

BOUND



MEGAN DERR

Less than three press

Bound
By Megan Derr

Published by Less Than Three Press

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be used or reproduced in any manner without written permission of the publisher, except for the purpose of reviews.

Edited by Samantha Derr
Cover designed by Megan Derr

This book is a work of fiction and as such all characters and situations are fictitious. Any resemblance to actual people, places, or events is coincidental.

Electronic Edition September 2010
Copyright © 2010 by Megan Derr
Printed in the United States of America

ISBN 978-936202-38-6

BOUND

A MAN NEEDS THREE PEOPLE IN HIS LIFE: SOMEONE TO KNEEL
BEFORE, SOMEONE TO WALK BESIDE, AND SOMEONE TO HOLD.

~ The HOLY GENERAL

PROLOGUE

"This is really it?"

"Yes," Ingolf replied, smiling briefly as he watched his men stare. He wiped sweat from his face and neck as he watched them admire the sword, hoping they would be too busy to notice how profusely he was sweating, or mark it to exertion rather than the cold fear he'd felt since this entire thing had begun.

"I cannot believe it," said Sepp, voice full of awe. "This must be a dream. It cannot be possible."

"It is very possible, my friends," Ingolf said, satisfaction and pride and excitement beginning to heat his blood now that the fear was fading. "I have done it, and you hold it."

Pancraz looked at it in wonder, eyes shining even in the dim light of the abandoned cabin they had overtaken for their own use. "The sword of the Betrayer himself," he breathed, as if afraid to give voice to the words. "It looks precisely like the legends say. I thought for sure it would be the complete opposite."

Ingolf gazed at the sword, seeing again the marble hands which had held it, the carved face which had seemed to stare so coldly at him. That was when the cold sweat had broken out, when those marble eyes had glared at him, and every story he'd ever heard of the Betrayer—the one the Illussor called the Holy General—flooded his mind.

He shoved the memory away, dismissed it, because it did not matter now in the least. The sword was now in their hands, and they would use it to drive back the bastards seeking to subjugate them. Most of the country had fallen to defeat — but not all of it.

They would sooner die than kneel before those filthy bastards. Hopefully the legends of it being able to block magic might be true. If so...they might stand a real chance.

"Did you hear that?" Sepp hissed.

"Shut up," Ingolf snapped, retrieving his own sword from the floor as he did, indeed, hear something. Boots in snow, trying to be quiet, but nature preventing whoever wore them from being entirely successful.

Then the door crashed open and hit the floor with a thud as the old leather hinges finally gave in to age and mistreatment.

Ingolf drew a sharp breath despite himself. In lamplight and moonlight, their attacker was a handsome one. His hair was so pale it looked silver in the dark, and though his eyes were not clearly visible, Ingolf knew they would be just as pale, so too the skin that seemed to reflect the moonlight.

He was not slight, however, but broad in the chest and shoulders, all but filling the doorway. "Give it back," the stranger bellowed, brandishing a sword that Ingolf was impressed he could properly use. Didn't these people typically prefer smaller swords? He had never met an Illussor who bore a sword equal in size to any Krian sword.

Intriguing. Drawing his sword, Ingolf motioned Sepp and Pancraz back. "The sword belongs to us."

"No, it does not," the man said and lunged.

Ingolf blocked the swing, but just barely. Swearing loudly, he shoved the man back and lunged forward and down, retrieving the stolen sword before bolting outside.

An angry bellowed followed him, and he swung around just in time to block another swing.

"Stay out of it," he said sharply as he saw his friends moving to join the fray. "Three against one is not fair."

His attacker sneered. "Well, well, look at that. One of you is trying to play at honor."

Ingolf snarled and swung angrily, laughing in cold triumph when he managed to slice a wound on the bastard's arm. "Who are you to question my honor? I am guilty of many things, but not dishonor."

"Stealing sounds a dishonorable crime to me, bastard," the man replied, and the fight was on again.

"You just let it sit around collecting dust," Ingolf replied, gasping the words out between swings, muscles aching after his earlier exertions, but some part of him thrilling at finding such a worthy opponent even amidst the unhappy reasons for the duel.

The wound had not slowed the bastard down at all — merely forced him to fight with his left rather than his right. Impressive. Under any other circumstance, Ingolf would have defeated him and then fucked him. "You leave it to rot," he continued, "and we intend to use it."

"Maybe you should accept your days of glory are at last come to an end, and you are getting what you have always deserved."

"You know nothing about it," Ingolf bellowed. "Your country is not free of taint. Who are you to question me?"

"I am the owner of that sword, and you will return it, or find yourself returning home lacking both sword and head."

Ingolf sneered. "No man owns that sword."

"Return it," the man bellowed again.

"Prove it is yours and perhaps I'll let you see it one last time before I kill you," Ingolf returned, amused despite himself, enjoying himself though he should have been afraid because this man was proving to be his equal.

The man roared again, pale eyes flashing, and he looked like nothing so much as the moonlight come to life in the form of a fierce warrior. Beautiful. "Prove it? I have nothing to prove to *you*. I am Erich von Adolwulf, Duke of Korte, direct descendant of the Holy General himself. Return the sword or die."

Ingolf charged, but it was only later that he admitted to himself that the snow was the only reason he was alive. He watched in horror as Erich moved, caught a patch of ice, and crashed hard to the ground. There was a cracking sound, a brief cry of pain, and then the Illussor man lie still.

Striding gingerly across the field, not wanting to share the man's fate, Ingolf stared down at the body of the fallen Illussor man, then knelt to examine the head wound he had incurred from his fall on an unseen patch of ice. There was no blood, a good sign.

"Is he really related to the Betrayer?" Sepp asked, as he and Pancraz joined Ingolf.

Ingolf shrugged. "I would imagine that is not something anyone would claim to be lightly. He did say he was the Duke of Korte, which was the Betrayer's title."

"What are we going to do with him?" Pancraz asked.

"Take him with us," Ingolf said. "If he has come after us, others will be on their way. That aside, if he really is the Duke of Korte, he will know things about the sword we do not, and it could help us." His mouth tightened as he thought of all they must do, how small a chance they had—no chance, really, if they were resorting to stealing the sword of the Betrayer on the small chance the legends of its resisting Salharan magic were true.

They needed all the help they could get, unfortunately. If they did not find some way to defeat the Salharan magic waging out of control and overtaking Kria, then by the spring thaw there would no longer be a Kria.

PART ONE TWO PRINCES

NEVER LET A KRIAN TAKE YOU PRISONER.

~Geralt von Adolwulf, seventh Duke of Torla

Chapter One

Erich woke up tied to a bed.

He knew this chiefly because it was hardly the first time he had been tied to a bed and woken up in that state. The thought stirred an old, bittersweet ache. He let it linger for a moment, a brief distraction, then gently pushed the ache, the memories, back into the recesses of his mind and focused on the problem at hand.

The problem being that his hands were tied. He tested the rough rope binding them, and found they were *well* tied. Probably by the insufferable bastard who had stolen Bright.

Although, if that were true, it begged two questions—why was Erich still alive, and why had they kidnapped him? They had the sword, Goddess take them all, what more could they want? That begged the question, how much did they know?

First thing was first, however. He would not find answers to his questions while he remained tied to the bed. They had not secured his legs—that must be useful to him somehow. It would have to be, for he had nothing else to work with.

Now he was paying attention, he could feel they had not removed the dagger he kept in his boot. Either they had not noticed it when stripping him of his weapons—and the boot was not the only one they had missed, the fools—or they did not think it was worth the bother of removing. Definitely fools.

He hoped they were fools long enough to give him time to escape.

Grimacing, he began to swing his legs up and then down again, bringing them parallel with his torso, folding himself in half—more difficult a trick at thirty-one than it would have been even five years ago. For the first time in his life he was grateful for all the dancing he had once done, and that he kept himself in shape, even if he could be bothered to do little else.

Finally he got his legs far enough over he could wrest the knife from his boot. Letting his legs drop, red-faced and panting a bit, he began to fight with the ropes. Much swearing and half a dozen nicks later, he was free.

Tearing the remaining rope from his wrists, he cast the bits aside and slowly stood, carefully stretching out all his stiff muscles. He examined the nicks on wrists and hands and decided they would be fine without special treatment. He had done worse to himself in the past, Goddess knew. Someone had already bandaged the wound on his arm, and it somehow had not suffered in his attempts to get free.

Next he began to take a closer look at his surroundings. They had stripped him of his cloak and light armor, in addition to his sword and three of his nine daggers. Erich snorted in amusement and quickly retrieved his gear. His hand curled in anger around the pommel of his own sword. Bright, he had to get Bright back—whatever it took. That sword was a holy treasure of Illussor, and he had let the Krians take it! Tits of the Winter Princess!

He was furious with himself. Livid. It was a disgraceful to the Korte lineage, to the name of von Adolwulf, that he had permitted thieves to take the sword of the Holy General. And not just thieves, but Krian soldiers!

Well, no matter. The deed was done. What mattered was that in very short order, he would be undoing it.

So far, the room had been almost too quiet. What sorts of fools were these Krians, to leave him completely unsupervised? That was the work of amateurs, and well they should know it. Well, leave them to suffer the consequences.

He was in an inn of some sort, to judge by the furniture and the muffled noises coming up through the floor. But an inn where? Somewhere in Kria, to judge by the style, the bedding, the smells of the food wafting up to him. How long had he been unconscious? How far into Kria had they come? Hopefully far enough no one would find him to drag him home again kicking and screaming—though, likely, they would knock him out and keep him that way. They had learned before the hard way he did not go home politely until he was ready.

Shaking his head, deciding he had enough time not to race off blindly, Erich took stock. He had no idea where he was, he had no idea where his captors might be—likely in the inn. Unfortunately, he was Illussor through and through. He could not simply go around without attracting notice. He ran a hand through his hair, grimacing. So pale it was nearly white, save when the sun brought out the hints of gold in it. No, he could not go unnoticed through Krian land. He needed to find the sword—find it quickly—and race for the border.

Easier said than done. Well, a problem was not solved solely by thinking about it.

First thing was first—he could not continue to wear his present tunic. Moving to the small table tucked into one corner of the square room, he opened his travel pack and pulled out the one spare he carried with him for precisely this reason—sometimes it was better if no one knew he belonged to the Order of the Scarlet Wolf.

Quickly undoing belts and buckles and lacings, he stripped off the black and scarlet tunic emblazoned with a wolf and moon and pulled on a much plainer tunic of pale blue trimmed in gray. Tucking the scarlet tunic away, he restored his sword belt and cloak, smoothing down the black and gray wolf fur that comprised the hood and top half of the long, heavy winter cloak.

He sneered at himself as he moved to the door, annoyed but resigned. Who was he fooling, after all? He was angry about Bright being stolen and more than happy to take heads—but he was in Kria. The birthplace of his revered ancestor, the Holy General himself. He had wanted all his life to venture into Kria, even if he had never dared voice that wish aloud. Illussor and Kria were not enemies, per se, but neither were they friends. With the war, it became even more impossible to explore the home of his ancestor.

Slowly he pulled the door open, hand ready to draw his sword in an instant—but the sound of a voice abruptly stopped him.

It stopped him mostly because it was coming, not from the hallway, but from the window on the opposite side of the room—and speaking Salharan. What in the world...? Moving soundlessly to the window, he stopped where he knew he would not be noticed, even by way of his shadow, by those standing outside and below his window.

Because now that he was closer he realized it was two voices. One was gruff in the way of someone recovering from a recent illness; the other was smooth and rippling, almost pretty. They both spoke as only natives could. Angling just so, he managed to glimpse two shadows cast by flickering torch light.

You have them both?

Yes, and they will be delivered on time. Tell him to calm down.

You should take him now, before something goes wrong.

That is why you are the lowest ranking. If we take him now, we will have to carry an unwilling man almost forty miles to the border, and then further still to home. If we leave well enough alone, then he will go willingly to within ten miles of the border. From there, it will be easy. Eight days, and the hardest part will be done.

Yes, and that means in nine days Kria will fall.

So get back and tell our esteemed leader to stop fretting. He will get what he wants in nine days.

The voices faded off as the men finished their conversation and went their separate ways.

Erich narrowed his eyes as his mind raced. Both. Two things. To be delivered, obviously to some leader in Salhara. That could mean anything. Could it have anything to do with him and the sword? No—possibly the sword, but what did Salhara care about the sword of the Holy General? They had never seemed to care before.

It could not have to do with him, because the men he had fought had not known who he was until he had informed them, and they had not cared once the information was known. No, he had just happened to overhear some bit of plotting which had nothing to do with him.

Except it was Salhara doing the plotting. Kria and Illussor may not be friends, but they were not enemies either. Salhara was an enemy, even if Illussor worked hard to keep from outright war. Choosing between Salhara and Kria, there was no contest.

So it would seem his plans were going to have to change, at least until he better understood what he had just stumbled into. What was he going to do, though? He had not the slightest idea where to begin to look for traitor Salharans, and he still had to get his sword back. Traitors or no, he would not surrender that sword permanently into anyone's hands—not Krian, not Salharan. It was bad enough they had taken it from him to begin with; he would get it back.

He would have to get the sword, then figure out the rest. Or something. What he really wanted was food, but he supposed *that* would not be forthcoming anytime soon—beyond the bare essentials in his pack, anyway. Heaving a sigh, Erich moved away from the window and back toward the door—

Right as it was thrown open, and the man he had fought before filled the doorway. They stared at each other a moment in surprise, then lunged at the same time. Rather than swords, cumbersome and dangerous in such tight quarters, they drew daggers.

The Krian was fast, almost too fast—Erich found himself shoved into the wall, cursing silently, but the Krian was not so fast that he got away with the move unscathed. When they at last came to a halt, Erich shoved into the wall with the Krian flush against him, it was with a dagger to his throat while he prodded the Krian's gut with a dagger of his own. Draw.

His captor smelled like smoke and snow, a hint of ale and meat. A couple days growth of dark hair gave his face an unkempt, but not entirely unappealing look. He was as dark as any Krian, brown hair and eyes of a shade that made him think of trees in winter. Not precisely handsome—too hard and sharp for that—but striking.

Vaguely familiar, but Erich could not for the life of him think why. He had never seen this man in his life before their first encounter however many nights ago. If they had met before, Erich would remember—the man was certainly no chore to look at, and he was a damned fine swordsman.

"What a clever little Illussor," the Krian said, voice deceptively casual. "Or perhaps cracking your head on the ice managed to knock some intelligence into you."

Erich pressed his own dagger just the slightest bit harder, feeling the way the man's muscles moved with the threat, the way he tensed to avoid fatal damage should Erich actually try to shove it through his gut. "Give me back my sword, Krian, and you will not have to find out what else I can do."

"Pretty as you are, I can guess."

Erich narrowed his eyes at the jibe, but he did not rise to it. Before either one of them could speak, another figure appeared in the doorway. "My lord, how is the pris—"

The voice made Erich freeze and all but forget his precarious position between wall and knife-wielding Krian. That voice was all he could focus on—gruff, like a man recovering from a recent illness. He stared at the man and remembered there had been three of them when he had attempted to take back his sword.

So the Krian with the gruff voice was really Salharan, even though he was currently speaking Krian like a native. That did not really much, though. Erich himself was speaking Krian just as fluently. Language was one of the few things no one had been forced to tie him to a chair to make him learn.

Three men, at least one of them was a traitor. That meant that of the remaining two, one was possibly a traitor...and one was definitely going to be betrayed.

The press of the dagger drew his attention back to his immediate captor, and Erich locked gazes with the dark brown eyes—and knew suddenly, like a blow to the gut, that this was the man being betrayed. He could be wrong, he could be out of his mind. Goddess knew it would not be the first time he'd come up with a crazy, baseless idea.

But his gut was good; instinct was one of the few traits he possessed with which no one could find flaw. This man was going to be betrayed by gruff voice, and possibly the other.

Now the real question became how to handle the odd problem suddenly dropped into his lap. He supposed technically he had nothing to do with it; Kria could deal with its own problems. Except...Kria was neither friend nor enemy, and Salhara was a definite enemy.

And no one deserved to be betrayed by those he called comrades.

Really, though, who was he fooling? He did not want to go home and be useless and in the way. He did not want to go home, period. Maybe he could do something useful being by dragged into Kria and saving this idiot Krian from himself.

Of course, that required a plan. He needed to remain with them, without it being obvious he wanted to remain with them. That was the only way to gain more information, because right now he knew just enough to do more harm than good.

Focusing on the man still pinning him to the wall, Erich asked, "Why do you want my sword, Krian? Surely you have enough of your own?"

The Krian was frowning at him, obviously puzzled by something about Erich.

He strove to be distracting, another of his skills, though that one was seldom lauded. Erich eased off his own dagger the slightest bit, ignoring entirely the traitor whom his captor had signaled to remain where he stood on the far side of the room. "Just give me the sword, my dear, and we can part as friends."

The Krian shook his head. "Then I am afraid we are enemies. Kria needs that sword more than Illussor." He flashed a grin that was all teeth, an amused predator. "However, *dear*, I have decided that we need you to go along with it. So, you will be accompanying your sword for as long as we need it."

Erich grunted. That had been easy. "And what happens when you no longer need it, or me?"

"We'll discuss that when the time comes, hmm?"

"Men will be looking for me," Erich said, because it was true. "They tend not to like it when I vanish for days at a time. Do you want them coming along, as well?"

The man snorted in amused contempt. "They will not travel to the heart of Kria to search for one idiot Duke."

Erich decided *not* to mention that they would, if only because said idiot Duke had once been married to the crown prince of Illussor, and so was kind of, sort of a prince by marriage himself. It would take Reni's men days to find him, though, and that would give him time enough to get his bearings and formulate a proper plan.

"So I'm to be your prisoner?" he asked.

"Correct," the Krian said. "Any problems with that?"

"Several," Erich said drolly, but gave up all tension on his own dagger. "However, I feel you will not listen to my complaints."

"That would be correct."

Erich smirked. "Then I shall simply offer a bit of advice. If you continue to tie me up, I might think you like me. Stop doing it."

The man stared at him, so startled it showed plainly on his face—then he burst out laughing and withdrew his own dagger, tucking it away somewhere in the folds of his massive winter cloak. "What was your name, Illussor? I caught only the Duke bit, what with one thing and another."

"Erich von Adolwulf."

"So you really are descended from the so-called Holy General? We typically call him the Betrayer, you know."

"I know," Erich replied. "Who are you, Krian?"

The man sketched him a short, mocking bow. "I am Ingolf von Dirchs."

So he was a noble of some sort—and clearly a noble of great importance, if his capture and death would cause the fall of Kria...

The thoughts churned in Erich's head. Nobility did not have that much power. The country would not rise or fall because of the death of one mere noble.

But a country could be made or destroyed because of a single royal.

Erich suddenly wondered if he was staring at a Krian prince. Of course, that did not entirely make sense. He had met the royal family once, during a very cautious, very tense meeting in which all parties had agreed to politely ignore the other unless violence reached an intolerable level—and they had carefully left the definition of intolerable vaguely defined.

The royal family of Kria consisted of the Kaiser, the Kaiserin, and their four children—two sons, two daughters. They none of them had looked like Ingolf, even if it had been ten years ago. Anyway, he had not heard that the royal family had fallen. Even Salhara would have a hard time keeping that quiet for very long, and if the royal family *had* fallen, then what was keeping Salhara from taking over?

Nine days, they had said. That meant someone or something was keeping the Salharans from staking a claim on Kria. Someone or something, and they were bringing along someone—Ingolf, he would stake his life—to the border, there to take him across the border, ostensibly to kill or imprison him.

So he must be someone important, someone of royal blood. Which meant he must be a bastard, or married to one of the royal family like Erich and declared a suitable heir should it become necessary.

Erich looked Ingolf up and down, and decided that he must be a bastard. He could be an in-law, even if he did not wear a marriage ring, but Erich's gut said he was a bastard.

Of course, he could be completely out of his mind and making up tales... but Erich did not think so.

Ingolf spoke, breaking into his thoughts. "So if tying you up will not work, how does one keep you prisoner?"

Erich grinned. "No one has been able to figure that out, to date. If you find a method, there are many in Illussor who would reward you handsomely for the secret."

It was true. His favorite activity growing up had been to get away from whomever was making him stay in a place he did not want to be—which was almost everywhere, just to be contrary. So they had taken to locking him up, tying him, anything they could think of to make Erich hold still long enough to acquire some knowledge, to master some lesson. He had never remained trapped longer than two days. The only one he had ever *allowed* to tie him up had been Hahn. "Rather than take me prisoner, why not convince me to stay?"

Ingolf's expression turned hard, distrustful. "What reason would an Illussor Duke have for helping a Krian who stole a national treasure?"

"We are not enemies, and I want the sword back—and even a Krian is better than a Salharan. The von Adolwulf family has ties to Kria, as well, though I am sure Kria prefers to deny it. I am not opposed to helping you, but you will have to tell me exactly what it is you are doing."

Ingolf cut the air with one hand in negation. "I do not have to tell you anything, your grace. I am willing to take you up on your offer of cooperation, if only because I do not want to keep losing money on rope." He nodded to the cut remains that had bound Erich to the bed. "However, only a fool would trust a man who is two steps from being an enemy. We need the sword to combat the Salharans. As it is your sword, you quite possibly offer additional information about it. If you cooperate, we will treat you accordingly. If you do not, we will treat you accordingly. That is all you need to know for now."

"For the moment, I would gladly cooperate for a meal," Erich replied. "We will smooth out the rest as we go, hmm?"

The words drew a laugh from Ingolf. It was a nice laugh. That he noticed it shook Erich to the core. To notice a man was good looking was one thing—to notice his laugh was quite another. He had not noticed another man's laugh in five years.

It was only then that he realized that, since coming on this adventure, he had started to feel more like his old self. He fisted his hands to still their trembling. In the back of his mind, he heard a more familiar laugh, warm and reassuring, smoothing out the knots and worries clouding his head. It was an old sound, that warm laughter, one that had drawn him in a thousand times or more, once.

Of course Hahn would find this all amusing.

Ingolf gave him a last cautious look, once more breaking Erich's thoughts, then motioned for Erich to walk between him and his man as they left the room and ventured downstairs to the dining hall.

Erich idly stroked his thumb over the plain gold and silver band he wore on the second finger of his left hand. The widow's finger.

Yes, Hahn would have been amused by the entire situation.

Downstairs, he let the smells of meat and ale consume his thoughts. His stomach rumbled with the smells. He focused on the food, ignoring the brief, sudden silence that sprang up as the Krians noticed a full-blooded Illussor in their midst.

Thank the Goddess he had changed out of his scarlet tunic. The very last thing he needed on top of being ghost-white by comparison was to wear the colors of the army and general declared forbidden ever since the Betrayer turned on Kria to join Illussor after murdering Kaiser Benno.

Kria obviously did not know their own history.

"Why are you smirking, Illussor?" Ingolf asked, no real heat in the words.

"I was just thinking it is a good thing I changed my clothes."

Ingolf frowned at him, as the other man vanished to fetch their food, and settled down next to Erich at a small table off to one side of the large room. "Yes, you were wearing the Betrayer's color, the color of the Autumn Prince. It is forbidden; you would have caused a great deal of trouble."

Erich snorted. "The Holy General's colors, yes. I belong to the Order of the Scarlet Wolf, not that it would mean anything to you. I guess it is what the Scarlet Army was back in those days." He reached beneath the layers of his clothes and drew out a braided gold chain from which hung a pendant—a sunburst made of gold, overlaid by a crescent moon made of silver. "I also belong to the Order of Light."

Ingolf narrowed his eyes. "It is true, then, that the Betrayer ran away to Illussor with a Salharan whore."

"He was not a whore," Erich replied coldly, shoving the pendant back beneath his clothes. "He saved our country. He was the Breaker and the Holy General's bonded. Do not besmirch his name in my presence again. To do so is to insult me."

"Whatever," Ingolf said, dismissing the matter as their food arrived—along with the third man.

Erich studied them surreptitiously.

The gruff-voiced traitor was a handsome fellow, if rather slender for a Krian. He was also remarkably fair, both of which made sense if he was actually Salharan—and come to that, the eyes were slightly off, the cheekbones a bit too soft for full Krian blood. He was at least a quarter Salharan, not more than half, which meant he must have grown up right on the border. Erich doubted he would have noticed the Salharan blood if he had not known to look for it.

He shifted his attention to the second man, who was definitely all Krian—but a traitor, or ignorant, or the true target? Erich had no way of knowing, not at the moment. The man was dark, skin weathered

from sun and snow and battle, not handsome, but not plain either. Respectable, Erich decided. Easy to look at, easy to forget, if that was what the man wanted.

Ingolf motioned, introducing the two men. "Pancraz," he said, pointing to the gruff-voiced man. "Sepp," he said, pointing to the other. "These are my friends and my comrades in arms. Gentlemen, this is his grace Erich von Adolwulf, Duke of Korte, and he has agreed to accompany us."

"Right," Pancraz said, clearly contemptuous. "A Krian Duke just agrees to go along with the men what stole his sword. Have you gone soft in the head, Ingolf?"

"No," Ingolf replied, eyes taking on a hard glint. "I believe him sincere, and I am taking responsibility."

Privately, Erich agreed with Pancraz's unspoken but plain-upon-the-face opinion that Ingolf was trusting too easily. However, that worked for him, and he would see to Pancraz as soon as it was possible.

He was *not* going to think about why he was finding this matter increasingly important, or reminding himself how stupid this was—he had responsibilities, whether he wanted them or not, even if he was unsuited for them.

But, it was too late now. Anyway, he was doing his part for his country by seeing to it Kria did not fall to Salhara.

Sepp seemed amused. "He'll certainly make the going interesting, pale as he is. We had best keep him out of sunlight and moonlight, else he'll glow and be visible at five hundred paces."

"Indeed," Ingolf said, snorting in amusement. "How do you lot avoid blinding one another with your paleness, Illussor?"

Erich rolled his eyes, and ignored them all in favor of filling his stomach. "So where are we going, or am I not allowed to know?"

"You are not allowed to know," Ingolf replied, almost sounding cheerful.

"You said you thought me sincere."

"That does not mean I trust you with vital information. You will know only what you must, and I decide what precisely you must know. Sincere does not mean you will not take the first opportunity presented you."

Though Erich had no intention of going anywhere until he knew Kria would be as safe as he could make it, it would not do to give voice to that thought. "That could certainly be true, I suppose. But I'm not leaving without my sword."

Ingolf shook his head and drank his ale.

"How do you come to know Krian so well?" Pancraz asked. "You speak nearly as well as any native."

"It was one of my many lessons," Erich replied and added, "and I like learning languages. I am fluent in Krian, Salharan, and Welestran, though let me tell you that was damned hard to learn."

Ingolf replied dryly, "I would imagine there might be some difficulty in learning the language of the pirates."

"Not really," Erich said with a grin. "Those we manage to arrest, with lesser offenses, I offer a pardon on the condition they first study with me for a set period of months, and in that time they also perform some manner of labor. The hard part is just learning all of the language; criminals of that nature are not given to an extensive vocabulary, and the higher ranking criminals are not fit for pardons, or even conversation."

Muttering something Erich could not quite catch, Ingolf returned to his food. The group subsided into silence, then, focused only their food and ale, until there was scarcely a bone left as they shoved back empty plates.

"We are moving on tonight," Ingolf said as they sipped their ale. "The snow will not stay gone long, and I want to reach out next destination before it resumes falling and traps us somewhere. You two, go pack up and ready the horses."

"Aye, boss," the men chorused, promptly standing and departing.

Definitely a figure used to authority. Erich was growing more and more certain that he was right in his baseless suppositions.

If he was correct, then why not simply kill Ingolf outright and end the royal line once and for all? The obvious answer was that Ingolf had or knew something that the Salharans needed.

This little problem was proving to be quite the mystery.

Erich was surprised he was looking forward to solving it. Despite himself, he had begun to well and truly leave behind the despondency in which he had lived so long. Oh, he had not been as bad as that first year, or even the second, since Hahn's death. But even he knew he was nothing but a shadow of himself, even five years later.

Now, for the first time in a long time, he felt like himself again. All because a bunch of idiot Krians had stolen his sword, and dragged him into a matter of terrible intrigue. He wondered what, precisely, had triggered the change, and added it to his growing list of questions in serious need of answers.

Chapter Two

Aden grimaced, but did not turn away as the Cobalt General's just-severed head was driven onto a pike in the middle of the courtyard, alongside the rotting heads of the Krian royal family. All of them, from the Kaiser to his wife, and all their children. There were also the bodies of several supporters, strung up to die slow deaths in cages above the rotting heads.

Even by Krian standards, it was barbaric.

The royal heads were at least a week old. The bodies swaying above them were older still; it took a strong man several days to die that way. One of them had just been put up that morning, the son of the dead Cobalt General. The unfortunate son was crying, and still wore the bold blue tunic of his father's army.

Unable to bear the sight, or the fact there was nothing he could do about it, Aden turned away from the grisly sight that had turned the central pavilion into an executioner's playground and made his way back into the city proper.

So the royal line of Kria was dead and its supporters were rapidly falling. Very little remained now of the once proud nation of Kria. Salhara ached to take it over once and for all, the finest of feathers in its cap—but Kria had taken five of its precious Brotherhood down in the earliest days of the bitter war, and Salhara's power was not all that it should be.

Nor could they completely defeat Kria, not while too many knew that a claimant to the throne remained alive—not to mention the two missing Generals, who continued to fight from locations unknown. Cobalt had been captured and executed, but Saffron and Verdant remained.

He wondered if Kria missed having four Generals, and if that fourth might have made a difference. Likely not; the Scarlet had been tainted ever since that long ago betrayal by the Holy General.

Aden needed to find a way out of the city and report what he had learned to the Queen. At the very least, he needed to get a message out. All his avenues of escape and communication were cut off, however. Those of his contacts who had not fled at the start of the mess were now too terrified to do anything.

Damn the Salharans anyway. It was times like this Aden really wondered if his ancestors knew what they had been doing when they rid Illussor of magic.

He needed to get home. His information could not wait. If Salhara took Kria then they would not wait long before going after Illussor. And Illussor would be all too easy to take with a sickly Queen and her only heir a despondent prince-by-marriage who avoid the responsibilities of the throne at all costs.

Stifling a sigh, he threaded his way through a pack of youths looking too grim for their age and into his favorite tavern. He was heartily sick of Krian food, but enjoyed the beer and atmosphere—or had enjoyed the atmosphere, before it was drowned in anger and depression and fear.

Once, the Krians had been the mightiest, fiercest nation in the world. Now, they were scared of their own shadows, while the drug-addicted Salharans slaughtered their leaders in a desperate search for the last remaining heir to the throne and two generals who refused to give up.

He went to the bar to order his food, then carried it to the back of the tavern, tucking himself into a corner that had easy access to the kitchens if an escape was needed, while affording him a position where he could watch everyone without anyone being able to watch him unnoticed.

Not that anyone had any reason to watch him, but neither was it the time to grow overconfident and careless. He had not gotten where he was by being reckless.

There was little worth watching, this night. Disconsolate men who obviously had been soldiers and were trying not to be to avoid being found by the Salharan army. Krian soldiers were either forced into new service, or executed on the spot. The Winter Palace and its surrounding city was no place to be right now, least of all for a soldier.

Aden picked at his food, forcing himself to take a bite here and there. Whatever plan he came up with, he would need his strength. Even if that strength came from sausages and sour cabbage and a dozen other foods of which he was heartily growing sick. He could not wait to return to Illussor and gorge himself on real food.

Though, he would miss the beer. No one made beer like the Krians. It alone was almost a good enough reason to save them from Salhara.

Of course, he would not be able to assist in that saving if he could not get himself or a message through to Illussor. Damn it!

He ate another bit of sausage, hiding a grimace, and pondered his options. He had tried almost everything, so he supposed it was time to resort to those methods he considered his last resort. Whoring might work, if he could find the right soldiers to turn his tricks. Did he have what he needed for that? Aden drummed his fingers on the table as he thought and signaled a bar maid for another beer.

Well, what he did not have, he could acquire. A night or two of that might turn him up some new avenues to pursue. Men said anything after a good fuck, and Aden could do that as well as he could everything else.

It would be well worth fucking even the most unpleasant soldier if it led him home, to report to his Queen before running off to his own home, an ancient but still sturdy Fortress overlooking the sea. He could sit on the terrace and watch the waves while his cook served him every delectable dish Aden could coax him into making.

He was so engrossed in daydreams of home and food, he nearly missed the conversation happening one table over. People were never as quiet as they liked to think, and his ears were trained to pick up even the most innocuous of words—even when he was dreaming of spicy fowl and cream sauce.

Murmuring thanks for the fresh beer, he kept his casual, disinterested ear and drank in every word the idiots said.

They were talking about the man just hung up in a cage less than an hour ago—the Cobalt Generals' son. They wanted to break him out, and move him from the city.

Aden latched on to those words—if they were going to get him out of the city, obviously they had a way out.

But they couldn't figure out a way to free the man; apparently the plan to get to him before the cage had gone awry.

Well. Aden knew an invitation when he heard one.

Picking up his beer, he moved to the group of men and dropped down in the empty seat beside the nearest—and pressed a dagger to the man's gut. They all three stilled, the one with the dagger pressed against him going pale. But they did not fight, odd for Krians, and it said more loudly than anything just how far they had fallen.

"Friends," Aden said. "I would like to have a *friendly* discussion. I'm thinking we can help each other out."

They just glared at him.

Aden smiled pleasantly, and took a sip of his ale. Then he spoke, far more softly than these men had managed—in Illussor. "*Come now, you have nothing to fear from me. The dagger is formality, I promise.*"

Two of them looked at him with annoyed scowls—they recognized the language, but obviously not the words. The third one, sitting next to him, however, gave a snort of surprise. "One of the pale ones," he said. "What in the name of the Spring Prince are you doing here?"

"Trying to get out," Aden replied, slipping back into Krian. "I cannot. You seem to have a way. I will put it to you plainly. If I can free your friend, you will take me out of the city with you. How does that sound?" He put his dagger away, to show he had faith in their intelligence.

The man directly across from him only glared. "Why should we trust you? You are Illussor, but obviously pretend to be Krian. How do I know you have not sided with Salhara? You could be a spy. We are not that foolish."

"I could be a spy," Aden said with an easy smile. "However, I am only a humble wanderer eager to get home, trapped because I stayed a day too long in your fine city. I want to go home. You want him free. I do not see the problem with this bargain."

"How do you intend to get him free?"

"The less said, the safer," Aden replied. Then he gave a long sigh. "I see you do not believe me. Very well, I shall prove it to you. If you want to see me free him, then watch tonight just after the stroke of midnight. I suggest you find a safe place from which to watch. I can save one man; I cannot save four." He smirked.

The men exchanged looks, obviously unhappy, but every man at the table knew they had no choice.

"Very well," the man across from him, who seemed to be in charge, spoke at last. "If you mean it, then free him and meet us at the watch tower on the east side of town. One of us will be watching, and if you do anything suspicious, you will be leaving this city, but not in the manner of your choosing."

Aden acknowledged the point with a gracious nod. "Good sirs." He tossed back the last of his beer, set the empty tankard down with a thunk, threw down a handful of coins, and left the tavern before they could think better of it.

Outside, he called himself an idiot in every dialect he knew.

How in the name of the Goddess was he supposed to save a man from a birdcage in the middle of the central pavilion when it was crawling with guards watching over the corpses and heads to prevent the very thing he was going to attempt?

He prided himself on not being reckless, but every now and again he proved himself a self-deluded fool.

Well, what was done was done. He had struck a bargain, and he would uphold his end. That in mind, he retraced his earlier steps and made his way back to the pavilion. The crowds had largely died down by that point; those who had born witness to the grisly executions had gone on their way. Only the guards, some stragglers, and a handful of pickpockets and other desperate figures loitered.

Aden pulled his cloak more securely around his shoulders, pulling up the fabric of the high collar to cover most of his face, adjusting his posture to give the appearance of one of the morbidly fascinated gawkers who flocked to such spectacles like flies.

He eyed the son of the late Cobalt General, rifling through his memories to turn up a name, wondering if he even knew it.

A moment later, however, it came to him. Reinoehl von Hostetler. The General's only child, if he recalled correctly, which he always did. Aden examined him as thoroughly as he could without rousing suspicion. Under normal circumstances, he was likely a handsome and striking man. At the moment, he simply looked battered, exhausted, and miserable. Brown hair, touched enough by the sun there was almost some true blond in it, visible even through Goddess knew how many days of grime and lack of bathing. His clothes were just as ragged, torn and bloody and barely fit for keeping him from freezing to death—about the only concession the Salharans made, because freezing to death was too easy.

He continued to stare, this time taking stock of the birdcage—what most called the atrocious devices. It was barely big enough to hold a man, the bars so close together that little more than a finger could get through. The victim could move just enough to be tantalized by the thought of real movement. But he could not sit, could not even really slouch. There was no comfort, just constant agony until the poor bastard finally died, one way or another.

Aden looked again at the man within the cage—and drew up short as he found eyes meeting his. They were, shockingly, cobalt blue. What were the odds of that? Krians with blue eyes were a rare thing, and he had never seen a Krian with eyes that vibrant. Even the Salharans, with their glowing eyes, did not have that much force behind them. Aden felt like he'd been kicked in the gut by a horse.

Dark, chapped and bloody lips turned down in a frown as the man stared at him.

Then nearby noise drew Aden's attention, and he turned just in time to get cuffed by a guard, who then gave him a kick in the ass and sent him off with a flurry of curses. Aden did not argue the point, not wanting to draw further attention.

He resisted an urge to look back, to see if those eyes still watched him. Shaking his head, unsettled by the eyes and his reaction to them, he abandoned the main street and wove his way through various smaller streets, until he at last reached the tiny hovel of a room he had rented because it was all a proper wanderer—as he purported to be—could afford.

In his room, he locked the door and then pulled out the large satchel with which he always travelled—large enough to prove he was a dedicated wanderer without being so large as to rouse suspicions. And it could carry everything he needed, most of the time.

Tossing aside various costumes, a couple small sacks of various currencies, other miscellany, Aden finally drew out the case he wanted. It was small, of a size to hold jewelry or other such things, made of ebony and seemingly without lock or hinges.

But he knew how to open it, pressing and sliding with familiar ease.

Inside, nestled in their pockets of black velvet, were two dozen small crystal vials. Some held pale liquids, others dark. Seven of the vials, lined up neatly in a row, formed a perfect rainbow of colors. Of all his poisons, of the two dozen here and the many more at home, his collection of arcen was easily the most valuable—and the hardest to obtain. He had a scar on his back as testament to that little adventure.

Not that he ever had much cause to use them, thankfully. He just liked having the arcen in his collection. The greatest drug and poison in the world, and only Salhara itself knew how to turn the arcen flowers into the elixir that gave a nation unmatched magical prowess.

Sliding his fingers fondly over the vials of arcen, he then dismissed it and focused on what he actually needed, and selected a vial full of a liquid so dark a blue it was nearly black. Perfect.

Poison was a tricky thing, a very delicate art. Too much, too little could alter the affects and it varied greatly from person to person, use to use. Still, if one mastered it, the effects of certain poisons could be controlled and predicted.

He held the vial up to the weak light of his feeble lantern, watching the dark liquid within glimmer. This one had cost him nearly as dearly as the arcen, acquired from a handful of pirates who had not been inclined to hand the poison over willingly or easily.

It was purportedly made from the ink of some vile sea creature. Aden had seen it once, or at least, he had been told that it was the rumored creature. He had not been impressed.

The poison, however, did impress him. Depending on the dosage, it could do anything from inducing a state of seeming drunkenness to causing the victim to fall dead asleep. For his purposes, somewhere

right between the disorientation and the fast asleep would be ideal. Soldiers in a severe state of intoxication would not have the wherewithal to take offense to his breaking a prisoner loose.

Aden had told them he would do it shortly after midnight, which was of course the perfect time—the guard was lightest then, and they were all bored and eager for their beds or a tavern. A desperate whore eager for any bit of coin would not warrant more notice than a quick way to pass a bit of time, and it would be simple to poison them without harming himself in the process.

The scheme was almost too simple, and more than a little mad—but it might just work. All he needed were a few minutes to drag himself up the cage, pick or break the lock, and get von Hostetler out of there. Whatever happened after that, he would have to figure out as he went.

Nodding, decided, he stowed his box of poisons, left the vial on the table, and began to strip. The clothes he wore at present would not do for a whore.

Unfortunately, playing the whore meant freezing to death. At least he usually had an easy time of it obtaining customers, by way of his rather interesting heritage. One of his ancestors had been a Krian soldier who defected to Illussor to join the Holy General. It gave him a lineage that made him blend in perfectly in either country—and made him slender, dark, and almost pretty. Combined with a host of other skills... well, there were reasons he had once managed to work two months in a high class brothel while gathering dirt on a particular politician.

Cheap, thin clothes advertised his wares, and a bottle of rotgut he always kept to hand for such purposes added a nice touch of drunken desperation splashed on his clothes and skin. Then he pulled out a small jar filled with a pale, thick cream. This he used to coat his hands. Until he scrubbed it off with a special soap, liquids would slid across his skin like water on glass. This meant he could touch and administer the poison without it affecting him. Another pirate trick.

He stared longingly at his bed, but if he was going to do this, then he needed to set the act now. The best way to look tired, desperate, cheap, and easy, was to render himself as close to that state naturally as possible.

It would also give him more time to analyze the pavilion, makes note of the guards, and see just how hard it would really be to scale the scaffold to get at the cage itself.

Hopefully he would be able to do all that without too many people actually propositioning him. He might be a good whore when the occasion called for it, but that did not mean he enjoyed it.

Slipping outside, he went in the direction opposite the way by which he had first returned to the room. Looping around the outer streets, he swiftly made his way to the poorer districts of the city, pausing at the edge. Removing his hat, he stuffed it into a pocket of his threadbare cloak and raked out his shoulder-length dark blonde hair.

It did not take long for people to start eyeing him; some speculatively, others with open hostility as they saw a newcomer in their territory. Most simply ignored him, desperate to avoid one more bit of evidence of all that was wrong.

The next few hours were not pleasant, but by the time the late hours came around, his goal had been achieved—no one was giving him a second glance, except insofar as to gauge whether or not he was affordable.

Pretending a certain level of drunkenness as the bells began to toll the midnight hour, he teetered and tottered his way to the central pavilion. He reeked of sweat, sex, smoke, and rotgut, and he did not have to pretend the weariness even a bit. Pausing at the edge of an alleyway, he opened the vial of poison and let a few small drops fall into one specially treated hand. Then he tucked the vial away, and rubbed his hands together, spreading the poison across both of them.

Balling his hands into loose fists, he stumbled his drunken way in the general direction of the four soldiers stationed around the grisly center of the pavilion.

"Ho, gentlemen," he called with drunken cheer. "Amazed you've not frozen to death in this cold. I hear told Salharans lose bits to the frost every year."

One man laughed in unpleasant fashion, as the other three snorted and immediately dismissed one stupid, drunken whore. "Not as many bits are you're going to lose, you don't put some clothes on."

"Then there'd be too many to take off," Aden replied, smirking, tossing his head so his hair fell just so, and he could see two pairs of eyes already more drawn to him than their duty. He scanned the surroundings, ensuring no other guards were tucked away somewhere, watching the guards on the distant castle walls as well.

It was a bitterly cold night, however. Even the Krians preferred to bury themselves indoors on such a night. The only guards on duty tonight were those who could not get away with slacking off, such as these fours. The guards on the walls were inside their towers, and they had ducked out of them only to give an obligatory look around when the bells had struck the midnight hour.

He would have to act quickly from here. One of the two men seemed definitely interested in a distraction. Moving closer, letting his clothes fall open the slightest bit despite the frigid air—

He nearly laughed as another grabbed his arm. This would be too easy.

"Go get your coin elsewhere," said a soldier in crude Krian, not quite willing to let his fellows screw around that much while they stood watch. Aden covered the man's hand with his own, just barely getting a finger on a smidgen of bare skin between sleeve and glove.

"I'll go, I'll go," Aden said to appease him and pulled free. He reached out as he passed the interested man to playfully touch his cheek, spreading more of the poison. "Come and find me when you're off duty, handsome."

The remaining two men chuckled, while the first looked on in disgust.

Aden turned playfully away from the man still eyeing him with interest and moved toward the remaining two. He poked one in the chest, smiling teasingly, reaching up to tweak his nose when the man only rolled his eyes.

The man gently pushed him away—but straight into the other one, who settled a hand lightly on Aden's hip. His breath stank of the rank liquor Salharans favored, as well as a bitter trace of their precious arcen—green, to judge by the faint glow in the man's eyes, just visible in the moonlight.

Laughing, Aden twisted away and patted his cheek the same as he had the second man. "You should all come and find me, I'm very talented."

"Not that...talent..."

Aden held his breath as the words faded off, then looked at each man in turn. They all stood as though asleep on their feet, eyes vacant in the weak available light. It had worked. In an hour or so, they would stir, recalling little or nothing of being all but dead on their feet. They may not even remember him clearly, if he were lucky.

Wasting no more time, Aden knelt and plunged his hands into a pile of dirty snow, using it to scrub the remaining poison from his hands. Then he pulled out a cloth at his belt, brought for this very reason, and used it to wipe his hands and ensure no trace of the poison remained.

Then he moved to the nearest main beam of the scaffolding holding the cages, climbing swiftly, and moving along the top beam until he reached the proper cage. Swinging off the beam, he climbed down the cage until he was hanging precariously over the pavilion, with only his hold on the ice-cold metal to keep him from falling to the stones below.

He reached into his boot and extracted a lock pick—but it proved to be the wrong size, and so he slipped it back into place and pulled another. When he glanced up again, he saw the noise had stirred the prisoner he was attempting to free.

Aden put the pick in his mouth, and pressed a finger to his lips.

The man—Reinoehl—frowned, but said nothing.

It took only seconds to spring the lock, and Aden let himself slip further down along the side of the cage, until his hands were all that bore his weight, and his feet dangled over the stones—but it was close enough to drop, and so he did. Once landed and out of the way, he motioned to Reinoehl.

A moment later, Reinoehl dropped down neatly beside him.

Not giving him a chance to ask the questions plain upon his shadowy face, Aden motioned for him to follow and made his way swiftly from the pavilion, weaving his way through the city to the appointed meeting place.

"Here you are," he murmured as he saw the three men from before step from the shadows. "As promised."

A hand grabbed his upper arm, yanking him around, and beneath the wavering light of a torch, Aden found himself the captive of jewel-bright eyes. "Who in the name of the gods are you?" Reinoehl demanded. "What have you to do with this?" He glanced over Aden's shoulder to glare at his men. "Tits of the Winter Princess, what have you lot done, and what is going on here?"

"We could not break you free," one of the men said. "Our avenues were all cut off..." The man's mouth quirked. "And, we obviously do not have his considerable assets and resources." Aden did not turn to look, but he could feel more than one set of eyes crawling up and down his body. He really disliked having to play a whore. "He's definitely not what he says, or anything which he pretends to be—but he got your free, as he said he would, Lord General."

Reinoehl grimaced and shifted his full attention back to Aden. "Who and what are you?"

"Nothing but a helpful neighbor, eager to return home," Aden answered in Illussor. *"They needed you, I need a way out of the city. We reached an accord."*

Eyes narrowed and the grip on his arm tightened to the point of pain. *"You will tell me your true reason for being here, or I will kill you,"* Reinoehl said in perfect, if somewhat stiff, Illussor.

Aden glared back. *"Killing me might not be as easy as you think, General. I saved you. All I want is to get home, that I might tell those who need to know what has happened here. There is no love lost between our countries, but we share a mutual dislike."*

Reinoehl sneered. *"Illussor has never troubled to dirty its hands before, why bother now?"*

"I saved you," Aden said again, voice even, but full of steel. *"The least you can do is uphold the bargain struck. All I want is out of this city, Krian. Without me, you would still be in a birdcage, watching as your father's head slowly rotted."*

The backhand caught him by surprise, and he was shaken by that—no one took him by surprise. Not like this. Aden wiped blood from his lip with the back of one hand.

"Do not speak so crassly of such things, you pale-skinned coward," Reinoehl said coldly. "I acknowledge you freed me, and I honor promises made on my behalf. So be it; you will leave the city with us."

"I need to collect my things," Aden said, slowly lowering his hand, the right side of his face throbbing. "It will only take a few minutes."

"Fine," Reinoehl said curtly. "We will accompany you, however."

"Fine," Aden said, mimicking him. He turned away, then turned sharply around again, forcing Reinoehl to take a surprised step back to avoid crashing into him. He held a dagger to Reinoehl's throat. "If you ever strike me again, Krian, I will kill you myself. Learn a bit of gratitude." Then he tucked the dagger away as quickly as he had drawn it and stalked from the square, shadowed by four loudly silent Krians.

Back at his room, he swiftly climbed the stairs, ignoring it when Reinoehl ordered his men to remain on the street to keep watch.

Inside, still ignoring Reinoehl, Aden packed up his belongings. He should not be so angry; he had received less for doing more in his life. The life of a spy was essentially one of never receiving proper credit and appreciation for what he did; the very nature of his job required that precious few knew he did anything at all.

Still, Reinoehl's attitude rankled. He easily could have gotten himself killed rescuing the bastard—and he had known full well that they could have simply tried to kill him and renege on their promise. Betrayal was a way of life in times of war. Aden had taken a great risk.

Only to be threatened and backhanded and treated like... a common, dirty spy, he supposed, grimacing. Still, a simple 'thank you' would not have hurt anyone.

Belongings packed, save for a couple of last minute things, Aden stripped out of his whore clothes and quickly pulled on more suitable attire—heavy clothes meant for hard travel and harsh weather, saving for last a fur-lined cloak with a deep hood that would beat off the worst of the snow that would resume falling before too long.

Shoving his discarded clothes into his bag, he buckled it up and swung it onto his shoulders. He used a bit of leather to tie his hair back, then pulled up his hood and motioned to Reinoehl he was finished and stalked to the door.

A hand caught his wrist, and Aden immediately jerked free, glaring at Reinoehl from the depths of his hood.

Undaunted, Reinoehl grabbed his wrist again and used his free hand to shoved back the deep hood.

Then he dropped his hand enough that he could brush a thumb across Aden's split lip—the one Reinoehl himself had damaged when he'd struck Aden. "I'm sorry," he said quietly, hand sliding away after a moment. "I thank you for saving my life."

Aden nodded stiffly and pulled his hood back up. "So long as you hold up your end of the bargain, you are welcome." He led the way from the room before Reinoehl could say anything further.

Chapter Three

Remarkably, they reached his cabin in the woods a few miles beyond the Coliseum without incident. Reinoehl had been tense the whole of the trip, running on nothing more than fear and desperation as they fled into the night.

With a strange Illussor spy by their side.

He eyed his men, but Bruno, Ebbe, and Henrik were all as silent and tense as he—probably more so, for it had fallen to them to figure out how to get him free and out of the city.

Spring Prince, he hoped they were able to make it to his fortress with as much ease. First, however, he wanted to eat and sleep. The damned birdcage... his father... Reinoehl closed his eyes as grief and shame and rage washed over him again. He had done all he possibly could, but his best had not been enough. That his father had forgiven him all and begrudged him nothing before they were torn apart did nothing to soothe his agony.

The Cobalt General was his father; Reinoehl should still be his second, gods damn them all. He did not want his father's mantle, not yet. He had no choice however; his father was dead—all of his family was dead, and he could only be grateful that his father's one boon—that they killed his wife honorably—had been granted.

He freed one hand from the reins of his horse to touch the hilt of his sword. Someway, somehow, his men had managed to retrieve his sword. Silver and gold wire wrapped around the hilt in an intricate braid with a brilliant sapphire set in the pommel. The twin of his father's sword, save for the words etched into the blade itself. His father's sword had born the timeless vow: *For Crown. For Country. For Sword.* Reinoehl's sword bore part of an old prayer of the Winter Princess: *All things must rest.*

Those who did not know the old, familiar prayer, took it for cockiness, arrogance, or a borderline cruel, taunting line—if they had time to read it at all. But the full prayer, which every Krian knew, said: *All things must rest, that all things might heal and renew/ Take me, Fair Princess, into the shelter of your cold embrace/That I might cool my heated body, heal my weary soul, and restore my peace of mind.*

For the Winter was the time of rest and mourning, and the Cobalt army bore the snowflakes of the Winter Princess, and they would always love that season best.

Though, he enjoyed it more when he was properly attired. Hopefully, he would be again very soon.

Reaching the cabin, he half slid, half fell from his horse, as the last of his spent strength finally gave out. Though his pride chafed, common sense forced him to allow his men to assist him into the cabin. The strange Illussor took over the horses, tending to them with the familiarity of one who knew a healthy horse could be the difference between life and death.

Inside, his men quickly set to work lighting a fire and preparing hot water for him. Reinoehl could have wept, and might have kissed them in gratitude, if he had possessed strength enough to do either. As it was, he could only stumble to his feet and strip off his clothes, eagerly accepting the soap and razor and cleaning cloths as he hastily but thoroughly washed himself beside the fire.

He had just begun to dress again, in clean and proper clothes, when the Illussor slipped back inside. Reinoehl studied him surreptitiously as he dressed. The Illussor was definitely strange—he had Krian blood, but that was not terribly strange, really. Thousands of Krians had defected to Illussor in the time of the Betrayer. These days, especially along the borders, it would be nigh on impossible to determine a man's origins.

However, even with the Krian blood there was something Illussor about him—when he had switched to speaking Illussor, Reinoehl had not been surprised in the slightest. Perhaps it was a certain... delicateness, or something very like that, which marked an Illussor. Salharans had a sort of shiftiness to them he could mark at a thousand paces; no doubt it came from a lifetime of depending upon drugs for things no man really needed. Their need for magic was pathetic, and only such underhanded methods had permitted them to get this far—that, and too many betrayals and that damned plague five years ago which had killed far too many people in Kria.

If it had affected the Salharans at all, they gave no sign of it, but then again, they were used to having polluted bodies.

The Illussor turned toward him, and Reinoehl resisted an urge to jerk his gaze away as though he were guilty of something, which he most certainly was not. The man was a spy, not to be trusted, had said those things about his father, and... well, this was a war. Why would a mixed-blood spy be willing to be so helpful for no good reason?

"What is your name, Illussor?"

"Aden," the man said.

Reinoehl frowned. "That is not your full name."

"My full name is none of your business," Aden snapped.

"What, are you part Salharan as well? That would explain the murkiness of your motives and the ease with which you deceive."

"You know nothing about me, Krian," Aden hissed, hand twitching with an obvious urge to pull out that dagger of his again. "My name is none of your business. Come morning, we'll not see each other again."

Reinoehl was surprised how badly he wanted to believe the man, but he was obviously a spy; deceiving came naturally to his blood.

What reason did he have to believe that the man would not run to reveal the information concerning the missing Reinoehl to the first Krian he saw now he was free of the city as he had wanted? Nothing, save his own odd desire to believe, which was no reason at all.

He turned away from Aden to finish dressing, smoothing down the pale gray leggings and ankle-length under tunic, over which he now pulled a dark blue tunic, embroidered along the cuffs and ends with snowflakes. Three large, intricate snowflakes spanned his breast, woven from white and silver thread. His boots were high, made of polished black leather, and over all he settled a blue cloak trimmed and lined in steel-gray fur.

His hair was mercifully clean, though it needed a trim that would have to wait. Brown, with blue eyes, the spitting image of his father, and every other man of von Hostetler blood, proud holders of the position of Cobalt General since the previous family to hold it had been murdered by the Salharan assassin whose who had worked alongside the Betrayer.

"Here, General," Henrik said, stepping forward to give Reinoehl a small velvet bag.

He knew what it contained before he even opened it. Three rings were inside, along with an envelope sealed with unmarked wax. The letter within, he knew, would be written in code. His father telling him all that he needed to know; these things would have been given to one of their men right before capture, on the chance this worst possible outcome came to pass. If he had died alongside his father, the bag would have been kept to pass on to one of the other Generals should they ever be found.

All three rings were generations old, gifts from the late Kaiser's great grandfather to his Generals, after they had taken a particularly successful victory from the Salharans. One ring for each General, though one had only been symbolic and meant to be cast into the fire as a show of apology to the wronged Autumn Prince whose banner no longer flew high and proud amongst the armies of Kria.

One ring was the royal ring—as badly sought by Salhara as Prince Ingolf, who by rights should now be wearing the ring. It had been tasked to the Cobalt General to see that the ring reached the Prince, but so far no one had been able to find him.

Of the remaining two rings, one now belonged to him. Grief washed over him all over again as he slid the silver ring set with a large, square sapphire onto his right middle finger. He was the Cobalt General now.

The last ring was that which should have been cast into the fire generations upon generation ago. But his own honored great-grandfather had been a pious man, deeply devoted to his Winter Princess and the other three. He had never liked the banning of the Scarlet Army and had believed with his last breath that Kria would live in shame until it reinstated that lost General.

So he had managed to keep the ring and hold on to it and protect it until... something changed or happened; it was one more duty of the von Hostetler line, the Cobalt General.

Personally, he had always thought his grandfather just wanted to be Scarlet himself; that most infamous army that had been feared by the world until its last General abandoned Kria to work for the old deceivers.

Shaking his head, he examined the glistening ruby set in gold one last time, before slipping it back into the velvet bag and tucking the bag away inside his tunic.

Then he opened the letter, and read it in silence, breaking down the difficult code only because he had been doing it his entire life.

When he was finished, he cast the note into the fire and stood contemplating the flames for a long time. Finally, he made himself speak, hand resting lightly on the hilt of his sword. "We leave at dawn," he said. "We are heading east." He turned from the fire and sought out Aden. "A few hours riding will bring us to a small town. From there, you should be able to swing safely south back to your home."

"I have no intention of betraying you," Aden said quietly. "It's easy enough to see that is what you fear. I told you, I want only to go home and tell my Queen what has happened here. Illussor has no desire to see Kria fall to Salhara. Neither of us will benefit from their victory. So far as I am concerned, General, you and I never met, never saw each other, never knew one another existed."

"My father was caught, tortured, and killed because of a deep betrayal," Reinoehl said curtly. "If I cannot trust my friends and comrades, why should I trust a man who comes from a land that is careful to always keep its pale skin free of smudges?"

Aden laughed softly, hair falling across one cheek as he shifted his head just enough to stare into the fire himself. "A man once said, 'when friends become enemies, is it so strange that enemies might become friends?'"

"Only an idiot would say such a thing."

"Indeed," Aden replied, laughing all the harder. "A Krian would certainly think it foolish, since in your eyes anyone who is not a friend must be an enemy. An ancestor of mine said those words. He fell in love with his greatest enemy, as it happens. They are buried together in the royal crypt; a high honor in Illussor."

Reinoehl shrugged. "I do not care. You will ride with us tomorrow; if I decide you are no real threat, I will let you live. If not, I will kill you."

"Killing me is not so easy a thing as you might think," Aden said, pretty eyes as hard and cold as the icicles hanging from the roof. "You took me by surprise once, General." He reached up to touch fingers lightly to the livid bruise marring his right cheek. "You'll not do it again."

"We shall see. Now, we sleep, for we must leave in only a small handful of hours."

He set Ebbe to stand watch, then waited until the others were all bedded down before lying down himself close enough to the Illussor to hear any suspicious movement, but not so close he would not have time to react to any threat upon his person.

Then he forced himself to sleep despite all the thoughts overcrowding his mind, knowing he would need whatever rest he could get—the next several days were going to be filled with hard travel all while avoiding recapture. If even one General fell, any chance of salvaging Kria would fall with him.

A hard shake woke him all too soon, and Reinoehl resented it wholly—but his life was not one of soft beds and gentle nights, as much as he might wish it so. Dragging himself up, he righted his clothes, settled his sword, and ordered his men to ready themselves.

He studiously ignored Aden, not knowing what to do with the man beyond watch him. He would be grateful when they saw the back of the bastard. It probably would be easier to simply kill him and be done with it... but he had already taken too many lives, and a few of them he had believed to be his friends. Even Bruno, Henrik, and Ebbe he could not trust entirely, though it would ease him greatly to know he could trust *someone*. Regardless, he did not kill until he had to—taking a life was no pleasant task, and he grew increasingly weary of it with each passing day.

There was no help for it, however.

Outside, he pulled up the hood of his cloak. It limited his sight, but he could not afford to be recognized. No Krian who saw him would give him away, or so he continued to hope despite evidence to the contrary, but there were too many Salharans afoot. Really, he should not be wearing the garb of the Cobalt General at all—but there were some points on which he would not fold, no matter what.

When everyone was mounted, he gave the signal to move out, putting Ebbe on point and motioning for Henrik to take up the end, putting himself, Aden, and Bruno in the center. All had swords ready to be drawn in a moment, though he hoped that their journey would be a peaceful one.

They rode briskly, but not so quickly they would arouse suspicion if they were met by those who had reason to be suspicious. He glanced at Aden, who had not said a word since rising. His cheeks were red with the cold where they were just visible within the depths of the hood of his cloak. He rode well, and obviously knew how to use the sword he wore easily at his hip. Did he know how to use it well, though?

Not that Reinoehl particularly cared, except insofar as Aden's words from the previous night remained with him. To judge by the anger in it, his odd Illussor was not used to being taken by surprise. Reinoehl felt strangely pleased that he had managed to do precisely that, even if it had been by way of violence. If he did decide to kill the Illussor, to how much trouble would he have to go to see the deed done?

The sound of other horses snapped his attention back to the road, and he tensed, ready to draw his sword in a moment.

As the newcomers rounded the corner, he realized too late that every last one was a Salharan soldier carefully dressed to look Krian—but they had been speaking in their native language, and that was their mistake.

Then everything turned loud and wild and bloody, as the Salharans struck with their unmatched weapon—drawing weapons with energy and words in a way Reinoehl had never been able to comprehend, slicing skin merely with their will, causing his horse to go mad with fear and pain.

Bringing his horse to rein only by effort of will and years of experience, he charged the Salharans, cutting down one even as he heard a terrible scream from Henrik, saw Ebbe tumble from his horse—

Saw the Illussor spy run off, vanishing around the curve.

He slid from his own horse as the world calmed again, holding a hand against the worst of his cuts, going to each Salharan soldier and ensuring they were well and truly dead.

Then he took stock of his own men—Henrik was dead, Ebbe badly wounded, Bruno nothing more than scrapes. He knelt before Henrik and rested a hand on the blood-soaked chest. "Walk with the Autumn Prince, my friend, and find peace in the arms of the Princess." Then he stood, and looked on as Bruno patched up Ebbe as best he could. "The Salharans should not be skulking about here, unless they were looking for us—or someone else."

Bruno grunted. "They could be looking for his Highness; they must fear he will attack them any day to reclaim his birthright. Not to mention that Saffron and Verdant remain free—they will be out in droves."

"But not around the coliseum; they hate this place," Reinoehl muttered. "I underestimated them, and it cost Henrik his life." He felt tired, and unfit—he was not his father, gods take it, and he proved that more and more with every failure.

Snarling in rage, he looked about for something to focus on. "Where did that cursed Illussor go?"

"He chased after one of them," Ebbe said, gasping the words as Bruno finished tending the nasty gash in his leg.

Even as he finished speaking, Aden returned, coming slowly around the bend, blood staining his clothes, a small splash of it on one cheek. "We need to hurry," he said. "I killed one, but I do not doubt these woods are crawling with more, and by now they would have been informed of your disappearance."

"They cannot believe that I actually managed to get out of the city," Reinoehl said, frustrated. "Tits of the Winter Princess!"

Aden shrugged. "Salhara is nothing if not ruthless; I think they have proven that. They depend on poison to give them power; what would people like that have to fear?"

Grunting, Reinoehl helped Ebbe into the saddle, then mounted his own horse. "Then gods damn discretion. We go deeper into the forest, and we ride as hard as possible. If you fall behind, you get left behind."

He said nothing more, simply charged ahead, around the curve in the road. There he saw a tethered horse, and a dead man sprawled in the woods—Aden had indeed run off to kill a soldier that might have otherwise gotten away.

A short ways down the road, he abruptly abandoned it to plunge into the thick woods, trusting to his memories and knowledge to ensure they did not get lost. If he kept true, they would make the village that was their destination in twelve hours—two hours later than he would have preferred, but it was better than risking another battle.

