yawn and feel his eyelids grow heavier and heavier. And the heat pouring off the brute beside him didn't help things either.

Whatever. Beraht stopped fighting sleep. If he started walking, fine. Dieter showed no qualms about waking him up as painfully or jarringly as possible.

Pain woke him. Jarring, hot, burning. It woke him screaming, and from the corner of his eye he caught the flash of Dieter's sword in the early morning light streaming through the windows. He twisted and turned and clawed around on the bed, the pain too great for him to pinpoint the source. "Stop! Stop! Stop!" His words descended into screaming, and then he was being held face down on the bed, fingers touching his lower back.

Then he knew. "They know," he managed before he had to bite back another scream.

The doors banged open, admitting Iah and Sol. Sol, he could see, was also in a great deal of pain. The two Salharans shared a look.

"What's going on?" he heard Dieter demand.

"The Brothers," Sol managed before he crumbled to his knees, hugging himself against the pain, barely seeming to notice as Iah held him in an attempt to comfort. "It's just a warning. Probably..." he gasped in pain. "Tawn. It's his sort of trick."

The pain didn't ease for several more minutes; by the time it stopped a serving girl had arrived with Dieter's breakfast tray. Beraht sat up slowly, barely hearing as Dieter ordered the girl to set it down and go, watching as she all but ran out.

Great. Miserable night. Miserable morning. And time was ticking down now that the Seven Star knew two of its members were traitors. Which made him think. "How would Tawn know?"

"I'm sure his methods of acquiring the information weren't pleasant," Sol said, slowly standing up. He slid an arm around Iah's waist. "But I know he's the one who did it. We need to talk to Matthias and the

rest today – if you don't take care of matters soon, Tawn will be along to deal with us. I don't know how, but if there's a way Tawn will find it.

Beraht nodded and slid out of bed.

"What were you doing in here, anyway?" Sol gave them both a look.

"Another story that can wait until we're at breakfast," Dieter said with a grimace. "Something tells me I shall have to endure the downstairs this morning."

Beraht rolled his eyes. "Is the brave Wolf scared of a few people?"

"I'm more not looking forward to the one that finally snaps and tries to attack me – because I will win, and it will not end well." Dieter grabbed his sword from beside the bed and set it on the table. "Now everyone get out."

Biting back a dozen or so comments, Beraht grabbed his things and returned to his own room. On top of everything else, he got to be seen sneaking out of Dieter's room like a guilty secret.

The man was going to die.

## CHAPTER NINETEEN

"You three look a somber bunch this morning," Esta said with a frown, setting down the pastry she'd begun to eat. "Did something go wrong last night?" She blinked as a fourth man walked in. "Pardon me – you four. General, to what do we owe the honor?"

"Honor?" Beraht grumbled. "More like insult." He sat down and stared unseeing at the plate of food set in front of him. He ignored it in favor of the tea set in front of him. It was good...but he had reluctantly conceded the other day that the tea he'd had in Kria was more appealing. But both were preferable to the bitter stuff they drank in Salhara, which he'd never liked except with excessive amounts of cream and sugar – things he rarely got. The Illussor version wasn't bad, though. And it woke a man up, which was all he could ask for. "Or punishment."

Everyone ignored him.

"What's wrong?" Esta asked, then shook her head. "We should wait for Matthias, though."

"No need," Matthias said, walking into the room. "I got held up by a minister; but he quickly grew offended by my presence and scampered off to plot assassination."

Esta frowned at him. "I've told you before not to make those sorts of jokes, Matti."

"Esta, no one would ever assassinate me because they know it means you would take over. I assure you that is enough to scare nearly every man into ensuring I live a very long life." He grinned when Esta's

frown turned into a glower and she went back to eating, carefully not noticing as he sat down beside her. "Did you mention something about a problem, Essie?" He looked at Dieter, at the same time motioning the servants to depart. "Something must be amiss, if you are joining us."

Dieter sat back in his chair. "Your Breaker has taken to sleep walking to the Crystal Chamber. In his sleep, he nearly touched that crystal orb. Every time he fell asleep, he began to do it all over again."

"What?" Esta and Matthias said together. Matthias shook his head and looked at Beraht. "But why?"

"I don't know," Beraht said. He picked at his food, then shoved the plate aside and stuck with just the tea. "I barely remember it, really. Just a soft voice that I wanted to listen to."

Dieter drank his own tea as if it were little more than warm milk. "You talked, too. An entire conversation, though with who I don't know."

Beraht held his tea cup tight to avoid throwing it, seeing in Dieter's face the bastard had been holding that bit of information back on purpose.

"You kept muttering about power, and making it stronger."

Matthias and Esta paled.

"What does that mean?" Sol asked, frowning at Iah, who was equally upset beside him.

The breakfast room, as cheerful and bright as it was, morning sunshine setting the blues and greens of it ablaze, seemed to darken with the mood of the diners. Rather than cheerful, it suddenly struck Beraht as strained. Trying too hard to be happy. He poured himself more tea, not bothering to sweeten it, and wished it was late enough to add something stronger to it.

"It means," Matthias said. "That the magic is more out of hand than I thought. The Crystal Chamber isn't...dead exactly. It's not living, either. But it's a...well...it's powerful. I have never heard of it trying to increase its own power...but it doesn't really surprise me either. What bothers me is that it nearly succeeded." He looked at Beraht. "Of course it should have occurred to me that if your power can be used to stop it, it can also be used to amplify it and the Crystal would sense that. I'm sure some of Benji's loneliness is a factor in drawing you in..."

Beside him Esta nodded. "So you go into this trance every time you fall asleep? Then how did you manage to avoid getting pulled in?"

"He woke me up with it the first time," Dieter said. "And I kept—"



"Trying to kill me every time after that," Beraht broke in. He glared across the table. "I'm not sure which was worse – the sleep walking or the waking."

Dieter said nothing.

"You watched his room all night?" Esta asked, looking at Dieter. "That was kind of you."

Beraht snorted into his teacup.

"Shall I have a guard set?" Esta asked, and they could see she was already making plans and selecting suitable guards.

"No," Dieter said. "For one, it should be someone capable of going down below, in case he gets that far again. And word would spread about his strange sleeping habits, which we want to avoid."

"Yes," Esta agreed.

"This entire situation could be avoided," Beraht grouched, "If we could simply get on with it. Why can't I just Break or whatever it is?"

Matthias let out an aggravated huff. "Because my father is being stubborn. Second thoughts and all that. I never thought he would do it – but lately he has not been himself. Esta and I are speaking with him; Kalan is searching high and low for wherever he might have hidden the counter stone."

"Counter stone?" Beraht asked.

"Just like the orb that Benji holds, except that it's black and will help you Break. It's the exact opposite type of energy."

Beraht shook his head. "Am I going to wind up like Benji?"

"No!" Esta exclaimed, obviously upset. "Nothing of the sort. What you're going to do is basically cancel everything out. The two powers clash, equal each other out, and will 'Break' the Crystal Chamber – and the magic. We just need the counter stone, which was made as a failsafe."

Matthias propped his chin in one hand, staring glumly at his tea. "But my father hid it for 'safekeeping' and now he won't give it up. I never expected it of him."

"He's just old and scared, Matti," Esta said gently. She reached out and covered his hand with her own. "Don't worry about it. We'll work things out." Then she withdrew her hand and returned to her breakfast. "So until then, I guess we shall just trust the Lord General to look after Beraht. Do you mind?"

Dieter laughed, and grinned mockingly at Beraht. "Not at all."

"Stars refuse you!" Beraht said, then ignored them all to focus on his food.

Esta frowned but said nothing. Sol shot Beraht a reproving look, and kicked him under the table when Beraht continued to ignore him. Beraht shot him a dirty look then went back to his food.

"So why do you look so tense, Sol?"

"Because something else happened this morning," Sol said quietly. "It is not something I'm terribly happy to discuss, as I had hoped by coming here I'd finally left it behind...but it would appear Beraht and I have been found out. An old enemy of mine is most likely heading this way to kill us."

Esta dropped her fork. "What?"

Matthias didn't look surprised in the least. "You should probably explain; but you are traitors – I'm surprised it's only now becoming a problem."

Sol nodded. "Have you ever heard of the Seven Star Brothers?"

"Secret society in Salhara. Nothing is really known about them, except that they apparently have only twenty-one members. The significance of the number always escaped me."

Beraht answered the unspoken question. "The stronger a man's soul, the more stars he becomes in the sky. The mightiest king that ever lived spanned seven stars in the sky – he is the Grand Seven Star in the sky. Seven is also the number of colors through which arcen progresses."

"Twenty one for three sets of seven," Sol continued. Seven to watch the home. Seven to watch the yard. Seven to watch the neighbors. The Seven Star Brothers is a network of spies and officials who manipulate the country from behind the scenes. Even the Queen, it's said, bows to the dictates of the Seven Star."

He fell silent and Beraht picked it up again. "In all of Salhara, only the Seven Star are allowed to use orange and red arcen. They hold the only full license for arcen – a star with seven points on the small of their backs. With each color granted, a piece of the star is filled in. The highest members go all the way up to red."

Sol nodded and resumed. "The easiest way to mark a Brother is by his eyes – most are dark yellow at least, more often orange. The oldest have red eyes. Jaspar, the leader of the Brothers, has eyes which are nearly black.

"I knew it," Iah said. "I could tell, just listening to him. He won't live much longer, will he?"

"Don't underestimate him," Sol warned. "He's addicted to arcen but that makes him as deadly as it does weak. I have yet to meet anyone else who can drink black arcen once a day and live to do it the next day – and he's been in that condition for the past five years."

Beraht hissed. "I knew he was bad, but..." He shook his head. "I'm not sorry I'm gone."

"That's the first sensible thing you've said since you fell into my keeping," Dieter said. "Perhaps the arcen hasn't rotted your brains entirely."

"Don't get too lofty, Wolf." Beraht set his tea cup down with a sharp snap. "It was arcen that saved both of us, and it's arcen which helped make your sword. Don't lecture me."

"Arcen doesn't give me my skill," Dieter snarled. "If I could strip my sword of it, I would."

Beraht sneered. "You keep telling yourself that. Don't like being as dependant as the rest of us on outside forces?"

"I'm not," Dieter said. "And if you don't shut up, I will be more than happy to prove it."

"I always forget the thrill you get out of beating me."

Dieter let out a short bark of laughter, and his grin was a challenge. "It's the only thing that shuts you up."

"Enough!" Matthias snapped. "If you two want to kill each other, take it elsewhere. Not here and especially not when we've got more important things to deal with." He nodded when both subsided, though their resentment still hung heavy in the air. "So I am going to assume the obvious and say you are both members of this Seven Star Brotherhood?"

"Yes," Sol said. "It is how I was able to gather so much information, and move freely between countries." He slid a look at Beraht. "Beraht is newer. He was a brother for only a few months; ordered to slaughter as many Scarlet as possible if he wanted to keep both his life and be given a name."

"Be given a name?" Esta repeated.

"I will explain that custom later if you like, Lady Esta." Sol smiled.

Beraht began to pick at his food again.

"Iah's unit was killed by the Scream their Captain used in hopes of preventing the Breaker from being taken further away – I believe he was in your charge at that time, Dieter?"

"Yes," Dieter said. "We were headed for the Winter Palace. But I don't get the Screaming – wouldn't it have killed the Breaker as well?"

"No," Matthias said. "He can resist it, because his untapped power is stronger than that which is used to Scream. He's too strong for it."

Beraht glowered. "Figures."

"Anyway," Sol pressed on. "I met Iah when he was taken prisoner by another Seven Star Brother – one who is named Tawn deVry.

My brother-in-law." His face tightened for a moment before he forced it to relax. "We are not on friendly terms. He did not like that I took Iah from him – and by now it is obvious that he and probably the other Brothers have figured out what we did."

Dieter laughed. "So there's an angry Kaiser looking for me, and the most powerful force in Salhara out for your necks. How amusing."

"Your sense of humor is as warped as the rest of you," Beraht snapped. "And at least your Kaiser is too much of a coward to come after you." He shifted in his seat, still feeling an ache at the small of his back.

"Cleansers," Sol said, looking at him. "It will be impossible for Tawn to touch us if there is no arcen in our systems." He explained quickly what had occurred that morning.

"But we can't alarm people by stripping him of it completely," Matthias said, drumming his fingers in thought. "Too many are already noticing with the dropped levels." He looked at Beraht apologetically. "Not that I want to keep you drugged..."

Beraht laughed. "Highness, I've been keeping myself drugged, and far worse than this, for years. A few days at such low levels is barely even noticeable."

"But remaining at even those paltry levels will possibly prove dangerous if not fatal if Tawn works up the strength to try it again," Sol said firmly.

Matthias nodded and stood. "Then you'll have to excuse me. It looks like our search for the counter stone must become a much higher priority." He began muttering to himself as he limped from the room. And he was the only one not startled when Dieter stood up and followed him out.

Esta watched them go, then shook her head gently back forth, sending the soft curls of her hair bobbing. "It's far too early in the morning for all of this. Would anyone like some more tea? Ring for more pastries."

Obedying the silent command, the remaining three men set to managing a less serious conversation.

"Why has your father changed his mind?" Dieter asked. "I thought he was the one who started the search for the Breaker?"

"He was. But I think he is letting his fears get the best of him," Matthias said as he limped along the hallways, nodding to but otherwise

ignoring everyone he passed. "It is not a happy thing, to learn to live without magic..." He sighed. "We don't use it here in the palace much, but the moment everyone steps out – it changes." Matthias laughed. "That's actually why not as many people come to the palace. Only in winter, and only until the worst of the snow is gone. Not like Kria – you remain together the entire season, don't you?"

"Yes," Dieter said. "Many have debated the advisability of the tradition – but generally only after they get caught playing the favorite winter sport."

Matthias laughed. "How many did you have to kick out of your bedroom?"

"None," Dieter said. "Everyone was too scared of either me or the Kaiser."

"Well don't think you'll be so fortunate here – once you're established as *my* general, there's more than a few who will be more than happy to set aside old grudges." Matthias grinned. "Though I don't think you'll have to worry about chamber maids overstepping their bounds."

Dieter just shook his head.

"Here we are," Matthias said, nodding to the guards as they opened the wide set of double doors for him. Dieter ignored the looks they gave him – a mix of curiosity, fear and not-quite hate. Well, that was progress. Though it would all backslide the first time he sent them to bed with too many bruises to count.

The King's Chambers were opulent. Far more ornate than anything else he'd seen in the castle. Purple and blue and gold, still somewhat dark as his windows faced the west. It was also warm; quite a feat given how open and large the room was. Two fire places – one on the west wall, one on the east, both lit and currently being tended by servants.

Near the eastern fireplace, the King sat on a chair while more servants fluttered around him. Some helped him dress, arranging his hair and the various accoutrements of office. Others flitted to and fro with things for him to read or sign while the last man adjusted and reordered the King's schedule.

"Good morning, father."

Everyone stopped as they realized Prince Matthias was in the room – and more than a few muttered a quiet exclamation when they saw who was with him. Matthias motioned them from the room.

"What do you want, Matthias?"

"We're running out of time. I need the counter stone."

The King turned around. His eyes were palest blue, short, white hair carrying only a hint of the silvery shine it had once had. Once he had probably been strong, but age had sapped it away, leaving only a skeletal thinness. "No. I've told you. We're making a mistake."

"No, we're not!" Matthias snapped. "Is that what you want to tell your uncle? Your brother? *Your son*? When you meet them in the afterlife? That killing them to give us magic was the right thing to do? Benji had a lover! He had dreams. A life. Yet he gave it all up because you promised he would be the last. That we would never have to make that sacrifice again. Now you stand there and tell me letting him die was the right thing to do?"

"You're going to be King someday, Matthias." The King spoke coolly, as if he had either not heard Matthias's words or simply did not care. "I do not need to tell you that making hard decisions is part of being a leader. You're as foolishly idealistic as I was at your age. But with age comes wisdom – and wisdom tells me it is foolish to take away our greatest strength."

Matthias clenched his hands into tight fists. "We can build a new strength – that's what Dieter is for."

"Yes. I have heard a great deal about the Bloody Wolf you have invited in." The King looked him slowly up and down. "He is certainly a beast."

Dieter laughed.

"He's agreed to teach us to fight in the Krian style."

"Disgraceful!" The King snapped.

"Certainly you are!" Matthias snapped back. "What happened to you? You've become nothing but a cowardly ghost; some sad imitation of my father! I don't like you, not one bit."

The King said nothing for several minutes, merely glared balefully at his son. When he at last spoke, he sounded weary. "I wish I could make you understand, Matthias. Yes, I once thought getting rid of everything was the right way to go. But I was young and righteous and stupid. To get rid of it would cripple us – looking back don't you wish you had not broken that leg? It's weakened you. Do you enjoy it?"

"I've learned to live with it," Matthias said, though his face had paled slightly. "And climbing that cliff was a mistake – one I wish I'd never made. Exactly like the decision to increase the power of our magic. A mistake that shouldn't have been made."

"Except," his father replied coldly. "We haven't fallen off the cliff – we're holding on just fine."

Dieter startled them both when he spoke. "The higher you climb, the greater the cost when you finally fall. And what happens when you reach the top?"

"Nothing," the King said. "From the top we'll be the strongest." He recoiled at Dieter's chilling laugh.

"The strongest?" Dieter looked at him in contempt. "Hardly. Merely unable to go higher; though you'll no doubt try to do so anyway. You would not be the first. A smart man is the one who falls and realizes to try again would be stupid."

Matthias snorted. "A smart man wouldn't try in the first place."

"Some things are only learned the hard way," Dieter said, almost offhandedly. "And this is a point that could be endlessly debated. What will it take to obtain the stone?"

The King looked at him in contempt. "I will not give it to you. Its location will go with me to the grave. I am doing this for my people; when you're older, Matthias, you will understand."

"I know for a fact that Essie and I would never consign a child of ours to Benji's fate. Essie cried for *days* father. She never cries. And she has never forgiven us – nor herself – for doing that to him. Nor will she, not until we make sure it never happens again. Do you think it makes me happy to do this to my people? We'll be crippled for years until we raise generations that don't know what they're missing."

"And in the meantime you will get our country killed."

Matthias bit back a curse. "Why, father? Why are you letting me down when I need you most?"

"I am not the one offending the ministers every single hour of the day. Nor do I spend more time harassing a recalcitrant woman into being my bride."

Matthias froze. "So now you're claiming I don't work? Father – this isn't like you. More than anyone you should know how hard I work. My time is spent making up for the duties you neglect! It's easy to forget sometimes that you still run the country!" He turned away. "Mother would be ashamed to hear that you've given up."

"You have no idea what your mother would think."

Ignoring him, Matthias motioned to Dieter and led the way from the room.

Out in the hallway, Matthias released a long sigh. He slid Dieter a glance. "Do you see what I have to put up with?"

"He is old and scared. Lecturing him will gain you nothing."

"I know," Matthias said. "Thank you for supporting me, by the way."

Dieter shook his head, brushing the words aside.

"So what do we do now, I wonder," Matthias mused allowed.

"It's not in the castle," a voice said from behind them. Matthias rolled his eyes as he turned around. Kalan grinned back, then sobered. "I've been watching him. As agitated as your father is...he's the type to check on something like that. He'd want to make sure it was safe if it were nearby. So I don't think it's on the premises. Or if it is, the damnable thing isn't where even he can easily access it."

"Where does he go during the day?" Dieter asked. Matthias led them away from the King's Chambers and back toward the main halls of the palace.

Kalan fell into step on Matthias's other side, and together the three men took up most of the hallway as they walked. Enthralled in their conversation, they barely noticed as others were forced to step out of their way, nor the mixed expressions on their faces as they watched the prince walk along with the Duke of Ferra and the Wolf of Kria. "Mostly he stays in his room. He's old enough now the cold is sheer torture – his room is stifling, I can't stand it." He shuddered. "Give me the cold of winter any day. I'm telling you, I'm going to die in the snow and not in front of some stuffy fireplace."

Matthias laughed. "Yes, Kalan."

"He also goes to visit the late queen. Occasionally to meetings with the ministers – which I wish he'd stop doing because every time we've got them squirming your father undoes all our work. Goddess I cannot wait until we have some real measure of control!" He grimaced.

Dieter frowned in thought. "He does not sound the type to leave another to the task of hiding such a thing. So he hid it himself. Unless he leaves the castle, it is probably here."

"A good point," Kalan conceded. "He never leaves the palace, and there is no way he would trust a messenger with something like the counter stone." He looked at Dieter. "You are not bad at this game."

"On the contrary – I have no patience for games." Dieter's hand briefly touched his sword. "It is not a General's job to solve such riddles. My job is merely to know who is best suited to solving it."

Matthias's brows went up. "You sound like you've someone in mind."

"The cat," Dieter said, confusing them both. He looked at Kalan. "You have the same crafty air about you, but it's not as developed. If you want to find this counter stone, I highly recommend consulting with Sol."



Kalan broke into a grin. "Of course. I should have thought to ask for Spiegel's help myself. I will go and find him now. Thank you, Lord General, for the suggestion." As they reached a split in the hallway, he veered left while Matthias and Dieter continued straight.

"Speaking of recommendations," Matthias said after a moment. "Your moment is fast approaching. I would imagine we are woefully unprepared for whatever you have in mind."

Dieter nodded. "You lack weapons, I doubt you have the appropriate sword smiths, and your country has no foundation in such combat at all."

"No..." Matthias said. "We have always used magic. Is there any hope of our surviving without it? Sometimes I wonder..." He started to rub away the ache in his head, but stopped.

"I am going to be universally hated," Dieter said. "But they will learn. It would be easier if they had some sort of foundation...or I had more help." He shrugged. "But largely it depends on your people. They will only learn if they want to."

"Hmm..." Matthias fell silent as he thought. "I will see what can be done to help you. It will not be much – I am all too aware how unfit for Krian-style combat we are. But a leg does not heal easily. Compose a list of what you need, or write me a report. Bring it directly to me when you're finished."

Dieter nodded. Matthias clapped him on the shoulder, then turned toward the Hall of Ministers. "I'll see you at lunch, Dieter."

"Yes, Prince." Dieter turned back down the hallway to return to his room, mentally outlining his report.



## CHAPTER TWENTY

Iah hummed along as he listened to his sister and poor Beraht dance. It did not take eyesight to realize how discomfited he was – it probably did not help that Essie was his self-appointed dance teacher. He wished he could see, though he knew exactly how it would look. The ballroom was a beautiful room. Long, rectangular, the floor was made of a light wood and polished to a high shine. Ten glass chandeliers ran the length of the room, and windows ran along the top edge. This time of day, they would hit the chandeliers and send shreds of rainbow all over. Esta loved to dance in the empty ballroom even more than she liked dancing at a party.