He had not thought they would think to look for him outside the city so soon—it made more sense that he would hide within the city walls, and amass forces secretly that way. That aside, the Salharans loathed the coliseum. The first they had done after freeing their own there had been to destroy the ancient building. Even now, the smell of smoke lingered, where it had burned all but the stonework, which would probably be taken apart once the warmer weather arrived.

The going was rough, between the dense forest, the hard pace, and the snow that began to fall halfway through the journey, and slowed them down. They stopped to rest the horses only just enough they could keep pushing on.

Dark was falling when they finally broke free of the forest just over fourteen hours later. Only the moonlight guided them as they made their way wearily across a last stretch of field to the village they had worked so hard to reach.

Once there, he led the way to a house at its very edge, the little home of an old man who had long been faithful to his family—and whom so far had not proven to be a traitor.

Reinoehl dismounted and strode to the door, knocking briskly three times, pausing, then knocking four times more.

The door opened to reveal a wizened old man with frizzy white hair and burn scars over most of his face. "Old man," Reinoehl greeted.

"Lord General," the old man replied and opened the door to gesture them all in, shutting it firmly behind them. "You made it out, I am happy. Your father rests easy to know that you are safe and have taken his place. I am sorry for your loss, Lord General."

Reinoehl waved the words away, not interested in hearing his failures treated as praiseworthy. Too many mistakes, and he just kept making them. "No one has come looking for us?"

"No," the old man replied. "Even if they did, they would not get much out of a half-mad old man." He grinned, then walked slowly to the fire. "Tea? Ale? There is also food on the table. Eat, regain your strength, you will have to ride quickly, before they come this far in their search. Henrik fell, then?"

"Yes," Reinoehl replied tersely, and motioned for Ebbe to sit at the table. Cutting away the man's clothes, he examined the nasty magic-caused gash himself. It was a miracle the man had lived this long, especially given the hard ride.

Calling for supplies, lips pressed into a tight line, he focused on cleaning, stitching, and wrapping the wound, ignoring the weak protests that it was not the General's duty to tend trivial wounds. His father had always said he had his mother's touch for healing, and that he should use it, not neglect it—so use it he would.

When he was at last satisfied his man would live, and heal well, Reinoehl sat back and asked for the ale to be brought.

He was startled when it was Aden who pressed a cup into his hands, and more surprised still when the man sat next to him beside the fire.

After a moment of silence, he finally said, "You probably changed our fates today, by killing that man who nearly got away. I thank you."

Aden shrugged, mouth quirked in a rueful smile. "Well, I had no desire to be hanged as a Krian."

"There are worse fates," Reinoehl said dryly.

"True, I could be hanged as a Salharan."

"Somehow, I doubt they will make that mistake."

Aden's rueful smile turned into a grin of pure, triumphant mischief. "They have before; they could again if I so wanted."

Reinoehl lifted one brow at that, but only took a swallow of ale in lieu of replying. Why in the world would an Illussor venture into Salhara? What sort of games did the Illussor play? The man must be bold indeed, to play such dangerous games. He never understood such people, who could lie and deceive as though it were all some children's game. "I think it is a good thing you are *not* Krian," he said at last. "If you were, you would deeply trouble the person for whom you named your sword."

"My sword does not have a name," Aden replied, smile returning to rueful, and Reinoehl almost thought he saw a hint of sadness in it.

He frowned, confused. "I was not aware the Illussor named their swords..."

Aden laughed. "After the Breaker destroyed our ability to use magic, the Holy General taught us to fight in the Krian style. We picked up many of the Krian traditions surrounding their art."

"The Betrayer taught such a thing, when he himself never had a name for his sword?"

"But he did name it," Aden replied.

"For his Salharan whore, you mean?" Ebbe asked from the far side of the room. "Everyone knows that story, but I had not heard he was actually so desperate for a name he took the name of a whore."

Aden only continued to smile, but Reinoehl could see the menace in it. "Do not insult the Breaker again in my presence. You will find that all of Illussor takes great pride in him and the Holy General. We do not take well to hearing them maligned. Let us call it a cultural difference, and change the subject. Does your sword have a name, General?"

Reinoehl wondered if Aden was leaving the 'Lord' off on purpose, and decided he was, but he honestly did not care. He was not entirely convinced he deserved the honorific. "No," he said quietly, "my sword is not named."

Likely it never would be, because how was he supposed to have time for such things when he could not even manage to stay alive without the assistance of a foreign spy? Despair clawed at him, made every breath a burden, every heartbeat a chore. Would that he had died, and his father had lived—then Kria would stand some chance.

But giving up was not an option, not so long as he breathed. He finished his ale, and finally motioned for someone to bring him food. Eating did not much interest him, but he needed to keep up his strength. It would take them almost two weeks to reach the Fortress of Eis, deep in the mountains that had always

been where the Cobalt Generals most often served—a land almost always buried in snow, a place considered harsh even by Krian standards.

He missed it, missed the sense of familiarity that came from being there, the intimacy that came from knowing a place better than any breathing person—and that thought brought another wave of sadness, because his parents had known it better than anyone. The Fortress of Eis was their home, and they had been the ones to complete recent renovations at it, using the family coffers to do so when the Kaiser would not authorize funds.

Every now and then, he wished his sword had a name. Most days, however, he was glad it did not—no lover would tolerate being named for the sword of a man who failed so abysmally at so much. He had not even been able to take his father's head and see it was properly buried or burned. No, it would remain there to rot away into nothing, to become an unrecognizable skull until it was finally tossed away like so much garden rot. His mother would have wept.

But he could not wallow in self-pity and shame. He was alive, and he was the Cobalt General now, so onward he must go—and just hope he learned from all his mistakes.

Which meant they must leave soon, and use the dark to their advantage. "Rest up," he said to his men, "and make certain we are well stocked on food and water, for we will be stopping only for the horses." He turned to look at Aden. "I would imagine you want to be leaving soon, yes?"

"Am I being kicked out already?" Aden asked, obviously unperturbed by the words. He finished his own ale, and set the empty cup next to the stool on which he sat. "I do not suppose you will leave me some way to contact you, to let you know I am no traitor—or that assistance is being offered you?"

Reinoehl reached out and grabbed one of Aden's hands, turning it in his own, fascinated by the skin as fine as china, so delicate looking it seemed as though not even the sun would dare besmirch it. He might have Krian blood, but he was unmistakably Illussor. "Assistance?" he asked with a sneer. "The Illussor dirty their hands by becoming directly involved in a war? Your hands are far too pretty for anyone to approve you dirtying them in a proper fight, pale skin." He dropped the hand and stared into the hard brown eyes glaring at him.

They were the color of cinnamon, he noticed, surprising himself. Fine ground cinnamon, his favorite spice, though it was costly, and he had not purchased it since the intermittent battles had turned into full-fledged war. Cinnamon eyes and hair like honeycomb. Perhaps he was simply hungrier than he thought.

"My hands are dirtier than you might think," Aden said quietly, voice somber for all that his eyes bespoke an urge to pull his dagger. "I do not fight and kill your way, but I do fight and kill. Illussor needs to be protected the same as any other country."

"So you do it by slinking around, lying and deceiving, cheating and killing in the dark? What honor is there in that?"

Aden smiled a mirthless smile. "We all do what we must, regardless of what others think. I do what others can't or won't, and my actions have helped ensure that Salharans do not live in *my* palace."

Reinoehl bit off a snarl, knowing full well he was being goaded. "I will never trust a man who lives on lies, no matter how beautiful or persuasive or seemingly helpful he might be."

"That is, of course, your decision to make," Aden said, voice icy. "I will never again help an ungrateful wretch too busy hating himself and everyone around him to realize the enemy he perceives might indeed be a friend." He stood up, knocking his cup over in the process. "Thank you, General, for taking me out of the city as per our bargain. May we never trouble one another again."

With that, Aden stalked to the door and left, gone as silently as he had first appeared, dangling from Reinoehl's birdcage as though it were the easiest thing in the world to do.

Biting back more curses, Reinoehl wondered if he was doing the right thing—or if perhaps the bastard was right, and he was doing the wrong thing. How had the dratted Illussor said it? *When friends become enemies, is it so strange that enemies might become friends?*

Standing up, he stalked to the door and yanked it open, slamming it behind him before continuing to stalk across the small yard to where Aden was preparing his horse.

"Perhaps you are right," he said stiffly.

Aden paused, but did not turn around to look at him.

"I have tried to do the right thing many times, and it always winds up being wrong," Reinoehl said heavily, wondering why he would say such a thing to the very last person he should. "So, perhaps the seemingly wrong is actually the right. You seem as though you should be an enemy, so perhaps..."

At last Aden turned around, arms sliding from the saddle he had been strapping in place, and gave one of his soft, quirky smiles in the dark. "So perhaps we might be friends. I promise you, Lord General, I want only to save my own people. Letting Salhara have Kria goes against that want. I would help you, if you would but let me. Tell me how I might contact you, if I must."

"It is a dangerous thing, to let anyone know where we hide," Reinoehl said quietly, so that his voice would not carry farther than the two of them. "No one knows where we hide, save the three of us and those few others who must know. However, there are ways of letting us know things. If you seek to find me..." He thought a moment, then reached into the depths of his cloak, sad and relieved all at once when he found that what he had put in a secret pocket, remained there still.

He drew out the necklace, and cupping Arden's hand, tipped it into his palm. "Show this at the Fortress of Eis, and say you want to see me."

Aden smiled—really smiled, with nothing else to color or shape it. Reinoehl realized it unsettled him, and did not like that one bit, especially as he could find no good reason for being unsettled. Then again, the man was a professional deceiver—surely that was reason enough to be unsettled by anything that made him happy.

"I will see you again, then, Lord General. I hope when that time comes, I shall have good news for you. Stay alive until then; I did not save you only for you to get your fool head lost anyway." He swung up into

the saddle, and tucked away the necklace that had once belonged to Reinoehl's mother. "Farewell, and may the Gods favor you."

Reinoehl waved, and watched him ride off, then turned and went back into the small cabin.

There, he moved to join his men at the table. "We must leave as soon as possible," he said. "However, we are not all going to the same place. Ebbe, you cannot push on with that leg, not at the hard pace we will be traveling. You will rest here a few days, and do what you can to ensure those polluted bastards lose our trail, should they happen to find it."

Ebbe's mouth tightened with obvious displeasure, but he only gave a terse nod and said, "Yes, Lord General."

Nodding in reply, Reinoehl turned to Bruno. "The last information we had concerning his Highness, he was headed south. He was last seen at the village of Grimmel. Find him, and bring him to me—by force if you must. We must secure his Highness before the Salharans find him."

"Where are you going, Lord General? Will you be taking an escort? You should not travel unprotected."

"I am safer alone, because no one would dare to believe a General of Kria would travel unprotected. I am going to plot the fall of Salhara, be it one way or another. I expect to see you both—and his Highness—at the Great Pass in not more than two month's time, and not more than one month would be better. Am I understood?"

"Yes, Lord General!"

Reinoehl stood up. "Then we go."

Chapter Four

Ingolf fervently hoped that he was doing the right thing. He knew he was, though, even if doubts tried to plague him. If the Generals hoped to defeat Salhara once and for all, they needed some edge over the arcen that had already destroyed so much. Not knowing how to combat the magic was one of the main reasons Kria was falling; the only thing crippling them more was the number of people lost to the plague that struck five years ago.

Only one person had ever possessed anything which could resist Salharan magic, and that had been the Betrayer, who legend held possessed a sword which had been made with arcen.

He had not really believed it, though he had pinned all his hopes on the veracity of the legend. But now that he held it, he could see the arcen in the blade whenever the light struck it—a rainbow shimmer and sheen that no metal contained naturally. Not of this nature. Ingolf ran a thumb over the red jewel set in the pommel, a ruby worth a tidy fortune.

All in all, it was a beautiful sword—a masterpiece.

It was truly a pity that the man who had wielded it had been unworthy. Thanks to his betrayal, there was no longer a Scarlet Army. The Autumn Prince no longer had a banner flown in his honor, and an Army to fight in his name. Reinstating it was not so simple a matter, not with the taint hanging over it. Someday, perhaps...if they survived the war, he would definitely work toward restoring the Scarlet so that Kria once more had four armies to protect it.

"You can stop looking at my sword like it belongs to you," Erich grumbled from where he lay on one of the two beds. "Bright is my rightful property and I will not return to Illussor without it."

"Bright?" Ingolf asked, taken aback. "The sword has a name?"

"Of course it has a name," Erich replied, looking at him like he was an idiot. "Why would it *not* have a name?"

Ingolf said nothing, not really interested in getting into what would only prove to be an argument. But he found it hard to believe the Betrayer had named his sword for anyone.

Erich broke into his thoughts by asking, "Are you certain we should leave your men alone? What if something goes wrong, and we find out too late?"

"What's the matter, Illussor? Afraid a Salharan might jump out of the shadows and bespell you?" Ingolf asked with a smirk.

Erich rumbled something Ingolf did not quite catch.

Refusing to be provoked into asking him to repeat it, Ingolf returned his attention to the sword. The most fascinating part about it was the way it resembled the sword now traditionally carried by the

Kaiser—the sword that had been carried by Kaiser Benno, before the Betrayer killed him, the sword that should be his, and would be his, as soon as he reached the Saffron General, who held it for him.

Gods, he was Kaiser now. The last he had heard about his family, they had been arrested and set for execution. He had barely gotten out of the city in time—and only under protest and necessity, for he had loathed leaving them all to die while he lived. He had been the only one not captured, however. There had been no choice, because the Krian throne must be preserved at all costs and he was probably all that was left.

Were they dead? His father? His half-siblings? Had they died honorably, or had they been tortured on display before being strung up or their heads driven onto pikes?

It made his stomach knot to think of it, made it hard to draw a deep breath. There had been no great love lost between himself and his father, but he had liked his siblings well enough, and the Kaiserin had always treated him respectfully, if warily.

Ingolf had tried to reassure her, more than once, that he had never wanted to usurp the throne that should have been his, had he only been born legitimately. He much preferred being a bastard, and one with no chance at the throne. But the throne he had now, if only he could drive back the Salharans who currently tried to occupy it. Not that they would entirely succeed, not while he lived. Kria could be made to obey, but they would always wait with swords at the ready, for him to reappear and drive the Salharans out.

And he would do it, just as soon as they had the leverage they needed to beat back the arcen evil that had always been Kria's greatest nemesis.

Sighing softly, he turned to look out the window, watching the relentless snow. Three days, now, it had snowed too heavily for them to travel. They had barely made it into the village safely, and had been stuck there ever since. Even when the snow stopped falling, it would be damned hard getting through the mess to their next destination.

He ran a thumb along the shimmering blade, drawn again to the way the colors in the metal shimmered from deep within. His own personal sword was an exceptional blade, but it was nothing like this one. He reached out idly to touch the pommel of his own sword, simple metal shaped to a fine point, four sides, each marked with an old rune that represented the four gods. A sword with no name, because even if he had a lover, he would not feel right naming his sword when so many were dying alone and afraid around him.

The sword of the Betrayer *had* to help, one way or another. If they failed to make use of the magic-resisting properties it was said to possess, perhaps it could be used some other way. He simply did not know, and that was the worst part of all. He was tired of not knowing, of not doing—even this mission seemed reckless and pointless at times.

Hopefully his Generals were still alive, and preparing to put their plans into action. If they could find ways to resist the magic more, the plans would stand a better chance, but better to die fighting for freedom than live to surrender it.

Turning away from the window and sword, he glanced at his unusual companion. Of all the outcomes he had anticipated, that Erich would join them willingly had not been one of them. Erich von Adolwulf was a puzzle, to be certain.

He looked to be around Ingolf's own age, though that was a hard thing to gauge. Still, if he was a day past thirty, he would be surprised. Thinking of age suddenly reminded him of something. "What is today?"

Erich stirred on the bed, lifting his head up to reply, "By your reckoning, three days past the Winter Moon. Why?"

Shaking his head, Ingolf laughed softly to himself. He was thirty-one today, and had not even realized it. "Nothing of import." He continued to watch Erich, constantly drawn despite himself to his pale, strange beauty. So much white, offset all the more by his dark clothes, the dingy room. He almost looked as though he were made from the snow falling relentlessly on the other side of the window. Illussor were exceptionally fair by nature, but Erich carried it to a new extreme.

Ingolf found it difficult to tear his eyes away, even when he knew he should not be thinking such thoughts, not when so much rest upon his shoulders, not when his country was a breath away from falling to Salhara...but he was only a man, after all, and there was no harm in admiring so long as that was all he did.

A glint of metal caught his eye, and he saw that Erich wore a ring on his left hand. That was a marriage ring, in Illussor culture, was it not? Ingolf was surprised by the disappointment that flitted through him. "You said people were looking for you?"

"Yes..." Erich said, sitting up, raking a hand through his pale hair and yawning widely. "They do not like it when I go gallivanting off."

Ingolf looked at him in amusement. "If you are married, I can see where a wife might find vanishing acts annoying."

Erich looked at him in surprise, then glanced down at his ring. He smiled sadly when he looked up again. "Oh, no. My spouse is dead—he died five years ago of the plague, along with too many other people."

"Oh," Ingolf said, feeling wretched. "I am sorry, that was unforgivable of me."

"Not at all," Erich said. "You could not have known." He held up his left hand, and tapped the ring he wore on his second finger. "If I were married, it would be this finger," he tapped the empty third. "The second finger, we often call the 'widow's finger' since that is where those in mourning wear their ring."

Ingolf nodded, but still felt awful and awkward. A widow's finger—that was something his siblings probably would have known, but he had not managed to pick up. All his lessons had been acquired here and there, as he picked things up traveling, or was occasionally permitted to attend some special function, the few occasions he spent time with the higher ranking army officials as he grew older. He had never received formal schooling, so the finer points like widow fingers were not known to him.

Yet he was going to be Kaiser. It would certainly be interesting; hopefully his officials were better trained than he, and could impart that knowledge. He did not want to win one war only to start another by being unintentionally rude.

Then something else that Erich had said finally struck him. "You said 'he'," Ingolf said, the words spilling out in surprise before he could hold them back.

Erich laughed. "Yes, I did. I forget such things are illegal here."

Ingolf shrugged. "Illegal, yes, but that does not mean it is not done."

"True," Erich said, still smiling, looking amused by some private jest.

Scowling, not liking the feeling that he was being mocked, Ingolf turned away from Erich and resumed staring out at the damnable snow. He wanted to be pressing on, reaching the village where they most needed to be, not sitting here exchanging awkward conversation with an Illussor who found him amusing because he obviously knew nothing of Illussor culture.

"So what is it you hope to gain by stealing Bright?" Erich asked after several minutes of ringing silence.

Ingolf looked at the blade again, stroking the cold metal. "According to various accounts, his sword could resist Salharan magic."

"Because of the arcen in the blade?" Erich said. "I have heard that before, in historical accounts."

"Oh?" Ingolf asked eagerly. "That is why we wanted you as well, once you showed up. You must know all the sword's secrets, if you are its present owner."

Erich frowned...and Ingolf felt something wither as he shook his head. "No one really knows anything about that sword. It was made by the Holy General's father, arcen was involved in its making—but by all accounts, even the Holy General himself did not know that until Lord Beraht pointed it out. But the secrets of its making died when the Holy General's father died. No one ever knew how he did it, and obviously they could not return to Kria to see if someone else might know."

"But—you're his direct descendant!" Ingolf protested, refusing to give up. "You said so yourself, how in the name of the Gods can you know nothing?"

"We revile magic," Erich said unhappily. "The Holy General especially wanted nothing to do with it; he never cared that his sword had arcen in it, and refused to look into the matter. Lord Beraht and their friends respected that wish, and the matter died entirely when he passed away. I'm sorry."

"No!" Ingolf bellowed, slamming his fist into the wall, barely missing the window itself. He cast the swords aside and rose, stalking across the room to grab Erich by the front of his tunic, shaking him hard. "You must know something, you pale-skinned bastard. There must be a way to learn of its making, how it works. We need that secret!"

Erich only stared at him in obvious misery.

Ingolf let him go and shoved, refusing to feel guilty about the way he tumbled from the bed and landed with a thud on the cold, wooden floor. He raked his hands through his hair, and laughed bitterly. "So why did you come then, Illussor, if you knew you could not help? Have you played me for a fool this entire time?"

"No," Erich said quietly, and Ingolf listened to him stand, the rustle as he adjusted his clothing. "I just want to help drive back Salhara. I did not know what your true purpose was, until now. If I had known sooner..."

Not wanting to hear it, not really caring about anything except getting away from the crushing disappointment the sword upon the floor represented, Ingolf stalked from the room and bolted down the stairs, then fled out into the swirling white.

It was true their original plan had not included kidnapping the Duke of Korte—they had hoped that the sword itself would reveal its secrets...but if the original owner, he for whom the sword had been made, knew nothing about it...what chance did desperate men generations later stand of uncovering the secrets? Apparently only one person had known, and he had died before sharing that secret. He should have studied his history better, Ingolf thought bitterly. Between his ignorance over Illussor customs, and what little was available about the Betrayer...he was nothing more than a great fool.

But it was too late now to change his course of action. What would the Generals think, if they knew their Kaiser had given up so easily? No, he had sworn to gain them a definite edge over Salhara, even while they protested and ordered him to stay put—he had not defied them only to return a failure. He would do this, and they would drive back Salhara.

He just wished he knew *how*, instead of always hoping that someday a clear answer would come to him.

At that, he had to concede that wandering around in a snowstorm two steps away from being a proper blizzard would not help him find any answers, and as much as he hated to admit it he was too valuable to be risking his life with something as stupid as the weather. He should go back inside.

Turning around sharply, in what he hoped was the direction of the inn—

He slammed into something and stumbled clumsily back, losing his footing and flailing for balance, succeeding only in taking the wall he had struck down with him.

Buried in the snow, being pressed into it by a veritable mountain, Ingolf felt the very definition of a perfect fool.

Then the mountain laughed, and Erich's breath was shockingly warm against his cheek, with a hint of something sweet that even the snow and frigid wind could not entirely snatch away. "Found you."

"Indeed," Ingolf replied, shoving futilely for Erich to get off him. They were neither of them small men, and roughly matched in size and strength, but for some reason at that moment, he felt the smaller of them. "Get off me."

Erich obeyed with a grunt, and before Ingolf could fully get his bearings, he reached out and yanked Ingolf to his feet. "This way," Erich said, and not releasing Ingolf's arm, dragged him off into the whirling white.

Ingolf marveled at the sense of direction, all too aware that after storming about in a temper, he had likely lost his bearings and might have indeed lost his stupid damned life to a measly blizzard. Wounded pride and self-recrimination left a foul aftertaste, but he had brought it upon himself.

"Thank yo—" He stopped as cold leather covered his lips, the press of Erich's fingers an unmistakable command to be quiet.

Then he heard them—voices, only snatches of them, just visible from somewhere in the inn, while they still stood just outside it, barely undercover of the overhang covering the main entrance.

Worse still...

He knew one of those voices. That...that was Pancraz. Speaking Salharan. Ingolf felt as though he were going to be ill. It could not be, it *couldn't*. Telling himself it was the cold making his hands tremble, he moved closer to the door, gingerly pressing his ear against it to better hear what was going on inside.

As the voice washed over him, he realized it was not a nightmare. No, that would be too easy—it was definitely real. Pancraz was speaking in Salharan, and he spoke it too gods damned well. Pancraz was a traitor, and likely had been all along. Did that mean Sepp was against him, too? But they had been by his side for so long.

Ingolf turned away, barley cutting off a rough snarl of rage. His earlier breakfast tried to rise up, but he fought the urge. How many, he wondered, how many had died because he had been trusting the wrong people? Autumn Prince take him for the fool Kaiser he was proving to be.

He buried his hands in his hair and fought an urge to bellow, to go and find his sword and simply start taking heads.

A hand landed heavily on his shoulder, and urged him to turn around.

In the mass of swirling white, Erich really did seem like some other-worldly being, like some child of the Winter Princess herself, come to the world of mortal men to...do something, but Ingolf was too tired to think what that something might be. Slay him, maybe.

Erich's hand slid from his shoulder, instead curling around his upper arm, dragging him away from the inn and around it to what Ingolf realized was the stable.

He stood in wretched silence while Erich searched the place, making damned good and certain they would not be overheard by anyone.

Even now, he could not avoid noticing Erich's beauty. Still that impression of a lost god's child remained, as Erich shook the snow from his clothes, brushed the melting flakes from his hair. One drop ran down his forehead, the bridge of his nose, before finally sliding off to fall like a stray tear down his cheek.

Then he spoke, snapping Ingolf back to the thoughts he did not want to face, but even then he noted how different Erich sounded speaking his native language. *"Do you know Illussor? Do your men?"*

"I know it," Ingolf replied. *"They do not, to the best of my knowledge...which obviously is lacking."*

"We will chance it, and just take care to keep our voices low."

Something struck Ingolf then, though he could scarcely comprehend it. *"You already knew they were traitors—well, the one, at least."*

"I knew," Erich replied quietly. *"I overheard Pancraz shortly after I broke free, beneath the window, just before you found me."*

Ingolf sank down on a crate, burying his face in his hands. *"If you knew...I do not understand what is going on, or your role in all of this. Tits of the Winter Princess, in what mess have I become mired?"*

"So it is you they want to ambush when we reach this village that is our destination," Erich muttered. His eyes snapped to Ingolf, and the piercing sharpness to them made it hard to breathe for a moment, and left him reeling. What in the world was Erich seeing, to look at him that way? *"I have to ask, as you have become aware of the traitor—possible traitors—are you royalty?"*

"What?" Ingolf asked, a nasty jolt shooting through him. *"How—"* He cut the words off, glaring angrily.

"They spoke, that day I overheard, of having 'them' and taking 'him' now instead of waiting until we are closer to the Salharan border," Erich replied. *"They said that with 'him' that Kria would fall in nine days."*

"Autumn Prince," Ingolf whispered, then buried his face in his hands again, moaning in dismay.

Erich sighed softly. *"So you are royalty—a bastard son, I gather."*

"How could you know that?" Ingolf demanded. *"How?"*

"Well, Pancraz spoke of having someone, and killing him, but not wanting to do it until we reached Salhara—and how 'he' was crucial to the fall of Kria. No man, save a royal one, would be so pivotal. But I met the royal family of Kria once, if only briefly. You were not among them, I would have remembered. So, that could only leave an especially powerful noble—or an illegitimate heir."

Ingolf laughed, and shook his head. *"You are too clever for your own good, Illussor. Yes, I am my father's eldest son, but born of his mistress, rather than his wife. My family is dead, or I assume they are, if I am being this badly sought. I was forced to flee the Winter Palace when they were all captured, and barely escaped in time."* He scrubbed at his face, remembering that awful moment when Salhara...and his stupid, simple life had finally fallen completely apart.

He was not the one who should have been saved, but he had been the only one not where the Salharans had expected to find him—the only one with a chance to escape. Then he had fled, with a half-formed plan to find a weakness in the Salharan magic, a way to help bring them down, because without some advantage...

"I am the Kaiser, now," he finished on a whisper, feeling far older than thirty one. "To think I nearly walked straight into their damned trap!" He pounded his fist on his thigh, barely noticing the pain. He looked up. "I still do not see what you have to do with all of this."

"Neither do I," Erich said, then smiled. "Except that I meant it when I said that I infinitely prefer Kria to Salhara, and neither of our countries will benefit by their victory." He moved closer to Ingolf, close enough to touch, though he lifted his arms only to cross them over his chest. "I had hoped to figure out this riddle myself, but I suppose it is more useful to have you aware of the traitors in your midst—though, at that, you've no cause to trust me, either."

Ingolf shrugged. *"If you were interested in killing me, or using me, you would be acting differently. Nothing useful can be made of this conversation, unless you are being honest."* He sneered. *"Though, I am not proving to be a very good judge of character, am I?"*

Erich mimicked his shrug. *"If they were not good at deceiving, they would not be good spies. To be angry at being deceived by a spy is like being angry at the snow for making you cold. It is a waste of energy."*

"I suppose," Ingolf said sourly. Then he put the bitter thoughts aside, and attempted to salvage the situation. *"If we know, and they do not know we know..."*

"Then we have a chance to gain the upper hand," Erich finished, nodding his agreement. *"Though, you are valuable enough, it would likely be wiser simply to flee and get you to safety."*

Ingolf dismissed the motion immediately. *"No. Salharan magic is destroying us, and I stole that sword in the hope that a sword master I know could solve the riddle of the Betrayer's sword, if indeed it could resist magic."* He grimaced. *"I suppose that with having you, I suddenly relied too much on the hope that you would be able to tell us much. I still wish it were so,"* he finished on a near-whisper.

"Me too," Erich said. *"I am sorry. I did not mean to upset you so—we have always respected the mystery of it. No one knew less about Bright's magical resistance than its owner, I promise you. He detested the arcan in it, but he loved the sword too much to part with it for any reason."*

"It was foolish of me to pin my hopes on something so fragile," Ingolf said, making the words dismissive only with great effort. Fragile hopes were all he had, anymore. If his sword master could not solve the riddle, then Salhara likely would win the final battles.

Erich sat down beside him on the crate. *"I say we hold our tongues, and see what we might learn when we snatch the upper hand from them. It puts you in greater danger..."*

"A worthy risk," Ingolf replied, *"especially since it is only your presence that has likely saved my life, Illussor."* He let out a soft sigh, and looked up at Erich, dredging up a weak but genuine smile. *"I thank you."*

"Do not thank me until we manage to escape this mess with our necks," Erich said, dismissing the words with a motion of his hand. The movement caused the light of a single lantern to catch on the ring on his left hand.

It was a pretty band, done in the traditional Illussor style—only silver and gold, instead of some lavish construction of jewels. That much he *did* know. The two metals were braided together, a simple but elegant design.

A twinge of envy rose up briefly, twined with a wistful longing to know what it was like to be so bound to another person. His life had never permitted more than a night's liaison with anyone, and as he was now Kaiser...assuming he lived, the match would have to be a political one, something to help rebuild Kria's lost power and prestige, something to stir pride and confidence and faith in his people once more.

Gods, his people. He was a bastard; he was never supposed to have *people*. "So we play ignorant, for now," he said. "If we stay on guard, then we can turn the ambush to our advantage." His first curled around the hilt of his sword, as he thought of precisely all he would do to the foul Salharan traitor he had called comrade for so long. There were all manner of ways he could extract the information he wanted—and betrayal meant there was no reason to hold back on which of those methods he chose to employ.

He might not have had his father's love, and his father had made it painfully clear that he never once considered Ingolf a proper heir...but he had acknowledged Ingolf as his son, and had the royal sword master craft his sword, and he had put him in line to assume the role of the Verdant General someday. Ingolf was not meant to be Kaiser, but he was a damned good soldier, and if there was one thing the Krians did not forgive—it was betrayal, especially in the ranks.

Pancraz had better hope this was all a terrible misunderstanding, or he would learn the hard way what Krians did to traitors.

"We had better return," Erich said, breaking into his bloody thoughts. *"They are probably already suspicious that we have been gone so long, with the weather as it is, and as suspicious as they are trained to be."*

Ingolf let out a soft chuff of amusement—then grabbed Erich by the front of his tunic and threw to the ground.

"What—"

Erich was abruptly cut off as Ingolf straddled him. He reached out and ruffled Erich's hair, grabbing handfuls of fallen hay—grunting in surprise when he was abruptly thrown, and instead found himself straddled, two fists tangled in the fabric of his tunic.

"What do you think you are doing?" Erich demanded.

Ingolf grinned, and said nothing, merely shoved hard, upsetting Erich's balance just enough to twist free, then grabbed and threw again—yelping when Erich took him down as well, sending them both crashing to the stable floor again.

By the time they finally ceased, panting for breath and too exhausted to continue, Ingolf was too amused by Erich's confounded glares to remain despondent.

"By the Goddess, what was that madness all about?"

Ingolf smirked, and slowly stood up, giving his clothes and hair only a cursory straightening. "Why, it looks as though we were out here either fighting or fucking. Most seem to believe one is the same as the other, to a Krian. Either way, they will not be suspicious of my motives for dragging you out to the stable to tend the matter."

Erich stared at him—then clapped a hand over his mouth to muffle his laughter. When Ingolf held out a hand, he took it, allowing Ingolf to help him to his feet. When he finally spoke again, he switched back to Krian. "So are you trying to say, Krian, that fighting and fucking are *not* the same thing in your mind?"

"If you think Krians fuck the same way they fight," Ingolf retorted, "you have been bedding the wrong Krians. Though I suppose I should not be surprised you cannot even do that right; your brains are as pale as your skins."

"Well, once I manage to save your sorry asses from the Salharans, I shall have you point me in the direction of Krians who know what they are doing."

"I doubt you would be able to handle it," Ingolf said, biting back a sudden, stupid urge to offer himself. There was no use denying it to himself, of course. Even in the middle of their duel only days ago, he had wanted Erich. It was not the sort of indulgence he could enjoy, for a multitude of reasons, and so he put the thought right out of his head, switching the conversation to safer ground as they made their way carefully through the snow back to the inn.

Chapter Five

Erich was not entirely convinced he liked being himself again.

Being himself meant feeling—and feeling things he had thought he had buried five years ago with Hahn.

Like a need to protect that was hot and cold and achingly warm by turns. He had hated the despair and self-loathing on Ingolf's face, every unhappy thought which had flickered in his eyes as he realized how deeply he had been betrayed, how close he had come to capture and death.

There was absolutely no good reason to feel protective about a man who was possibly an enemy and definitely a stranger.

Except they had so much in common, Erich was coming to realize, and it was hard to consider a man a stranger when he could understand so much of what must be going through his mind simply because those thoughts echoed his own.

He wished Hahn were there... and yet he did not, because even now he felt a flush of guilt for laughing so easily and feeling protective... and lusting. As much as he hated it, as hard as he was trying to deny it, there were definitely feelings of lust.

Hard. Hahaha. He was going to smack himself in two more minutes.

The dining room was quiet, everyone holed up in their rooms to stay warm. Erich waited impatiently at the bar for the barmaid to bring him the requested food and drink. Light glinted off his ring, and he felt the guilt all over again.

He should not, he knew. Hahn was five years dead; everyone had been telling him to let go and move on for at least the past four. Even the *Queen*, Hahn's little sister, had said he had mourned long enough.

Except one did not move on with an enemy, not even for a night, not even if the circumstances were beyond strange. His libido could not have picked a worse time, a worse place, or a worse person. Really, he asked himself irritably. The last resort Kaiser of a country a step away from being overtaken? Could he have made a worse choice. He had never wanted anyone but Hahn, had never been with anyone but Hahn, and now this?

Hahn would probably find the situation more amusing than anyone.

Sighing softly, Erich slid the ring from his finger and turned it so that he could see the inscription inside. He had been the one to propose...but it had been Hahn who had commissioned their wedding bands. Braided silver and gold. *Ghost*, it said, carved in elegant script. Hahn's ring had said *Binder*. Their names for each other, silly nicknames that over time had become endearments; special enough that when they took up their swords, those were the names bestowed.

When Hahn had died, Erich had buried him with both Ghost and Binder, unable to carry a sword that bore the name of a man he would never again hold.

The clatter of feet, the rattle of a tray, drew him from his thoughts, and he slid the ring back on his finger with another sigh, pushing away the complicated thoughts of love and lust in favor of the much simpler thoughts of war and intrigue.

He slid a few coins across the counter, smiling briefly at the bar maid, who flushed and would not quite look at him—but he did not doubt she would have a million things to whisper about once he was gone. Hahn had said the women always talked about him when he left the room, especially his 'pretty pretty hair'.

Erich had always rolled his eyes and given Hahn better things to think about than his hair.

Smiling faintly at the memory, barely aware he did so, Erich took the food and turned toward the stairs—and drew up short as he saw Pancraz standing in the doorway. "Can I help you?"

Pancraz sneered. "First he captures you, then he fucks you in a stable, and now he has you fetching his food? My, my, how the mighty descendant of the great Wolf has fallen, if that's really who you are."

Erich laughed. "How do you know we did not simply fight in the stables? Krians are not happy, after all, unless they are picking a fight. As to the food, I wanted it, so I fetched it." That part was true; Ingolf had not seemed terribly interested in eating, though Erich fully intended to make him eat anyway.

He made to move past, but Pancraz did not budge. Erich was grateful he held a tray full of food that was not worth wasting, for otherwise he might have given in to the urge to have done with the whole matter and slit the bastard's throat.

That urge to protect burning hot. He shied away from it, not certain how to deal with being awake again.

So he grinned, taunting, and said, "If you're jealous your boss would rather fight *me*, Krian, I could probably put in a good word."

Pancraz only sneered again and flicked the words aside with a sharp gesture of his left hand. "I find it amusing that your ancestor ran away with a whore, and now his descendant has become one. Illussor is apparently the place for it, who knew?"

"Everyone just likes our pretty hair," Erich replied, and this time shoved past Pancraz, who moved a beat too late to carry off his attempt at turning uncaringly away.

As he reached the stairs, Erich's false levity faded. What had that little encounter been about? Feeling him out for what had really transpired...or was it really the jealousy it had sounded like? Goddess, he was not the man for intrigue. Oh, he could play a good game of mischief as well as any man...but true intrigue was an art, and he was no artist of that kind.

No, that had always been Aden's game.

Mouth curving in a genuine grin as he thought of his friend, who likely was pretending to be a woman in order to beguile secrets from drunken pirates, or playing at being a shy clerk to catch some toad at stealing money from the royal coffers, Erich reached the top of the stairs and strode down the hall to the room he shared with Ingolf.

When he stepped inside, he immediately sought out Ingolf—and found him once again by the window, staring out, his sharp face in almost perfect profile, gaze fastened on the snow or something in it.

Once again Erich was struck by a sense of familiarity. It made no sense, however. He would remember if he had ever encountered Ingolf before, and he definitely had not. So, Ingolf must remind him of someone. But who? No Illussor had Ingolf's dark coloring, the hard, sharp lines of his face. Nor his build—Erich was one of the few Illussor who would not be knocked over or carried away by a strong wind.

Ingolf abruptly shifted, catching Erich staring, and raised his brows in question. "Something wrong?"

Erich shrugged off his private musings, deciding the answer would come of itself in time. "Pancraz found me downstairs; he is not happy you tumbled me in the stable. I think he's jealous."

"I see," Ingolf said with a snort of amused disbelief. "I would be surprised, for I have seen him tumble a wench or three in various stables."

"Oh?" Erich asked, smirking as he set the food down on a rickety table and beckoned Ingolf to join him. "You have seen him tumble the wenches? Do you like to watch then, Krian?"

Ingolf rolled his eyes. "At least I do not like rope."

Erich said nothing, merely removed the covers from two bowls of soup and poured out the pitcher of ale into two tankards. "Come, eat." He tore a chunk from a small loaf of bread and dipped it in the broth, focusing on the food and not on the fact that Ingolf had not exactly denied the accusation.

He frowned when Ingolf remained by the window, Bright in his lap. "You should come eat, before the soup grows cold. It's not bad, for Krian fair."

"Indeed," Ingolf said, snorting in amusement. "I will take Krian food over your spicy preferences, and might even be tempted to choose starvation."

"Well, that is your loss," Erich said cheerfully. "However, this is not Illussor fare, so you should eat it."

Ingolf's brows rose. "Are you my mother, to pester me into eating? I'm not hungry."

"Any man should be, after tumbling *me* in the stable," Erich said.

"Maybe you are not half the tumble you have been led to think."

"Maybe you were so well tumbled, your mind cannot recall it all for fear of being overwhelmed indefinitely." He lobbed a chunk of bread at Ingolf's head.

Ingolf caught the bread and ate it reflexively as he rolled his eyes. "I will not dignify that with a response, Illussor."

Erich only smirked, and went back to eating—carefully saying nothing when a couple of minutes later, Ingolf joined him. Though he ate absently, slowly, Ingolf *did* eat, and Erich silently crowed the victory, trying to ignore the warmth of protectiveness.

Making jests should not be so easy. Feeling protective should not be so instinctive. Hahn was his heart and soul, his everything, even dead. He should not be feeling these things that had died five years ago for a Krian he had met only days ago.

It made no sense, and so he ignored it, but even so he could not quite bring himself to look again at the ring on his left hand.

"So you truly know nothing whatsoever about the Betrayer's sword?"

"You know, you could stop insulting him like that," Erich replied, irritated despite knowing the futility of it. Of course the Krians would regard the Holy General with such negativity. In their eyes, he had betrayed Kria—why would Kria dare to permit any other view be told?

Still, he had read the Breaker's journals, and the true history had been meticulously recorded by royal historians. Lord Dieter had betrayed no one who had not first betrayed him, and Erich hated hearing his name besmirched.

Ingolf's mouth tightened. "He was a traitor."

"He was betrayed first," Erich replied. "I know it because I read the same journals that detailed the only known information about the sword—that it was made with arcen, likely arcen powder, and it can up to a point repel Illussor magic. But the details were lost, because that is how Lord Dieter preferred it. He worked hard to ensure that Illussor would never again rely upon magic, and that meant leaving the secrets of his sword unexplored. Thanks to him, we can fight Salhara *without* magic and keep them from making of us the enemy they have made of you."

"The Betrayer left us and ruined the good name of Scarlet, and all that after murdering Kaiser Benno," Ingolf snapped, hand balling into a fist on the table. "If you benefit, it is because you cut away a piece of Kria that was never given back, never restored."

Erich slammed his own fist down, temper beginning to get away from him, as it had the night he had first met Ingolf. "Does your history bother to tell the part where your useless Kaiser instigated the fight? Does it tell you the part where he murdered Dieter's father in a fit of jealousy? Does it tell you that?"

"Illussor lies," Ingolf snarled, hands slamming as well, bracing him as he leaned forward across the table, their meal forgotten entirely, "so that you might live with yourselves and the knowledge that your freedom was bought with treachery, rather than honorably fought for and won!"

Not to be outdone, Erich stood up as well, until they were barely a hand's width apart over the table. "Oh, yes, and a secret prince," he hissed, "in the middle of a war full of backstabbing and lying has so

much room to talk down to me about treachery. It seems to me that these days, Kria defines the very word!"

Ingolf punched him, sending Erich reeling back, upsetting the table and the food upon it.

Erich recovered quickly, and lunged forward, getting in a hit of his own.

From there, he remembered little more than flashes of pain and the satisfaction of knowing he had given every last bit of it back. They might have gone on until they were both unconscious, if not abruptly halted by the furious shouting of the landlord and pounding upon the door.

Snarling several curses, Ingolf roughly let go of his tunic and stalked to the door, yanking it open and conversing in terse, rapid Krian with the landlord, nearly too fast for Erich to follow the words despite his fluency.

He pulled himself up into a sitting position, back against the nearest wall, legs stretched out in front of him. His entire face throbbed, and he used the back of his right hand to wipe blood from his mouth. Ingolf slammed the door and turned back around, and Erich's mouth twitched to see the livid bruise already forming around his right eye. Oh, yes, he had gotten in a few good hits to make up for the ones Ingolf had landed.

Making a face, Ingolf leaned against the door and folded his arms across his chest. "We should, perhaps, avoid certain topics of conversation."

Erich nodded. "Perhaps."

Apologies made, Erich stood up and returned to the table, righting it and the chairs, then slowly picking up the scattered dishes and bits of food, amazed all the dishes had survived with nothing more than a chip in one bowl.

Before he could speak, another, calmer knock came at the door. The smell of food slipped in as Ingolf opened it, and this time Erich could follow the conversation—apologies and thanks and the exchanging of enough coin to ensure silence and forgiveness.

Ingolf set the new tray of food on the table, and this time ate with real appetite, tearing his bread apart and dipping it in the soup between swallowing spoonfuls of it. They ate in silence for several long minutes.

The silence was not quite tense... but it was not as congenial as it had been, before. They really would have to avoid certain cultural discussions if they wanted to remain comrades and not enemies. A pity, because he rather suspected that Ingolf might like the real Lord Dieter—the Holy General, rather than the Betrayer.

"Did you say that information on the sword was in a journal?"

"Journal number...eight or nine, I always forget precisely which," Erich replied, after swallowing a bit of sausage in the soup. "Lord Beraht von Adolwulf recorded his life, and that of Lord Dieter to some extent, in a series of twenty journals. His life was fascinating, and the small bit that he detailed of Lord Dieter..."

Ingolf frowned, obviously disbelieving. "If they were as close as you have previously implied, why would he say so little about a man important enough they shared a name?"

"Because Lord Dieter wanted to be largely forgotten, or so the journals say. He did not want to become the legend that he became anyway. He was also intensely private, as was Lord Beraht to a somewhat lesser respect, and so he left most of the details of Dieter's life out." Erich shrugged, as disappointed as always. He knew more than most people, because the Holy General was his ancestor, but he doubted he knew even a tenth of the full story.

"So he selfishly took vital secrets to the grave with him?" Ingolf demanded. "Yet you say he is a hero."

Erich's mouth tightened. "He is," he said quietly. "I am sorry we will likely never agree on the point. He was asked by King Matthias to teach the Illussor to live without magic and to fight like Krians. Thanks to him, we are no longer threatened by even the pirates overmuch. What little I know of their history, tells me they were both good men. If he took the secrets with him, it was because he believed the world was better off without still more information on arcen."

Ingolf said nothing, but the vicious way he tore up more bread said enough.

"It is actually rather amusing," Erich said, mouth quirking as a thought occurred to him. "Did you know that before he met Dieter, and they fled to Illussor, Lord Beraht was a Salharan spy?" He had actually been a great deal more than that, but the fact he had been a member of the Salharan Brotherhood was a secret Erich was not at liberty to share. Two of that Brotherhood had died in Illussor in the time of the Holy General—one at his hand, the other at his side, when he and the Breaker finally passed away. "He wrote that he and Dieter clashed often because of their views—that Beraht believed subterfuge had its place... and Lord Dieter, like you, hated it unconditionally."

To that, Ingolf said nothing, though Erich could see he was not pleased about having something in common with the Holy General—never mind that contempt for subterfuge was a uniquely Krian trait. The pirates who ruled the oceans surrounding the continent actually had a saying about the three countries ever clashing across it. *Kria the daylight, Salhara the night, Illussor the dawn and the twilight*. The saying was not meant to be flattering at all—that Krians had a very strict, sharp view of things, Salhara skulked about in the dark, and Illussor waffled between them as was convenient.

Erich had never really cared for most pirates, and he had never been very surprised that despite their contempt, they got along with Salhara best. Like to like, even if the pirates claimed otherwise.

"How do you even know the contents of the journal are true?" Ingolf asked. "Salharans need lies the way they need arcen."

"You would have to read them, to appreciate that every word is true. Lord Beraht would never lie about his life, not after all he lived through, and all he gained."

Ingolf made a face, shifting impatiently. "Whatever. Keep your precious secrets then, and Autumn Prince take your damned journals."

Erich shrugged. "As you wish, then," he said, sad that they seemed to be at odds now, despite agreeing to leave such discussions alone. But, their countries had been at odds or leery truce for nearly as long as they had existed. Was it not a great war which had first torn one great nation into three? "But...if you are ever in Illussor, I grant you permission to read them."

"I need your permission?" Ingolf asked. "You are not descended from the Salharan—" He bit off the sentence, obviously keeping himself from tacking on the 'whore' Krians were so fond of using in reference to Lord Beraht.

"Mine, or that of the Breaker's descendant. He is a friend of mine, actually. We are the only ones allowed to read them, save those to whom we grant permission. So, you have mine." He gave a hesitantly teasing smile. "It might do a Krian good, to read a bit of real history."

Ingolf narrowed his eyes, but then shrugged one shoulder and jested cautiously back, "Like an Illussor would know the look of reality."

Erich laughed, too amused and relieved even to be bothered by the fact his lip had split open again. Across the table, Ingolf was obviously beginning to feel the hits Erich had gotten in their earlier scuffle.

Pushing his food away, he stood and crossed the room to his small bag, rifling through it until he came up with the ointment he always carried for just such purposes. "You look like you lost a fight, Krian."

Ingolf sneered at him and sneered all the more at the little battered tin container of ointment Erich held. "I have never lost a fight to a piddling Illussor."

"Do I look piddling to you?" Erich demanded, offended even though he knew he should not be.

Ingolf looked him up and down, face insultingly thoughtful—but, for a second, Erich thought he saw a spark, a flare of heat that was quickly banked.

Surely he must be imagining things. The very last thing he needed was for his unexpected, unwanted, impossible hint of lust for the damned Krian to be mutual. That was a headache of a whole different nature, and not one he was prepared to deal with—not when he could not even cope with lusting after someone after five years of barely wanting to continue living.

"I suppose not," Ingolf said. "For an Illussor, anyway. All that muscle, I might almost think you have some Krian blood, but you are entirely too pale for that."

"Maybe you're entirely too dark," Erich retorted. "I vow, anyone outside my country I have ever met, has been confounded by our light coloring. I do not see what is so baffling about it."

Ingolf snorted. "I have seen many Illussor in my days working the border; few of them were as pale as you."

"Mmm," Erich said with a shrug. "My father postulated once that I am likely of completely pure Illussor blood. There's no pirate or Krian or Salharan or anything in it—I am as pale as the oldest of our ancestors, or near enough."

"Interesting," Ingolf said. "A full blooded Illussor descended from a full-blooded Krian." He shook his head. "Such a thing would never be possible in Kria. Illussor is a strange place."

Erich smeared some of the ointment over his own cuts and bruises, carefully rubbing it in, hiding any grimace at the sting, just knowing Ingolf would sneer if he did. "Most of the noble houses are more strict in regards to having a legitimate blood heir. It is standing tradition for the two houses of von Adolwulf to adopt heirs, rather than tie the tradition to blood. Neither Lord Dieter nor Lord Beraht favored right of blood over a man earning his place."

"So what if you had not earned your place?" Ingolf asked. "Would they have told you sorry, but back to the street you go?"

"No," Erich replied, amused and horrified all at once. Was that really what a Krian would do? But, he supposed it was—he had never known a Krian to show mercy to anyone, for any reason. "My father said I seemed to bumble my way through it well enough," he said with a grin, "even if he never could figure out why I do not share his passion for politics."

Ingolf grimaced at the mention of politics, and Erich could only smile in agreement. His father had possessed a rare talent for it, and all while being a good man, but Erich had always been too hot-blooded for such delicate games.

He stared out the window and saw that the snow was only falling all the heavier. "I fear we may not ever have to address the matter of the mysterious sword," he said, knowing Ingolf would know he meant the traitors.

Nodding, Ingolf moved to the window, blocking Erich's view—but the view of Ingolf's backside was not entirely abhorrent, as much as he hated himself for thinking it.

He rubbed in the ointment still on his hands, using it to ease the way the cold always made the skin drier and more prone to splitting. He frowned thoughtfully at Ingolf, wondering if he would have to pin the man down to get any of the ointment on his myriad wounds. Krians. They would rather suffer miserably than seek any sort of comfort for fear it would appear weakness. Was any creature in the world more stubborn than a Krian?

"If you would sit down, I could treat those wounds," he called out.

Ingolf turned, familiar Krian sneer on his face. "I do not need you treating such paltry cuts."

"Mmm, we have agreed I am not piddling, therefore, the wounds I inflict are not *paltry*. If you would prefer to feel that bruise over your eye for several days rather than a couple, by all means, you daft Krian. If you have any smidgen of intelligence, however, I suggest you get your stubborn goat ass over here."

The only reply he received to that was another sneer, but before he could begin to argue the point in earnest—and really, he was only looking to spark another argument, and why he would do that was not a question he felt like answering—there came a knock at the door.

Ingolf's face, beginning to light with the same something that had driven Erich to start the argument, immediately tightened. He strode across the room, boots making hard, sharp thumps on the floor, and yanked the door open. "Yes?" he asked, voice a bit cool.

"Boss, I was downstairs getting a drink and the wench said there'd been trouble up here." Pancraz arched his eyes at the livid bruise around Ingolf's eye, the scratch that ran from midway down his right cheek to just about his chin. No doubt it would be more or less gone by morning, but for the moment Erich supposed it was one more reason for Pancraz to dislike him. "We should not be letting the damned Illussor wander free, boss. Look at what he's done to you!"

"Are you implying I cannot handle myself against one pathetic Illussor?" Ingolf demanded, voice like ice. "If I required assistance, Pancraz, I would have indicated as such. We had a disagreement."

"Like your disagreement in the stable?" Pancraz asked, and the bitterness in his voice took Erich by surprise.

He gave up watching the two surreptitiously and stared outright. Pancraz was a traitor; if anything he should be gleeful right now that Ingolf was proving to be so unstable a ruler by seeming to get on more or less well with a hostage.

"Well, that argument was a bit more pleasant," Ingolf replied with a smirk. "If you had not knocked, well, we might have moved on to that portion of this disagreement. Go get your beer and go to bed, Pancraz. Or find a wench to tumble; you look as though you could use it." He reached out and slapped Pancraz's cheek lightly in gruff affection. Erich wondered what it cost him to put on such a farce.

Then he wondered if it was entirely a farce... until a couple of hours ago, he had trusted Pancraz with his life. How hard was it to give up such a bond, such faith? Surely it must be nearly as hard as giving up on a spouse half a decade dead and gone.

"The snow will keep us here a few more days, I fear," Ingolf continued. "Do not succumb to the winter fever quite yet, my friend. Go find your beer and bed. We will speak over breakfast about how best to get on our way."

Pancraz nodded stiffly, obviously wanting to continue to argue, but knowing the futility of it. "Yes, boss," he said tersely. "Breakfast." He shifted his gaze to stare at Erich, and the depth of his dislike took Erich completely aback.

How had he incurred so much hate, so quickly? Especially from someone who wanted Ingolf dead. He stared back, keeping his expression carefully blank, and decided he should perhaps move up his plan from waiting until they reached their destination to quietly following and observing Pancraz whenever he was able.

The door closed a moment later, Ingolf calling a final goodnight, and Erich watched as he strode slowly back to the table, and dropped down wearily into a seat.

Erich rubbed ointment onto his own fingers then snatched up Ingolf's right hand from where it lay upon the table, lifting one brow in concern and question when Ingolf did not even attempt to fight him. When

he finished rubbing the ointment into the scraped knuckles and minor bruises, he shifted his chair to sit next to Ingolf, rather than across from him.

"You have known each other a long time?" he asked very softly, in Illussor.

Ingolf nodded stiffly. *"Pancraz and Sepp were part of my personal retinue. The others were all killed, getting me out of the city. He has saved my life, before, and I his... I had always planned to give them positions of honor, after I was made Verdant General. When all this happened... I thought to keep them as my private guard. It is..."* He broke off, mouth tight, unable to say anymore of what he likely thought to be weak words.

He did not need to finish them, though. Erich could finish the sentence well enough himself. It was hard to accept that men he trusted that deeply had never truly followed him. Erich could not fathom it, though he could sympathize with the wrenching cold of accepting that a crucial piece of the world was forever gone, and there was nothing to be done about it.

Though he was tempted to offer some words of sympathy, he knew Ingolf would only reject them and sneer. Instead, he only nodded and scooped out more ointment to rub into the bruise and scratches on Ingolf's face. That Ingolf only sat there gnawed at Erich, a feeling of protectiveness that was cold and unhappy with the knowledge he did not know how to take these shadows away.

Stifling a sigh, he wiped his hands on his leggings, then replaced the lid on his tin and moved to restore the tin to his bag. He glanced again at his ring as he set the bag back on the floor, slipping it off to toy with it again, read the word *Ghost* that was inscribed inside.

"But you are a ghost," Hahn insisted, nose scrunching in that way it always did when he was irritated. "Or you may as well be one, in some respects."

Erich snorted. "You know, it's really completely distasteful when my fellow countrymen make fun of my coloring. Especially my best friend."

"Lack of color, you mean. But, that's not what I mean. Yes, that's part of it... but come on, you can never be found unless you want to be, you thrive on surprising and scaring people—just look at what you did to poor Minister Esten! You come and go at will, and no one knows how to capture you." Hahn's arms moved about to emphasize all he was saying, pale green eyes bright, a smile curving his entirely too pretty mouth. Really, Erich hated that mouth. It got him into all manner of trouble.

He smiled at Hahn's words, undone by his best friend as he always was, even if Hahn did not realize just how much power he really had over Erich. "That's not true. You know how to capture me, Binder."

"Maybe I should be a ghost hunter," Hahn said, and the thoughtful expression on his cute, freckled face was endearing and the most exquisite of torture. Erich felt like the worst sort of leech. He was sixteen, and Hahn only fourteen. He should not be thinking his best friend had a pretty mouth, and cute freckles, or all the dirty things that came to mind when he was alone in his room at night.

Struggling to put the thoughts away, he snorted and reached out to ruffle Hahn's soft, pale gold curls. "Maybe you should stop reading those ridiculous books. I am a proud descendant of the Holy General, not some ghost."

"Yes, you are. You're pale and sneaky and elusive and know more about my moldering castle than any living person. Always dressed in red, stark white otherwise, skulking and sneaking about—the Ghost of the Scarlet Wolf! The Scarlet Ghost." Delighted with his own wit, Hahn collapsed into a fit of giggles, nearly planting his face in his neglected lunch.

Erich made a face and stole the dish of custard that Hahn was obviously never going to eat. "Oh, stop laughing."

Hahn stuck his tongue out and waggled his eyes brows. "Make me."

The urge to do precisely that, in all sorts of dirty ways, nearly caused Erich to bite his own tongue off with the effort of resisting. Shifting in his seat, uncomfortable and tense and guilty, he settled for throwing the bones left from his lunch at Hahn's head.

Erich smiled faintly at the memory, recalling that it had been their afternoon history tutor who had caught them and reported their unseemly behavior to the Queen—who had told his father, who had set him to memorizing various political essays as punishment, for no greater punishment had existed for Erich back then.

Only a couple of weeks later, he remembered, he and Hahn had gotten into the fight that nearly ended their friendship. Two months after that... Hahn's fifteenth birthday, and everything had changed for the better that morning.

What would Hahn say, to know his Ghost was quietly lusting after a Krian? And the Kaiser, no less. Nothing would ever come of it, of course. When this strange adventure ended, he would return to Illussor and take up his role as the heir apparent, though he did not want the throne. He would very likely never see Ingolf again. So it was momentary lust and hardly worthy of inspiring the guilt wracking him, the odd feelings of protectiveness.

"What would you say, Hahn?" he asked himself softly in Illussor.

He buried his face in his hands, to hide the sudden and unexpected tears, as he could all but hear Hahn's voice in his head, warm as sunlight and familiar as his own, saying that he was not really a ghost and should stop acting like one.

When he could finally pull his hands away without feeling as though he would attract sneering attention from Ingolf, he stood up only long enough to remove his topmost layers of clothing and his boots, then lay down in his bed and pulled up the thin blanket and his cloak, draped over the bedding for additional warmth. Ignoring Ingolf, unable to deal with any of it, he closed his eyes and willed himself to get some rest.

Chapter Six

'Sneaky enough to be a Salharan' was a phrase Aden had heard more than once growing up, usually from people who had personal reasons for wanting to hurt him, occasionally from friends and family who loved him and just liked to tease.

Aden had never denied he had a talent for sneaking about, but he did resent being compared to Salhara—they, after all, had never caught him, and he had caught a few of them. He was better than any Salharan sneak-thief by a long shot.

No one had really been surprised when he began to show a penchant for such things. It might not be in the blood, but it *was* in the family. To date, three in his line had taken up darker aspects of serving the royal family, and they all had done it well.

There were times, however, when he wished he were content to be a simple soldier. If he had chosen that path, by now he would be high enough in rank to have his own office in his own fortress, with plenty of foot soldiers to run every tedious errand while he stayed snug and warm inside.

Goddess, he was tired of the snow and cold. The very moment he found a fire, he was going to throw himself into it simply for the warmth. Cresting the latest hill, he nearly wept with relief to see the village precisely where the farmer had told him it would be. A night or two of rest, and then he could travel the week to the royal palace—assuming the weather held. It had finally stopped snowing four days ago, and travel was just barely possible for those fools desperate enough to try.

Aden definitely qualified as desperate, and he had the money and the horse to indulge his desperation.

He reached the village an hour later, just ahead of the falling night, and stumbled his way wearily to the stable. Rousing the stable lad from a nest of blankets and hay, he gave him a coin and stayed to watch long enough to ensure the boy would not shirk any duty in tending his horse.

Then he fought his way through the snow to the inn itself, not bothering to keep back a deep sigh as he reached it. Warmth from the fireplace drew him, made him shake as his body slowly began to thaw. He stripped the gloves from his hands first, never comfortable when he could not use his hands to their full capacity. Once they had warmed, he began to strip off the rest of his winter gear, hanging it on the appropriate hooks close to the fire, then sitting down straight on the floor to be as close to the flames as possible.

A woman came bustling in a couple of minutes later, snorting at him in amusement. "Thin-blooded Illussor," she said, clucking her tongue. "Not enough Krian in you to make you tough, I can see that."

Though given a nasty start that she would make him so easily, Aden gave no show of it. Instead he merely gave her a sheepish smile and laughed self-deprecatingly as he took the warmed ale she plopped on the nearest table. Settling down in a proper seat, he gestured. "Sorry to offend your sensibilities, milady," he said. "I hope you will not hold it too much against me."

"Long as you got the coin," she replied, setting out food and a pitcher that contained more ale. "I do not particularly care how thin your blood. Little Illussor should stay inside, however, lest the Winter Princess take them to her bed for a night they cannot handle."

Aden shuddered. "Never fear, milady; that is one woman I am capable of resisting."

"Ha!" she declared, but smiled before moving briskly back toward the kitchens.

Grateful for food and drink, even if they were yet more Krian fare, Aden dug in until the wretched snow outside was just a nightmare he could avoid for one night. As he settled down and began to relax a bit, conversation began to filter into his mind—it was not much, only the woman and her barmaid, gossiping about men, but eavesdropping was second nature. It often provided him with information he would never have gotten otherwise.

Like the fact, he suddenly realized, they were discussing an Illussor visitor who had left just three days ago after being trapped by the snow in this very tavern for almost four days. He listened with amusement as they discussed him—tall and almost Krian in his build, but nearly as pale as the snow in his coloring.

Aden snorted in amusement, the description reminding him of his friend Erich. Now there was an amusing thought—Erich tromping through Kria. As if Erich was that much fun anymore. The momentary amusement faded from Aden's face. No, that Erich was long gone; he may as well be as dead as Hahn. The Erich of today was somber and quiet, always sighing or staring off into the distance at things that were long dead.

Still, an Illussor this far into Kria—and one who could not be mistaken for anything *but* Illussor—was unusual. Aden wondered if he knew the man. Likely not, but it would probably be wise to learn what he could, in case the man proved to be up to something, or perhaps sent here by the Queen. Aden really hated that his life often made him completely unaware of the rest of his world at times.

"Ho!" he called out cheerfully to the women, giving them his most charming smile. "You say another of my brothers was here? Did he carry a sword? What did it look like?" It was the best way to mark the man, and no Krian would ever fail to note a unique sword. Whoever the man was, Aden doubted he walked with an unremarkable sword.

"Oh, he was beautiful," the younger woman said eagerly, cheeks flushed pink. "Most impressive for an Illussor, but he was not as small as most of you are." She flushed darker as she realized she might have offended him. "That is, I did not mean—"

Aden waived the words aside, laughing gently. "No harm, little sister," he replied congenially. "Describe his sword, for me, if you do not mind."

"It was a fine piece, especially for an Illussor," the young woman said. "Good steel, the hilt was wrapped in braided silver and gold, and the pommel was shaped to resemble the head of a wolf."

He nearly choked on his ale, as the words struck him. Bent double in a coughing fit, he told himself he *had* to have heard wrong. "Did you say the pommel was shaped to resemble a wolf's head?"

"Y-yes," the woman said, frowning uncertainly.

Getting control of himself, taking another cautious sip of ale to ease his throat, he smiled at her. "I was merely surprised; I believe that is a sword I know by reputation. He is a good fighter, back home."

The women nodded, but soon found reason to vanish into the kitchen.

Aden glared at the table once he was left alone. Knew by reputation, his ass. That was Erich's sword, the unnamed blade he had taken after burying Hahn with Ghost. Tits of the Winter Princess! He curled his hand into a fist and slammed it on the table, then forced himself to relax and think clearly.

Why in the hells would the only heir to the throne run off to Kria? A sick feeling pooled in Aden's stomach. Was Erich running away? Had he decided he could not bear to stay in Illussor without Hahn, and run off to the homeland of his precious ancestor? But even as he thought it, he was shaking his head. Erich had been getting *better* these past couple of years, even if he was still only a shadow of what he had been.

He frowned unhappily at the table, memories of the Erich he had grown up with clashing with images of the wan man his friend had become. Erich, who had once been in possession of a temper that, once slipped free of its leash, made everyone declare Erich a true descendant of the Holy General. Erich, who had once laughed at everything and could never hold still because there was always something to do, someone to cozen into helping him broaden his language skills. Erich, who had been kind and funny and ready to do anything to help a friend.

Erich, who now barely smiled—and only weakly—and who wandered the palace and the land like the Ghost Hahn had once so fondly called him after. He was nothing now but a pale imitation of the man he had been—had that pale imitation finally snapped, somehow?

Aden worried his bottom lip, hardly noticing when his teeth accidentally tore open a barely-healed split in it until he tasted the blood. He chased the coppery taste with ale, mind still completely on Erich. He needed to find Erich, but he had no idea where he might have gone after departing here, and he still needed to get word back to the Queen.

So, he would have to come back after he delivered his news. There was no other choice, as frustrating as it was. Goddess damn him, what was Erich doing? Queen Reni was sick and weak, despite all efforts to restore her health. The plague had not killed her, but it may as well have for all the strength she had left. Erich knew that, damn him. Where would Illussor be if something happened to him here—and that was an all too real possibility. Salhara was tearing Kria apart; they would not hesitate to kill one pesky, out-of-place Illussor.

Unless, of course, they figured out who Erich was; in which case they would take him hostage and demand a ransom, which would in turn set off events that Illussor could ill afford at the moment. If they were going to involve themselves in the fight, then they would be best served to do it on their terms. If they were forced to enter the fray because of a ransom demand for the heir apparent...

When he found Erich, Aden was going to wring his neck and beat him to a pulp, and then he was going to find a way to chain Erich to one location.

He smiled, ever so briefly, as he recalled what must have been hundreds of escapes in their youth. Aden had the talent for blending in, getting information...but he had never come even close to Erich's almost eerie ability to escape all manners of capture and confinement. Only one person had ever captured Erich and kept him, and that person held him captive even in death.

Unless...someone had kidnapped Erich? Aden pursed his lips in thought, then dismissed the notion with a shake of his head. No, the Salharans had no need to make such a bold move, and they would not move through Kria—there were better and faster ways to transport a hostage between Illussor and Salhara. Neither would the Krians do it. They were not above taking prisoners of war, but it was not their style to take a hostage from an uninvolved country. And it would gain them nothing but another enemy, anyway.

No...he knew nothing, had nothing to go on, but something told him this was all Erich. If Aden did not know better, he would say it sounded like the old Erich, running off on some strange adventure from which he would have to be literally dragged, kicking and screaming and getting free at every opportunity unless someone managed to keep him drugged—and that was harder to do than it should be.

Heaving a sigh, thinking wistfully of the bed he had hoped to sleep on that night, Aden threw some coins down upon the table and gathered up his winter gear, then left the inn to go back to the stable. Erich always had been good at depriving him of sleep.

In the stable, he left the poor stable boy to his warm little nest, readying his horse himself. A fine beast, and if ever saw Reinoehl again, he would have to thank him for allowing him to keep it—not that Aden had asked, nor had Reinoehl offered, but neither had he protested.

Aden's hand stilled as he thought of Reinoehl, absently curling around the leather saddle he had just secured. By now, Reinoehl must be in the mountains, hidden away to...what? Obviously he intended to fight the Salharans, but how?

He let go of the saddle to draw out the necklace he wore, the gleaming silver bright against his cold hand, and only then did he realize he had forgotten to put on his gloves.

It was a beautiful necklace, made of high quality silver. The chain was delicate looking, but deceptively strong. The pendant itself... it was a thing of beauty. He wondered to whom it had belonged. Reinoehl had said his sword was unnamed, so likely not a lover... his mother? There was no way to know. The pendant was of the four crests of the gods of Kria, the Goddesses of Summer and Winter, the Gods of Spring and Winter, each affectionately called 'prince' or 'princess' respectively by the people of Kria.

The crests were artistically twined together, with each symbol arranged in its appropriate position—north, east, south, west. At the top, in the position of north, was an intricate snowflake. Woven into it in the eastern position was the ivy leaf of the Spring Prince. Directly opposite it was the red-orange leaf of the Autumn Prince. Tied into both of those, in the southern position, was the sunburst emblem of the Summer Princess.

He tucked it away again into his tunic, shaking his head at himself. Why he was so caught up on Reinoehl, he did not know—but there was no denying he had been relieved, even pleased, when Reinoehl had decided to trust him after all.

Leading his horse from the stable, apologizing that neither of them would be getting a full night's rest after all, he mounted and rode off into the dark, driven by a desire to reach home and share his information, so that he might turn around and go in search of a runaway prince.

~~*

Aden all but fell off his horse as he reached the courtyard of the royal palace of Illussor. It was a beautiful sight after having spent so many long days and night to reach it, after whoring himself out to save a mercurial general...

Despite it all, he *was* home. He wasted no time, though the urge to find the nearest flat surface and fall asleep was strong, and threw the reins of his horse to a waiting footman. Then he bolted up the main stairs, and all but ran through the halls, ignoring the startled and dismayed looks of the people he passed. A few called him by name, others by title, but he ignored them all. He had very little energy left, and he wanted to make his report before he simply fell over and did not wake for three days, which was very much what he wanted to do.

Reaching the Queen's private chambers, he nearly groaned in despair as he saw an unfamiliar face at the desk in the waiting room—Reni had replaced her secretary yet again. Damn the woman, could she not be satisfied with one of them?

The clerk, a man entirely too young for his post, lifted disapproving brows at Aden's appearance. Aden glared right back. Yes, he was in quite the wild state, but the man must know her Highness received all kinds—and that often men were far more than they seemed.

"Inform her Majesty I am here to see her," Aden said imperiously, deciding he would not tell the man who he was—the little boy should know, and if he did not, well, Reni needed to stop selecting nitwits for such a post.

"Her Majesty gave orders not to be disturbed," the man said haughtily. "I will inform her of your presence when she chooses to receive visitors again."

Aden smiled in a way that made the man recoil and stalked to the desk, reaching over it to snag him by the front of his heavily laced, dark pink jacket. "This is a matter of urgency, little boy, and I have told you to inform her that I am here."

The man's eyes widened—but mostly because he had spied the ring that Aden had restored to his finger after crossing the border into Illussor.

"Y-yes, your grace. My apologies, I did not recog—"

Aden roughly let him go. "Inform her."

Before the man could obey, the door opened and a tall, slender woman dressed in pale blue filled the doorway. "Honestly, Addie. Stop scaring him. Goodness, you look a perfect fright. Get in here; we have problems."

Striding to the door, Aden strode past her into the office, pointedly ignoring her as she explained to her sniveling secretary that there was no cause for alarm, and he had best grow used to it, because the Duke of Torla most always arrived looking as though he had escaped from some dungeon and sometimes even a cave.

He collapsed on the settee beneath the wide windows on the eastern wall, relishing the feel of sunlight minus the bite of winter air, stripping off his gloves and casting them aside.

"I have called for tea."

Aden looked up at the words and smiled warmly despite his exhaustion, taking the pale hands offered him in his own somewhat darker, and much, much dirtier hands. "Reni," he said. "I am sorry. We do, indeed, have problems."

She sighed and nodded, and bent to kiss his cheek, wrinkling her freckled nose at him. "Honestly, Aden. Must you always arrive in such dishevelment?"

"I had no time to arrive as befits my station," he replied tartly. "The Krian royal family is dead, and I have reason to believe that Erich is somewhere in Kria, though only the Goddess knows why!"

Reni sat down beside him, hands curling in her lap briefly before they smoothed out to worry the soft, pale blue silk of her dress. "Someone stole Bright," she said. "Erich jotted a note before he bolted off after the thieves. I have sent men out to find him, and the last missive I received said he had charged into Kria after them. We have not been able to locate him, yet."

Aden groaned. "Bright? How in the world did anyone manage to steal Bright?" He knew how, though. Once, Erich would never have allowed such a thing to happen. Ever since Hahn's death, however... he had barely functioned, never mind kept his guard up. If he kept up his swordsmanship, it was only because that had become pure habit. "Why would anyone steal Bright? The Krians hate the Holy General, why would they want his sword? And Salhara would not insult themselves by using an arcen-soaked weapons when they know the 'true' way to use the stuff."

Reni shook her head, looking almost twice her twenty-six years for a moment. "What do you mean, the Krian royal family is dead?"

"Exactly that," Aden said grimly and proceeded to tell her everything he knew and had experience since entering Kria three months ago. When he finally finished, their tea had come and been long forgotten on the table before the settee.

Reni stood and strode across to the windows on the opposite side, hands clasped behind her back.

Aden watched her, familiar feelings of sadness and regret and pointless wishing for things that might have been and would never be. The plague five years ago had seemed to come from nowhere, striking nearly everyone. Too many had died from it after suffering for two or three days. Some, like he and Erich, had been fortunate enough not to be struck at all. Others, like Reni, had somehow survived but been weaker in body afterwards.

None of them would ever forget those horrific days. So many had died and in such awful fashion... of the royal family, only Reni remained. She had buried her father, her mother, and a brother. She had been forced to take the throne when she was only twenty-one, too young, stricken with grief and fear...

All of which she had overcome, or mastered, or shoved away until she had the luxury of time to cope with it. She was tall and slender, with hair the color of corn silk and eyes the same pale green as her proud father. Her skin was too pale, from sickness she would never overcome—too many feared that the Queen would succumb to the ravages left by the plague at any time. They feared more she would do so without leaving a proper heir, that Erich was too unstable to take the throne.

Illussor needed a strong leader, but there did not appear to be one forthcoming. The best solution would be for the Queen to marry, or at least adopt, but so far she had refused to do either. Even Aden did not know her reasons for eschewing something so vital and basic as securing a good heir.

Perhaps she, like him, still had some quiet hope that Erich would overcome his depression one day—and one day soon. They needed that Erich of old; they all needed to be what they once had been... for if Aden were honest, neither he nor Reni had ever recovered from those days either. She buried herself in the complications of ruling an unstable country, and he took dangerous jobs that left him buried for months in enemy territory, instead of rousting out local troublemakers as he had once preferred.

Too many pieces of their world had been buried five years ago, though he rather thought none of them had taken it as hard as Erich.

He scrubbed tiredly at his face, and picked up his teacup, drinking the contents despite the fact the tea was long cooled. "So what do you want to do, Reni?"

She did not immediately reply, her mouth drawn down as she carefully turned over the unhappy thoughts preying upon her mind. "I believe," she said at last, "that Illussor has stayed neutral long enough. I will summon my generals, and the banners of war will fly once more from the Regenbogen."

Aden stood only to kneel on the floor before her, bowing his head low. "Yes, my Queen. What would you have of me, in this?"

Reni smiled faintly, sadly, and reached out to stroke his hair. "Do not die, Addie. Please, I could not bear to lose any more family. You and Erich are all I have left."

"Do you want me to go find him?"

She sighed softly, and replied, "No. I have good men hunting that troublemaker out. I want you to return to this Cobalt General of yours, and let him know that we march to war. If Kria desires our help, inform them that we will march from the Regenbogen directly into Salhara, headed for the capital. The only way to end this is to go directly to the source. With so many of their forces in Kria, their homelands will be weak. We can take advantage of that if Kria will support us."

"Yes, my Queen," Aden replied, heart beating rapidly in his chest. They really would go to war—and he would be able to inform Reinoehl that he had been true to his word, that he had proven worthy of that trust. It should not matter... but somehow it did, and he did not at present have the energy to figure out

why. He only hated the despair and self-loathing he had seen, had hated the way Reinoehl had spoken to him, about him. A spy he might be, but he was still honorable, Goddess damn him.

Reni tugged lightly, indicating he should rise and kissed his cheek before he rose to his full height. "Go, Addie," she said softly. "Rest, prepare, and then simply go. I will be locked in arguments with my council and the generals for days as we prepare to move forward with our plans."

He looked at her, smiling. "So you have been preparing for this?"

"Preparing for the possibility," she demurred. "I only hope what we intend, works. Illussor has not gone to war for some time, and the last was only a battle to reestablish that we would never part with the Regenbogen, no matter how badly Salhara wants it."

"It would certainly be the first thing they would try to take after securing Kria," Aden agreed.

He was not fooled by her modesty. Reni might be weak in body, but her mind had always been the sharpest amongst them. Despite everything, she was a good ruler when her poor health did not get the better of her. Especially when it came to war strategy—throughout their schooling, not a one of them had beaten her at the games they had played to master such skills. If the events of five years ago had not gone the way they had it was entirely possible that Reni would be serving on the war council even now, rather than preparing to go meet with it as Queen.

But, the past was the past and could not be undone, and she was a good Queen.

Kissing her cheek in turn, bidding her a farewell, Aden left her chambers and, ignoring the secretary and everyone else he passed, headed for his own private quarters in the royal palace.

There was no mistaking his room, for emblazoned on the door was the crest of Torla, redesigned several generations ago by the seventh man to take up that title, after being awarded it by King Matthias. It displayed a golden sun, overlaid by a silver crescent moon—the Seal of Torla, and the symbol of the Order of Light.

As the current Duke of Torla, he and he alone could induct soldiers into the Order of Light. Those inducted were people who had proven themselves capable in less than orthodox methods—in the greatest of ironies, the Order of Light was comprised primarily of spies. The entire order had been created by the eighth Duke of Torla, in honor of his father, the Breaker himself.

In addition to the seal, the Order also shared the family motto—*One man's darkness is another's light*.

Sighing softly, Aden let himself into his room and promptly began to strip out of his rank clothes, tossing them haphazardly as he half-walked, half-stumbled to the bath that Reni had somehow arranged to be waiting for him. Scrubbing himself with the pails of water closest to the fire, he soaped and shaved and cleaned before finally sinking into the still-hot water of the bathing tub, groaning in relief as the hot water soothed away all his physical aches.

He tried to let his mind rest, but it simply refused—there was too much to think about: how soon he should leave, what he should take this trip, how best to sneak back into Kria, what to do once he was there, how best to reach Reinoehl again.

Around his throat, the necklace still weighed heavy. He picked it up and looked again at the intertwined emblems, running his thumb over it, memorizing it's contours, every minute detail. He was not one for talismans, really. In his line of work, one learned quickly to become attached to nothing. Such things gave a man away, marked him—made him weak. It was bad enough he carried his own personal sword with him, though he was smart enough to wrap the hilt and not wear it unless he strictly needed.

It would be best if he left as soon as possible. A day or two to rest, get the feel of things, see his gear properly cleaned, his supplies replenished. Then he would be back on the road, racing through a war-torn Kria up into the mountains toward the Fortress of Eis.

Though... wait a moment...

He had been so consumed with getting home, so angry at the way Reinoehl had treated him, that the sheer oddness of his statement had not struck Aden before. Show the necklace at the Fortress of Eis, he had said.

The Fortress of Eis had always been the stronghold and home of the Cobalt Generals. The ever-snowy mountains were the realm of those who carried the banner of the Winter Princess herself. But...the Fortress of Eis had been taken by Salhara weeks ago. That was how they had driven the Cobalt General from it, out into places where they had been able to use treachery to capture and kill him alongside his unfortunate wife and most of his compatriots.

Why would Reinoehl tell Aden to find him at a place occupied by the Salharans?

Aden's gut twisted at the thought he had been played for a fool—yet Krians in general did not favor such games, and Reinoehl had seemed in keeping with that. He had been completely and utterly Krian, with a stark black and white view of the world. Why would he tell Aden to seek him at a place even Reinoehl could no longer go?

Unless...

He laughed with sudden realization and the hot surge that told him his instincts were right.

Reinoehl was not betraying him, had not lied to him. No, Reinoehl had, true to his nature, been a Krian through and through. If he had told Aden to seek him at the Fortress of Eis, it was because he intended to be once more in possession of his home by the time he expected Aden to come in search of him.

Laughing all over again, Aden heaved himself out of the bathing tub and snatched up a drying cloth, scrubbing himself ruthlessly dry before casting it on the massive bed and walking naked into his wardrobe.

Tonight and tomorrow, he would remain in the palace. He would show support for his Queen, and enjoy real food, replenish his mind, body and spirit, before he ventured back into Kria and went to greet his new comrade in arms at the Fortress of Eis.

Chapter Seven

Reinoehl accepted the flask his Commander held out to him with a grunt of thanks, taking a swallow of the burning liquor, appreciating the artificial warmth it lent against the biting cold. He loved his mountain home, but she was the most frigid bitch she knew. Even most Krians, who otherwise loved the cold, detested the mountains.

"Where do we stand?" he asked, the words barely audible, handing the flask back.

Tucking it away again, his Commander flicked his fingers in silent reply, indicating things to which Reinoehl nodded. They were in a tenuous position. Most would no doubt consider it the height of stupidity to waste men and time and limited resources to take back a fortress buried high in the mountains and well over a two week's ride away—in good conditions.

But the mountains had always served as a natural barrier between Kria and Salhara along the northwest edge. It was taking the Fortress of Eis that had allowed them to secure a place from which to finally attack the Winter Palace.

His father had failed in his duties as the Cobalt General—even if he had never expected the treachery that had spelled his demise. Reinoehl would have begrudged his men nothing if they had decided not to follow him... yet upon his arrival, they had sworn fealty to their new Cobalt General without hesitation.

He could only hope he proved worthy of their loyalty.

The plan was a risky one, mostly because their knowledge of the fortress' occupants was severely limited. They dare not send scouts, however, for to give themselves away even a little bit would spell the end of the venture before it could begin.

Salharan strength must be great, if they thought to hold the Fortress of Eis indefinitely. Reinoehl could only hope that they were not enduring the cold well; that would help them more than anything right now. He was banking, perhaps too much, on the Salharans being tucked safely and warmly away.

Their limited observations seemed to support that theory—so far the patrols they had spied had been minimal, and lazy. He seldom saw more than a cursory walk of the battlements. The Salharans inside were confident in their victory and loathing the miserable cold.

Reinoehl silently motioned for his second to come with him, and with careful movements they left the rock from which they had been observing the fortress, slipping through the dense trees into a hidden cave entrance that led to his temporary headquarters.

The mass of caves had been a personal project of the Cobalt Generals for generations. Even when his family had not held that honored position, the preceding family had worked upon the caves. An elaborate network of them—and more than a few men had died carving these paths and blocking those dangerous holes—all so that should the worst happen, the enemy still would not know that they had not completely defeated the Cobalt Army.

He could only thank his patron Goddess that those who had known of the caves had not given *that* secret to Salhara. Now, of course, the secret must be out—what remained of his army was hidden within the elaborate maze of caves with him. They, all of them, were growing weary of living by lamplight, and cooking only when the dark would keep their smoke a secret.

They might love the winter and this land where her presence never faded, but they preferred to do it from the comforts of their home.

It would all be worth it, though, because that night they would take back the Fortress of Eis, and Salhara would learn that Kria was not yet as defeated as Salhara might wish. Not while the Sacred Four Armies still stood, and not while their new Kaiser remained free.

Reinoehl grimaced, thinking of Ingolf. He hoped the damned bastard was still alive, so that he might kill Ingolf himself. What had he been thinking, vanishing like that after barely escaping the Winter Palace with his life? At least, Reinoehl *hoped* he had escaped. No one, to the best of his knowledge, had heard a single word in regards to the Kaiser.

He was certain the Salharans did not have him—if they did, they would have made certain all of Kria knew it. The only thing that had saved Ingolf was the fact that until the last moment, no one had known the Verdant General's Commander was, in fact, the Kaiser's bastard son. The Kaiser had never denied his son, but for purposes of state, the truth of his identity had always been kept fairly quiet.

Thank the gods for that.

Wending his way through the caves, joined at some point by his strategists, he led the way through his private chambers and into the war room alongside them.

Rugs covered the floors here, and furs draped the walls, with several lanterns strewn about to make the place as bright as possible. He missed the fine wooden paneling of his real war room, the beautiful map that took up an entire wall—and which they had burned, to prevent its falling into Salharan hands. It would take years to recreate it, and it would never truly be the same...

He shook off the regrets; there was no time for such things. "So tell me our final plans," he said, motioning to his Commander and two strategists, nodding as another came from one of the back rooms.

The strategists moved forward, to the large table in the middle of the room and the map spread across it. Various markers covered it, designating the different groups of soldiers and their numbers, as the strategists explained the finalized plans for the attack they would be mounting when the full moon rose.

A night attack was dangerous for more reasons that Reinoehl liked to think about, but it was their best chance, because they could fight better in the dark and cold than any Salharan, even if too many of the Salharans appeared to have yellow eyes. Tonight, beneath a full moon, would be their best chance.

He listened attentively as his men laid out the finalized strategy, asking questions and pointing things out as he saw fit, but when they were done, only a few minor details had been altered. His men were the very best at what they did, and they had never had such motivation as this.

Next to him, his Commander once more pulled out his flask, passing it around the table. Reinoehl chuckled as he accepted it in his turn. "Vester, only you could acquire such things in the middle of a war. I continue to be grateful the von Sturm family has always chosen to throw in their lot with Cobalt."

Vester smirked briefly, but his face was a study in innocence when he replied, "Lord General, it is my life to serve you, in whatever capacity, by whatever means. You need not trouble yourself as to the details of how such is accomplished; simply enjoy the fire-water."

Reinoehl snorted in amusement at the 'fire-water' bit—a Salharan's too literal translation of the name for the strong alcohol common to this region of Kria. It was an older Krian word, and roughly meant liquid fire; the name derived from the way it burned going down. Locked in a war, with villages being overrun—if not outright destroyed—fire-water was hard to come by, yet Vester always had a supply of it.

That resourcefulness and cleverness was only one reason he had taken Vester as his Commander, and he had been most relieved to find his friend and comrade still alive and already setting into motion this plan all Cobalt Generals had hoped never to use.

He had been humbled to find all that remained of the Cobalt Army waiting for his return, with every faith that he *would* return. Did he deserve this? Reinoehl rather thought he did not, but he would not walk away from it. His father had raised him to be the Cobalt General, and while it was sooner than he would have liked and only because his father was dead, he was a Sacred Lord General of Kria, and he would take back the Fortress of Eis.

Then he would find the Kaiser and devote his life to ensuring that never again would the Krian throne be taken by filthy, polluted Salharan scum.

"We move soon," he said, motioning to his assistant to see that the vital contents of his room were packed. Turning to Vester, he said, "See to it that all are in place, then report to me at the rock. Your men will move in first; you know where. When I go, so too all the others. Ensure that is understood; no one else moves until your goal is accomplished."

Vester saluted him, gray eyes sharp even in the wavering lamplight. "Yes, Lord General. By the will of the Winter Princess, we shall succeed and bring Kria victory this day."

"Victory, yes," Reinoehl said. "Victory, or we ensure they die with us, for the Winter Princess grows weary of the filth polluting her mountains. We go."

His men all saluted again, then vanished without further word. His strategists would remain with him, for best to alter any plans as necessary. Please, Reinoehl pleaded silently, let this work.

Reinoehl balled his hands into fists once he was left alone, closing his eyes against the deep ache in his chest. He was supposed to be Commander, and he should be speaking with his father in the final moments before battle. Instead he was alone, and while this was far from the first time he had led a campaign—he had always been ordered to do so by his father, had always returned to his father with word of victory.

He had never been so terribly *alone*.

Drawing his sword, he read the inscription upon the blade, but it failed to offer its usual comfort. Sheathing his sword, he reached up to touch the necklace around his throat. The pendant was the four symbols of the gods, twined together. It matched the one his mother had worn every day of her life; they had been wedding gifts from an old friend of his parents. He had managed to save his mother's before she had died, but had thought his father's lost. Upon his return to the mountains, however, Vester had presented it to him; apparently the necklace had come off in the fury of battle, and his men had found and saved it.

Thinking of the necklace made him think of his mother's. He fervently hoped he had done the right thing in giving it to Aden, who would not share his last name and had offered practically nothing about himself save that he was, indeed, a spy. Reinoehl grimaced at the thought, disliking he had put his faith in a man whose life was lies, but he could not entirely regret what he had done that moment of their parting. He hoped he was right, believing a possible enemy might indeed be a friend.

Would Aden come in search of him? Would he have good news to offer? Reinoehl did not dare get his hopes up about that, however. Illussor was notorious for keeping its hands clean and hiding any signs of dirt beneath their fancy clothes. He could not recall a time in history when Illussor had openly declared outright war—outside of their small skirmishes to reaffirm their long-held hold on the hotly contested Regenbogen, anyway.

Tucking the necklace away beneath his armor, not wanting to lose it but unwilling or unable to take it off, he drew a deep breath and released it slowly. As ready as he was ever going to be then, and war waited for no man.

Leaving his cavern rooms, he returned to the forest outside, nodding to those men who had been assigned to his contingent. The forest was dense, comprised mostly of the evergreen trees that even the Autumn Prince and the Winter Princess could not kill. His family seal featured an evergreen covered in snow, wreathed by flames, with the family motto written below in old, extremely formal Krian—*The frozen body thrives because the heart is made of fire.*

He nodded to his men, who nodded back. They did not salute, because his most stringent command was for anyone outside the caves to move as little as possible. They were all of them cloaked in white and gray and black to blend into the mountain as best they could. The element of surprise was their greatest chance at victory—perhaps their only chance. All was lost if they lost that single element.

Now came the waiting.

Reinoehl rested his hand lightly on the hilt of his sword, eager to draw it and throw himself into battle and have done with it—one way or the other, for the waiting was always the worst part. His men were just as restless and anxious around him, but they did not move. Despite everything, they remained true and loyal soldiers of Kria. The betrayals had hurt them, but thankfully not broken them.

He turned his head slightly as a man slipped through the trees and into the clearing where Reinoehl waited with his men. The soldier nodded, then went perfectly still.

Nodding in reply, Reinoehl slowly drew his sword and waited.

A heartbeat later, he heard Vester give the battle cry. Then the fortress came to life as Salharans stirred to life, were jerked from their cozy beds and dragged into the fray.

Though it was hard, Reinoehl continued to wait. To move too soon would be disaster. Vester had been assigned the most crucial and most dangerous part of this campaign. It was the duty of his contingent to draw the Salharans' attention, to make them think that one small band was launching a desperate, suicidal attempt against the Salharans who had stolen their fortress.

The chances of them living through it were slim, and he hated to lose a man he could still trust—a man he would like to call friend—but that he trusted Vester was the most important part. Vester had taken the order calmly, even proudly, as a true Krian soldier should.

Finally he heard the sound for which he had been waiting—the clear call of a battle horn that normally meant retreat, but in this case it was the signal for the rest of them to move forward.

Abandoning the forest in which they had so long hidden, Reinoehl gave the battle cry himself and led his men from the trees as hundreds more poured out from the hidden cave entrances to attack the impenetrable Fortress of Eis.

The Salharans had taken it through treachery, by sneaking people inside and taking it from within—through deceit, through lies, as only filthy Salharans would.

Reinoehl planned to take it through familiarity.

The most difficult challenge to overcome in taking Eis was the moat. In a land of ice and snow, the unfrozen moat was the prize component of the Fortress of Eis. The most baffling part to would-be intruders was that the water was hot nearly to the point of boiling.

This was because the builders of the Fortress had discovered the hot springs deep beneath the mountain and had chosen a location where they could manipulate those spring as they saw fit. The history of Eis was written in the blood of the builders, carved into the cave walls that honeycombed the mountains. Back up plans for war had not been the only thing done in those caves.

Unknown to intruders, the hot springs which fed the moat were not connected to those within the castle. To access the hot spring which fed the moat, one had to leave the Fortress itself. Another failsafe, if a risky one, should the worst ever happen.

So, the first thing Reinoehl had done upon his return to the mountain had been to go down into the depths of the cavern and divert the channel that piped the hot water to the moat. After that, it had not taken long for the moat to freeze over, especially as his men had assisted the matter as best they could in cover of night, creeping dangerously close to shove snow and ice into the hot water to speed its cooling.

With the moat frozen over and the Salharans stupidly unaware of how serious a problem that was, assaulting the fortress was a relatively easy matter. Salharans fought with magic and treachery. They knew very little about true combat and even less about siege.

It took only minutes for his men to put ropes and ladders into place, scaling the outer curtain with relative ease. He blocked out the screams of agony, the dying cries and focused only on cutting down every Salharan he could find as he reached the battlements of the outer wall.

Then he was down, along with a greater number of men than he had dared hoped to have by this point, and they were racing to the inner wall. The hot, sizzling cut of magic burned him, and he felt blood pour from various wounds—but they were small, not enough to stop him, and Reinoehl simply screamed his pain and rage as he cut down the Salharans attempting to stop him, savagely grinning as the glowing yellow of their eyes abruptly dulled.

Cutting down two more, he landed neatly on the battlements of the inner wall.

A Salharan cry drew him, and he turned sharply, drawing a dagger and throwing—then just barely catching the one to his right as he cast a spell. Grabbing the man by his throat, Reinoehl threw him over the battlement, not waiting to see what became of him on the ground below.

Striding to the other he had just killed, he yanked his dagger from the man's chest, then plunged it into his throat to make certain he was good and dead.

Then he ran along the battlements toward the gatehouse. He heard, rather than saw, Vester working upon it from the outside. Throwing two more Salharans over the wall, he thrust his dagger into the chest of another, slashed open the chest of another with his sword, and drove back three more before he was finally able to fight his way through the guard tower to the gatehouse proper.

There he found half a dozen men ranged over the murder holes in the vaulted ceilings of the entryway between the twin portcullises. Behind him, he heard the familiar cries of Krians alerting him to their presence, and then the sound of still more Salharans, as they fought with all their might against what they realized was an attack they had never expected.

Reinoehl attacked the men over the murder holes, ensuring they were well and truly dead. Then he set to work on the rest of the Salharans littering the gatehouse and surrounding area. If they could breach the gatehouse, the fortress was all but theirs for the taking.

"General!"

He whipped around and saw one of his sergeants holding a ring of keys—then he saw too late as a Salharan spell all but tore the man apart.

But he threw the keys before he died, and Reinoehl lunged forward to catch them, shoving them into his clothes before he was suddenly attacked by the man who had just killed his sergeant.

A man who had not blue or green eyes, or even yellow—but orange. Damn it.

Reinoehl grunted in pain as a spell tore at him, hating that mere words could inflict more damage than a sword. He ignored the blood, ignored the pain, and allowed pure instinct to take over. The only way to fight a Salharan was to muscle past the magic. Sheer stubborn fury was the only way to conquer the power of arcen. No other method had ever been discovered, though Kria had tried to find one.

Old rumors said that a sword existed which could resist magic; a sword that had belonged to Kria's greatest traitor—but Reinoehl did not put faith in childish stories. Kria had always won by sheer strength, by force of will, and he would not lose his home a second time, by the gods! If stubborn fury was all he had, then he would make it be enough.

Still, it was hard. The orange-eyed bastard had a level of power that had likely killed more than a few Krians. Yellow was conquerable—orange was something else entirely. He would not be intimidated, he refused. So he fought and fought, driving the bastard back, rendering him incapable of getting off his more difficult spells.

He was not winning though—not until the Salharan side stepped a blow, and slipped in the blood of one of his own dead men.

Then Reinoehl was upon him in a flash, throwing all his weight into the lung, coming down hard to drive his blade into the bastard's chest. But even as his blade barely ceased to move, he was drawing his dagger and slitting the Salharan's throat to ensure he was dead and would stay that way.

Searching the body, for anyone with orange eyes obviously held great authority, he found a second set of keys—these to all the inner chambers of the Fortress. Only the General normally carried this set of keys.

His father's snowflake fob, made from steel, a silly gift from his men, was still on the ring.

Choking off the emotions that wanted to stir, Reinoehl tucked the keys away and stood, yanking his sword free and racing off back to the gatehouse, swinging himself over the edge of the battlements and dropping neatly to the ground, rolling as he landed and coming up running.

He found the key he needed with ease, not needing light to know the familiar weight and feel of it.

A moment later, the inner portcullis was unlocked and raised, and he raced through the passageway to open the outer door.

Vester grinned at him as he bellowed for the outer portcullis to be raised. They clasped arms briefly, and then Vester was bellowing, rallying the men, calling them from all points to make a final assault on the inner keep.

After that, Reinoehl recalled little but the blood and frenzy of battle. When at last the world seemed to hold still again around him, he had to fight his way back through the stench of death.

His white cloak was ruined, soaked in blood. He thought hazily that at the moment, he must look more Scarlet than Cobalt.

Bodies were strewn about him, Salharan and Krian mingled together on the ground and floor. He wondered how many men he had lost in this desperate fight, and silently said a prayer for them, a heartfelt thank you for the sacrifice made. The rest of the world might think Krians heartless, unfeeling killers who thrived on war and their Coliseum, but they fought to protect the crown that made them a sovereign nation, for the people and land that were their home, and for their swords, which bore the names of those they most loved.

He wiped away the sweat and blood dripping down his face, then cast his ruined cloak aside, grateful for the biting cold which cooled his overtaxed body. The sound of someone calling for him drew Reinoehl from his thoughts, and he looked up from the horrific massacre to see Vester striding toward him.

Vester's smile was all teeth, fierce and proud. He dropped to one knee, and bowed his head. "Lord General."

Around them, other soldiers were trickling in. They were battered and bleeding, wounded and exhausted, but they bore the same ferocious smile—a smile that said they had claimed what was theirs, despite all odds, and would never again let their home fall into enemy hands.

Reinoehl returned the smile full measure and lifted his sword high. "To crown and country and sword! The Fortress of Eis is Kria's once more!"

The cheers that rose up were deafening, and seemed to go on forever though they lasted only a moment or two.

All too soon, it was back to business. They had reclaimed the fortress—now they must keep it.

At his command, Vester set to work assigning men to various tasks—ensuring all Salharans were dead, sending others to tally the dead, setting contingents to begin moving supplies from the caves to the fortress, and dozens upon dozens of other jobs besides.

Several minutes later, he returned to Reinoehl's side, and stood with him a moment gazing out over the landscape from the battlements. "What would you have us do with the Salharan dead, Lord General?"

Reinoehl tipped his head back to gaze up at the stars. The moon was perfectly round and silver, tonight, the only chance by which they had to see. Around it, the stars glittered like diamonds. The battle had not lasted long, only a little over two hours, though it had felt like twenty. Dawn was still a few hours away, and so the moon and stars were still sharp and crisp in the cold night sky.

Salharan faith, he knew, ran deeply to the stars. It was believed that the best of them became stars when they died. Only Salharans would be so bloody arrogant as to presume they deserved such a place in the heavens.

"Bury them," he said at last, dropping his gaze from the sky to resume watching the trails of torchlight in the forest—most of the men working to move supplies, but others were out hunting any runaway Salharans. Every now and then, the sounds of a skirmish could be heard. "Find a suitable cave or chasm, and throw the bodies into it. See that they remain in the ground, and will never again glimpse the sky. They do not deserve it."

"Yes, Lord General," Vester replied, then turned neatly on one heel, and strode off to see his orders carried out.

At some point, someone had brought Reinoehl a clean cloak, this one the color of smoke. He pulled it more tightly around him, warding off the deepening cold, the air almost painful as he drew breath into

his lungs, misting in large clouds as he exhaled. He should go inside, but he was almost afraid to relax. He had been so tense for so long...

Did his parents rest easier now, knowing their home was back in Krian hands? Now that their son ruled the fortress as he had always been meant. Would his father be proud of him? Had he done everything right, or had there been a better way to launch this campaign?

No, he and his men had worked hard on refining the contingency plan that all Cobalt Generals knew, on the slim chance the Fortress of Eis was lost.

"Lord General! Lord General!"

He turned as three soldiers came running up to him. "We have capture one of them—an orange-eyed bastard, currently unconscious. We were going to kill him, but thought we had better check with you first."

Reinoehl frowned in thought, then motioned sharply. "Have we cleansers?"

"Yes, Lord General," one of the soldiers replied, snapping a belated salute. "They were recently lifted from the bodies to be buried."

"Good," Reinoehl replied. "Force feed him the cleansers, secure him in the dungeon, and see that Vester is sent to me there."

"Yes, Lord General," the men all said, snapping parting salutes before racing off.

He stared out at the landscape for a moment more, then turned and made his way down the stairs of the inner wall and across the inner ward to the south most guard tower, where the dungeon was located.

Vester was waiting for him, standing over the captured Salharan, his hand buried in the bastard's hair, yanking his head back at a painful angle.

"Who have we here?" he asked coolly.

"The good Lieutenant will not give his name," Vester said, roughly letting the man go.

Well, that was no surprise. Salharans were peculiar about names; Reinoehl had never understood it. "Does he have anything to tell us, do you think?"

"Likely," Vester said. "They do not hand out orange arcen to men who know nothing."

Reinoehl tilted his head thoughtfully, looking the battered and bruised man up and down. "Does he have a mark of the Brotherhood?"

"No, Lord General," Vester replied. "That was looked into before they brought him here."

"Good work," Reinoehl murmured, knowing the approval would filter back to those who needed to hear it, further motivating his men. He drew a dagger and moved forward, pressing it lightly to the Salharan's throat. Furious eyes met his, but they were a dull, flat, fading orange, not the vibrant glowing color they should be. So the cleansers were working. After taking the fortress, the Salharans would have destroyed the supply of specially concentrated cleansers that all Krians kept to hand for purposes such as this.

He smiled coldly at the Salharan and pressed the dagger just enough to draw the thinnest trickle of blood. "You may speak to us, and die a painless death, or we can show you why Krians do not need your foul magic to inflict great pain."

"May the stars reject your Winter Princess and reveal her for the cheap, filthy whore she is," the Salharan snarled, spitting in his face. "You'll get nothing from me."

Reinoehl laughed and sheathed his dagger, then tore away a piece of the Salharan's shirt to wipe the spit from his own face. He then threw the scrap aside, and said to Vester, "Summon Wendel and Gernot." He patted the Salharan's cheek with mock tenderness. "Tell them to get something from him."

Then he turned and left, striding back into the main keep.

He was greeted by one of his ensigns. "Lord General, your rooms are ready."

"Thank you," he said. "Inform my commanding officers to report to my chambers in two hours to give full reports."

"Yes, Lord General!" The ensign replied, saluting before he raced off to see the orders delivered.

Not knowing what else to do, at a loss as everything went on smoothly around him, Reinoehl headed for his chambers. A soldier had been left to escort him, though Reinoehl knew the way with his eyes closed.

Except, as he followed the man, he realized that they were not going to the rooms which had always been his...

Of course not. He was no longer his father's second in command. He was the Lord General of the Cobalt Arm. His father's chambers were now his.

Feeling numb, Reinoehl absently thanked the young foot soldier, and closed the door so that he was left entirely alone in the suite of four rooms which had always been the domain of his parents. The few times he had been here, it had always felt as though he were intruding.

They were beautifully appointed rooms; if the Salharans had besmirched them, Vester had seen to it all was rapidly restored before Reinoehl saw them.

He passed through the front room and into the bedroom. He glanced at the bed, then turned away from it. He swallowed against the sudden lump in his throat, struggling to hold back the grief he had refused to feel since Aden had freed him from that damned birdcage.

Studiously ignoring the bed, he strode to the door at the far end. The sharp, pungent smells of the hot springs wafted up to him. Stairs had been carved into the stone beyond the door, spiraling down to a private bathing chamber below.

He took them, still feeling numb.

Below, once he had lit all the carefully arranged lamps, the hot spring showed his mother's touch—shelves had been carved on her command into the rock itself, and arranged upon them were soaps and lotions, cloths for scrubbing, softer ones for gentler washing. Buckets and stools were neatly arranged nearby for cleaning one's self before plunging into the hot water to soak for a time.

Moving without real thought, Reinoehl stripped out of his filthy clothes and moved to scoop hot water from the spring, using it and soap and the rough clothes to scrub himself free of the blood and ichor of battle, washing his hair until it was clean, shaving away the rough growth he had been forced to ignore while they prepared to take back Eis.

Finally he slid into the spring itself, settling on one of the ledges that served as a natural bench. Steam curled around him, making his skin bead with sweat. If some of that sweat were tears, well... who was there to see the Cobalt General's moment of weakness, in the depths of a cavern that none but the General and his family may enter.

Chapter Eight

The falling snow was barely that—it trickled down in sparse patches, as though even the snow itself was sick of the bitterly cold weather and could not be bothered to make an effort. It was the sort of cold that hurt to breathe in, that cut right through even the finest furs and the hottest fires.

It was the kind of day meant to be spent in a warm bed, preferably with the sort of companionship that was eager to generate heat beneath the blankets.

Resolutely turning his mind away from *that* path of thought, because if he traveled it he would definitely catch himself looking at Erich again, Ingolf tried to put his mind to the matters it should be pondering.

The worst of the snow had thankfully stopped falling a couple of days ago, freeing them from the farmhouse where they had been trapped for another day, only half a day after leaving behind the village where his world had proven to be not at all what he thought.

He still could not figure Pancraz out. At times, he thought he could see the traitor beneath the surface of comrade; other times, all he saw was his friend, the man who had saved his life, whose life he had saved. The two images simply would not, could not reconcile.

There were also those strange flashes of jealousy that he had never noted before. Likely, then, they were some sort of show for the sake of covering up keeping an unusually close eye upon Ingolf and Erich. It was the only thing that made sense, for surely he would have noticed if Pancraz had been jealous before, if Pancraz felt more than friendship for him.

Not that he would have acted upon them, for he did not dally with his men—that road only led to disaster. That aside, he was Kaiser now, even if it still did not feel real. As the next in line to be the Verdant General, he had been able to take his pleasures where he wanted, so long as he had done so discreetly. It might be frowned upon publically for one man to fuck another, but that did not mean it was not done. These days, it was much less a problem than it had once been.

Still, it was one thing to do it discreetly as a rising General, another to do it when he was the Kaiser of a war ravaged country in need of a leader—and heirs. It made him tired just thinking about. The rest of his life would be spent repairing the damage Salhara had wrought, and that included taking a wife and bearing at least one son.

He did glance at Erich then, feeling wistful and envious of a culture where it was completely acceptable—even normal—that one man could marry another. If he ever took a lover of the kind he preferred, that man would always be a secret. He could not wear a ring or so openly mourn his loss as Erich still obviously mourned his lost spouse.

Why was he thinking about such things? He had far more important things to think about. Personal woes had no place in his thoughts, not when his people were suffering, and his Generals in hiding because they dare not show themselves until they knew for a certainty they could stop Salhara once and for all.

Of course, he could not think bitterly, it would be easier if they had help. Kria's greatest problem was the plague which had wiped out so many of their numbers. It was only by the grace of the gods that Salhara had not struck in those days, when Kria had been so much weaker. Five years had given them back some small measure of their strength, but it would be many years yet before Kria's full strength was restored. Longer still, now that they must recover from the war as well.

Illussor had suffered too, he knew that—especially since meeting Erich. So why did Illussor not help? Why must they always sit on the side and watch Kria and Salhara fight? Had they no real spine? Was Erich really the only Illussor willing to make some sort of stand, take some sort of action?

He was only making excuses, though. He did not give a damn about Illussor. Kria had never needed anyone's help before; they should not need it now.

A few more days, hopefully, and all the waiting would be over. He would know once and for all that Pancraz was a traitor and possibly Sepp, as well. He would kill them both; kill the Salharans awaiting his arrival, then unravel at least some small part of the mystery surrounding the Betrayer's sword. If they had that much of an edge over Salhara, then they stood a real chance of driving the bastards out.

When Kria was finally free again, then he would figure out the rest. Perhaps when all was said and done, he might at least have an avenue through which to build a real friendship with Illussor. Surely his meeting Erich meant that much; he did not want them to return to being strangers or possibly enemies.

Strange as it was, Erich was the closest thing he had to a friend right now. It would be amusing, if it were not so pathetic—that the Kaiser's only sort-of friend at the moment was an Illussor Duke descended from the Betrayer himself.

If it was any life but his own, Ingolf would find it all very amusing. As it was, he only felt tired.

The day was a quiet one, as most winter days tended. Ordinarily, he would be tucked away with his men in the Winter Palace, or perhaps they might have chosen to remain in their own home, the Fortress of Efeu, to the west. Like the Fortress of Eis, it must have fallen by now—but the west was not a border shared with Salhara, so it was possible the Salharans had not made it that far.

Regardless, they would not find the Verdant General there, and finding the Verdant General would be their primary goal. Ingolf did not know where his Generals had scattered, had not wanted to know, on

the chance that he was captured. If the worst happened, then at least he would not be able to give his Generals away. They, more than him, would be responsible for freeing Kria.

He reached up to scrub the accumulated flakes from his hair and finally pulled up the hood of his cloak. It limited his range of vision, but he could no longer tolerate the cold; too much heat was lost when the head was uncovered.

They traveled on, and while he wanted to break the silence, he could not figure out what to say. He did not want to mistakenly stumble into another argument with Erich—had carefully avoided precisely that ever since they had fought in that damnable inn.

Not because he feared the violence, but because he had seen that one small spark of want, followed by Erich collapsing into anguish as he stared at that damned ring on his finger.

He rubbed his forehead, feeling tired, exhausted by the problems great and small which preyed upon him. An unfit Kaiser, his Generals missing, a sword whose mysteries would likely never be solved, and now he was lusting after an Illussor who was too grief and guilt stricken to even consider returning the interest, even if the matter of their clashing heritages—and Ingolf's being a Kaiser—was not enough to keep them apart.

Well, it was all to the good. He would never seriously consider giving in to the winter-child temptation of Erich, anyway. He had simply been alone too long, and he had always liked his men with more spirit than sense.

Shaking his head, he tried to focus on more mundane matters—such as how much daylight was left, how much moonlight would be available, and when they would therefore be forced to stop for the night. It was just two days past the last full moon, which meant they could probably ride for some time, stopping only to eat their rations and rest the horses. If they were fortunate, they might even find a farmhouse willing to give them good food in exchange for coin or even help with chores—gods knew those could be arduous enough in such foul weather.

In fact, if he recalled correctly, there should be another house or two just over the next rise...

His question was unwittingly answered by the sound of a woman's terrified shriek. It was cut off abruptly, but only a moment later the terrible sound resumed.

Ingolf did not waste time wondering, simply kicked his horse into a gallop and raced across the tamped down snow that someone, thankfully, had traveled over before them. Otherwise, he was not certain how far they would have gotten.

He crested the hill and immediately raced down it, drawing his sword as the sight below made his blood boil—Salharan uniforms, eight of them. At a glance, he saw four Krians. Farmers, and at least one of them only a woman.

Snarling a battle cry, he raced toward the Salharans that were bracing to confront him, but even as they bellowed their damnable spells, he was upon them, cutting them down from on high.

When they fled into the house, he dismounted and followed, barely noticing as someone called his name.

The spell took him by surprise as he entered the house, causing him to drop his sword and grasp at the heavily bleeding wound in his right arm. He fumbled for his dagger even as the Salharan came at him with glowing yellow eyes and a smirk of triumph on his face—

Then a wall of white blocked Ingolf's view, and he heard the Salharan give one sharp gasp, the sound followed by the heavy thump of a body dropping to the floor.

Erich did not waste time, merely turned to see that he would live, then at Ingolf's nod returned to the fight.

Ingolf followed him, hand still at his wound, staying well out of the way as he watched Sepp and Pancraz help Erich cut down the remaining Salharans.

"You're badly hurt, my lord," said a soft voice.

Turning, Ingolf saw the speaker was the woman who had likely been the source of the earlier shrieking.

He nodded, but suddenly could not muster the energy to reply, and realized that perhaps he was losing too much blood.

Then he passed out.

~~*

He woke with a start, gasping, shivering, struggling to sit up and speak and think all at once, and not really succeeding at any one of them.

Then he felt slightly nauseous, and held a hand to his face to steady himself. Bit by bit, he let his surroundings filter through his senses. Wood and smoke, roasting meat, cheap beer; he also smelled something faintly sweet. Erich, he realized. That was Erich's scent.

He should not know that, but he did. Ingolf stifled a sigh, and half wished he was still unconscious.

Finally pulling his hand away from his face, he saw Erich slumped in a seat beside him, obviously snatched away by sheer exhaustion.

Soft chuckles drew him, and he saw a woman by the fireplace, stirring the contents of a cooking pot before she swung it back into the fire to cook. Wiping her hands on her apron, she walked over to him and pressed the back of her hand against his forehead. "You're doing much better, my lord," she said, smiling. "That Salharan cut you deep; we feared we would not be able to stop the bleeding. Your pretty Illussor managed it, though, and it was he who had all the right supplies to stitch and bind you." She glanced at Erich, fast asleep in a rickety chair that seemed entirely too small for his large frame.

"I thank you for helping us," Ingolf replied, tearing his eyes away from Erich only with effort. "Where are my other two men?"

The woman pointed with a thumb over her shoulder, to the door of the large, one room cabin. "They went with my husband to dispose of the bodies and ensure that no Salharans search for their brothers here."

"Why were the Salharans attacking you?" Ingolf asked, swinging his feet over the edge of the bed, grimacing at the pain that flared in his right arm as he gingerly tested it. He would not be able to hold his sword for days at the very least. Tits of the Winter Princess! Served him right for being that reckless and stupid.

Spreading her hands, the woman shook her head and said, "I do not know, my lord. I do not speak a word of that foul language. My best guess is that they sought provisions or shelter. There is more snow on the way, and traveling will be next to impossible for Krians, never minded those thin-blooded bastards."

He smiled at her contemptuous tone and slowly stood up. "I am glad we were able to rid you of their filthy presence. I also appreciate you offering us the shelter you refused them. We will of course compensate you for the food and supplies; I know it is a danger to lose both in the middle of winter, and this has proven to be a particularly brutal one. The Winter Princess is expressing her displeasure over the state of her land, I fear, and our failure to defend it from pollution."

"Whatever we have is yours, my lord."

"You need not address me so," Ingolf said gruffly, discomfited by the respect when she had no reason, surely, to believe him to be anyone of note.

Yet her eyes blazed when she looked up to meet his, though her tone was soft and shy. "It would be unwise to address you properly, Kaiser, but I cannot leave off all proper respect."

Ingolf drew a sharp breath, shaken to have been so easily marked—no one else so far had realized it, how had this small woman?

She smiled and tucked back a loose strand of long, black hair. A bruise discolored one cheek, but she appeared to give it no mind. "I grew up in the city, Lord, and lived there until I was nearly twenty. I know the Kaiser, the Generals and their men. I have seen you before, marching alongside the Verdant General, and all know that the Verdant Commander is the Kaiser's eldest son."

Laughing, Ingolf cupped her cheek in one hand, and bent to kiss the other softly. "Then your Kaiser appreciates your generosity, and your loyalty, and will see you generously compensated for both. Now, where did your husband and my men go to dispose of the bodies?"

Her reply was cut off by the sound of movement, and they both turned to see Erich rubbing at his eyes. A moment later, he looked up, and their gazes locked. Ingolf was not certain why he could not look away.

"You seem to be all right," Erich said at last, voice quiet, still heavy with sleep.

"Yes," Ingolf replied. "I appear to have you to thank for it, and I do thank you."

Erich shrugged and stood up. "What I want to know is what those Salharans were doing so far out here, and with no back-up and not a single encampment for miles. They're Salharans; they have no use for miles and miles of snow-ridden Krian farmland. Why would they come all the way out here for nothing? Unless I am mistaken in my assumptions, and they have an encampment closer than I supposed."

"I doubt it," Ingolf replied. "More than likely they were simply scouts and got overwhelmed by the snow. Salhara does not get much in the way of snow, except in the mountains, and they're too thin-blooded to deal with it for very long. Most of the time, anyway. It must really bother them that the best time to attack us was in the dead of winter." He shook his head, half-wishing he were still asleep. "Whatever the reason, we had best not linger here long. We put everyone in danger and risk a fight we might not be able to handle."

Never mind that he had not been able to handle *this* fight, but if he kept thinking about it, he would put himself in a truly foul mood.

"Well, you should stay long enough to eat and rest properly," the woman said calmly, breaking into their conversation. "Supper is nearly ready, and my husband and your men should be back shortly."

"Where did they go, and what are they going to do? Also, what is your name, milady?"

The woman laughed at the formal address, shaking her head and waving it off. "My name is Jana, my lord. My husband is Achim. My eldest boy is Achim as well, and the younger is Franz. We do all thank you."

"You have more than repaid our meager assistance with your generosity, I promise," Ingolf assured.

She nodded, and continued. "They went out to the field where the bad well be, my lord."

"Bad well?" Erich asked, raking a hand sleepily through his hair, and failing to muffle a yawn.

"Yes," she said, nodding again. "Some creature fell in there and died several years back, and fouled the water. We dug a new well, somewhere else." She shrugged. "If the thing already holds one dead body..."

Erich snorted in amusement. "Krians. Always so ruthlessly practical." He breathed in, and let out a long, easy sigh. "I smell something positively delightful."

Jana laughed and clucked her tongue at him. "Dinner will be ready very soon. If you do not mind me saying, my lord, you speak remarkably good Krian for a pale skin."

"I like Krian," Erich replied, winking. "It makes me sound tougher, and people forget about my pretty face."

Rolling her eyes, shaking her head in amusement, and muttering something about all men being the same, she bustled back to the fireplace to attend her soup. "There is wine on the table, if my lords would like some. I've only humble fare to offer, of course..."

"It is the best smelling fare I have experience in a long time," Ingolf said, cutting her off, smiling. Moving to the table, he sat down and poured beer for both himself and Erich. It was cheap stuff, but good.

"I wouldn't drink that too fast," Erich said, looking at him in amusement. "I gave you something to help you stay asleep when you kept trying to wake up. It does not always mix well with alcohol of any sort."

"Do not drug me again," Ingolf said. "I dislike it."

"I dislike my patients rolling around so much they constantly threaten to tear open the stitches I worked hard to get into their stubborn arms," Erich retorted. "Next time, be good and hold still, and I will not drug you."

Sneering, Ingolf settled for drinking his beer and not replying to that utterly ridiculous statement. He would have been perfectly fine without being drugged. Honestly, Illussor had blood only slightly thicker than Salharans.

"Your thoughts are plain upon your face, you stubborn goat," Erich said, rolling his eyes. "Honestly, Krians are stubborn to the point of stupidity—present company of our fine and lovely hostess excluded, of course. But, I have found women in general tend to be more sensible than men."

Jana laughed from where she still worked by the fireplace. "Spoken like a man who has learned that the hard way."

"Yes," Erich replied. "I grew up with two women who may as well have been my sisters. Then there was my mother. I am well acquainted with women and their insufferable tendency to be right about damn near everything. This one time—" he broke off abruptly, eyes going wide as he stared at...what?

Ingolf frowned, and realized after a moment that Erich was staring at the wildflowers arranged in an old jar in the center of the table.

He also saw that Erich's hand shook as he pulled one of the flowers from the bunch.

Slowly Erich stood up and turned to show the flower to Jana. "Milady... where did you come by these flowers?"

She frowned, confused by his serious manner. "They grow by the fouled well. Corpse flowers, my husband calls them, because they appeared right about the same time the well went bad..."

Ingolf finally looked closely at the flower Erich held, then glanced at the bunch of them—then stared harder, unable to believe what he was seeing. It *couldn't* be. It was impossible. "Erich—those are—"

"Arcen flowers," Erich finished grimly. "Worse, they're *red* arcen flowers."

Ingolf snatched up the bouquet from the jar, and strode across the room to cast them into the fire. Then he went to a bowl and pitcher next to the bed and scrubbed his hands clean.

"I—my lord—I did not know—I'm sorry," Jana said, dropping to the floor and bowing low, tears streaming down her face, hands trembling even as she balled them into fists to try and hide it. "I had no idea—why—"

Drying his hands, Ingolf strode back to the fireplace and gently helped her to her feet, then embraced her. "Of course you are not to blame, milady. How could you know what they were? That is not the problem, please do not worry upon it. You are not in trouble."

If they were growing arcen on purpose, they would not display it as harmless wildflowers on the table—and their eyes did not glow. No Krian would dirty himself by taking arcen. The situation was decidedly odd, but Ingolf did not believe for a moment that a family of humble Krian farmers, still some distance from the border, would purposely be growing arcen flowers.

He turned and shared a look with Erich, who moved to cast his own flower into the fire.

Ingolf kissed Jana's cheek again, then stepped back. "We are going to go investigate that field, and see that whatever is there is destroyed. If any Salharan scout saw those flowers, he would have sent word back, and those men we killed likely came to investigate the find further. I do not know what happened, but please trust me when I say I do not hold you guilty."

She nodded and smiled faintly. "I am sorry all the same, my lord. It shames me that such foul flowers have been in my home, and I never knew it—and you of all people must point it out to me."

Erich quirked a brow at that, but said nothing as he turned away to fetch their cloaks where they hung near the door. He tossed Ingolf's to him as he drew close, then pulled his own on, settling it with a roll of his broad shoulders.

Ingolf admired them briefly, then tucked the inappropriate thoughts away and returned all his attention to the mystery at hand. Why in the name of the gods was arcen growing here in Kria—and red arcen at that.

Outside, dark had not quite fallen. It would fall fast, but was not quite there yet. Jana had directed him where to go, and he led the way, one hand resting lightly on the hilt of his sword.

The sight that greeted him as he turned the corner into the abandoned field made him draw a sharp breath of dismay.

It was not so much a field, really, as a clearing over which trees stretched to form a sort of natural canopy. They were so dense and tangled together, and so covered in ivy, that very little snow slipped down to the ground below.

At the far end was the well, and it was easy to see that some way, somehow, all the small, red, five-petal flowers filling the clearing had started growing at the old well.

Seeing them, Sepp and Pancraz bolted to them, and Ingolf could see they were just as dismayed as him by the discovery—and by the look of him, Jana's husband had not known what they were, and did like what he had learned.

"What are arcen flowers doing here?" Pancraz said. "Worse—they're red! If Salhara finds them—"

"I do not want to think about," Ingolf said grimly. He did not know much about arcen, no one outside Salhara did, but even the greatest of idiots knew that an entire field of red arcen flowers was not a good thing.

Pancraz, for whatever reason, almost looked terrified—Ingolf rather thought he looked more terrified than the rest of them. That made no sense, though. Pancraz was secretly Salharan—surely this must be the greatest discovery of his life. The Salharans would reward him richly for this discovery.

Yet, when Pancraz spoke, his voice was only just barely steady. "We need to destroy this field. Burn the flowers and salt the ground so that nothing will grow for the next several years," he said as the farmer, Achim, joined them. "It is a waste of land, I know, but arcen flowers are incredibly difficult to kill, once they have settled into the soil. They will grow and grow, unless you make the earth unfit for anything."

"How do you know that?" Ingolf asked.

Pancraz shrugged. "I grew up in the borderlands, and was raised more Salharan than Krian for a long time. I was just Krian enough to want nothing to do with arcen, but I could not help learning about it."

Indeed. Ingolf wanted to beat him black and blue, demand the truth—something, anything, to make Pancraz come clean, tell him the truth. He wanted Pancraz to say that he was loyal to Ingolf, to Kria, and that he was not truly siding with the filthy Salharans.

He was so very tired of lies, of never knowing who to trust. Stifling a sigh, Ingolf motioned to the field. "It will have to wait until morning," he said. "We cannot risk playing with fire at night; even with the snow, we would risk it getting out of control. Tomorrow, we will burn it all before we leave, and hope that so much smoke does not draw unwanted attention." He turned to Achim. "I will leave it to you to salt the field, and ensure nothing grows here for the next few years."

"Five, at least," Pancraz said. "Seven would be better."

Ingolf looked at him, stared until Pancraz finally dropped his gaze. "What else do you know?" he asked quietly.

"A lot," Pancraz said flatly, looking up again, eyes hard. "I told you, I learned a bit growing up, before I was smart enough to realize that Salhara was not where I wanted to be."

Filthy liar, Ingolf thought, but kept his anger and bitterness from his voice. "You have never mentioned this knowledge before."

Pancraz shrugged irritably. "A Krian who knows too much about arcen is a dead Krian. Knowing is not enough to combat it, anyway. Arcen is only defeated by arcen."

"Or cleansers."

"Cleansers are made with arcen," Pancraz replied. "They simply come from a different part of the plant."

Ingolf snapped. He simply could not take one more moment of Pancraz's lies. "You are going to tell me everything you know," Ingolf said, yanking Pancraz close, unable to contain all of his anger, though he tried to rein in some of it. "Then you are going to tell me why you kept this knowledge to yourself. After

that, you may try and convince me I should not beat you for your silence, or simply have done and kill you."

"Y-yes, my lord," Pancraz said, suddenly looking miserable—and even dejected.

Ingolf did not allow himself to think about it, merely released Pancraz roughly, nearly sending him falling into the snow. Then he turned around sharply, and stalked through the snow, leading the way back to the farmhouse.

Suddenly, he felt far too much like a Kaiser.

Chapter Nine

Hahn's favorite game at the formal dinners they had often endured had been to try and figure out all that he could about a person simply through observation. People gave almost nothing away in what they said, he was fond of saying, but they gave everything away in what they did and did not do. Hahn had always believed that actions said far more than words.

So Erich would select an individual, some stranger to both of them, and Hahn would spend the majority of the evening observing the chosen person. After dinner, Hahn's turn ended, and Erich would seek the person out, determine as best he could all of Hahn's suppositions. Hahn had been correct far more often than he had been wrong, and he had only gotten better as the years went by. Far too often, Hahn had been so eerily accurate, Erich would have thought he was cheating save that it was Hahn, and Hahn was far more pleased with himself for winning honestly.

Even Hahn, however, would have had a hard time figuring out Pancraz. Erich could make no sense of him, no matter how many ways he looked at Pancraz, the entire situation. They had not misheard those conversations; Pancraz completely supported the idea of killing Ingolf after they got from him what they needed. He had proven himself to be irrevocably Salharan in those conversations.

So why all the confounding behavior? He had helped them kill the Salharans attacking the farmers without hesitation—though, that could have gone to protecting his cover. Ensuring the Kaiser was delivered to Salhara was more important than the lives of a few foot soldiers.

That did not explain the possessive jealousy; it did not explain a lot of things, though it *did* explain why thinking about it gave Erich a headache. If the bastard did not provide answers, one way or another, Erich was going to cure his headache by taking the bastard's head off.

The silence around the table as they sat was grim. Ingolf had sent the farmer and his wife to bed in the loft upstairs with their children; he had not wanted to endanger them with knowledge.

"So tell us what you know," Ingolf said coldly, setting his cup down with a hard clack on the table. "Then tell me the real reason you know it, Pancraz. Then you will tell me why you chose to keep it secret, instead of being honest with me, when I am the very person with whom you should have been honest."

Pancraz frowned and looked as though he wanted to say something, and for a moment, Erich almost thought he saw a familiar despair in his eyes. Then it was gone, and Pancraz only nodded.

"Arcen flowers are difficult to grow," Pancraz said quietly, "but once they take root, it is hard to kill them." He smiled bitterly. "Much like arcen itself—the first taste makes you extremely ill, but if you can survive it, then the body takes to it, and pretty soon living without it becomes impossible."

"What makes arcen flowers so hard to grow?" Erich asked, curiosity immediately caught despite the gravity of the situation. "I have heard that before, but no one could ever explain the reason."

"The soil must be suitable," Pancraz said quietly. "Arcen farmers train for a decade and a half to handle arcen flowers before they are allowed to grow them independently. The last I heard, and it was only rumor, there were thirty arcen farmers to serve all of Salhara."

Surely such information was not common knowledge—arcen was Salhara. Without arcen, there would be no Salhara; they would have fallen to Kria centuries ago. Erich wanted more and more to know Pancraz's real identity. He kept himself from asking, but only because it was of utmost importance that they not reveal what they already knew.

Pancraz continued, "Once arcen flowers are planted and survive one full season they take over the soil and make it suitable themselves, but getting them to survive a full season is the hard part." He laughed softly. "To think a couple of unwitting Krian farmers managed it without even trying. The Brotherhood would have fits. Anyway, to reach full strength, a full season, takes seven years."

"Goddess," Erich exclaimed. "Seven years to grow an arcen flower? But I thought the different colors of poison..."