He sat on the raised platform where the King and Queen would normally sit. Far on the opposite end was a place for the musicians. Today Esta had kidnapped only one pianist. Iah didn't doubt by the end of the week she would commandeer the whole troupe. Teaching Beraht to dance had, it seemed, become her latest mission.

Which made him wonder if Matti had noticed Esta's infatuation with the Breaker. Probably. The better question was when would Essie notice it was pointless?

The sound of someone tripping and the music stopping made Iah grin. "Come, Beraht. This is the easiest dance in the lot. You're going to be in trouble something fierce at the Winter's End Ball if you can't master at least the simple dances."

Beraht muttered something indistinguishable. "I don't see why I'm going to this stupid ball, or any ball at all. Soldiers don't do balls."

"I tried that line for years," Iah said. "No one ever listened to me. In fact, Esta usually made me dance *more* for daring to say such a thing."

Esta sniffed. "By the Goddess, why are men such babies about dancing? Children are easier to deal with, I swear it."

Iah laughed hard enough to nearly fall out of his chair. "I'll remind you of that when you're tracking down a tiny Matthias and find him up a tree."

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Esta snapped. "Now—" Iah heard her snap her fingers at the pianist and resume her instruction as she forced Beraht to dance.

Someone sat down next to him, and Iah reached out a hand with a smile. "Sol."

"Iah," Sol leaned in to kiss his cheek, and Iah turned his head to steal a proper kiss. "Where have you been? Trying to find trouble to get into?"

Sol laughed. "On the contrary – I was merely listening to a discussion on the weather."

"Looking grim?"

"They didn't seem to think so."

Iah smiled. "Who was it?"

"I'm not certain. A few noblewomen."

"Well, I guess we'll see. There are many saying that we're in for one more nasty spell before winter finally begins to loosen its hold." Iah held Sol's in a light grip. "Personally I hope the snow does not melt for a long time."

Sol squeezed his hand. "There's no reason anyone has to go back to war, Iah. I doubt the Illussor will be missed. Kria and Salhara have always been more than happy to kill just each other."

"Something tells me you can't simply declare you're finished fighting," Iah said. "And just because we drop out of the problems surrounding the Regenbogen doesn't mean the trouble with pirates will stop. *That* will get worse. Much worse."

The music stopped, interrupting Sol's reply, and Iah grinned as he heard Beraht stomp over and drop down beside him on the dais. "Giving up already, Beraht? Come now, you're far more stubborn than that." He laughed. "You'll get into fights with the Wolf but a simple dance defeats you?"

"Fighting that bastard is far easier than learning all these mincing, turning steps. How is this fun?"

Esta stamped her foot, and Iah bet her hands had gone to her hips. "Quitter! It's no wonder Salhara never seems to win any battles!"

"Hey!" Beraht stormed to his feet. "There's a world of difference between fighting for your life and flitting about trying not to trod on someone's stupid slippers. And we've won plenty of battles!"

"Calm down," Esta said with a laugh. "I was only teasing. You're plenty coordinated when you're not thinking about it – just pretend you're fighting." She laughed again. "Honestly, I don't understand men and dancing. My father used to love to dance. And he said the coordination and grace of movement he learned from dancing helped him on the battlefield."

Iah and Beraht laughed. Beside him he could tell Sol had turned thoughtful. "There is something to what you say, Esta. Though I still think soldiers are better served practicing movement and coordination in circumstances a bit more strenuous than the ballroom."

"You don't think this is strenuous?" Beraht asked irritably. "That's just because you're good at it. *You* dance with her and I'll keep Iah company. I think we'll all be happier that way."

Sol laughed but stood good naturedly, and Iah listened with a smile as he and Esta began to work on the Salharan dances he had begun teaching her.

It was, he thought, not unlike the old days. Of course he'd been able to see, and had often messed up his own steps laughing when Kalan and Matthias danced together, making up the steps as they went. Even back then, Esta had been far more terrifying than the dance instructor. He seemed to remember most of the knocks upside his head coming from her.

"So are you enjoying yourself at all here, Salharan?" Iah asked.

Beraht did not immediately reply; Iah could hear him shifting and settling on the wooden dais. "Yes," he said finally. "I wouldn't have thought so. It's probably obvious that I didn't have the...upbringing the rest of you did."

"I wouldn't know," Iah said with a smile. "If you look uncouth or uncultured, it matters little to me. You speak Illussor like everyone else in the city, minus the Salharan accent. And...I suspect you'll have a title before too long. It would be Matthias's style and he's got three of them to hand out."

"What are you talking about?"

Iah grinned. "Nothing of importance. So are you going to wind up stuck in Dieter's bed again tonight?" He felt Beraht stiffen.

"Not if I can help it," Beraht muttered, adding a few curses. "The bastard."

"I wonder when you two will finally get around to killing each other. I thought once we got here, the hostilities would ease. But they seem only to be getting worse."

Beraht shifted on the dais, obviously restless. "He doesn't know what to do with himself now that he doesn't have an entire country to terrorize. But I'm sure that will change once he has to start teaching everyone how to fight. I still think the Prince was insane to contrive such a scheme."

Iah shrugged. "It seems a good idea to me. Better to have the Wolf on our side than to fight him without magic. We'd be massacred." He paused, head bobbing as he thought. "Though I don't know that he would."

"Would what?"

"Massacre us."

Beraht snorted. "A good General takes advantage of a situation. What else would he do? Let you live? Why in the stars would you even be out there fighting without being able to actually do so?"

"I didn't say we would. It was just an observation, really."

"A poor one," Beraht said, and Iah could feel his clothes rustle. Recalled the bruises on his throat that Beraht had been complaining of the other day – loudly, to Dieter. Sometimes it seemed Beraht went out of his way to incur Dieter's anger. "He has no qualms beating me, and my ability to fight back is rather nonexistent. I don't think he'd hesitate to crush a weak army."

Iah laughed. "You seem to do all right."

Beraht didn't reply.

From the dance floor, Esta burst into laughter. Iah felt a pang. "What's she laughing about?"

"Hmm? Oh – she keeps messing up the last step. It's this weird twist one way while the feet go the other. Some of the soldiers I was with used to dance when they were drunk. It was hysterical." Beraht laughed. "I'd forgotten about that until now. Captain used to scream himself hoarse, and we just kept laughing...until the arcen burn anyway. He was always good at that."

"Arcen burn?"

"Sort of like the way Sol and I woke up screaming. Really good mages know how to do it on a smaller scale – they 'set off' the arcen in our systems. Nasty piece of work, that spell. Luckily not practical at all. Burns the user's arcen off pretty fast."

Iah started bobbing his head again. "Is that why the spells you guys use are seldom in and of themselves fatal?"

"Yeah," Beraht said. "Too costly. Arcen powerful enough to use in war is hard to grow. Used wisely a yellow dose of arcen can last a couple of weeks, but most of us need it every few days when we're in the field – and that's just basic and medium spells. We used stronger ones? We'd be dosing every day, and no one can afford that. Not even the Seven Star – not with our most powerful needing red every few days."

"Do you miss it?"

"Yes," Beraht said. "But I'll live."

"Why?" He felt Beraht shrug. "I wasn't trying to pry."

"You're not. I'm not used to talking to someone that isn't threatening my life or beating me to a pulp. People don't talk to nameless except to tell them to get lost. The army is about the only place that will take a person that doesn't exist."

"Doesn't exist?"

"Exactly."

"I find that hard to comprehend," Iah said. "If you're here, you exist. A name doesn't decide that."

"Doesn't it?" Beraht asked. "Try spending twenty-eight years of your life without a name, then tell me the lack of one doesn't matter."

Iah reached out, hand landing on what seemed to be Beraht's knee. "I'm sorry; I didn't mean to offend. It's simply hard to understand, though you are giving me some idea. Sol did not explain it quite so."

"Perhaps because General Sol deVry has always had a name, if occasionally too many of them. Had we both returned to Salhara at winter's end, our tasks completed, he would have been among those who did not acknowledge me outside of giving orders."

"Sol wouldn't do that," Iah protested. "Not when he knows what it's like to be shamed."

Beraht laughed bitterly. "Yes, he would have. If only to preserve his own role as a General and cousin to the Queen. Someone of such importance does not demean himself by speaking to people who don't exist. It would have tarnished the role he was playing." Beraht stood up. "I am feeling hungry. Excuse me."

Iah heard him stomp away – then stumble to a halt, apologizing to...Kalan, Iah realized as he finally heard the new voice clearly. Then Beraht was gone. "Kalan, come to dance?"

"I've told you before I don't agree with torture," Kalan said. "Anyway I paid my dues thrice over growing up." Iah listened as his boots clicked on the hardwood floor, grinning at the pianist's frustrated

sigh. And Esta's, who from the sound of it had finally gotten the hang of the Salharan dance. Before she was interrupted.

"What do you want, Kalan?" Iah knew her hands were back on her hips.

Kalan, he could tell, was grinning. His friend had always had a death wish. "Apologies, my Queen. I've come to steal away your dance instructor." He yowled a second later; a screech Iah knew all too well – Esta was pulling his hair. Hard.

"What do you want with Sol, Duke?" Esta asked in too-sweet tones.

"Merely a bit of his time, Duchess." Kalan hissed in pain and moved closer to Iah when she let go. "Which reminds me – are you going to give the title back to your brother, now that he's home for good?"

"Yes," Esta replied.

"No," Iah said at the same time.

Kalan laughed. "Excellent. Then we can hand the title back when Matti hands out all the rest. Sol – a word with you in the hall? You've come highly recommended for a particular task, and I should have thought of it myself."

"Certainly," Sol said in his calm way. Iah heard him approach, and tilted his face up for the kiss Sol gave him, allowing himself to be tugged up. "Would you like to be taken back to your room first?"

Iah nodded. "Yes, I think so."

"Let me take him," Esta said, the faintest bit of hesitation in her voice.

Iah smiled, and he knew Sol did as well.

"I promise I won't let him trip on the stairs again," Esta said more firmly.

"Oh, Essie. You can't still be upset by that? It takes getting used to. Now come on, help me back to my room. I've got the layout memorized, but people are still the very devil." He didn't voice that when he tried to do it alone, the whispers that chased him were the worst part. No one needed to know that he was being mocked. Some were even scared of him; he heard it in the way they greeted him. Stiff, uncertain, occasionally derisive. It was nothing he hadn't expected. And he had Sol, along with his sister and friends. He'd be fine. "We'll just make a penalty – cause me to trip and you have to be nice to someone."

"I'm always nice," Esta protested. "You just don't like that I'm always right."



Kalan started coughing. "Pardon me – better yet, pardon *us*. I will see you later, Esta. Iah. Make sure if you trip that I'm the first one on that list." He and Sol fled.

Esta took his arm. "All right," she said. "Tell me if I'm doing something wrong."

"One would think," Iah said with a grin. "That being blind, I would be more nervous than you. Leading me around has got to be easier than getting Matthias to do as he's told."

"That's certainly true," Esta muttered. "All right – ten paces to the door?"

Iah grinned. It was actually twelve, but she'd get the hang of it. "Then we turn right, yes? Did you know that damned staircase has a hundred and seven steps?"

"So what did you need?" Sol asked, shaking his head as Esta began to lead her brother to his room. He followed as Kalan led the way to what turned out to be a small office.

"It's nothing we can't mention to the others – I just didn't feel like making Essie worry when she was having such a good time." He leaned against edge of a large, dark desk. It was covered in neat stacks of paper and cumbersome ledgers. One whole wall was given over to books ranging in quality from thin paper and heavy stock covers to rich leather and thick, cloth-like paper. "Remember our conversation this morning? About the counter stone?"

"Yes," Sol said, nodding. "You still have not been able to obtain it."

Kalan nodded, folding his arms across his chest. It was easy to see the office was his, and not one he'd simply picked because it was empty. It had his same quiet flare, splashes of color that somehow managed to fit together. Mostly red, but a rainbow of accents in pillows on the small couch, the books, and the colorful rug on the floor. And even in all the color, his jewel-green coat stood out. "I wondered if you'd like to help find it."

"I don't know that I would be of much use," Sol said slowly. "But I'm certainly happy to try. What precisely is the problem?"

"Excellent. The problem is that we can't figure out where it's been hidden."

Sol frowned in thought. "You can't...sense it?"

"No," Kalan said. "The stones are little more than dead weight until someone like Beraht activates it. And don't ask me to explain – that's more Matthias's field. He's been studying what little information remains nearly all his life."

"And its most likely general location?"

"The palace, though that is not completely certain. We doubt he's hidden it elsewhere, but we're not discounting the possibility entirely."

Sol nodded. "What places have you already tried?"

"Only the cemetery. I doubt it's in his bedroom, or somewhere else a great many of people go. But he doesn't go anywhere else."

"Nowhere at all?"

Kalan shrugged. "To visit his wife's grave. All the royal family is buried in a private cemetery at the far end of the castle property. No one else is allowed in there."

"An easy hiding spot," Sol said.

"That's what I thought, but I combed the area and had no luck." He made a face. "Cost me a jacket and my favorite pair of pants. Trust me, it's not there."

Sol smiled. "If it's no insult to you, I will check once more. You will also have to tell me what else he does, where he goes...everything you can think of. To figure out where someone might hide something, you must be able to think as he does. My sister and I used to love playing hide and seek when we were children – but we got too good at knowing where the other hid. So...I need to speak with everyone who knows him well."

"Matti and Esta can be interrogated at dinner. I'm probably not the best. I know he's quick to anger, quick to get over it – or at least he used to be. Lately he's nothing but a grouchy old man who lets his son do all the work and then reprimands him for it. I think age is getting the better of him." Kalan shrugged "And I guess you can't really blame a man who lost his uncle, his brother and his son to the magic that keeps his country functioning."

"One would think, then, that he'd want to be rid of the magic."

Kalan gave a half smile. "Like I said – age is getting the better of him. I'm sure Matti will crack him eventually, but time is a luxury that we do not have. Not that we often do."

"Where is the King now?"

"Probably in a meeting with the ministers. Some private lunch thing where they all bitch about Matthias and the King assures them that yes, his son is young and foolish and no, he won't let the boy do anything stupid."

"...The Prince strikes me as someone who is most definitely not stupid. I would think men shrewd enough to run a country would notice that."

Kalan sniffed. "We work hard to make sure they don't realize, thank you *very* much. Do you know the last time twelve ministers were dismissed simultaneously was at the end of the war that put Matthias's family on the throne? Every last one was removed from office; seven were executed and the other five banished. One tried to sneak back into the country ten years later and was killed within days. That was...not long before the war with the neighbors began. I guess no one likes to be too idle." He gave another shrug. "Anyway – it's going to cause a massive upheaval. I don't doubt one or two will turn to violence. So the fewer that know it's coming, the better. And speaking as the future Minister of Finances – it'll be cheaper as well."

"Why finances?" Sol asked.

"Because," Kalan answered with a grin. "No one ever pays attention to the poor fool who got saddled with such an unhappy job. Far too easy to steal funds if you know what you're doing, and highly unpopular because the Finances department is the one most likely to complain about every new scheme."

Sol smiled back. "So you're in a fine position to continue communications with Spiegel and others of his sort."

"I'm sure I don't know what you mean."

Laughing, Sol turned back to the original topic. "So walk me through the areas the King frequents. Tell me what he does. If you're not busy."

"Nothing that can't wait or be foisted onto lackeys," Kalan said. "Come, I'll take you to the cemetery first. You can have a turn destroying your pants."

Outside, the sky was sunny but clouds loomed not too far off – by dinner the weather would be gray and damp. The wind held a bite, a promise of snow. Kalan let out a happy sigh. "I love winter. Salharans spend most of the year warm, don't they? I don't know how you do it."

Sol laughed. "I never understood why Kria and Illussor were so fond of being buried alive every winter. But the snow begins to appeal, after a while. Though that might simply be the madness talking, I don't know."

"Could be," Kalan agreed, chuckling. "Here's the path to the cemetery," he pointed. "It winds round all the way to the perimeter. Many don't like it being so close...but it was established early on and

later moving it all became too difficult a task. They're all buried above ground...the building is actually rather pretty..."

Rounding the few buildings where various craftsmen lived, Sol immediately spotted the gray and white building. It wasn't terribly large, but plenty big enough to house several generations of royalty. "The gravestones indicate special personages considered important enough to be buried with royalty...I shouldn't doubt you'll all wind up here, to be morbid a moment."

"I sincerely doubt traitors, no matter how loyal to the country for whom they betrayed their own, are fit to be buried with kings." Sol smiled ruefully. "We're much more the sort of thing everyone likes to forget about after a time."

Kalan snorted. "I want to see you tell that to Matthias. Trust me when I say that for all he was reluctant to cooperate with "enemies" he has taken to all of you. Perhaps because you've already done more than anyone else has." A grin. "Except me, but my main role is to stay with him, which limits me to the palace."

"I am humbled by the prince's trust."

This time Kalan's grin was slow, sly. "Well, even if we didn't trust the others – it's pretty obvious you're not going anywhere unless Iah decides to pack up and leave."

"...Iah was...unexpected..." Sol looked away, embarrassed, and stared at a well as they passed it. A young girl stared back, then shuffled away with her heavy bucket of water. "If I am causing some offense..."

"No!" Kalan said hastily. "I'm sorry, I was just teasing. Iah used to be a bit of a flirt growing up, then he mellowed out and after he joined the army he just...sort of gave up. I can't even begin to imagine what it must be like for him now..." He shook his head, pale hair catching the sunlight that was even now beginning to succumb to cloud cover. "I'm glad he has you. I don't think even friends would be enough right now."

Sol glanced at him. "I think you underestimate him."

"I doubt it," Kalan said. "Iah's strong – no choice when you're related to Esta. But he has his mother's sense of duty and his father's stubborn headedness. Which means he's good at suffering in silence." He glanced at Sol. "I've caught snatches of more than a few comments about his blindness. Hopefully he hasn't caught wind of them."

Sol shook his head. "He has not mentioned it. But that may explain why his nightmares are coming back."

"I would suffer a great deal more than nightmares in his situation," Kalan said with a grimace. "As I said before – I cannot even begin to imagine. Unfortunate that the least deserving of us is the one

who suffered. I'm sure it all makes sense to the Goddess." He grinned playfully. "What is it Beraht's always screaming? Stars take it! – that's it. Perhaps those stars know something we don't."

"Yes," Sol said with an answering smile. "Stars see things that those of us on the ground never notice."

"Irk some stars," Kalan replied. They reached a high, iron gate; the bars so close together that a grown man or woman would not be able to slip a hand through. From his coat Kalan pulled a ring of keys and selected a larger key made from iron. The lock turned easily, but the gates squealed loudly as he pushed them open. "Welcome to the royal cemetery," Kalan said. "This isn't going to be a very exciting tour, I'm afraid."

"I would imagine not," Sol replied, smiling. But it was distracted, as he began to take in and examine the small cemetery.

Perhaps three dozen or so gravestones, the marks on them meaningless to him but the wording spelling out names, dates and a brief poem to the deceased. "In Salhara, bodies are burned so that they might reach the sky and become stars."

"We burn them too, though mostly because the ground is too hard to bury the ones that die in winter. These markers are just...reminders."

Sol nodded. The wind snatched at his hair, his long dark blue coat. Beside him Kalan cursed as the wind sent his hair flying in all directions, the ribbon holding it blowing away faster than Kalan could move to catch it.

"Let's go inside," Kalan said. "Before I lose my clothes." He stopped in front of the door to the mausoleum and withdrew a small, ornate key made of silver. This time the door opened soundlessly, and the smell of dust and decay. The inside was as ornate as the outside had been – whorls and loops, all manner of whimsical, grotesque figures no doubt meant to keep several things out...and perhaps a few in.

"I'm going to hazard that the royal family is never burned?"

"They're too special," Kalan said. "It's expensive to put them here, though I will admit most of the money goes toward the fuss of storing them."

Sol shook his head, lips twitching. "You're not the minister quite yet."

"Yet," Kalan said, and winked. "Everyone knows I'm angling, and that the prince favors me. It's only a matter of time."

"I thought a good leader didn't play favorites," Sol said, but his tone was teasing.

Kalan let out a snort strong enough to stir up the dust on the column he stood beside. "In politics you have enemies and favorites."

"Yes," Sol said. "I know all about politics and playing sides. I've been involved in Salharan and Krian politics, one way or the other, for years. Where have you looked?"

Kalan grinned. "You should consider a position; Matti doesn't have all the new ministers figured out. He'd love to have someone else on board that set everyone else on edge. Keeps them on their toes. You name it I've looked in, under, above, through or all around it. If that damnable stone is in here, I wasn't clever enough to find it. Which will annoy me because those breeches really were my favorite pair."

"We all must make sacrifices," Sol said, and abruptly knelt on the ground. "So no one else accompanies him here?"

"Matti does occasionally, but not every time, no. Only the King has time to come down here every single day for half an hour or more. So you'll have to ask Matti what he does, if that's what you're hoping to hear. And what he does with Matti..."

"Is of course not likely to be what he does when he's alone. His entire family is buried here?"

"Yes," Kalan said, pointing to each one and ticking off the kings, queens and various other royals sealed up in the walls. Over each section was an ornate gold nameplate, the royal seal, a brief dedication and a relief of the deceased's face. "Even Benji already has a place. Most everyone believes he died of illness. That was not a happy time, let me tell you. It was after he 'died' that we all became a bit too serious...it's only in recent years that we've begun to lighten up again. I think mostly because it was just getting too cumbersome."

Sol nodded. "No one can be miserable forever. No one is meant to be."

"Indeed. Anyway – all of the family is buried here...at least those that are dead...but he only really comes to see his wife. They were close; I think it was Matti's mother who first put the idea of marrying Esta into his head. Matti protested quite loudly until the day he and Esta got into a huge fight – this at the age of sixteen – and she pushed him into the pond. In winter. After he was saved from freezing to death and Esta was done feeling guilty, he proposed. She kicked him and stormed off." Kalan grinned. "As you can see, they're still working it out."

"I see," Sol said with a smile of his own. He examined the place where the late Queen was buried. "I don't think the stone is going to be in here anywhere. Too obvious, and too hard to hide something like that."

Kalan rolled his eyes. "Of that I wouldn't be too sure – when you really start looking there are far too many nooks and crannies."