"Are harvested as the flowers themselves change color," Pancraz finished with a nod. "The arcen works the same as the flowers, yes. Violet is the lowest and weakest, they can be grown quickly and easily, and it is the color available to all the people of Salhara. Indigo is next and takes two years to grow. You can figure out the rest yourself. They can grow throughout the year, unhampered by temperature, though they run into trouble if they are covered by snow or too much frost."

Ingolf shook his head. "Seven years to grow red arcen. That is crazy. Salharans truly are mad."

Pancraz shrugged. "It takes even longer than that to grow the concentrated reds."

"Concentrated reds?"

"For the Brotherhood," Pancraz said, voice harsh as he talked to the table. "The normal reds don't work on the highest ranking of the Brotherhood. It takes nine years, and excruciating care, to raise the flowers to that point. If the flowers fail..." He shrugged again and fell silent.

"That still does not explain how it managed to grow so well, here in the middle of Kria," Ingolf said.

Pancraz laughed again, a sound so bitter and tired that Erich barely kept from flinching. "It's a fouled well," he said simply. "Blood works better, but a body will suffice. If the polluted water fouled the land around it then the arcen could have taken. I do not know how arcen could have come this far, and seven years ago at that, but if it did, and it happened to find fertile soil, then yes, the arcen could take."

Erich shook his head. "Blood? Corpses?"

"Yes," Pancraz said. "Irony that these farmers called it a corpse flower. I wonder that it never struck them how the flowers changed colors over the year—but then again, why would they suspect arcen here, of all places? But why do you think arcen grows so well in the Regenbogen? Hundreds of thousands have been killed there, and no matter how many times they destroy the flowers themselves, so long as the ground is fertile and a few seeds remain, they will continue to take to the land. That field is perfect for arcen growing; why do you think Salhara has always done their damndest to take it?"

The slide of steel against leather was almost painfully loud in the stark silence that fell as Pancraz finished speaking, and fire caught the metal of Ingolf's dagger as he pressed the tip to Pancraz's throat.

"Tell me who you are, comrade," Ingolf said softly, "and I will kill you quickly. Whoever you are, you were clearly never a friend of mine. No border child would know so much about arcen when even most Salharans are ignorant."

Pancraz did not flinch, merely stared bleakly into Ingolf's eyes. "I did grow up in the borderlands. Abut until after a drought destroyed my father's arcen fields, and the Brotherhood saw him hanged for it. My mother and I were cast out, sent to the borders, stripped of our names and left to rot. After that, do you think I had any love left for Salhara?"

"Why did they not kill you?"

"That would have been kinder," Pancraz hissed, seeming not to care about the dagger pressed against his throat, leaning forward in his anger so suddenly that Ingolf barely withdrew the blade in time. "I told you—they stripped us of our names and cast us out of our homes, to live in the border villages. I wish they had killed us, but women and children are not worth the time or effort."

He was not telling the whole truth. Erich shared a look with Ingolf, but Ingolf only gave the barest shake of his head and slipped his dagger back into hiding.

"All because of a crop that went bad for a reason beyond your control?"

Pancraz's mouth twisted. "I do not expect Krians to understand life in the deepest parts of Salhara. I told you, the concentrated reds are the hardest to grow, and if they fail the Brotherhood is not forgiving. We had a field of concentrated; the drought killed it even though we did all that we could to save it. The

Brotherhood does not forgive because it is nine years of time and money and arcen wasted. They killed my father, threw us out, and replaced us with a more competent family."

Erich could think of nothing to say in the face of such cruelty. Farmers led cruel lives, for their fates rested on things completely out of their control. When the crop being grown was the very lifeblood of the country...

"You speak Krian well, for a born Salharan," Ingolf said, carrying ruthlessly on with the conversation. Erich knew he must be upset by what he was hearing, but in true Krian form he showed none of that while there was a battle to win—even if that battle was only verbal, and none but they two knew Ingolf was fighting for a reason not to kill Pancraz.

He could see all too clearly that was *precisely* what Ingolf wanted, despite knowing that Pancraz was still withholding vital information, was still lying to them. Pancraz had proven himself a traitor, but still Ingolf was hoping he might not be. Some would view that as admirable; most would view it as weak.

Erich could not blame him, however. He knew all about clinging to the impossible, after all. Whatever Ingolf chose to do, Erich would support him without question.

"We were cast out when I was eleven," Pancraz said quietly, once more talking to the table. "Being nameless, no Salharan would have anything to do with me unless it was to make me do some unpleasant chore, or use me." He did not elaborate on 'use' but he did not need to. Erich's gut twisted. He truly hated Salhara. Pancraz continued, "So I spent more and more time on the Krian side. They might not have liked me any, but at least they would acknowledge and talk to me. They did not understand I was to be ignored, or if they did, they did not care. Kria was all I had."

The words made Erich wince, though it only increased his confusion over the odd matter of Salharans and names. "I do not understand how you can be nameless. If you were given a name when you were born, then that is your name. Anyone can give a name."

"No, they cannot!" Pancraz snarled, and his eyes then could not have blazed more even if saturated with arcen. "A name shapes a man, shapes his fate, tells the world who he is and what others think of him. What could an Illussor Duke possibly understand about not having a name?"

"But you have a name," Ingolf interjected, looking as hopelessly confused as Erich felt. "Your name is Pancraz."

Whatever he had been expecting, it was not for Pancraz's face to collapse into an expression of barely contained grief.

"Enough," Ingolf said abruptly. "That's enough for one night. You have told me what I needed to know, Pancraz—go get some sleep. In the morning, I am setting you to supervise the burning of the arcen. If

you can find some clue as to how it came to be here, then let me know." He stood up and strode from the cabin, shutting the door behind him.

Frowning, Erich stood to follow him, but he paused at the door, hand resting lightly on the frayed rope handle, and turned to glance back at Pancraz and the oddly silent Sepp beside him. "I admit I never understood the Salharan obsession with names. I know they meant a great deal, and the name itself is less important that who chooses the name and the reasons why. Who named you Pancraz?"

"I did," Pancraz said bitterly, looking so miserable and ashamed, Erich half-feared he would find a dagger and turn it upon himself.

"Then I would say that what that says about you," Erich said, "is that you have enough sense to be Krian, and leave all that wretched Salharan nonsense behind." Then he opened the door and stepped out into the chill night, closing the door firmly behind him before wading through the deep snow toward the shadow he could just make out on the far side of the little stable.

Ingolf stared at the snow almost as if he expected it to cause him problems, as well.

Though it was probably unnecessary, Erich did not see any harm in taking precaution, and so spoke in Illussor. *"I do not know what to make of your friend. He is still hiding the ambush from you, yet I feel his story was true, right down to his claim of rejecting Salhara entirely."*

"I do not know either," Ingolf said with a tired sigh. *"He is a traitor and yet not. It would probably be best to ask him about the matter straight out; yet I would rather bide my time, and see what comes to pass."*

"Reckless, but Krians have a tendency for that," Erich replied, smirking when Ingolf glared at him. He sobered after a moment, mind returning to the problems at hand. *"My real concern is what the arcen is doing here in the first place. No Salharan would bring arcen seeds this far into Kria, and even if he did, he would not leave them to grow unattended. Pancraz made it painfully clear that no mistake is tolerated where there precious poison is concerned."*

"Seven years," Ingolf muttered. *"No one knows anything about arcen, and I have had an arcen farmer in my midst this entire time. Did they think he would not tell anyone? Surely it is the height of stupidity to leave someone that knowledgeable alive. I cannot believe it takes seven years to reach the most coveted color, and that would mean five years to grow the yellow that is becoming more and more common, Autumn Prince damn them and strip their leaves from the tree."*

Erich could only shake his head, sharing Ingolf's bafflement. *"Salhara is Salhara."*

Ingolf snorted in agreement and finally glanced up from glaring at the snow. *"Strange as they are, I do not think any Salharan is as strange as an Illussor Duke who agrees to be kidnapped simply for the sake of protecting a bastard Kaiser."*

The speculative, almost too-knowing look upon his face nearly made Erich recoil. He did not want the conversation shifting to him. *"I have never been held captive unless it was willingly,"* he said, shrugging and smiling to emphasize the words were a jest. *"I want my sword back, and I want my country not to be overrun by Salharans. Those seem perfectly logical reasons to me."*

This time, Ingolf's snort was one of adamant disagreement. *"Logic is no bedmate of yours."*

Erich laughed, surprised by the familiar words and said before he thought, *"Hahn always said the same thing."* Then his own words stuck him, and he felt silent and realized it was his turn to stare at the snow as though it were the most fascinating thing in creation.

"Was that his name? Your spouse?" Ingolf asked, and Erich could hear the awkward uncertainty in his voice. He did not immediately reply, and after a moment of silence, Ingolf spoke again. *"I am sorry, I should not have asked. It is certainly none of my business."*

"N-no," Erich said, hoping it was only to his own ears that his voice sounded shaky. *"I do not mind; it is only... I never talk about it. Everyone I know, knew him, knew us, so there was never a need to explain anything. Everyone knew."* His voice caught in his throat, but he forced himself to speak, suddenly needing to even as he wished they could talk about something else. *"Yes,"* he finally managed. *"His name was Hahn—Hahn Kalan Regis."*

Ingolf gave him an odd look, and Erich could see him slowly making all of the connections.

"You were married to the Crown Prince of Illussor?" Ingolf finally said, slipping back into Krian from shock, as realization struck him. He threw his head back and laughed, collapsing against the side of the stable. *"So it would seem I am not the only royal running around loose."* He shook his head and made hitting motions in Erich's direction. *"You are the craziest person I have ever met, Illussor."*

Erich shrugged. *"I never wanted the throne and do not want it now."* He took a deep breath and let it out on a sad sigh. *"I would rather have Hahn."*

Ingolf nodded, mouth quirking in the closest to an expression of sympathy Erich had seen from a Krian. *"I never wanted a throne either. So, if I may ask, how did you meet your prince? I guess being a Duke, you would have run in the same circles..."*

"Yes," Erich said slowly, overcome by too many memories at once, overwhelmed by the strange willingness to speak of them. Perhaps it had to do, at least in part, with the fact he saw no pity in Ingolf's face.

He turned away from Ingolf and stared up at the sky, breath misting in the cold air. *"Hahn was my first friend, my best friend, my first love. And I thought he would always be my only love."* He smiled sadly,

wistfully, and shifted his gaze from the stars to the shadows of distant trees. "We grew up together, as you said. He lived in the palace, obviously, and I spent most of my time there because my father had strong political leanings.

"We were inseparable, despite a two year age difference. They often said that as the older, I was the corrupting influence. It was always Hahn, though, who started the mischief." He laughed softly and shook his head. "As I have said before, you are hardly the first to tie me up. I was never good at staying put when I did not want to; my tutors had to literally tie me to my chairs to make me stay. The minute they left the room, I broke free, just because I could, and wanted to.

"It started as a dare, a challenge, with Hahn." He swallowed, unable to speak for a minute as the memories overwhelmed him—foolish children, but they had turned into so much more, he and Hahn. They had never told anyone about those early foolish games, or what they later turned into. It was no one's business.

But Ingolf was still silent nearby, the heat of him almost tangible in the freezing cold, his silence pure Krian—only silence, with nothing in it but listening.

"This was when I was thirteen," Erich continued at last, "when they were only really beginning to understand that the only way to make me do anything was to chain me down. Hahn decided he could tie me down, and keep me tied down, even though no one else had ever managed it. I said he could not do it. The next morning, I woke up tied to my bed."

Ingolf laughed.

Erich grinned briefly and continued. "So it became tradition. Whenever Hahn wanted something, despite my efforts to thwart him, he would tie me to my bed while I slept."

His smile faded to a smirk of fond, wry amusement. "Everything changed shortly after I turned sixteen, and I started to notice things about my best friend that a man should not notice, especially when his friend is only fourteen. But notice them I did, and fighting it—avoiding Hahn when resisting proved too difficult to manage in his presence—put the first true strain on our friendship.

"Then, the morning of Hahn's fifteenth birthday, I woke up tied to my bed." He shook his head at the memory, not bothering to sort out the emotions that rose up with it. "I demanded to know what he wanted, since at that point we had not spoken for days or even tolerated being in the same room. He informed me he was going to unwrap his birthday present."

Ingolf choked off a laugh, and Erich glanced at him. Ingolf's brows shot up at his look. "Never say..."

"I do say," Erich replied dryly. "After *that* morning, our friendship changed again. We were lovers, and in love, no matter that all the adults in our world said we were fools. Of course we thought we kept our new intimacy a secret, but no young boy has ever managed to keep such things a secret."

"None that I ever met," Ingolf said with a laugh. "I certainly did not bother to hide that I had discovered one of life's good points."

Erich grinned. "They all tried to stop it, to say that we were too young to know what we were doing, that we should not carry things so far. That I should know better, being the older." He shrugged. "We ignored them. Eventually, everyone left us alone, deciding we would simply have to learn our lessons the hard way."

"I take it you did not learn the lessons everyone expected."

"No, we did not." Erich glanced down at his gloved hand, not needing to remove the glove to see the gold and silver ring on his finger. "Shortly after his eighteenth birthday, when I was twenty, I asked him to marry me. Of course he said yes, and of course our parents and assorted relatives were livid. When it seemed as though they were going to tear us apart, we ran away and had another friend of mine marry us. She had only been a full priestess for a year, then; ours was the first marriage she performed."

"When everything finally settled down, Hahn's parents said they would stand by the marriage, and acknowledge my proper place if we kept the marriage quiet until Hahn was twenty-five, when he would come fully of age and, in their minds, be finally old enough to know his own mind. They also figured that by then, I would have figured out my own mind as well and finally see reason. We agreed, if reluctantly, because it made everyone happy, and they would not force us to break the marriage."

His smile fell away, hands balling unconsciously into fists. Staring hard at the snow, he said quietly, "Hahn died of the plague just a few days shy of turning twenty three. He had only just started to plan an elaborate ball to celebrate our marriage when he turned twenty five in two years, and it would have taken him those two years to see it all come to fruition." He closed his eyes for several minutes then finally forced them open, unfolding his fists slowly as he drew a deep breath.

"I am sorry," Ingolf said softly.

Erich nodded, but said nothing.

They sat in silence for several more minutes, before Ingolf broke it with a question. "If you were married to the crown prince, why are you not now King? Did they never acknowledge you, after all?"

"No, all the royal family save Hahn's sister was killed by the plague. She saw I was acknowledged in full and the reality of our marriage made clear when she took the throne. Those of us who survived agreed

she would be a better heir. She is a blood relation and has a better head for it. But should she die before producing an heir..." He shrugged and motioned tiredly.

"I envy you having someone else to take the throne," Ingolf said with a sigh. "Truly, I do. I was never meant for it, and now I have it and do not know what to do with it."

Erich nodded in commiseration—he certainly would panic if he ever found himself saddled with a throne. The wind rose up, bitter and sharp, making him briefly forget his thoughts in the sudden rush of *cold*.

Ingolf obviously liked it as much as he did, grimacing and pushing away from the stable wall, circling around until he could slip inside. The smell of hay and horse and dung was strong, but Erich cared only that he was out of that murderous wind.

He shoved back his hood and glanced toward Ingolf—and froze at the way the man stared at him, the look in his eyes unmistakable.

But then Ingolf seemed to recover himself and coughed, turning away and breaking the odd spell.

Erich shivered, and pulled his cloak more securely around his shoulders; he sneered at himself, for even trying to pretend that a cloak could banish his reasons for shivering. He had just spoken of Hahn, his mind was still filled with Hahn, but his reaction to that unguarded look had not been one of rejection.

Goddess damn him.

He took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "So what is your story, bastard son? Why would a Krian Kaiser allow his illegitimate whelp to live? Surely your siblings must have regarded you as a threat."

Ingolf laughed, a thread of weariness in the dry sound. "What is the story always with a bastard son? My father loved my mother enough to fuck her, to give her a nice home, but not enough to give her his name. I do not know why he chose to acknowledge me, or why he even let her birth me. But he did, and saw that I was given a good place in the Verdant Army and set on a path to be the next Verdant General. Perhaps he saw me as useful, or perhaps he only felt a little bit guilty. I never knew. For better or worse, enough people knew the truth of my birth that they knew to get me to safety when the Winter Palace was taken." He shrugged. "I was never meant to be Kaiser, but my father was a frugal man. Perhaps he thought that if I existed, it was best not to waste me. I do not truly know, though. I knew him, but only as a soldier."

Erich nodded and repeated the words Ingolf had told him only moments ago. "I am sorry."

"It is what it is," Ingolf said. "I am Kaiser, there is nothing but to go forward with it, and my first order of business is to see what we may learn in the village of my sword master." His eyes glinted, and Erich knew they were discussing more than Bright.

"Let us hope we find the answers we need and want," he replied.

Ingolf nodded, but said nothing, and they fell into a silence that was somehow comfortable despite all that Erich had said, the rawness left by speaking of Hahn when he had barely been able to say Hahn's name in the past five years without falling back into despair.

Suddenly restless, he moved to the door and opened it, glancing out at the snow which almost seemed to glow beneath the light of the moon.

A sharp intake of breath, followed by what sounded remarkably like a curse, drew his attention around. He frowned as Ingolf strode toward him, and it was only when he was forced to tilt his head back slightly as Ingolf drew unusually close that he realized Ingolf was taller than he. Not by much—he came just to Ingolf's nose—but taller all the same.

But whatever he might have said fled out of his mind entirely as Ingolf touched his cheek lightly, the leather of his gloves cold and firm against Erich's skin. "How can you be so pale?" Ingolf asked, shaking his head in wonder. "I should be used to it by now, but it constantly amazes me. I have seen Illussor before, but they none of them were as pale as you."

Erich laughed, the matter of his coloring—or lack—familiar, comfortable territory. "Even in Illussor, I'm a bit strange. Most have a little bit more coloring than me, and plenty these days have a bit of Krian blood in them." He smiled, and somehow it did not hurt as much this time to speak of Hahn. "Even Hahn used to tease me for it. He called me his Ghost."

Ingolf was shaking his head almost before Erich had finished speaking. "Ghost does not do you justice."

"What?" Erich asked, confused and suddenly close to panic, and yet the urge to *run* was not strong enough to overcome whatever kept his feet in place, kept him staring right back into the eyes watching him so intently.

"You look as though you are crafted from snow," Ingolf said, fingers pulling briefly on a stray bit of Erich's hair, releasing it only slowly. "I have thought before that you seem to be some child of the Winter Princess herself." He chuckled. "Perhaps you are, and all this snow is your fault."

Erich shook his head. "I cannot handle being a prince—I want no part of being a god."

"So you say," Ingolf said quietly, lightly touching his cheek again, fingers lingering. "Yet I still wonder if you will melt come the spring."

"It's never melted me before," Erich said, the words not quite steady, because he was definitely melting—but the seasons had nothing to do with it.

Then Ingolf was closer still, and there could not have been more than a breath of space between them—close enough to tantalize, close enough to torment. He wanted it and didn't, and the barest taste of Ingolf that he got in the heartbeat of time their mouths met would keep him unsettled for days.

In the next breath, there was real space between them again. They looked at each other then looked away. Erich took a moment to gather himself before he thrust the stable door all the way open and silently led the way back to the cabin.

Chapter Ten

Spying, Aden had found over the years, was five parts skill, three parts instinct, one part dumb luck, and a whole lot of being in the right place at the right time—or the wrong place, at the wrong time, depending upon the situation.

Accidentally wandering into a Salharan camp was definitely more wrong than right, and he very much wished that he had taken the *other* path, even if this one was a shortcut.

Well, there was nothing for it but to make the best of the situation. It was too late, too dark, to turn around and find somewhere else to bed down. It should have occurred to him, when he saw the campfire in the distance, that it could be Salharan. But it had not, and so now he would have to manage.

There was also that whole spy thing. Even when he was not actually working, the desire to know things he shouldn't was there. Here was a Salharan camp he had not expected to find. What might he learn? The lure could be resisted if he tried, but he seldom did.

The tricky part was what role to play. He could not be either Krian or Illussor—an Illussor here, especially traveling at such a strange hour, would look more than a little suspicious. They would simply kill any Krians they came across.

No, the only way he would live through this was if he pretended to be Salharan.

He had done it before, twice in fact, but he had not liked it. Being Salharan was incredibly difficult because all but the very poorest of Salharans had arcen eyes. Here, across the border and deep into Kria, to be a Salharan with unaffected eyes was to be spotted for a fake in a second flat.

Unless he could convince them he was a spy, and so needed to have clean eyes, but the only thing harder than passing for a Salharan was passing for a Salharan spy. He had never been *that* reckless. No, better to be a runner. Someone who had delivered a message and was now returning. Then, no one would be surprised if he had no details to provide, or that his eyes were a low ranking color.

Decision made, he grimaced briefly and then acted before he could change his mind. It was the best option and provided a chance to gain real information. First, he removed his sword and daggers, tucking them away where they would go unnoticed, though the sword was a bit tricky. Nothing would give him away faster than carrying weapons—especially so many of them. Then he reached into his pack, and he fetched his case, flipped it open, extracted the bottle of blue arcen, and downed half of it.

The taste immediately made him nauseous, but he ignored it. He had taken arcen only two other times in his life, instances that had been two years apart—and the last time had been a few years ago. He hated it. It was sticky sweet on the surface to hide the awful foulness beneath, like eating candy with rotted food to disguise it.

It had made him horrifically ill the first time he had tried it alone in a forest in preparation for his first foray into truly enemy territory. That had been to find a runaway Illussor, believed to be selling crucial financial secrets to Salhara.

That had also been his first order to kill mission. It had been Reni's father who had issued the order to him, but Reni and Hahn had both been present, to learn one of the shades of gray that came with ruling. No one in that room had liked it. He had done it, though, and done it well.

His second foray had been to solve the mystery of a dead Illussor turned up near the border, obviously killed by magic.

The coughing fit had drawn attention, and Aden held up his arms as three Salharans—one with yellow eyes, two with green. "Peace, comrades." He could tell the moment they caught the tell-tale glow of his eyes and relaxed. That was the first, and easiest part, accomplished.

The one with yellow eyes did not relax, though he motioned for the other two to stand down. *"Comrade, it is late for you to be traveling and alone. All is well?"*

"It is well," Aden said, flapping his hand impatiently. *"You know how it is—get this message to such and such or your balls will be fed to my dog. They said it was a matter of great urgency, but if you ask me, I just dropped off a dinner invitation."*

The men all laughed, and the yellow-eyed soldier—obviously the Scout Leader—relaxed. *"So who were you delivering to?"*

Aden motioned behind his back, calling up information he had picked up as he made his way through Salhara-infested Kria. *"Colonel Smitten. He has a dinner of some urgency, I guess."*

They motioned him toward the fire, calling out to the fourth man left to watch the camp to fill another bowl of soup. Aden reached into his pack and produced his own bowl—the same sort of battered metal, multipurpose cup any soldier carried, regardless of country. Some things did not change much from border to border, even amongst soldiers.

Murmuring a thank you for the soup, which tasted of rabbit and a distinctly-Salharan combination of herbs, Aden settled himself near the fire and silently reminded himself to take extra precaution. Now was not the time to make a mistake.

"What is your name?" Yellow eyes asked. He did not ask rank, or even question why Aden was not in uniform—none of them were, which meant they were scouts with the sort of orders that meant they were as eager to answer questions as Aden. Good.

"Dimas Helder," Aden replied promptly and bowed his head low. Two crucial things about Salhara must be known well, if not mastered, if one wanted to pretend to be Salharan. Arcen and names. Salhara took nothing so seriously as those two things. Being of lower rank, and having only blue eyes, he would never dare to ask a superior his name. He must wait for it to be offered and accept if it was not.

Coming up with a suitable Salharan name had been no easy feat—it had finally required finding a Salharan who had preferred to live in Illussor and actually managed the escape to give him a proper name. Even the better part of a decade out of Salhara, she had not liked helping with something she considered repulsive.

Still, she had helped in the end, and the name she had given him had probably helped to keep him alive. Most of his knowledge of Krians had come from such persons, and there were more than a few of them in Illussor.

Otherwise, his knowledge had come from the journals of Lord Beraht, who had related much of his life in Salhara as a nameless boy forced to whore himself out until the army took him in to be used as little more than fodder.

Until, of course, Lord Beraht had been made a member of the Brotherhood. It had been a fascinating story, and Aden had always hated how much was left out at the request of the Holy General.

The men did not offer their names, but Aden wasn't surprised by this. If they were on a covert scouting mission, it was best their names not be spread about. Every Salharan name was unique; the registry of names was meticulously kept to avoid repetition. No name could be reused until a person had been dead for at least a decade, or until the discarded name of a person when he moved on to a new one had been abandoned for at least a decade.

"I am heading back to main headquarters," Aden offered. "Or, as main as they get in this stars-refused country."

One of the green-eyed men snorted. *"Quite. I cannot wait to be out of here and back home, where we belong. These beasts are not worth the time or arcen being wasted upon them."* He started to say more, but cut himself off, and the look the Scout Leader gave him for the near slip piqued Aden's curiosity something fierce.

There was something here—but how to get it? These men were neither stupid nor careless.

"Seen anything interesting while you delivered dinner invitations, comrade?" Another green-eyed man asked.

He would never get over the eeriness of those faintly glowing eyes. Someone had once told him that the glowing red eyes were the worst; Aden had never been in a position to see if that was true. He would never risk it; a red-eyed Salharan stood the best and likeliest chance of spotting him for a fake.

"Interesting?" he echoed. *"Depends on what you mean. I saw Krians doing normal, stupid Krian things, and that is always interesting."* He laughed to show he meant amusing, the way it was always amusing to watch lesser creatures interact in their inferior ways.

"Mm," the scout leader said. *"I guess they did not give you any trouble, then? Some of these sword-loving idiots still think they can put up a fight. Their Generals are hiding scared, and they want to fight us with brooms and pitchforks!"*

Aden laughed along with them, even as his mind raced a mile a minute. They were expecting the Krians to be troublesome, and that crack about the Generals—this could perhaps be a scouting mission to see what information about the Generals could be surmised. People acting cocky might know more than they would ever say, and giving a solitary Salharan trouble definitely counted as cocky.

Could he give them something, to tempt them into giving him something in return? Soldiers loved to gossip; it was often all they had to do between orders from on high—but first he had to get past their discretion. *"The only interesting thing I have heard or seen of late is that some idiots let the Cobalt General get free. I have not been back at headquarters long enough to hear the tale, only that there is a tale, however."*

The scout leader sneered. *"Not the General himself, no. He was beheaded and his head staked out for the ravens. His son was turned into a songbird."*

"How did the songbird escape his cage?"

"Word has it someone drugged the guards and slipped the birdie loose," the scout leader said with a shrug. *"You ask me, they were too drunk to notice he slipped himself. Drugged! Like anyone could drug a Salharan."*

Aden sneered as he should and pulled out one of three flasks he kept for just such occasions. This one was filled with the sort of Salharan liquor one of his station should not necessarily have, unless he was doing favors for people who could afford to give lowly messengers handsome gifts to ensure silence.

Being a spy, he had learned quickly, was all in the details.

He took a sip, then passed the flask to the scout leader, who grunted in appreciation but no real surprise. The scout leader helped himself to a second swallow, then finally passed the flask to the next man.

"So are they trailing the songbird," Aden asked, yawning to emphasize idle curiosity rather than purposeful interest. *"Or has he flown to some nest?"*

"No one knows," said a green-eyed soldier. *"We barely know ourselves, beyond that he got away. It little matters. One General's son running around will not save Kria from what has been a long time coming."*

They did know. Aden could not pinpoint what precisely gave it away, except he knew what it looked like when a group of men were keeping secrets. They *were* hunting the missing Generals, and so far he sensed they were having no success.

Not surprising, really. The Krians, contrary to Salharan opinion, were not stupid. They rejected magic, and gave names to things like swords, but that did not actually mean they were any more stupid than all men.

He wondered if they knew to pay more attention to the temples. Probably not. Salharans worshiped the stars, and they had a bad habit of looking down on those they believed inferior. Salharan temples were nothing like Krian temples, and they hated to spend much time underground. It would never occur to them that there might be far more than was visible in Krian temples.

Even most Krians did not know about the secret rooms beneath many. Aden doubted he would know himself, if not for the journals carefully locked away in his family vault. Normally, only he and Erich held keys to it. Reni held both keys now, however, because they never carried them when leaving the country.

At least, he hoped Erich had been enough in possession of his good sense to leave his vault key.

His flask reached him again, and he took the barest sip while appearing to take a generous one, then passed it along again. *"Well, one little songbird is no matter. It is not as though he will be able to do much, surely. All the colorful little songbirds have flown Kria, leaving the chicks to fend for themselves."*

"They have not all flown," a green-eyed soldier said, then winced at a furious glance from the scout leader.

Aden decided to risk it and said, *"Oh, ho. So perhaps that is what the dinner invitation was all about. A celebration and songbirds perhaps to entertain the mighty?"*

The men all laughed. *"Only one songbird,"* the scout leader said slowly, but it was obvious the liquor—a little bit more potent than it strictly should have been—had finally loosened his need to brag. Still, he did not say more, but instead prodded. *"What do you know about dinner parties?"*

"Nothing," Aden said, holding up his hands in a show of innocence. *"I am a good little soldier, with blue, pure eyes."*

That gained him another laugh—this one because the words were a joke. Blue was the color at which arcen started to turn truly addictive. Violet and indigo were too weak to cause any real addiction, but when a man began to use blue with any regularity, he became too polluted to easily turn back.

It was said that past yellow, one literally could not live without arcen. Aden had never been able to determine if that was true or not, and arcen was something Lord Beraht had carefully not discussed in his journals. His very words had been that if he presented the knowledge, it would serve as temptation, and Illussor did not deserve that after all it had achieved.

"So what kind of songbird, if I may ask," Aden said after a moment.

The men all shared a look, having some sort of silent conversation, but at last the scout leader faced Aden and said simply. *"We are going to tell our superiors where they might obtain a yellow songbird to sing at his dinner party, since he is so desirous of one."*

Aden nodded, smirking and chuckling and letting them imbibe freely of his flask. They knew the location of the Saffron General. He had a decision to make.

Best to first consider his options. He could stay and attempt to gather more information, but if he pressed much harder they would become suspicious again. A man seeking gossip was nothing, but it was not information he should know, and so they would wonder why he pressed for it. So, that was likely out.

He could hope that they did not know as much as they thought, but that was not even a real option. That was cocky and careless.

He could leave, and follow them, and see what came of it. He could even return with them, wherever they were going, but no, he had already said he was returning to the Winter Palace. Unless that was

their destination, that would do no good—and they had very carefully kept the matter of their superior's identity secret.

If he knew himself where the Saffron General was hiding, he could go and warn the man, but he only knew the location of one General and had barely obtained that information.

So, he really only had one option, though it guaranteed nothing. At best, it would delay and confuse—but that might be just enough to save a General's life, and the lives of those who were undoubtedly hiding with him.

Nodding to himself, he moved the conversation to safer waters, chatting idly and easily until they all at last bedded down. The scout leader took the first watch, but they were all more than happy to let him take the second when he offered, it being the most unpleasant watch to take.

So he waited, never sleeping, but making a good show of it, pretending to wake groggily when the scout leader shook him, muttering and cursing in Salharan as he took up position.

Then he waited another half hour, until he knew they were all dead asleep, encouraged in it by the poison he had added to the liquor.

When he was certain they were all asleep, he drew out the knife he had kept in the hidden sheath in his cloak and slit their throats.

A messy business, slitting throats, but the best way to kill them quickly and quietly. Not a one stirred enough to give warning to the others, and the matter ended with surprising ease and speed.

Then came the grunt work. One by one he dragged the bodies deeper off into the woods, spreading them far apart so that if one was found, they would not necessarily find the others. One Salharan body thrown into the woods was simply a careless Salharan killed by a reckless Krian. Four Salharans killed was suspicious, especially with no signs of violence around them.

Bodies dispersed, left out of sight of people, but where animals could get at them easily enough, Aden moved on to their belongings. He had stripped the bodies of all but the barest clothing, leaving it all in a heap alongside their packs. Now he would see if the mess contained anything useful.

The clothes were quickly discarded after he soused out all the little pockets hiding arcen. The mystery of the dead soldiers grew and grew—they were carrying a fair bit more than seemed standard issue for soldiers, even those on a highly confidential scouting mission. Each green-eyed soldier had apparently been carrying one vial of yellow, in addition to five green. The scout leader had five yellow, and a vial of red.

That was more than a little interesting. His eyes had been pure yellow. To jump straight to red was bad, Aden knew that much. Transplanted Salharans, even if their loyalties shifted to lie with Illussor, still had enough Salhara—or perhaps fear of Salhara—in them to flat out refuse to discuss arcen much.

They had at least told him that one could not simply pick a color and go with it. Each color had to be worked through, worked up to, and slowly. The higher the color, the longer it took to adjust to it. Arcen

was, after all, a poison. It might often seem as though Salharans had forgotten that, but Aden respected the art just enough to know they never forgot it for a moment—they simply knew how to live with it.

Concentrated reds he and a few others knew about from Lord Beraht's journals. His own work had led him to the realization that Kria knew of the concentrated reds, as well. Salhara still had a great many secrets, but it had lost more than a few through the years of bitter war.

So why would the good yellow eyed scout leader have a great deal of yellow, one red, and no orange? That implied he was not, in fact, a yellow-user. Precious few persons in Salhara were permitted to use reds. The Brotherhood, definitely. Beyond them, he did not know. Interesting, interesting, though it hardly mattered now. Whatever color he could use, the bastard was dead.

All told, he had twenty four vials of arcen and twenty cleansers. So they had anticipated having to clean out their eyes often. Hmm. Then again, they had apparently been hunting the Saffron General, so that would make sense.

He popped one of the cleansers, nearly doubling over and retching from the nausea it induced. Goddess, he did not see why Salharans loved arcen so. The few times he had taken it, he had wanted to be sick. Every time he flushed it from his system, he wanted to be sick. It was vile and nasty, and he hoped he had no cause to use it for a very long time after this.

Shuddering, he tucked the empty vial away with the full ones in his pack, to be carefully disposed of later. He could simply dump them out, but he did not like to be that careless. He did not want to poison the ground, or cause arcen flowers to grow. It was not a chance he was willing to take.

Arcen tended to, he cast aside the clothes and moved on to the packs, beginning with the scout leader.

Interestingly, his pack contained a dagger. Aden's lip curled in contempt, to see how shoddily it had been cared for—that was to say, the bastard had never cleaned it once. It looked as though he had barely bothered to wipe the blade before shoving it back into its sheath and throwing it into his pack. Pathetic.

That it had been used was definitely intriguing. The better a Salharan was at magic, the less likely he was to use weapons—weapons implied stupidity and incompetence. A good Salharan did not need weapons even in battle against blood-crazed Krians.

So why would a man who was definitely at yellow in skill—and very likely all the way to red—use a knife? But the answer came to him even as he asked the question: to avoid it being noticed the bodies had been killed by magic. They had killed with weapons to avoid tipping anyone off to a Salharan presence.

They had definitely been doing seriously deep work, then.

He poked through the bag some more, tearing it apart at the seams to hunt out anything hidden in the lining or secret pockets, but he turned up nothing. No coded messages or long letters spelling out in nice detail all the Salharans intended. Not that he had expected so much as a blank piece of paper, but one could always hope his enemies were dumber than they appeared. Still, if these men had been serious enough in their work to dirty themselves by using weapons they were not stupid.

What he *did* find, in lieu of a handy, detailed letter, was a map in a hard leather map case. A Krian map, at that, and someone had actually made marks upon it—damn near a crime, in Kria, to so ruin a map, but Salharans had never been accused of courtesy or common sense. Nine different points had been marked off, all of them over empty wooded areas or valleys along the very edge of the mountain range.

It all seemed quite random to him, but coupled with the fact he knew they had been seeking—and had found —the Saffron General, it stood to reason they had been narrowing down the possibilities. His best guess, the marks were places they had tried and found nothing. But he did not have enough knowledge to make a good guess and so gave it up. Rolling the map up and sliding it back into its case, he tucked it away in his pack.

He might not know what it all meant, but he just bet that Reinoehl would know something.

The last thing he took from the scout leader's pack was his foodstuffs. Extra food was never a bad thing to have, especially as quickly as he was traveling and in such miserable weather.

Finished with the scout leader's pack, he set it aside and began on the others. They all proved to contain daggers as poorly treated as the first, as well as various bits and pieces of clothing and jewelry that seemed to confirm his earlier suspicions—these men had worked hard to play at being Krian.

So they had unmistakably been spies, not that it was ever in doubt, but not terribly good ones for all they had obviously accomplished their mission successfully. Good spies would not have felt compelled to brag. A good spy caused as few ripples as possible in the dark waters through which he swam, left no wet footprints behind when he climbed out of it, and told only his liege what he had seen while swimming.

Obviously this group had not quite learned that lesson. Were he to investigate what they had done, he did not doubt he would find evidence of them everywhere. If they had been good spies, he never would have discovered them—let alone killed them.

It was peculiar for Salharans. They were notorious for using such tactics.

Well, it was no problem of his how competent or not they had been. His only mission now was to reach Reinoehl and share with him the news that Illussor would openly join Kria in a war against Salhara and to help in that vein whenever and wherever he might without interfering with the primary objective.

This definitely counted as assisting without losing sight of the main goal. Wherever the Saffron General hid, he was safe for at least a few more days.

Aden permitted himself the briefest of smirks for a job well done then sobered. The Salharans had died because they had been cocky and let their guard down. If he was not careful, he would find himself guilty of the same, and that meant he would find himself dead.

Finding nothing else of interest, he took their food then moved to the campfire. He fed everything that he could into the fire and buried the rest in the snow so that it hopefully would not be found until well into spring.

Then he demolished the camp, taking extreme care that no sign of it remained before he finally strapped his weapons back into place and continued on his way.

He was two days from the Winter Palace, and as he was making a point to avoid it, he could take an alternate route along the river that would shave a couple of days from his journey. That meant in just under two weeks, barring insurmountable weather, he would reach the Fortress of Eis.

The thought excited him, though he was not quite sure why. Well, he wanted to prove to Reinoehl that he was a man of his word. Reaching beneath his clothes, Aden wrapped his fingers around the pendant. By now, he knew its every curve and contour by touch. He lingered on the snowflake, tracing the intricate pattern, wondering idly what manner of reception he would get upon his arrival.

At last he withdrew his hand and shifted his thoughts back to work and traveling because he had been lucky to survive one unexpected band of Salharans. That time, he'd had the chance to prepare his eyes and hide his weapons, to think of a good cover and use it to his advantage. He could not expect to be that fortunate twice, and so it paid to be on his guard all the more.

One eye on the sky to watch the weather, and the other on the road to watch for trouble, Aden traveled as quickly as he dared, bound for the mountains and the General he hoped was awaiting his arrival.

Chapter Eleven

Reinoehl patted his stallion's neck, urging the restless beast to calm down even as he kept his own senses carefully attuned to figure out what was bothering his horse.

He wished there was moonlight, even though he knew the dark worked for him as much as against. He tugged at the hood of his cloak and stepped a bit farther back into the thick cluster of trees that ringed the small clearing, feeling horribly vulnerable.

Perhaps he was the reason for his horse's restlessness, Reinoehl thought in disgust, mouth curling in a grimace beneath the dark of his hood. He could barely stand still himself, why should he expect his horse to do so?

Really, he just wanted it over with, already. He did not like the risk they were taking, even if it was necessary. Only a fool wrote down important information, and the information was crucial enough they dared not even send messengers with memorized, encoded lines. No, the information was not to be shared, and so they must take this risk.

His breaths misted in the frigid air, and he wanted nothing so badly as to be in his bed, buried beneath warm blankets and fast asleep. Unfortunately, his bed was three long, hard days away, and all of it up an icy mountain—and he must first get through this damnable meeting.

Which would go much faster if his compatriots would bother to show up, and the longer they took, the more worried he became. He did not like the risk, he did not like the wait—

But just as he was about to scream from the tension, he heard another horse approaching. A moment later, a figure on horseback broke through the thick forest, walking slowly into the clearing, dismounting with the lithe grace and elegance that Reinoehl normally only associated with wild animals.

That was not entirely true, he realized, almost as an afterthought. Memories stirred of the strange, Illussor spy he had met what had been weeks ago, but somehow seemed only hours. He'd possessed that same animal grace, but perhaps that befitted a man whose every word and action could spell his capture and death.

Hildebrand von Berger was in his early fifties, but moved like a man half that age, and had enough vitality for three men. He was a fierce leader and a terrifying swordsman, but Reinoehl had also known him to be the kindest man in the world—and even in the midst of these terrible times, he knew Hildebrand could still find a reason to smile and laugh. The Verdant General fit that title well, and bore the ivy crest of the Spring Prince with great pride.

Reinoehl stepped from the shadows as Hildebrand dismounted, a hand on his sword. He trusted Hildebrand, but he had also trusted his father's best friend and now his father was dead.

"Reinoehl!" Hildebrand called, and though it was too dark to see his smile, Reinoehl could hear it in his voice. "You are looking well, my lad." He stopped, and shook his head. "No, that's not really fair. You are hardly a lad anymore, haven't been for a long time."

They reached each other and clasped arms, both relaxing and smiling as they dared to believe they would find no treachery in each other. Then Hildebrand clapped him roughly on one shoulder, a smile still in his voice. "I am sorry about your father. We all mourn him deeply. To look at you now, though, I think he must rest in peace. We have heard about the retaking of Eis. Well done, with that. If it was half the battle described to me, it must have been a thing of beauty.

"Thank you," Reinoehl murmured, not certain what else he could say, overwhelmed and humbled by the praise, the words about his father wakening an ache he did not think would ever fade. His father had been highly regarded, even by the other Generals, but no one had adored the Cobalt General more than his own son. He just hoped he was doing proper justice to his father's memory; it was so hard to take up the mantle.

Hildebrand started to say more, but the sudden appearance of another small lantern on the far side of the clearing stopped them. Drawing apart, hands on their swords, they waited to see if the newcomer was the friend they awaited, or a foe... or both.

"Peace," called a gruff, but easy voice. Daring and bold, responsible for the deaths of three of the five Brotherhood Kria had managed to kill over the years, the Saffron General was not a man to be trifled with. Viktor von Dresden was half past forty and bore scars from head to toe; the legacy of a man who had been fighting practically since the cradle.

They exchanged greetings, then simply stood there in a silence filled with anxiety, relief, and the hot anticipation that came with the knowledge that they were *finally* going to begin taking action against the polluted bastards running amuck in their homeland.

"Reinoehl," Viktor said, "well done with Eis."

Now he was just beginning to feel embarrassed. "I doubt that what you have heard was anything like the battle itself," he said. "A very basic ambush strategy with some minor tweaking. We lost only eleven of the hundred soldiers in the assault."

Viktor and Hildebrand both laughed, and Reinoehl had the sense they were sharing a look—or would, if any of them could see properly. "You sound like your father," Hildebrand said and clapped him briefly on the shoulder again.

Reinoehl only nodded, unable to say anything.

"Has anyone heard anything that might alter our plans?" Viktor asked, taking pity on him. "For my part, we had some suspicion a few days ago that my location had been leaked, but though I was discreetly relocated and the old location watched, nothing ever came of it. Either they realized I moved, or I saw a problem that was not there."

"Better to take the precaution," Hildebrand replied. "For my part, nothing. We remain secure, unless something has changed in my absence. I hope not, for I grow weary of treachery."

Reinoehl nodded in agreement, and knew Viktor did the same.

"So then our final plans remain unchanged?" Viktor asked.

"Yes," Hildebrand replied.

"It will still take time," Viktor said. "The siege of the Winter Palace alone could take months, and we must first fight our way to it."

Reinoehl motioned and would have smiled, save he was simply too nervous. "If I do my job correctly, then it should not take you too long. They will not be able to last without reinforcements."

"You are taking a great deal of risk, going straight into Salhara," Viktor said. "Even for me, that is a bit much."

"What choice do we have?" Reinoehl asked, biting back an urge to tell them that Illussor might possibly join the war. Even thinking it, he wanted to sneer in contemptuous disbelief himself. Illussor had never dirtied its hands, always slinking around the night to take what it needed, but never openly drawing sword in battle. They might wield their swords like Krians, but that was all they had in common.

Except, the memory of Aden persisted. He had seemed to think matters might be different this time, though Reinoehl did not see what made him think that. Would he even be coming back? Or had he gone off to spy elsewhere, his duties in Kria finished?

He shook his head in the dark and brought his thoughts back to where they should be. "Without my part, we stand no chance in retaking the Winter Palace. The only way we will drive the Salharans out is to see to it that the forces remaining in Salhara do not join up with the forces already in Kria."

"We also need to take out more of the Brotherhood," Hildebrand muttered.

Reinoehl replied, "I think it a miracle that we have killed five already. They were careless, though I wish they had been that careless a little longer. Still, five dead Brothers is five they no longer have."

"I would be happier if we could take out at least a full seven," Viktor muttered. "Then again, the war is not over yet. I intend to put them in cages the same way as they have done to so many of us, and more than a few of their heads will be spiked along the border to warn off the rest of those glowing-eyed bastards."

Hildebrand grunted in agreement. "If I have my say, the bodies of their generals will swing from the Winter Palace until they fall away as dust—and that is only if the Kaiser does not put them in the coliseum as little more than common criminals."

Reinoehl laughed. "Now there is a fine punishment for the polluted bastards, to die at the hands of a petty thief for want of true combat skills." His lip curled in contempt. The bastards were a force with arcen in their blood, but take that away, and they were pathetic.

The other two laughed with him, before they sobered and returned to business.

"So," Viktor said quietly, voice barely audible even to them, for no chance could be taken with their plans being learned by the wrong persons. "Hildebrand and I will work our way slowly toward the Winter Palace, taking out as many as we can, to reduce their strength of numbers. If we can herd the survivors to the Winter Palace, then it is nothing but a siege from there, and that we can handle."

"If no support is forthcoming from Salhara," Reinoehl said softly, "and that I will ensure at all costs."

Salhara was already taking a big risk, spreading its armies across Kria—but there was little choice. The heart of Kria was far from the heart of Salhara. So far, it had worked for them, but if all went according to plan then that gamble was about to become Salhara's greatest regret.

All he had to do was keep further Salharan forces from crossing into Kria—or, at least, too far into Kria. It would help if they had a fourth division to watch the southern half of the country, but they would have to hope that Salhara dared not to draw too close to Illussor in order to cross into Kria. Most of their traveling would be done more north, in the lower mountain ranges. That being the case, Reinoehl and his troops could keep them out, or at least thin the numbers to the point they would be no challenge.

He had the forces, if only barely, with him in the Fortress of Eis, tucked away in the honeycomb of caves, and hidden amongst the peasants in various villages and farms. When he gave the signal, all would begin, and he would see if he could keep Salhara back long enough for his fellows to reclaim Kria.

It was a huge gamble on their part, and if one army fell, then very likely all was lost. They had never needed a fourth general more, but there was no one suitable, no one they trusted enough to take up the stricken mantle of Scarlet now. They would have to make do, and hope that the Autumn Prince gave his support anyway.

"More help would be nice," Hildebrand said with a tired sigh.

"Illussor may yet join the fray," Reinoehl said cautiously, not quite wanting to tip his hand, for fear of saying something he would never be able to take back. "They cannot think they will be better off with Salhara in full control. After us, Salhara will take the Regenbogen—and Illussor will just be for sport, after that. They will turn Illussor into new homes for their pithy polluted nobles and Kria into arcen farms."

He could hear the sneer in Viktor's voice. "Illussor? Those pale-faced weaklings who think they are outside any chance of harm simply because they are very careful not to let anyone see smears on their perfect white skin? Bah. No help will ever come from that quarter, and we do not need the help of cowards."

Reinoehl frowned, fighting the objections that wanted to spill out. Aden was a spy, yes. He had admitted he needed to get home to report what he knew—but he had also said that Illussor would not want Salhara to defeat Kria.

"What is it, Reinoehl? You are all but vibrating in place."

"I should be dead," Reinoehl said slowly, still not entirely certain he wanted to speak. "My men could not break me free when they were supposed to, and I was put up in a birdcage to watch while they beheaded my father and put his head on a pike. We all knew that once up there, I stood no chance of breaking free, not with all the guards in the pavilion..."

"So what happened?" Viktor demanded. "I heard only that you escaped. No one knew more than that."

Despite himself, Reinoehl smiled in the dark, remembering the details his men had told him, of all what the Illussor had done. They had, apparently, kept watch over him the whole day to ensure there would be no treachery from that quarter. "He played the whore," Reinoehl said, "and got close enough he was able to drug the guards. Then he climbed the beams and picked the lock, and sprung me free."

"Who?" Hildebrand demanded, sounding amazed and disbelieving, and irritated by the mystery.

Reinoehl laughed. "An Illussor spy. He wanted out of the city, but could not find a way. He freed me in exchange for a way out. Before he departed, he said that he had to report all he had learned here to his Queen, and that Illussor preferred Kria to Salhara."

Viktor grunted. "That means nothing. Salharans have glowing eyes, Illussor have gilded tongues. Those pale-faced creatures might have stolen our fighting style, but they stole their slinking ways from Salhara. We do not need them."

"You are probably right," Reinoehl said, his tone implying he was only saying so to end the discussion before it became an argument. Around his neck, he could feel the weight of his necklace. Would he soon be informed a stranger was at his gates, bearing its mate and demanding to see him?

Or was Viktor correct, and he had merely been bewitched by Aden's gilded tongue?

Perhaps it had been the entire gilded form, he conceded reluctantly. Aden had hardly been a chore to look at, with that interesting mix of pale Illussor and dark Krian.

No, he decided. Had he not given Aden his mother's necklace? He had done so to prove he was willing to trust a possible enemy, when he was not even certain he could continue trusting friends. Aden had not lied to him, and Aden would return to tell him *something*, even if it was only that Illussor had decided to keep its hands clean.

"We should go," Hildebrand said, further ending the would-be argument. "We have lingered too long as it is. Our plans are finalized; there is nothing for it but to push forward no matter what, no matter who falls."

"Yes," Reinoehl and Viktor agreed together.

Hildebrand reached out and tugged them both into a loose embrace, pushing them roughly away as they broke apart. "Go, then, my brothers, and the next time we all are together, let it be because we have a victory to celebrate."

This time, the agreement was a silent one, but it was there all the same.

Nothing else to say, Reinoehl turned away and mounted his stallion, turning it around and vanishing into the woods along the path by which he had come. Once he was well away from the clearing, he doused his lantern and fastened it in its place with his saddlebags. As of now, he traveled only by the limited moonlight, but his well-trained eyes swiftly adjusted to the dark.

Exhaustion tugged at him, for he had not slept much in the days it had taken him to get here—and the other two had traveled much farther—to reach the one safe place they all knew, and he wanted badly to climb into his bed in Eis.

He would settle for the small cabin where he had left his men, a day away from the meeting spot. Risky, but he had conceded when they said it was now far too dangerous for him to travel alone. Still, he had only trusted them to a point.

Riding as hard as he dared, he reached the small cabin shortly after dark of the following day.

A lantern was lit, but not the way he had told them, so that he knew the cabin was safe. Damn it. What had gone wrong.

Leaving his horse some distance away, he drew his sword then slipped into the woods, circling around until he could approach the cabin from behind. What had gone wrong? Had they been followed here? Were they lying in wait for him?

Had Hildebrand and Viktor gotten away safely? Tired of the Winter Princess, he was tired of all this nonsense. Would he ever pass one day not full of too many things going wrong, one day of peace? Ha! Reaching the back door, he strained to hear any clue as to what was going on inside.

He could definitely hear Salharan—so his men were dead, or may as well be. He hoped they were already dead, and the Salharans were not playing with them. Listening carefully, not moving for the better part of an hour, he determined there were three men inside.

Three he could handle.

Recalling all he could of the cabin, examining it in the weak lantern light spilling from the two windows, he determined the door could very likely be kicked in—and it was his best chance of starting with the element of surprise.

Still he waited, until they grew quieter. He was no shadow-killer, but only a fool took three armed men completely blind. The more settled in they were for the night, the better his chances.

He could simply walk away and leave them waiting here indefinitely—as obviously they had gotten enough out of his men to know they were waiting for someone. He hoped they had not given away for whom they waiting.

The smart thing would be to walk away; his life was valuable. Salhara would love dearly to capture him—not least of all because he had managed to escape. That must burn them something awful, and he hoped they choked on it.

Finally all seemed as quiet as it was going to get. From his position, they would not be able to see him even if whoever was on watch bothered to look outside. Pathetic, really. A good team would set a man to keep watch outside.

He saw a shadow at the window, and waited for it to subside—then he drew a deep breath, stood up and worked out his stiffened muscles, bracing himself for what was to come.

Then he gave up slow and careful thinking and let instinct and training take over.

Kicking in the door, which gave way easily, he bolted into the room and immediately launched himself at the man put on watch. His eyes flared bright with the attempt to use a spell, and Reinoehl felt the hot burn of a spell meant to sear flesh—but then the man was dead, for magic would never be a match for steel in the end.

He roared in surprise and pain as something struck him from behind, grimacing at the stinging pain of a spell that cut like razors. It struck again, and he could feel the blood seeping through his clothes at too many small points.

But he pushed on, picking up a stool and lobbing it, catching one of them in the face. Then he bolted toward them, closing the space between them quickly in the confines of the small cabin.

The other tried to speak, but Reinoehl shoved, sending him into the fireplace, letting him scream while he addressed the other.

"Stupid Krian," the man snarled.

Reinoehl took the magic launched at him, wiping blood from his eyes and then lunging forward, catching the nimble little bastard on the arm—and spinning sharply around as he tried to flee, turning to meet him with his sword swinging at full momentum, all but cutting the bastard in half.

There was blood everywhere, and the stench of death was already permeating the place. Ignoring it, Reinoehl went for the man still recovering from being thrown into a roaring fire.

Gripping the man's throat, making it impossible for him to do more than gasp feebly for breath, Reinoehl smiled coldly. "Good evening, comrade. Were you waiting for me?"

The man struggled to get out a reply, and his yellow eyes flared as bright as sunlight then dulled swiftly as Reinoehl gutted him.

He dropped the body and turned away, looking around the cabin now for the bodies of his men.

They were in the far corner, near the first body he had slain.

Going to them, he knelt—and saw that one was still just barely alive. Unfortunately, he realized sadly, he would not live much longer.

"Lord General," the man said, obviously barely capable of getting the words out, or even keeping his eyes open. "Never told. You are safe."

Reinoehl nodded, and gripped the back of the man's head, leaning forward so their foreheads were pressed together. "Then go peacefully, my friend, in the hand of the Autumn Prince, to be given into the arms of the Winter Princess."

He did not withdraw until the man was dead, and then only stood slowly, feeling as though a heavy weight pressed down upon his chest, upon his shoulders. Whispering a farewell prayer to his men, he then moved to the Salharans and removed their heads.

Taking the grisly trophies outside, he carried them to the remains of an old well long gone dry, and tossed them down into it. "Look at the stars from there, you polluted bastards," he snarled, then left the cabin and returned to his horse.

As badly as he wanted to rest, he did not dare now. If one Salharan scout team had been out, there could very well be others. His men had died keeping him a secret, and he would not dishonor their deaths by being captured now.

The traveling was grueling, and he had never hated his mountain home so much as he did then, when all he wanted was to be home and safe, and in his damned bed. When at last the Fortress of Eis came into view, Reinoehl could have wept in relief.

Inside, he finally dismounted and nearly toppled when the dizziness struck him like a blow to the gut.

"Lord General!" Vester said anxiously, and Reinoehl realized then that he had only avoided toppling because Vester had caught him. "Where is your escort, my lord?"

"Dead," Reinoehl said wearily, righting himself only with great effort. "I found them dead and Salharans occupying the place where they were meant to await me. A scout team, but I did not stop to ask what they sought. They are dead, and my secrets safe, but I did not dare sleep until I reached safety. Vester, my chambers please."

"Yes, Lord General," Vester said, and he kept a firm grip on him as he escorted Reinoehl through the halls of Eis to his room.

Inside his bedroom, Reinoehl quickly stripped off his filthy, sodden clothes. He wanted nothing more than to fall into bed, but there were matters to attend first, and he would not go to bed reeking of days of hard travel and blood.

He was not, however, going to even try to attempt going downstairs to his hot spring. Instead, he let Vester see that hot water and all else he needed was fetched.

"Tell me what I have missed," he said as he began to wash and shave, and make himself blissfully clean again.

"Not much," Vester said, as he waved out the man who had brought food and wine. "All is quiet, though I have doubled the number of our own scouts to ensure that we are not missing something the same way the Salharans missed something. I would almost say it is too quiet, save that I do not think the major Salharan forces yet know they have lost Eis. A missive came that the men you sent out are drawing ever closer to the prince. They hope to have him by the end of the month."

Reinoehl grunted. "Good, though sooner would be better. Anything else?"

"We have received all the supplies for which we dared hoped and more besides. Some villagers have taken refuge in the fortress, but they are being very closely watched as well as confined. Anyone thought even slightly suspicious goes in the dungeon."

"Fine," Reinoehl replied. "The very moment the thaw begins, however, they go out again."

"Yes, Lord General. Anything else?"

"I am not to be disturbed unless necessary for the next ten hours. Send men back to the cabin, to tend the bodies of our men properly." He gave the coordinates of the cabin.

Vester nodded. "Yes, Lord General." He hesitated, then said. "I am glad you returned to us safely, my lord. Did your business go well?"

"Yes, it did," Reinoehl said and strode naked to his wardrobe to pull out fresh clothes, pulling them on and sighing deeply in relief. "In ten hours, we must talk. Thank you, my friend. Go for now and make certain everyone stays on guard. We must not fall prey to the mistakes the Salharans made, and there are more in the woods than I think we realize."

"Yes, Lord General," Vester said, and this time bowed. "Sleep well."

Reinoehl grunted in acknowledgment and waved him out.

He looked at his bed, but instead of falling into it as he wanted he strode to the window and threw it open. Outside, it was a rare clear night. There was not much in the way of moonlight, but the stars sparkled with a startling clarity. He could almost understand, on nights like this, why the Salharans worshipped them so much.

Except he never wanted to understand the Salharans more than was strictly necessary to kill them. He swept his gaze over the landscape, settling at last in the direction of the Salharan border. Soon, he thought savagely. Very soon, Hildebrand and Viktor would sweep through Kria with everything they had. The blood that would spill, and the lives that would be lost made him sick to his stomach. They had already lost so many and more still to that damned plague half a decade ago.

It would all be worth it, he hoped, when at last they drove Salhara out and restored peace. It had to be worth it, there was no other choice. He refused to think his father and mother had died for nothing.

His mind filled with the plans and strategies he had been working through in solitude, for how best to keep Salhara in Salhara, while Hildebrand and Viktor waged war in Kria. He hoped it worked, and if he fell ensuring victory, then gladly would he fall.

At the moment, however, he was going to fall into bed. Closing and barring the window, he swept the room to ensure all was truly well, locked his door, and put his boots by his bed so he could get to them quickly. Then he took his sword and laid it near to hand, blew out the candles, and finally slipped beneath the heavy quilts.

He sighed in pleasure and relief, burying his head into one of the feather pillows. Thankfully, he could no longer smell his mother's perfume in the linens, nor any trace of his father. It still felt wrong, sleeping in their bed, but he was slowly coming to accept that it was now *his* bed.

Turning over, he stared up at the ceiling, still too tense to fall asleep even if his body screamed for it. At times like this, he envied his parents. His father had said more than once that Reinoehl's mother had helped him to keep his sanity when everything got to be too much. With all the betrayal around them, they had still been able to implicitly trust each other.

It would be nice to have such a person. He trusted Vester, who every day was proving more and more worthy of that trust—but it was not the same as having someone to occupy the other half of the enormous bed.

His hand went absently to his necklace, tracing its every detail from memory, lingering on the snowflake. On his hand, the ring of the Cobalt General felt heavy, but familiar and almost comforting. He might not have anyone to share the massive bed, but he'd been fortunate in his parents, and he had the trust of his men despite all that had passed.

He also hoped that a certain spy was returning to him, with news that just might help to turn the tide of war in Kria's favor once and for all.

Something about his thoughts finally settled his mind, and Reinoehl yawned loudly in the absolute silence of his room. Touching his necklace one last time, he rolled over onto his stomach and listened to the sounds of the fortress—men calling out the time, others doing late night drills by torchlight, the sounds of the watch, horses and men and the wind blowing through trees weighed down by snow and ice...

His sword just visible in the dark, necklace pressing against his skin, Reinoehl drew a breath, and was asleep before he had finished releasing it on a soft sigh.

Chapter Twelve

They would reach the village late tomorrow morning.

Ingolf did not know what to do, torn between relief and misery. He did not want Pancraz to prove traitorous, for he believed everything Pancraz had told them just a few days ago—but he had also withheld the treachery that would come to pass all too soon. Why would he do that, if he was not a traitor? What other motive could he possibly have?

He wished there were some way to completely stop his thoughts for a time, for between Pancraz and Erich, he was truly tired of thinking.

His stomach twisted as he thought of Erich and that night in the stable. He would never be able to forget that moment, no matter how hard he tried—not that he had been trying. Even now, his fingers twitched to trace his lips, the memory of that almost kiss.

Really, he thought in disgust, what sort of bastard was he? It had obviously cost Erich much to speak of his dead lover. It was clear he still loved the man—Hahn—deeply. And what had Ingolf done?

Barely waited for him to finish speaking before he had all but pushed him against a wall and given in to temptation. Except... that was not entirely fair. Erich had wanted him, too, beneath all the tangled emotions tied to his dead lover. That kiss had not happened, but it had *almost* happened, and—

It did not matter, he reminded himself harshly, because nothing should be happening. They were two princes—well, he was a Kaiser now, but he still felt like a bastard prince—of two very different countries, and their responsibilities to those countries must come first. Soon after he saved Kria, he would have to take a wife to further stabilize it. Erich was crown prince of his own nation and so had plenty of obligations of his own.

Even if they were both inclined toward a dalliance, that was all it would ever be. He did not know why that mattered, when dalliances were all he'd ever had and wanted, but it did. He wanted a great deal from Erich, for all they had known one another for only a short time, and the circumstances were hardly ideal for trusting emotions.

Whatever he wanted, though, the truth of the matter was that he could never even hope to compare with a memory as powerful and perfect as Hahn. Kaiser he may be, but that mattered not a bit in matters such as this. Erich and Hahn had been a rare thing, even he recognized that.

How was an awkward and bumbling Kaiser to compete with that?

Not that he was going to be foolish enough to try. He wasn't, and that was all for the best.

Setting the matter firmly aside, which was more difficult than he liked, Ingolf returned his thoughts to the more immediate problem.

Pancraz, who stood by the fire putting together a soup from the rabbits they had managed to catch that day and the stuffs they all carried in their packs—though after the first couple of days, they had learned to stay away from Eric's packet of herbs. Illussor and their spicy foods—vile.

They had all been quiet since leaving that damned farmhouse and its arcen field. It still troubled him, that field, but he could make no sense of it. How in the name of the gods could arcen flowers get so far? Where else in Kria had arcen been seeded? It made him sick to his stomach just thinking about it—and sicker still to think that Pancraz might be involved in it, but would not say. Why would he admit to so much, and still withhold the most vital pieces.

Despite claiming to want nothing to do with Salhara any longer, Pancraz was leading him straight into the arms of Salhara. Why? Ingolf wanted to ask, badly, but did not dare tip his hand.

Ingolf wished he could break the silence, though. Erich had been quiet, Pancraz had been quiet, and Sepp had always been the silent type. Ingolf was heartily sick of it. He missed the jesting and taunting, and Pancraz's easy ability to converse when he was inclined. He missed the feeling of camaraderie; everyone now was tense, lost in their own heads.

Now, Pancraz would barely look at him and acted as though he expected to be struck at any moment. Ingolf supposed he was to blame for that. Would that he could fix it, but why should he, when Pancraz was still planning to take him to Salhara to die what would no doubt be a very slow and painful death before they displayed his head where all of Kria would see it and hear of it.

He stifled a sigh as the silence stretched on, feeling more inadequate than ever; any of his family would have been able to break through the ice in the room, get conversation flowing again, ease the tension. He could only seem to sit and fret and wonder, mind swinging wildly from wondering if he would have to kill Pancraz very shortly to what he was going to do about Erich.

And when would he get it through his head he could do nothing about Erich? They had not known each other long, there was no good reason to be so tangled up. He was, though, and damned if he knew what to do about it.

Outside, the snow was falling lightly. It should not hamper their traveling unless it grew heavier, and he would not call a halt to continuing on unless it grew much, much worse. He just wanted it all over with, one way or another.

He had been so busy with Pancraz and Erich, he had nearly forgotten their true purpose in heading for the village. After all this aggravation and worry, someone had better be able to tell him something about the damned sword.

"Boss," Pancraz said quietly, and Ingolf turned from the window to look at him—but Pancraz did not meet his eyes, only pushed a bowl of soup into his hands before turning away to return to the fireplace to serve the others.

Ingolf sighed again and drank the soup. Movement, a familiar flash of white, caught his eye, and he turned his head to see Erich dumping a small packet of herbs into his soup. He grimaced and spoke before he thought. "Must you ruin perfectly good food?"

Erich looked up, surprised, then grinned. "Ruin? Hardly. What good is food that does not sear the tongue?"

"Good," Ingolf retorted dryly.

"Bland," Erich replied, scoffing. "You enjoy your bland soup, and I will enjoy my flavorful soup."

Ingolf shook his head. "Crazy pale-skinned bastard."

"You're just jealous my skin is prettier than yours," Erich replied loftily. "Everyone wants my skin."

"Oh, yes," Ingolf said. "I aspire to look like an icicle. Illussor have very strange tastes. You prefer to look frozen, but eat food that burns."

"Cool looking, but hot to the touch," Erich said with a smirk.

Ingolf choked on his soup as the provocative comment did an excellent job of provoking. He doubled over in a coughing fit, and it took a few minutes to completely recover himself. He glared, but Erich only looked at him innocently and dropped his own gaze to his soup.

That was...interesting...

Heart pounding, head beginning to throb from trying to puzzle out all the riddles and questions plaguing him, Ingolf returned to his soup and his window, but smiled briefly that at least a little bit of the tension in the room had eased.

Perhaps he could try to ease a bit more, even if he was quite hopeless at such things. "The soup is good, Pancraz. I am sorry the Illussor insists upon ruining it."

"Thanks, boss," Pancraz replied from where he sat close to the fire with Sepp only a few paces away.

Silence fell again, and Ingolf tried not to be dejected by his abysmal failure. Well, if he was not going to get anywhere with easing the tension, he may as well ask the questions picking away at the back of his mind. "Could I ask more about arcen?"

Pancraz froze, then shrugged and scowled at his soup as he replied, "You can ask whatever you want, boss."

Ingolf did not bother to hide his sigh that time. "I simply wondered about the concentrated kind."

"Oh," Pancraz said and looked up briefly in surprise—then realized what he had done and looked hastily back down. "It's extremely difficult. See, after seven years, the plants have reached the end of their life cycle and want to die—but if you can keep them alive just a little bit longer, then the poison in the roots gets stronger and stronger. If you do it right and keep them alive against their will, then after two years the plants are so toxic they finally kill themselves no matter what the farmer does. The petals turn such dark a red they look black, and the plant withers right up. But the roots are still good and poisonous to the touch. That's concentrated red arcen."

"That sounds awful," Ingolf said. "I cannot believe... growing it sounds incredibly complicated."

"It is," Pancraz said quietly. He hesitated, then shrugged. "My father told me once and bid me keep it a secret because it was worth my life if I told, but the flowers are not native to Salhara. He did not know where they were first acquired, but he did know they don't belong here. He thinks Salhara imported them a long, long time ago." He shrugged and fell silent.

"That does not surprise me," Erich replied. "No other such flowers exist anywhere on this great continent, in any of our countries. If it did, someone would have found it by now. I do wonder where they acquired it, but I suppose the answer to that question is lost in time."

Pancraz nodded in agreement. "I suppose the Brotherhood might know more, but they would never share such information, even on pain of death. My father said once that a great deal of knowledge had been lost over the years, though."

Ingolf finished his soup and set the bowl in his lap. "Was it hard, giving up arcen? When you... when they banished you, such as it was?"

"What?" Pancraz looked up in surprise again. "I never had to give it up. Arcen farmers are the only Salharans strictly forbidden to use it. Too dangerous, you see. If we get addicted the same as anyone else, well, we have the best access in the world, don't we? Farmers with glowing eyes are immediately cast out of farming it. I've never used arcen, for one reason or another." If there was bitterness there, it was so old as to be barely present.

"That does not seem fair," Erich said quietly. "I am glad you wound up on the right side, Pancraz, even if you did not at first want to be here."

Pancraz nodded, but said nothing, merely finished his soup and stood to begin cleaning up.

Ingolf shared a look with Erich, then returned to staring out the window, impatient for tomorrow, that things might come to one end or another.

He abruptly stood up, tired of holding still, needing to move. "We leave at dawn," he said curtly. "I will take the first watch, Sepp the second, Erich the third."

If Pancraz felt the sting of being left out of the watch, he gave no sign of it, merely nodded as he continued to clean up the small, abandoned cabin they had commandeered for the night.

Muttering to himself, wishing he had something to ease his throbbing head, Ingolf strode outside to take the first watch.

~~*

The village was quiet when they arrived—almost too quiet, even accounting for the weather. Ingolf loosed his sword in its sheath and saw the others do the same. "Come," he said quietly. "The sword master's home is at the far end of the village."

He let Sepp and Pancraz lead the way, with Erich a step or two behind him, not liking he must always be the protected center but resigned to it. The smells of roasting meat and fresh bread came from many of the houses, but no one peeked from windows to ogle the visitors they surely could hear—especially since said visitors arrived on horseback, something precious few peasants could afford.

Ingolf felt sick. So this was it, then. Did he deal with Pancraz now? No, best to wait. He wanted to see what, precisely, the Salharans intended. It was a risk, because if they took him and managed to capture or kill the others...

But this chance to learn about the enemy was even more valuable than the chance to learn the sword's secrets.

So onward they walked, in a tense silence that seemed to worsen with every step until they passed through the main part of village to the outskirts, where the sword smith's shop lay.

"Pancraz," Ingolf said tersely. "Knock and see if our good sword maker is home."

Nodding, Pancraz approached the door—but he paused just shy of the threshold and looked over his shoulder just enough to whisper in halting Illussor, *"Not what you think."*

Ingolf could hear Erich make a startled noise behind him and felt even more confused himself, but before he could form a reply, Pancraz was knocking on the door.

The door creaked open, but only the barest amount so that Ingolf could not see the person standing there. "Can I help you?"

"Yes," Pancraz said. "My lord has an appointment with the sword master. Let us in at once, hag."

The old woman, if it was indeed an old woman, obediently stepped back and pulled the door all the way open.

Ingolf followed Pancraz and Sepp inside—but barely had he stepped one foot past the threshold when he was grabbed and shoved, magic searing like fire and ice through his blood via the hands upon him. Gasping in pain, he dropped to his knees and only just avoided curling up into a ball of agony. "Polluted bastards—" he gasped out before another wave of the awful pain cut through him.

Six voices laughed. *"Well done, nameless,"* said one of the voices in fluid Salharan, a cold jeer in his voice as he spoke Pancraz's name. *"Good enough, we might actually give you a proper name and place like we said."*

"I thank you, Brother," Pancraz said formally, looking at the floor.

Nearby, Ingolf could see Erich was doubled over as well.

Their swords were taken, and he could see Erich fighting an urge to attack as the laughing and jeering Salharan took Bright and clumsily drew the heavy sword from its sheath.

"So this is the sword," said the man who had mocked Pancraz. Ingolf looked him over.

Tall and slender, with blonde hair—and blazing orange eyes. Goddess, he had orange eyes. Looking around, Ingolf saw that the other Salharans all had yellow eyes. Tits of the Winter Princess, they had no intention of leaving here without him.

But those orange eyes... with his new knowledge of arcen, he appreciated all the more the seriousness of those eyes. Six years for the flowers to reach that orange stage, and he already knew that no one but the Brotherhood, and those approved by the Brotherhood, were allowed to go above yellow. Just who was this man?

He looked again at Pancraz who was his normal stoic self—but those words spoken so awkwardly in Illussor. Dare he hope that Pancraz was not a traitor after all?"

"Pancraz," he said, speaking Salharan mostly to offend them. *"I guess you were no friend of mine, hmm? I never took you for Salharan filth."*

The orange-eyed man laughed. *"Of course you did not. That is why you are the prisoner, Kaiser."* He motioned to the sword, which he had set on the table. *"So this is the sword of Kria's infamous runaway Scarlet General?"* He touched it lightly, picking it up by the hilt just enough to angle it back and forth so that it caught the light, making the myriad colors deep in the metal shine. *"It really is made with arcen. Bring me the sword maker!"*

One of the Salharan soldiers vanished briefly, then returned dragging an old but well-built man with him. The man was bound and gagged, but it was obvious that they had struck him with the same spell they had used upon Ingolf.

Yanking the gag out, the orange-eyed soldier demanded in heavily accented Krian, "Sword man, examine the blade. How is it done, the putting of the arcen in it?"

The sword master shook his head. "I do not know."

Orange eyes flashed, and the sword master screamed in pain.

"Tell me," the orange eyed soldier said coldly, "or your wife will die."

"I swear to you, I do not know! I did not believe it possible until I saw the blade myself just now. I know of the man who made it, for his legacy is a highly respected one, but his secrets went with him to the grave."

He sobbed as he was struck again by magic, collapsing to the ground in pain.

"Stop it!" Ingolf snarled. *"He's telling the truth."*

"Oh?" the orange-eyed soldier asked. *"You came here to talk to him, yet knew he had nothing to tell?"*

"I came in hopes we could figure something out," Ingolf replied, struggling to stand despite the pain so that he could meet the bastard eye to eye. "The Betrayer died with the secret of his sword, the same as his father, who made the blade. They did not want anyone to know of it."

"How could you know this?"

Ingolf said nothing, and when the Salharan backhanded him, he only spat the blood in his filthy face.

That, of course, got him struck by magic again, and Ingolf collapsed hard to the ground—but he decided it had been worth it.

"How could you know?" the Salharan demanded again, eyes still glowing brightly with the after effects of using magic.

"I told him," Erich said.

The Salharan looked amused. *"Did you, pretty little Illussor? How could you know? I was led to think you were only his Majesty's little plaything."*

Ingolf would have laughed at that, were the situation any less dire. He did shoot a look at Pancraz, who remained blank-faced—but Ingolf thought he caught a hint of something, some spark of amusement and satisfaction, in his eyes for the briefest of moments.

"I am descended from the Holy General who wielded that sword," Erich replied. *"Whatever knowledge is available about that sword, I know it. In fact, I know a lot of things."*

"Like what?" the Salharan asked, amusement increasing.

"Well, I can now say with satisfaction that the old legends of the sword are true."

The Salharan frowned, confused. *"What?"*

"I can also tell you that your men took two swords and eight daggers from me—but I carried nine." Erich moved even as he finished speaking, driving the dagger into the man's throat, sending blood everywhere.

But he yanked it free again immediately, shoving the body away and throwing the dagger at the nearest of the soldiers, taking him in the gut. Then he lunged for the table, where the Betrayer's sword still lay unsheathed.

He killed two more, but by the time he was finished, Ingolf saw that Pancraz had killed the rest.

Kneeling, Pancraz rifled through the pockets of one of the dead men. Making a soft noise as he found what he sought, he wrapped his fist around the object and strode across the room to Ingolf. He knelt again and held out his hand. *"Majesty, take this, it will help ease the remains of the magic still in your system."*

Ingolf glanced at what Pancraz held out and recognized the thick, milky substance—what they called a cleanser.

"No, thank you," he said and pushed Pancraz's hand away. "I want nothing to do with arcen, not even one of those." He grabbed Pancraz by the scruff of his shirt and yanked him up as he stood. "What I want to know, Pancraz, is what was going on here? Are you on their side or mine? You very carefully did not tell me about this, when you told me everything else. What is true, and what is lies? I would like to trust you, but I fear I cannot."

Pancraz stepped away when Ingolf roughly released him and motioned to the dead orange-eyed Salharan. "I wanted him dead, and dared not speak of my plans for fear that another Salharan might ever be watching and listening to what I do. No nameless is ever fully trusted, especially not one with my knowledge." His face twisted, and his voice was not quite steady when he spoke. "They said if I were to do some spying for them—and later, to bring you—that they would give me a proper name, and a new farm. They would erase all the marks on my family's record. I did not believe them, of course. They would have simply killed me alongside you." He shrugged.

"So why all this?" Ingolf asked quietly.

"Him," Pancraz replied, moving to the orange-eyed man, voice soft and tired as he continued speaking. "He's the one who hanged my father and laughed while he did it. Then he... used my mother, all the way to the village where we were cast out for good." He flipped the body over, seemingly oblivious to the blood spreading across the floor, soaking into his leggings. Fumbling briefly to remove the dead man's cloak, he tossed it away and attacked his tunic, finally shoving it up enough to bare the man's back.

Ingolf hissed in surprise. "He was a Brother. Tits of the Winter Princess, he was a Brother. That—that is six of them dead, now."

"Yes," Pancraz replied. "He was the one who destroyed my family and took my name, and so he was sent to enlist my aid and ensure the Kaiser was captured. I just wanted him dead."

"You endangered the Kaiser and the fate of Kria for revenge?" Sepp suddenly demanded from the far side of the room, all but vibrating with anger. He strode across the small space and swung, fist catching Pancraz in the jaw, the sound awful. "How dare you! I should see you executed as the Salharan filth you are—"

"Enough!" Ingolf bellowed.

"Majesty!" Sepp protested. "He has proven that his loyalty is tenuous at best, and if this mess had gone the slightest bit awry—"

"It would not have," Pancraz cut in. "Before I was sent to locate the Kaiser, I was trained and ordered to kill. I am exceedingly good at killing men in their sleep. They would never have stood a chance, I promise you."

"You cannot make such promises," Sepp retorted scathingly. "I think you are better off dead."

"Probably," Pancraz agreed. "The Kaiser is alive, and now six brothers are dead. I no longer particularly care what now becomes of me. Kill me or let me live, it matters not."

Ingolf started to speak, but Erich's quiet voice cut through them all as he said, "Nine."

"What?" Ingolf asked.

"Nine of the Brotherhood are now dead, not six."

Pancraz frowned. "What do you mean nine are dead? Kria has killed five, and I this one—that is six."

Erich threw his head back and laughed, then moved to the nearest corpse and used its clothing to begin a rough cleaning of the Betrayer's sword. "Lord Beraht von Adolwulf was a Brother, though not particularly by choice. Like you, he was enlisted to kill on the promise of being given a name. He was eventually captured by the Holy General—but that is a long story, for another day. When he died, that mark obviously went with him. Tawn and Sol were also Brothers, so nine."

"DeVry?" Pancraz demanded. "Are you certain that was the name?"

"Yes," Erich said firmly. "The DeVry family is still highly regarded in Illussor, their lineage is as noble as my own."

Pancraz laughed, shaking his head in amazement. "DeVry is a stricken name in Salhara—we are forbidden to use it for any reason. I did not know that three Brothers had died, and so long ago, in Illussor. But, they would fight quite hard to keep that knowledge secret. With over seven dead, now, the power of the Brotherhood is well and truly breaking."

"What is the power of the Brotherhood?" Erich asked. "Does that mark actually do anything? Surely it takes more than a tattoo to rule."

"I do not know, really," Pancraz said with a shrug. "No one does, outside the highest ranks of the Brotherhood. It's said that once lost to death, the marks cannot be transferred. Rumor has it they cannot be replaced, either—that is, I think, why the Brotherhood wanted the sword."

Ingolf frowned. "What do you mean?"

Pancraz smiled in amusement and jerked his head at the sword Erich still held. "None of you has any idea just what the maker of that sword accomplished. We have only ever been able to make arcen work by ingesting it—by giving it *life*, so to speak. It works in flower form and activates once it mingles with living blood. Past that? It does nothing, is worth nothing. Yet somehow the man who made that sword managed to keep the arcen active and potent even as he mixed it with hot metal. If the Brotherhood had that knowledge, they would be able to make new Brotherhood marks, and would not have to worry that once dead, a mark loses its power and cannot be transferred. We had that knowledge once, but it was lost long ago."

"Incredible," Ingolf said and pulled out the rickety bench shoved beneath the table, dropping down on it.

Erich sat down next to him, setting the Betrayer's sword once more on the table. "Are there any other Salharans in the village?"

"Good questions," Ingolf said and looked to the sword maker and his wife.

"No, Majesty," the sword maker said nervously. "I am sorry that—"

Ingolf cut him off with a sharp motion. "There is no need for apologies; this ambush has been long in the planning. I am happy you and your wife are alive. If you have anything to drink, however, I would be most appreciative of that—and perhaps your lovely wife might go tell the rest of the village that all is well again?"

Nodding eagerly, the woman bundled up and was quickly gone.

The sword maker chuckled. "She will be telling this story for the rest of our lives, your Majesty—that the Kaiser was here and neatly foiled a Salharan ambush, and I am certain she and the village will add all sorts of handsome details."

Ingolf snorted in amusement and thanked him for the ale that was handed over. "I did very little. Without Erich and Pancraz, I would likely be on my way to Salhara by now. Thank you, both." He hesitated, then continued. "No more lies, Pan. No more secrets. Once and for all—are you with me and Kria, or against?"

Pancraz squared his shoulders and stood up straight. "With, Majesty. Always with, though I am nameless and worthless."

"Your name is Pancraz," Ingolf said, exasperated. "You are part of my personal guard; that is hardly worthless. Honestly, I will never understand Salharans—and you are Krian, now, so you will have to get over that. Alright, Pan?"

"Yes, Majesty," Pancraz replied quietly.

"Good," Ingolf said with a nod. "Then you and Sepp go and find us lodgings for a couple of nights. After that, we must plan what we do next."

"Yes, Majesty!"

"And stop calling me that."

Erich snorted in amusement as Pancraz and Sepp vanished. "You will have to get used to it, you know, Majesty."

"Like you are undoubtedly used to it, Highness?" He smirked when Erich winced. "That is what I thought."

"I'm only the possible heir," Erich said. "That's hardly the same thing, and I'll have you know a great many still forget to address me thus—most still just call me 'your Grace' when they talk to me at all."

Ingolf frowned. "Why would they be so rude as not to address you at all? Is that common?"

"No, it's not," Erich said, then shrugged. "I was not myself for a long time after Hahn's death. I barely spoke to anyone, and so eventually they gave up speaking to me. It is no matter, at the moment. What do you intend to do, now that all of this is finished?"

"Hmm," Ingolf said, pursing his lips in thought. "I still wish we could learn something about that damned sword," he said with a sigh, then gave up. "However, that is clearly not possible. That being the case, it is time for me to begin acting like a Kaiser. I need to locate my Generals."

Erich's brows went up. "They have been missing for some time."

Ingolf smirked. "Unless they are all dead, they are around, and if I know my Generals, even as we speak they are plotting how best to take back Kria. We should probably start with the Fortress of Eis."

"I have heard of that place," Erich replied. "I look forward to finally seeing it."

"What?" Ingolf said, surprised. "But—you have your sword back, and I am alive—"

Erich shrugged. "I want to stay."

Ingolf nodded, but did not quite look at him, not certain he wanted Erich to see in his eyes the strange hope that had suddenly set his heart to pounding fiercely in his chest.

Chapter Thirteen

Erich had no idea what he thought he was doing.

Something incredibly stupid, incredibly foolish, and incredibly impossible.

But... weren't those the very same words everyone had once used to describe him and Hahn and their relationship?

Stupid, everyone had said, because they were both too young—little more than children!—to know what they wanted, or what they were doing, and they should listen to their betters. They were too young to know real love.

Foolish, because they were letting youthful wants and needs ruin a solid friendship that showed every sign of lasting a lifetime, if only they did not muck it up with things they were a long way from understanding. They were too young to understand passion.

Impossible, because who had ever heard of people marrying that young, and for love at that, who actually made it the whole of their lives in those very same states? It had never happened, because young people were stupid and foolish.

Yet, had life been less cruel, Erich knew he and Hahn would have been as in love and happily married now as they had been when Hahn had died. They had always wanted to grow old and die together.

But life *had* been cruel, and Hahn was gone, and try as he might Erich could not get Ingolf out of his head.

It was stupid, because they were in the middle of a war and anxious and afraid of a thousand things. Emotions were not to be trusted in such conditions, and lust was only another way to cope with more difficult problems.

Foolish, because Ingolf wanted him, but how deep did that want go? How deep did his own want run? Erich did not know, had not expected to ever wonder such a thing again. He only knew that it mattered, whether he wanted it to or not.

And it was completely impossible, regardless of the rest, because he was the crown prince of Illussor and Ingolf was the Kaiser of Kria. Those two positions would never cross the way he wanted, no matter what he did. When the war was over, their paths would once again diverge.

The words chafed now the same way they had back then, when he and Hahn had defied everyone they knew time and again, trusting that everyone's idea of wrong was very much their definition of right. The one time he had caved to what others thought, it had nearly torn him and Hahn apart—and only through defiance had Hahn brought them back together again, deeper and stronger than ever before.

He looked at his ring and sighed softly, but the sound of clattering and voices from outside drew him from his thoughts and reminded him of what he was supposed to be doing.

Stripping off his filthy, blood-soaked clothes, he tossed them outside the bathhouse for a kindly village woman to wash. That left him with only his red tunic to wear, but if he kept his cloak fastened then it should not be much of a problem.

Pulling his spare clothes from his bag, including the scarlet tunic, he carefully set them out on the cloth racks and then crossed to the far side of the room where the bathing stuff was arranged.

He did love Krians and their bathhouses. This one smelled of old wood, the mineral-saturated hot spring water, and rough Krian soap. There was much that people could and did say about Krians, but they would never be able to legitimately accuse them of being *filthy*, savage bastards. Nearly every village in Kria was built around one of the numerous hot springs that riddled the country or where the hot spring water could be guided to a suitable place, as was the case here.

The village bathhouse was of modest size, only able to accommodate three or four comfortably, but the house itself must have been one of the best-made building in the village, for scarcely a hint of the cold winter air outside slipped through. In the center, the bath was sunk deep into the floor, lined with stone that must have taken months to put in place properly. When Erich slid into it after thoroughly rinsing, it came to just about his shoulders.

It was blissfully hot, soothing every ache and pain acquired over the arduous journey they had made to reach the village. He very possibly might have moaned and decided he was never leaving the wonderful water.

He wondered if it would be at all possible to move one of the hot springs to Korte Manor. Lord Dieter had seen to it a most impressive bath was installed, but it was still no hot spring.

Settling a bit further down in the water, Erich allowed himself to relax a little, though he had kept three daggers with him when he entered the bathhouse. They had, in the end, searched the entire village to be absolutely certain that no Salharans were hiding after all—but all they had turned up was a mass of proud, excited villagers who would talk for decades, if not centuries, of the Kaiser who had come to their village in secret and slain the evil Salharans lying in wait to kill him.

Erich snickered at the thought and reminded himself to return one day to see how the story changed over the years.

Of course, shortly after asking for spare rooms where they might lodge for the night, Pancraz and Sepp had returned to inform a discomfited Ingolf that the village chief and his wife had surrendered their entire house to the Kaiser and his men for the night and would not accept any refusal. Reluctantly, Ingolf had agreed.

After that, they had asked after the baths, which had also been turned completely over to their use. Ingolf had gone first, and alone, following the new etiquette and privilege that was his by right of place now, under the eager, watchful eyes of the villagers. Then, Erich had let Pancraz and Sepp go ahead of him, wanting a bit of time to himself.

He lingered in the bath as long as he possibly could, reluctant to return to the bitter cold outside, but finally he forced himself out, quickly scrambling to climb into his clothes. He paused when his tunic was in place, stroking the fabric he had not worn, or even really seen, since he had woken up in Kria weeks ago. It felt good to be wearing it again. Back home, nearly every day of his life was spent in scarlet, even when he had not had much care for guiding those under his command in the Order of the Scarlet Wolf.

Picking up his cloak, he pulled it on and fastened it closed, so that no one would see the brilliant scarlet tunic beneath—he did not want to cause trouble for Ingolf now and hopefully his spare tunic would be clean and dry by morning.

Raking his hands through his hair to untangle it as best he could, grateful that the thin strands would dry quickly, he gave the steaming bath a last, longing look and finally opened the door, stepping back outside.

He was not surprised to see a small group of young women turning and bending to pretend work, faces flushed with guilt, though he hoped they had not been *peeking*, good Goddess. Still, the village was a remote one, deep into Kria. He doubted they saw many travelers at all, let alone one as unmistakably Illussor as he.

"Good evening," he called. "Thank you, my ladies, for all your generous assistance."

Laughing and blushing, they stammered out replies and shyly asked him questions. Grinning, Erich moved closer to chat and flirt for a bit, more amused than he showed when they asked to touch his hair. Finally, however, he had to concede he was only stalling—and he did not want a bunch of village men to lynch him, and he was beginning to get a few glares.

Bidding the women a good night and pleasant dreams, he turned and made his way across the village to the chief's house. It was of remarkable size, given the small village, and boasted a luxurious five rooms—though, the front three were really more one giant room informally divided into a living area, and then a kitchen and dining area. Along the back were three rooms—two bedrooms on either side, and a locked room in the middle.

After a puzzled moment, Erich realized it held the village's emergency stores. More than one Krian story revolved around small villagers buried in snow, going mad and desperate in their need for food and not so much a single one left alive come the spring.

He shook off the morbid thought and moved to the table, which was buried under so much food, Erich was impressed the poor table did not collapse beneath the weight. There was a bench on either side of it; Pancraz and Sepp took up one, and Ingolf sat alone on the other. They had already begun to eat, but he saw that they had first piled a plate high for him.

Sitting down next to Ingolf, he poured ale from a pitcher into his cup, then dug into the food with relish. After days of thin soup and basic trail food, the simple fair was the finest of feasts—even if it was tame Krian food.

It would always amuse him that as tough as Krians could be, add a little spice to their food and they whined like children.

They ate in silence, working through the food like men on some vital mission, until the table was covered with nothing more than dishes, empty cups, and bones with not even the marrow left in them.

Erich grunted as he finished the last of the ale. "It is good to be traveling with the Kaiser, I will say that much."

Ingolf rolled his eyes but did not reply.

Pancraz laughed. "I, for one, will hate going back to our travel diet. I have missed real food. I really miss the sausages of the Winter Palace. If those stupid Salharans killed any of the sausage makers, all the concentrated red in Salhara will not be enough to save them."

Erich threw his head back and laughed, clutching at his sides as Sepp rolled his eyes and Ingolf chuckled. "Spoke—spoken like a true Krian," he finally managed and wondered if Pancraz even realized how firmly he had set himself as a Krian in his statement.

But he was not going to ruin the mood by pointing out his observation or asking questions. It was enough that Pancraz was fitting in and without any shadows to mar it. Erich was glad to see that the situation was smoothing out, and the awkwardness and misery from their travels to this town were already fading.

"I wonder sometimes," he continued, "if the first Kaiser was Kria's best sausage maker."

"The best sword master, actually," Ingolf replied, shoving at him lightly.

"I just bet," Erich retorted, shoving back, glad that the tension that had lain between them since that moment in the stable seemed to be easing. If he did not lose his courage, perhaps tonight it would fade away entirely.

Ingolf stared at him a moment, obviously sensing his mind had wandered to more serious matters, but before he could ask or say something, Sepp spoke. "So where are headed next, Majesty?"

"Can we not go back to 'boss'?" Ingolf groused. "I do not see what was wrong with that."

Erich clapped him on the back, grinning just to provoke. "Now, now. We already had this discussion. You are going to have to get used to it, Kaiser. Very soon, now, you will never be spoken to casually again." He paused, then continued, "Except perhaps by disrespectful Illussor who do not see what the fuss is all about."

"Yes, and disrespectful, troublemaking Illussor will find subsequently themselves locked up in my royal dungeon."

"Is that a Krian term for bedroom, or does it actually mean dungeon?" Erich taunted. "You know what they say about Krians and fucking and fighting. It can be hard to tell what you mean."

"Dungeon as in dungeon," Ingolf replied tartly. "I know you said not to tie you up, but you said nothing about putting you in a cage."

Erich shrugged. "You can try it, though I warn you those never work. The locks are too easy to pick. I keep telling you, they tried *everything* to make me hold still and learn those lessons which did not interest me."

Ingolf only rolled his eyes again.

Sepp started to make some remark, but was cut off by a sudden massive yawn. He shook his head, and tried again—but only yawned a second time. When he finally stopped yawning long enough to speak, he only held his hands up in defeat. "I give up. I am going to bed. Good night to all of you. I am glad we continue to travel together, even if the Illussor attracts too much attention and Pancraz is a troublemaker." His smirk took any sting from the words, and they bid him sleep well.

"Thank you," Pancraz said in the silence, looking cautiously at Ingolf. "I fully expected for either the Salharans to kill me outright, or for you to execute me afterwards. I am sorry for the deception."

"You should have trusted me," Ingolf reprimanded lightly. "I would have helped you get revenge. However, I understand why you did not. Simply trust me from now on, and we'll speak no more about it."

Pancraz nodded, and smiled hesitantly, then stood and bid them both a good night.

Erich smiled as they were left alone. "You are entirely too generous to be a Krian Kaiser, I think. You're supposed to be violent and bloodthirsty and feed upon innocent young girls."

Ingolf shoved him again and grimaced. "If you people ran your countries half so well as you make up ridiculous stories, then we would not at present be mired in yet another war."

"Tell that one to the Salharans and see what happens," Erich said with a snort. "Anyway, I do not make this stuff up. My all-knowing villagers inform me of these things. Without them, I would know nothing of Krians—and you should hear what they say about the Salharans." He tsked. "Disgraceful."

"I'm sure," Ingolf said dryly, obviously fighting a laugh.

Erich smiled briefly, but all too soon the levity faded away, leaving only tension, a silence that seemed fraught with... something. Just when Erich was about to knock everything off the table just for the noise, Ingolf spoke. "So why are you staying? Surely, it is wiser, Highness, for you to return home? There must be people looking for you."

Rolling his eyes, Erich said, "Oh, they're looking for me all right. I'm lucky they're not actually allowed to beat me. Going home would be the right thing to do, certainly. The expected thing, the proper thing, what everyone would tell me to do, were they here to give me orders. But I realized a few days ago that I have spent my entire life doing what others have said I should not—what they said was reckless, foolish, wrong, improper, not done. I have always defied convention." He looked at Ingolf. "Why am I now bowing to it?"

Ingolf drew a startled breath, eyes sharp and focused as they watched him, searched Erich's face for something. "What are you saying?" He finally asked.

Erich smirked, surprised at how easy it was to keep going. "I am not saying anything, Krian. I am asking—do you fuck like you fight, or will I be able to tell the difference?"

Ingolf's eyes widened with surprise, then narrowed at the challenge.

Then a hand was in Erich's hair, dragging him close. He felt a brief, deep ache for Hahn, but pushed it gently aside, putting all his focus on Ingolf's mouth.

Which was certainly no chore. Kissing Ingolf was much, much better than constantly recalling and dwelling upon that almost kiss in the stable. For a man who lived in a country where this sort of liaison was frowned upon, Ingolf certainly knew what he was doing. His kisses were much like the rest of him—a hard-edged roughness that hid a surprising softness.

Ingolf was completely different from Hahn, whose kisses had always been playful and sweet. Even sitting, Ingolf was taller, and Erich was not used to being the shorter in a kiss. It was different from here, but not at all unpleasant.

The differences, being kissed and touched after his years of self-imposed celibacy, drew a shaky moan. He wrapped his arms around Ingolf and held on for dear life, uncaring for the awkward angle. It was all surreal, new and yet not, and Erich did not know if he wanted it to stop or go on forever.

Except it did stop, and that was definitely disappointment he felt.

Ingolf drew back just enough to ask, "Are you certain, Erich?"

"Yes," Erich replied. "I think we both know what we are doing, the reality, the consequences, but if I am going to say no, then I will say it because that is what I *want* to say, not because others tell me I should say it—and I do not want to say no. That aside..." he swallowed, and looked down at his left hand, the gleaming gold and silver band there. "It is time to move on, and I *want* to move on, as hard... as hard as that is to admit."

Ingolf took his hand, thumb running gently over the band. "You should remove it," he said quietly. "Not for me—for you."

Erich nodded, agreeing with him, but could not quite make himself move to do it, but he did not resist when Ingolf slowly removed it himself and set it gently upon the table. He looked up and saw Ingolf watching him with nothing but concern.

He smiled and tugged Ingolf into another kiss.

Two became three became seven became too many to count, and once they had given in to what they had been fighting, it was impossible to stop. They barely let go of one another long enough to stumble their way into the remaining bedroom and once there stopped only because they nearly killed themselves tripping and crashing into the wall.

Erich had a brief pang of sheepish guilt that they were putting the chief's bed to such a use, but then Ingolf started to strip, and his thoughts narrowed to 'want' and 'now', the rest going out like a candle.

There was nothing quite like the body of a lifelong soldier. Such a body was honed and muscled and marked in a way wholly unique to the brutal life of warfare. And no one, bar none, wore soldier even a quarter so well as Krians. Other nations might take well to the craft, when necessary, but Krians seemed born to it.

He suspected he whimpered as he drank in the sight of Ingolf completely bare, not a single patch of him even remotely close to disappointing. Closing the space between them, he pressed up against all that lovely, dusky flesh, titling his head up—still so strange, to lift his head up for a kiss—in invitation.

Only to receive a sharp nip that made him jerk in surprise, though it was not entirely in displeasure. "What was that for?" he asked.

Ingolf lapped at the lips he'd just nipped, soothing the lingering sting. "You're still dressed."

Erich laughed and stepped back to begin removing his own clothes, startled to realize he felt almost shy as more and more of his clothing fell away, and his skin was laid bare. As pale as he was, he often felt almost sickly in color next to even his own countrymen. It was even worse standing alongside Krians, who seldom were indoors longer than it took to get through the worst parts of winter, and so were perpetually golden and dusky of skin.

But whatever shyness he felt, vanished rapidly at the hot, fascinated look in Ingolf's eyes. Obviously Ingolf had no problem with his pale skin.

"Are you quite certain," Ingolf asked as he pushed Erich down upon the bed and moved to hover over him, "that you are not some lost winter child, made of ice and snow?" He smoothed his hands down Erich's chest, clearly fascinated. "As you once said, cool looking, but hot to the touch."

Erich snorted—honestly, that was completely overstating things. "If I am a child of winter, then perhaps you are the spring sent to melt me."

Ingolf laughed, and then they were skin on skin, gasping and moaning, taunting and pleading and Erich thought it should have felt stranger than it did, to be so with Ingolf—but it felt the precise opposite of strange, and he could only move with the sensation, all the sensations, for withdrawing from them was not even a possibility, nor did he want it to be.

It had been a long, long time since he'd had anyone inside him—and it had only ever been Hahn. But he was not as out of practice as he had feared he would be. There were some things the body never forgot how to do, he supposed. Ingolf was nothing like Hahn, but the differences were all pleasant, hot and charged, and he did not want anything to be the same.

Erich had always been the larger, between himself and Hahn. Like his sister, like most of his family, Hahn had been tall, but slender, just muscled enough not to be delicate. For all his slowness, though, there had been strength. Ingolf's strength was more obvious, for there was nothing slight about him. Tall, fit, with fine broad shoulders that Erich gripped tightly as Ingolf fucked him.

Hahn had been a warm, easy summer day. Erich had always needed that heat and light, back then. When Hahn had died, all of it had gone with him, leaving Erich in a miserable cold.

Ingolf was no summer, but the earlier jest about him being spring seemed fitting—the hard edges of winter colliding with the warmer notes of the pending summer, hot and cold clashing, mingling, settling into a season that began rough, but ended gentle.

When at last they calmed, too tired and drained to continue, Erich waited for that moment when the guilt and regrets and self-loathing would strike him. But minutes passed, and the expected feelings never came. Perhaps they were merely lying dormant, waiting for his guard to be down before they struck, but he hoped they simply never came.

He heard Ingolf yawn behind him and felt him vanish briefly, but he returned almost immediately, spreading their cloaks over the bedclothes to provide additional warmth against the frigid air. Erich smiled and relaxed, but then almost startled as a heavy arm draped over him, pulling them flush together. Ingolf's breaths were soft and warm against his neck, strange but not wholly unpleasant. Erich had the feeling he could get all too used to it.

And, Erich realized, he had sorely missed the simple pleasure of sleeping with another. He had grown so accustomed to sleeping alone—or, more often, not really sleeping much at all—that he had forgotten how much more pleasant it was to share a bed. That was doubly true in these chilly months.

Warm and sated, less shaken than he had thought he would be, Erich closed his eyes and fell into a comfortable doze.

He woke abruptly some time later, and saw from the lack of light seeping through the covered window that it was still night, or at least barely morning. He lay back down, but realized immediately that he would not be going back to sleep. So long used to sleepless nights, or nights of travel where it was hard to get real rest, he realized it would take time before he started sleeping straight through the night again.

A walk had always helped before, or at least was one way to pass the time. He did not want to stay and risk waking Ingolf, who needed a good night's rest before the trials started anew tomorrow. Yes, a walk would do him good, and perhaps while he did it, he could bid a proper goodbye, for he had not done that yet, and it was long past time.

His finger felt naked without the ring upon it, but he did not want to put it back on.

Throwing back the blankets, he fumbled in the dark for his clothes, muttering curses until he at least turned up enough of it that he would neither freeze to death nor traumatize any wandering villager who might also be out for a midnight stroll.

A sleepy groan broke the silence, and he could just see the shadow of Ingolf moving, sitting up. "Erich?"

Erich smiled and moved to the bed, kneeling upon it to push Ingolf back down into the warm blankets. "I'm going for a walk; I'll be back shortly."

Ingolf's hand reached up to tangle in his hair, and he could feel the tension in the lines of Ingolf's body. "Erich..."

Leaning down, Erich kissed him. "All is well. I'm simply restless, as I often am at night. A few minutes and I'll be rushing back here to get out of the cold. You had better be warm when I get back, hmm?"

"Oh?" Ingolf asked quietly, but seemed reassured after he had taken a second, long and thorough kiss.

"I will return soon, I promise" Erich said firmly, and fumbled on the bed to extract his cloak, swinging it over his shoulders as he departed.

Except, as he settled it and drew up the hood, he realized it did not feel right—and laughed as he realized he had grabbed not his own cloak, but Ingolf's. Well, what was the harm in sharing a cloak after his body ached with the evidence of everything else they had shared?

Still laughing, he closed the front door quietly behind him and looked around the village. It was quiet, still. The sky was clear, the stars and moon bright, and the air was crisp without being miserable, with not even a hint of wind. A perfect night for walking, and he saw the perfect footpath, curving around the village and almost to the edge of the forest before turning back in to loop completely around the village.

He let his thoughts wander as they liked, and wander they did—from Hahn to Ingolf, from home to Kria, from what he should be doing versus what he wanted, from peace to war, Illussor to Kria to Salhara, from there to arcen, then to swords, to food, back to Hahn and Ingolf—

None of them lingered long, but they filled his mind and took his attention completely. Despite the chaos of his thoughts, he felt better and more at peace than he had in a long time. If his mind was waiting for a better time to convince him he was wrong in his actions, then he hoped it kept waiting for a very long time.

He was so busy with his thoughts, so distracted by them and those simmering in the back of his mind of what he would do to Ingolf upon his return, that he did not see the men until it was far too late.

A blow struck him hard on the back of the head, the shock and pain of it forcing him to release the sword he had not quite managed to draw—and he thought he heard a voice say something about finally and Kaiser before another blow struck him, and the world went black.

~~*

Ingolf climbed out of bed when the waiting seemed to stretch on forever. Those kisses had been reassuring, the promise more reassuring still, but it had been much, much more than a few minutes, now. Well, perhaps Erich had lost track of time. He seemed the sort to do that when something was on his mind.

He hoped Erich had not fled. What if he had? Ingolf grimaced and sighed and sat down heavily on the bench where everything had changed. He rested his hand upon the table—and was startled by the feel of cold metal against his palm.

Erich's ring, he realized. Had he done the right thing, in removing it? He had thought so at the time, for Erich had seemed relieved, but now he wondered.

The draft in the open room picked up, making his shiver with the cold, and he decided that it made more sense to keep fretting and worrying in bed. Erich had requested he be warm when he returned, and that combined with the kisses gave Ingolf hope that Erich would be returning.

He picked up the ring on a whim, for it too reassured him that Erich would return, and took it into the bedroom so that it was not lost should someone come before they woke, to clean up. Slipping it onto his finger for safe keeping, he climbed back into bed and pulled the covers up and waited for Erich.

He had just drifted into a light doze when he heard the rustle of fabric, the tread of boots. Sitting up, far more relieved and happier than he suspected he should be, he shoved back the blankets and reached out—

And only then realized the figure before him was all wrong for Erich.

Too late, as a rough hand slapped a piece of fabric over his mouth. Too late, he realized the fabric was soaked in knock-out oil.

The darkness grew deeper and deeper around him, even as he struggled to fight it. And something... something seemed off about his assaulters, but it was only as he finally succumbed to the knock-out oil that he realized they were speaking in Illussor.

PART TWO

WINTER AND SPRING

WHAT THE AUTUMN PRINCE TAKES, HE KEEPS.

~The Holy General

Chapter Fourteen

Erich pressed the dagger to his would-be captor's throat, holding him tight, snarling at the other five as they tried to draw close. "Stay back or I will slit his throat and not be very sorry about it! Where is Ingolf?" he demanded. "What in the name of the Goddess have you done with him? If you've hurt him, I will make you wish you were dead."

"That is what we want to know! We would never hurt the Kaiser!" One of them said, red-faced and furious. "Tits of the Winter Princess, put the dagger down!"

"I do not think so," Erich replied, pressing harder with the edge of his blade, not quite enough to draw blood, but they all knew it would take only the slightest bit more. "You tell me this instant what you have done with Ingolf and where he is, or I will kill you one by one until I have my answer."

"We thought you were him!" Another man said in frustration. "You wore his cloak, you move like him—Gods, you even speak Krian. We were attempting to take the Kaiser home, on the orders of our master."

Erich sneered. "Oh? Who is your master? You look Krian, and your eyes do not glow, but I have seen Salharan filth resort to dirtier tricks."

"Autumn Prince take you, we are not filthy Salharans!" Another man roared, and the others added their own vehement protests.

The man held at knife point laughed. "We would never hurt the Kaiser, Illussor. We are Krian."

"Oh?" Erich asked. "What's your name, then, Krian?"

The man laughed again, and Erich was impressed despite himself because it was damned hard for anyone to manage to laugh when there was a knife at his throat. "Bruno, my name is Bruno."

Erich nodded and let him go, kicking him back toward his men. They could still be Salharans, but he had never really believed it. They acted far too Krian, to be Salharans pretending to be Krians. "So, you are Krian, you would recognize the new Kaiser on sight—from which of the missing Generals are you taking orders?"

The six men shared a look, but all shook their heads, and Bruno finally said, "Illussor, we do not even know what you were doing dressed in the Kaiser's cloak. Were you purposely impersonating him? Why would you do this? Where is he now? What in the world is an Illussor soldier doing in the middle of Kria, and dressed in scarlet at that?"

"I forgot I was wearing my order tunic," Erich said, glancing down at it briefly. "As to the rest of your questions: I was impersonating no one but myself, I simply grabbed Ingolf's cloak by mistake. Originally, I went after Ingolf because he stole something from me. Then, we simply became allies."

They laughed, and Bruno's lip curled. "An Illussor, call himself anyone's ally? I suppose next Salharans will decide to fight with honor."

Erich shrugged. "You may believe me or not, as you choose. It matters not to me. However, I think our business here is concluded if it is not me you wanted to take prisoner. Now, I must be off to find Ingolf."

Not least of all because Ingolf must think he had fled in the night, probably given in to regret and panic. Erich's mouth tightened to think how Ingolf must feel at the moment—but no, surely Ingolf would not believe that, not yet. There must be signs of a struggle, and he had left both his ring and Bright behind. He would never leave without those things.

Whatever had happened, he hoped Ingolf was safe.

Shrugging the worries off for the moment because he could do nothing about them until he saw Ingolf again, Erich retrieved his sword and the seven of his daggers they had found, strapping and buckling everything back into place.

"We'll go with you," Bruno said. He was short and stocky, with a close-cropped beard and dark green eyes. Erich did not doubt that surprise alone was the reason he had gotten the man at knife point. "We need the Kaiser back before he gets himself killed."

Erich snorted. "I believe Ingolf is old enough to take care of himself. Anyway, given you could not even tell I was not him, I am not certain I trust you with his safety. "

"Why do you keep referring to him so informally?" Another of the soldiers asked.

"We are friends," Erich replied, turning away to peruse the landscape. They were, he hoped, a good deal more than friends—but until he saw Ingolf again, he did not know what might become of them. "You had better hope your mistake did not cause some greater harm."

Goddess damn them, he had no idea where they were. Heaving a sigh, he turned back to the men, who stood watching him with a mix of emotions. "How do we return to the village from here?" he demanded. "I must return to Ingolf."

Bruno pointed. "That way. We will take you; it is the least we can do for mistakenly kidnapping the Kaiser's friend."

Erich grinned, despite himself. "You mean instead of the Kaiser?"

"Precisely," Bruno replied, briefly returning the grin. "You are damned brave, or damned stupid, pale-skin, to saunter around Kria the color of snow and dressed in scarlet."

"I have been accused of both, but often the latter. However, in this case, my acceptable tunic was soaked through with Salharan blood. I was kidnapped before I could fetch it from the washer woman."

Bruno rolled his eyes, then turned to his men and ordered them to mount up.

"How far are we from the village?" Erich asked as he mounted the horse over which he had been slung only a few hours ago, before they had been stupid enough to remove him from it and attempt to tie him to a tree.

"About half a day's ride," Bruno replied .

They rode in silence, breaking it only occasionally to call out a direction or caution.

Several hours later, however, as they drew just barely in sight of the village, they saw smoke. Too much smoke. As they drew closer still, Erich began to hear the sound of screams.

He wasted no more time after that, merely set his horse to a full gallop, drawing his sword as he drew ever closer.

The Salharans were everywhere, and they were clearly angry.

Erich roared a battle cry as he cut one down, his horse crying out as he pulled hard, turning them around, hooves crashing down on another Salharan. Foot soldiers, all of them, and no match for a Krian on horseback—never mind seven.

Still, it lasted too long, and he heard too many civilians scream—and too many of those screams cut abruptly short.

Amidst the smoke and blood and chaos, he saw a familiar face, smeared with grime and suffering a wound to the face, but fighting ruthlessly on. "Pancraz!" Erich called out, and raced toward him, cutting down more Salharans as he went, never giving them a chance to turn their damnable magic upon him.

Reaching Pancraz, he threw himself off his horse and helped Pancraz on foot, killing the Salharans and getting as many of the people to safety as they could manage.

The battle seemed to last forever, though it could not have lasted that long, really. When the chaos finally turned to a calm, Erich lowered his sword and looked around, taking stock.

Bodies were everywhere. Civilians, Salharans—"Where is Ingolf?" he asked. "He's not in this mess, is he?"

"No," Pancraz said tersely. "He is long gone."

Erich sheathed his sword and used his sleeve to wipe blood and sweat from his face, feeling the sting of a cut across his cheek. Ignoring it, he motioned to the scattered survivors as well as the Krian soldiers who were with him. "Take the people to safety, gather up the bodies. See ours are properly tended...do what you want with the Salharans. Pancraz, can you tell me what happened here?"

Pancraz started to speak, but Erich lifted a hand to forestall him, striding to where a woman was tucked between two houses, trembling against the wall and sobbing hard, a nasty gash running the length of one forearm.

He knelt and pulled off his cloak, draping it around her and slowly helping her to her feet. "There, there, sister, all will be well now. I am sorry we let these bastards harm you." He brushed her hair back, and guided her gently to the people who came up to fetch her—and frowned when they all stopped short, staring at him wide-eyed.

Then they were upon him, poking and staring and speaking too rapidly in their thick, hill dialect for him to really follow.

Pancraz gave a faint, tired smile at his look of confusion and disconcertion. "They want to know why you wear the colors of the Autumn Prince, if perhaps you are some ghost, after all."

"No," Erich said, "and you know that very well, Pancraz, so please tell them so for me." He carefully extracted himself from the tangle of fascinated people, reassuring and soothing as best he could, while fervently hoping that he could find a different tunic *somewhere* before someone decided that rather than a ghost, he was a disrespectful Illussor in need of a hanging.

"What happened here, Pancraz?" Erich asked quietly. "Where is Ingolf?"

"You would do better to ask, 'where are Ingolf and Sepp?'" Pancraz said, obviously angry about something. "Come on, we need to pack our things and then get out of here. Those Salharans attacked because the ones we killed the other night did not show up at a pre-arranged time. When they did not arrive, others came looking—and you can figure out the rest from there. I am glad you showed up, because I could not have held out by myself much longer."

Erich rested a hand briefly on Pancraz's shoulder in silent apology and reassurance. "They are dead; hopefully more will not be coming."

"At least thirty of them attacked this morning, possibly more, but I could never get a good count. Combined with those already dead, that is too many Salharans missing in a place where they were supposed to take a Kaiser prisoner," Pancraz replied tersely. "More will come."

Sighing, Erich closed the door of the chief's house behind him and slumped down at the table. "So tell me the rest."

Pancraz grimaced and sat down next to him, raking a hand through his hair, not seeming to notice that he only succeeded in putting more dirt and blood in it. "I was drugged last night, went out like a snuffed candle. Apparently, Sepp has been leaving markers this entire damned time for his fellows in the Cobalt Army so that when they were able to send someone to fetch the Kaiser, they would be able to find him."

Erich swore loudly. "They grabbed me instead, didn't they? But that does not explain why Ingolf is missing."

"Because the story grows more fascinating. Sepp drugged me because he knew I would interfere—but this morning he woke with a headache himself, the kind that is most often induced by knock-out oil."

"What!" Erich exclaimed. "Krians don't use knock-out oil, except medicinally. That—oh, Goddess, that's an Illussor trick." Especially when Reni sent men to fetch him; they kept him dosed on it as long as

possible, to get him as close to home as possible, before he ran off again. He groaned and buried his head in his hands. "Please do not tell me..."

Pancraz almost seemed amused for a moment. "We do not know. When we woke, you were both gone. There were two distinct trails. I took one, Sepp the other. We knew it was you taken by Krians only because of what we found and where we found it. But, if you ask me, it sounds as though..."

"As though I was mistaken for the Kaiser, and the Illussor thought Ingolf was me," Erich finished with another groan. "I knew they would come after me, but I did not think they would find me so fast. Damn it!"

He would have laughed if the situation were not so serious. Of all the things to happen—

"We need to go after them," Pancraz said.

Erich started to agree, but then snapped his mouth shut, a sudden thought occurring to him. "No," he said slowly. "I don't think we do."

Pancraz scowled at him. "What do you mean?"

"The whole point of taking Ingolf was to get him somewhere safe—what could possibly be safer than the royal palace of Illussor? Even if Salhara did figure out he was there, they would never dare march into the heart of Illussor to take him by force—and they can negotiate all they want, Reni will not give in."

"But—" Pancraz stopped, frowned, and reluctantly nodded. "That's assuming they will take him that far, though. What's to say they won't simply dump him off somewhere when they realize their mistake?"

"One, they will not realize it's him for quite some time. They think they have me and to drag me home they have learned it's best to drug me heavily with the knock-out oil, then wrap me up and tie me down so that I cannot move, talk, or even see. They will not stop until the horses demand it, and by the time they unwind him, it will be too late to turn back and try to fix things."

Pancraz choked. "Ingolf will be livid."

"Probably," Erich agreed. "Goddess knows I always am. By that point, their only option will be to learn all that he knows about me, to figure out where to find me, and the best place to do that—"

"Is the palace," Pancraz finished. "When he gets there, surely he'll tell someone who he really is, though I guess they would have no reason to believe him. Then again, that would be a stupid thing to lie about. So, we do not go after his Majesty?"

Erich sighed, thinking of all that had recently passed, kissing Ingolf and promising to be back soon. "No," he said. "We are better off trusting Illussor to take care of him. I know the men Reni would have sent to drag me home by force; they're good men, and they will see no harm befalls him."

Pancraz nodded. "So what do we do now?"

"Ensure the villagers will be safe, for starters," Erich replied. "I do not want even more of them killed, should more Salharans come looking." They both looked up as a knock came at the door, and Erich called for the knocker to enter.

Bruno strode inside, followed by the rest of the Krians who had kidnapped him. "We've disposed of the bodies as best we were able, given the number and the snow. Nineteen villagers are dead, regretfully, but those who are injured will recover without real lasting harm. I do not understand why they are attacking one harmless village, though."

"Because they knew the Kaiser was here, and expected to take him prisoner here," Erich replied, standing up. "Instead, they were betrayed by someone they were foolish enough to trust and were killed. So, these men came looking for the others and the captive Kaiser."

Pancraz grimaced, standing as well, wiping a smear of drying blood from his cheek. "More will come, after so many Salharans have gone missing—and one them a Brother."

"No," Bruno interjected. "I disagree—especially if a Brother is missing. They lost the first group, meant to kidnap the Kaiser, sent a second troop, and that too is now missing. Salharans have no taste for extended, messy combat. They will hold back troops and return to slinking around in the shadows."

Erich raked a hand through his hair. "So we are better off leaving them and getting away as quickly as possible?"

"Yes," Bruno replied. He shifted his glance to Pancraz. "Who are you, if I may ask?"

"Pancraz. I was with his Majesty's personal retinue back in the Winter Palace. My partner in that aspect, Sepp, is with your army I believe."

The men shared looks and snorts of amusement. "Sepp, yes," Bruno replied. "My brother-in-law, as it happens. Where is he? Not dead, I hope."

"No," Pancraz replied, and grinned. "Though once his Majesty finds out what has happened, and what went wrong, Sepp might wish for death."

Bruno and his men laughed.

Another knock came at the door, more hesitant. Bruno opened it, stocky frame blocking Erich's view. He spoke in low, rapid Krian, and while Erich could not follow all the words he could get the gist from the soothing tone.

Finally, Bruno turned around, giving Erich a sharp, almost amused look. "They came to humbly request that the Scarlet Lord recite the prayers for their dead."

Erich stared at him. "Scarlet...I am really nothing remarkable." He ignored Pancraz's blatant snort of disbelief. "I'm not even Krian, surely—"

But as Erich shifted, he saw the old woman standing in the doorway, dirty and bloodied and obviously trying not to resume crying.

"Whatever they want," Erich said quietly. "This should not have happened to them. They were kind to us after we killed the Salharans, and the Salharans were only here because of us."

No one said anything in reply to his words, but no reply was really necessary. Striding outside, he asked the old lady to lead him to where he needed to be. Someone moved up on his right side, and he turned to see Pancraz. "I hope I remember the proper prayers," Erich said.

Pancraz looked at him. "You could say most anything, and they would be content, I think."

Erich looked at the dead bodies lined up neatly in the snow, feeling miserable. "I do not see why; it is partly my fault that these people are dead."

"You also saved a great many lives," Pancraz replied. "No one is to blame here but the filthy Salharans." He smirked briefly. "Anyway, you're pretty and wearing red—that color has not been seen in Kria for generations, especially in a place as remote as this. Oh, I also brought you this, thinking it would make a nice touch."

"Probably," Erich agreed, accepting Bright as Pancraz thrust it toward him. The sword was heavy, but perfectly balanced, and even as old as it was, it still drew smooth as silk from its sheath. Moonlight shimmered along the blade, drawing out colors though it should not have even been possible to see them at so late an hour.

The rest of the little village piled into the square, circling around the bodies, shivering in the cold, but he knew they would have stood there naked if that was the only way to bid their loved ones farewell.

In the end, it turned out he did remember all the appropriate prayers, and he silently thanked his beleaguered tutors for managing to get a few of the important things through his stubborn head.

When at last the ceremony finished, Erich did not have the energy to move further than the bathhouse, sitting on the ground with his back against the wall, grateful for the overhand that meant so snow covered the ground here.

Pancraz and Bruno joined him.

"So are you going to return home now?" Pancraz asked. "I'm sure having you there would help to sort out the problems that Ingolf will invariably cause."

Erich laughed briefly at the idea of Ingolf in his home, but finally said reluctantly, "No, I do not think so. It would be better if we led them as far from Ingolf as we possibly can. When they come asking questions, what answers are they more likely to hear from a village full of loyal Krians—that their Kaiser was here, or that a strange Illussor wearing scarlet took off in that direction?"

Bruno and Pancraz laughed in agreement. "You have a point," Pancraz said. "So, what are you going to do, then?"

"I do not know," Erich said, realizing that he had no idea. "I was simply going to follow Ingolf. He never said more than that it was time to find his Generals and join more actively in plans to take back Kria."

"So he was going to return freely," Bruno said, heaving an aggrieved sigh. "This mess could have been avoided if he had simply been clearer in his intentions. We knew he ran away after managing to escape the Winter Palace, and we managed to put Sepp with him, but that was all."

Erich started to reply, but they all stopped as a group of three women shyly approached them carrying food. Holding out the bundles, the woman slowly extended further thanks, and explained they would give them whatever else they needed for travel.

He thanked them warmly, and cautioned them to be wary of any strangers who might show up over the next several weeks.

When the women had gone, Erich reluctantly stood up, groaning and stretching. Belatedly, he realized he still held Bright. Not knowing what else to do with it, at least for the moment, he buckled the belt into place so that the sword hung with his own. "Come, we need to be going. The longer we linger, the more dangerous the situation becomes for the village. Bruno, call your men. Where were you intending to take his Majesty, once you had him?"

It was Pancraz who replied, voice filled with amusement. "The same place Ingolf was headed, oddly enough. They are the Cobalt Army, and they would not lower themselves to go anywhere less than home."

Bruno smiled and nodded. "We were bound, as he says, for the Fortress of Eis. We reclaimed it under General Reinoehl only a few weeks ago."

"Reclaimed?" Pancraz asked. "General Reinoehl? What happened..." he trailed off, letting the question linger unasked.

Bruno answered it anyway, face grim in the torchlight. "He was captured and killed, his head spiked in the pavilion of the Winter Palace. General Reinoehl might have suffered the same fate, because we could not free him, but an odd Illussor volunteered his services and actually managed to spring him from the birdcage they'd put him in."

"A what?" Erich demanded. "What odd Illussor?"

"He was a spy, I think," Bruno replied. "Wily bastard, said his name was..." He frowned in thought for a moment, then finally said, "Aden. He refused to give his last name."

Erich's jaw dropped. "Aden? Aden freed the General from a birdcage in the middle of the pavilion of the Winter Palace?"

"Yes," Bruno said, grimacing. "He made it look easy."

Erich threw his head back and laughed, entire body shaking with it. "Aden! I do not believe it!" Of all the people, and he should be surprised, but he was not. Of course Aden would be skulking around Kria, and

he wished he had been around to hear that tale reported to Reni. "His name is Aden von Adolwulf, Duke of Torla, descendant of the Breaker and spymaster to the Queen."

Bruno's brows went up, but he said nothing.

Pancraz rolled his eyes. "For a nation that prefers to keep out of war, there seems to be an awful lot of you wandering around Kria poking your noses into things."

He clapped Pancraz on the back, smiling cheerfully. "Nothing is more interesting than doing what you should not. Come, I want the village to be a very distant memory by dawn." Turning away, he led the way back to the chief's house to gather the rest of their things.

Leaving Pancraz to speak with the chief and his wife, Erich strode into the room he and Ingolf had shared and drew up short inside it, breath lodging in his chest. He had wanted nothing more than to return here the previous night, and remain with Ingolf however long was possible.

He wanted was to go running after Ingolf. He knew his decision to stay was the right one, though. Let the Salharans chase a pale-skinned bastard dressed in forbidden Scarlet—that would keep them occupied for quite some time! Meanwhile, Ingolf would be safe.

Their packs remained—he had never been able to fetch his, and the men sent to take him, who had taken Ingolf stead, would not have wasted any time in grabbing his belongings. They knew better.

He picked up both packs, and only then realized he had not seen his ring. But Ingolf had left it on the table, so it was probably still there. Erich shouldered the packs and stared at the rumbled bedding for a moment more, then finally turned away.

When would he see Ingolf again? After the war, whenever it ended? That was months, possibly even years away, and at present there was no clear winner for all Salhara had the upper hand. Perhaps he could help with that while he was leading the polluted fools on a merry chase.

Looking down, he fingered the fabric of his scarlet tunic, wishing he had a spare on, because wearing just this one would wear it out quickly. But, there was no help for it, not at present.

Out in the main room, he went to the table..., but despite checking every nook and cranny, he could not find his ring. Erich frowned, feeling suddenly miserable. He had not intended to put it back on, but it was still important to him—where could it have gone? Had it fallen? But several minutes later, he still could not find it.

"Something wrong?" Pancraz asked.

Erich shrugged, and sighed. "No. My ring seems to have vanished." He turned to the chief and his wife. "If you happen to see a gold and silver ring, I do not suppose you would keep it safe for me?"

"Of course my lord," the chief's wife rushed to assure him. "I am deeply sorry that your ring was lost in our home. We will look for it."

"No, no," Erich said. "If it turns up, wonderful, but do not put yourself to trouble. If it is gone, it is gone." He smiled faintly, and took her hand, patting it gently. "Please, do not worry about it. I thank you for letting us into your home, my lady. I hope you and yours are troubled no further by unwelcome strangers."

She beamed at him, wrinkled face turning pink. "You are always welcome in our home, my lord. Those who bear the blessings of the Gods always are."

Flustered, Erich accepted her kind words and those of her husband which shortly followed, then all but dragged a quietly sniggering Pancraz out of the house with him.

"I'm not certain what's more amusing," Pancraz said as they walked to the end of the village where Bruno and his men stood with the horses. "That they suddenly are calling you 'my lord' and almost think you a living version of the Autumn Prince, or that technically they're not being polite enough and should be calling you 'your grace'."

Erich shot him a look. "You've gotten awfully mouthy all of a sudden."

Pancraz shrugged. "I thought I was going to die when I reached this village, one way or the other. I had just gotten used to the idea of it when the Salharans attacked, and I realized *they* would probably kill me because I would not last long by myself against so many. Then I survived again. I'm afraid all this living is going straight to my head."

"I see," Erich said with a laugh. He nodded as they reached the others, and accepted the reins one man held out to him. Settling the packs he still carried, he then swung up into his saddle and turned to face Bruno. "Where are we headed?"

"That way," Bruno pointed. "Due north, then eventually a bit east. We should reach the Fortress of Eis in just over a week from here. Perhaps less, if the weather does not slow us and we ride hard."

Erich nodded. "Then I say we send two men ahead to scout. Set another two to trail behind us, to see who might be following us."

"Yes—" Bruno paused, then asked, "Pardon me, but I do not know what proper form of address to use."

"Your grace," Pancraz offered.

"Technically..." Erich began with a wince.

Pancraz looked at him. "Let me guess—you're *not* the Duke of Korte?"

Erich rolled his eyes. "Yes, I'm the Duke of Korte, but several years ago I married into the royal family. With all but one of them dead, I remain the only heir to the current Queen. Given that we are planning on the Salharans hunting for me, I suppose it is best you know—especially if something were to happen to me."

"You're the crown prince of Illussor?" Pancraz demanded. "I'm going to kill you. Why can't royals stay in their castles like they are supposed to instead of running around risking their fool necks? Give me one good reason I should not kill you."

"Killing a crown prince is generally frowned upon, and you would be doing Salhara a favor if you did." Erich said. "That's two reasons. Now, can we go?"

Pancraz threw his hands up and muttered uncomplimentary things in at least two languages.

Bruno simply nodded. "Yes, Highness, though perhaps we should keep to 'your grace' for safety's sake?"

"You will not offend me by doing so," Erich assured him.

Pancraz smirked. "We could just call you Autumn Prince or Scarlet Lord? Perhaps Scarlet General, if you're going to be that defiant."

"I am no Scarlet General," Erich retorted. "We go, and if you keep it up, Pan, I am going to gag you."

Still sniggering, Pancraz kicked his horse into motion and led the way out of the village.

Erich turned to wave a farewell to the villagers, then turned and ran after the others, bound for the Fortress of Eis.

Chapter Fifteen

Ingolf was torn between wanting to attempt an escape, break out of his room simply to explore, and punch Sepp in the face.