"All the same..." Sol stood up, brow furrowed in thought. "I do not know the King, or how he thinks. But if I were a king eager to hide something which could cripple my kingdom..." He turned and headed out of the mausoleum, walking briskly from the graveyard along the stone path that wended its way back to the castle proper. Kalan bolted after him, falling into step and keeping pace until he almost continued on when Sol abruptly stopped.

In front of the well he'd glanced at before. "There is a phrase of which the Seven Star is particularly fond...mostly because we completely disregard it." Sol glanced at Kalan. "The best way to keep a secret is to kill everyone that knows it."

"Morbid but true. Rather than those of us that knew, you think he 'killed' the stone by throwing it in the well? How did you ever come to that conclusion?"

"A hunch," Sol said. "There's no guarantee I'm right. But if he goes to see his wife that often, I have no doubt he does as much for guidance as anything else. He must miss having her to talk to...and the well would be an easy way to dispose of the problem. Not destroying it, which would be going too far...but close enough. If it really is there, no one can get it out."

Kalan grinned. "Don't be too sure of that," he said. "Matti and I could do it. He knows what the stone looks like, and I can help him since calling it up from the well won't be easy within the confines of the castle – especially not knowing how deep this well is." He clapped Sol on the shoulder. "Well, done! No wonder you were so highly recommended."

"By who?" Sol asked.

"Dieter – and I can see why he calls you a cat. You're as sly as one, and you move the same way." Kalan shook his head. "And that voice – it's a wonder you don't purr, my friend. You should become a minister. I bet you could convince the lot of them to jump off a cliff if you wanted."

Sol rolled his eyes. "Absurd. I am a spy – hopefully a *retired* one. I want no part of ministry work."

"I'll tell Matti to start convincing you," Kalan said with a wink. "Now let's go see if Esta managed to kill her brother with the stairs yet."





## CHAPTER TWENTY ONE

"So this is it?" Beraht said, looking at the orb Matthias had dropped into his hand before collapsing tiredly into a nearby chair. It was late – or early, depending on how you wanted to view it. No one was about, though throughout the night nearly everyone had been giving Beraht strange looks.

He had never wanted a dose of arcen so badly in his life. Anything to go back to being looked at normally – like a mere foreigner, instead of a very strange one. It was bad enough he almost wished for the days when no one looked at him at all. He barely suppressed a shudder.

Maybe not.

"It certainly doesn't look like much," Beraht said. It didn't. He remembered the one Benji held – a clear orb of crystal. Like glass but thicker, denser. The one in his hands was a smoky black. Like someone had mixed ink into the crystal. And heavy. Beraht hefted it thoughtfully – he bet with a good throw he could dent even Dieter's head. He glanced up.

"Don't even think about," Dieter said.

Beraht lifted a brow. "I have no idea what you're talking about." He glanced at Matthias before he gave himself away. "So...what now?"

Matthias, Esta and Kalan exchanged a nervous glance. Matthias shrugged his shoulder, looking sheepish. "I...don't really know. In theory you just go down there and...Break the chamber. All my research and no

one bothered to say exactly how it was done. Perhaps because they never thought it would actually happen?"

"You're kidding, right?" Beraht reconsidered whose head he should be throwing things at. "You want me to improvise?" He glared. "I wondered why I hadn't been getting any lessons or explanations."

"I'm glad you decided not to ask," Kalan said shamelessly. "Because now it's too late."

Beraht shifted his glare. "I will throw this at your head."

"You'd probably hit it too, but Esta will be the first to tell you my head is harder than rock."

Esta's glare froze the entire room. "I do not think now is the time to be making jokes. Especially bad ones. Your head isn't as hard as rock, it's simply as dense! Now be quiet until you can say something useful."

"Yes, my Queen." Kalan backed away as she looked at him again. "I mean Duchess."

"This is no time for joking," she repeated icily.

Kalan shrugged. "There's always time for a joke."

"Enough," Matthias said wearily.

Beraht dropped the stone from hand to hand, back and forth. Ice cold and damp from the well it had been dropped in, it began to warm in his hands. Almost hot. He frowned at it, something cold crawling up his spine. Abruptly he stood up, nearly knocking his chair back. "Let's get this over with. Whatever it is." Without another word he stormed from the room, clutching the stone close to his chest.

At least it was quiet enough even the majority of the servants had gone to bed. The few still awake would be gossiping in the kitchens, waiting until some lord or lady rang for a midnight snack. Beraht strode through the halls and out into the garden.

It was *freezing*. Stars curse everyone and everything. At the first opportunity he was going to find somewhere to live that was never cold. Nothing was worth spending what felt like half the year freezing to death. Shivering, he all but ran through the garden, fingers shaking too hard to unlock the door. He dropped it, the ringing clang of metal on stone jarringly loud in the dead garden.

Movement, heat, and Beraht was shoved aside as Dieter opened the door and hauled him through it. He saw the others behind him, and fought the urge to snatch Dieter's cape away. He hadn't seen the damn thing since their arrival – and it looked far cleaner than it had in what was probably a very long time.

Angry with himself, Beraht yanked free of Dieter's hold – and nearly fell down the stairs, but a grab at the rough wall helped him keep his balance. "Having trouble, Beraht?"

"Shut up," Beraht snapped. He didn't bother to light a torch at the bottom, merely held the stone tightly and kept walking forward. That chill in his spine felt like cold fingers; he half expected cold lips and colder breath at the back of his neck. Just behind him he could feel Dieter – he really wished the man had not come. Whatever was about to happen, he had no doubt it would only provide the bastard with fodder.

At least he wouldn't have to sleep with him again.

What normally felt like forever took only seconds, and the door to the Crystal Chamber loomed, just barely visible in the light of the torch beside it. Beraht continued on through the door and slammed it shut behind him.

He couldn't lock it, so hopefully they all got the message.

How had he gotten into this mess?

Oh, yeah. He'd set out to kill the Scarlet. Every star-cursed problem since that damnable day could be laid at Dieter's feet.

Beraht forced the thoughts from his mind. He'd get Dieter if it was the last thing he did – but right now he had something else to do.

It made him feel strange. The way Esta smiled at him. How Kalan and Matthias laughed and talked with him. A Duchess, a Duke, and a Prince. All people he thought he could almost get away with calling...friends. So too with Iah and Sol, for all that he and Sol would never speak outside the Brotherhood.

He refused to think about Dieter again. Bastard.

Here he was, in a room made of crystal with only a near-corpses for company. And he was supposed to save people. Some sort of perverse hero. Better, he supposed, than someone who killed men in their sleep.

Though...everyone *was* asleep. It was almost funny. Kalan would be amused if he thought of it. Amusing that after only a few weeks, he knew exactly how Kalan and all the rest would react.

He'd started out just saving himself. Now he supposed he was saving them. A strange feeling.

The tingling in his spine felt like claws, digging deep and raking up through his neck to his head. Beraht cursed and clutched at his forehead, holding the counter stone tight in his other hand. He barely noticed when he hit his knees, not really hearing his own cry of pain.

It was a deeper, harder cold than what had annoyed him outside. Like it was spreading from the inside out...Beraht realized he was

shaking and pressed the stone against his chest to avoid dropping it. Sensing, somehow, that dropping it would be a bad thing to do.

The cold spread, and he began to shake harder, not even able to stay on his knees, collapsing to sit fully on the floor. His hand hit the crystal, and he went so cold it almost felt hot. Beraht choked on a cry of pain, and it came out like a thin hiss.

*Don't*

*Please*

*Don't do it.*

*Please do it.*

"Shut up," Beraht snapped. "If you give me a headache, I'll kill you twice. Or whatever." He bit down hard on his lip, the copper-tang of blood in his mouth and the feel of it dribbling down his chin helping to restore some order to his mind.

The voices kept whispering, as thick and bitter-sweet as arcen sliding down his throat. So easy, he thought as his eyes slid shut, to just join them. Sink into the voices, into the calm of the crystal...be the arcen that gave the country magic...

He bit down hard on his lip again, and would have cursed except that it was hard to do when your mouth was full of blood. But the pain brought clarity that he desperately needed.

Perhaps he should have asked how to work the star cursed counter stone. Opposite was all he had to go on...Breaker...so maybe he should just think of breaking?

*Help me...*

"Shut up," Beraht said again. "I'm not listening." He pressed the hand already on the floor flat, wincing at the cold that lanced up his arm. No, it wasn't cold. It was something worse. He just didn't know what to call it.

Ignoring it as best he could, Beraht tried to think of what next to do. No ideas were coming.

In his other hand, the black counter stone felt hot. Too hot, next to the cold that was everywhere else. Hesitating, he gave a weak shrug and then lowered his other hand to the floor, touching the counter stone to the crystal.

And screamed.

He yanked it away again, curling up and hugging himself, burning hand close to his body.

Stars take them all! Every last one of them was going to get the same measure of pain at breakfast. Wasn't there some other way?

Beraht admitted with an inward wince that there was not. It had hurt worse than even Tawn's torment from the day before, but it had been at least close to the right thing to do. He glanced at Benji, as still as ever. Not so much as a finger had moved, but he could hear two voices in his head. Two versions of the same voice, one begging Beraht to join him, the other begging him to stop it. The former must be what had caused him to sleep walk. And the other...the real Benji?

He didn't know. Obviously weaker than the voice trying to coax him into power. How there were two, he didn't much care. He just wanted them both to shut up. Taking a deep breath, bracing himself, Beraht closed his eyes tight and sought for something – anything – that would help him endure the pain.

Curses flooded the room when his mind immediately dredged up thoughts of Dieter – the smug, smirking, arrogant, violent—

Beraht slammed his hands down, barely noticed the jarring pain in his left hand as the counter stone slammed into crystal. Nor did he notice when he started screaming, just that suddenly he was. He bit hard on his lip again, focusing on the pain and how everything was the fault of that damned bastard and he'd curse his name under every star in the sky if that's what it took to break his damned—

Voices filled his head. Angry. Sad. Coaxing. Pleading. Screaming. Sobbing. Hundreds of thousands of voices, until his head ached to the point he wished it would just hurry up and burst already. His left hand burned with pain, his right had gone numb from the searing cold.

*Don't*

*Please*

*Join*

*Stop*

*Stop*

*Stop...*

Beneath his frozen right hand, Beraht felt something shift. Crack. He saw blood leaking from under his palm. His left hand and now the arm felt like they were on fire; he wondered if they were bleeding too, but couldn't take his eyes off the blood on the floor. More dripped from his ruined bottom lip. He'd have to start mangling his top lip next, if this continued.

Then something inside him seemed to *snap*, like a strong spell searing the arcan right out of his body. Then he felt empty.

Then nothing.

He felt hot. Way too hot. Beraht struggled to figure out the source of the overwhelming heat and could only determine that he was

moving. "Bastard," he guessed, and fell back into the black, not hearing the laughter as he was carried out of the tunnel.

Beraht groaned and opened his eyes. Then closed them again and scrambled to pull the blankets back up. "Stars, how much did I drink last night?" He struggled to remember, and to recall who had let him drink that much so that he knew who to kill.

Then the night started coming back, in bits and pieces and then all at once and Beraht wished he'd simply had too much to drink. He debated between staying in bed and getting up. Staying in bed sounded wonderfully appealing, but he resisted and threw back the blankets, made himself sit up.

In his room. Not dead. Bastard asleep in a chair by the window. Something in there didn't fit. Beraht closed his eyes, then opened them again and half-stumbled out of bed. His head felt like the worst possible mix between arcanic withdrawal and no less than six jugs of wine. He'd only been that stupid once – his first time back in the city after surviving a season of war.

Never again, he'd vowed.

It was a damn shame that he was feeling the pain and hadn't had any fun first. Someone would pay dearly.

He sat down hard at the table by the fireplace, fumbling with the glass of water sitting there. Dieter's no doubt. Beraht gulped the water down, then managed to spill only a bit pouring more. He sipped the second glass, knowing from experience that he'd only heave it up if he drank too much too fast.

His head hit the table with a thump and he immediately regretted letting it drop. Someone was going to die. Hopefully him. Anything to make the pain stop. Holding his head in his left hand, he reached out with his right to grab the water glass – and let it go with a curse.

Stars his hand hurt. Beraht stared at it, frowning. A long, deep gash ran the width of it. It started to bleed again as he watched and he muttered a few more choice curses.

"Tits of the Winter Princess," Dieter said. "Why couldn't you sleep a little while longer?"

He loomed over the table and Beraht. Where the blazes had the man come from? Beraht glanced toward the chair where Dieter had been, half expecting to see him still there. No such luck. Which meant he'd actually have to deal with the man...who was currently bandaging his hand.

"Leave me alone."

"Shut up," Dieter said. "And hold still. If I have to hold you down, I will."

Beraht made a face. "I'm in excruciating pain and you wake up and start threatening *more* pain. Typical. Go back to sleep; it's too early in the morning to put up with you."

"It's late afternoon."

"Still too early," Beraht said, drawing his hand back as Dieter finished, examining it suspiciously. Unable to find anything wrong, except that he was wearing a bandage instead of using magic to fix the wound, Beraht used his left hand to grab the water glass. Which was empty, because he'd spilled it a moment ago. Biting back more curses, he reached for the pitcher and poured more.

Silence fell for several minutes. Finally the driving pain in his head faded to a dull, throbbing aggravation – not great, but better. Another day or two and he'd be back to normal. Hopefully. As normal as he could get, he supposed. "I'm still alive, so it either worked or failed miserably. I'm hoping the fact that I feel like I lost a drinking contest means I succeeded."

Dieter laughed, the sound doing nothing to help his head. "Yes, Beraht. As soon as everyone calms down, you'll be a hero I'm sure."

Beraht rolled his eyes and drank more water. He stared at the empty glass, contemplating the positives and negatives of attempting food. Better not to try yet. Distraction then. He looked up. And up. Dieter needed to sit down. "What are you doing here?"

"Watching you," Dieter said. "You kept thrashing around last night after I brought you up here. Kept tearing the bandages off your hand. Finally wore yourself out and fell asleep." He scrubbed his face. "I wish you could have slept a little longer."

"So go back to bed," Beraht said irritably. "Believe me, I wish I'd stayed. Stars, my head hurts." The dull throb had flared back into a grinding pain. "Stars take them all. I'm going back to bed and I'm not waking up until I'm either feeling better or finally dead. So by all means go find your own bed."

"I'm under strict orders not to leave you alone."

Beraht glared, then gave up and climbed into bed. "Fine, whatever. Grab your stupid sword and cuddle up with it. Just don't wake me up." Pulling up the blankets, he immediately fell back asleep.

When he woke again, the first thing he noticed was that he was no longer in crippling pain. It was at a level of a few days without arcen, which was bearable. The second thing he noticed was that he was hot. Beraht shoved his hair out of his face and glowered at Dieter's back.

He climbed out of bed and helped himself to what remained of the water. Feeling marginally more alive, he crossed the room and yanked on the cord. Please let someone understand it meant food. Beraht collapsed into a chair at the table, staring unseeing at the mostly-dead fire.

All things considered, he was feeling remarkably empty. And not just his stomach. His entire body seemed to be missing something. Magic, he supposed. Or whatever had given Illussor their ability to use magic. Funny he'd never noticed it before. But that was part ignorance and mostly arcan.

Was there food coming? Beraht folded his arms on top of the table and used them to pillow his head, letting his eyes close, trying vainly to ignore the headache that was steadily getting worse.

The click of the door opening roused him from his doze, and he blinked a couple of times before he realized that Esta was standing at the table with a tray of food – plenty enough for two or three. And Dieter had woken. How had he not heard the man?

"Are you feeling any better?" Esta asked, looking concerned. So strange, to see worry plain on her face.

Beraht smiled. "I'm fine. Just a headache. Is everything..." He trailed off and accepted a plate gratefully, more interested in food than questions.

Esta handed a plate to Dieter, who accepted it with a nod, and then sat down. "Once you're feeling better, Matthias would like to see everyone in his chambers. He thinks it would be best if we waited to talk until then." She smiled, and there was a wealth of emotion in the simple expression. "But you did it."

"Good," Beraht said. "I would hate to be in this much pain for failing." He went back to eating, digging eagerly into the meats and cheeses and small pastries. Esta laughed, but he barely noticed. Dieter's comments he did notice, and paused long enough to shoot him a glare. "Let's see how you feel after destroying magic."

Dieter gave one of his taunting grins. "But you do it so well, and it's the quietest I've ever seen you."

"Shut up," Beraht said, and went back to devouring the contents of his plate. "Do I have time to clean up?"

"Of course," Esta said, and stood up. "Take your time. We'll be in Matti's office when you're done. Do you know where that is?"

"I do," Dieter said before Beraht could speak. "We'll be there in an hour's time."

Esta nodded her head, shoulders dipping in a slight bow. Gathering the skirts of her dress, she bid them farewell and left.



"So why are you playing nursemaid?" Beraht asked, shoving his plate aside and standing up – slowly. The headache had begun to ease with food, but he didn't doubt for a moment that it would take any opportunity to flare up again.

Dieter stood with him. "When we finally were able to get inside, you were more dead than alive. We had almost given up when you seemed to revive – Matthias feared a relapse, given how much pain you were obviously in."

"How long have I been unconscious?"

"Three days."

Beraht blinked. "Oh. And you decided the best way to make sure I didn't die was to fall asleep?"

"I cannot stay awake for more than two days straight at a time," Dieter said, face clouding. "And I would have known if something was wrong."

"Sure."

"Clearly you're feeling better," Dieter said. "Get clean. I'm sure everyone is tired of waiting on your headaches." He turned around sharply and stalked from the room – Beraht half expected the door to slam, but it didn't.

What had put him in such a snit? Bastard. A knock at the door and then servants were carrying in a bath and hot water. They looked as haggard as he felt. An hour later Beraht stepped into the hallway, smoothing down a dark brown coat and matching breeches. The throbbing in his head had receded to a dull ache.

He still wanted to go back to bed.

Dieter was waiting for him, leaning against the wall like a hulking shadow. Black. Did the man never wear anything with colors? Then again, he couldn't really picture Dieter in the jeweled tones that were in favor. But really dark shades...Beraht shook his head, then immediately regretted it. "You always look like you're going to a funeral," he said in an effort to ignore his aching head.

"Indeed," Dieter said. "Ready?"

"Yes, nursemaid," Beraht replied, and set off without waiting for Dieter. But the man fell into step beside him easily, sword jangling at his hip. "Do you really need to wear that sword everywhere?"

Dieter grinned in that way that always set Beraht's teeth on edge – because Dieter was about to be painfully, obviously right about something. "As it stands, I'm the only one in the palace that knows how to fight. So yes, I really do need to wear it."

"Like you ever needed a sword to inflict damage," Beraht muttered.

"It's usually enough to discourage."

Beraht rolled his eyes, but bit back pointing out that most people saw Dieter and ran long before they saw the sword. Which drew his attention to an oddity that had escaped him until then. "There's no one running away from you." He shook his head – then winced – and tried again when Dieter looked at him in annoyance. "I mean there's no one around."

"Everyone is recovering. Much like you. Matthias has ordered an entire week of quiet and rest. He sent out dozens of messengers to explain things to the outlying towns, but even they were barely able to function. Tomorrow morning he's arranged to speak to the Ministers and a handful of nobility. He and the others were all resting until a day or so ago. Losing the magic was a bit more taxing than anyone anticipated. As you've seen, some of the servants are about – but few. Not even a third the normal number." Dieter looked tired for a moment, but then his expression was as stony as ever. "Iah was not hit as hard; he and Sol have been managing things while I watched you."

Beraht nodded, processing the information. An entire country laid low. It was a good thing spring was still a month or more away – if not for the winter, the country would be in a very dangerous position.

He felt a chill, recalling that the Brothers knew where they were...but there was no possible way they could know why. Nor was Kria a threat. So there was nothing to fear.

Except his headache, which did not seem to want to go away. Every time he thought it was beginning to ebb, the pain came rushing back. Stars take it. He stifled a yawn as they reached Matthias's office. "I really am not in the mood for a long discussion that requires thinking."

"Since when have you ever stopped to think about anything?" Dieter replied. He smirked when Beraht shot him a withering glare. "Even when Breaking, you just barreled on ahead. One would think you'd learn at some point."

Beraht ignored him and shoved his way past when Dieter opened the door, immediately taking a chair as far from the sunlight streaming through the window as possible. Looking around the room, he noticed an exhaustion in Esta, curled up in a chair close to the desk, that he hadn't seen before. The same weariness was shared by all the others, save Sol and Iah, who looked tired but not haggard. "So I guess what we really need to do is go back to bed."

"You are probably correct," Matthias said with a weak but sincere smile. "But before much longer, people will begin to stir. It's amazing they're not rioting already – in a way, it's a good thing the Breaking temporarily incapacitated everyone." He frowned. "Though I hope it did not prove too detrimental to those in the outer lying regions..."

Esta shook her head. "What's done is done, Matti. Let's just focus on moving forward." Her eyes drooped, slid shut, then popped back open. "Everyone, more or less, seems to have survived. Which means the first and hardest stage is complete.

"I wouldn't say that was the hardest part," Kalan said, his perpetual humor absent. "Keeping that riot that Matthias mentioned from happening – that'll be the hard part."

"And how will they riot?" Dieter asked. "I would actually like to see it – a display of physical outrage rather than magical. It would give me an idea of where to begin training." He ignored the looks the rest of the group gave him, but subsided into silence.

Beraht sighed. "So you're planning to meet with your ministers and explain things?"

"Yes," Matthias said slowly. "I'm not quite certain how that will go. This all seemed a lot easier in the planning. I wish I could have anticipated feeling so..."

"Dead," Kalan offered. "Like waking up after a night of debauchery, only there's no fun memories to go along with the headache."

Beraht laughed. "I thought the same thing."

"And just what have you two been doing that you know exactly what it feels like to wake up after a night of debauchery?" Esta asked, eyes flaring with her usual temper.

Kalan grinned, his humor not completely defeated by exhaustion after all. "Just from what I hear, of course."

Beraht snorted, but said nothing. "So what exactly do we do now?"

Matthias shrugged. "Go on like normal. Those used to going magicless in the palace will adjust with the most ease. I've already sent men off to carry explanations; as people grow used to living without magic, I will send them out to instruct and help. The hardest part is up to Dieter."

"As I said before – do not interfere in whatever I do, unless you have a very good reason." Dieter's eyes were hard; much like they'd been when Beraht had been his prisoner. "What I do will not be liked by anyone. But it will be necessary."

Matthias sighed. "When I first asked you, I mentioned that I anticipated many a headache. And it is better to have you wreaking havoc *for* us rather than against us. I can't promise Esta won't tear you apart, but no one else will interfere unless they want to spend the night in stocks." He grinned. "All right, I can't swear Beraht won't bother you either. But I can't put him in the stocks."

"It would be a wasted effort anyway," Dieter replied.

Beraht ignored them both.

## CHAPTER TWENTY TWO

"Get up," Dieter said. He watched, unmoved, as the man on the ground before him slowly clambered to his feet – and dropped after making it halfway. "Get up or I'll beat you."

The man glared. "You'll beat me anyway."

"Wrong," Dieter replied. He sheathed his sword. "So far you've only been losing. You're plenty capable of pushing forward if you'd start *thinking* you can. Stand up and put some effort into it or I'll show you the difference between losing and a beating. I don't have time to waste on men who insist on being weak."

Standing up, driven by anger, the man began to shout. His hair was pale blonde, nearly white, and his blue eyes were pale to the point they seemed fragile – except for the fury. He wore old pants and an older shirt, like every other man assembled in the yard Dieter had commandeered for training. A bruise smeared one cheek and there would be many more and a few cuts when he removed his clothes later that night. "Weak? I am not weak! But you cannot treat us like those brutes in your army."

"You're the same type and structure as any Krian. All you lack is skill." Dieter stalked across the yard, hand on his sword but he didn't draw it. "You have plenty of potential – you do quite well when you forget about magic or being offended by a few bruises." He drew his sword, steel hissing against leather, and held the blade just shy of the man's throat. "But your manner leaves much to be desired, as does your

mindset. Pick up your sword or you'll be dismissed from practice the rough way."

"Do whatever you want, Krian," the man spat. "We don't have to take this."

"Wrong," Dieter said. His movements were fast, flawless as he sheathed his sword and then sent the man to the ground with a fist to his stomach. Almost but not quite hard enough to knock him unconscious. Dieter grabbed him by his shirtfront and hauled him back up. "You do have to take it. And you will. Like it or not, I'm in charge here." Dieter let him drop and looked around at the men gathered around them. Every last man seemed to vibrate with anger or fear, perhaps both and more besides. "Hate me all you like. Ignore me if you want. No one is forcing you to come. But I won't be held responsible when you're cut down by pirates or Krians or Salharans. And if you come to learn," Dieter looked at the man on the ground. "You'll respect and obey me. You're dismissed for the day, and if you act this way tomorrow you'll be bedridden for a long time. Is that clear?"

The man made no reply, merely picked himself up and stalked out of the yard.

Dieter looked around the circle of gathered men. "Who's next?" Then he realized their attention had shifted. Spinning around, Dieter stared furiously at the arrival. "You shouldn't be here."

"What?" Esta lifted a brow. "Women aren't allowed?"

"Civilians aren't allowed," Dieter replied. "Unless you're ready for practice, you are not allowed in the yard. If you want to watch, find a different location." He ignored the murmurs and whispers filtering around the yard.

Esta laughed, then gave Dieter a short bow. "Yes, sir. I merely wanted to see how the men were faring and offer whatever encouragement I could. Even you, General, will concede they could use it." Her expression dared him to countermand her.

Dieter bit back a laugh. He was amazed only that she didn't already wear a crown. "Do not delay practice overlong, Duchess."

"As you say, General." Esta nodded to him and then wandered toward the crowd of men, speaking to them in low tones, drawing out smiles. Dieter let them be, sheathing his own sword and leaning against the wall with arms folded. If the men knew they had the support of Lady Esta, whom they more or less regarded as a queen-to-be, perhaps they would be more willing to cooperate. The Prince's words had helped, but Esta would have far more an effect than Matthias.

"A fine sword," Esta said, her voice pitched loud enough to reach all the assembled men. She spoke to a young man, roughly sixteen or so, who looked stunned that she would speak to him.

"Yes, Duchess." The young man nodded slowly, still uncomfortable with his sword but pleased all the same by her compliment.

"Have you a girl waiting for you back home?" Esta asked, and bit back a grin as he began to talk eagerly about the girl he did in fact have. "She sounds lovely," Esta said as he finally finished. "And her name is Klara, you said?"

The young man nodded, taking the ribbing of his friends good naturedly. "Yes, Duchess."

"A good name. Is that what you will call your sword, then?"

Around her the men frowned. "My Lady?" One asked.

Esta laughed, and Dieter listened as she explained the Krian custom to them. He wondered where she'd heard it, and frowned as she winked at him on her way out. Dieter pushed off the wall to return to the center of the yard.

"Are we finished chatting?" he asked the men.

But they did look somewhat less morose, and some even looked up to a fight. That was certainly much better than giving up and slinking off to their rooms. Dieter motioned them back into place.

One man didn't move; the younger man who had first drawn Esta's attention. His chin lifted in challenge, and Dieter noticed several men hovered in anticipation of his reaction to whatever the man was about to say. "So what's your sword named?"

Dieter paused. He should have anticipated that, given Esta's attempt to make the men more comfortable with their weapons. "Bright," he said. "My sword's name is Bright. As you've energy enough to spare for asking questions, you can be the next up."

The young man winced, but obediently drew his sword.

Steel rang against steel, followed rapidly by the sound of someone hitting the ground. Nobody noticed that Esta lingered just outside the yard, her eyes wide with surprise and locked on Dieter. A minute later she finally left, a frown marring her features.

Dieter laid his sword on the table and collapsed in a chair, enjoying the waves of heat from the fire that washed over him. Even

with constant activity, his hands and face were frozen. And in an hour he'd be back in it.

What he wouldn't give for trained soldiers right now. Even fresh Krian recruits would be useful – every last one of them knew the basics of combat before joining. Training men his own age in those very same basics was nothing less than aggravating, if only because doing so cost every last one of them a great deal of their pride – in their own heads.

Of course, everything would have been far easier if so many officers and no small number of foot soldiers had not quit outright. If they were in Kria, they would have been executed for such traitorous behavior. Matthias was perhaps wise in not doing so, but only because tensions were already so high.

Regardless, he'd make the lessons stick eventually. Patience was the key, and he had no where else to be. At least not until the snow melted, and then he would have to see about getting some respectable blacksmiths.

He barely noticed as food was brought in, nodding absently to the girl that scurried out after depositing her burden on the table. The food smelled wonderful; the spices lighter, more varied than what he was used to in Kria but good all the same. And they had finally figured out that he didn't drink anything containing alcohol.

It made his stomach roil to even think about it. Dieter shoved the thoughts aside as idiotic and focused on what he had to do that afternoon. Mornings had been given over to those who showed the most promise – younger men who caught on quickly, older ones who seemed to pick up the new skills with ease. Still, he could have bested them all when he was thirteen.

Everything would be easier if he had trained soldiers to match them with.

But he didn't, so that was the end of that. Dieter let his head fall to rest against the back of the chair and closed his eyes. Lunch for an hour, then back to the yard until dinner. It was unfortunate the days were still so short – with spring he could extend practice to the after-dinner hours. He laughed, thinking of the protests sure to arise. Just like his own men always had, while they waited for the snow to melt completely and signal the return to the Regenbogen.

Were his men dead yet? Probably not. Yet. Benno wouldn't bother to dispose of the Scarlet until late Spring, when travel was easy. Was there any way to warn his men? Had anyone bothered to send a message about what had transpired?



Probably not, Dieter admitted bitterly. For daring to follow him, a thousand men were going to be put to death or carted off for the coliseum next winter. Because Benno knew it would upset him, wherever he was. Dieter clenched his right fist, wishing he had his sword and that it was shoved through Benno's gut.

At least he did still have his sword. Dieter opened his eyes and stared at it, caught by the way the jewel in the hilt glowed in the firelight. *Why* he still had his sword, he did not know. He probably never would.

Then again, Beraht was nothing if not confusing. He doubted Beraht understood his own actions half the time. Certainly only an idiot would behave as he did – from shadow killing to saving his captor to nearly killing himself playing with foreign magic.

Dieter frowned, remembering despite himself the way Beraht had looked on the floor of the crystal chamber. Nearly as pale as his surroundings, normally brilliant eyes flat, dim. He really had been dead for a moment. How he had survived after all, no one really knew.

Whatever. Dieter directed his thoughts back to the problems at hand – problems which would not disappear for decades. When he could train soldiers who had never known magic.

It was strange to think he would be here that long. The fact that he was still alive and living in Illussor still carried a dreamlike quality to it.

Biting back a curse, Dieter once more tried to direct his thoughts back to the soldiers. What was wrong with him? If he could control nothing else, he could usually keep order over his own thoughts. Perhaps the task set to him was a trifle more demanding than he'd anticipated.

Dieter pinched the bridge of his nose, willing every last stray thought away. His head thumped against the back of the chair again, and he began ticking off his plans for the afternoon and how to deal with the more problematic of the soldiers...

Matthias knocked, then frowned when there was no response. He knocked again, then after a moment of hesitation pushed the door slowly open and stepped inside. His eyes flicked immediately to the window but Dieter wasn't there.

A quick glance around the room revealed Dieter at the table beside the fire...Matthias looked. Looked twice.

Dieter was asleep. He looked dead, he held so still. Not a snort, a twitch, nothing. Matthias wasn't certain, but he rather suspected Dieter

neither slept during the day nor stayed asleep when someone walked into his room.

Which meant something must seriously be wrong. Without a sound, Matthias turned and left, pulling the door carefully shut behind him. He frowned at the man waiting for him. "Inform the soldiers that afternoon practice is cancelled; that Dieter has been called away to assist me. If anyone has further questions, tell them too bad."

"Yes, Highness." The man departed. Matthias remained standing in front of Dieter's room, frowning in thought.

Three weeks since Matthias had forced his people to live without magic. The reports coming in were mixed, and there was no doubt in his mind he wouldn't go down in history as one of the more popular kings. The ministers were doing their best to have him dragged out into the streets and hung.

He had his doubts.

But in those three weeks, Dieter had been working diligently to teach his men how to fight in a brand new style. *Those* reports weren't mixed – there was enough tension in the ranks he could cut it with a sword. And the swords were another problem; sufficient for practice, made quickly for that purpose, but Matthias had seen Dieter practice on his own a few times.

Dieter's sword made it painfully clear that the swords used by his soldiers were cheap imitations.

Still. Dieter practiced before the sun was up, between breakfast and lunch and then until dinner. It was amazing he had only now succumbed to exhaustion. Knowing what he did of Dieter, the man would be furious with himself when he woke. Matthias's frown only deepened as he slowly made his way through the halls back to his own offices.

Something would have to be done. Well, a great deal would have to be done. It was harder than even he had anticipated, suddenly doing without something he'd always had. Even if he had used magic as sparingly as possible since learning the reality of it, not using it and not having it were two different things. Painfully different.

He was getting every headache he'd anticipated and plenty more besides. Esta was tired doing what he could not, as were Kalan and Iah – who received grief both for his eyes and his lover.

Matthias rubbed his forehead as he sat down, and noticed the tray someone had set at the corner of his desk. He smiled faintly at the sight of his favorite foods and wine. Esta, he knew. The servants and nobility alike had lately been as wary of him as they were of his new General. It

was a wonder he'd gotten even one to follow him when he'd gone to find the missing Dieter.

Problems and more problems. But they'd resolve themselves one way or the other.

At least he wouldn't have to worry about sending men back to war. *That* announcement he was saving for the End of Winter Ball. It would do a lot to dispel the resentment running thick through the air, but in the meantime *fear* of war would drive his men to relearn how to fight.

He hoped.

Of course they wouldn't be learning anything if he killed his general with work. Matthias drummed his fingers across his desk as he thought.

A knock at the door broke his thoughts, and then Kalan stepped into the room. His oldest friend looked tired. "How is he?"

"Your father," Kalan said with a shrug, and perched on the edge of his desk. He snatched a piece of fruit from the tray. "He's not half so weak or sick as he's letting everyone think. His attitude is doing nothing but causing problems."

Matti nodded, accepting unspoken the sentiment that it would have easier if the loss of magic had rendered his father too sick to do anything. He refused to think farther than that.

"So what did you steal Dieter away from training for? I thought he'd be here with you."

"He's sleeping," Matthias replied.

Kalan paused with a bite of bread halfway to his mouth. He grinned. "He does that?"

"Not often enough," Matthias said morosely. "I'm not a very good ruler, am I?"

"No, you're not." Kalan said levelly, then smiled. "You're an excellent one. I'm sure when the Wolf wakes the only one he'll be mad at is himself. And Beraht. Somehow I'm sure he'll find a way to blame his nap on Beraht."

Matthias's lips twitched. "So what else have you heard?"

"Snarl this, stupid that, burn them at the stake, so on and so forth. But there are a few, and their number is growing, who accept and even approve. Esta, of course, is largely responsible for that. Even the council won't growl too much if she's in earshot." Kalan stole more food. "And showing them what's left of the chamber and Benji's body helped put them in their place, so a well-earned point to you. I think if we – Dieter – can whip the army into shape we'll be well on our way toward avoiding that riot you were worried about."

"Word from the villages?"

"Some were hit pretty hard. But it's something we knew would happen. Others are doing well enough; it's nothing that won't heal over time if done properly. Make it a special day, throw in a festival, eventually all will be well."

Matthias shook his head. "You're such a politician, Kal. However did you turn out this way?"

"It's fun, if right now a trifle gruesome. Besides," he grinned and stole the last of the fruit. "There has to be at least one politician in your pocket. You're not a respectable royal if you don't play favorites somewhere."

"I am glad you're on my side, it's true." Matthias sighed and stood up.

"Where are you going?"

"I don't know, but I don't feel like sitting here. I'm certain there are things that I simply *have* to do. And Essie hasn't yelled at me yet, today..."

Kalan laughed. "Then by all means, let us go get yelled at."

Esta held lightly to Beraht's arm, knowing how awkward he still felt about everything. People, when they saw him now, either nodded and smiled or faltered and looked away. No one was quite willing to snub him, not with his relationship to the crown, but many came close.

But Beraht wasn't taking to it at all. Hero or hated; it seemed no one, himself included, could really decide which he should be. Well, the relevant persons considered him a hero. By the time of the End of Winter Ball, she was determined that everyone would. He deserved it; even if Beraht would be the first to say otherwise. "You should try smiling," she scolded, gentle but firm. "Honestly, Dieter scowls enough for everyone."

"I really hope you didn't just compare me to *him*."

Esta frowned. "Why do the two of you hate each other so much?"

"Because he's a bastard," Beraht snapped.

"I see," Esta said patiently. "No one is every going to tell me, are they?"

Beraht shook her head. "It's not an interesting story, and I'm sure Sol or Iah would say it's best to leave it in the past."

"Then why don't you?" Esta asked.

"Because every time someone says my name," Beraht said, "I am forced to remember everything all over again." He pulled away. "If you will excuse me—"

"I'm sorry," Esta said. "I didn't mean to drive you away. I just hate seeing you so upset. If you don't like your name...why not choose a different one?"

Beraht's face clouded. "I will not go from one stigma to another. I don't expect anyone but a Salharan to understand – but I will tell you this. Were I not a traitor, and returned home this very moment, I would be put to death for being so weak as to permit a Krian to give me a name."

"I am sorry." She hesitated, then pressed on with her more characteristic resolve. "But are you certain it's such a bad name? It..." she frowned to herself in thought, not quite ready to give up what she'd learned that morning. "It seems to suit you."

Beraht's expression was bitter. "It's a mockery; it has been from the start. Now if you'll excuse me, I would like to retreat to rest." Without another word he left her standing in the hallway.

Esta sighed and turned to travel another route...perhaps a walk would prove refreshing, or least too cold to think. She was truly growing tired of thinking.

Familiar laughter brought her head up. Kalan and Matti, who could probably find a reason to laugh even as they lay dying. It was a trait she both loved and hated. Esta lifted a brow as they drew close. "And just which unfortunate Minister are we laughing at this time?"

"Just us, Essie." Matthias grinned. "Trying to predict the ways in which I'm going to be assassinated. Then it occurred to us that the ministers have been trying to kill us both with boredom for years."

Esta glared at them both, then turned on her heel and stalked off. Kalan's laughter chased after her, and after a moment they managed to catch up. Matthias frowned. "Aw, come on, Essie. There was a time you would have at least cracked a smile."

"Don't you think we have enough problems," Esta said slowly, as if she thought them too stupid to understand her otherwise. "Without my having to listen to jokes about people trying to kill you? Especially in light of recent events? If the ministers think you're children, it is probably because you act like children!" She jerked free of Matthias's grip.

"Essie..." Matthias let her go, but it was with obvious reluctance. "What's wrong with you? You know better than to take me seriously...what has you so upset?"

"Nothing," Esta replied. "I'm just tired. I think I'm going to rest before dinner; Goddess knows those have become tense affairs of late. If I were you, I would step up the ball. If we wait longer than a couple of weeks, I fear the consequences. People are putting up a good front, but

for every smile there are three nasty looks." She sighed, feeling tired. "We need a more obvious hero than Beraht is proving to be – no one saw him do anything; they only felt the effects. And he is not someone used to dealing with people, not in this manner." She looked at each of them in turn. "The Ball will distract people and improve the general mood."

"But there is no real cause for a celebration, Essie." Kalan looked just as unhappy. "If Dieter could at least bring the soldiers together, and with some degree of skill to display, that would be something. But as it is now – there is little to no morale. Nothing we do helps, either. A party now would just make things worse."

Esta nodded. "I will see what can be done at dinner; but without some visible victory or accomplishment, the people will see only that something has been torn out of them."

"I can't pull something like that out of thin air," Matthias said.

"I suppose not. I will see you both at dinner." They watched her walk away, head and shoulders up as if she had not a care in the world.

## CHAPTER TWENTY THREE

"I'm going to get something to drink," Sol said softly. "Do you want anything?"

Iah smiled in the dark but did not stir from the warmth of the blankets. "Only for you to hurry back."

Sol laughed. "Of course." He slide from bed and slipped into breeches and linen shirt, slipping on ankle boots rather than his normal knee-high. The castle was quiet; almost eerily so. He knew there was a night staff, but at the moment it seemed as though not a single soul save him was awake. Sol wasted no time in reaching the kitchen and retrieving a drink -- and at the urging of the kitchen maid, a late night snack.

Strange that he'd woken, there seemed to be nothing amiss. Everything, for the moment at least, seemed peaceful. Perhaps it was only that he did not know how to relax. Sol wished he could believe that were true.

Humming softly, Sol reached his hallway -- and stopped. He had closed the door before leaving. It was now wide open and light from the lamps spilled into the hallway. When he'd left, only the fire had been ablaze.

A sick, heavy feeling settled in his stomach as Sol dropped his wine and pastry and ran for the room. For the first time since he'd destroyed the last of it, Sol felt and regretted the lack of arcan in his system.

Iah lay on the floor, far too still. Sol knew he was biting back sounds of pain, and could see the dark stains on the floor beneath him. He wondered how long Iah had to live.

"Tawn."

"Dear Brother-in-law," Tawn said, moving around Iah and closer to Sol. "I've been sent to retrieve two stars."

Sol barely kept from letting his dismay show, as a thought struck him too late. "You already killed Beraht?"

"The peasant? I'll take care of him later."

He drew closer and Sol recoiled. "What have you done?"

Tawn's eyes were a rich, dark red. The exact color of an arcen flower in full bloom. It was a beautiful color; women attempted to match it in their apparel, and jewels of the same color were highly sought. But in eyes it was a color of madness.

"On the contrary," Tawn said. "I am better than ever. Complete mastery."

"Complete mastery, yes," Sol replied. He had to end this quickly, or Iah would not live. But Tawn could kill him all too easily and without arcen he had no way to counter. Not even a dagger and he was not stupid enough to think he'd get close enough to break Tawn's nose a second time. Sol tensed for the inevitable. "But it is not you who is the master."

Tawn laughed, but Sol noticed when the laughter flowed into a spell.

*Razor* it was called, for the way it made the victim feel as though his skin were being sliced open. With yellow arcen, it was effective. Enough to fell a Krian if cast properly. Red could make it fare more painful, far more deadly. The fact that he was alive made it clear that Tawn intended to toy with him. The spell struck twice, thrice, and Sol crumpled to the ground.

He should have gone for help, and cursed himself for giving into panic like a green soldier. Foolish. He tried to cry out, but another spell made the floor move dizzily beneath him. Sol fought it, attempting to regain himself, drawing upon all he knew about arcen-induced magic.

Suddenly he felt sorry for the Krians, really and truly sorry. For years they had gone up against not one but two magic-capable races with nothing more than steel. Krians did not have magic to soothe the force of a blow, to numb pain. Even while living in the Winter Palace, he'd always had some measure of arcen in his system.

Blood dripped and trickled from a dozen wounds or more – deep enough to cause excruciating pain but not quite bad enough to kill. It *hurt*.

No wonder the Krians hated magic.



Sol waited, bleeding, as Tawn approached him.

Tawn laughed. "You're as vulgar and pathetic as the rest of them now. Even your lover could not put up a fight. At least the Krians have some means of fighting back."

Snarling, Sol threw himself up, toppling Tawn, screaming as loudly as he could and fighting to keep Tawn from speaking. His vision swam, but Sol kept it up until he heard people enter the room.

He looked up to see Dieter and Beraht, both only half dressed. Dieter's sword shimmered in the light of the fire and lamps. Sol slid to the ground and Tawn broke free. Distantly Sol heard as Tawn attacked the new arrivals, wincing. He looked up in time to see Dieter shove Beraht aside and raise his sword – and deflect the misshapen air that was the only visible sign that a spell had been cast.

Then Dieter was moving, and if Tawn was hurting him, he gave no sign of it. The two men fought around the small space, table and chairs treated as little more than minor annoyances. Sol didn't struggle when Beraht finally reached him and helped him up. They made their way slowly toward the fire, and Sol collapsed fearfully alongside Iah.

Dieter was driving Tawn back into a corner, barely seeming to notice the spells tossed at him, ignoring the cuts and burns that were ruining his clothes. With a lunge and roar, he broke through the barriers Tawn had erected at the cost of dimming his eyes to orange-red.

Tawn fell, wounded too grievously to be able to heal. Dieter stabbed him again to be sure, and did not move until the man was unquestionably dead.

Sol collapsed.

"Stars above!" Beraht swore. He looked at the bloody corpse in the corner, Dieter's red-stained sword, the bloody men in front of him before the fire. "Stars above," he repeated.

Dieter looked at him. "How are they?"

"Not good," Beraht said grimly. "Any arcen on him?" He returned the scathing look Dieter shot him. "It's the only way! Save your lectures for when everyone is alive and well enough to put up with them."