"So let me see if I have got the right of it," he said slowly, the slightest bit mollified as the tone of his voice caused Sepp to wince. "You were part of my personal retinue, but you were put there by the Cobalt General, who decided that I needed...what, exactly? His protection because the rest was not good enough?"

"All the Generals wanted you watched," Sepp said from where he cowered on a plush, velvet sofa on the far side of the room. "You would recognize most anyone from Verdant, though, and I volunteered before anyone from Saffron could. I was supposed to protect you and ensure that should it become necessary, the Cobalt Army could find you again. It was just a precaution; no one expected it to actually become necessary."

Ingolf glared at him. "I was so busy watching Pancraz I did not realize my own people were spying upon me and leaving trails. I might not like it, but I *am* Kaiser, and I do not need everyone else deciding what is best for me or what I should be doing.

"Yes, Kaiser," Sepp said quietly. "We only want to protect you. At first, it was just a precaution, but with the fall of the Winter Palace, well, you are all that remains of the royal house of Kria, now. Punish me for overstepping my bounds, Kaiser, but at least understand my reasons."

"I do," Ingolf conceded with a sigh. "I suppose it is only proof of my lack of royal upbringing that makes me chafe at being so closely supervised. I guess I shall have to grow accustomed." Abandoning the window overlooking the palace courtyard and the landscape beyond, he moved back to the couch where he had first been placed and shifted Erich's cloak out of the way.

Erich...

"What has become of Erich and Pancraz?" Ingolf asked, a sudden thought making his heart race. "Are they here somewhere?"

"No, Majesty," Sepp replied. "I do not believe so. From what Pancraz and I could determine, the Illussor mistakenly kidnapped you, and the Cobalt sent to fetch you took him."

Ingolf almost laughed, and would have, were the situation not so dire. "Winter Princess! What will happen next, I wonder?"

"I suspect part of the problem lies in the fact that you—rather *he*—has the wrong cloak." Sepp frowned. "Why would Erich have your cloak?"

"Because when he got dressed, he grabbed the wrong one," Ingolf said with a smirk.

Sepp's frown only deepened—then abruptly cleared, and he looked very badly as though he wanted to say something, but could not quite figure out what to say that would not get him into further trouble.

He was saved by the opening of the door, as one of the soldiers Ingolf recognized from the kidnapping party stepped inside—but then he moved to the side and bowed low as a woman entered behind him.

Ingolf stood, and only at the last minute remembered that he no longer bowed to anyone.

She was a beautiful woman, tall, slender, and pale without being the snow child that was Erich. She had the regal bearing that only someone born to the life could.

Unfortunately, she was also dying.

He knew what that looked like all too well. His aunt had withered away when he was a boy, slowly at first, but then suddenly she was gone. Then there had been all the plague victims, the unlucky ones who had not died immediately. The Queen was holding up well, and he admired the strength that took, but she was losing the battle.

Nodding to the soldier who had preceded her, the Queen turned her attention to Sepp and said in good, if somewhat formal Krian, "If you would pardon me, good guardian, I need to speak with your master in private."

Sepp swept her a second bow and replied in slow Illussor, "Of course, your Majesty."

She smiled at him and motioned to her own soldier, speaking now in Illussor. "Food, Tomas, and perhaps show him to his room?"

"Yes, Majesty." He turned to Sepp. "If you would follow me?"

Casting a last pensive, anxious, 'don't do anything stupid' glance at Ingolf, Sepp followed the soldier from the room, leaving Ingolf alone with the Queen.

"Kaiser Ingolf, it is a relief to meet you."

Ingolf nodded his head, somewhat amused by the words. "I do not believe meeting me has ever been described as a relief. I will be more traditional and say that it is an honor to meet you, Queen Reni." He took her hand when she held it out and kissed the back of it, but stood, startled for a moment, when she then leaned up to kiss his cheek.

"It is an honor, of course, to meet the new Kaiser. I only meant, I was brought word all your family was dead, and that you were missing. I am happy to have found you, even if it was by accident. I half thought you were lying, so that my men would release you. I can see at a glance you must be of royal blood, however. Quite shocking, really."

"I do not take your meaning," Ingolf said, horribly confused. "Why do you say the sight of me is shocking?"

She looked surprised by the question. "Why, because you look so much like Kaiser Benno."

"Benno?" Ingolf repeated. "Not Benno, but this has nothing to do with my presence here. I am here by mistake, that much I know. So why am I being kept here? Even a Queen cannot get away with holding a Kaiser hostage."

She laughed. "I am not holding you hostage, my dear Kaiser. I wanted only to speak with you on several very important matters. I had not thought it would be possible to find you, but lo, you are all but put right in front of me. I never would have believed it possible, the mix up that has occurred, but then again I have learned that anything is possible where my troublesome Duke is concerned."

Ingolf grinned briefly, unable not, at the description. "Erich is unique, I will certainly grant that. If he was taken by the men after me, I can only imagine what trouble he is causing them."

"Hopefully he is headed home, the idiot," she replied, but there was affection beneath the aggravated tone.

The levity in the room faded as he was recalled to what else she had said. "You said you had important matters to discuss with me—what matters?"

"Matters your father and I were discussing for many years before he died," she said quietly. "The discussions began, of course, between both our fathers, but when mine died I took up where he left off. Those discussions concerned both of us, but I can see from your face that you know nothing of the matter."

Ingolf shook his head. "No..." he said slowly. "I was a soldier, nothing more. My father never drew me into the political side of things. He had other sons for that."

She sighed softly and sat down next to him. "Then I am afraid what I am about to say will possibly come as a nasty shock. Do you know anything of the political climate, in our respective countries as well as abroad?"

"Not really," Ingolf replied. "There's always talk, of course, and I learned a little, but not what a Kaiser should know, I am ashamed to say." He had never had the time, or seen the point, when his father had sired four legitimate children and raised *them* to take up the reins of leadership. The eldest, but bastard, son, he had always guided toward war, to lead one of the Sacred Four Armies someday.

The Queen covered his hands with her own and smiled warmly at him. "Please, do not look so. Much has been thrust upon you that no one ever thought would be yours. I know the feeling, believe me. I did not know quite what to do, after I had buried all my family and so many friends. I learned quickly, though, and so will you. I will gladly help, and want to, if you will allow me."

Ingolf smiled and shifted their hands so he could gently squeeze hers. "Any friend of Erich, I would call a friend of mine, Queen. Most especially you, as you are the sister of Hahn."

She looked at him in surprise, mouth dropping open. "Hahn? How do you know of Hahn?"

"Erich talked about him," Ingolf said.

"I cannot believe that. Erich barely speaks at all, anymore, and never about Hahn."

Ingolf shrugged, and thought of the ring he had tucked away in his tunic once they had given him clothes. He considered pulling it out, but held back on some instinct. Anyway, call him childish, but he did not like her immediate dismissal that Erich might speak of Hahn. "What is it, Queen, that you have to teach me, and tell me?"

She nodded, setting aside the matter of Hahn and Erich, and moved the conversation back to the right path. "First, would you care for something to eat? Poor manners, indeed, to immediately launch into business without offering you something."

"Food would be appreciated, Queen."

"Do please call me Reni," she said. "We are peers, you and I. We need not stand on ceremony."

"Reni, then," he said with a faint smile and waited as the food was requested and brought.

When it came, they settled at the small table on the far side of the parlor, where he had gazed out the window in fascination. Even covered in snow, Illussor was distinctly different.

But eventually the silence ended and conversation resumed. Reni set down her fork, and picked up her wine glass, taking a delicate sip before saying, "So tell me what you do know."

Ingolf considered the question. His realm had been the immediate concerns of Salhara on all fronts, and the pirates preying along the shores and close waters. Traditionally, Verdant and Saffron held the coast while Scarlet and Cobalt fought along the inland borders—but with Scarlet forever banned, Verdant had been called more and more often to fight elsewhere, leaving the shorelines to Saffron. It strained an already struggling nation.

"The pirates are becoming more and more of a problem," he said at last. "Welestra has become a genuine threat to the waters; they are a veritable nation of pirates, living on their chain of islands. To the best of my knowledge, all attempts to beat them down has failed—and failed horrifically." He hesitated, then continued cautiously. "Money is always a problem for any army, but I know in the past many years that it has becoming a much greater problem for Kria as a whole. Though I have no basis, I am not certain Salhara fairs any better. The costs of their arcen alone must be extensive. I also overheard a few discussions, between my father and his men, to the effect that the constant warring between the nations of this continent has ostracized us from the rest of the world—not a good thing, when travel is already so severely hampered by the pirates."

Reni smiled. "You are better informed than you think. That is the heart of the matter. Welestra, as you say, has become a nation of pirates. They are out of control, and contributing to the bleeding out of countries' coffers by near-constant war. Welestra troubles other nations, as well. No one yet has been able to make a concerted, successful effort to stop them. As you said, they have all failed. We cannot deal with them properly ourselves, for being too busy with our warring. One problem keeps us from solving the other, and around and around it goes.

"Our fathers wanted to break the cycle. They began work upon a plan, then the plague struck, and then Salhara attacked Kria with a vengeance. I did not think I would be able to see if the initial plan might be pursued, as my chances of meeting you were slim—and, anyway, the ramifications of the original plan have changed greatly."

"What do you mean?" Ingolf asked. "I am afraid you have lost me."

Reni sighed and peered up at him. "Your father never once spoke to you of his plans?"

"No," Ingolf replied quietly, stifling an urge to sigh. "Most days my father barely looked at me. I was never in his confidence. I was little more than a soldier particularly vulnerable to his will. He told me nothing."

"That is unfortunate."

"Best just to say whatever it is you have to tell me."

"Our fathers wanted to bind our countries, to bring them together in a way stronger than any truce or treaty. They wanted the fighting to stop, they wanted an insurmountable force against Salhara. Then we would be able to move on to other matters, namely the pirates and relations with other countries. Rebuilding our coffers."

Ingolf shook his head, bemused. "I still do not see what this plan has to do with me..." A knot of dread was forming in his gut. What had his father done and not told him?"

Reni smiled, looking almost amused, but mostly tired. "Illussor, thanks to our careful tendency to keep from outright war, has more money than Kria—though not much. Staying out of war with two nations is almost as expensive as war itself would be. The bargain first struck between our fathers was that Illussor would put up most of the money required, both to end the war with Salhara once and for all and to fight the pirates. Kria was to supply most of the men and the greater leadership. We were promised that a General fit to lead one of the Sacred Four Armies would lead the war against the pirates."

The words turned the knot in his gut to a roiling mass of hurt and anger and disbelief. "So, you put up the gold, and I was to lead the armies. That's why my father trained me so extensively; he never meant for me to take up the Verdant mantle. He was preparing me to go to war with pirates."

"More than that," Reni said. "I told you, it was more than a simple truce or treaty. They were binding our countries together."

"What?"

"Marriage," Reni replied. "They had arranged for a marriage between me, the royal princess, and you, the King's son and personally appointed general to fight against Welestra."

Ingolf had never cared for his father. He had tried; he had wanted to care about the man. As a child, but that was all past, and dwelling on it now was useless. His father had chosen his half-siblings over him, and he had learned to live with that.

But this... this planning his life, his marriage, and never telling him a word of it. When had he planned to say? Would he at least have asked Ingolf if he would do it? No, Ingolf knew. He was a soldier of the crown, he had no opinion. What the crown said, he did, or suffered the penalty for it. "So we were to be married."

Reni nodded. "Yes. I am sorry..."

"There is no need to apologize," Ingolf said. "Please, do not be troubled. So I assume all of this fell through when they died, and all that came after?"

"It was put on hold, certainly, but I do not know that it has fallen through; that is for us to decide."

Ingolf silently vowed to make Erich pay dearly for this. Someway, somehow, he was deciding this was Erich's fault; who ever heard of a Duke for whom a group of men had developed a *system* for retrieving him whenever he vanished for too long?

Of course, he could also keep Sepp terrified and contrite for an indefinite length of time, but punishing Erich for it was so much appealing.

"What do you propose?" he asked, anxiety rising.

"As I said before," she said, looking down at her hands briefly, then forcing her gaze back up. "Once, it would have been a minor thing only, for us to marry. Now, were we to do it, it would be no simple alliance."

Ingolf nodded. "It would be a true joining of our countries."

"That is what I propose," Reni said quietly.

"What?" Ingolf said, startled. "Why? An alliance is one thing, but to unite Illussor and Kria..." But even as he spoke, he began to see what she was thinking. Oh, Autumn Prince, was this what it was like to be Kaiser? It was terrifying.

Reni's voice was somber, but level and controlled, as she replied—the voice of a Queen, making the decisions that only she could make. "Both our countries are weak right now. The plague wiped out too many Illussor. Kria survived it little better, and the war has not improved anything. Am I mistaken?"

"No."

"Salhara stands too good a chance right now, of winning the war. What information has been brought to me speaks of a hope, but a very slim one. Even if Kria wins the war, it will be only barely, or am I mistaken?"

"No," Ingolf repeated. "The war is exhausting us, and there is no telling what may happen if Salhara recovers from it first."

Reni nodded. "Unified, that would cease to be a problem. Salhara may even back down, and if not, we would together have a real chance. Though, you should know, I have already ordered my armies into Salhara. I will not stand for Kria falling to Salhara, for my country would fall shortly thereafter. Though, as to that," She took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "My family is dead, my country is weak, and I..."

"You are dying," Ingolf said bluntly, when it seemed as though she would not be able to say.

"Yes," Reni whispered. "Three healers, all sworn to secrecy, have examined me wholly independent of the others and they agree completely—I will not live more than another year, possibly two. I was never as healthy a child as my brother; my mother said it was because I came a trifle too soon. The plague did not kill me, but it worsened the weakness I always carried. Right now, I have no one to leave my country to who is strong enough to take it."

Anger flared up, and Ingolf tamped it down only because he knew he had no right to speak; he had only known Erich a very brief time. Beyond that, Erich had said he did not want to rule. Neither did Ingolf, but that choice had been taken from him. He would not take Erich's choice, too, not when he did not even know where Erich was at the moment.

Reni turned away, looking out the window. "I do have an heir, but he does not want it, never wanted it, and I am not even certain he wants to come home right now."

"Erich will return," Ingolf said.

She shot him a startled look. "Ah, but you knew of Hahn, I forgot. He could hardly tell you that without telling you that Hahn was royalty."

"He tried, but yes, it did make the telling awkward," Ingolf said with a smile. "So, you do not want to leave the throne to Erich?"

"If that is what the Goddess decrees, I will not argue it," Reni replied. "However, my people would be happier if I were to marry and produce an heir. The rest of the world would be more confident in my country, for few share Illussor's views on marriage and children."

That was certainly true. Certainly Kria did not adopt heirs, as apparently Erich had been, and he did not offhand know of another country where Erich would have been so free to marry Hahn.

"Your arguments are sound, Reni," he said. "On all fronts, uniting our countries seems the wisest choice, though I never thought I would live to see the day such a thing would happen."

He reached out to take her hand and summoned a smile and finally understood that *this* was what it meant to be Kaiser—doing what was right, doing what was necessary, even if his heart was breaking because it was Erich he wanted to be with, and now he would be marrying Erich's sister in law.

"It would be an honor to marry you, Reni," he said.

She smiled, and leaned forward to kiss his cheek. "The honor is mine, Ingolf, especially as I have dumped all of this on you so suddenly."

"Well, what other way was there to do it? Time is not a luxury we have, unfortunately."

"No," she agreed it is not. "I am afraid that the sooner we wed, the better, and I shall begin to instruct you in ruling my country, and you can teach me the details of Kria, though I fear..." She trailed off, and did not finish the sentence.

She feared it would be pointless, as she would not live longer than two years, at best. He wished he had some way of reassuring her, but what was there to comfort that sort of truth? "We will see your time is not wasted, Reni."

The way she smiled then, he guessed it must have been the right thing, after all, and felt a little better for that. No one should have to live with death so looming a presence, especially after losing so much already.

"I am certain you would like to rest, now," Reni said, standing up and shaking out her skirts to settle them into place. "Under the circumstances, we thought it fitting that you take Erich's rooms."

Ingolf managed a genuine smile at that. "I'm sure he would find it amusing, but still I feel that would be a bit of a presumption?"

"Not at all," Reni assured. "He hardly uses them himself, even after the renovations he ordered were complete."

"As you wish then," Ingolf replied. "Actually, speaking of such things—I never thought it would come to pass, but Erich said that if I were ever to visit Illussor, he granted me permission to read a set of journals..."

"Beraht's?" Reni asked, startled. "Well, certainly if Erich gave you permission. I will see that you are given a key to the von Adolwulf vaults." She hesitated, peering at him, confusion, anxiety, and curiosity plain upon her face. "How...how is he?"

"I'm not certain how to answer that, honestly," Ingolf said. "The man you speak of is not the man I know, so I am not sure that to say he seemed 'fine' would mean much. The man I know, however, attacked me in a fury because I stole his sword. He was furious, yet decided to forgo that anger when he learned of a plot to kill me and from that deduced my identity. He told me it would be best not to tie him up and always has at least one dagger that no one ever finds. He's funny, loyal, and charms more people than I can count. He's a good man. I can tell you nothing more than that."

"Erich..." Reni whispered. "That sounds like the old Erich, but what brought him back? The man you describe died five years ago, or so I had thought."

"Died?" Ingolf asked. "No, his lover died. The Autumn Prince took Hahn and drove Erich into the arms of the Winter Princess. But Spring always comes, no matter how Winter might at first resist."

Reni nodded. "We had given up hoping he would ever move on. My brother would not have wanted him to be so sad, so long, but Erich is Erich. I am happy that he found in you the friend he needed, if indeed he is what he used to be."

Ingolf almost started laughing, just because he could bear to do nothing else when faced with such words and the entire situation. Friends! Definitely that, no matter the brief period they had known each other. But he liked to think that they would have been more, given a fair chance.

He wished they had been given that chance, but for now, he would have to set his wants aside and focus on his country.

Someone knocked on the door and entered at Reni's bidding. The man came up and bowed low to Reni, then said something in soft, but rapid Illussor. Reni turned back to him after a moment, and her smile was one of polite and regretful dismissal. "If you will forgive me, Ingolf? I think you would like to rest, anyway. Tomorrow, I fear, the work begins."

"Yes," Ingolf agreed and kissed her hand, permitting her to kiss his cheek one last time, then stepped out of the room and followed the footman obviously waiting to escort him to his rooms—Erich's rooms, and he did not know if that was a kindness or some sort of unwitting torture.

Torture, he decided, as he entered the rooms. Reni had said he seldom used them, but the rooms smelled of Erich anyway—that hint of something faintly sweet, but combined here with steel and leather that even frequent cleaning would never banish.

The rooms were beautifully appointed in deep, rich browns and reds, touches of gold and silver scattered about. A front room and three doors leading off of it, what looked like an office, then a bedroom, and the third actually proved to be a sort of small, private library, with chairs and tall lamps of beautiful colored glass obviously meant for prolonged spells of reading.

Erich had claimed to be a poor student growing up, but if these all belonged to him then he obviously just preferred to learn in his own way. Drawn to the collection, he could not help but feel slightly envious. Ridiculous, of course, for he now owned an entire country, but he had always been a soldier. From the moment he could hold a sword, it seemed he had done very little else. All his belongings could fit in one good-sized trunk. His room in the Winter Palace was small, barren.

The collection was a stunning one—an entire range of subjects and in a variety of languages. He recognized Krian, Illussor, Salharan, and Welestran; some others he suspected, but did not know for certain. Had not Erich said he only knew the four? Why would he have books in languages he could not read?

He wished Erich were here to ask. Where was Erich? Would he come home, realizing the mistake made? Would he remain in Kria? What would he do, though, if he remained? Why would he not come home? Then again, Ingolf thought with a hint of bitter resignation he could not quite quell yet, did he really want Erich here? Did he want to see what would happen when Erich learned that Ingolf was to marry his sister-in-law?

Not that he had anything against Reni, per se. No man should ever complain about having to marry so strong and brave a woman, but... He reached into his tunic and pulled out the ring, rubbing it with his thumb, then examining the inscription he had discovered inside. *Ghost*, it said. Erich had mentioned that was what people here called him.

He still thought that did not do Erich justice. It vastly undervalued his presence. Wherever he was, Ingolf hoped he was safe. Hopefully—

A knock at the door broke his thoughts, and Ingolf tucked the ring away as he strode out to the main room and called for the knocker to enter.

"Majesty," the same footman from before greeted, bowing low. He rose at Ingolf's bidding and held out one white-gloved hand, upon which lay a simple iron key strung on a silk cord. "From her Majesty, a key to the royal vaults of von Adolwulf. Would your Majesty like to see them now, or at a later time?"

He really should rest, but restlessness, unhappiness, and curiosity would make it impossible for him to get any sleep. "I would like to freshen up," he said, "and then visit the vaults." He almost asked if that could be done, but bit the question off. He was Kaiser; of course it could be done. One day, he would get used to that, surely.

"Yes, Majesty," the footman replied. "I will see a bath is readied immediately. Is there anything else?"

"Something to drink?" Ingolf asked. "Wine, dark, dry."

"Of course, Majesty."

"That will be all. Thank you...?"

"Jon, Majesty. I am given into your service, however so long you desire it. If you need anything, only tug the bell, and I will respond immediately."

Ingolf nodded. "Again, I thank you. Oh—clothes. I am afraid I was ill prepared for my arrival here."

Though he ducked his head, Jon did not quite manage to hide his quick, brief grin. It would seem the tale of his arrival had already made the gossip rounds. Ingolf's own mouth twitched with a brief smile.

"Clothes are being readied for you, Majesty. I will see that something is waiting when your bath is finished and more by tonight. By the end of the week, you will have no cause for complaint."

"I have no cause for complaint now," Ingolf assured.

Jon bowed once more. "I will see to your requests, Majesty."

"Thank you," Ingolf murmured again and watched Jon depart.

Then he returned to the library and looked over the collection again, finally selecting a simple history of Illussor, curious to see what Illussor said about some of the pieces of history they had in common—especially, despite himself, the infamous matter of the Betrayer.

He carried the book out into the main room to await his bath and settled onto a couch by the glass doors that led out onto a small balcony, deciding he could ignore the problems facing him for at least the few minutes between now and when his bath would be ready.

Chapter Sixteen

The Fortress of Eis was nothing like what he expected. He had read of it innumerable times, for the Fortress featured often in the annals of Krian history. It had been around for centuries, built by Kria to safeguard their portions of the mountains and ensure no one slipped through the passages there with hostile intent—which was the only way Salhara ever entered.

He had even seen a few rare sketches of it, but they had done nothing to capture the reality. It was enormous, nearly a mountain in and of itself—or perhaps a part of the mountain. Built of local stone, half-buried in snow, and surrounded by...

Aden stared in shock. The moat really was filled with hot water, and the pungent smell identified it as definitely coming from a hot spring. He laughed, utterly taken. He had always assumed that must be myth, or some sort of exaggeration, but it was completely true! A fortress named for the ice which surrounded it, surrounded by near-boiling water. He shook his head in marvel—only Krians.

He approached it slowly, ever watchful of the guards he could see posted as well as those he could not see, but knew were there. Loosening his cloak, he raised his arms as he drew close enough for someone to call a halt, which they did.

"Who goes?" demanded one the guards stationed atop one tower of the gatehouse.

"A messenger," Aden called back in Krian. He had considered this as he traveled, and the simplest, truest answer seemed the best way to go. To try and explain anything else at this juncture would just frustrated all of them.

"From whom do you carry a message?" the guard demanded.

"None of your damned business," Aden retorted, "Unless you are the General, and you quite obviously are not. I was told he was pretty, and your face is too ugly."

The guard laughed and spoke to someone Aden could not see. A few minutes later, he motioned that Aden could proceed, and the first of the two gates was pulled up.

Inside the passageway between the two gates, he was met by four more soldiers.

"Who are you?" demanded one, a senior officer to the other three.

"My identity is none of your business," Aden replied, "unless the General sees fit to make it so. My message is for him and him alone."

In reply, the guards merely drew their swords, the senior officer stalking toward him.

Aden shoved back his cloak enough that the necklace was struck by torchlight. "I was told that if I showed you this, he would see me."

The guard grabbed him by his tunic, yanked him close, and snarled, "Where did you get that?"

"General Reinoehl gave it to me," Aden replied.

That drew the guard up short. "General who?"

"Reinoehl. General Reinoehl gave me this necklace, and said—"

"What is going on here?"

Aden shifted his attention to the new arrival. He was a handsome, striking man, surely not any older than thirty. Dark hair and sharp gray eyes, with the trim, strong body of a seasoned soldier. Not that he was a simple soldier. By his markings, he was the Cobalt Commander—Reinoehl's second in command.

"Commander Vester," one of the guards said. "We did not mean to disturb you—"

Vester held up one hand, and the guard immediately fell silent. "I was curious," he said, eyes shifting to Aden, and then down to the necklace he wore. "So you are the reason," he said.

Aden frowned. "The reason for what?"

"That he has been clinging so oddly to his father's necklace. I did wonder what had become of his mother's. I will take you to him...?"

"Aden."

Vester lifted one dark brow, but said nothing, merely tilted his head, indicating that Aden should follow him.

Shoving back the man still holding him, Aden obediently followed, tucking the necklace away. He fastened his cloak shut again as they walked through the second gate and across the inner ward and up a wide set of steps up into the keep itself.

The fortress seemed even larger inside than it had out. The gatehouse had been three stories, but the keep proper was at least four, easily. He marveled that Reinoehl had been able to reclaim it, for surely the Salharans would have taken care to secure such a prize as this.

He was led up another set of stairs, up to the third floor, around the circling hallway to a set of heavy oak double doors carved with the snowflake crest of the Winter Princess and her Cobalt Army.

Commander Vester knocked upon the door, and Aden could just hear Reinoehl's voice from within calling for them to enter. He realized his heart had sped up at some point and wondered at it, but then Vester was pushing the door open—

Aden held back, suddenly nervous but not knowing why.

"Lord General," Vester said, "there is a messenger to see you."

"A messenger?" Reinoehl echoed. "He is cleared? I was not expecting a messenger."

Aden could hear the smirk in Vester's voice. "I believe you were, Lord General." He bowed and stepped back, motioning for Aden to present himself.

Irritated with his own sudden anxiety, all the more because he could not say precisely what made him so, Aden stepped forward so that he could finally see Reinoehl and be seen.

Reinoehl's eyes went wide, and he stood up from where he had been working at a massive desk in one corner of the room. "Aden!"

The door closed behind them, but Aden barely noticed, for some reason unable to tear his eyes away. Reinoehl was casually dressed, obviously having settled in for a night of paperwork. His hair was mussed, as though a hand dragged frequently through it, and the barest smudge of ink marred one cheek. The lacings of his tunic were undone, baring the white under tunic beneath, and his sleeves were rolled up to make writing easier. His sword was near to hand, but otherwise he seemed completely relaxed and at home.

"You came," Reinoehl said, moving around the desk and striding toward him, running a hand through his hair, almost as if to neaten it and instead only making it worse.

Aden ordered his mind to start functioning properly again and managed to reply, "Did you think I would not?"

"I presume nothing," Reinoehl said, "but I confess I did hope."

"Well, I am here, and I have come with good news."

"Oh?" Reinoehl said, tilting his head, the smudge of ink more apparent than ever, and Aden's fingers twitched with the effort it took to make them remain still and at his side. "What is that?"

Goddess, why did he not remember Reinoehl being so oh, admit it, he thought irritably. So damned good looking. Perhaps he was simply sick of his own company.

Aden swept him a courteous bow then stood as straight and stiff as any well trained soldier. "My Queen says that Illussor will join the war and help Kria drive back the Salharan forces. As I speak, the Queen's Army at the Regenbogen prepares to march directly on Salhara, to strike the home while most of the Salharan army is in Kria."

He admitted he liked to see the look of shock that flooded Reinoehl's features. "Truly?"

Bowing his head, Aden replied, "Truly. If Kria wants to accept our assistance, then Illussor offers it."

Reinoehl threw his head back and laughed in sheer joy. "I told them! Wait until Viktor hears this; he will eat his sword! I wish I could tell them. I cannot believe it! This changes everything."

Aden grinned. "Have I pleased you then, Lord General?"

The words made Reinoehl's head jerk up sharply, and something flared hot in his eyes for a moment before Reinoehl banked it. "Perhaps you are not completely hopeless, Illussor." He shook his head and gestured to the room. "Would you like to rest? Food?"

"Honestly, I would like nothing so much as a bath."

Reinoehl laughed. "That, I can give you."

Aden nearly had to bite his tongue against asking what else Reinoehl might give. Clearly he *had* been by himself for too long.

Still, when Reinoehl led him down a dark set of stairs to the wondrous bathing chamber below, he almost jumped the man just in sheer gratitude. "Thank you," he said instead.

Reinoehl nodded at him and motioned. "Take your time. I will have food and drink brought, and perhaps you can tell me in more detail all that your Queen said and intends."

"I will tell you what I can, but I am not privy to many details—I am a spymaster, not a soldier or a councilman."

"Still, any information would help. This might change what I must do, and the more information I have, the better."

Aden nodded. "I am more than happy to help." He started to strip off his clothes, and only then remembered the necklace. He clung to it, oddly reluctant to let it go, even though Vester had said it had belonged to Reinoehl's *mother* and how had he forgotten that? Goddess. "Your necklace."

Reinoehl hesitated, then shrugged. "There is no hurry. Wear it, everyone here will know you are my friend." He smiled, somewhat cautiously.

Returning the smile full measure, Aden let go of his hold on the necklace. "Then I thank you."

"I will go and summon food," Reinoehl said and turning, left him to bathe in peace and quiet.

Aden finished stripping off his clothes and only then realized that he had not brought anything to change into—not that any of his clothes were fit for wearing any longer. Not even washing might save them at this point. He had travelled hard and not spared his clothes in the slightest.

Well, bath first, and then he would figure out the matter of what to wear.

The soap was bliss, and the chance to shave nearly as wonderful. Nothing, however, was better than sliding into the hot water. Krians might not be much for food, but they were the best in the world for baths, surely.

Only the fact he wanted to see Reinoehl again drew him out of the water. He bundled up in a large drying cloth and ventured back up the stairs, the stones cool beneath his overheated feet. At the top, he hung back, waiting until the soldiers who had brought the food departed.

When Reinoehl closed the door and strode back to the meal laid out on a low table by the couch, Aden motioned, catching his eye.

Reinoehl drew to a halt, then seemed to shake himself, and smiled. "I suspected you would need clothes. They are not much, but they are there, on the bed."

Aden turned and saw that clothes were indeed laid out. "I thank you."

Shrugging, Reinoehl sat down and poured a glass of wine, looking at the food and not at Aden.

Hmm...

Was there, perhaps, some chance he would not have to ask if a spare bed be found for him? Should he be doing such things... but why not? He was an adult, he could handle himself—and Reinoehl was no potential enemy now. On the contrary, Aden had come here to assure him that they were most definitely allies.

Though, he would not push it, but if Reinoehl indicated a definite interest, then perhaps.

He dressed quickly, pulling on leggings and an under tunic of soft, pale gray, over which went a dark blue tunic trimmed in white and gray snowflakes. Not quite Cobalt colors, but an indication he was tied to that Army. He raked fingers through his damp hair, thinking absently that it was getting overlong. The strands fell a little past his shoulders, now. A little too long even for him.

Moving to the couch, he sat down beside Reinoehl and accepted the wine offered with a smile. "Thank you, Lord General."

Reinoehl snorted. "Thank you, Illussor." He took a swallow of his own wine, one of the dark, rough reds that Krians typically preferred on the rare occasion they did not opt for beer. "So, what more can you tell me?"

"Not much," Aden replied, slightly disappointed. Perhaps Reinoehl was going to keep it all business, after all, and he had only been deluding himself. "I reported to her all I had learned, here, and she told me she would be ordering her armies to ready and move out. Then I was ordered to report to you here and put myself at your disposal."

The words caused Reinoehl to choke on his wine, and Aden thought maybe it was not simply wishful thinking after all.

Reinoehl set his wine down, and gave Aden a look that was partly inquisitive and partly suspicious glare.

Aden smiled blandly back and only said, "As I said, her plan is to head straight into Salhara and strike while they are vulnerable there. They will be coming up from the south."

"So it would be beneficial to have someone come in from precisely this position," Reinoehl said, shaking his head in amusement. "My part in the plans we have made were to keep the rest of Salhara *in* Salhara while my brothers in arms started to take on the forces in our country. We are hoping, over the course of the next several months, to take back the Winter Palace and all of Kria."

"That will take a long time," Aden said. "Especially given your reduced numbers and coming by supplies must be difficult."

"We are strained," Reinoehl agreed. "However, the only alternative is to surrender, and Kria will never surrender to Salhara. We would rather die fighting." He sighed softly, looking tired.

Aden did not doubt he was tired; as relaxed as he seemed just then, it must be an extreme rarity that he had that sort of free time. "Are you leaving soon, then?"

Reinoehl shook his head. "The formal campaign does not start for another week or so; we want the Salharans lured into a false security. They think Saffron and Verdant have fled out of fear, and that I took back my Fortress to hide myself away. I expect them to make another play for it very soon; they took Eis once, they will want to take it again. If they do not before our campaign begins..." He shrugged. "We will see. War relies on improvisation as much as strategy."

Nodding in agreement, Aden poured himself more wine and helped himself to some of the food set out. It was good, and he was hungry enough he did not even really mind it was Krian. He looked back up after a couple of minutes, his eyes landing upon the necklace Reinoehl wore, the exact match of his own, and he recalled again that the one he wore had belonged to Reinoehl's mother

He also remembered, now, what Vester had said about Reinoehl 'clinging' to his; he had forgotten that 'til now, so caught up in his own thoughts. Honestly, what was becoming of his mind?

"Are you certain it is all right I keep this necklace, even for a short time? Commander Vester said that it belonged to your mother."

"It did," Reinoehl replied and touched his own. "This was my father's. They were wedding gifts. I was fortunate in that I reclaimed them before they were executed."

"They're beautiful work," Aden replied. "Thank you for giving it to me—you risked much, trusting me with it."

Reinoehl smiled faintly. "Friends are to be trusted, right?"

"Yes," Aden said, returning the smile.

"Speaking of," Reinoehl said. "I confess I have been curious as to your recalcitrance to give your surname."

"Ah," Aden said and drank more of his wine. "That is because you would recognize it, and at the time, your reaction was not a risk I could take."

Reinoehl frowned. "What do you mean? That I would disapprove? That is not the sort of thing one friend should keep from another."

"I know," Aden replied quietly and set his goblet down. "My name is Aden von Adolwulf, and I am the Duke of Torla, though that would not mean much to you."

"Adolwulf..." Reinoehl stared at him in surprise. "But—that's the Betrayer's name. Are you saying you are related to the Betrayer?" He almost looked as though he wanted to recoil, remove himself from the couch completely.

Aden swallowed his disappointment and reminded himself he had known this would be the reaction. "No," he said, trying to accept the reaction, move on, overcome it. "I am descended from his spouse, Beraht von Adolwulf, the Salharan he ran away with and later wound up marrying. They kept their separate titles and holdings, to better serve Illussor."

"Married... you are descended from the Salharan filth who fled to Illussor with the Betrayer?" Reinoehl asked disbelievingly.

"He wasn't filth!" Aden snarled. "You do not even know him, or Lord Dieter, or anything about them except the lies spread by the Krian bastards who first drove them out of Kria and into Illussor! They're heroes to us, and I am proud that Lord Beraht is my ancestor!"

"And what did they do that was so heroic?" Reinoehl demanded. "Betrayed their countries to flee to another?"

"They saved Illussor," Aden replied. "They saved us, broke us of our need for magic, taught us to fight. And what did they leave behind? Lord Dieter left behind a country that hated him, and the Kaiser who murdered his father. Lord Beraht was unnamed and reviled, and Salhara wanted him dead. They left those that did not want them, for a country that did—so Goddess take you and your prejudice, Lord General."

Reinoehl slammed his own wine down, barely noticing as it splashed across the table.

"Prejudice?" Reinoehl repeated coldly. "If he had not betrayed us, if he had not killed Kaiser Benno dead in the snow, if he had not fled to Illussor and taken the Regenbogen from the safety of your falsely passive, sneaky little country, we would not be one full Army short. We would not lack a complete set of Armies to defend our country, and right now would not be so crippled. Do not tell me the Betrayer is some hero, because he only saved your country by devastating ours."

"Kria made its own mistakes," Aden snapped. "You did not have to choose to ban the Scarlet Army—do not blame that on one man, and that man one who only betrayed those who first betrayed him. That is cowardly and you know it—own up to your own mistakes!"

Reinoehl bit off his reply with an angry snarl and rose to his feet, then stalked across the room to his desk, throwing himself into the chair and picking up a sheaf of papers.

Well, Aden thought miserably, he supposed that was that. He wished he could have simply lied, but he did not like to lie more than the job required. So much for not needing to ask for a bed—so much for enjoying himself, for once in his damned life.

He should not be as disappointed as he was, Goddess knew he'd endured greater disappointments in his life, but there was little point in denying it. Kria and Illussor might be tentative allies now, or would be very soon, but that did not mean all the barriers between them had vanished. If anything, they seemed to have gotten greater.

Stifling a sigh, he slowly climbed to his feet. The necklace shifted where it lay against his collar bone, and he brushed his fingers over it absently. Then he let his fingers fall away and forced himself to ask, "Is there some place I might bed down, so that I need not trouble you further?"

"I am certain Vester can you find you something, if you are in that much of a hurry to go," Reinoehl said flatly, not bothering to look up from his papers.

Aden wanted to pitch something at his stupid, stubborn Krian head. He stalked across the room, furious; if they were going to have it out, then they were going to have it out, and he wouldn't let the bastard hide behind his damned papers.

Snatching them away, he threw them back and on the desk and said, "You are the one who just made it clear you wanted nothing further to do with me, Lord General. I am sorry it angers you I am descended from a man you never actually knew, married to a man you think unfairly betrayed your homeland—but there are two sides to every story, and it is not Lord Dieter's fault that the Sacred Armies lack the Scarlet. That was Kria's decision."

"Kria's *decision*?" Reinoehl repeated, voice still frigid. "No one would take up that banner after he ruined it. Even today, no one will dare take up the banner and colors last worn by a man who left Kria behind for a bunch of pale-skinned sneaks."

"That's not fair!" Aden snapped. "We have our reasons; do not bring our methods versus yours into this, Lord General—do not. Politics has nothing to do with this argument. This is about you hating me for the name I bear, because you think you know what happened when in reality you know nothing about the reality."

"I never said I hated you," Reinoehl replied.

"You certainly act like it," Aden snapped. "How like a Krian, to rant about fairness, but then to turn around and hate me simply because I bear a name that you do not like. I am not Salharan; I am much more than my name."

"I do not hate you," Reinoehl said. "Nor am I saying you are your ancestor—I am simply saying that it is unfair of you to think that I would be happy to hear that name. We are raised to hate it, and no matter what you say, we have reasons for hating it. That Sacred Army was outlawed, that color was outlawed, and only the Kaiser and a unanimous vote of the Lords can undo the law written so long ago. Because of his actions, warranted or not, all of Kria suffers. Since the banning of the Scarlet, death has dogged us more than ever before. Perhaps the Autumn Prince has come to hate us for not honoring him the way we should. Maybe it is what we deserve. But it all started when the Betrayer chose Illussor over Kria, and you cannot expect me to believe anything else on the basis of one man, even if that man is one I call friend."

Aden stared at him for a moment, but at last relented with a nod, his body easing with relief. "I would have hated to stop calling you friend."

"As would I," Reinoehl replied. "If you still want a bed, I will see to it Vester finds you something befitting your station."

"Not necessary, Lord General," Aden said with a smile. "I am only a Duke on my own soil. Anyway, I am not truly tired. I just did not think you wanted me around any longer, Lord General."

Reinoehl stood up and moved around his desk, pausing as he came around it with one arm still braced so that it stretched out just in front of Aden. "If you call me friend, then stop calling me 'Lord General'."

They were close enough he could smell Reinoehl, warm and male—close enough he could touch, and he really hoped he was not the only hoping that Aden would not leave here to go in search of a bed. "Of course, Reinoehl."

"Better," Reinoehl murmured, and slowly moved away, back to the table to resume his seat on the couch.

Aden joined him and poured them both fresh wine before he resumed eating. The silence still held a bit of tension, but it stood the chance of easing, and he quietly vowed to ignore the matter of his ancestor at all costs.

"So, how, precisely, are you at my disposal?" Reinoehl asked after a few minutes.

The question nearly caused Aden to choke on his food, not unlike the way Reinoehl had choked on his wine only a few minutes before. He eyed Reinoehl suspiciously, but only said, "I am a spy, Reinoehl. That is all I'm really good at in matters of war and state."

"It must be an interesting life," Reinoehl mused, and Aden wondered if he imagined the brief disappointment that flickered across Reinoehl's face. "What is it like, being a spy? I have scouts, of course, and teams meant for deeper work, but Krians do not delve into such things as... thoroughly as Salhara and Illussor."

Aden was startled into silence. No one had ever asked him that before. Those few who knew how he really spent his time treated him with a grave respect and no small amount of distrust—or worse, they pitied him and distrusted him. No one liked a spy, because no one ever knew a spy's true purpose.

"Lonely," he said, surprising himself again with the honesty. "No one likes a man whose mission is to steal the truth from others by way of lies. It's a hard life, and a necessary one. I enjoy it, to a degree, but it is lonely."

Reinoehl nodded, as if unsurprised by the answer. "It has certainly made you resourceful, though I guess that is to be expected. My men told me they were completely stumped on how to free me from that birdcage, yet you made the answer seem so simple, so easy. Though, I did wonder what precisely you did to the guards. They were all but dead on their feet."

"I poisoned them," Aden said. "I am something of an expert with poison. I used one to keep them sort of dazed and unaware, since if I had knocked them out the wall guards would have noticed them lying upon the ground. It's a poison I obtained from the pirates; they often use it for similar reasons."

"I see," Reinoehl replied, looking amused. "I am glad you call me friend and not enemy."

Aden laughed. "I could say the same in regard to you, Lord General—that was no act of modesty, telling me to find you here when we had only just left the Winter Palace! I might call it arrogance, but you obviously took back your fortress."

Reinoehl smirked, eyes like jewels over the rim of his cup as he took a deep swallow of wine. "Of course I took it back—they took my family, my friends, and injured the pride and honor of the Cobalt. They were not going to keep my home as well."

"It's an impressive home," Aden said. "Much too grand for those filthy bastards. The moat, I confess, I always thought was myth. To see the tales of it are quite true is amazing."

"Yes, Eis is a masterpiece," Reinoehl said with no small measure of pride—and even affection, Aden thought—in his voice. "The Salharans were fools, to think we did not know our own home well enough to know how to take it back."

Aden grinned. "Well, we already know that Salharans are fools. I'm certain they did not know what to do with this place. I hope they did not do it any real harm while they had it."

Reinoehl sneered in contempt. "Nothing that we did not easily repair, or extract the payment for in flesh and blood. That will teach them to think they can take the Fortress of Eis, and I look forward to the day they decide to try it again."

"Well, if you want me to find out if there are Salharans about with that very thing in mind, only ask," Aden said.

"I have scouts out."

"No scout, however talented—oh! I cannot believe I forgot to tell you!" Aden slapped his forehead in irritation. "I was travelling here and came across a group of Salharan scouts—spies, and high caliber ones at that. I managed to extract a bit of their mission from them, and learned they had discovered the lair of the Saffron General."

"What?" Reinoehl demanded. "How in the name of the Winter Princess could you forget to tell me such a thing? I saw him only a week ago, and now he is in danger? I must—"

"No," Aden cut in, grabbing his arm so Reinoehl would sit down again. "That is probably why I forgot—the matter was resolved. When I realized what they had learned, I killed them and hid all traces of them and their campsite. I believe it was enough to prevent the Saffron General's location from being discovered."

Reinoehl frowned. "Yes, I believe it was, now that I think about it. Viktor said something about suspecting such a thing, and that he had moved, but that nothing came to pass at his old location, so perhaps he had simply been paranoid." He shook his head and smiled ruefully. "It would seem he was merely saved by our new ally and did not know it."

Aden let out a sigh of relief and sternly called himself a thousand kinds of fool—this was what came of thinking too much about Reinoehl, and not about his job. "I brought you a map they carried, in the hope you might make sense of it. Let me fetch it."

"Very well," Reinoehl said. "Are you certain you are not tired? You have traveled long and hard, my friend. I do not want to keep you up if you would like to rest."

"No," Aden replied, standing and going to his discarded pack, set against the large chest at the foot of Reinoehl's bed—and didn't he like too much the sight of his stuff alongside Reinoehl's. Sighing to himself, he bent and rifled through the pack until he found the map case. Grasping it, he strode back to the couch and held it out.

Reinoehl's fingers touched his briefly as he took it, and the jewel eyes lingered on him, and the tilt of Reinoehl's head seemed thoughtful, questioning. "Do let me know if you want to rest."

Heat raced up Aden's spine and pooled warm in his gut, and he met the cobalt eyes full measure. What had brought about this change, Reinoehl going from horribly unclear to blatant? "Soon, I'm certain," he said in reply.

Smiling briefly, Reinoehl finally turned his full attention to the map case, but Aden did not think they would be keeping their eyes on work for much longer.

Chapter Seventeen

Being the only son of one of the Generals of the Sacred Armies had taught Reinoehl several things at a very young age—discretion being chief among them. That all important lesson had become almost a survival instinct when he realized that while there were things about which he was particular in those he took to bed, the sex of his companion was not one of them.

His father, of course, had been aware his son had occasionally less than traditional tastes—but so long as he was discreet, he had never cared what his son did in the privacy of his bed chamber.

Still, taking the occasional man into his bed was a far cry from wanting to pick up an Illussor spy and throw him down upon the blankets, and render him incapable of moving for an indefinite length of time. Especially when his mind should be upon the war and the Salharans no doubt hiding away in his mountain, just waiting for a chance to strike.

Instead of war, however, he was having a difficult time thinking past the joy he had felt at seeing Aden again—that Aden had kept the promise he had made.

Then there was the sight of Aden stripping, forcibly reminding Reinoehl that there were very good reasons no one had doubted Aden when he had played the whore to free Reinoehl. The sigh of Aden leaned up and dressed in Reinoehl's clothes had made Reinoehl want nothing more than to tear the clothes off again and finally put his bed to good use. Rather, use his bed to put Aden to good use.

Shaking himself, he focused upon the map Aden had given him, frowning as he examined the marks upon it. "Not a very good map," he said. "This is barely worthy of being called apprentice work. How does anyone work with such a useless map? If a soldier presented this to me, I would clap his ears and send him away until he could produce an adequate one."

Aden looked at him as if he were mad. "What in the world do you mean? It's an excellent map."

Reinoehl snorted and stood up, crossing the room to his desk. Behind it were several small, deep cubbies, most of which contained neatly rolled maps. His fingers drifted along the rows as he sought the proper one until, with a soft 'ah,' he found it and pulled it out. Turning back around, he spread the map across his desk and placing map weights on the corners and edges.

Then he fetched the discarded map and held it up against his own.

"You're right," Aden said with a rueful laugh. "It's not a very good map."

Reinoehl nodded and, after making certain he had properly memorized the marked portions, set the poor quality map aside. Opening a small wooden case, he took out nine markers; he had several sets, for devising a strategy could require any number of them, but his favorite set was the one his father had given him on the eve of his first completely independent mission. He had only been twenty-three, far too young most had said, but he had done it.

They were simple markers, made of quartz, but each one was carved into the image of a snowflake, and no two of them were alike. A standard set included fifty markers, but his had been special made and included one hundred. Half of them were made with white quartz, the other half with gray.

Setting the nine markers out in the designated points, he more closely examined the results—not that he needed to, for he knew what those locations contained.

Aden looked at him, curious. "I can see that the points mean something to you when they meant nothing to me."

"Temples, or where temples used to be," Reinoehl replied, pointing to each spot in turn. "Two of the nine were destroyed decades ago, one by fire, one by snow and neglect of the villagers who lived closest to it and so should have been maintaining it. Three of the remaining seven are all temples of the Autumn Prince. Then one each for Spring, Summer, and Winter. The last is a temple for all Four—and where the Saffron General hides, or had been hiding. I am dismayed that the Salharans managed to learn that. We have taken extreme care to hide ourselves away. Well, Viktor and Hildebrand have. All of Salhara likely knows I am here, there is simply very little they can do about it."

Aden nodded absently, picking up one of the markers almost as though he could not help himself, examining it thoroughly. Reinoehl ducked his head to hide an amused grin and moved around the desk as though to examine something, shifting the box of markers closer.

Sure enough, a moment later, Aden had replaced the first marker he had picked up, and was examining those in the box. He wondered if Aden even realized what he was doing, and if he always liked to touch and examine things. Probably—Reinoehl suspected that a dangerous amount of curiosity helped to make a good spy.

"What does it mean that they were examining temples?"

Reinoehl pursed his lips in thought, then after a moment said, "It meant they knew to look for him in a temple, but not which one. Whatever lead they got, it seems possible that the information was not entirely detailed, or the Krian who gave it was more vague than the Salharans realized until too late. We can at least hope that was the case, and I see no other reason they would hunt down and explore so many temples."

He ran his fingers lightly over the map, tracing the possible routes the Salharan scouts could have taken. It was impossible to tell which one exactly, of course, given that he did not know their starting point—but maybe he did know where they ended up. "Where did you meet them?"

"Here," Aden replied immediately, pointing to a spot on the map.

Reinoehl reached out and took his other hand, guiding it so that he could place the dark quartz piece he held on the spot.

"Oh," Aden said, shaking his head at himself, looking embarrassed as he set the marker down. "I have been in and out of Kria too many times to count, but I have never seen a map like this, and even with poor maps I do not recall seeing these little markers."

"Where you find the good maps, you find map markers," Reinoehl. "People collect them, as well." He moved to the wall of cubbies, and pulled open one of the deep drawers beneath them. Inside were at least two dozen little cases much like his own—most contained standard sets, but a few contained sets of one hundred. "Gifts, both to myself and my father."

Aden looked at them, and Reinoehl could see he was fighting an urge to investigate the contents of each case. "I am astonished the Salharans did not take them or destroy them."

"When we realized the Fortress was going to fall to Salhara, we managed to get many of the things in it out, one way or another. Salhara claimed Eis for some time, but never discovered its secrets."

"I'm glad you have Eis back," Aden said, smiling, but his eyes slid back to the open drawer even as he finished speaking, obviously losing the battle against his curiosity.

Reinoehl laughed. "You can touch them, you know. If any set strikes your fancy, you can keep it. There is more there than even I can use, I promise."

Aden smiled sheepishly. "I'm just being nosy," he said, but began to pick up and examine all the little cases, occasionally making some noise of satisfaction or wonder. There was a variety—they were carved from marble, jade, glass, bone, even semiprecious and precious jewels in some rare instances.

The one he noticed Aden kept returning to, however, was a set of fifty little swords, carved from onyx, each with its own minute, intricate details. When Aden returned the box to the drawer with reluctance he was clearly trying to hide, Reinoehl prevented him. "I said you might keep one."

"You've already let me keep the necklace," Aden said with a shake of his head. "I did not come here so you might give me things. It's not as though I have any use for such a thing. Spies don't carry maps unless absolutely necessary; we prefer to use the maps in our head."

Reinoehl smirked and decided he was tired of stalling and behaving. He set the box of markers on the table, and closed some of the space between them. "As I said, they are merely collected as often as they are used. But if you feel bad taking them, you could thank me properly for them."

He loved it when those pale eyes flared with heat. "There is that," Aden agreed slowly. He tilted his head in a way that was simultaneously invitation and challenge. "What did you have in mind?"

There were times when the best attack was a steady, methodical siege—and other times, only a direct and merciless assault would do. Reinoehl was not in the mood for slow and steady, not when Aden had kept him half-hard most of the night and that mouth was all but begging for trouble. He closed the last of the space between them, grasping Aden's head in his hand, sinking his fingers into the long, beautiful hair, and kissed him with every last bit of pent up emotion he had been holding back for what seemed ages since Aden's arrival.

Aden did not falter or hesitate, but immediately returned the rough kiss full measure, arms sliding around Reinoehl's waist, rubbing up against him as shameless as a cat—but with an edge to all of it that said if Aden was any sort of cat, it was feral and no fat, tame mouser.

He tasted mostly like the wine they had been drinking all evening, but also a bit like cinnamon and Reinoehl wanted *more*. It reminded him of the mulled wine he loved, but much more potent, far headier. He let go of the soft hair only to fumble with Aden's clothing, growing frustrated when he realized there was too much of it for him to slip beneath to find the skin he wanted so badly.

A warm tongue lapped at his throat, Aden's teeth nipping at the point where his pulse beat strongest. Reinoehl took Aden's mouth again, eager—almost desperate—to memorize every line and contour of it, aching for all of the man now they had finished stalling.

Tearing away, he began moving Aden to the bed, moving them as fast as he could without tripping, shoving Aden down once the bed was finally reached. Then he went for the clothes as though his life depended upon getting Aden naked—which, his sanity very well might, if not necessarily his life.

Aden might have laughed, or groaned, or something; whatever the sound, it was no complaint, for even as he worked upon Aden's clothes, clever, eager fingers were pulling at the lacings and belt of his own. Reinoehl was grateful that tonight he had actually been busy enough with paperwork he had taken off his armor. If they had to stop to work upon that *now* he might have lost his temper.

Finally Aden was bare and even finer a sight than he had been before, fresh from his bath. He was not as pale as most Illussor because of the Krian blood, but there was still something to it that could only be Illussor. A fairness, a smoothness, that no full-blooded Krian would ever possess. He was remarkably bare, with little hair beyond the long strands spread now across Reinoehl's bed and the thatch of curls at his groin.

Swiftly discarding the last of his own clothes, Reinoehl climbed up onto the bed and over Aden, leaning down to take another kiss, bracing himself on one hand while he used the other to touch all that smooth, flawless skin.

Except where his fingers mapped it was not quite so flawless. They traced scars that he could almost mark at a touch—a burn here, an arrow wound there, the faded slice and stab of daggers and even a sword. He broke the kiss to put his mouth to each one, eager to memorize every nuance of the body as he already had the delectable mouth.

It was hard to focus, however, when Aden had hands and mouth of his own, and they soon devolved into a battle to see who could get the most of the other, reach more, taste more, and finally overcome the other.

Eventually, sweaty and gasping and so hard he hurt, Reinoehl found himself on his back, Aden straddling him like a man on a mission—and to judge from the expression on his face, the way he pressed against Reinoehl's cock, it was going to be a damned fine mission.

Aden leaned down and kissed him, hard and hot, sucking and nibbling on his bottom lip before asking, "I hope you have something, because otherwise I have to go find my pack."

"What a prepared little spy," Reinoehl replied, but twisted a bit and was able to reach the small box on the table by his bed. Normally he kept it locked, and he was grateful that the previous night he had simply not had the energy to lock it again after using the contents.

Taking the glass bottle Reinoehl held out, Aden wasted no time preparing them both. It had been a long time since Reinoehl had dared to take a lover, even for a night, and he felt a niggling of guilt in the back of his mind for taking such pleasure when war raged around them, but Aden was tight and hot around him as he slid down, and the way he began to move perfection, and Reinoehl really could not think past anything but that.

He only barely managed to muffle his shout as he came, fingers digging hard enough into Aden's hips he would likely leave bruises. The world returned a pant at a time, and he groaned as Aden slid slowly off him. Sliding his hands up to wrap around Aden's forearms, Reinoehl tugged Aden down to lie beside him.

In the light of the fire, he could just see his mother's necklace around Aden's throat. It was probably the greatest of perversity, to give his mother's necklace to a lover that was very likely fleeting, to take said lover in the bed that had once belonged to his parents, but Reinoehl could only feel a bone deep satisfaction. He never would have guessed, in a thousand years, that he would take an Illussor spy to his bed and enjoy him far more than any other lover. But he was not going to protest it.

No, instead he simply folded Aden close, enjoying their mingled scents on the soft, smooth skin, how easily the lithe frame fit against his own. Tugging the blankets up, he closed his eyes and settled into a doze. He would have to stir soon and find Vester and his strategists, to inform them of the change in plans.

For now, though, he was going to enjoy the fact he was not sleeping alone.

~~*

It was the knocking upon his door that finally woke him, and Reinoehl grunted in displeasure. Throwing back the blankets, he stumbled from the bed to his wardrobe, fumbling for a night robe and pulling it on, belting it closed, as he made his way to the door. He stopped as he passed the bed again, and moved to pull the blankets back up so that Aden would not get cold and wake up.

Well, that and no one else needed to see him naked.

Pointedly ignoring that errant little thought, Reinoehl went to the door and pulled it open. "What is it?" he asked, stepping back and motioning Vester inside. Closing the door, he moved to stoke the fire and throw more wood on.

When he turned around again, Vester was smirking, and he dragged his eyes slowly from the bed to Reinoehl. "So I guess the message was successfully delivered?"

"Do not make me discipline you for disrespect," Reinoehl said, mouth twitching as he fought a smile. "What time is it?"

"Just past midnight, Lord General."

"I did not mean to sleep that long," Reinoehl muttered and threw a last log on the fire before sitting down and drinking some of the remaining wine. "Why are you still awake, Vester?"

Vester shrugged. "I seldom sleep, Lord General. Anyway, the night watch at the gatehouse summoned me a quarter hour ago with word of a disturbance in the woods. I sent out two scouting teams; they should be returning shortly. I thought you would like to be informed."

"Yes," Reinoehl replied, and strode to his wardrobe to fetch fresh clothes, pulling stuff out and tossing it upon the bed. Then he strode to the bed and discarded his robe and began to pull on the clothes—and stopped, abruptly, as he realized two pale eyes watched him intently. "You're awake."

"I heard someone approaching the door," Aden replied, and sat up, moving to pull on his own clothes, before he strode to the fire to warm up. "Commander," he murmured in greeting.

Vester grinned. "Messenger. Did you deliver your message?"

"Vester!" Reinoehl protested.

Aden only smirked. "Yes, quite. All of them."

Laughing, ignoring Reinoehl's threats to beat him, Vester clapped Aden on the back. "So from where do you hail, messenger?"

"Illussor."

Vester fell into a startled silence. "I thought you looked of mixed blood, but your Krian is so flawless, I thought you must be native. What in the name of the Winter Princess is an Illussor soldier doing here?"

"Delivering a message," Aden replied and glanced at Reinoehl, obviously wondering what he was allowed to say.

Reinoehl said it himself. "It does not leave this room until I call a formal meeting, Vester, but he has brought word that Illussor will join the war on Kria's side. They are planning to march directly on Salhara, to take their strongholds there while the bulk of their forces are here in Kria."

"Tits of the Winter Princess!" Vester exclaimed. "Never say! When did this—how—" He stopped abruptly and narrowed his eyes thoughtfully at Aden. "You are the one who freed the Lord General, aren't you? I did not make the connection before, because I thought you Krian. It's quite the tale I have been told."

Aden swept him a playful bow. "Guilty, I'm afraid, though I am sure the tale you hear is far more exotic than what actually occurred."

Vester laughed. "No doubt; tales usually are, especially when soldiers are involved. So were you delivering a message or collecting payment due, Illussor?"

"Vester! Such disrespect is not like you!" Reinoehl protested, gaping at his Commander in disbelief. "What has come over you, Vester?"

"I seldom sleep, Lord General," Vester reminded him. "The lack of sleep goes to my head, you see. That aside, the tale of your escape is becoming the stuff of legends. The men speak of it often; to hear them tell it at least half of them were somehow near that courtyard when it happened. There will be no controlling them, should they find out the Illussor in question has come to receive the Lord General's gratitude—and brought us astoundingly good news besides."

Reinoehl scrubbed at his face and finished dressing. "I do not think I like you at midnight, Vester. Do not force me to present you in the ward for a beating. Have the scout teams returned?"

"We can go see, Lord General," Vester replied, "Though I told them I would be here and they should send word immediately upon the scouts' return."

Stamping into his boots and lacing them up, Reinoehl pulled on his cloak and finally gave a nod. "I do not feel like waiting. Let us go see what is happening."

Vester led the way out of the room, and Aden fell into step alongside Reinoehl, smiling at him briefly in amusement. Reinoehl nearly rolled his eyes, his Commander being impertinent, and his lover snickering. This was no way to run an army or anything else.

Still, it was hard not to smile in return.

Outside, they arrived to see a bit of scuffle by the gatehouse where the dungeon was located.

"What is going on?" Vester demanded, and all soldier present snapped to attention.

"Commander," one man replied, "We captured two Salharan spies, but one has just died of his wounds. The other was force-fed cleansers. They bore yellow eyes and badly injured five men. We fear he will not talk."

Reinoehl started to speak, but beside him Aden quietly murmured, "Let me try."

"What?"

Aden repeated more forcefully, "Let me try. I might be able to extract information in a way you would never try." He lay a hand on Reinoehl's arm, and for a moment it startled him, for it was not something anyone in Kria would dare do save for his closest peers. Around the ward, he could see others had noted the gesture.

"I am here to help you," Aden continued, then lowered his voice so only Reinoehl would hear him. "As much as I would like all of my help to pertain to warming your bed, Reinoehl, I am a soldier of a very particular type. Let me try them; I have experience with Salharans. They do not answer to your ways, but they will answer to mine. I was sent here by my Queen to assist you, so let me."

"Very well," Reinoehl said and motioned to Vester. "Let our new ally have a go at them." He pushed Aden lightly forward, waving his own men well back. "Vester and I will be near to hand, however, should you require assistance. One never knows what those filthy bastards will do."

Nodding, Aden strode to the dungeon, vanishing into the dark depths.

Motioning to Vester, Reinoehl strode to the far side of the western tower of the gatehouse, slinking to stand to one side of the bared window where he knew the prisoners and Aden would be. Then they simply listened, ready to go inside and strike should anything go wrong.

But when he began to hear what was being said, all he could feel was cold shock. He knew it was not true, but Aden made it all sound so horrifically real.

"Brothers," Aden said in perfect, native-sounding Salharan. "Foolish of you to get caught. I hope you do not expect me to get you out."

"Who are you?" the soldier asked suspiciously.

"My name is none of your business, and you well know that. Do no insult me by asking again, brother. I am here on the orders of our most noble Brothers, and I will not jeopardize my mission for you. Tell me what you were doing outside."

"I cannot believe—"

"I do not care what you believe, especially as you are the one chained to the wall and set to hang in the morning. Tell me what you were doing, and I will ensure you are not buried beneath the earth."

"Watching," the soldier said slowly. "Only watching, and waiting to see what they would do next. We do not like having Kria in the Fortress of Eis again, but we also think they will not remain there much longer. If we cannot get to them while they are in it, then we will take them the moment they are foolish enough to leave it. If they do not leave of their own volition, we intend to coax them out. That is all, brother. Might I ask—"

"No, you might not," Aden replied sharply. "How are you planning on coaxing them out? Why did no one tell me of these plans? If they interfere with my own, I will take all your heads myself. Perhaps I will simply see to it your names are stripped away, hmm?"

"No, my lord; we were going to raze a few villages that we know full well the Fortress will need to replenish supplies. We have of course avoided doing it because we could use the supplies ourselves, but it is more important that we secure the mountain border. I did not know we interfered with your plans, lord brother. I promise that no one told me there were other plans afoot here. If someone had warned me, I would have found a way to contact you, to let you know of my own plans. I am sorry, brother. I will help you as best I can, to undo any damage I have unintentionally caused."

"You certainly cannot help me while you are chained to a wall," Aden said coldly. Reinoehl did not know Aden could sound so horribly cold. It should not surprise him, not when he had sounded so himself on more occasions than he cared to recall. It was part of being a General. He had his own men trained to extract information at all costs, as well, but Aden made it seem so natural, so real. If he did not know better, he would swear Aden was a Salharan spy.

Doubts tried to plague him, but Reinoehl fought them back, refusing to believe anything was true except what Aden had told him.

"Tell me the villages, so I can put a stop to this nonsense long enough to finish my mission. Idiots, all of you! When I am able, I will take names for this! Tell me the villages!"

The soldier gave up the names, and Reinoehl closed his eyes in horror and relief—he had men in those villages, but the Salharans must have sniffed them out. He hoped they were alive, but would not be surprised to learn his men were dead. Autumn Prince!

"Well at least you are good for something. Perhaps I will not take your name away, if live long enough to have need of it ever again."

Reinoehl heard a grunt of pain as Aden knocked the captured soldier out. A couple of minutes later, Aden emerged from the dungeon, grimacing as he brushed dust and grime from his clothes.

"You are a little too good at that," Vester said quietly. "I almost want to run you through for being a Salharan spy, though I know very well you are not."

"No," Aden agreed quietly, talking to Vester, though his eyes were trained on Reinoehl. "I am an Illussor spy, and I would be a poor one indeed if I was not good enough to fool even my own mother." He smiled faintly. "Which, oddly enough, I never actually managed."

Vester grunted and moved away to tend the soldiers and the night watches.

"You are the smoothest liar I have ever known," Reinoehl said quietly, gut roiling as though from soured wine. "Even I wanted to believe you were Salharan, and I know far better than anyone here."

Aden sighed and looked away. "Do you? You look very much as though you doubt me, again."

"It is hard to trust a man who can lie so easily, Aden," Reinoehl said.

"Do you think it is fun for me, knowing that no one trusts me because my life depends upon being able to make every lie a truth? Rare indeed are the persons to whom I can speak honestly." His hands curled into fists. "I was trying to help you—he told me more, believing I was a comrade, than he ever would have confessed under torture." He turned sharply away and walked back toward the keep proper.

Reinoehl went after him, grabbing him by the upper arm and yanking hard, forcing him to slow so that they might walk side by side. "Do not walk away, Aden. I did not say I had stopped trusting you; I am saying you are making it damned difficult to do."

"I am what I am," Aden said flatly. "Without my lies, your Saffron General could very well be lying dead right now. You would be dead without my talent for deceiving. No one likes a spy, and I accept that, but we have our place in war and many more people would suffer did we not exist." He tore away, and stopped abruptly in the hallway. "At least when you die, Lord General, you will do so on a battlefield or in your bed—somewhere people will find you. Should I ever fail a mission, it is very likely I will die in

enemy territory, with no friends for miles, and no one will ever find my body to take it home. I am very good at what I do, and to a degree I enjoy it, but I know I pay a dear price for it.

"My Queen put me at your disposal. Until she recalls me, you come first. It is to you I report, to you I answer, and you I protect with my unwelcome skills. Do you want them or not, Lord General?"

"I do not need your protection or your skills," Reinoehl replied quietly. "All I want is to know you are my friend."

Aden stiffened. "Friend?" he repeated "Only that?"

Reinoehl smiled, feeling more relieved than he liked to admit. "No," he replied. "I like having you at my disposal."

"I like it too," Aden replied. "We shall have to explore the arrangement further, after business has been addressed?"

"Yes," Reinoehl said with a sigh. "Come, we'll go the main war room." Turning the corner, barked at a foot soldier to fetch his Commander, strategists, and senior officers and inform them they were to report to him immediately. He made another run for food, then led Aden to the war room, more than happy to focus on the matter of war and leave behind the matter of spies and anticipate returning to his bed.

Chapter Eighteen

Hahn had been a beautiful man. Ingolf had been wandering the palace one day on one of his few breaks from learning how to rule Illussor in a matter of weeks when he had found the galleries. One of them had been filled with portraits, and he had immediately been drawn to the one that bore a gold plaque bearing Hahn's name in delicate script.

The portrait must have been painted fairly close to Hahn's death, for he looked to be right around the twenty-three years he had been when he died. Pale, curly hair and freckles scattered across skin that had been ever so faintly kissed by the sun. He was dressed in various shades of green, with the traditional gold and silver accents and all the seals and marks of office pinned across his breast. The quirk of his mouth seemed to say he was amused by something he had no intention of sharing, and Ingolf rather thought that fit, knowing what little he did of Hahn.

He supposed he should be jealous, resentful, or at least relieved Hahn was dead—but truly he was only sorry he had never met the man. If Hahn had lived, Ingolf would stand no chance with Erich, but still it seemed a tragedy that Hahn was dead.

Ingolf reached almost absently into the pocket of his dark gray jacket and pulled out the gold and silver ring that never seemed to leave his person these days. Some sort of talisman, a pleasure and a pain, for it reminded him of Erich, but also reminded him he would not likely ever have Erich.

Which reminded him that he was to be married on the morrow. Amidst a storm of controversy, anger, confusion, and one stubborn Queen more than willing to take heads if her court did not settle down over the matter.

Not that he could blame any of them. It was a bit much to go from a Queen who refused any offer of matrimony to one who announced that in a matter of weeks she would be marrying the new Kaiser and uniting Kria and Illussor. Even the history books could not recall the last time their countries had been one, though history did agree that once upon time, there had been only one country on the continent.

Still, the council had agreed to the marriage eventually, and Ingolf at present had no council but himself, so his word was final in Kria, and he had agreed. Thanks to their fathers, most of the paperwork had long ago been drawn up; it had only taken fixing a few minor things in the wording, working out the details between their two countries. If nothing else, he and Reni made a good team, for they thought similarly on many things. He took that as a good sign for the impending marriage, even if his heart was still heavy over it.

Reni was also a good teacher, though Ingolf still did not believe he could run a country—let alone two countries newly united as one. But he did not quite believe he would destroy it, either. Well, he hoped he would not.

He sighed softly, mind whirling with the five thousand problems facing him. On top of everything else, at the back of his mind pressed the anxiety of the wedding night—the married nights. He had bedded all of four women in his life, mostly because he had not been able to avoid the various situations, and all of

them had been experienced in such matters. What in the name of the Summer Princess was he supposed to do with a virgin Queen barely strong enough to *have* a wedding night?

The matter of an heir was one on which she refused to bend. So too the council, for that matter. He wondered if they appreciated that childbearing would probably speed her death—if she even lived long enough to bear the child. He suspected they did not; the way they spoke to and about her, he had the horrible impression they did not know she was anything more than somewhat physically weak.

He hated it, hated the entire damned situation, but what could he do save go along with it? Were he in her position, he would hide the knowledge as well. A country needed a strong ruler, and if she was weak of body then Reni made up for it with her mind, her presence, but if the council knew the Autumn Prince stood beneath her tree, poised to strip the leaves...

No, as awful as it was, it was better that they would all find out too late.

Unfortunately, that meant there was no avoiding the matter of an heir. If it was at all possible to produce one. Everything was moving so fast. Too fast. But they needed something to stabilize it all, to make it nigh on impossible to tear asunder what they were about to join. As cold as it seemed, nothing would serve to solidify the unification better than a child born of the Queen and Kaiser, a prince or princess of both lands, a position that no one and nothing could take away.

Sighing again, Ingolf picked up the book he had set aside on the bench where he sat in the portrait gallery. He had come here because it was always deserted, and he loved to look at the portraits of Erich and his ancestors, other men and women descended from what he assumed was the line of Lord Beraht...

He looked again at Hahn, then stood and walked down the hall to a different set of portraits. Here, in a place of honor, hung a portrait of two men. As hard as it still was to believe, he was staring at the Betrayer himself, and the Salharan spy he had married. No such images of the Betrayer existed in Kria, and descriptions of him were sparse—dark hair, pale eyes, hostile and untrustworthy.

The words hardly did him justice, and the last seemed flat out lies, though Ingolf had never thought he would come to believe good things about the Betrayer. Lord General Dieter had been a striking man, if the portrait was to be trusted. He could not have been much more than forty when it was done. The man beside him looked a few years younger. Ingolf also realized something else—Lord Beraht had been at least half Illussor. That delicateness, that paleness, could be nothing else.

The Betrayer... no, Ingolf conceded, if he should be called anything, it was Wolf. That was precisely what he looked like, save for the oddly delicate green of his eyes.

Ingolf turned away and returned to his bench, opening the book he had brought with him. It was a handsome volume, as were all the journals of Lord Beraht. Black leather with no markings save the Seal of the House of Torla and a number on each spine. The simplicity of the binding vastly understated the astounding words within. Ingolf had sacrificed many a night of sleep once he had begun reading them, unable to tear his attention away from a story that was nothing at all like the story he and the rest of the Kria had been told their entire lives.

It should not matter, really, for the old tale had little bearing on the present, but it was fascinating all the same. It angered him that the truth had been so horribly distorted in Kria, that those lies had caused the dissolution of one of the Sacred Four Armies. Whatever Lord General Dieter's betrayal, he had been betrayed in his turn, and those betrayals should not have affected the rest of Kria. The dissolution of the Scarlet Army had clearly been done for reasons of personal vengeance, and that angered Ingolf greatly. The country should not have suffered for a personal vendetta.

He had finished all of the journals two days ago and now was starting over, reading them more slowly.

The introduction, even the second time around, drew him in and caught him. Whatever he had expected to read, it had not been this.

The recording of one's life is a frivolous practice indulged in by nobles with nothing better to do. Only the arrogance of nobility would lead one to think that the details of his long and tedious life would matter to people he will never meet.

Seeing as I have somehow managed to become a noble, and at present I find myself with nothing better to do, why not? My life has hardly been ordinary, I can say that much. Certainly it was seldom tedious. Even now, I am a matter of national interest, my hand alone responsible for destroying the Illussor ability to use magic. Though I wish only to be left to the stars when I die, alongside my Wolf, I doubt I will be that lucky.

If nothing else, the knowledge I am doing this will aggravate Dieter.

So, how to begin? Giving one's name is the traditional start in most countries. It would not be in Salhara, for my status means that I give my name to no man save my King unless I choose otherwise. Then again, were I still in Salhara, I would be dead or nameless.

Let us start there, then.

I spent the first twenty-six years of my life nameless. No one outside Salhara can possibly understand what that means, what it is like. I had no name, no identity, no family, no friends, no home. I had no existence. People did not see me unless they were men eager for a place to put their dicks, or shrews who needed a slave to do some gruesome bit of work. Even when I was permitted to join the army, it was as a nameless bit of fodder meant to take a sword while a real soldier killed the Krians.

Then, by chance, I was made a Brother—one of those infamous twenty-one who rule Salhara from the dank depths of the palace, hiding away from the stars we worship for fear those stars might condemn them. It was not done by anyone's choice, but it was done. So they made use of me, and I went from nameless fodder to nameless shadow killer. I was tasked with killing the Scarlet, our greatest threat and all that stood between Salhara and the Regenbogen.

In the midst of that mission, I was taken prisoner by the Scarlet Wolf himself. He gave me a choice—take the name he had given me or die nameless.

The name he gave me was Beraht. Roughly six years after that first encounter, he gave me his own surname—von Adolwulf.

At the time of this writing, it is nearly ten years to the day that we met, when I killed a great many Scarlet, and he took me prisoner, and the Illussor attacked and killed all the men I had not.

We were married five years ago, an event in Salhara that would have meant the complete changing of my name. Here, no such tradition exists. I find myself relieved, because my name was hard won. It was founded, and first given, in hate, but it did not end up that way. A name is a powerful thing, for it tells the world all that it needs to know about the man who bears it. All that anyone needs to know about me is in my name, but only a Salharan would understand that, I suppose.

So I guess I shall write the rest, if only for the amusement and chance to annoy.

Beraht von Adolwulf, in the eleventh year of King Mathias

Ingolf closed the book again and set it aside, frowning in thought. It was, as introductions went, decidedly peculiar. It seemed flippant, more than anything, though the tone was grim as he briefly laid out what it was like to be nameless—

Ingolf's thoughts immediately turned to Pancraz, and he winced. The idea of not having a name simply because no one had given one... it was a strange custom, but Lord Beraht had painted all too clear an image of how deeply such things ran in Salhara. He could not understand it, but that did not make it less real. Had Pancraz suffered such things as the crudities—the cruelties—Lord Beraht had briefly but vividly described?

And they only grew worse once Lord Beraht began the tale properly and explained in much greater detail. Was that what Pancraz had suffered? Ingolf knew that Illussor and Salhara alike reviled the Krian custom of the coliseum, but that could not begin to compare to the cruelties Salharans inflicted upon anyone who did not have a name.

Whenever he saw Pancraz again he would do what he could to see that Pancraz was happy. No one should be forced to endure such terrible things just because he lacked a gods damned name.

He picked the book up again, turning it over and over again in his hands, mind roiling. What struck him the most perhaps, was that even in the brief introduction, the story painted was impossible to grasp. He and Erich had been leery of getting involved for many reasons, but one of them had been that while not enemies, their countries were not exactly allies either. To take up with someone who could be enemy...

...was nothing like marrying a definite enemy. More confounding still, the only reason they had done it was one never explicitly stated, but plain as day anyway—Lords Beraht and Dieter had loved each other deeply.

Ingolf still could not wrap his mind around it.

But even that, as much as it fascinated him, was not the most important part. The important part was that if even half of what Lord Beraht had written was true, then Kria had only itself—and its Kaiser

then—to blame for the loss of its most notorious General. Autumn Prince, he suspected Lord General Dieter had been one of the best, if not the best, Sacred General that Kria ever was given.

He wished Lord Beraht had given more details of the Lord Genera's life and hated that such details were lost forever. Mostly, however, the entire matter and the way it had resulted in the dissolution of the Scarlet Army just angered him. Kria would not be under the thumb of Salhara right now if they had not lacked a fourth army to help stand guard. Though the sizes of the other armies was increased accordingly, and their territories adjusted, it was not the same as having all four armies. Kria had always revolved around its Sacred Four Armies, named for the Gods and Goddesses they so revered, the changing of the seasons that governed all things.

And for petty, stupid reasons, the Scarlet Army had been banned forever.

Opening the book, he flipped idly through the pages, seeking out the sketches scattered about at odd points. Lord Beraht had possessed a fair hand for artistry, though it did not seem he knew it or cared, and the journals all contained at least a dozen sketches—some to better explain a bit of story, others seemingly random, and some he suspected were merely for the sentiment.

The one which had shaken Ingolf, however, was a rough sketch of what had at first appeared to be his own face, but a closer inspection and reading of the accompanying passage, had revealed it to be Kaiser Benno.

How in the name of the gods did he look like Kaiser Benno? That line had died out three generations ago. Unfortunately, it was a question that would never find an answer because his mother had died years ago.

He settled randomly on another sketch, this one of Dieter standing by a window that Ingolf thought was in his own apartments—Erich's apartments. Was he really sleeping in the same place the Betrayer had once slept? The thought was a strange one.

This whole adventure was a strange one. He kept expecting to wake up, kept hoping to wake beside Erich. That was not going to happen, though, and he wished he could simply come to accept it.

The sound of boot heels on marble tile drew his attention, and he looked up to see Sepp smiling in greeting.

"Majesty," Sepp greeted. "I believe you are being sought to finalize the last details for tomorrow."

Closing the journal, Ingolf stood and brushed at his clothes, settling them back into place. "Very well. How are you, Sepp? I scarcely see you anymore."

Sepp shrugged, smiling ever so slightly and looking vaguely guilty for it. "My Illussor is improving by leaps and bounds, even if I cannot grow accustomed to their damnably spicy food. They are not all that bad with their swords, though. They keep asking me about Kria—some of their notions! I vow they think we bathe in blood, or something equally vile. One would think they would know better, but who can say?"

Ingolf chuckled. "It's to be expected, I suppose, as we always seem to be locked in war with Salhara. Hopefully this marriage will be the start of the end of that. I would like to spend some time at home, rather than always in a tent, waiting for the next battle. Wouldn't you, Sepp?"

"Yes, Majesty," Sepp replied. "Though, that brings to mind a question I had—where will we reside when the war is over? People are already gossiping about it something fierce."

"Reni and I have considered that," Ingolf said. "We might travel for a time, if it proves possible, because it would do Illussor good to see me, and Kria to see its new Kaiserin." He snorted in amusement. "I guess what we are to be called must be decided as well, never mind the matter of languages—but that will not get resolved while I live, I suspect. Travels aside, we believe we might simply see a new palace built. It will be a place with no ties to either country, but hopefully a meeting of them, and the location will be far more centralized than either of our current main residences."

Sepp whistled and moved so he was standing alongside Ingolf's bench. "That is quite the undertaking. But where are you going to build it?"

Ingolf laughed. "The Regenbogen, of course. What could be more central? It is right smack in the middle of the new country we are forming."

"True," Sepp said, boot tapping as he thought.

"You can sit down, you know," Ingolf said, amused. "You always sat in my presence before, and my being Kaiser is not a good enough reason for you to stop."

"That is because standing as was proper would have perhaps given people the notion you were more than you appeared," Sepp replied. "You are openly Kaiser now, and it is not proper for any but your equals to sit in your presence. That aside," he continued before Ingolf could protest, "I am still a part of your retinue. It is my job to guard you whenever these crazy pale skins leave me alone long enough to actually do that."

Ingolf rolled his eyes and grabbed Sepp's wrist, yanking him down to sit beside him on the bench. "There, you're being rude. No one is shouting, and the world is not ending, and I am much happier."

Sepp only rolled his own eyes, then shifted his attention to the book Ingolf still held. "So is it true, all the things they have been saying about the Betrayer?"

"Probably," Ingolf said. "At least, I cannot think why a man would fill thirty-odd volumes with complete lies, and the history books match what the books say."

"Hmm," Sepp said. "So that means there is probably grounds to lift the ban on the Scarlet Army."

Ingolf looked at him in surprise. "Probably. Why?"

"Well, Kria is hardly Kria when the red banner does not fly with the other three," Sepp replied, then shrugged and spoke to the marble floor. "My family has a long history with the military. There has never

been a man in it who has not served, but we always fought wearing scarlet. Since it was outlawed, we have fought under Cobalt. It does not really matter, I suppose, but still."

"But still," Ingolf agreed, anger stirring anew at the way a selfish bitch of a Regent had seen to it that the Scarlet was forever outlawed. He also felt a wave of guilt. "I never knew you had such ties, Sepp."

Sepp snorted. "My personal history is hardly of relevance to the throne, Majesty. That I am a good, if somewhat sneaky, soldier is all that matters."

Ingolf cuffed him, expression bland when Sepp glared at him.

"What was that for?" Sepp demanded.

"You're my friend," Ingolf said, standing up. "So sit down when you're around me, and don't ever think again that your personal history does not matter to me. Now, come on, there are apparently things I should be doing."

"Yes, Majesty," Sepp said. They walked in silence for a moment, before Sepp said hesitantly, "My family has always lived in the Winter Palace, you know. We do not make much money, as soldiers, but we have been around long enough we actually own our home and pay only the necessary taxes. It is just off the main market square, and my bedroom growing up had a perfect view of the Winter Palace itself. We have had many an offer for the home, some triple its worth, but we do not part with it."

Ingolf smiled briefly. "That is impressive. I am sorry it will no longer be my permanent residence. We shall have to make certain you are given its equal when we settle in the Regenbogen."

Sepp only nodded, and they fell into another silence as they drew closer to where Ingolf needed to be. "Majesty—" Sepp began, but the sound of another calling for Ingolf made him break off, a frown on his face.

Unfortunately, Ingolf was not given a chance to find out what Sepp had wanted to say. "What is it?"

"Majesty," said the tailor. "We wanted one last fitting."

"Very well," Ingolf said reluctantly. "You only did more fittings yesterday, however; I could not have changed that much in a day, surely."

The tailor fussed and muttered and generally avoided the question as he dragged Ingolf into the room and up onto the stool to be poked and prodded and nigh on molested as his clothes were tweaked for what felt the thousandth time.

Sepp coughed, doing a poor job of covering up his laughter. "Well, Majesty, I shall leave you—"

"Oh, no you won't," Ingolf said, and pointed to the nearby couch. "You will sit right there and talk to me while I endure this, or I will see to it that you are fitted for clothes for the next year."

"Yes, Majesty," Sepp said, and slunk over to the couch, where he obediently began to talk and converse, offering more tidbits of his life.

It did, indeed, make Ingolf sad he knew so little about the men who risked their lives to protect him. Had he really been that preoccupied? Yes, but that was no excuse. Well, he could only repair it by caring now. "Do you ever plan to settle down, Sepp?"

Sepp seemed surprised by the question. "Someday, I suppose, Majesty. Hasn't really been time for that sort of thing, not since the plague and the way the war came so hard and sudden after it—not to mention I'm still part of your retinue. Courting a woman is hard enough at the best of times, never mind during times of war."

"Mm," Ingolf said. "I begin to suspect you work too hard—you and Pancraz. I shall have to insist that at some point you both stop working and have a bit of fun." He laughed. "Maybe it would work better if I ordered you to go out and find women, eh?"

He was startled when Sepp threw his head back and laughed so hard he nearly fell off the couch.

Ingolf looked at. "What in the world did I say that was so funny?"

"You might get me to follow that order, Majesty, but Pancraz, well his tastes run a bit more toward..." He nodded discreetly at Ingolf, indicating that Pancraz shared Ingolf's preference for men—something that he could not say aloud in front of the tailor, for fear of gossip spreading.

"I see—that still does not seem to merit that fit of laughter."

"Oh, no," Sepp said, grinning in a decidedly evil way. "The laughter was because of a particularly amusing story pertaining to his tastes. We were returning from some errand, I do not recall what now, and then we were only recently arrived. Pancraz stopped abruptly mid-sentence. He was so busy staring at something—someone—like his life depended on it, that he did not watch where he put his feet. He tripped and went crashing down a flight of stairs we had only just come up. I am afraid he is still quite hopeless around the man, though he tries miserably to hide it."

"Pancraz?" Ingolf said incredulously. "Mercurial, stony, solitary Pancraz? Moonstruck over some soldier?"

Sepp started snorting with laughter again. "Oh, no," he said, clutching at his sides. "Not some soldier. Pancraz is utterly besotted with no one less than Commander Vester von Sturm."

Ingolf gaped at him. "The Cobalt Commander? Pancraz fell down a flight of stairs because he was moonstruck by the Cobalt Commander?" He could not even picture that; it sounded too surreal. Pancraz was so... Pancraz, and he did not seem the type to act so about anyone or anything.

"Only you would never notice Pancraz cannot string two words together when Commander Vester is about."

He did not even try to argue that point, but he did tease in revenge. "I did not know that Pancraz could be moonstruck, and I certainly did not know you could gossip as well as any fishwife."

"I'm a soldier," Sepp replied dryly. "We gossip *better* than the fishwives."

Ingolf wished he could deny it, but he would be a liar.

He tried to picture it—Pancraz gawking like a moonstruck youth at the formidable right hand of the Cobalt General. Vester was young for the post—about his own age—but he had a talent for it that was impressive even by Krian standards.

Poor Pancraz. He could not have aimed much higher had he tried, and all that while he was carrying on his miserable subterfuge. Once again, Ingolf thought of all he had read in Lord Beraht's journal, how much of what he'd written of his life in Salhara echoed what Pancraz had endured. He might have neglected his men up 'til now, but he would see that he made up for that grievous error no matter what the cost.

The opening of the door drew him from his thoughts, and he looked up to see Reni poking her head in. She smiled at him. "Good afternoon, Ingolf. Sepp."

"Majesty," Sepp said, standing and bowing, but he sat again when she indicated he should, which Ingolf was happy to see. Maybe there was hope for the formal idiot yet.

"I came to see if you had been pinned to death," she said, smiling at the tailor, who only laughed and kept working.

"Nearly," Ingolf said. "I have decided we should employ this as a form of torture on capture prisoners."

Reni laughed. "We will suggest it at the next council meeting that does not involve negotiating the wedding contract for the hundredth time."

"Well, then we can propose it the day after tomorrow," Ingolf said, but his levity faded as he really looked at her. She was, as always, beautiful, nearly perfect. But she was a trifle paler than usual, and had been quick to sit down next to Sepp. He also saw she was wearing her locket today—delicate gold shaped like a cluster of roses which held the medicinal powder she occasionally took to bolster her strength.

He motioned to Sepp and the tailor, ordering them from the room, then stepped down from the stool and sat beside her, taking her hand. "You should be resting."

She dismissed his words with an impatient flick of her hand. "There is no time for resting."

"You must make time," Ingolf said firmly. "There is no point in pushing yourself too hard now when everything is going to get much more difficult for you later. You will need what remains of your strength then, Reni. Do not use it now." He sighed, and picked up her locket, finding it far too light. "Unless you want to give up this mad idea of a child—"

"No," she said firmly, cutting him off.

Ingolf sighed. "It will kill you."

"I'm dying anyway," Reni replied. "At least this way, I will leave something behind."

He could have argued more, but what was the point? She was making the decision that was best for the country, and he was making the decision that was best for her.

Why must everything be so difficult?

"A proper wife, or pending wife, would listen to her husband, or pending husband, and not argue with him," he said.

Reni laughed. "How many proper women do you know?"

"There is no such thing," Ingolf replied, happy when she laughed again. Taking up her hands, he kissed the backs of them, then kissed her cheek and let her do the same. "At least indulge your almost husband and go rest for a few hours. The council is doing nothing today that I cannot stumble or fight my way through. If I find myself losing the battle, I shall send for you at once."

She looked at him then sighed in defeat and slowly stood. "Very well, husband to be. Do not let me sleep past dinner, however, or I shall be most cross."

"Perish the thought, dear," Ingolf said and kissed her hand again before seeing her out the door.

He closed it again before Sepp and the tailor could rejoin him, leaning against it with a tired sigh.

Then he put all the doubts and worries and pointless longings away. There was no point dwelling on the impossible, and he was to be wed tomorrow. It was time to accept that and live the reality as best he could.

Opening the door again, he bid the tailor and Sepp return so that he could finish fitting his wedding clothes before going to meet with the council.

Chapter Nineteen

"Repeat that," Erich said in disbelief.

"I said," Bruno said with a hint of amusement, "that another fifty have shown up; where would you like me to put them?"

"Do I look like I have any idea? What is this, an army?" Erich threw his hands up. "That makes what, three hundred?"

Bruno did not bother to keep his amusement mostly to himself any longer. "Four hundred and twelve, at last count, your grace."

"What in the name of the Goddess am I doing with four hundred and twelve men traipsing along behind me? What am I supposed to do with them? Why are you laughing?"

"I would never laugh at so dire and serious a matter," Bruno said, coughing. "As to what to do with them, I would suggest food and work. At least we have more than enough for proper scouting parties and patrols, though we are in dire need of supplies. Thankfully winter is well behind us now, and we can manage without tents."

Erich eyed him suspiciously. "I am fairly certain that a month and a half ago, I left with you, Pancraz, and six other men to travel to the Fortress of Eis. Would you like to explain to me why I am now nowhere near the Fortress of Eis with over four hundred men all declaring they want to throw their lot in with mine when I do not even know what my lot is!"

"I am only trained to manage the men, your grace, not explain them," Bruno replied blandly.

"Then add it to your duties!" Erich retorted, and he would have continued further, if Pancraz had not come running up with two wounded and exhausted looking—farmers?—in his wake.

"Your grace!"

Erich and Bruno both snapped to attention at the tone of his voice. "What is wrong?" Erich asked.

"They've just come from a town half a day's ride from here. It runs right along the border, but was secluded enough that until now they had managed to be left in peace. That changed yesterday, when Salharans attacked them for food and supplies. They say the town is now completely under Salharan control."

"What can they tell us?"

"I can tell you quite a bit, myself, actually." Pancraz replied. "I have been there before. My own former home lies only two weeks from it, further down along the border and deeper into Salhara. A great deal of sheep come from the town; the village makes a tidy sum off the wool. They also produce a portion of Kria's red wine. As I said, it is secluded, so generally they escape harm; I would put the population at about 1000. It would have been more than that, before the plague."

Erich frowned. "Where were the soldiers who should have been defending such a valuable town?"

"Dead, Lord General," said one of the men. "The first thing the Salharans did was sneak in and kill them. It was the middle of the night—we scarcely knew what hit us. My friend and I are here only because we were out drinking, when we should have been in bed." He dropped his gaze, shamefaced. "We wanted to stay and fight, but what could we do against what seemed like hundreds of Salharans?"

"You could run for help, which is what you did," Erich said firmly. He motioned to a guard standing nearby—when had he started meriting guards? When had they started using guards at all? "Get them food and find a place they might rest."

The guard snapped a salute. "Yes, Lord General."

Erich turned away and motioned to Bruno and Pancraz. "So, what—" He froze as something struck him. "What did they call me?" he demanded.

Pancraz and Bruno gave him carefully bland expressions. "Your grace?"

"I am not a General," Erich hissed. "I told you to make them stop calling me that."

"Yes, Lord—your grace," Pancraz said.

Erich jabbed him hard in the chest with one finger. "Are you certain those men are not spies? How did they know to find us here? To find us at all?"

"They did not know," Pancraz replied. "I investigated that immediately—apparently some Salharans saw them fleeing and attempted to chase them down. The pursuers stumbled across some of our own scouts, who killed them and brought the survivors to us. I suppose there could be some chance they are spies; Salharans have been known to pull dirtier tricks, but they seem legitimate."

"Good enough for me," Erich said. "I suppose we should go free this town, too. What is one more? Though we are drawing dangerously close to the border and risk running into more than we can handle."

"I say we do what they did," Pancraz said, "and attack under cover of night. It would not be hard—" He stopped and let out a huff of frustration. "This would all be much easier to discuss and plan if we had even halfway decent maps. I would give my sword arm for one decent war map and a place to lay it out."

Erich grunted and looked at Bruno. "Four hundred and twelve people, and we do not have a single respectable map? What has become of you Krians?"

Bruno rolled his eyes. "At least we know how to *make* maps, Illussor."

"Why bother making them, when we can just let the Krians do the work and then steal them?"

"Indeed," Bruno said, rolling his eyes again. Then he turned around and gave a sharp, piercing whistle. "I will be back, *Lord General*, with your map."

"Stop calling me that!" Erich bellowed after him. He glowered at a snickering Pancraz. "Truly. I am no General. What is there to General? Four hundred odd men who seem to think I am doing something, when all I really am is being led around by two smarmy Krians?"

Pancraz only laughed harder and clapped him on the back. "Now, now, thanks to your efforts, we have routed a significant number of Salharans and freed a handful of villages. This town would be a major coup—we were headed that way, anyway, to obtain supplies. We do not have nearly enough to provide for a growing army."

"I was not aware I—we—had an army," Erich muttered.

But, he admitted warily to himself, it would seem they did. Such as it was—a group of villagers and displaced soldiers who had, somehow, somehow, heard of his growing band and sought them out. He wondered when they would attract enough notice to start acquiring spies and other such nuisances.

He also wondered what in the name of the Goddess he was supposed to *do* with all of them. Stop this 'Lord General' nonsense, definitely. That had been Pancraz and Bruno's idea of a joke. That all the people following them in hopes of safety were now calling him that... it was not a joke, not by any stretch, and it needed to stop. He was the crown prince of Illussor; he had no right taking up such a mantle. And there was no mantle to take. Kria had its three Generals. Wearing Scarlet did not make him its long outlawed fourth.

The sooner they could finally get to Eis, the better. No one should be relying upon him to be any sort of General. "So what is your plan, Pancraz? As best you can tell it without the maps."

"As I said, the same way the Salharans probably did it: use the paths and roads made by the shepherds and wine merchants over the years; weave our way there in small groups. They would not have put a great many men into such a maneuver—not more than two hundred, two hundred and fifty men, I would imagine. Anything else would risk using up all the supplies they were trying to take for the army as a whole. At least a third of that will be serving as escort for the supplies on their way back into Salhara, leaving not more than two thirds of the initial force behind.

"So we are looking at roughly a hundred and sixty men or so," Erich replied. "Even as small a bunch as we are, that should not be too difficult."

"Not if we attack at night, and not if we use a double ring strategy."

Erich smiled. "A good idea, Pancraz. Anyone who slips past the first ring will not make it past the second. We have the manpower for a small double ring, and that is all we would need for a town of such size when it contains not quite two hundred soldiers." He sighed. "I only hope the villagers are still alive."

"Let us hope," Pancraz agreed. "Shall I start arranging everything with that strategy in mind?"

"Yes," Erich said. "Keep me apprised of any changes you make along the way."

"Yes, your grace" Pancraz said and turned, running off to begin arranging their attack.

Leaving Erich not quite certain as to what he should now be doing. He was used to people always needing him for something. These lulls were becoming increasingly rare. Shrugging, he strode across his portion of the camp to one of the few tents they possessed, and which everyone had insisted was his and his alone.

He shook his head, as confounded as ever. He had never asked for special treatment—quite the opposite. This insistence upon deference was driving him mad; he got enough of it back home. Here, he was not meant to be anything special. He had wanted simply to reach Eis to let the Cobalt General know all that had transpired in regards to Ingolf.

Ingolf...

Was he safe in Illussor? Did he miss Erich? How was he getting along with Reni? Had he taken up Erich's offer and read the journals? What did he think of what they had to say—the sketches? Questions, questions, and he suspected he would not know the answers for a very long time, if ever.

He looked absently around his tent, wondering where in the world some of the items in it had come from—and only then saw the tunic laid out on his bed. It was his own scarlet tunic; he had cast it aside early that morning when it proved too torn and filthy to wear any longer. In their travels, he had acquired sufficient clothes to wear instead and had thought not more upon it.

But here it was, cleaner than he had ever been able to get it and repaired with skill that almost bespoke a professional seamstress or tailor. Huh. Striding to his cot, he picked it up and shook his head in bemused wonder. Well, he certainly would not complain. It was nice to have it back, for all that he knew he could get a new one whenever he returned to Illussor.

Moving to a small table, the sort that could be put together and taken apart easily and was meant especially for war camps—where were people getting all this stuff?—he lifted the cover off a tray of food and inhaled the scents. His stomach growled, and it occurred to him he had not eaten since they had stopped to make camp for the day.

Sitting down in the chair that had appeared around the same time as the table, he ate with relish, wanting to finish the food before he was interrupted.

"Lord General!"

He looked up with a snarl as Bruno and Pancraz slid into his tent.

"I mean your grace," Pancraz replied casually. "We have located a map and a promise that more will be coming in a few days' time."

That was good enough news that Erich did not yell at them further for the continued disobedience about forms of address. "So show me in detail what you are planning."

Clearing his table, they spread the map out, and Pancraz pulled out map weights to hold it in place. Erich could not even be surprised when he then pulled out a set of map markers. "Where are we getting all these things?" he asked.

"You would be surprised what people have with them, what they think to save when they are running for their lives. Many of the officers, especially, carry such things as map markers with them. They often trade them as tokens and such. But, these are actually mine," Pancraz said and opened the small, leather-bound wooden case. "They were gifted to me when I was appointed to Ingolf's retinue."

Well, no wonder Pancraz had held onto them. Erich nodded and examined them briefly: simple marble, half black, half white, and each carved with one of the old Krian runes really only used now in temples and other religious matters. All together, he saw, the fifty markers would spell out a prayer—to the Spring Prince, he thought. "A handsome set."

"Yes," Pancraz said absently and began to set the markers out. "The village is here," he said, placing a black marker over a spot on the mountains that were the start of the range. The further north, the higher the mountains became, until one reached their heart, where rested the Fortress of Eis. "I suggest we set up the first ring here and the second ring about here." He placed more markers. "But, rather than a solid line for each ring, which would be impractical, moderate groups set close together. The first group will attack the village directly, and the second ring can move in to cover any possible escapees."

Erich nodded. "So are we putting our full four hundred into this?"

Bruno coughed. "Five hundred, give or take. I am still awaiting an update on the final count, but more people poured in even as I relayed the count of four hundred twelve earlier."

"What?" Erich demanded. "Where are they coming from?"

"From the border villages," Pancraz replied. "Some of them are even Salharan, close enough to the border to question which side of it they prefer—but they are being closely watched and are not permitted into the camp until they take a cleanser and are searched for further arcen."

Erich grunted. "Good. Continue to watch them. Do not put more than three hundred men on this venture, I think."

They nodded in agreement.

"Your grace..." Pancraz hesitated.

Erich just looked at him. "What?"

"There are a couple of third level strategists amongst those who have joined us. I wondered if I might employ them to assist me with such things, as I am pulled in several directions—"

"Do whatever you want," Erich said, "so long as these third levels become first levels quickly. They're no good to us if their skills are sub par."

"I would not waste my time if they were," Pancraz said. "They are even now fine tuning this; I will inform you of any changes they make."

Erich nodded. "Fine. We should begin to move into place around dusk; I would say the attack begins not less than a full two hours after dark."

"Yes, Lord—your grace."

"Get out of my tent!" Erich said, scowling at them.

He glanced down at the map after they had gone, letting out a soft sigh that bespoke confusion, exhaustion, worry, and at least a dozen other things besides. He traced a path on the map, from their current position all the way to home.

Where had they put Ingolf? In one of the royal suites? Probably, where else would they put a Kaiser? But thinking of such things made him wonder how Ingolf would look in his own bed, recently redone to banish all memories of Hahn that he could. Ingolf would look good amidst the brown and red, wearing nothing but the bed clothes—

Making a rough sound, Erich turned away from the map and returned to the discarded tunic on his cot. Stripping off the dark green one he currently wore, he pulled on the scarlet one, smoothing it into place before buckling his sword belts back on. He fingered the brilliant red jewel of Bright, then let his hand fall away. If they were to be in position in time, they had to leave in less than an hour.

Striding to the center of the camp, still confused as to what he was doing in the middle of such a large camp, Erich waited for Bruno and Pancraz to come to him. They came, accompanied by half a dozen other men. Pancraz introduced two of them as the strategists he had mentioned.

"You have finalized the plans?" he asked.

"Yes, Lord General," one of them said, bowing.

Erich grit his teeth and cast a look at Bruno and Pancraz, but said nothing. "Then you may explain them as we ride. Have you selected the three hundred?" he asked Pancraz.

"Yes, Lord General."

"Then tell them to make ready for we ride now," Erich snapped, jabbing him in the chest again before turning to go fetch his horse—only to halt abruptly as he realized a foot soldier had brought it to him. He narrowed his eyes. When had his horse acquired a red saddle pad?

Muttering Illussor curses, he thanked the foot soldier and mounted his horse, swinging around to call out for his—the—soldiers to present and make ready. He grit his teeth and ignored it when they all called back 'Yes, Lord General.'

He also ignored the snickering coming from two people he would kill himself if they did not put a stop to all this nonsense very soon.

They were, as he had hoped, in position by the time dark fell. The waiting was the worst part; it always was in battle, between battles, after battle while the losses were tallied...

The town was remarkably quiet—too quiet. No town of that size was ever this quiet so early in the evening.

Just when he could bear the sitting and the silence no more, Pancraz indicated it was time.

Erich gave the signal, heart hammering in his chest as the waiting ended and the battle began. They moved swiftly but as quietly as was possible, men who knew the area on point to lead the others through the dark to the dimly lit town.

As they reached it, his men surged into the town, and Erich gave his battle cry—which was taken up by the soldiers and met by startled Salharan cries. After that came the first screams of pain, and then all was steel and blood and smoke and the sort of chaos that only battle could bring.

The lack of a Salharan to kill and the sound of his name drew Erich sharply from the haze of battle, and he realized it was over, and the town was theirs. Bruno appeared at his side, bellowing a victory cry that echoed throughout the town, called by at least a thousand voices.

"Where do we stand?" Erich asked.

"Victorious, obviously," Bruno said. "I do not have a head count yet, but men are already set to searching the bodies for survivors. They have orders to execute any Salharans on sight, unless the Lord General wanted any kept?"

Erich shook his head. "Not unless you think they could tell us something useful, but men sent on raids such as this seldom know more than the orders they are given. Where is Pancraz?"

"Here, Lord General," Pancraz said. "I hate to bring you bad news immediately following a victory, but I was called out of battle right in the midst of it, and only now could return to you. Come with me." So saying, he immediately turned and ran off.

Sharing a look with Bruno, Erich took off after him, racing through bodies and clusters of soldiers, absently returning the hails they called out to him. "Pancraz," he said as they finally caught up to him, "what in the name—oh my Goddess!"

He shoved past Pancraz and dropped to his knees, gripping the badly wounded soldier by the shoulders. "*You are Captain Gregory. What is the Illussor Army doing here?*"

"*Prince Erich!*" Gregory replied, eyes going wide. "*The better question would be why are you here? Have you not heard—*" He broke off with a cry of pain as soldiers began to set the wound in his leg. "*Later. Queen Reni and the council agreed to go to war to assist Kria in driving back Salhara. Our plan was to attack Salhara directly while most of their attention is focused on Kria. But we were ambushed yesterday*"

evening. A red eyed fiend, accompanied by a force all bearing yellow and green eyes took us by surprise fifty miles or so into Salhara. They went for the commanding officers first. I am afraid they are all dead. At least a third of the army was killed before we could route them, and I fear the rest are scattered now. Control broke when there were no superior officers to hold them. Your scouts found me."

Erich's mouth tightened. *"Can you give me better coordinates?"*

"Seventy miles northeast of the Regenbogen, close to the Great River, perhaps two days out from a village they called Milton."

Standing, Erich turned and asked, "Pancraz, do you know a village called Milton?"

"That's where I was banished," Pancraz said, startled.

"Gather men, at least a hundred. We are riding hard to that village, scour the countryside for Illussor survivors. Apparently, they were sent to help Kria fight off Salhara. They were attacked and a great many killed. The rest are scattered now, all the commanding officers dead. Someone bring me my horse!"

When the horse was brought, he threw himself onto it and barely kept himself from riding off immediately. "Bruno, you are to remain here. Secure the town, send out scouts. Send word to me immediately should something go awry. Also, see that a messenger is sent to Illussor to inform the Queen what has befallen her army. A more detailed message will follow, but make certain she is aware I have control of it now. Pancraz, we are going!"

"Yes, Lord General!" Pancraz immediately obeyed, running off to see his orders carried out, shouting to his men, getting them in line around and behind Erich as they rode off.

~~*

It took them a week to locate what survivors they could and get them all back to the relative safety of the town they had reclaimed. If he slept, Erich could not recall it, so exhausted did he feel when he finally slid from his horse and realized he could rest for a couple of days.

But it would have to wait just a little bit longer.

"What have you to tell me?" he asked as Bruno approached him. He yawned as he looked around the camp. "We have recovered almost half the scattered force; see that something is found for them." He scrubbed tiredly at his face.

Bruno motioned for Erich to follow him, leading him to a two story house in the town square. Inside, several men were gathered around a large table in the central open room. Pancraz had somehow beaten him there, and he recognized two lieutenants from the Illussor army—one dressed in the red tunic of his own Order, one in the dark gold tunic of the Order of Light. Three other men sat with them, all Krian by their dress and manner, in addition to the two strategists Pancraz had earlier located.

"What is this?" he asked, dropping down into the seat Bruno indicated, only absently noting that it put him at the head of the table.

"A meeting," Bruno said. "More Illussor found their way here while you were out finding the rest, and they bring interesting news indeed. They also speak remarkably good Krian," he added, almost as an afterthought.

He would have been amused, had he the energy. "What news?"

The lieutenant in the gold tunic spoke up. "We only recently learned of it ourselves, brought by special messenger, right before the attack..." He stopped, looking more than a little nervous.

"What?" Erich growled, too tired to employ charm or patience.

"Queen Reni was married two weeks ago, your Highness," the other lieutenant said, when the first proved too nervous to speak.

"Reni is married?" Erich said in disbelief. "What in the name of the Goddess—to whom?"

"To the Kaiser," replied the lieutenant.

The words struck him like a fist to the gut—or perhaps a knife to the chest. "She... she is married to Kaiser Ingolf?" he asked.

"Yes, Highness," said the first lieutenant. "As I said, we were informed by special messenger. I believe formal announcements of the union are still being sent out. As of two weeks ago..."

"Kria and Illussor became one country," Erich said, feeling numb. He could see the whole damned plan; he could see exactly what Reni had been thinking, what Ingolf would have seen.

He was suddenly grateful he'd not had anything to eat for longer than he could remember.

"What else do you have to tell me?" he asked flatly.

Some of the men exchanged confused glances, especially the two lieutenants, but Erich did not feel like explaining his less than pleased response to anyone; it was bad enough that Bruno and Pancraz understood all too well.

He would have to accept it; such was the way of life in the circles to which he had been born. It was bold, clever, and utterly perfect a plan. So very much like Reni, and Ingolf would have seen the sense in it.

So he would accept it. He would live with it, and support them, and always do his duty. No one, however, could ever make him like the fact that Ingolf was married to Reni. That was asking too much.

"With the Salharan forces regained and those from Kria that continue to trickle in, we have a solid standing army of fifty thousand men," Bruno said. "It is small and no match for a full sized army, but it is still enough to work with, and there are other Illussor forces in Salhara. Should we meet up with them, or manage to reach the Cobalt Army further north..."

Erich nodded and tried to put his personal feelings aside for they had no place in war. "Then we continue the plan that Illussor made: we assault Salhara directly. We have come this far, we may as well continue. If we keep close to the border, we can send word to the Fortress of Eis of what we intend and see if the Cobalt might lend its services."

"Forgive me, Highness—"

"I'm not 'Highness' here," Erich cut in, summoning a smile to ease any sting from the words. "I am simply your grace, if you must have something. Ignore these buffoons when they call me—"

"Lord General," a soldier called, shoving the door open.

"Learn to knock!" Bruno bellowed at the man, stalking over and cuffing him hard. "What is so urgent that you must disturb us?"

"I'm sorry, sir, it's only that the townspeople have learned that the Lord General has returned and they are insistent upon—"

"Of course," Bruno said. "Bring it in and extend the Lord General's thanks. He will open it shortly."

Erich waited until a large chest was brought in and the door had closed, until he demanded, "I will open what shortly? What is going on here?"

"Gifts of gratitude, Lord General," Bruno replied, "from the people you have saved. They worked very hard upon them in your absence."

"What have I said about calling me that?" Erich demanded.

"Calling you what, Lord General?" Pancraz asked.

Erich glared at them, but at the pointed glares they returned, stood and moved to the chest, throwing it open to examine the contents inside.

A scarlet tunic lay on top—not the jewel bright scarlet of his own tunic, but a deeper, richer color that Kria had not seen for a very long time. He had never seen it outside of paintings, himself. He stood and shook the long tunic out, unsurprised at what he saw, emotions knotting his stomach and drying up his throat. "You are giving me no choice in this," he said quietly.

"There is hardly anyone more suited than you," Pancraz said.

Erich grimaced, but said nothing, eyes on the embroidery stitched across the breast of the tunic. Three leaves, joined at their stems so that they formed a sort of triangle. Autumn leaves, shaded from red to orange to gold.

He sighed softly in defeat, not even really capable of being angry. How could he? The Holy General himself had once worn such a tunic proudly, and he had been the best Scarlet General in the history of

Kria. If anything, Erich felt unworthy of taking up such a mantle, but... how could he refuse in the face of the anxious silence awaiting his final decision?

"Fine," he snapped, clutching the tunic tightly and turning sharply around. He pointed at Bruno. "I hope you are aware that you're now officially my Chief of Staff."

"Yes, Lord General," Bruno said with a nod that did not really succeed at hiding his smirk.

Erich shifted his attention to Pancraz. "Commander, see to it that my troops are ready to begin marching in two days. My strategists are to devise the best course for reaching the capital of Salhara, and how we are to take that course, and I want it ready in ten hours."

Pancraz's eyes widened at being addressed as Commander, but he only nodded and saluted. "Yes, Lord General."

"I will leave you both to assign the other positions we require as you see fit," he said, indicating they should assign whatever posts were still needed to the various officers at the table. "If we are to be a proper army, we should devise a banner..." But he let the word trail off as Pancraz lifted a banner from the chest. Like his tunic, it was decorated with the leaves that had always been the symbol of the Autumn Prince and his Scarlet Army.

Shaking his head, Erich dismissed all but Bruno and Pancraz with a motion. "See that food and bath water is brought to my room," he said, moving to the stairs. Halfway there, he realized he had no idea where he was going and pinched the bridge of his nose. "And someone show me to my room."

Laughing softly, Pancraz and Bruno led him away.

Chapter Twenty

"You make it very hard to focus on being a General," Reinoehl said.

Aden looked up, startled. "I'm sitting here reading."

Reinoehl snorted and bent back to his papers.

Shaking his head, Aden returned to his book. Really, he should be suffering from winter fever, even if winter was now well past. He was used to being out, to doing things—but of late, there had not been much for him to do beyond the moments he stole with Reinoehl. The worst part of war sometimes seemed not to be the battles, but the interminable periods of waiting between them. Beyond a few rough but relatively simple skirmishes, there had not been much in the way of Salharans to drive back.

There was definitely something amiss, and yet the scouts had found nothing. He had offered before to go foraging, but could not argue Reinoehl's decision that he would be better saved for when they had a direction in which to point him. Let the scouts do their foraging first.

So, logically, he should be out of his mind with boredom.

Instead, he spent his days amongst the soldiers, picking up all sorts of interesting Krian turns of phrase he had never heard before, lore about Eis and the surrounding mountain, all the gossip about the fierce Lord General and his deceptively quiet Commander. He dined with Reinoehl and Vester, or sometimes with the soldiers to hear even more gossip. Occasionally he would venture out on brief forays, or go on a patrol.

But a good chunk of his time was spent right where he presently sat—on the sofa—in Reinoehl's room, reading while Reinoehl worked, quietly anticipating when Reinoehl would reach a stopping point and give him better things to do than read.

Not that the reading was all bad, though he had never been much for it before. Books were a means to an end, for him. Erich had always been the fiend for them for all he had never sat all the way through so much as one lesson.

He certainly would not complain if a mission came his way, but he would not yet complain about staying put either.

Reinoehl heaved another aggravated sigh, and Aden looked up again, only to see Reinoehl striding toward him with an exasperated—but fond? Why did he hope for fond?—look on his face. He set the book aside as Reinoehl dropped down next to him and immediately dragged Aden all but into his lap. "I had no idea watching someone read affected you so," Aden said teasingly.

"It's not the reading, it's the way you—"

A frantic knocking cut the words off, and Aden frowned, wanting to know what Reinoehl had been about to say. But the knocking continued, and Reinoehl called for the knocker to enter.

"Lord General," said a foot soldier, too panicked to remember to salute. "The Commander bids you come at once to the ward."

Reinoehl stood, all business once more, and Aden swiftly retrieved his own sword belt from where he had left it near to hand upon the sofa side table. Pulling on a light cloak against the cool spring air, he followed Reinoehl outside to the ward, where Vester stood in the center of a mass of soldiers—all of them far too quiet and grim-faced.

They parted as they saw Reinoehl approach, murmuring polite greetings to him.

Vester motioned to what they were all looking at. "Our missing scouts. The party we sent out yesterday morning found them."

Aden stared at the bodies: four of them, a standard scouting party. Their bodies had been torn to shreds. It was a wonder the soldiers who found them had been able to bring them back in more or less one piece.

Only Salharan magic was that vicious, that needlessly brutal. They did it just to prove that no sword was needed to tear apart flesh, and that magic could do it better by far.

"I wonder what they knew that the Salharans wanted so badly to prevent it," Aden said thoughtfully, crouching by the bodies and going through the clothes as best he was able, grimacing at the similarity between shredded cloth and shredded flesh.

When his search turned up nothing, he stood and reached for the cloth he perpetually carried at his belt for just such a purpose. Wiping off the gore and blood, he discarded the cloth and looked at Reinoehl. "These men knew something—something the Salharans did not want reaching Eis."

Reinoehl looked at him, brows raised. "How can you tell?"

Aden looked at the bodies again—the shredded remains of them. Then he looked up again, voice flat as he replied, "They killed them quickly."

Silence met his words, and he watched as Vester and Reinoehl carried on some private conversation.

"I'll go figure it out," he said, when the silence stretched on too long.

"No—"

"That's what I'm for," Aden said, speaking over him. "That's my duty. I'm a spy the way you are a General, Reinoehl." He gestured at the bodies. "We had been thinking it's been too quiet of late. I have been too idle. I'll go out and figure out what we're missing; what's being kept from us."

Reinoehl grimaced, but nodded.

Aden swept him a bow, then turned and walked briskly off, mind already sliding back to work.

He would have to pose as a Salharan. It was the only thing they would trust. Already the thought of having to take arcen was making him nauseous, but there was no help for it. The Salharans had already proven how ruthlessly they would keep whatever secret they held—he would have to infiltrate them to find it out.

So what color? He did not dare go too high or too low. Too low, and he would learn nothing. Too high, and he would be discovered for lack of knowledge. He worried at his bottom lip as he pondered the matter, striding absently to his pack as he reached Reinoehl's chambers, pulling out clothes suitable for a Salharan soldier out of uniform. Green, he decided. Green would put him just high enough to ask questions and be in any number of places, without the authority they would expect of someone with yellow eyes.

His story... that would have to be improvised, of course. He simply did not know enough right then to prepare something ahead of time. Stripping off his own clothes, he quickly pulled on the Salharan ensemble. Thankfully his own boots would not arouse suspicion; they were plain enough to have come from anywhere.

Dressed, he put away his own clothes and then pulled out his poison case, smoothing his fingers over the glass vials containing jewel-bright poisons. It was a beautiful collection, but he was happier when he did not have to employ it.

Stifling a sigh, he picked up the vial of green and held it to the light. Translucent and as brilliant in color as an emerald, and the color at which true addiction could begin. He should not jump colors the way he did; the risk was not a slight one, but there was no other way.

"What is that?"

He startled, not realizing that Reinoehl had returned to the room as well, so caught up in the looming mission. "Arcen," he replied, grimacing, and started to say more, but the cold fury that filled Reinoehl's face stopped him short.

"Arcen," Reinoehl repeated flatly. "You take that filthy poison?"

Aden fought his own rising temper at being so spoken to for no reason, remembering that Krians hated arcen possibly more than any other living soul in the world. "It's necessary," he said calmly. "I cannot infiltrate the Salharans if my eyes do not glow. That's all I take it for; to make my eyes glow."

"You've done this before," Reinoehl said flatly.

"Yes," Aden replied, irritation beginning to slip into his voice. "Three previous occasions—and one of them, I might add, I saved the Saffron General. I do not enjoy it, Reinoehl, but I am a spy. I have to blend in. If my eyes do not glow, I will end up like those poor soldiers out there."

"No," Reinoehl said. "I cannot believe—that is not an excuse—there is no excuse for using that filthy poison like one of those polluted bastards. Green, even! Are you certain you've only used it three times?"

"Yes, Goddess damn you!" Aden snarled, losing control of his temper. "You lecture me all you like, but I know how to do my job without allowing the dangers of it consume me. I take it to color my eyes, so that I can move undetected. I have never used magic, I despise it—"

He stopped, seeing that his words were having no effect.

Reinoehl stalked closer to him, eyes going to the case on the bed. "That's red arcen," he said in a soft, frozen tone of voice.

Aden slammed the case shut. "Yes. I collect poisons. I have the entire set, but I have never—and will never—go above green. It's simply too dangerous. I'll already be sick from it and the cleanser later, as it is, never mind going straight to green. I swear to you, Reinoehl—"

"Swear to me?" Reinoehl demanded. "Of what worth is the promise of a man who secrets away arcen and considers its use without hesitation? We fight the bastards who use arcen every day; they used it to shred my men into pieces, and I find you have had it in my room this entire time? I do not want to hear about using it for spying—there is no excuse for using arcen!"

"You're my friend," Aden said. "I am yours. I thought—" They were more than that. A great deal more. He—he'd never known anyone who made him happy to be in one place for an indefinite period of time. Even now, he was in no hurry to depart. He had thought he would at least get a kiss goodbye. Obviously not. "I promise you, Reinoehl, I only do it because it's necessary."

Reinoehl remained unmoved. "Arcen is never a necessity."

Aden fought an urge to punch him. Goddess spare him mule-headed Krians! "It might surprise you, Lord General, what is necessary in my world. I had to play the whore to get you, and I used poison to sedate the soldiers long enough to free you. Now I need to use arcen to color my eyes—nothing else works, the Salharans know a deception when they see one. Do you want me to do this or not?"

"I do not care," Reinoehl replied, voice bitter. "Not if you are as polluted as the rest of them."

"I...I'm not polluted. You said you trusted me. Why does arcen make a difference? I only use it to color my eyes! I hate the polluted bastards as much as you! You said you trusted me."

"Not arcen," Reinoehl said coldly.

"I used poison to save your life!" Aden snarled, unable to believe that Reinoehl could be so cold—so unbending. He knew his being a spy did not rest completely comfortably, but hadn't he proven he was honorable at the end of the day?

"Not. Arcen."

Aden turned away, going to retrieve his pack and secret away small daggers to use on the chance something went wrong. As badly as he wanted his sword, he dared not take it. Shouldering the pack, he turned to face Reinoehl one more time, still sort of hoping for that goodbye, I'll miss you, please come back kiss. He'd never really had one of those before and realized he had wanted to know what that

might be like. "I should be back in a day or two, though I would not worry if I'm gone as many as five. Past that, there is probably trouble, but little you can do about it, so try not to worry anyway."

Reinoehl's cold expression did not change.

"Are you really that upset with me? Are you really forsaking that you said you trusted me? Over something I have used only four times in my life, and which I hate and hope someday I never have to use again?"

"Not arcen," Reinoehl hissed. "I will forgive many a thing, but not arcen. I know too well what it does. It cost me my family. I will not tolerate it. If you take it, for any reason, you are as filthy and polluted as the Salharans. If you are going to take it, then get out."

The words had a finality to them that made Aden feel sick, made it hard to breath. "Reinoehl—"

But Reinoehl turned away, ignoring him—dismissing him.

Aden stared at his back, hands curling into fists at his side. Maybe he should just give it up, find another—

No. He was a good spy. He was honorable and trustworthy, damn it. Reinoehl was the one going back on his word—on them. Then again, he thought bitterly, maybe he was the only one who had ever thought there was a *them*.

Even now, though, he wanted to go to Reinoehl. He wanted to wrap his arms around Reinoehl and press against his back, stay there until they both calmed down a bit. But Goddess damn it, he would not be betrayed like this—he would have trusted Reinoehl with anything, trusted him no matter what he did.

Reinoehl was just kicking him out. He was leaving to do Reinoehl a favor, and Reinoehl was kicking him out.

Pulling the stopper from the vial, he swallowed the jewel-green contents, then hurled the empty vial across the room. It shattered on the wall near Reinoehl, who gave no sign that anything had transpired.

"Goodbye, Lord General," Aden said, as coldly as Reinoehl had spoken to him.

He slammed the door shut behind him, furious enough that it was probably for the best that he did not have his sword.

With all he had done for more than a decade, all he had accomplished, all he had sacrificed, was it really asking too much that he get a goodbye kiss? What had he been thinking, anyway? He was Reni's spymaster. There were reasons adoption had always worked so well in his line.

Still, it had been a nice thing to think about, in the back of his mind, while he had readied—

Aden fell to his knees as the illness got the better of him. He had been so angry, so *furious*, that he had been ignoring the arcen and what it was doing to his body. He clapped a hand to his mouth in an effort

to stifle the urge to wretch, because if he tossed the green he would have no choice but to chance the yellow.

Gods, it was even worse than the blue. He hated it, and now he was suffering for a man who had thrown him out and never wanted to see him again. So why was he doing this at all?

Bending over had caused his shirt to gape open, and the heavy necklace around his throat tumbled free of the fabric. He wrapped his hand around it, something besides the arcen making him feel sick and dizzy and perfectly miserable.

Why was he doing this? Because apparently he was a fool.

Standing again, he strode from the Fortress of Eis, pausing only long enough to tell a confused Vester that he would be receiving Aden's report upon his return.

Outside, the night was cold. He slunk off into it, trying to shut away all the emotions that had no place here. If they got the better of him now, they would only get him killed. Shoving everything away, including the odd, foreign sense of loneliness, he focused only on his mission. His best chance for finding Salharans was just over the border, and that was about a day's walk from here if he recalled the maps correctly.

Might have been nice if Reinoehl had been willing to give him one, but there was no point in thinking about it. Several missions had required he play the whore, for it was a handy position for getting information. None of those had made him feel particularly dirty. But Reinoehl's cold dismissal had made him feel low and used. Perhaps he should have demanded payment for his services.

Snarling angrily at himself, he tried again to shove the thoughts away and focus only on the information that must be obtained. Onward he trudged, making his way carefully through the night, looking for a place to bed down and not thinking of the bed in which he would rather be.

~~*

It took him two days to find some Salharans, and they were actually the ones who found him, stumbling over him in the dark of early morning.

He was glad they spoke first though, for as exhausted as he was he nearly forgot to speak in Salharan. "Watch where you're stepping!" he snarled as they hauled him to his feet.

They stopped abruptly at hearing him speak. "Brother?" One asked cautiously.

"What is your name?" Another demanded.

"None of your stars refused business," Aden snapped.

The man backhanded him. "Now, now, little brother—it is my business." The man snapped his fingers, and light flared around them.

Aden's eyes went wide—he had never seen magic like that, even in his deeper foray into Salhara. The man's hand seemed to glow with fire, yet it did not hurt him.

But, as he looked into the man's eyes, he saw why—the bastard had orange eyes. Tits of the Winter Princess!

"I ask again, little brother—what is your name?"

"Dimas Helder."

They all fell silent, and something in that silence told Aden he had just made a *very* big mistake.

Orange-eyes laughed, and the sound made Aden's blood run cold. "Well, that is interesting. My brother, three years of age, was just named Dimas."

He was dead, Aden realized. Somehow, that thought was not as depressing as it should have been. But, then, what did it matter? Reinoehl would not miss him, and past that, he realized he just did not care. It would have been nice, though, to die recalling a goodbye kiss.

The soldiers—just the two of them, and the second with green eyes—laughed. "Well, well, it would seem we have a little spy. I have never known a Krian to resort to taking poison..." Orange eyes laughed again, surprise in the sound. He abruptly switched language, his Illussor good, but not great. *"I do believe we have a pale-skin in our midst, though it looks like your mother spread her legs for a Krian."*

"My mother was the Krian, actually," Aden snarled in reply, lashing out, just barely twisting free of the man's hold.

He screamed in pain in the next breath however, as the orange bastard struck him with that strange fire—but where it had not harmed the soldier casting it, it positively seared Aden's back, or felt like it did anyway.

Wrong, horribly wrong, and damned if he could fix it now.

He fought as best he could, but he was no match against a man with orange eyes, backed up by one with green. Panting, he gave up the struggle, biding his time.

"So what are you seeking, pale skin?" the orange-eyed soldier asked, fingers burning where they touched his skin.

Aden said nothing, even after they made him scream.

"You are pretty," the Salharan said, "for a mixed breed. The green suits you. I am amazed you were able to ingest it. Either you have been seduced by our pretty flowers, or you are a survivor of our plague, hmm?"

"What?" Aden demanded. "Your plague. But that's—"

The soldier laughed, and his eyes flared as he made Aden scream again, the smell of burnt flesh strong in the small clearing. "No? You take arcen. Surely the symptoms remind you of something?"

Aden glared hatefully at him. It could not be. How could anyone construct a plague?

"Think you're better than everyone, you pale skins and those sword-loving bastards—but you all have tasted it, and the finest of it. A pity, really, that so many of you died from it."

It couldn't—that wasn't *possible*—"There is no way you could have poisoned two whole nations worth of people! If it were true, you would not tell me!"

"Yes, I would," the soldier said, clearly amused, snapping his fingers and lighting his hand up again. "Because you'll just scream all the more while I slowly kill you."

"No!" Aden bellowed, beyond thinking, beyond anything but feeling hate and rage and pain. He screamed again, just wanting the men *away*, wanting to be free—

And then he realized he was free, and the screams were not his, and he did not feel well at all.

His body felt hot, from the inside out; it felt as though his blood was on fire. His heart was beating too fast, too hard. It was like running as fast he could and being too drunk to move all at the same time. The odd rush of *something* made him tremble, made him sweat...

He sat up, wondering what in the name of the Goddess was going on—and saw that the orange-eyed soldier was dead. His skin had been...torn open in dozens upon dozens of places. He knew that spell...but who had cast it?

The other soldier was lying on the ground, wounded badly but not fatally.

An awful, terrible feeling settled in Aden's stomach. Standing up slowly, stumbling twice before finally managing to keep his balance, he staggered to the green eyed soldier and yanked him up. "What did he mean about the plague?"

The man attempted to sneer. "An Illussor who can use magic. Thought you pale skinned cowards gave that up."

"What did he mean!" Aden snarled.

The man attempted to reply, but the words died in his throat as he passed out.

Aden pulled a dagger and slit his throat, instinct and experience telling him nothing would be gained by keeping the bastard alive. Anyway, he was too weak and wounded to drag him back to Eis.

An Illussor who can use magic.