Though he looked as though he wanted to argue, Dieter nodded stiffly and knelt to rifle through Tawn's clothing. He came up with three vials and tossed them one by one to Beraht, who caught the first and

uncorked it one-handed while he caught the second two. "Remember the last time I had red?" he asked.

"It would be rather hard to forget."

Beraht whistled as he held up a vial. It was viscous, the color of fresh blood. "This is good stuff. Better even than the stuff you gave me in Kria."

"So if you start acting more hostile than usual I should do to you what I did to him?" Dieter motioned to Tawn's body.

"Go ahead and try," Beraht said. "For once I might actually be able to give you the thrashing you deserve."

Dieter said nothing, but Beraht could see the smirk in his eyes. Ignoring him, Beraht downed the sickly-sweet arcen, grimacing at the underlying bitterness. Bitter tea with too much sugar that was still not enough.

Iah was in bad shape; weak and shuddering and not a healthy color at all. Beraht wondered what Tawn had been planning, to leave him alive. Nothing good, from all that he'd heard about the man. Ignoring the dizziness and nausea brought on by the arcen, trying hard to ignore how confident he suddenly felt despite the clawing need to puke, Beraht focused his mind on the magic. On not being overwhelmed this time – which was a lot easier to do when there wasn't some rocks-for-brains bastard picking fights while people cheered for his death.

The healing spell hurt him, drawing things from his mind and body that only arcen could tap; but the red arcen was too much, too fast – but it was all he had. Beraht bit down hard on the inside of his cheeks and made him himself *focus*. No one else would be able to heal them.

He didn't stop channeling the magic until Iah's face took on a healthier color and he seemed to breathe more easily. Wiping sweat from his brow, Beraht shifted his attention to Sol. Knowing what to expect, and with the injuries much less severe, it was easier if not easy.

"It never fails to amaze me," Dieter said as he finished.

"What?" Beraht snapped, pleased he could muster the energy for that. The fire felt too hot, the floor too hard and he really wished everyone would just go away. Especially the bastard.

"How much your country values something that clearly does nothing but kill you slowly."

Beraht slowly stood up, not really trusting his legs but hating to be on the floor while Dieter loomed over him. "We need to move them."

Though it looked as though Dieter wanted to argue the matter, he nodded stiffly and lifted Sol into his arms. "A different room?"

"Only you," Beraht said in disgust, "would say it like leaving them in here is an option." He struggled to pick up Iah, but gave up when he nearly fell over himself from a hard wave of dizziness. "You do it. I've done my part."

He thought he heard Dieter laugh, but he was already out the door and Beraht could not catch his expression. A couple of minutes later he returned and took Iah. Beraht followed behind.

"Should we wake everyone up?" He helped Dieter settle the two men in their new bed, tugging up the blankets and risking a couple more healing spells to ensure that they were well and truly all right. But even with his assistance, they would not be moving any time soon.

"No," Dieter said after a moment. "There is nothing Lady Esta or the Prince could do at this hour that cannot wait until morning."

"Esta will be mad at you."

Dieter shrugged. "Have someone wake Kalan. He would be most useful now."

Beraht nodded and headed for the door. "I'll do it myself."

"Why," Kalan demanded with a yawn. "Do I have to be the one to deal with this?" He grimaced at the corpse in the corner of the room. "It's far too late at night, or early in the morning, for such things."

Dieter snorted; it almost sounded like amusement. "You're awfully calm about this for a civilian."

"I'll thank you not to call me names," Kalan said, making a face. "I more or less run the part of the army that no one knows about – how else do you think I knew Spiegel? Even Matthias doesn't know everything I get up to. Who is he?"

"Tawn," Beraht answered. "One of the higher in the Brotherhood – as in, he's been given permission to use the entire spectrum." He waved his hand in the air, as if motioning something away. "All the way up to red. It means the Brotherhood was either confident or desperate."

Kalan sighed. "He came here to kill you and Sol?"

"Yes. A prelude of it was the pain inflicted on us the other day, when I had just recovered from the Breaking. But...I think Tawn would have come for Sol anyway. There's a personal antagonism between them that runs deep." He shook his head. "Spare me ever dealing with the complications of family."

"Hmm..." Kalan motioned to two soldiers he'd brought with him. "Get rid of this. Have it burned, bring the ashes to me. We'll return them to the Brotherhood with a polite note. Will there be more?"

"I don't think so," Beraht said. "At least not right away. But..."

Kalan nodded. "No one invades Illussor, not when it is impossible to pretend to be one of us."

"So they knew," Dieter added, looking up from the fire he'd been glaring at. "They knew Illussor magic would not be a problem."

"Precisely." Kalan frowned in thought, eyes narrowed with worry. "Be discreet," he cautioned the guards. "I want no one to know about this. And it will be your heads, gentlemen, if I hear rumors flying about tomorrow."

"Sir," the men said stiffly as they struggled to take away Tawn's body.

"Thank you." Kalan grimaced. "The rest of this can wait until tomorrow. What a mess. I am glad Sol and Iah are all right. Tawn should be grateful he's dead; Esta would have been cruel in her revenge had he lived." He yawned again. "I think I need a drink. I'll settle for food. Come on, let's rouse a cook and then you can tell me everything over again and we'll see just exactly how much damage we're dealing with. I don't like the sounds of the Brotherhood knowing we no longer have magic..."

"Are you certain you're all right?" Esta asked again, clinging to her brother's hand.

Iah sighed. "Yes, Essie. I'm certain. Now quit asking, please."

Esta frowned, but remained silent. She shifted her attention to Sol. "How did it happen?"

"*Essie*," Matthias said tiredly. "They've already told you four times. Let it drop."

"First he goes off to war! Then he comes home blind! Then I wake up to find him almost dead!" Esta stormed to her feet, belatedly dropping Iah's hand when he protested having it yanked about. "I'm sick and tired of it! When does it stop? We're losing people to the Breaking because they won't learn to live without it. The King barely leaves his room, you and Kalan and everyone else whisper and keep secrets, and over and over again I come close to losing my brother. Goddess curse you all!" Gathering her skirts, Esta turned and stormed out, slamming the door behind her.

Iah winced. "I'm glad you get to be the one to calm her down, Matti."

"Coward," Matthias said with a grimace.

Kalan grinned. "You want to marry her; best get used to it."

"Oh, yes. Because that plan's going so well." Matthias sighed and slumped down further in his chair. "Why don't we continue with the general misery and you tell me what you weren't saying with Esta in the room."

Beraht stirred where he stood with Dieter by the fire. "Tawn came with the intent of killing us for turning traitor. You two know better than us that sneaking into Illussor is impossible. Nor would the Brotherhood allow him to do something so obviously pointless unless they knew it could be done."

Matthias nodded wearily. "So they knew we were without magic. But how?"

Kalan looked grim. "I received a report only just this morning that the men in the second watch tower were killed, their eyes torn out. No doubt that explains a great deal. One of the chamber maids was also found dead this morning."

"Stars above," Beraht said. "Does it never end?"

Dieter looked at him scathingly. "You've been involved long enough to know it only ever gets worse."

Beraht ignored him.

Matthias sighed and stood up. "Depressing but true. If I had known the fallout of the Breaking would be this bad, I don't know that I would have been able to go through with it." He settled his cane before attempting to move, and if anyone noticed his wince, they did not mention it. "So it's just as well that I didn't know. Dieter, how goes the training?"

"As well as possible. Not as well as I'd like. It will take time."

"More time than we have, I'm certain," Matthias said grimly. "If Salhara is aware we are without magic, then I've no doubt Kria is as well. I'm honestly not certain which country is more problematic."

Beraht snorted. "I'm sure they'll fall to fighting each other long before they reach us here."

"I think even the Polluted would find it ideal to cooperate in the name of putting down their only threat so far as magic is concerned," Dieter argued. He slid a thoughtful glance toward Sol. "That aside, I do not think your countrymen are up to traveling in this weather. Nor do the Krians favor doing it without sufficient motivation." A grin. "And I assure you, fighting the Illussor is not sufficient motivation."

Matthias quirked a brow. "Not even if we're housing their Wolf?"

Dieter laughed. "Killing me can wait 'til Spring, I'm sure. If they bother to come for me at all."

Beraht glanced at him, before letting his eyes return to the fire. His thoughts wandered to the Kaiser, his behavior that day in the coliseum. The rage that had surfaced when magic had taken Dieter's sword away. For all that the bastard laughed it off, Beraht wasn't so certain the Kaiser would so easily let Dieter get away. Hate was a harder master than that.

Shoving the thought aside, Beraht focused on more important matters. "So how much do you think they know?"

"We don't have magic," Matthias said. "What more is there to know than that?"

"Him, for one," Beraht pointed a thumb at Dieter. "He's not a universally hated bastard for nothing." He could feel Dieter's eyes, the urge he must be quashing to send him to the floor gasping in pain. Beraht ignored him.

Sol chuckled. Though he was obviously tired and still in pain, his words proved that his mind was as active as ever. "There is that. Certainly I would hesitate to go where the Wolf has taken refuge, in their position. I'm sure rumors are abounding that you've been a traitor for some time, much like I've been." His eyes slid closed as he thought. "I guess we need to ascertain just where we stand, how much danger we could be facing." He opened his eyes. "I do hope you're right about no one risking the snow."

Dieter nodded. "Kria would not waste time and effort, when the same could be accomplished at much less expense in the spring. No one is going anywhere until then. Especially the Salharans, who for all they complain about how pathetic we are for quitting in winter," he said and sneered at Beraht. "Cannot take the cold at all. You never see a Salharan run faster than when the snow begins to fall."

Beraht rolled his eyes. "Not all of us have ice in our veins."

"Merely drugs."

Matthias held up a hand. "Enough. The two of you could give my ministers lessons on bickering." He started to say something more, but shook his head and fell silent. "So we need to know precisely where we stand. Any idea how we go about that?"

"Let me go to Salhara," Beraht said, words coming out in a rush as the idea came to him. "I've still plenty of red arcen in my blood, a journey there and back should be easy enough and I'm good enough at—"

"Sneaking around," Dieter interrupted.

"Going unobserved," Beraht snapped, "that I should not have too much trouble gathering information."

Dieter sneered at him. "Not content with your eyes, *Beraht*? Hoping to make them the color of blood?"

"Stars refuse you!" Beraht hissed. "You have no idea what you're talking about."

"No?" Dieter's arm snaked out and he jerked Beraht close, one hand tilting his head up and slightly toward the fire. In the light of the flames, Beraht's eyes were a pale, glowing orange instead of the rich yellow they had been only yesterday. "Isn't that the trick of arcen? That after a point it begins to control you? Have you not said before, *Beraht*, that it means a great deal to you? I think letting you go right into the heart of it would be the height of stupidity."

Beraht lashed out, growing more furious at the realization that Dieter *let* his kicks land. Stars, the man was the epitome of aggravating! Would he ever be rid of him? More bitter still was the knowledge that he had no one but himself to blame for the Wolf's presence. Stars refuse him for a fool. "You don't know me. Don't pretend to. You think I don't know the risks of arcen, *Krian*? I don't need to be lectured by a man who thinks himself so superior. Especially one who's relied on arcen unwittingly for years."

"Arcen did not give me my skills, *Beraht*." Dieter's voice was low, a sure sign of danger.

Surely by now Dieter knew he wasn't intimidating enough to stop him. Stars, he *bated* the way the bastard said his name. "No, but I'm sure it explains why you're still alive. I'm almost certain it must affect spells cast at you."

"I assure you it does not."

"Then how is it you didn't seem affected by Tawn's magic last night?"

Dieter smirked. "It takes more than a few pathetic spells to stop me."

Neither man seemed to notice the dead silence that had fallen around them. More than once, Matthias had started to interrupt, stopping only because watching them fight was strangely fascinating, as though it were some intricate dance.

"That was concentrated arcen, you idiot. Did the cold freeze what passes for a mind in that rock head of yours? The spells Tawn was using were probably fatal or very nearly. If they didn't kill or even hurt you, it's probably because your sword was absorbing or deflecting or otherwise affecting the spells he was casting. So just accept that maybe you're as arcen-reliant as any Salharan."

Dieter threw him to the floor. "Ridiculous. I fight often enough I would notice such a thing. As to how the spell affected me, how could you possibly tell? You don't know me." He turned away in disgust. "Do as you like. It makes no difference to me." Nodding to Matthias, he turned toward the door.

Which flew open as he reached it, and Dieter barely stopped in time to avoid the soldier that burst into the room. "Highness! Highness!"

"I'm right here," Matthias said, torn between concern and amusement.

The soldier barely remembered to bow, and came out of the motion only halfway through it. "Scarlet!"

"What?" Matthias demanded. His eyes flew to Dieter, who had gone still, then back to the soldier.

"The Scarlet Army is approaching. Watch estimates there are no less than five hundred."

"Why?"

The soldier shook his head. "We don't know."

"What banner do they fly?" Dieter demanded, voice cutting across the room. The soldier jumped, and looked at him warily.

"A black one," the soldier replied. "With your leaves."

Dieter said nothing, merely nodded, turned, and vanished out the door.

"Hey!" Matthias called. "Wait a second!" He moved to follow his general – by the goddess Dieter was *his* general now – and cursed as he stumbled. Remembering his cane, ignoring Kalan's frown, he gripped the soldier's shoulder in thanks and went after his general.

He found him on the parapets, surrounded at a distance by whispering soldiers and a handful of nobles. "Dieter?"

Dieter did not reply, though he glanced at Matthias briefly.

"Are they here to attack?" Matthias pressed. There was indeed a large number of them, though if three hundred was correct it was paltry compared to the thousand he knew should compose the entirety of the Scarlet. Most were on foot, and they marched slowly through the deep snow. Those on horseback fared better, but not by much. Their dark red uniforms were a wash of blood on the white snow.

Matthias wondered suddenly if he had made a very big mistake. He started to voice his question again when Dieter raised an arm and pointed.

"The banner," he said, indicating a long, black flag bearing the triple-leaf crest of the Scarlet. A reference, Matthias knew, to one of the



Krian gods. In the middle would be a bear, the symbol of their Kaiser. "Were they intending harm, it would be red. Black is a show of peace."

"Do the Scarlet know what the word peace means?" Beraht asked from behind them.

Dieter whirled, and even Matthias recoiled at the fierce look in his jade-green eyes. "Peace is leaving the Regenbogen when winter arrives. Peace is being three days away from it, and knowing it's okay to relax when you sleep. Do not speak to me again, *Beraht*." He turned away, hands wrapping around the edge of the stone wall surrounding the palace. "I don't know why they're here. My men should be holed up in the Regenbogen fortress, unless the Kaiser ordered them to move. But they would not fly the black banner if that were the case..." Muttering to himself in Krian, Dieter turned away and shoved Beraht away from the stairs, descending them rapidly and calling an order for the gates to be raised.

Matthias motioned for them to obey when the soldiers looked to him. He watched pensively as Dieter waited, frown deepening as the Scarlet reached the palace wall.

A man dismounted and stalked toward Dieter and clasped hands. From a distance, their words were undistinguishable but the tone was not – whatever was occurring, Dieter was pleased by something.

Then Dieter threw his head back and laughed, and it carried far across the snow, joined by that of the man with him and more than a few of the nearest soldiers. Dieter turned and looked up. "Prince Matthias!"

"Yes, General?"

"Have you room for some guests?"

Matthias flicked his eyes out over the men, doing some quick calculations. "If they'll earn their keep," he called back. "There should be food enough, certainly room enough, to last what remained of winter. And he had the emergency stores besides, if worst came to worst."

Dieter's laughter spilled across the snow again, and Matthias fought an urge to smile. "Most assuredly." He spoke rapidly to the man with him, who turned and barked orders to his companions on horseback, and then Dieter was leading his Scarlet into the Illussor palace.



## CHAPTER TWENTY FOUR

Matthias sat behind his desk, arms crossed as he regarded Dieter and the man beside him. What surprised him was that the man was older than Dieter by at least a couple of decades, his hair gone completely gray and face bearing just as many scars as wrinkles. He wouldn't have thought a man so obviously seasoned in war would obey a man as young as Dieter. But the most obvious thing about him was his allegiance.

And a glaring lack of fear. Didn't the Scarlet fear their General as much as everyone else? That had been so vehemently told that he had not thought it merely another overblown rumor. Matthias spoke, feeling and seeing the tension of the others in the room. Kalan watched the Krians pensively, and he could see Sol's mind racing behind that still face and Iah's shoulders hunched with worry beside him. Beraht was the only one who seemed unfazed.

"This is Colonel Reinhard Becker," Dieter said. "One of my best men, and he's survived long enough in the business he recalls not one but two of my predecessors."

Matthias nodded at Reinhard.

"He reports that several days ago he was sent orders to prepare for war, and that the Scarlet would be the first wave against the Illussor. Upon learning the details of the matter, gleaned from the messenger," Dieter's grin left no doubt as to what precisely was meant by 'gleaned.' "Three hundred of the Scarlet came to warn me. The others remained behind to slow down the rest of the army."

"I'm confused," Kalan interrupted. "It was always my impression that your army hated you. Why would they traitor for you?"

Dieter smirked and spoke in rapid-fire Krian to his Colonel, who laughed. He turned back to Kalan. "My men are not as scared of me as everyone seems to think. That aside, they would sooner side with their General than the Kaiser who refused to acknowledge the deaths of their comrades."

"That was only because they work for you," Beraht pointed out. "Isn't it kind of stupid to stay with you?"

Dieter again spoke to the man beside him, too fast for anyone but Sol to keep up, and again the man laughed. Reinhard looked at Beraht and spoke more slowly. Nearby, Sol quietly translated. "It is better to side with a General who strives to keep us alive than the man who has suddenly decided that because we wear Scarlet we should die." He shook his head slowly back and forth. "He has become a stupid Kaiser. We would rather follow our traitor General than the Kaiser that leaves his throne only to kill his own men."

Beraht frowned and glanced at Dieter, who stared silently back. They seemed to watch each other forever before Beraht finally tore his eyes away. "They're as stupid as you."

Dieter said nothing.

Matthias looked between them and shook his head. "So they will remain with us?" he asked at last. "The ministers have probably expired from outrage by this point. I can't imagine why else they haven't beaten down my door." He flicked his eyes warily to the heavy oak door of his office, half-expecting it to burst open or dissolve into splinters as angry councilmen crashed through it looking for his blood.

"At least until the Kaiser is forced to withdraw."

Beraht rolled his eyes. "I may be just a shadow-killer, but even I know what we have here cannot fight against what the Kaiser must be bringing. Even if the rest of them never seemed to do more than try and threaten you. Nor do I think you have beaten sufficient skill into the Illussor quite yet.

Dieter laughed coldly. "What I have is all I will need. Anyway, war is not what I intend for them." His eyes gleamed with something like genuine pleasure. He looked at Matthias. "Now I have more effective means to train your men. If nothing else, they'll inspire a riot. Even that would be remarkable improvement."

Matthias could not help a burst of laughter. "You are promising to be every headache I anticipated, my general, but you are worth them. Do as you see fit and send me the reports and any complaints."

"Matthias!" Esta hissed. "You cannot simply set the Scarlet loose around the palace. Have you forgotten—"

"I've forgotten nothing, Essie," Matthias interrupted, unusually somber. "Perhaps you've forgotten that we currently have all of the Krian army, minus not quite a thousand Scarlet, headed for us and our men can barely hold their swords properly."

"Of course not," Essie snapped back. "But they can hardly train if they don't trust their teachers – and why should they? Kria has been our enemy for ages, especially the Scarlet. You're going too far, Matthias. I conceded on the point of Dieter – but the entire Scarlet? There could be traitors! Soldiers out to settle a grudge! The ministers could declare you unfit without even trying – and your father will probably help them!"

Matthias frowned. "I know what I'm doing Essie, and I have enough people telling me otherwise; I don't need to hear it from you."

"Matthias!"

"Duchess!" Matthias said, and Essie stopped. "I've made my decision."

There was a long pause. "Yes, Highness," Essie finally bit out, then gathered her skirts and stormed from the room.

Matthias sighed.

From a seat near a wide window, Iah offered a faint laugh. "If I were you, Matti, I'd check my bed every night for tacks."

"Tacks are the least of my concern at the moment," Matthias said glumly. "Now everyone leave me alone so I can get work done before I'm burned at the stake. Dieter, keep the terrorizing to a minimum for the day or you might find tacks in your bed too."

"If I can handle Beraht," Dieter replied, "I can handle tacks." Nodding to Matthias, Dieter touched the fingertips of his right hand to the space over his heart before turning sharply around and stalking the room, shadowed by Reinhard.

The rest of the room gaped after him, save Beraht. "Bastard."

"Did he just salute you?" Sol asked in disbelief.

Matthias grinned. "Of course he did. Now let me get some work done." And he bent to the papers on his desk, not looking up until the room was empty of all but Kalan, with whom he immediately fell into business.

Dieter walked into the training ground as though it belonged to him – which it more or less did. Especially now. He looked with satisfaction at the men filling it, all of them either drilling or barking orders. On the fringes were a few dozen Illussor soldiers, their expressions a mix of hate, distrust, respect and even awe on a few less guarded. More had shown than he'd thought. He wasn't sure if he was relieved or disappointed that fighting hadn't broken out. The Illussor were holding fast to their reticence on learning to fight in the Krian style.

Though he didn't really care what language he spoke, it had always felt strange to speak something other than Krian while drilling.

As he entered, the drilling immediately fell off as his men lined up and snapped sharp salutes, right fist touched to left shoulder before they stood tall and unmoving. "Scarlet, your actions commend you." A few grins ghosted briefly through the ranks. "Captains," he said to the three men at the fore of the ranks. "I'll expect your reports by sundown tomorrow. Reinhard, update me."

Briskly Reinhard began to relate all that had transpired since Dieter's departure of the Regenbogen, going into more detail than he had earlier. As soon as he finished, Dieter launched into what they would now be doing and though confusion rippled back and forth across the men's faces, no one spoke. "Resume practice," Dieter finished.

"Will you be joining us, Lord General?" Reinhard asked, then said in an undertone. "It would do much."

Dieter grunted. "Of course. See that as we go, an effort is made to draw in the Illussor." He motioned to the men watching with mixed emotion as the Scarlet took over their space. "The faster we can quell rumors as to your presence here, the less trouble we'll have later. And I know at least twelve here can speak Illussor to some degree – see that they do so and teach it to the rest." His tone brooked no argument. Stepping into the middle of the cleared arena, he drew his sword and grinned at Reinhard. "Now come, old man."

Reinhard grimaced. "You shouldn't be throwing old men in the dirt, Lord General." But he drew his sword and brought it up just in time to block the blow Dieter swung, jarring his arms and sending Reinhard reeling briefly back. But he recovered quickly, and soon was doing reasonably well to stay up, even as Dieter was driving him back.

When Reinhard at last signaled defeat from where he had fallen to the ground, Dieter grinned and whirled, barking out a sharp "Next!" and immediately another soldier, dressed in a Scarlet tunic, attacked him. A half dozen soldiers came after that, and Dieter fought them all, distantly making note as Reinhard dispensed orders to his Captains, and

so on down the line. When he at last called a halt to his own participation and withdrew to the wall to observe, he was pleased to see that several Illussor had been draw in – though not nearly enough.

But progress was progress.

Reinhard appeared at his side. "If even a few men choose to remain here, as I imagine they will given the options left to them now in Kria, you will need a larger practice hall."

"Yes," Dieter said. "How far away is the army?"

"A week from the Regenbogen, Lord General. The weather could alter that either way. Worst case, they are three days from it, putting them at two weeks or so from here. The army moves slowly under the Kaiser's command. Your scouts report that Lady General Heilwig appears to be doing the bulk of the leading. That she is even flourishing."

Dieter grunted, but said nothing. He watched the practicing soldiers. "How quickly can our sword smiths be ready to work? The Illussor weapons are not fit for children's games."

Reinhard agreed with a grimace. "Yes, they are enough to make a soldier cry. They await permission, but otherwise it will not take them more than a few hours."

"There is plenty of room behind the palace proper, if I recall correctly. I will speak with his Highness to be sure and send you word. Have them set up immediately once permission is obtained. If there are any problems, bring them to me or ask to speak with the Duke of Ferra. Keep them drilling, and make sure the Illussor learn the Krian commands. It will be easier in the long run. Handle whatever problems crop up, unless they are bad enough to require my presence."

"I think your men will be smart enough not to cause that much trouble, Lord General. The Illussor are a different matter, but your men won't misbehave – not where you might hear of it, anyway."

Dieter looked at the men on the wall. "I don't think they'll be much trouble, mores the pity. See how far a bit of provocation will get you, but don't let the men go too far. I'll expect a report first thing in the morning."

"Yes, Lord General." Reinhard made to salute, but was halted by Dieter's shaking head. He watched as Dieter saluted him in the Illussor manner, then nodded and mimicked the gesture, fingertips touched to the space over his heart. "So you truly are Illussor now?"

Dieter said nothing, merely turned to go. Reinhard's voice carried over the racket in the arena, calling all men to a halt, then saluted Dieter again so that all could see. Immediate obedience ruthlessly drilled in by the Wolf of Kria, the Scarlet did not hesitate to perform the new salute.

Around them the Illussor soldiers rippled in surprise, and a few hesitantly followed suit. Dieter smiled briefly, pleased, and nodded to them all before he swept out.

He'd make real soldier of them eventually, though he wondered how long things would go as peacefully as they had. Dieter looked up as his name was called, and frowned as Kalan came bearing down on him. "Yes?"

"Want to go before the Ministers?"

"No."

Kalan laughed. "Too bad. Matthias has requested your presence. The Ministers are, I think, mere moments from stringing him up. Come glare at everyone until they do his bidding."

Dieter looked at him and shrugged off the hand on his arm.

"Perfect, that's exactly the glare we need." Grinning, Kalan turned and led the way to the Hall of Ministry.

Wordlessly Dieter followed, loosing his sword in its scabbard. The noise, when he entered, was deafening. Tits of the Winter Princess, he'd never known old men to be so noisy. It died off, however, as the ministers realized who had entered behind Kalan.

Dieter glared at them all.

"Ah, General. Thank you for coming so quickly. Assure the good ministers that you and your Scarlet do not intend to murder us in our sleep."

"That would be the work of cowards," Dieter said in contempt. "If our plan had been to sneak our way inside under guise of truce, you would already be dead. And why go to such trouble when you have nothing we want? Illussor has nothing Kria does not already possess in greater quantities."

"Kria always want more land."

Dieter looked at the man who had spoken, a spindly older man with gray hair and eyes, dressed in blue and green. Eventually the gray eyes broke away. "If you are interested in what Kria wants, ask a politician. I'm merely a soldier; I do as I am told."

"Hardly a mere soldier, Wolf of Kria." A man of about fifty eyed Dieter thoughtfully, and with a trace of respect. "Most men of your station are my age. Yet all in three countries know and fear your name. Prince Matthias has been careful to keep us from attacking you before now. I would know why we should believe that the Wolf of Kria has suddenly decided to become a Wolf for Illussor."

Dieter flicked a brief look at Matthias, who merely shrugged. He turned back to the ministers, who looked like a pack of small, hungry



dogs. "Kaiser Benno never held my loyalty. I have opted to give it to Prince Matthias."

"Why?"

"That is my business, not yours."

The Head Minister, a man with wild brown-gray hair and wilder blue eyes, slammed his fist down on the table. "You will answer our questions, General! It is only because we have been indulgent that we have not demanded you be killed or locked away. His Highness might think he's the King, but he has a ways to go yet. If you do not satisfy our questions, then we will have you put down like the beast you are!"

Laughter rippled across the room, full of contemptuous amusement, punctuated by the hiss of steel sliding from leather. Dieter held the edge of his sword to Matthias's neck, ignoring the slight gasp of surprise that escaped the prince, too faint for any but he to have heard it. He motioned with his free hand for the Ministers to resume their seats. He saw Kalan from the corner of his eye, but did not have to motion for him to hold his place. "You speak so dismissively of him, yet if I were to kill him you find yourselves in quite a quandary. Even if I were the villain you accuse me of being, there is nothing you can do about it. I can kill every man in this room with very little effort, and it would take a great many of your soldiers to kill me." He slid the sword away and sheathed it; there was not a single mark upon Matthias's skin.

"There is a saying in my country," Dieter continued slowly. "That a poor man has no choice but to make the best of what he finds or is given." He eyed each minister in turn. "Until you obtain someone better, you have no choice but to endure me, lest you want your people to die." He turned, saluted the prince, and left.

Tits of the Winter Princess he hated politics. The ministers here were as annoying as every slithering noble in Kria. Dieter stifled a sigh and ignored the mixed expressions of the people he passed in the hallway.

"General!"

Dieter grit his teeth and turned to face Kalan. "What now?"

"I need to convince you and Sol both to become ministers."

"Never."

Kalan only grinned. "Anyway, Matthias reminded me your office is finally ready. Would you like to see it? Since he's got you writing all those damnable reports now?"

Dieter frowned, momentarily surprised. "Yes."

"This way," Kalan said and motioned him down the hallway in the direction of Matthias's office. They continued past it for three more doors, and Kalan opened the fourth with a flourish. "The ministers were

serious about Matthias keeping everyone away from you – and the other two. He's been attempting to let you settle in, but if you're going to be our General – and we need one, now that most of ours have refused to continue without magic – you'll have to join the thick of it, I'm afraid."

Dieter sneered at the mention of the flood of officers that had refused to remain in the army. They'd been joined by no small number of regular army, only adding to his frustration and exhaustion. But he'd already begun making note of suitable replacements for the lost officers, and now he had the Scarlet to help him.

So Benno had intended for his own men to kill him before he had them all put to death. Interesting. Almost creative, at least for Benno. But the Kaiser was even more of a fool than Dieter had believed, if he thought the Scarlet would side against their Lord General.

He looked around the office that was apparently his. A massive desk, set out with all manner of tools and implements. Rows of shelves specially made to hold carefully rolled maps. The walls were plain, which was good. The floor was covered with deep red rugs, the color continuing in the chairs near the fireplace and smaller accents scattered across the room. Scarlet, it seemed, would follow him no matter what country he served. Dieter shook his head, briefly amused.

"The war room is there," Kalan said, pointing to a wide oak door on the far side of the room. "It connects to Matthias's office." He grinned. "I'm across the hall, should you need anything. I think Matthias wanted me close to hand but not here, where I have almost instant access to his office."

Dieter grunted, agreeing with the prince.

"Everything you might need should be here, though I'm certain that your men can supply better maps."

"Of course," Dieter said. "Speaking of my men, I need a place for my sword smiths to set up. I was thinking of the fields behind the palace."

Kalan nodded, frowning in thought. "That's fine for the short term; I'll have more permanent locations looked into if you like. And it's high time our smiths started to learn such arts, so long as you and your men are amenable to more lessons."

"They are amenable to following my orders," Dieter said shortly.

"Of course," Kalan said with another grin. "Does the room satisfy?"

"Yes," Dieter said.

"I will tell Matthias. Tell me which men are to have access, your retainers and assistants, and I'll see they're known to the relevant

personnel. Have you any thoughts to who will be replacing those who left?"

"Soon."

Kalan nodded and sketched a bow. "If you need me, simply knock at my door or set some poor footman to find me."

"As if they would find you unless you permitted it. If Sol deVry is a cat, you are a fox."

Kalan's laughter followed him from the room as he left. Dieter grimaced and took a seat behind the desk – his desk.

Far more than he'd ever had before. If not at the Regenbogen, all he'd had before was his bedroom. Dieter frowned at the polished surface of his desk, mind going to the problem of the approaching Krian army.

Despite his skills and those of his men, they would not be able to hold such a poorly fortified palace against the entirety of the Krian army. The only real option would be to stop the army before it could pass the Regenbogen, which would be the easiest place for them to cross, never mind that they were supposed to be meeting up with the Scarlet that were no longer there. If Benno was aware the Scarlet had betrayed him, he would push the army harder, giving Dieter less time to solve the problem than before.

Any other General would have already made the obvious decision. The most effective way to stop an army was to kill its leaders. Normally, the only way to do that was to fight through the army first. Barring that, it was best to use stealth. Shadow-killing.



## CHAPTER TWENTY FIVE

Was it possible to feel both safe and trapped in enemy territory?

Possible or not, that's exactly how Beraht felt. Surrounded by Illussor on one side and Scarlet on the other. On top of all that, the country he'd always called home wanted him dead.

Beraht stared out the window, not really seeing the snow-ridden landscape or the people bustling below. His eyes were more on his reflection, vague and unremarkable save for the faint orange-yellow glow of his eyes. The red arcen in the coliseum had stained them orange for a time, but one dose did not have a permanent effect. Nor did two doses, even though he'd used heavily concentrated red arcen the second time. But if he used it a third time, his eyes would stay orange.

As it stood, eventually his eyes would fade back to yellow, the only color he'd consumed frequently enough to permanently affect his eyes. If he never used arcen again, even that might possibly begin to fade back to his original color – whatever that was.

Breaking away from the staring contest with his weak reflection, Beraht contemplated the vials in his hand. Two more doses of concentrated red arcen. At a glance, the deep red appeared black. Beraht shuddered, to think of what black arcen would do to his body. On his lower back, the Brotherhood star twinged with memory of pain inflicted too recently.

The tattoo on his wrist, concentric circles of increasing size, were done with simple ink. Purple in the center, a small dot, because all citizens, even nameless, were permitted to use violet arcen. Around that was a circle of indigo, followed by blue, green, and yellow. His arcen license, giving him permission to use all colors up to and including yellow.

However, the star on his back was unique to the Brotherhood. They were made from arcen, placed there by magic, and the art of the initial inking had been purposely lost by the Brotherhood so that their numbers could never exceed twenty-one. All that could be done was to pass the stars on, and that only as someone was dying and the magic holding the star weakened. Hence the Brotherhood's ruthless diligence in keeping track of who had them and seeing that they were returned to the Brotherhood to be appropriately redistributed.

Something Beraht had realized far too late, and with much bitterness. He lived only because the Brotherhood had decided, essentially, to toy with him. Desperate, he'd agreed to their demands.

He'd encountered the Scarlet three days away from the Regenbogen, two weeks after the winter truce had been called – still the most unusual thing he'd ever heard of – and begun to kill them in their sleep.

Now the ones he hadn't killed passed him by in the hallways, and over the past few days many had shifted from strangers to familiar faces. He even knew a few of their names, and they his. There was suspicion in their glances, he could see it – why should a Salharan have a Krian name? But they did nothing, and Beraht wondered if it was that they knew and wouldn't dare, or if they simply didn't care.

But given how much Dieter still hated him, he doubted it was the latter.

Everywhere he went, it seemed, he was despised. Beraht rolled the small glass bottles in his hand, focusing on the scraping and clinking of glass against glass. He'd held them long enough that they were warm, and when the arcen caught the firelight it looked as though he held blood.

With a soft curse, he shoved the vials in a pocket of his dark brown jacket and strode from his room. He hesitated in the hallway, not quite certain where he wanted to be beyond not in his room. Somewhere that required no thought; he was tired of thinking.

Allowing his feet to decide, Beraht wandered the palace halls, surprised when people greeted him – and when he returned it. He still found it hard to believe that when people said 'Master Beraht' they were speaking to him.

Reaching an intersection, he glanced down the hall to where a small group of soldiers were gathered, obviously leaving what he realized was Dieter's office.

The bastard was making himself right at home. Beraht glowered at the group of soldiers, then turned sharply on his heel to stride in the opposite direction.

Debates had been raging for the past three days, as Matthias, Kalan and Dieter waged a small war against the King and Ministers who steadfastly refused to do anything they suggested. Beraht had been involved at first, but he had been painfully aware how ill suited he was to such talks. He was a simple soldier, not a General or Duke or Prince. He took the orders handed down after they debated what should be done.

Though he wasn't stupid. If this were Salhara, the Brotherhood would have already handed out orders. Assuming he would still be alive in Salhara, had his mission to kill the Scarlet not gone awry, those orders would most likely have gone to him.

The Krian army, including its Kaiser, was marching on Illussor. Had it been marching on Salhara, there would have been two means by which the Brotherhood would have stopped or slowed the army.

One would have been direct and brutal confrontation, the majority of soldiers given leave to use orange and red arcen. The fatalities that would have resulted on their side would have been worth the damage they could do the Krians with so much high-level magic.

The second method would have been more practical, if more difficult. Shadow-killing. Sneak into the Krian camps and kill their leaders while they slept. Easier said than done, even with red arcen.

That no one had taken such an action probably meant Dieter was being his usual bastard self. Let him kill by a multitude of other methods but not by stealth.

Beraht sighed and touched fingertip to his jacket, feeling the hard press of glass hidden within. For him, it would be a relatively simple matter. At least initially; the problem came not with the sneaking in, but in the sneaking around to kill multiple targets and get out before the deaths were noticed.

If he'd been more careful the last time he'd done it, he would not currently be in Illussor bearing a Krian name given by the worst bastard to ever breathe. "Stars refuse him. Stars refuse me."

"What has he done to offend you this time, Beraht?"

Beraht looked up at Sol. "What?"

Sol quirked a brow and fell into step beside him. "I asked what the General has done to offend you this time."

"Why in the stars do you think I was talking about him?"

"He's the only one to ever make you that angry, even when he's too busy working to bother you."

Beraht grimaced. "I have no idea what you're talking about. I see you are feeling better."

"Yes," Sol said, sliding him a pensive look before shrugging. "I'm still quite tired, but it will pass." He made a face. "It is humiliating to think that bastard nearly killed me."

"He was using concentrated red arcen. That could only have come from Jaspar or with Jaspar's leave. Even with arcen in your blood it would have been near impossible to stop him." Beraht started to touch the vials beneath his coat, then recalled himself.

"All the same," Sol said. "It was I who named him."

Beraht shrugged. "Tawn never played by rules unless they suited him; even in my limited time with the Brotherhood I knew that." He gave Sol an odd look. "Surely you did not track me down to discuss such an idiotic thing."

Sol laughed. "No, I merely chanced upon you. But you are the only other Salharan I know now, and it struck me when I saw you that you would understand how I felt."

"You named him well, he betrayed your faith," Beraht said flatly. "He died in Illussor at a Krian's hands. I would say that puts an end to things." Grimacing, Beraht changed the subject. "So where were you headed, if not to speak with me?"

"Back to my room; I was listening in on the meetings."

Beraht nodded. "Have they accomplished anything at all? Doesn't it get boring, saying the same things over and over but never reaching a decision?"

Sol threw his head back and laughed. "Such is the way of politics. I do miss the simple life of merely taking orders, though I don't think I had that life for very long." He shrugged. "I think Prince Matthias grows impatient, and time is growing short. The Krians will be here in a matter of weeks and if we do not stop them soon it will be too late. I sense that, if they do not accomplish what they want by tomorrow, Matthias will give Dieter leave to do as he pleases."

"Which is what?" Beraht asked scathingly. "Fighting a hopeless but proper battle against an army we're ill-prepared to fight?"

"Shadow-killing is difficult enough with magic," Sol said, sensing his thoughts. "It is all but impossible without it. Dieter has, believe it or not, considered that option. But ultimately, it will probably come down



to some form of bargaining. With the Scarlet here, we have a position from which *to* bargain."

Beraht grimaced. "More talking. Best simply to kill them and be done with it."

"Do you want to charge in like you did the Crystal Chamber?" Sol looked at him in amusement. "You do rather seem to like trying to get yourself killed."

"Not all of us, Sol deVry, have a choice if we wish to be acknowledged. Try living nameless and then tell me what you would do to have one."

"Peace," Sol said and held up a hand. "I meant no offense. Anyway, you hardly need worry about such things now. For better or worse, Beraht, all know your name now – and they will not be likely to forget it."

Beraht shrugged and turned away, finished with the conversation. "I will no doubt see you later." He did not hear Sol's reply as he continued down the hall and outside, making his way slowly to the graveyard and the mausoleum housing the royal family. He paused in front of Benji's marker.

Matthias had said Beraht would go down in history. Not simply that, but he would go as a hero. His name would be remembered forever, even if right now most people were not too terribly pleased with any of them.

So his name would be known forever. His *name*. Was that what bothered him? That he'd worked his whole life to be given a name, only for it to be Krian and picked by the most bastard Krian of all? Hundreds of years from now, if his name was indeed still known – would everyone believe him to have been Krian?

Muttering softly, Beraht turned away and began to walk back to the palace proper. That wasn't what bothered him.

He just wished he could figure out what did.

Inside, his feet carried him once more to Dieter's office and he glared at the people still crowding the hallway, coming and going from the General's office. Too busy glowering at the man he could not yet see, Beraht didn't notice the way everyone stepped aside to make room for him.

He met Dieter's eyes as he stepped inside, scowling at the smirk on the bastard's face. "General," he greeted coolly.

"Beraht," Dieter said in that way Beraht hated. Taunting. Possessive. As if he had every right to say it. Stars above!

"You're sitting rather pretty these days, aren't you?"

Dieter shrugged. "What do you want?" His eyes flicked past Beraht to the guard stationed outside, jerking his head briefly. The guard nodded, closing the door and leaving Dieter and Beraht alone. "I have work to do."

"I wanted to know why everyone is dithering over what to do."

"You mean why we're not using shadow-killer methods," Dieter said, standing up and moving around his desk, drawing closer to Beraht but not quite close enough to touch.

Beraht resisted the urge to take a few more steps back. "It would be the most effective," he said stubbornly. "If I'd had a bit more arcen..."

Dieter's face clouded, jade-eyes going dark at the mention of the night he and Beraht had met. "If I were you, Beraht, I would not speak further of that. And no, it's not the most effective. Surely even a foot soldier such as you were would realize that. Ah, but I forget, you are used to your infernal drugs."

"Sneak in, kill a few generals, they'll go home." Beraht refused to back down as Dieter drew close enough to loom. Barely avoiding rolling his eyes, Beraht tilted his head up and glared right back. "I really can't see negotiations going well if you're going to be the speaker."

Rather than punch or throw or merely grab, as Beraht had expected, Dieter merely threw his head back and laughed. "On that we are agreed. Which is why I'm not speaking. I do not represent Illussor, of course I wouldn't speak for them. Kalan will be handling that part of it. As for sneaking into camp and killing generals? Impossible, or very nearly. Just because Kria does not attack Salhara does not mean they couldn't. You caught me off guard, Beraht. I do not think you would manage the trick with the majority of the Krian army."

Beraht resisted the urge to wipe that smirk of Dieter's face. Why did the man always bring out his most violent urges? Why was he even here? "So that's it? You're going to go *talk* with a country that would just as soon cut everyone down, and a Kaiser that would love nothing more than to cut your head off and you think this is a good idea how?"

Dieter gave him one of those wolfish grins he hated, looming over Beraht more than ever. "Are you worried about me, Beraht?"

Curling his hands into fists, Beraht stepped away before he did something stupid. Giving in to his urge to smash that face in never got him anywhere. "I damn near got myself killed being their stupid Breaker. I'd hate to see all my hard work ruined because someone was dumb enough to give you the benefit of the doubt."

"You, Beraht, are the only one who seems to think me incompetent." Dieter closed the distance between them, smirking when Beraht back up a step.

Bastard. "That's because I know just how much of a stars-refused bastard you really are! Do whatever you want." Not even certain why he'd bothered coming to see the stupid Krian, Beraht turned sharply on his heel and stalked from the office, through the halls to his room.

Stars he hated that bastard! Raking a hand through his hair, Beraht glared around his room, wanting badly to punch a certain smug Krian firmly in the face but knowing he would never in a thousand years actually accomplish the deed. Argh, why did he have to be so *smug* and *infuriating* and—and—Beraht swore in three languages as he stomped around his room, pacing in a restless diamond from door to bed to fireplace to window.

Why was he being so stupid? Didn't Dieter see? Stars refuse the bastard, shadow-killing was the best way to resolve the entire matter. Talking. When did Krians ever *talk* about anything? It was idiocy. Then again, every last Krian he'd met was an idiot.

Beraht halted before the fireplace and scowled at the flames.

In the pocket of his jacket, the vials of red arcen seemed to burn.

He could show them how necessary shadow killing was. Show that stupid, smug, arrogant, thick-headed, brutal, aggravating bastard that shadow killing had its place. It'd be easy. They wouldn't be expecting magic. Not one lone soldier believed to be hiding away, half-buried in snow in the heart of Illussor.

What would he have to do? Beraht turned away from the fire as his thoughts raced, moving to gather those things he would need as he thought of them. Winter clothing, though he grimaced as he realized he was pulling out not the stuff provided to him since his arrival, but the gear he had taken from Kria. Quickly he stripped out of his clothes and slid into the heavier, cold-weather clothing. He sat down in the chair by the fire to pull off his palace boots and replace them with sturdy winter boots, pulling the lacing tight.

Food shouldn't be too big a concern. He could transfer to that weird temple...Beraht shook his head, disconcerted to think so suddenly of that temple. It seemed so long ago... He snorted softly. Snow was obviously freezing what little remained of his mind.

Disgusted with himself, Beraht reordered his scattering thoughts and retrieved a small travel pack from his wardrobe. Quickly he filled it with whatever necessities were readily accessible – not much, as he dared not leave the confines of his room. Shouldering the bag, he then scooped

up his fur-lined cloak from the bed and swung it around his shoulders, fastening it with a plain iron pin. It was heavy, but warm and made to encumber his movements as little as possible. The Krians didn't know much, but they knew how to fight well no matter what the weather.

Ready, Beraht drew a deep breath to steady himself, then drew out one of the vials hidden in his jacket. The arcen held the barest hints of red in the firelight. Grimacing, knowing what he was in for, Beraht pulled the stopper free and downed the contents in one quick swallow.

He dropped the vial to the carpet, weaving unsteadily as the arcen hit his system. It was hot and cold, bitter, sour. It tasted like bile, and thinking that did not help at all. Pressing one hand to his mouth, forcing himself to think calming thoughts, not about the taste in his mouth, the almost painful, tingling sensation flooding his body, Beraht grasped the back of a nearby chair and hauled himself to his feet.

For several minutes he stood there, taking deep slow breaths and letting the arcen settle into his system. He could feel the effects of it all too well and only knew them for what they were because he had always made a point to understand arcen. It was all he'd ever had.

He ignored the voice that tried to say he had more now. What did he have? A Krian name that would be carved into his Illussor headstone someday. He'd taken away magic, and people wouldn't thank him for that 'til he was buried beneath that headstone. Ignoring the stubborn voices in his head, he finally released his tight grip on the chair. Pulling his cloak more tightly around him, Beraht called up in his mind the spell he would need, then cast it.

Vanished.

Could it get any colder?

Beraht morosely pondered the merits of taking out a few soldiers to help himself to their tea, and reluctantly conceded that probably wasn't the best idea. Yet.

As much as he hated to admit it, the cold was working to his favor. With the snow coming down, not quite heavy enough to make travel impossible but enough to muffle his movements, everyone was bedded down or otherwise sheltered. Even Krians, it seemed, could only tolerate so much of the infernal white stuff.

It was dark, which made things problematic, but the various fires, and the fact he wore Krian clothing went a long way toward solving that

problem. Slipping through the camp full of cold and miserable soldiers was almost scarily easy. Especially when he considered the last Krian camp he'd snuck into...

Thoroughly disgusted that he'd allowed thoughts of the stars refused bastards to slip in, Beraht refocused on his mission and wended his way through the tents, making his way slowly through the Cobalt camp toward the tent in the center. The brilliant blue standard was caked with snow, hanging limply from its pole before the large tent of the Cobalt General.

Egon von Kortig...according to everyone, even Dieter, this man had a taste for torture. Beraht wasn't going to feel very sorry about killing him. The dimming spell he used worked like a charm as he bypassed the guards and slipped into the tent.

Inside, a single candle burned. The tent was thick, heavy, enough so that no shadows would be visible to those outside – not that anyone was awake enough to notice him. So he hoped, anyway. This was a lot more dangerous than sneaking into the camp of a single General.

Shunting his thoughts to the side, Beraht focused on the task at hand. He was a shadow killer. Had been trained for it from the very moment he'd shown a talent after helping to kill Krian scouts.

Carefully, slowly, he moved to the cot where von Kortig lay sleeping. He leaned his head down close, listening to the breathing patterns. Wine was heavy on von Kortig's breath, an unexpected bonus. Nodding, Beraht rose back to his full height and carefully grasped von Kortig, slowly turning him to his side, facing away. Then with a few whispered words and a motion of his finger, he sliced von Kortig's throat. Beraht grimaced at the wet gurgling sounds von Kortig made and let him fall forward to bleed into his bedding.

One down. Two Generals and possibly even a Kaiser to go. Making certain his dimming spell still held, Beraht turned and slipped back out of the tent, past the half-frozen guards – stupid arrogant Krian, it was a wonder no one had managed this successfully before – and slowly made his way out of the Cobalt camp and toward the Verdant.

It took him nearly two hours to make his way through the Verdant camp. The soldiers here were far more alert...though Beraht was forced to concede again that they paled in comparison to the Scarlet Bastard.

This time he had to slink more carefully to the tent of the Verdant General, Ludwig von Eisenberg. Going through the front wouldn't work this time, so Beraht gingerly worked his way around to the

back, waiting patiently for the patrol to pass, then slipped beneath and into the tent.

He stilled as it became obvious that von Eisenberg was only just asleep – he moved restlessly, like a man that had fallen asleep but was too restless to stay that way for long. Beraht waited several minutes, then finally began to slowly stand up.

Shouts and the blowing of horns abruptly shattered the night. Beraht swore – this late, he had not expected them to find any of the dead Generals this quickly. Stars refuse them all!

On his cot, von Eisenberg twisted around to his back and sat up. He started to speak, and Beraht wasted no time, bolting forward and grabbing von Eisenberg's head with one hand, raking the fingers of his free hand across Eisenberg's throat with the other. Hot blood gushed over his hands and arm before he finally dropped the dying general.

The tent flaps flew open, soldiers in dark green shouting for their General to come at once – then froze in shock as they registered both von Eisenberg lying in his own blood and Beraht standing over him.

Beraht had used a very precisely aimed razor spell to slit the throats of the two generals. It was a nasty spell, one the Krians loathed with particular vehemence. Using it the way he did, guiding the movement of the magic with his hand, controlled it and burned as little arcan as necessary.

Now he threw the spell out, attacking the men much as Tawn had attacked Iah and Sol. The men cried out in shock and pain, blood spurting, spilling – but they drew their swords anyway, lunging forward. Beraht threw out another spell, knocking one man down, giving him an opening—

—Pain flashed in his head as he exited the tent, then all he saw was black.

## CHAPTER TWENTY SIX

Beraht woke with a groan, feeling as though his head had been split in half. What in the stars...

"Well, well, the nasty little Salharan-Illussor scum wakes. My men didn't hit you that hard. Weak Salharan blood."

"Stars refuse you," Beraht snarled through the dizzying pain. He'd hoped not to see the stupid Kaiser again until he was slitting the bastard's throat. Stars, what had happened? He'd made it out of the tent...and someone had obviously gotten the better of him.

There was still plenty of arcen in his system, however.

"Heilwig," Benno said.

Beraht tilted his head up, immediately regretting the movement and grateful there was nothing in his stomach to toss up. The beautiful but cold Heilwig von Dresden stood over him. She held a vial of...stars above where had they gotten that!

"Hold him," Heilwig ordered, and Beraht suddenly found suddenly gripped hard by the shoulders, another hand keeping a hold of his throat, making it impossible to breathe, to talk.

Heilwig grabbed his nose, then pulled the stopper from the bottle she held with her teeth. She shoved the vial into his mouth, filling it with a thick, grayish substance. It had the soured-milk taste of a cleanser, but was much more viscous than it should be. Cleansers were thin, watery. This was like drinking syrup...or concentrated arcen.

The grip on his throat released just as his vision began to go black, and in gasping for breath he was forced to swallow the noxious substance.

Dizziness and nausea washed over him as the substance took effect, confirming that it was in fact a cleanser – concentrated. Potent. Beraht's stomach heaved and he wretched violently on the ground, emptying his stomach of things he hadn't thought could still be in it. He heaved until his muscles ached and his throat was raw, wiping bile and saliva from his lips with the back of his hand. "What..."

With dismay he could feel the arcen already dying in his system. His stomach clenched as it tried to empty itself, not realizing it was already thoroughly empty. The potent cleanser was wreaking havoc with his body.

Instead of answering him, Heilwig merely shoved another vial down his throat. Beraht fought, struggled, but he was weak from the first bout and the hands holding him were far stronger than he.

By the time the second vial had been swallowed, Beraht was barely able to see straight. By the time they'd made him swallow a third, he was all but sobbing in pain, bending over, shudders wracking his body, sweat dripping down his face despite the cold.

"Like that, Salharan? Or are you Illussor? It's so hard to tell..." Benno's voice was idle, almost lazy in tone, but Beraht knew from experience his eyes would be hard and cold. "A clever little creation of my unfortunate Cobalt General...though I wonder how great a General he could have been to have fallen so easily to filth like you. Obviously he is useless when taken out of his fortress."

Beraht finally managed to lift his head. "Von Eisenberg wasn't terribly impressive either." He grunted as von Dresden backhanded him, and licked the blood from his lips. Lifted his eyes to Von Dresden and sneered. "You would have been next." This time he made no sound at all as the back of her hand cracked hard and painful across his face.

"That liquid you just drank was, as I'm sure you've realized, highly concentrated cleanser. It burns the arcen immediately from your system. What's more...you've swallowed so much of it that I doubt your body will ever again tolerate arcen." Benno's smile was infuriatingly smug.

Only the fact that he was too weak to move kept Beraht from punching the expression off his face.

Never use arcen again...surely that was a lie. The cleansers had been potent, and he was going to be sick for weeks after being made to drink so much at once...but he could not believe it had completely destroyed his ability to use arcen. Absurd.



Benno motioned. "Tie him up in front of my tent. See he doesn't freeze to death, but do no more." He stood up and approached Beraht, grabbing him by the hair and forcing him to look up. "Your eyes...when we captured you they were red. Now they are merely yellow again. The color of the General you did not kill, and who has helped ruin what was probably the only skill you had." He laughed coldly. "Though the stupid Deceivers obviously think you worth something. How valuable are you, I wonder? I suppose we shall see."

"What do you mean?" Beraht demanded, hating the hoarse rasping that was his voice.

He was released roughly, and toed over to lie on his back. Benno loomed over him. Beraht glared hatefully back. "We've already sent a ransom demand for you," Benno explained.

Beraht tried to laugh, but the movement hurt too much. "All you Krians are mad! I once told that bastard what I will tell you now – no one will pay a ransom for me."

"You had better hope you are wrong," Benno said, planting one foot on Beraht's stomach and slowly putting his weight behind it, not letting up until Beraht finally let out a choked gasp of pain. "If they do not bring the ransom I have demanded, you will die slowly and painfully. You killed two of my generals. If you think three vials of that cleanser was bad...wait until we feed you a dozen more and then make you drink this." He pulled a familiar looking vial from within his dark, heavy cloak.

Beraht paled. His second vial of concentrated red arcen.

"I see you begin to understand. You should not have much to fear, though, Salharan. All I want in exchange is my Scarlet General. No one will mind parting with him, not when they have apparently taken the entirety of my Scarlet."

What little hope Beraht had held out that *someone* might rescue him, trade for him, died. It was more painful than he thought it should be, forcing him to the bitter realization that he'd liked the strange life he'd seemed to have acquired in his brief stay in Illussor. There'd been no guarantee it would last...but he had been willing to see it through. Not now.

His role was over. He was of no further use to Illussor, not now that he'd served his purpose as the Breaker. More important to Prince Matthias and all the others – if begrudgingly – was the bastard who could teach them to fight in the Krian style. There was no choice there. Better to let him die.

Beraht didn't bother to resist as men hauled him up and then tied him up in front of the Kaiser's tent. Though they gave him blankets and

aplenty, a bedroll to keep him from the cold ground, and the fires were close enough to provide warmth...all he felt was cold.

"I am going to kill him," Dieter said slowly, precisely, enunciating every word as though it took great effort to form them.

Given that he was barely unclenching his jaw to do it, Matthias didn't doubt a great deal of effort was, in fact, required. "I'm sure he meant well..."

Dieter glared at the missive on his desk. "I am certain that idiot never thought it through enough to realize how stupid he was being. He is far too impulsive to be a soldier; I am amazed he's lived this long."

Matthias wisely did not point out that it was only because of Dieter that Beraht was still alive. "I think Beraht always intends to do what he feels is best..." He smothered a laugh as Dieter's glower only darkened further. "So what should we do?"

"I am going to get that fool back so that I can kill him myself," Dieter said, standing. Nearby, one of his attendants came forward with his heavy cloak. Dieter turned to Reinhard. "Assemble a guard to escort me as far as the border. Make certain that any Illussor willing are included; it is their country being defended."

"Are you sure it's wise?" Kalan asked as he walked with deceptive casualness into the room, leaning idly against the wall beside the large map covering most of it. "It seems to me Benno wants nothing less than your head on a spit."

Dieter grunted. "At the very least. You are suggesting we leave Beraht to die?"

Matthias lifted a brow at the chill that entered Dieter's voice. Though Dieter was never soft about anything, he was never quite that cold.

"Of course not," Kalan said calmly. "I simply mean sending you out there is not the best way to handle things. We risk losing both of you."

"I will be fine," Dieter said. "This is a matter I should have settled a long time ago. I will end it now."

Kalan looked at him, eyes sharp. "There is something personal here."

Dieter did not reply, merely stalked past them out the door, his retainers and attendants falling into step around him, gradually breaking

off to attend to some duty or errand. Matthias walked not far behind, Kalan at his side, but cut left where Dieter kept going straight, moving to the balcony that overlooked the main courtyard.

When Dieter reached the courtyard, Reinhard and what looked to be about a hundred men stood at attention, patiently waiting. More than half were Illussor. Dieter nodded to all of them and mounted his horse as it was brought to him. He turned to face Matthias.

"Be cautious but victorious," Matthias said. "We have never let the Krian defeat us before, we will not now. Go with the Goddess."

Dieter saluted him and turned his horse around to lead the way from the courtyard, barking commands in sharp, guttural Krian.

His men were relearning how to fight in the Krian style even down to the language. Matthias chuckled softly.

"This is foolish," Esta said, coming up behind him. "Can we really trust him? How do we know this is not some trap or—"

Matthias cut her off with a sharp shake of his head. "He is my General, Duchess."

Beside him Kalan laughed, oblivious to or uncaring of the nasty look Esta shot him. "At any rate, I do not doubt for a moment that he intends to rescue Beraht and at the very least beat him senseless before tying him down someplace so he'll stay out of trouble."

A strange look Matthias couldn't place flickered across Esta's face at Kalan's words. "There is that," she finally said. "I suppose I should tell the healers to be ready for trouble of some form or another." Muttering to herself, Esta tucked a stray bit of hair back into the tidy braid coiled around the back of her head and gathered the skirts of her maroon gown, turning away to tend her duties, not bothering to bid them farewell.

Kalan looked after her, both brows raised. "What does she know that we don't?"

"Who knows," Matthias said with a roll his eyes. "Women always know everything; they like to hoard the information until it can be used to maximum effect. Especially Esta."

"Yet you want to marry her," Kalan said, shaking his head and giving a dramatic sigh.

Matthias grinned. "What's not to love about a woman who is more than willing to beat sense into me and could probably manage it?"

"I prefer the sweet ones myself," Kalan said idly. "Come on, while your general is wreaking havoc on his homeland we can go terrorize the council."

"Couldn't I go count snowflakes instead?" Matthias asked with a sigh, but obediently limped slowly alongside Kalan through the halls.

Beraht fell to the snow with a wet thump, too tired and sick to really feel the cold. He was past caring anyway. Let him freeze a bit; it would dull some of the pain he was about to start feeling. Though why they brought him out here to do the deed, he didn't know. Benno was obviously the sort who preferred an audience.

"As promised," Benno said, his voice cutting sharply across the quiet, snow-smothered field.

"Barely," a familiar voice rumbled. Realization struck Beraht like a fist to the gut. He forced open his sore eyes and with an effort lifted his head.

Dieter.

What...what was Dieter doing here?

Surely the stars-refused bastard hadn't actually come out here to pay the ransom?

Beraht's thoughts stuttered, stopped, and dizzily he let his head fall back down. When he was reasonably certain he would not once again try to heave up his empty stomach, he lifted it again.

Arrayed behind Dieter, forming a half-circle of at least fifty men, matching the half-circle behind the Emperor, was a mixture of Illussor and Scarlet. All were still, quiet; even the Illussor did not look as nervous as they probably felt.

Snow crunched loudly as Dieter dismounted. He drew his sword and stepped forward, stopping about six or so paces away. Glared at Beraht, but said nothing. Shifted his gray-green eyes, dark with anger, back to Benno. "If you think simply to trade one for the other, I am afraid you are quite mistaken."

"Oh, I plan to kill you here and now," Benno replied, and motioned. "I have not decided if I want to kill your prisoner or keep him. He's quite useless now, but it would please me to have him."

Dieter sneered. "If you had not murdered my father, you would have something of your own and would not need to steal from others."

"Be silent," Benno hissed, drawing his own sword. Beraht looked at it, willing his eyes to focus, longing to sleep and never wake. This sword was nearly a match for Dieter's...same length, with a hilt that was dark, set with a crystal in the pommel. The metal, however, did not shimmer. Beside Dieter's sword, it was dull.

If he were not feeling so wretchedly, miserably ill, he would be disgusted with himself for thinking that.

"You have been nothing but the bane of my existence since your birth, son of Meinrad."

"You think he chose us over you?" Dieter asked, tensing as Benno stepped forward. "He wanted me only to mould into that which would most please you. What will you do after I am dead?"

"Leave your carcass for the dogs as I did with your father!" Benno snarled and lunged, sword arching, steel ringing as their blades clashed.

Dieter returned the snarl with one of his own, easily blocking the swing as well as the next.

Beraht could not keep from staring. The last time he'd seen Dieter fight had been in the coliseum, and that had been completely different. Then, there'd been no real challenge until the end and Dieter had been put in a weaker position by Benno.

This was entirely different.

It was making him even dizzy to watch them. A perversion of the dances Esta had been attempting to teach him...but instead of a turn at the end of each step, another smear of blood was added to the ravaged snow.

Morning sunlight reflected off Dieter's arc-en-rich blade, and Benno flinched slightly from the unexpected flash of light, the low cut he swung faltering slightly. A heartbeat later he stumbled back, clutching at his left arm, which was bleeding profusely.

"Bastard," Benno hissed, and hefted his heavy sword in his right hand.

Dieter sneered but made no reply, moving on the offensive as Benno lifted his sword.

The Kaiser grunted and blocked the swing, but with his left arm disabled there was no contest. Blood gushed as Dieter's sword plunged through his chest. Benno grunted, his face going gray, but gave no other indication he was dying.

Disgusted, Dieter yanked his sword free and watched dispassionately as Benno collapsed to the ground. "Pathetic. I will never understand..." He shook his head and turned to Beraht and Heilwig. "Let him go, whore, or you will join Benno."

Heilwig stepped up behind Beraht and yanked his head back, pressing a dagger to his throat. "You would not reach me before I slit his throat," she said calmly.

Dieter hefted his sword. "Kill him and I kill you. What would you rather do, von Dresden?"

"Return home," Heilwig said flatly. "I advised him against this." She shrugged. "Perhaps he wanted you to leave him cold and dead out here in the middle of the nowhere. I bedded the man but his thoughts seldom made sense to me. I do not think even he understood his own thoughts." Her eyes were speculative as she stared at Dieter. "You are of course completely and utterly a traitor to the crown."

"By all rights I could take the crown," Dieter said dispassionately.

"That crown belongs to his unborn son," Heilwig said.

Dieter sneered. "You are a calculating whore."

"I am the Saffron General, and now Regent until my son comes of age." Heilwig replied. She abruptly removed the dagger from Beraht's throat and kicked him forward into the snow. "Take your Salharan and go. If you ever step foot in Kria again, traitor, your life is forfeit."

Dieter said nothing, merely cleaned his sword and sheathed it, then strode forward and yanked Beraht to his feet. He nodded once to Heilwig, then turned and led Beraht to his horse, all but throwing him into the saddle before swinging up behind him.

Beraht swayed dizzily, aware of only two things – Dieter had rescued him, and Dieter was incredibly warm. "Bastard," he muttered as Dieter's heavy cloak settled around them. He heard a rumbling, anger-laced reply, but slipped into unconsciousness before the words could register.

He woke up feeling as though he'd been dragged through the streets and run over by a wagon several times.

Movement caught his eye as he sat up, and Beraht just barely caught sight a soldier bolting from...he was in a tent. Surprisingly warm, thanks to the little stove in the center. A large table was across the way, neatly arranged with rolled up maps and sheaves of paper, an inkwell and blotter. A familiar cloak was draped over the back of the chair.

Everything came crashing back to him.

Rescued.

He'd been rescued by the bastard Wolf himself. Beraht frowned, unable to pin down his roiling emotions long enough to figure out *why* they were in such turmoil. He felt...unsettled.

Further thought was spared him as an all too familiar large, dark form blew into the tent, Dieter's gray-green eyes immediately landing

upon him. Filled with fury. "Tits of the Winter Princess, I am going to kill you."

Beraht glared right back. "If you're hoping for a thank you, issuing threats is not the best way to see you get one. Stars refuse you, I think I'll just go back to sleep."

"You are not going to sleep until I knock you unconscious for being a complete imbecile," Dieter snapped. "Do you *ever* think, Beraht?"

"I think you're a fine one to call me an imbecile," Beraht retorted. "I think my head hurts too much for me to feel like putting up with you. I think food would be a splendid idea and wine a divine one. I think—"

Dieter crossed the room like a wolf approaching his prey, grabbed Beraht by the scruff of his shirt, and dragged him bodily from the cot. He held him close, so close that for a moment Beraht had the insane, wild thought that Dieter was going to kiss him—

—Then just as abruptly Dieter let him go. Beraht wobbled precariously on the cot, but a moment later it steadied. He dug his fingers into the blanket and watched Dieter in a bemused, befuddled silence.

Why in the stars had he thought such an absurd thing? Dieter wouldn't kiss him, not — well, perhaps if his life depended on it...

Which made Beraht frown. Dieter had kissed him before, though it was something he'd made every effort not to think about. He shivered and tugged his blankets up, glaring at the man standing over the table. "Why?" he demanded. "I can hardly think Matthias approved of sending out his General. You're irreplaceable. To him."

Dieter spun around sharply and stalked back toward the bed, and Beraht once more felt as though he were prey. "You're a fool!" Dieter snarled, reaching out to grab the front of his shirt and drag him close again. "The greatest fool I've ever met. What were you thinking, Beraht?"

"Stop saying my name that way!" Beraht snarled, shoving him back, ignoring the waves of nausea that rolled over him. "I'm not going to be sorry for solving your problems with a bit of shadow-killing! It worked far better than your stupid negotiations would have."

"Until you got caught," Dieter retorted, letting him go. "Slitting the throats of sleeping men is nothing to commend."

"Neither is mincing words when neither party means what they say," Beraht snarled. "I know how politics work, and I know how empty the words are. Nothing but lies, and it would have ended in killing. This way I only killed a few, you killed the Kaiser, now we can go home."

Dieter sighed and stalked back to the table, bracing his hands upon it, staring at something Beraht could not see. "Your eyes are yellow."

Beraht stilled. "Yes."

"They were orange when last I saw you, and if you used the arcen you took from Tawn's corpse, they should be red." Dieter turned around again, solemn and curious, and Beraht noticed suddenly that Dieter looked tired. His clothes fell in a way that said he'd probably been wearing them for at least a couple of days straight – and he'd noticed right from the start that Dieter detested being filthy. His hair too was mussed, and for some reason it only made the touches of silver more prominent. In a man as young as Dieter, those silver touches should look odder than they did.

Beraht wondered just how horribly the concentrated cleanser had ruined his mind that his thoughts were so utterly ridiculous. "I was force fed concentrated cleansers. They flushed the arcen from me, and made me sick in the process." He didn't bother to mention that they'd ruined his ability to use arcen.

Dieter once more approached the bed, and Beraht was struck with the realization that Dieter was *restless*. Finger and thumb grasped his chin, forced his head all the way up. "They're precisely the color they were when I first captured you. I've never known anyone to regress."

"It was concentrated," Beraht said, wondering why his chest felt so tight suddenly. Stars, he wished the bastard would go away and leave him in peace. "Heavily concentrated. The equivalent of concentrated red arcen."

"No wonder you have been so feverish," Dieter said, and Beraht once more had the wild thought that Dieter was about to—

"Lord General!" A voice said sharply from outside, the words Illussor.

Dieter growled low and strode to the tent entrance. "What?"

"We're ready to move out, Lord General."

"What are the final numbers?"

"Half the Verdant, two thirds of the Cobalt."

Dieter laughed low. "His Highness will not know where to put them all. My instructions were conveyed?"

"Yes, Lord General," the unseen man replied.

"Good. Appoint men to have my things packed. Send Reinhard to me."

"At once, Lord General," the man replied, and Dieter turned back to Beraht a second later.

Beraht glared. "You still have not answered my question."



"What question was that?" Dieter asked idly, picking up his cloak and swinging it up and around his shoulders. Beraht could tell from the carefully blank expression on his face that he was being purposely obtuse.

He bit back a retort and simply repeated his question. "Why did you bother saving me?"

Dieter looked at him, eyes holding something Beraht could not even remotely understand. Then he turned away, headed outside. "Because you are mine," he replied before vanishing.

What in the stars did that mean? He wasn't Dieter's prisoner anymore, and even then he'd never belonged—Snarling, Beraht threw back the covers and slid awkwardly from the cot, scrambling into the clothes he found after a moment's search. His body protested all the quick movements but Beraht grit his teeth and endured.

Stars if he'd let Dieter get away with such strange words and no explanation.

But when he got outside, Dieter was barely discernible all the way across camp, surrounded by soldiers, obviously handing out orders.

Heaving a sigh, Beraht turned away in disgust to find food and see if it would stay on his stomach. He'd deal with the stars refused Wolf when they returned home.

That was the third time he'd thought of Illussor as home.

Muttering curses, Beraht gave up thinking of anything but food.



## CHAPTER TWENTY SEVEN

"Spring is most certainly a season of change," Matthias said.

Esta rolled her eyes. "Do stop grinning so, Matthias, people will think you are gloating."

"I *am* gloating," Matthias replied, settling back in his seat and looking quite pleased with himself.

Kalan laughed from where he stood at Matthias's right. "As well he should." He motioned to the crowd filling the ballroom. "We have accomplished a great deal in the past month, and all of it without magic. Even the King has given up protesting."

Esta made a face. "Given up protesting, yes..." She sighed, and shoved the thoughts away. There was nothing to be done about the King. Even she had not been able to coax him out of his room, not even for this grand occasion.

Not that she could entirely blame him; she'd much rather be in her room. She skimmed the ballroom for anything which needed attending, smiling faintly to see her brother and Sol conversing with a handful of soldiers – both Illussor and Krian – on the far side.

Though she supposed that wasn't entirely fair. They'd all forsaken Kria to follow the Scarlet Wolf here. They were, even though many were still struggling with the language, Illussor now. If she were to order them to return to Kria, which in a few short hours would be within her power, they would be put to death.

She thoroughly disliked seeing swords everywhere, but they could hardly do without such things now. The underlying power structure of Salhara was crippled, the Seven Star having lost three stars forever. Kria was not fairing much better, with three Generals and the Kaiser dead, and the next Kaiser still to be born. Both countries would become troublesome again, someday, for she doubted either would feel like peace talks now...but it wouldn't be for many years yet.

Looking across the ballroom, she sought out the two men who were responsible for that – and shook her head when she saw them on opposite sides, still ignoring each other.

Ever since Beraht had been rescued they'd barely spoken to each other – barely even tolerated being in the same room. At present, Beraht was trapped in a corner surrounded by those who were brave enough to quench their curiosity. Those less brave stood close enough to overhear, and more than a few in the surrounding area were giving the corner many an inquisitive glance.

And perhaps a few predatory, Esta noted. Beraht cut a fine figure when dressed in full regalia. His pale hair was only slightly darker than that of a full-blooded Illussor, skin fair though she suspected that with the warming weather it would tan. Beraht did not seem the type to ever stay idly indoors. To accent his features, draw out the blazing yellow of his eyes, she'd bid the tailors put him in blue with accents of silver. If he wanted company tonight, Beraht would find himself with more offers than he could handle.

However, she suspected he would not be seeking any company.

She shifted her gaze to seek out the Wolf, unsurprised to find him high above on the balcony overlooking the ballroom. Many soldiers and older lords were gathered there, and Dieter stood in quiet conversation with Reinhard and the Illussor man who held the same position as Reinhard, balancing the power between the still blending halves of the new Illussor army.

Dieter was clearly involved in the conversation, but his eyes were fastened to the ballroom floor. Esta didn't have to look to see where particularly his gaze was directed.

Honestly.

If men weren't obnoxious and presumptuous, as were Matti and Kalan, they were obtuse and stubborn.

"Won't you sit, Essie?" Matti asked.

Esta sniffed, pointedly turning away from the seat Matti was offering her. "Not yet. I want to dance first."

"Shall I trod upon your toes?" Kalan asked.

"No, you shall not," Esta replied, gathering the skirts of her pale green gown, light catching on the gold and silver beads decorating it in a delicate pattern of small flowers. "You may stay here and continue to be smug and aggravating with Matti."

Laughing, the men let her go.

The crowd parted for her as she crossed the ballroom, and she returned the bows and curtsies with nods and murmured greetings. Stars, she was going to kill Matti. Yes, it was a good idea...and she'd always known Matti would get his way eventually...longer than he had, the idiot...but this new level of deference was disconcerting.

She smiled in greeting as she reached Beraht, holding out her hand, repressing a fond laugh at the way he awkwardly took it. "I don't suppose you would indulge me with a dance, dear Beraht? I'm afraid my fiancé and his favorite cohort are being quite insufferable."

"If you don't mind having your toes broken," Beraht said with a grimace, but obediently led her through the crowd and to the dance floor. "Do I know this one?"

"You do," Esta said, and got them into position, seeing comprehension flood Beraht's face. "Are you enjoying the ball at all?"

Beraht shrugged, and did not reply as the music started up, more focused on the dance steps. Esta left him in peace, following his lead, smiling and nodding at the people who waved or called as they whirled by on the turns. After the first set, Beraht finally spoke again. "It's not what I'm used to, and people keep pestering me with questions." He frowned.

Esta laughed. "Yes, they are always going to do that. You are quite the source of curiosity, Breaker."

Grimacing, Beraht again fell silent as they stepped and turned. When they came together again, Esta noticed his focus had wandered. The next step reversed their position, and she was not at all surprised to see Dieter speaking with Matti and Kalan, and that Dieter was watching them. His gaze shifted before she was once more turned away.

She politely ignored the way Beraht's gaze again wandered.

The dance ended a moment later, and Esta was gratified that Beraht did not immediately take off. "Would you dance once more with me?" she asked. "I promise to release you after."

Beraht shrugged and took up the starting position as the strains of the next dance began to play. "I don't mind." He flashed a brief smile, the hesitance in it cute. "Breaking toes is better than being trapped in that corner again."

Esta laughed as she was spun, and was still laughing when the dance brought her close to Beraht again. "I am flattered you find dancing with me more interesting than being lavished with attention. I think you will do quite well as a Duke, Beraht."

"I am not a lord," Beraht said stubbornly, looking slightly ill – but Matthias was adamant. He had titles to give away, and so he would. Technically they were the King's to give away, but every day Matthias took up more and more the role of King.

"Not yet," Esta said, smiling at Beraht's disgruntled look. "You are a fine dancer, you know, despite what you think. Even if you were breaking my toes, it's better than listening to Matti gloat all night."

Beraht glanced back toward the dais where Matti sat, conversing still with Kalan and Dieter, something amusing him vastly enough Esta could hear him laughing over the noise and music. "If you are that unhappy about it..."

Esta rolled her eyes. "I'm not. If I didn't want to marry him, I wouldn't. He's just being very much a braggart about it. I'll make him pay."

"Of that I have no doubt," Beraht said with a grin, and spun her around in the turn that completed the set, smoothly moving into the steps of the second set. He really was a fine dancer.

His eyes again wandered, and Esta knew where they lingered, why those shadows were there. Honestly. If it weren't for the fact she genuinely liked Beraht, she would leave them both to rot in their obtuseness. "Could I ask you a question, Beraht? It's been piquing my curiosity for some time, but I've never troubled to figure it out."

"Of course," Beraht said, brow wrinkling with confusion. "I doubt I've an answer to give, whatever it is."

Esta smiled, and fell silent until she was led through the turn and into the third set. "Your name is Krian, yes?"

"Yes," Beraht said tightly, eyes going immediately past her shoulder.

"It's not a name with which I am familiar, and I am rusty at best in the Krian language. Whatever does your name mean? If it's all right to ask, I mean. I do not know the Salharan etiquette for such things."

Beraht shrugged. "My name means 'bright'." He frowned briefly, eyes once more wandering as if of their own volition.

Esta doubted he realized he was doing it.

"That's peculiar," she said. "Does the word 'bright' have special meaning to the Krians? Is it a popular name for things?"

"What?" Beraht asked, his frown deepening with confusion growing. "There is nothing special about it, nor do I think it popular...to my knowledge, it's quite ordinary. Why?"

"Well, it's just I'm relatively certain I heard the Lord General say one day to the soldiers that his sword was named Bright, though if you ask me it's strange they name..." She kept her expression blank as they stumbled to a halt in the middle of the dance floor.

Beraht stared at her. "What?"

"I said Dieter named his sword Bright..."

Oblivious to the fact they stood still in the middle of the dance floor, Beraht looked toward the dais with a strange expression on his face. It turned into a glower. "Where did he go?"

Esta turned and saw that Dieter had, indeed, vanished. She turned back and saw Dieter once more on the balcony – headed for the door that led to the halls beyond. She pointed. "There. I believe he's retreating."

Beraht jerked around. "Bastard," he swore softly, then abruptly started heading that way, pausing mid step to turn back. "Pardon me, Princess," he said hastily, then bolted through the crowded ballroom, oblivious to the people who scrambled to get out of his way, taking the stairs two at a time and vanishing a second later from the ballroom.

Esta shook out the skirts of her ball gown, then gathered them close and walked sedately off the dance floor toward the dais. She accepted the hand Matti held out to her, and gracefully took her place in the seat beside his.

"What are you up to, Essie?" Matthias asked.

"I merely wanted to dance," Esta said primly. "Are you going to give me your mother's wedding ring or not?"

Matthias grinned and pulled a delicate gold ring from his pocket. "She told me when I was sixteen that I was going to give this to you one day."

Esta sniffed. "Matti, she told me when I twelve that you would give me this ring someday."

Kalan threw his head back and laughed at the expression on Matthias's face.

Feeling the evening one well managed, Esta rose with Matthias as the dance came to an end, sliding the ring on her finger and placing her hand in his. He lifted their joined hands as the music died away and the crowd turned to face them. "To your future Queen!" he called, and kissed the back of Esta's hand as the room bowed, curtsied, and burst into cheering.

Beraht bolted through the hallways, wishing his ability to breathe would return, or that his heart would stop pounding in his chest.

Esta had to have lost her mind. There was no way...

It wasn't true, and even if it was...

What game was Dieter playing?

Beraht stormed around a corner – and faltered to a stop.

For once Beraht didn't know what to do about him. That wasn't true. He hadn't known since Dieter had rescued him. He had, in fact, tried very hard not to think about the tangle in which Dieter had left him. "You stars refused bastard!" he bellowed, fisting his hands to still their sudden trembling.

Dieter stopped, then turned slowly around.

He made, Beraht had noted sourly earlier in the evening, an impressive figure. Esta had somehow gotten him to wear a color other than black. Granted, the green was deep enough to pass for black in weaker light, but in the ballroom the dark green trimmed in silver had...well, looked good. Up close he had no doubt it brought out his strange gray-green eyes, made the gray touches almost silver. Bastard.

"What did I do this time?" Dieter asked, and Beraht was brought up short by the utter weariness in his tone.

Beraht stalked closer, titling his head up to meet the cool gaze of those eyes. "You drive me mad."

"The feeling is entirely mutual," Dieter snapped, annoyance beginning to enter his tone. "Though I would like to know what I have done this time."

"You breathe!" Beraht replied, feeling the last of his temper slip free of restraint. "You exist! I have never in my life met anyone half so infuriating and confounding as you!" He could feel his nails digging into his palms, and a sticky warmth told him he'd broken the skin. "Bastard," he whispered, still glaring. He spoke again before Dieter could interrupt. "What is your sword's name?"

The dismay that flickered across Dieter's face was startling to the point it took Beraht's breath away. Such a vulnerable expression seldom found a place on the face of the Wolf. "Go away, Beraht."

"I asked you a question, you stupid Wolf!" Beraht snarled. "What is your sword's name?"

Dieter's mouth twisted. "Bright," he said curtly.



"Why?" Beraht managed to ask, unable to believe it.

"Tits of the Winter Princess, do you think I know?" Dieter bellowed, expression as uncertain as it was angry.

Beraht shook his head, unable to comprehend anything. "Is that what you meant—in the tent—"

"Yes," Dieter said.

He couldn't believe it. There was no way this made sense. It was impossible. They hated each other. "Bastard," he hissed. "Are you trying to be amusing?"

"Amusing?" Dieter said in a soft, dangerous tone that Beraht knew to mean he was about to find himself on the floor badly bruised, if not unconscious. He fought the urge to back away as Dieter stalked toward him, a shiver running up his spine and he suddenly felt exactly as he had in the tent a little more than a month ago—

—Except this time Dieter *was* kissing him.

The thought left Beraht reeling, or would have if the kiss itself wasn't already doing that.

This was *nothing* like the kiss Dieter had given him in the coliseum. That had been necessary. Brutal and hard. Flavored of arcen and blood. *This* kiss tasted only of Dieter, who seldom drank anything but tea, and while his lips were most definitely bruising it wasn't in an unpleasant way.

No, far from it. As much as he hated to admit it, as hard as it was to believe this was happening – Dieter could kiss. Stars, the man could kiss. Beraht wondered briefly it had to do with being trained to be the perfect gift to a Kaiser.

Then his thoughts skittered away, as Dieter's kiss went from fierce to consuming, and Beraht moaned wholly against his will.

He gasped for air when Dieter finally broke the kiss, and wondered when precisely he'd wound up pressed against the wall and why in the stars his hands were in Dieter's hair. This was *not* happening. Slowly he looked up.

He'd been right. Against the deep green fabric and silver trim, those gray-green eyes shone. Beraht drew a shaky breath. "Dieter..."

A smile he'd never seen before flickered ever so briefly across Dieter's face, lighting those eyes up even more. "That's the first time you've said my name, Beraht."

Beraht shuddered, hands tightening where they refused to let go of Dieter's thick hair. He'd always hated the way Dieter said his name because of the mockery in it. There had been no mockery this time, and that made it devastating. Stars refuse him for a fool, he should not like it

so much that Dieter said his name that way. Possessively. Knowingly. As if it meant something.

Never had anyone uttered his name while they kissed him, bedded him. They said nothing at all, or whispered the name of another. He'd never had a name for someone to say. Nor had he known what it was like to say the name of another. Always he'd been nameless and silent.

He spoke again, just because he could, because this entire situation was unreal and he realized with sudden, painful clarity that he wanted it to be real. "Dieter." He moaned low again as Dieter once more took his mouth, kissing back furiously, pouring every last thing he felt into it. If he was going to endure this, by the stars he wouldn't do so alone.

Shivers laced down his spine as Dieter became bolder, as true to form the Wolf wasted no time in claiming his victory. Beraht suspected he'd still wake up with bruises, but found he didn't care.

Dieter abruptly pulled away, dragging him along, and the sudden absence of that hard, warm body pressed against his left him feeling cold. His hand burned where Dieter held it, and Beraht realized after a moment where they were going. "We're going to your room?"

Dieter smirked. "Why not? You've been sleeping in my bed since we met."

Beraht rolled his eyes. "You're still a smug, arrogant, infuriating, violently tempered bastard, Dieter."

"You're still too mouthy for your own good, Beraht." Dieter replied.

There seemed nothing more to say, except to whisper Dieter's name once more as the door closed behind them and he was pulled into his Wolf's arms.

## EPILOGUE

"Dieter!" Esta halted in the doorway to his office, hair and clothes a mess, no doubt from running about the palace on yet another chase. "Have you seen Benji?"

"No, Majesty," Dieter replied, looking up briefly from his paperwork.

Cursing, Esta called a thank you as she vanished to search elsewhere.

Dieter reached beneath his desk and yanked, eyeing the gleeful smile on Benji's face. "You are driving your mother mad, prince."

"But her lessons are boring," Benji protested. "I want swords, not forks."

Thinking of his own etiquette lessons, drilled into him at length by his father and a tutor brought in at significant expense, all to prepare him for being utterly perfect for the Kaiser...Dieter could only sympathize. "Did you bring your sword, child of the devious Spring Lord?"

Benji laughed, amused as always by what seemed to him Dieter's strange phrases. Then he squirmed free of Dieter's hold and dropped down to crawl back under the desk, emerging a second later with a well-made wooden sword, the perfect weight and size for training a young child.

Dieter recognized natural talent when he saw it, and while he hoped Benji did not spend his life at war, he was not above training the boy when he should be learning his forks. "Your mother will worry until she finds you."

"Daddy knows," Benji said. "He'll stop mommy."

Shaking his head, almost feeling sorry for Esta that her son was all too much like his father, Dieter motioned for Benji to take up position in the center of the room, then began to drill him through the beginner lessons.

He didn't think it would be much longer before they moved on to more advanced lessons – and avoiding his mother was already teaching Benji more than any lesson could about stealth and knowing your enemy.

Dieter laughed softly.

A sharp rap at the door interrupted them, but neither budged from their spot. When the door opened a moment later, Benji abandoned his sword and bolted to the new arrival. "Uncle Beraht! Can we go riding later?"

Beraht rolled his eyes. "If your mother doesn't lock you in your room for running away from your lessons *again*." He shot a glare at Dieter. "You don't help."

Dieter shrugged. "It is not my fault the woman thinks a seven year old wants to learn about forks rather than swords. She should stop the etiquette lessons until he is old enough to threaten or blackmail."

"What's blackmail?" Benji asked.

"Nothing," Beraht replied, shooting Dieter another look.

Laughing, Dieter returned to where he'd been leaning against his desk. "Benji, go through all the forms again."

"Yes, General!" Benji said cheerfully, snapping a salute before obeying. His forms were nearly perfect, and Benji immediately made every correction Dieter called out.

Another rap at the door interrupted them a second time, and this time Benji bolted to cling to Dieter, sword clutched tight. "I'm not done yet!" he protested even before the intruder could enter.

"Benji," Matthias said with a fond smile, "your mother is on the warpath. I promise I will talk her into regular lessons for you – until then, please come learn your forks before she teaches knives to all of us."

Dieter and Beraht laughed.

"Go," Dieter said firmly.

Grumbling, face dejected, Benji went.

Matthias waved and followed his son out, and Dieter could just hear him bribing Benji with a visit to Sol and Iah to go fishing in their pond in a few days.

"You shouldn't be encouraging his bad behavior," Beraht said, leaning against the door and folding his arms across his chest.

Dieter shrugged. "Dining etiquette does not require training movements and reactions into the body from a young age. The prince should know how to fight."

"This isn't Kria," Beraht said, but the words were automatic, the easy bickering familiar, normal.

"No, if this were Kria, he would have started at three," Dieter said, and levered himself off the desk and stalked across the room, looming over Beraht, who unfolded his arms to brace his hands on Dieter's shoulders. "You're back early."

"The problem resolved itself by the time I got there," Beraht said. "I had only to authorize a few things and then I was left with nothing to do. I would have been back sooner, but I stopped off to see Sol and Iah. They're doing well, and are much busier than I. Why did I get the boring title?" He tilted his head up just a bit more in silent demand.

Dieter gave in, lowering his head to claim Beraht's mouth, the taste of his lover still more intoxicating than any wine could ever be. "You certainly whine as expertly as any noble I've ever met," he said when at last they broke apart.

Beraht kicked him. "Your office is remarkably empty."

"I was tired of the racket," Dieter replied, sliding one hand over Beraht's hip and along his back, tracing the dips and rises of his spine before letting go long enough to lock the door against which Beraht was still braced. He tucked the key away in his jacket before finally returning his full attention to his lover. "I sent them off to train at the Regenbogen." He smirked briefly as he thought about the fortress reclaimed by Illussor only a year ago.

Beraht rolled his eyes. "You're as smug as any general I've ever met."

Chuckling, Dieter once more covered Beraht's mouth with his own, growling low as knowing fingers landed on the back of his neck and a hand began to open his clothes, his own intent upon removing Beraht's. He broke the kiss to taste elsewhere, as stunned now as he had been years ago that this bright Salharan was his to kiss and touch and claim.

"How long do we have until his highness interrupts again?" Beraht asked, the question turning in to a long moan.

"Even his highness hasn't yet figured out how to pick a lock," Dieter said, greedily attacking Beraht's throat, displeased that their three days apart had given his marks time to fade. Fingers tightened in his hair, Beraht shivering in his arms. "As I've got the only key, you are my prisoner here until I decide you may leave."

But even as he spoke, he felt fingers wrap around the key in his jacket. He looked up, glaring.

Beraht smirked and tapped his cheek with the key. "Who's the prisoner?"

Rolling his eyes, Dieter did not deign to respond, merely attacked Beraht with another hungry kiss as the key fell to the floor.