Turning away from the corpse, he tossed the contents of his stomach into the bushes, retching until there was simply nothing left. He realized tears were streaming down his cheeks. From fear? From relief? From self-loathing?

How had he done it? He had never been taught how to use arcen. It really only had been a way of coloring his eyes to pass for Salharan. He wiped the tears away and slowly stood, unable to even look at the bodies, never mind dispose of them properly. Let the Salharans think what they would.

Getting his bearings, he slowly made his way back to the Fortress of Eis, barely aware of his surroundings, unable to feel anything except cold and...broken, perhaps. Magic. He had done magic.

He traveled without stopping, because stopping meant resting and resting meant thinking or dreaming and he did not want to endure what either possibility would bring. Goddess, how could he have done that? How had he done it? What had he done, precisely? He remembered nothing past the anger, the fear—then that strange rush, and someone two grades above him in color had been dead.

What had he meant about the plague? How could that possibly be true? There was no conceivable way the Salharans could have engineered a plague based upon inflicting arcen upon people. At the very least, it would have affected the victims' eyes and given the truth away.

His head hurt just thinking about it. He did not know enough about arcen to solve the riddle. They had always taken it for just a terrible, tragic illness. Neither he nor any other spy had ever heard a whisper of this, but neither had anyone ever learned Salhara's death counts from the plague. Apparently they had not suffered any losses for it.

He did not want to think about arcen. He hurt, from the inside out, and he did not think some of the aches would ever go away. His burns throbbed and pulsed with pain. Goddess, he had never seen that particular trick. Surely if they could call fire like that they would have done it before?

He did not know. He was too tired to figure it out. He was tired of thinking, tired of feeling, tired of *being*.

At some point, he must have collapsed from sheer exhaustion. He woke in the dark, disoriented and nauseous, but after several long minutes of fumbling and staggering about, he realized he knew where he was, but the thought was not as much of a relief as it should have been.

Some time later, perhaps a few hours, he really did not know or care, the Fortress of Eis seemed to appear suddenly before him. He hailed the guards, but his voice seemed far away, as though it belonged to someone else.

Numb and burning hot all at once, he walked slowly into the Fortress. Around him he could hear startled exclamations, voices raised in concern, some calling out to him, but he ignored them all, making steadily for the keep itself, wending his way through the halls.

At last he reached Vester's office, and eschewed courtesy to let himself inside.

"Aden!" Vester said. "Tits of the Winter Princess, what is wrong with you? Have you sought a healer? I will call one—"

"I don't care," Aden snarled. He did not think he would ever care again. "I have come to make my report, Commander."

Vester's look of concern did not fade, but he gave a slow nod and sat back down in his chair. "Then report."

His voice still seemed far away as he reported all that had happened since leaving Eis several days before. It was level, empty—until he got to the part about magic, and there it shook, but he pushed on until he was able to regain that empty tone. When he finished, he waited numbly for whatever Vester had to say. He wished he could care that they would punish or even execute him, but he truly had ceased to care about anything.

"Thank you, Aden," Vester said quietly. "You have been through much on our behalf. Go find food and rest. We will speak more in a day or so."

Nodding, Aden turned and walked out, not really paying attention to where he was going.

Unsurprisingly, he found himself outside Reinoehl's door. He almost opened it, but at the last stopped, just barely touching the handle. What was the point? Reinoehl had made his feelings clear, and when he learned what Aden had done...

His eyes stung, and Aden despised himself for it, even as he tried to remind himself he no longer cared about anything.

He was falling apart, breaking into a thousand pieces. For the first time in his life, he did not know what to do or where to go. He had no direction, no fall back, no plan. He had nothing.

Reinoehl had told him to get out, that he wanted nothing to do with him if he was going to pollute himself. Even if he had not said all that, even if he did not care about the arcan, what would the proud, strong, unbreakable Cobalt General want with a shattered spy?

What had he even been thinking that he could have some sort of relationship with a narrow-minded Krian who would never trust him? He would never be anything more than a temporary bed warmer for anyone.

He also realized his thoughts made no sense. He was a mess, that was for certain, and in such a state Reinoehl would find him more repulsive than ever. Even if he were willing to take Aden back, which Aden knew would never have happened.

For one brief moment, he thought about how he wished could be, Reinoehl taking him back, Reinoehl holding him, happy to see him again, worried about him, kissing him so hard and deep that Aden started to feel normal again.

Then he let the warming wish go and let cold reality back in. He let his hand fall from the door, and turned away from Reinoehl's rooms. Where should he go now? Go and ask if someone had a bed for him? After all that he had suffered, he did not have the stomach for that. He did not have much pride left, but he had a shred and would not sacrifice it.

He looked bleakly around, willing an escape route to appear before him. Off in the distance, he could hear soldiers talking and laughing. The call of the bells that marked the passing of the hours. On the other side of the doors he could not, would not open, he could picture Reinoehl sitting at his desk, smudged with ink as he bent over the unending pile of paperwork that came with a war.

Outside, it was slowly growing dark. The sky was a deep, rich blue, with shades of rose and orange along the edges. When dark finally fell, the stars would be sharp and crystal bright. On the rare occasions he was home during the spring or summer, he loved to lie on the roof with a bottle of wine and gaze at the stars until dawn forced them back.

The roof, he realized.

Striding to the window, he ducked his head outside and looked around. Yes, it was perfect. Climbing out the window and onto the ledge outside, he worked his way carefully to where he could grab good hold of the roof above and pull himself up onto it.

Perfect. The air up here was biting, but refreshing. He could already see a few stars, and in an hour or so they would all be beautifully visible.

Bundling up in his cloak, using his pack for a pillow, Aden pretended that he wanted to watch the stars alone on the roof.

Chapter Twenty One

Reinoehl swore as someone knocked on his door and glared furiously when Vester entered without permission, striding up to his desk as though he had every right to do so.

"Lord General," Vester said coolly, "I thought you might like to know that Aden has returned."

Emotions roiled through Reinoehl; so many he could scarcely sort them out. Relief, mostly. Aden, the stupid, stubborn fool, had said he should be back in five days. It had been nearly seven. Reinoehl was not certain when he had last slept through the night.

Rather, he did not feel like admitting when he had last managed to sleep through the night.

There was also anger, heavy and sour, in his stomach. Fury that Aden would go off, that he would take that Gods damned poison—

And that he would not even come and face Reinoehl upon his return, but instead had clearly gone to Vester. The bastard was probably sitting somewhere cursing Reinoehl's name and—Reinoehl cut his thoughts off with a snarl and scowled angrily at the papers in front of him, unable to recall what he had been doing.

"Lord General."

The amount of anger in Vester's voice jerked Reinoehl from his thoughts, and he looked up in surprise, taken aback by how much *more* anger burned in Vester's gray eyes.

"Do you not want to see him?"

Reinoehl made a sharp, dismissive motion. "No, and anyway, I think he has made it plain he does not want to see me." He ignored the voice that reminded him he had been the one to tell Aden to get out. He had been angry, and he was still angry, but get out did not mean stay out. "What did he report?"

"Not much," Vester said in a flat tone. "He was in too much pain for me to make him give all the details."

"What?" Reinoehl demanded, hand balling into a fist. "Is he all right? What happened?"

Vester sneered. "What do you care, Lord General? You said you did not want to see him."

Reinoehl shoved his chair back, nearly knocking it over in his haste, standing and slamming a fist on the desk. "Do not play games with me, Commander! What happened to him?"

"I do not know," Vester replied curtly. "He was badly burned; I am not convinced he was aware of the extent of his injuries. I am not certain he would have noticed if he were bleeding to death."

The words made Reinoehl falter. "What are you talking about?"

Vester leaned forward, bracing his hands on the desk, meeting Reinoehl dead on, eyes the color of steel. "Lord General, I do not know what happened between the two of you before he left, but given that his eyes glowed arcen green, I can guess. He is not Gernot; not as far as I can tell."

"Do not say that name," Reinoehl snarled, stepping back to avoid punching Vester just because he always wanted to punch someone when he heard that name. Gernot. His father's best friend. The Cobalt's late Chief of Staff—and the bastard who had betrayed them all, led to the death of his parents, all because he had developed a taste for arcen that he had somehow managed to hide for too long.

"I'll say it," Vester retorted. "You obviously need to hear it."

"I do not like your tone, Commander," Reinoehl snapped.

"Too bad," Vester replied. "I'm going to say and do what I please, because whatever happened is hurting you both, and the Cobalt needs you too badly for this to go on."

Reinoehl motioned for him to leave. "I've heard enough."

Vester ignored him. "I'll leave when I've said my peace, Lord General."

Reinoehl slammed his fist on the desk again. "Then say it and get out."

"Fine," Vester replied and drew himself up. "Only one other time in my life have I seen a man who looked the way that Aden does now. I wish to the Gods I had paid more attention then, but I did not. You had better, before it's too late."

Whatever he had expected Vester to say, it was not that. The scathing reply he'd had ready died beneath a wave of confusion. "What do you mean?"

"You were away visiting Verdant, Lord General, when I was granted permission to travel home for my little brother's wedding."

Reinoehl nodded.

Vester's voice was quiet and solemn as he continued. "The morning of the wedding, we discovered the bride had run away in the night with another man. She left a note apologizing, but my brother was crushed. He loved her, had loved her, for a very long time. He looked much like Aden does now. Like his spirit was gone, as though he were in a dream, like he was broken. When we finally sent him off to bed, he seemed all right, if still far from his normal self. I thought in a few days he would regain some of his spirit."

He fell silent, but Reinoehl could not bring himself to ask, sensing this story...

"When we went to wake him in the morning, we found he had hanged himself in the night," Vester finished. He met Reinoehl's eyes and finished, "If you do not find him soon and make amends, Lord

General, then I fear he will end up like my brother." Vester regarded him in silence, after he finished speaking. Then he nodded, perhaps believing that his point had been made, and strode from the room.

Reinoehl felt as if he had been punched in the gut. Surely Aden was stronger than that. What had happened to break him so? Surely not their fight; it was hardly the first time they had argued.

But somehow his stupid, stubborn pride did not seem as important as it had before. He hated arcen, but he—Aden was more important.

"Where is he?" he asked before Vester could leave completely.

Vester turned back. "I do not know, Lord General. I thought he would come see you when he finished reporting to me. He walked off in this direction."

"Tits of the Winter Princess!" Reinoehl said, slamming his fist against his desk again, then strapping on his sword and stalking to the door. "Find out if anyone has seen him."

"Yes, Lord General," Vester replied, then offered, "I am sure he's around somewhere."

Reinoehl's mouth twisted. "Why would he be?"

Vester smiled briefly, even as he turned away and signaled to two soldiers standing sentry at the far end of the hallway. "Because he loves you, Lord General. He would still be hoping, I think, that things might still change." The smile saddened. "I am certain my brother kept hoping until his last breath that his bride would return."

"I never knew, Vester. I'm sorry."

He shrugged. "It is not something I discuss. I will see if anyone has seen Aden."

Reinoehl nodded and lingered only long enough to hear what the sentries had to say.

"Aden?" They repeated. "Uh..." They looked at each other, then shrugged. One said, "We did not know what he was doing, Commander. He approached the Lord General's room, but simply stood there for several minutes. Then he turned and went out the window, there."

"What!" Reinoehl demanded, making them jump. "What do you mean he—" Cutting the question off as a waste of time, he stalked to the window and stuck his head out. Where in the world would Aden go? Why would he go out a window? "Tits of the Winter Princess!"

"Lord General!"

Reinoehl looked down at the sound of someone hailing him. "What?"

The guard below gave a hasty salute, sounding suddenly nervous as he replied. "If you are looking for Aden—"

"Where is he?"

"Uh—the roof, Lord General. We saw him climb up there a little while ago, but never observed him coming down."

"Damn it! Why in the name of the Autumn Prince is that pale skinned idiot on the roof? Never mind," he snarled when he saw the soldier was actually going to respond. Withdrawing, he snapped around and started to bellow for Vester—only to realize Vester had moved right behind him at some point. "He's on the roof. Send men to the trap door, and see the healer is sent to my room."

Not waiting to hear Vester's reply, he climbed out the window and braced himself on the ledge out of it. Now where...?

Ah. There. Moving slowly along the ledge, holding tightly to the roof above, he moved until he reached the corner, where it dipped enough that he could grasp a better hold and pull himself up.

Despite the dark, he saw Aden immediately, lying too still, looking so isolated and alone, and probably freezing, when he should be warm and safe and smiling in Reinoehl's room. Free of the anger that had held them back before, guilt and shame and misery crashed down over him, Summer Princess, he really had been a damned fool. Moving across the roof, growing terrified when Aden did not respond when his name was called, he sank to his knees and pulled Aden into his arms.

The smell of blood and singed flesh washed over him, leaving him baffled. Aden groaned and whimpered faintly, but did not stir. "You idiot," Reinoehl muttered, pressing their cheeks together, not liking the way Aden felt warm despite the chill in the spring air.

A loud, sharp bang echoed in the dark, and he saw Vester climb up through the trapdoor, accompanied by two soldiers. Reinoehl did not want to let go of Aden, was quite vehemently against the idea, but he could not carry Aden down the ladder himself and the soldiers Vester had chosen would be trained for getting injured men out of strange places.

"Be careful," he cautioned anyway, relinquishing Aden to them. "Take him to my chambers. The healer?"

"Is waiting," Vester replied. "How is he?"

"Feverish, at the very least," Reinoehl replied. "Vester—what happened?"

Vester sighed. "I do not know that he would want me to say."

"He is ill and badly wounded, and something more than our fight drove him to this," Reinoehl replied. "Do not force me to make it an order, Vester."

Grimacing, Vester motioned. "Let us get back inside. We'll catch sick ourselves, being out here much longer. The Winter Princess has not quite relinquished her hold yet."

Nodding, Reinoehl followed Vester down the ladder, locking the door to the roof himself before they made their way back down to his chambers. Reaching them, he saw that the soldiers had already deposited Aden and departed. The healer, an old, clever soldier who seemed to live through everything and anything, was bent over Aden.

"How is he?" Reinoehl asked.

"Feverish, from wounds and weather," the healer replied, scowling in disapproval. "Bad burns. They are peculiar burns, though. I do not think..." He hesitated, then only reiterated. "They are strange. I have treated them with salve and bandaged them. I also gave him a cleanser, to wash away any arcen residue and a tonic to help with the fever. I think what he mostly needs is rest." He pulled up the blankets and returned bottles and bandages to his bag. "If he does not wake in a couple of days, Lord General, we may have further complications, but I do not anticipate any trouble. He was mostly exhausted; it looks like he traveled far with those wounds untreated and was suffering from arcen all the while."

Reinoehl nodded. "Thank you."

"Of course, Lord General. We are all happy to see him returned, and hope he makes a full recovery. Good night, Lord General."

"Good night," Reinoehl replied, moving to the bedside, hating himself a thousand times over as he took in the number of bandages Aden bore. "What happened, Vester?" He picked up one of Aden's hands, tangling their fingers together, and listened in silence as Vester gave him Aden's report.

"Magic?" he repeated, unable to believe what he was hearing. He remembered their argument, the way he had refused to listen to Aden's insistence he only did it to color his eyes. "You say that is when he got upset?"

"That is when he completely fell apart," Vester corrected. "I firmly believe he has no idea how he did it, and I think that doing it broke him. Why should it not? Any of us would rather die than ever use that filthy Salharan trick."

Reinoehl nodded. "We fought about the arcen. I did not want him using it. He said he only used it to color his eyes."

"I had a feeling that was the nature of the argument when I saw his eyes. But you must know, Lord General..."

"I do," Reinoehl replied. He squeezed Aden's hand tightly, then reluctantly let go, standing and moving to his desk. "What is this about the plague being caused by arcen? That—I do not even see how it is possible."

Vester shook his head. "I do not know," he replied. "I do not even know how we would be able to investigate such a thing." He raked a hand through his hair, looking suddenly tired.

"Well, we will not figure it out tonight, I sense. Better if we wait to hear what else Aden might say when he wakes. Go to bed, Vester."

"I will certainly try," Vester replied. "Good night, Lord General." He saluted and left before Reinoehl could ask him about that comment; he recalled that Vester had mentioned before that he seldom slept.

Sighing softly, he shoved away the stupid papers at his desk and strode back to the bed. A couple of days, the healer had said. Must he truly wait that long for Aden to wake? What if he did not wake?

Would any of this have happened if he had not been such a damned fool?

He loves you.

The words made something catch in his throat. It was ridiculous. A few months of knowing someone was not enough to care that much, surely, and how well did they know each other, really? They could not even fight without all *this*.

He sat at the edge of the bed and took Aden's hand again. Bandaged, unkempt, tense, and obviously pained even fast asleep, Aden almost looked fragile. It was not a word he would have ever put with Aden, who seemed so strong. Reinoehl knew all too well *he* would never be capable of playing the whore simply to free a man on a thin promise of escape; nor would he be capable of pretending to be Salharan for the sake of unearthing secrets that had caused too many deaths already.

No, he was much too much a great fool for any of that, and perhaps if he had admitted that before, Aden would not be lying so in his bed. What in there was worth loving, even if it were possible Aden did love him?

He disentangled their hands to step back and shuck his blades and most of his clothes. His hand lingered on his sword, and he drew it almost without thought, eyes skimming the words set in steel. It was not the familiar, comforting prayer he heard in his head, however. No, what he recalled were Aden's words of not so long ago, when he had said that there was a very good chance he would die alone, lost forever in enemy territory.

It made Reinoehl sick to think that his words and actions had nearly caused those words to come true. He stared at his blade, trailing his fingers along its length, then sighed and sheathed it, setting it near to hand before he climbed into bed alongside Aden.

Though he wanted badly to pull Aden close and fall asleep breathing in his scent, Reinoehl did not dare risk causing him further harm. So he settled for taking Aden's hand again and watching him until he at last fell asleep.

Movement caused him to wake, and he opened his eyes just as Aden looked down and saw him.

Aden immediately froze, and Reinoehl hated himself all over again for the mix of unhappy emotions that flickered across Aden's face, not least of all because once, Aden could have kept them all from showing. Now he simply looked as though he did not care enough to hide anything. "What—how did I get here?" Aden demanded.

"We brought you down from the roof," Reinoehl replied, not letting go of Aden's hand as he sat up. "Aden—"

"You threw me out," Aden said, pulling his hand free. "You told me to get out, no matter what I said to you—now I'm here again? Why?"

Reinoehl resisted an urge to touch Aden, to pull him close, unable to bear that he would be rejected. "Because I was a fool. A stupid, stubborn fool who let fear get the better of me and drive you away."

Aden shrugged and shook his head and did not look up from where his hands lay in his lap. "You seemed pretty damned certain of your feelings, Lord General."

"I barely knew what I was saying," Reinoehl said quietly. "As I said, I let fear get the better of me."

"Fear of what?" Aden asked tiredly.

Reinoehl sighed softly, feeling cold himself. They were right beside each other, but he sensed that his words and actions meant now they would always be miles apart. "My father's Chief of Staff, his best friend him for years and years. Somewhere in that time, he developed a taste for arcen. How he managed to hide it so long, we do not know. At first, we suppose, he stole it from the prisoners we captured. But the Salharans somehow discovered the addiction long before us and used it. He betrayed all of us, condemned my father, his best friend, for arcen."

Aden sighed softly, but still did not look up. "I'm not him."

"I know."

They fell into an unhappy silence. Damn it, was there nothing he could do to overcome the rift between them? No, he conceded sadly, there probably was not.

"I gave Vester my report," Aden said dully. "Perhaps you should hear that before you start offering your apologies."

Reinoehl's mouth tightened, and this time he did reach out, grasping Aden's jaw and forcing his head up. "I heard his report. I hate that you suffered so—and that it was my behavior that likely caused much of what you suffered. I know the words are not good enough, Aden, but I am sorry. You are my friend, you are—or were, I suppose now—my lover. I do trust you, and I am sorry that I forgot that."

"I used magic," Aden said, and for a moment his face seemed completely to shatter. "How can you—"

He could not bear it. Making a rough noise, Reinoehl pulled Aden close and held him tight, hating the way Aden trembled. What had become of his unbreakable spy?

Something in him eased a bit when Aden relaxed in his embrace. Reinoehl carded a hand through Aden's hair, wishing he had his mother's ability to soothe. She'd always possessed a gift for it, and now more than ever, Reinoehl wished he were more like her and less like his gruff, reserved father. "Aden..."

The arms around him tightened briefly, then slowly loosened, as Aden drew back. "You told me to get out if I used arcen. Now you say nothing when I confess to having used magic?"

Reinoehl cupped his face. "I was afraid and proud, Aden. That almost cost me your life. I will regret for the rest of my life that my actions nearly killed you."

Aden looked at him, and Reinoehl hated the uncertainty in his eyes, when only days ago Reinoehl had not been able to focus on his work simply because he liked seeing the heat and fondness in them, because he liked the way Aden looked as a regular part of his life.

When the silence stretched on, he began to fill with doubts himself. He had not expected Aden to still care for him, but he had hoped some of the damage might be undone. Perhaps he was only getting what he deserved.

Heavy hearted, he withdrew and slid from the bed. "You should rest another day or two. Are you hungry? I can have food brought when I summon the healer."

"You still cannot stand me, can you?" Aden said bitterly.

Reinoehl jerked around, robe falling to the floor in surprise. "What in the name of the Winter Princess do you mean? Damn it, Aden, why would you think that?"

"I thought we were more than friends before I proved too dirty for you to touch. You would not kiss me goodbye, and you will have nothing to do with me now, either." He spoke to his hands, which were balled into fists.

"What?" Reinoehl demanded, then muttered soft oaths as he strode back to the bed. He grasped Aden's chin and forced him to look up, then stroked his thumb over Aden's bottom lip. "You are exhausted and injured, idiot," Reinoehl said, smiling briefly before it faded away. "I also did not think I still held the right to kiss you, Aden. I hardly deserve it."

Aden only looked at him, miserable and... well, broken. This Aden was nothing like the one Reinoehl had known for months. He wondered if that Aden would ever come back and hated himself for causing the change.

But he could not resist that sad, uncertain face, or his own wants. Tugging Aden's head up just the slightest bit more, he lowered his own and took a soft but thorough kiss. Something in him unknotted, eased, as Aden promptly returned it, clinging to him so tightly Reinoehl thought he might have bruises upon his arm later.

He broke the kiss when he felt Aden flinch, cursing himself for forgetting about the injuries. "You need rest," he said reluctantly. "Not more mauling."

To his astonishment, Aden smiled faintly. "I do not mind your mauling, but a bath would be nice."

"I doubt you can make it down there on your own strength right now," Reinoehl said cautiously, "but I am more than happy to help, if you like."

Aden nodded. "I would like that. I have not—" His voice faltered, and he paused ever so briefly, before continuing haltingly. "I have not felt clean in days."

Reinoehl pulled him into a tight embrace. "Dirt is easily washed away, and there is nothing else wrong with you." Aden's arms tightened around him nearly to the point of pain, but Reinoehl ignored it the same way he ignored the wetness he could feel against his skin where Aden's head was buried in the crook of his neck.

Standing, he guided Aden across the room and down the stairs to the bathing room. The water was probably too hot for his burns to take, but they could at least get him clean.

Aden obviously was thinking the same thing, for he gave the hot spring a long, wistful look and sighed. "If I did not think I would scream in pain, I would sink into that water and stay there for a couple of days."

Reinoehl smiled. "Give it a week or so, and we will do that very thing, hmm?"

"No, we won't," Aden said firmly, but his mouth twitched with an effort not to smile. "I want to relax in the water, and if you're in with me that won't happen."

The words startled a laugh out of Reinoehl and flooded him with shocked relief. He pulled Aden close and kissed him deeply.

Aden looked surprised but pleased when they finally broke apart. "What was that for?"

"When have I ever needed a reason?" Reinoehl replied. "But you seem already to be coming back to yourself, when I feared I had lost you."

Aden shrugged and looked away. "I thought I'd lost everything."

Reinoehl dropped a kiss on his shoulder, nuzzling his neck. "You will not lose me. I will never be that stupid again, though I realize my word is worth very little." He felt Aden's nod, wondering if he would ever be able to repair the damage he had done. Still, some progress had been made, and perhaps... but was now the time? What if Aden told him no? "Perhaps now is not the time to ask," he said, wanting badly to talk to the hot spring or the wall, but forcing himself to turn Aden around and meet his eyes. "But I would name my sword for you, if you allow it."

"What?" Aden asked, the surprise upon his face plain. "Rein—"

"Only with your permission," Reinoehl emphasized. "After all that I have done, I could not do it otherwise."

Aden stared at him a moment more, then threw his arms around Reinoehl's neck and held him so tight Reinoehl half thought he would pass out. "Only if you let me do the same."

Reinoehl closed his eyes, the last of his anxiety and fears fading away. "I would be honored, Aden."

Pulling back just slightly, Aden kissed him. "Then I would really like that bath now."

Chuckling, Reinoehl pulled him toward the washing area, tossing away their clothes and carefully pulling away Aden's bandages, washing him with the utmost care, wincing at the damage that had been done. "I have never seen such burns."

"Magic," Aden said. "I have never seen the like—his hand seemed to be on fire, but the flames did not hurt him. They only hurt me."

Reinoehl shook his head. "I have never even heard of such a thing. The Salharans seem to be learning new tricks."

"Maybe," Aden said. "He had orange eyes."

"And you killed him?" Reinoehl said, then regretted the question as he saw Aden flinch. "Never mind."

"No," Aden said, his familiar stubbornness coming out. "I did not know I could do it. Even now, I cannot tell you how it happened." His voice dropped to a whisper. "It was awful. I do not know why they are so obsessed."

"Because they are filthy Salharans so rotted on their precious arcen they do not see it for the poison it is," Reinoehl replied. He tilted Aden's head back and rinsed out his hair, then rinsed them both one last time, before fetching his robe and wrapping Aden in it, fetching a towel for himself.

Upstairs, they quickly dressed—or Reinoehl did, and he made Aden sit while the healer was called to bandage his wounds again.

The healer was just finishing when Vester burst into his room, followed by a man with the unmistakable coloring of a full blooded Illussor. "Vester?"

"Lord General," Vester replied. "A messenger comes with a letter he says is of highest importance, and is for your eyes alone."

"What?" Reinoehl asked and glanced at the messenger in surprise. "From Illussor? Why?"

The messenger, however, was not looking at him—he was looking at Aden. "Your grace!" he said, obviously surprised and startled Reinoehl further by dropping to one knee and bowing his head. "I did not know you were here, I would have requested I be taken to you."

Aden drew himself up and replied, "No. Lord General Reinoehl is in command here, and it was him you should have requested. Deliver your missive."

"Yes, your grace," the man said, raising his head. He turned it to face Reinoehl and bowed it again. "Lord General, I bring to you a message directly from the King and Queen."

"The what!" Aden demanded, all but vibrating in place as he waited for the message to be read.

Reinoehl took it, equally confused, Illussor had no King, unless he had missed something, which to judge from Aden's reaction he had not.

He was even more confused as he saw the seals upon the letter: two of them, one the official royal seal of Illussor, and the other Ingolf's personal crest. What in the name of the Gods...? Breaking the seals, he unrolled the letter and read the contents. His eyes went widened at what they said, and he had to read the letter thrice before he could even begin to believe what they were telling him.

"What does it say?" Aden demanded.

"It says..." Reinoehl took a deep breath. "It says that two months ago, Queen Reni of Illussor wed Kaiser Ingolf of Kria and united our countries."

A shocked silence met his words.

"Reni is *married*," Aden finally said in disbelief. "She's married to the Kaiser? Goddess take that woman!"

Vester laughed. "United our countries? I guess this means I must brush up on my Illussor. I cannot believe it! A Kaiser and a Kaiserin, and more country now than we know what to do with, surely."

Reinoehl handed the missive to Aden, who bent to reading it voraciously. "I do not know what to think. This would explain why no one ever brought Ingolf to me, though. I had wondered had gone wrong there, and why no one could locate him again." He sighed and rubbed his forehead and smiled wryly at Aden. "I guess this makes a trifle more than allies."

Aden snorted. "We were already more than allies. I'm going to wring her neck when I get back to the palace! How long was she planning this, damn it!"

"We do not make bad countrymen," Reinoehl said, stung. "Though I know we have our clashes."

"What?" Aden said, looking up in confusion. "Oh. No." He motioned impatiently. "I mean, Reni was struck badly by the plague. She nearly died and has been weak ever since. We fear for her constantly, and thought her weakness was why she never married, but this has the feel of something planned for a long time..." His brow furrowed in thought, and Reinoehl could see his mind working. "I wonder what else she intends, what else she is working on. The fact she never gave me so much as an inkling of this means that she knows I will not approve of what she does."

The Illussor messenger laughed briefly before cutting himself off.

Reinoehl looked at him. "What is so funny?"

"Oh, nothing, Lord General. I beg your pardon."

"Nonsense," Reinoehl said reassuringly. "What is so funny?"

The messenger cast a brief, cautious look at Aden, but then simply turned and faced Reinoehl again. "It is only that the arguments between her Majesty and her Duke of Torla are famous. I believe some people long placed wagers that eventually they would marry, so close have they always been."

Aden rolled his eyes. "Close like siblings, perhaps."

"That is good to hear," Reinoehl murmured, pleased when the comment made Aden smile. He motioned to Vester. "Find our new countryman here food and a place to rest. Have you any further word to tell us?"

"No, Lord General," the messenger replied. "I traveled straight here, at the bidding of my King, to deliver the news to you."

"He is well, our Kaiser?"

"I do wonder which it will be," Vester said in amusement. He motioned for the messenger to follow him out of the room, but lingered a moment to say, "I am glad to see you are doing better, Aden."

"Thank you," Aden replied. "I do feel much better."

Vester's mouth curved in a way that always made Reinoehl suspicious. "I was thinking, Lord General, that if his grace needed a respite from his shadow duties for a time, then perhaps he might take up our vacant position? I could use the help."

He left before Reinoehl or Aden could reply.

"What is he talking about?" Aden asked idly, going easily when Reinoehl pulled him into his arms.

Reinoehl kissed him. "Do you want a respite? I did not think to ask that."

"I did not think of it until he mentioned it," Aden replied, then hesitated a moment before saying uncertainly. "A respite might be nice. Spying does not appeal as much as it did a few days ago."

"Then, if you want it, the position is yours. I have refused to take a Chief of Staff since my father's friend betrayed us. As good as you are with people and as sharp a mind as you possess—though of course as a Duke of whatever our new country is called such a posting is technically beneath you."

Aden laughed against his mouth, twining around him, and Reinoehl had never felt anything half so wonderful as Aden against him and capable of laughing again. "I am always happy to be at your disposal, Lord General, though I thought it poor form for a General to sleep with one of his officers."

"Then I guess I will be in poor form," Reinoehl retorted and kissed him hard. "Welcome home, Chief of Staff."

"Thank you, Lord General. It's good to be home."

Chapter Twenty Two

Ingolf scrubbed at his face and reached for his tea, grimacing when he realized it had gone cold. Ah, well. Setting it aside, he returned to the book he was reading: one of many pertaining to law. He had worked his way through as much as he could of Illussor law, but a better grasp of that came with working with the council day in and day out as he took over more and more of the running of the country.

He chafed to pull Kria in more, but there simply was not much he could do in that respect while Kria country was mired in war. Anyone he might request join the council, was on the battlefield, and Kria's own equivalent of the council was long dead. Missives had been sent to Salhara, but they had been roundly ignored—and one messenger had turned up dead. After that, he had flat out refused to send out further messengers.

The temptation to contact all his Generals and demand their plans was strong, but he knew that the best thing he could do was inform them of the union and let them fight the war with as little interference as possible. The Sacred Generals of Kria knew their business, and it would behoove him to remember that.

Still, he hated sitting pretty in his Illussor palace, bickering with nobility and attending fancy dinners, while his fellows did all the real, dangerous work.

Sighing, he pushed away the book on foreign law and picked at the lunch he had called for some hours before, but never got around to eating. Books were piled up all around him, and he felt guilty for the trouble he was causing the library clerks would be stuck shelving them all again later.

He stood up and stretched with a groan, yawning as he moved to the window. Clasp his hands behind his back, he stared down into the world below. On this side of the castle, his view was mostly the southern gardens and the fields beyond the castle. He could just see curls of smoke from the little village that way; he and Reni had ridden out there for three days to visit with any of the people who so chose to come see them.

It looked as though dusk was rapidly approaching. He would have to meet with the council one last time, and then it would be time to face his court over dinner. They were much easier to deal with when Reni was at his side, but he did not want her straining herself with such pointless things as dinners. Better to save her strength; all too soon she would need every last drop of it which remained.

Perhaps he would go see her before he faced the dogs. Yes, that sounded like a fine idea. He had not seen her since they had parted ways at breakfast. Nodding to himself, he abandoned the library and strode through the halls of the palace toward the royal chambers.

His chambers now, even if months later he still missed the few days he had spent in Erich's suite. But there was little point in lingering upon such frivolous thoughts. His path was set, and he would follow it until it ended or led him to another path.

Nodding to those he passed, attempting not to show how disconcerted he still was by the way everyone bowed and curtsied, he walked past the guards watching the entrance to the royal suites and made his way to the western end, where lay the Queen's Chambers.

Knocking to announce himself, he then stepped into the room and quietly shut the door. Reni looked up from her writing desk and smiled warmly, pushing away her papers and standing. She shook out her skirts and smoothed her hair, then held her hands out as he approached. "Ingolf."

"How are you?" Ingolf asked, kissing her hands, then tugging her close enough to kiss her properly.

She laughed. "Fine, just as I was at breakfast. I have done nothing more than tend my correspondence all day, I promise."

"Mm," Ingolf murmured. He smoothed back a loose strand of her hair. Then, unable to resist, he gently rested a hand on her stomach. It showed only the slightest bulge, but it was more than enough to leave him anxious—even terrified, if he thought about it too long. "You are certain?"

Reni made a noise that sounded suspiciously like a poorly smothered giggle. "Yes, I am quite certain. We are both fine. Honestly, you hover worse than my physicians, and I did not think that was possible."

Ingolf rolled his eyes and pinched her nose. "Well, I think we are entitled to our fretting, wife. You are dining here with your ladies tonight?"

"Yes," Reni replied. "I wish you the best of luck with the rest of court."

"I have survived worse battles," Ingolf replied, then after a slight pause added, "I think."

Reni laughed and kissed his cheek before returning to her writing desk. "You will be fine. Call for me at once if you have a need, though I think you will not."

Ingolf nodded, though he had no intention of asking for her help even if he managed to start a riot in the court. If he ran to his wife whenever he felt overwhelmed, what sort of impression did that make? Not the sort of impression a Kaiser should make, especially in a situation as difficult and delicate as his. "I do not suppose further word came of the war while I was buried in the library?"

"No," Reni said with a sigh. "I wish. I am still hopeful we will hear something soon." She propped her chin in one hand and sighed again, staring at nothing, lost in her thoughts. "I do wish Erich or Aden could be bothered to reach me. Surely they are not *that* out of touch. Though Aden should be at the Fortress of Eis, and we did send a messenger there. Perhaps he will return with news of my spy." She made a face. "As to Erich, there is no telling with him."

"I am certain wherever he is, he is doing more good than harm," Ingolf said reassuringly, breath catching in his chest as it always did when he spoke of Erich. "As to the army, it is deep into Salhara by now and I promise Salhara is very good at cutting off communication."

Reni nodded, looking resigned, if not accepting, of this rather shaky reassurance. "Well, let us hope we hear *something* soon. Sitting still is bad enough. Being made to sit still and endure ignorance is so much worse. I will go mad."

"Quite mad," Ingolf agreed whole-heartedly. "Enjoy your supper, my dear, and hopefully I shall manage to enjoy mine. I shall see you later tonight."

She blew him a kiss and returned to her writing.

Going back the way he had come, Ingolf made his way downstairs and through the vast halls to the north east wing, where the meeting hall of the council was located. It was a beautiful room, the walls lined with stained-glass windows and furnished with costly woods and fabrics, the floor made of glistening red marble.

At the long table in the center of the room, the council had already assembled. Ingolf did not rush, but kept to his sedate, easy pace. These men served him, not the other way around, even if they were not entirely pleased by that fact. Reaching the farthest end, he took his seat and thanked the servant who handed the bundle of papers he had requested be brought to him there. Setting them out, he finally looked up.

The council was composed of fifteen men, some of the highest ranking nobles in the country, selected by general election to serve five year terms.

He was heartily sick of all of them and their unending attempts at trying to catch him in some failure, or prove him a charlatan, or put him under their thumb. It was aggravating, but also somewhat amusing, because if they knew anything about him, it was that he had never lived under anyone's thumb. He had obeyed his father, but his father had never forced that obedience upon him. A council of soft nobles would not defeat him, even if he was still uncomfortable with his new authority.

They might all be countrymen now, but he would never call these men brothers if they did not learn how to act like brothers.

"Gentlemen," he said, making it clear he used the term only because he could not be bothered to find a more fitting one, "what did you want to rehash today?"

The men stirred, sharing looks that were not as subtle as they thought. "Majesty, we know there are many pressing matters upon your mind," one said slowly, "But we would greatly appreciate knowing where we stand, what will change, what we are to do. There is much that must be worked out, but not knowing our place, we are reluctant to take certain actions. We do not know where best to turn our attention, where and how we would prove most helpful."

"There is a war being fought, in case that slipped your notice," Ingolf replied. "Unless you want to take up swords and go assist, you will help most by being patient. I will not make decisions that affect my entire country when half my country is not properly represented. I see no Krians here, to represent that half of my—our—country. Do you agree or disagree with this?"

"Of course we understand," said another man, "but the war could last years, and recovering from it could take longer still. We are to sit here and do nothing, Majesty? I cannot think the Queen—"

"The Queen is not the only one ruling this country," Ingolf said coldly. "You can help me do it, or you can argue every step of the way, but I tell you this, gentlemen. We will be rewriting the laws as we must to help Illussor and Kria become one land. There will be give and take on both sides, and if you do not give, then I will *take* in the Krian style."

The words caused them to fall into a startled, uncomfortable silence.

He did not bother to explain that the most effective means of dealing with recalcitrant nobles in Kria was to fine them exorbitant amounts. Hurting a man did not work half so effectively as hurting his purse. Beating a man just left him incapable of working, and did no good to anyone. Criminals and enemies were for beating, not troublesome nobles. But let their imaginations do his job for him. "What I would like to discuss is how we can help the war. We are cozy and safe here in the royal palace while your comrades fight and die. Right now, the Dukes of Torla and Korte—descendants of two of your greatest heroes—are fighting and possibly dying for your sake, for all of our sakes. What are you doing to help them, to show your loyalty to the honorable history they represent?"

There was a silence, but just as Ingolf was about to lose his temper once and for all, the shuffling of papers broke it, followed by the clearing of a throat. "We are diverting funds of course, your Majesty, per the recommendations made by you and her Majesty. We also have further recommendations, which should be before you."

Ingolf eyed each man in turn, noting those who met his gaze, those who did not. Being Kaiser, he was finding, was not unlike being a General, and he had only been a few steps away from that. Then he glanced at the portfolio set before him, flipping it open and swiftly reading through the brief proposal they must have written up only a few hours ago. "This... is far more helpful than you have so far been, my lords," he said slowly.

"We do not oppose the changes, your Majesty," a slender man at the farthest end said stiffly. "We only fear that by the time we are allowed to begin making the necessary changes, there will be no country left to benefit from our efforts."

"I acknowledge your fears," Ingolf replied, "but think of how you would feel were you the ones immersed in war, and your new countrymen made all the decisions without you. Already, you cannot stand the idea I might do something completely Krian without consulting you. I think..." He drifted off as the doors opened, admitting Sepp and a royal messenger—the one he recognized as being sent to inform the Illussor armies of the marriage.

He barely kept himself seated as the messenger approached, immediately motioning him to speak even as the messenger knelt before him. "What have you to tell me?" he asked. "Did you successfully deliver your message?"

"Yes, Majesty," the messenger replied. "Not only did I deliver it, I saw that it was heard personally by the Scarlet General."

"The what!" Ingolf said, jerking in his seat. "What do you mean, the Scarlet General? There is no such thing."

The messenger grinned, ducking his head to hide it. "I speak truly, your Majesty. I took your message to the Royal Army and found it had been besieged by Salharan forces. More than a third of the army was killed and nearly another third badly wounded. Krian forces helped to locate and rejoin the scattered army. The Krian forces were led by Prince Erich, Duke of Korte, who has taken up the banner of the Scarlet General."

"Erich..." Ingolf said softly. Then he laughed and laughed, gripping the table for balance. "Of course Erich would—I wish that I could see that! Tell me what you know, please."

Around him, the table had fallen into a shocked silence, but every last member of the council leaned forward eagerly as the messenger began to speak. "Your Majesty, I delivered my message shortly before the army was attacked. Later, I was able to see that it reached the Krian forces who rescued our army. They were lead by Prince Erich von Adolwulf, and all called him the Scarlet General. He bids me report to you that they continue the march begun, heading toward the heart of Salhara. They hope to meet up with the Cobalt Army, which is marching down the mountains from the Fortress of Eis." He smiled. "He also bid me tell you, Majesty, that he has stolen a member of your retinue and pressed him into service as the Scarlet Commander, and that you may not have him back."

Ingolf laughed again, missing Erich more desperately than ever. "Commander Pancraz, I never thought I would hear that!"

"I cannot believe it," said one of the councilmen. "His Highness? Prince Erich does nothing but mope about the castle, and that when he is not vanishing for days at a time! He is not fit to lead a dance, never mind an army!"

"That is enough," Ingolf said curtly, glaring until the man looked away. Then he turned back to the messenger and said, "Go, for now, and speak to me later tonight. I would hear all you can tell me. Thank you for bringing me such promising news."

"It is my honor to be the one who delivered it, Majesty," the messenger said and lowered his head one more time before rising smoothly and leaving the room.

Ingolf turned back to the council. "You do not speak so of your peers before others, and certainly you do not speak so of your betters before others! You will count yourselves lucky, *gentlemen*, that the man before whom you spoke was a messenger and knows how to be discreet. Watch your tongues in the future, for men who cannot guard their tongues cannot be trusted, and I will not take counsel from men I cannot trust. Am I understood? Whatever your private thoughts, before others, you stand united. This is something I should not have to tell you, and if I must remind you a second time, you will suffer for it. Am I clear?"

They all nodded and replied with a quiet, "Yes, Majesty."

"As to Prince Erich being unfit to lead an army..." Ingolf said quietly, and reached into his pocket, holding the ring tightly before taking it out and tossing it upon the table. "Perhaps you do not know him half so well as you like to think."

"But that's—"

They stared at it in shock, then almost as one looked at Ingolf. "That...is his Highness' wedding ring, is it not?"

"It is," Ingolf said calmly and leaned over the table to retrieve the ring. He stood up, and gathered his papers, tucking everything neatly away. "As I said, perhaps you do not know him as well as you think. I promise you that if Erich is the new Scarlet General, and the first one Kria has seen since Lord Dieter held that title, then I am nothing but reassured. The Scarlet Army was banned centuries ago. Kria would not resurrect that banner illegally if they did not believe wholeheartedly in the man they named Scarlet General. Keep that in mind, the next time you feel compelled to speak against your prince. Good evening, my lords. Perhaps I will see you at dinner."

He left the room as slowly as he had entered, refusing to ever be rushed by men who now answered to him, especially when they were so bratty! Honestly, an army of fresh recruits would be easier to manage.

Largely ignoring the people he passed, lost in thought, he returned to his own rooms in the royal wing of the palace. In his private sitting room, he went immediately to his favorite spot—a chair and table by the window that looked down into his private gardens.

Tits of the Winter Princess, he still could not figure out what he was supposed to do with a garden of his own. He vaguely recalled his private gardeners speaking to him a few days ago, but could not remember what in the world he had said. It seemed so frivolous.

He picked up the book he had left on the table, one of Beraht's journals. For whatever reason, he had become fond of them. This must be his third time reading through the entire set, and some volumes he had read several times. Perhaps he sympathized with being thrust into a position for which he had never been meant.

Flipping it open, he idly turned pages until he came to the first of several sketches—this one of Dieter fast asleep in bed. It was a strangely intimate picture, and given what the journals had revealed, he was astonished Dieter had permitted Beraht to include the sketch.

Then again, given what the journals had told him of Beraht, he would imagine Dieter had never known.

Laughing softly, he flipped to another page and read an accounting of a raid launched by pirates on Beraht's lands, and the mistake they had made in not realizing that the Wolf had arrived late at night to visit his lover at his home.

He looked up when he heard the inner door open, smiling at Reni. "Hello again. To what do I owe this honor?"

She only frowned at him. "Is it true you have Erich's wedding ring?"

Hot white rage filled Ingolf, though he gave no sign of it as he slowly closed his book and stood up. "Who told you that?" he asked softly.

"It is of no concern," Reni said, her eyes sharp and bright. "What are you doing with that ring?"

Ingolf stalked to the door, answering over his shoulder, "He wanted it off. I took it off for him. I still had it when your men kidnapped me." He yanked the door open, but forced himself to close it shut quietly behind him and not slam it as he truly wanted.

Then he made his way to the library, pulling down various tomes that the poor clerks had only just put away, searching until he found what he wanted—and confirmed it in half a dozen more volumes. Leaving them on the table, he stalked back to the council room. It was empty, but that was easily remedied. Grabbing the first servant he saw, he ordered the man to see his council was recalled immediately. Then he called for two of the royal scribes and Sepp. "Draw your sword," he murmured.

Sepp obeyed without question or hesitation, smoothly drawing his sword and standing to Ingolf's right, ready to defend or strike at a moment's notice.

When the council arrived, Ingolf was sitting in his seat, and he waited patiently as each of them took their own seats, ignoring the looks they cast him, the glances and whispers they exchanged with one another.

"Scribes," Ingolf said, "bear witness and record all that I say and see my words are carried immediately to all."

Ignoring their replies, he focused all his attention on the council. "I warned you to guard your tongues. I warned you that I would not trust men who could not do so. I will know right *now*," he demanded, slamming his hands on the table, "who told my wife of the ring."

Silence met his demand.

"You have one last chance to tell me," Ingolf said coldly.

Still, they said nothing.

"Fine," Ingolf said. "Then hear this. Under particular circumstances, the King is permitted to dismiss his council." He slammed his hand upon the table when they immediately launched into angry protests. "I warned you to watch what you said and to whom. I asked you twice to tell me who among you immediately ran off to the Queen. All of you held your tongues. This tells me you speak when you should be silent, and you are silent when you should speak. It tells me you are not willing to heed my advice, but expect me to heed yours. It tells me you do not obey me. It tells me that at least one among you is untrustworthy, and the rest of you side with that one rather than with your King—which means you are also untrustworthy."

"If I cannot trust you, then I have no place for you. By edict of the King of Illussor and Kria, you are forthwith dismissed and forbidden from resuming your places for at least ten years, or until I rescind my edict. Get out."

He sat down and relaxed in his chair, staring at nothing until one by one, and then in pairs and threes, the men left. Two tried to approach, but one slight motion from Sepp forced them back.

"You had your chance," Ingolf said coldly. "Get out of my sight before I see you locked up just because I have the authority to do so."

One opened his mouth, but immediately closed it. A couple of minutes later, Ingolf was alone with Sepp. "Thank you, my friend."

Sepp gave a careless shrug and sheathed his sword. "I am sorry you had to do that, but honestly, they were idiots." He made a face. "Illussor. My new brothers clearly need some good old fashioned discipline, to make such mistakes. Levy some fines on their heads, and I bet they will fall neatly in line. Barring that, I suppose we could just administer the beatings they are obviously expecting."

Ingolf managed a laugh. "I shall recommend you be permitted to administer the beatings, Sepp." He smiled faintly. "I am glad to have one person I can trust here."

The door opened, and he looked up furious, and only grew more furious to see his wife. "If you will pardon us, Sepp, I must have a word with my wife."

Barely had the door closed when Reni blew up. "You cannot dismiss the council! Not over some imagined slight! How dare you—"

"How dare you, Madam," Ingolf cut in, never raising his voice, but the chill in his tone was stronger than any shout. "I dismissed them because I cannot trust them, because they choose to lie to me and withhold information, than trust me and work with me. Were they in my army, I would have them beaten and permanently demoted, if not banished from my army entirely."

"This is not—"

"Not Kria?" Ingolf finished for her. "Yes, and no, Madam, but that is not the point. The point is that I would be that harsh because men I trust with my life, and the lives of my soldiers, cannot be trusted with those things. These men, I am trusting with all of my people, and they will not even tell me something so simple as who told you of the ring."

Reni's mouth tightened.

"What is worse," Ingolf continued before she could speak, "is that you chose to side with them, rather than with me. I asked you to tell me. If you had told me, I would have dismissed that one person and given the others a chance. They did begin, tonight, to prove to me they might be worth something. But over one simple matter, they could not act as they should. Why should I trust them with important matters, when I cannot trust them with trivial? But you, Madam—you disappoint me most of all."

"What right have you to be disappointed in me?" Reni demanded. "I was trying to avoid this mess, and you are a fine one to harp about secrets; you did not even tell me you had Erich's ring, and I would like to know why you really have it."

Ingolf shook his head. "That is not the point, Madam. The point is this: you are fully aware of the problems I have had with the council. You know they argue with me and side against me constantly. Over a trifling matter, you chose to side with them rather than with me. Perhaps you have known them longer, but it is I you married. I am your husband, I am your King; we rule our country together."

He strode up to her and touched her cheek lightly, then slid his hand down to rest it lightly upon his stomach. "It is our child you carry, Madam, and you chose to side with them against me. You may inform everyone that I will not be dining downstairs tonight. I have no desire to waste my evening doubting every word spoken to me."

Dropping his hand and stepping away, he finished by saying, "I have Erich's ring because he no longer wanted to wear it, but he needed a friend to remove it. Whatever else there might be to the story, Madam, you no longer deserve to hear it. Good night."

Finished, feeling weary and restless, he strode from the room and stalked through the halls of the palace, unable to decide where to settle. Perhaps he was overreacting... But he thought not. He had not wanted to be Kaiser, but by the Spring Prince he would do it, and do it as best he could. If he had to throw every single last one of the fools from the palace and start fresh, he would.

Sighing, he looked up and found himself in the galleries. Not surprising, really. Besides his personal rooms and the library, it was the most peaceful room in the palace. He strode down the long hall, stopping only when he reached the portrait of Beraht and Dieter, dropping down onto a bench with a sigh.

Leaning his head against the wall, he let his thoughts wander to something happy. Erich, dressed in the colors and blazon of the Autumn Prince. Not in a thousand years would he have imagined it, but he could see it, somehow, his child of winter dressed in rich Scarlet. Erich had the qualities of a General—instincts, an ability to lead, an impressive sword arm and so much more besides. He wished he could see Erich in his full regalia, beneath the banner of the Autumn Prince.

He closed his eyes, pushing back a lot of wishes that would never be fulfilled. Autumn Prince, he did not even know what to do anymore. The one person he thought had his back—his damned wife—did not seem to have it, after all. Erich would have it. He would trust Erich with anything, with everything. But he did not have Erich, and he was beginning to wonder if he would ever be able to accept that.

The soft swish of skirts, the soft tap of slippers, drew his gaze reluctantly up. He stared at Reni, as unhappy as she at their estrangement, but he would not back down from what he believed.

"May I sit?" she asked softly as she reached him.

Ingolf shrugged. "Do as you like."

She sat down, smoothing her skirts restlessly. "I was not siding with them. Not on purpose. I did not see it that way. Two of them came and told me of the ring, and all I could do was worry about Erich. He is like a brother to me, not merely a brother in law. I grew up with him, too, you know." She sighed softly, a trace of humor in her voice as she said, "He was so busy staring at my brother I do not think he ever noticed I was starry eyed over him for a little while. When I was told you had his ring, I thought perhaps something was wrong you had not told me, for fear of its upsetting me. I did not mean to dismiss your concerns, and if you had told me why you were so upset instead of storming off, I would have told you that, Ingolf."

It was his turn to sigh and slowly nod. "I should have been more patient, I will concede that. I will not, however, back down on what I did to the council. They will learn to obey me, or suffer for it. If they want their posts back, they must win my approval and then successfully win new elections."

Reni nodded. "Very well." She met his eyes and lifted her chin. "I will always stand by you first, Ingolf. It was unfair of you to accuse me of doing otherwise. You cannot begrudge me worrying about family."

"Then I am sorry," Ingolf said, and lifted her hands to kiss the back of them, not protesting when she gave him a proper kiss. "Are you going to make me go to dinner, after all?"

"No," Reni said with a smile, taking his arm as they stood. "If you are too angry to spend time with your people, then it would not look good for me to ignore that and dine with them myself. Shall we dine together?"

Ingolf nodded, and returned the smile. "Yes, especially since I suspect that in all of this mess, no one told you that a messenger returned from delivering our letter to the Illussor Army, and that it is now being led by the Scarlet General, one Erich von Adolwulf."

"What!" Reni screamed, nails digging into his arm in surprise. "Tell me everything at once!"

Laughing, Ingolf obeyed.

Chapter Twenty Three

Erich hated waiting for messengers. If magic had a way of instantly delivering messages, that might possibly be one reason for it. Except, well, Illussor had had magic at one point, and if that had been one of its benefits he had never read of it.

Sighing, he pushed away the paperwork that had suddenly started appearing to bore him to death after he was made General and went to find something else to do. Surely there was *something* interesting that a General was permitted to do.

He nearly collided with Pancraz as he stepped out of his tent.

"Lord General!"

Erich rolled his eyes. "You can just call me Erich, you know. Honestly, months ago you practically wanted to kill me. It seems a bit much to keep calling me that."

Pancraz smirked. "But it's ever so much more amusing."

"I liked you better when you were quiet," Erich retorted. "Did you need something, or were you just coming to harass me?"

"I actually did need something, believe it or not," Pancraz motioned. "The strategists and I have finished the latest set of plans for our next battle. I wanted you to come and give your approval, though of course they are tenuous at best."

Erich nodded and followed along beside him. The plans were tenuous, of course, because if—Goddess willing—the Cobalt General replied to his message and agreed to help, they would be making changes to those plans. But it was best to plan for the worst, and the worst was the Scarlet fighting alone. Hopefully his strategists had made that as painless as possible.

His strategists. Erich snorted in amusement. He did not think he would ever get used to that, no matter how many months passed. "So, Pancraz, do you think Cobalt will reply to my message?"

"If only out of curiosity," Pancraz replied. "I would imagine it was quite the shock to be asked for assistance from the Scarlet General."

Erich laughed and preceded Pancraz into the war tent where his strategists worked, nodding to Bruno, who was already at the table. The strategists themselves had already departed, waiting to hear the verdict from their Commander or Chief of Staff. "So, what do we have?"

Bruno motioned to the map spread across the large table that took up most of the tent. It was a true Krian war map, beautifully drawn, exquisitely detailed.

At present, his map was covered with hundreds of map markers, scattered about in seemingly haphazard fashion. He knew the mess made perfect sense to the others, and he was getting better at it himself—though he still was far from their level.

He listened attentively as Bruno and Pancraz explained the handful of strategies devised, giving the advantages and disadvantages of each. "I wish I had something useful to offer," he said when they had finished, "but all of this terrain is new to me. I have never been so far into Kria, and certainly not as the General of an army. Hopefully, the Cobalt will be willing to join us, and they might offer worthy advice. What are they like, at that?"

"Who?" Pancraz asked.

"The Cobalt General, his Commander and Chief of Staff—it is with them we will of course be working," Erich said. "It would be nice to know what I will be facing."

For a moment, he thought he saw a look of pure panic fill Pancraz's face. Bruno spoke before he could question it, however. "The Cobalt General and his Commander are both good men. I do not know who, if anyone, is now Chief of Staff. It was the last one who betrayed Cobalt to the Salharans. If General Reinoehl is anything like his father—and he very much is—he will leave the position vacant indefinitely."

"That would be a great deal of work to thrust upon the Commander," Erich mused.

"Commander Vester von Sturm would not mind. His line has always served in such capacities, and he is fiercely loyal to General Reinoehl." Bruno snorted. "That, and the man never sleeps, though he thinks his soldiers do not know that."

Reflexive curiosity drove Erich to ask, "Never sleeps?"

"Mm," Bruno replied "They say he has not slept since returning from some trip he took. Most say it was to see his family, but only the late General and Chief of Staff knew the details of it. Commander Vester is a very solitary person."

"Someone died," Pancraz said, the words quiet.

Bruno looked at him in surprise. "How would you know that?"

Pancraz only then seemed to realize he had spoken aloud. "Uh—I saw him a few times at the Winter Palace. He would take long walks at night. He... reminded me of my mother, after my father died. She did not sleep much either."

Erich had about a thousand questions he wanted to ask, but refrained. Some places curiosity was a fine thing; other places it was not. Instead, he focused again on the map, the different strategies laid out across it.

Strategies *his* army would employ, that *his* strategists had designed. Goddess above, he was leading an army—and not just any army. He was leading one of the Sacred Four Armies of Kria, under a banner that

had not been flown since his own ancestor had left Kria to join forces with Illussor. No matter how many times he thought about it, the reality still left him in a state of shock and disbelief.

"Lord General! Lord General!" A soldier came tumbling into the tent, too excited to contain himself or remember protocol. "It's the Cobalt General himself!"

"What!" Erich cried. "He was supposed to send a damned reply—" Striding from the tent, he glanced around and immediately saw the General on the far side of the camp, flanked by two...

"Erich, Goddess above, it really is you!"

Erich stared in shock—then bolted across the camp and embraced Aden tightly, laughing and clapping him on the back as they finally drew apart. "Goddess preserve me, what in the world are you doing here, Aden?"

"Me?" Aden demanded. "What are you doing leading armies? You—" he cut himself off and roughly cleared his throat. "You... you're *you*, Erich. I can see that already. I can scarcely believe it—but it's *you*."

Rubbing the back of his neck, Erich smiled sheepishly and motioned vaguely. "I guess it was bound to happen eventually."

"Yes," Aden said, peering up at him. "But *what* happened?"

"I get the feeling we both have much to explain," Erich said quietly, looking his old friend up and down. There was something different about Aden, something in the eyes, the new lines etched into his face—whatever had happened, it had struck Aden badly. "How about we go through the proper introductions, then find food and talk?"

Aden nodded and half turned, holding out a hand, and Erich narrowed his eyes in further surprise when the Cobalt General took it and kept hold of it. "What..."

Beside him, Pancraz and Bruno drew forward, flanking him the same way Aden and the other man flanked the Cobalt General.

"General," Erich greeted.

"General," Reinoehl replied, mouth curving in amusement. "You are as pale as Aden said. I might almost think you ill. Are you a new Scarlet General, or the ghost of one?"

"Much to the frustration of many," Erich replied with a grin, "I am flesh and blood. This is Commander Pancraz, and my Chief of Staff I am certain you already know—and I am not giving him back."

"Aden you know," Reinoehl said, looking amused. "This is Commander Vester."

It was Vester who spoke up next, looking at Bruno in amusement. "You have certainly gained yourself quite the promotion."

Bruno grinned. "Yes, Commander. I thought this a sight easier than taking your job."

Vester snorted in amusement and turned to Pancraz. "I know you—were you not a member of his Majesty's retinue?"

"Y-yes," Pancraz said, and Erich looked at him, surprised by the underlying nervousness in Pancraz's voice. Was there some sort of history between him and Vester? But they did not seem to otherwise act... but he could figure it out later. At the moment, he had far more entertaining things to do.

"So, General, why are you holding Aden's hand? Do I need to inquire as to honorable intentions?"

"Erich!" Aden hissed. "This is neither the time nor the place!"

"I'm a General," Erich shot back. "It's the time and place for whatever I want, and right now I'm asking why he's holding your hand."

Reinoehl laughed before Aden could reply. "So long as it is honor that concerns you and not virtue, for then we might have a problem."

"Reinoehl!" Aden cried, outraged.

"Now do you see how I feel when you and Vester harass me?" Reinoehl retorted.

Erich threw his head back and laughed and slung an arm around Reinoehl's shoulders, guiding him and the others to his tent. He motioned to his men as they all settled. He poured wine, waving off the soldier who tried to do it for him and passed the glasses out. "So, cousin," he said cheerfully to Aden, handing him his wine, "what brings you out so far and in the dress of the Cobalt Chief of Staff?"

Aden did not reply though, instead grabbing Erich's hand when he would have moved away, staring at it in complete shock. "Erich..." He looked up, confusion on his face. "Where is your ring?"

"Gone," Erich said quietly and gently pulled his hand free. He turned away to take his own seat, feeling Aden's eyes upon him, but he could not, would not, think about why his ring was gone. If he did that, he would remember that Ingolf was now married to Reni and so forever out of reach, and it hurt too much to think about that. Right now, he would rather enjoy the unexpected surprise of his seeing one of his oldest friends. "So how do you come you to be here?"

"Oh, no," Aden replied. "It's completely normal for me to show up in strange places. You are going to tell me right now why you are the head of the Scarlet Army."

Laughing, Erich obeyed, and they exchanged stories over the next few hours. Except, the stories faltered when Aden reached the point where he had gone spying on the Salharans.

"What's wrong?" Erich asked, concerned. Aden was unbreakable, yet he suddenly looked like something put precariously back together, with no certainty it would stay that way.

"I used magic," Aden admitted, leaning in to Reinoehl's touch. "I don't know how...I did not mean to..."

Erich winced. "You're not...permanently hurt by it, are you?"

"No, I do not think so..." Aden shook his head. "I just wish I knew *how* I did it. I never learned how to use magic, so how could I do it?"

"The ability to use magic is always there," Pancraz spoke up. He flinched when all eyes snapped to him, but at a nod from Erich, continued speaking. "One does not have to be *trained* to be able to use it. Anyone can use a dagger or a scythe or a cooking pot or whatever regardless of whether he has been taught to use any of those things. It is better if he has been taught, but a man can also teach himself. Arcen is no different, and when a man's life is at stake, will he not do things he might otherwise have not been capable of doing? Instinct drove you to use the arcen, nothing more. If you tried to do it now, you probably would not be able."

"How do you know so much?" Reinoehl asked coolly.

Pancraz flinched again and dropped his gaze.

Erich moved to stand beside him, resting a hand comfortingly on Pancraz's shoulder. "He was Salharan as a child. They betrayed him, in most cruel fashion, and he has ever since been fiercely loyal to Kria—and has proven it many a time. The Kaiser himself stands by Pancraz and trusts him implicitly."

"Fine," Reinoehl replied, though he still looked wary. "So you are familiar with arcen?"

Pancraz laughed bitterly. "Oh, yes. Though, I have never actually used it."

Aden frowned. "What do you mean?"

Erich spoke for him. "Pancraz's family farmed arcen."

"What!" Aden cried, all but leaping to his feet. "But they would never let someone with so much knowledge live—"

"They didn't," Pancraz cut in. "Believe me, killing me would have been a kindness, by the time they were finished." The tent fell into a startled silence. Erich gripped Pancraz's shoulder again, reassuring him.

It was Aden who finally broke the silence, speaking slowly; it was, Erich from experience, the way Aden always spoke when he was working out an especially complicated problem and could not quite believe that a large part of the solution had literally just fallen into his lap. "The Salharans who attacked me before I killed them... they said something—something about causing the plague. With arcen."

Pancraz's eyes went wide, a look of horror that was nothing like anything Erich had even seen before. Then it crumpled into a look of complete and utter misery—of self loathing. "Oh, stars, they *wouldn't*—except—why did I never see it!" He slammed his fists into his thighs, and though it looked as though it hurt quite a bit, Pancraz gave no indication he felt the pain.

Then he abruptly stood and strode from the tent with a rough sound.

Aden grimaced. "I am going to guess, from his reaction, that the soldiers did not lie to me. But I still do not see *how* it is possible."

Erich stared after his departed Commander. "I think Pancraz knows; I think he knows all too well. Still, it must have been difficult for the Salharans to manage it, given all that is required to grow arcen. The time alone would cripple them, surely."

"What are you talking about?" Aden asked, giving him an odd look.

"Oh," Erich said, motioning vaguely. "Pancraz once explained arcen to us after we found a field full of the flowers." He quickly explained their time at that little cabin in greater detail than he had bothered before, in a nod to Pancraz's privacy.

"I cannot believe it," Vester said. "Arcen in Kria. I hope there are no more surprise fields around; I do not want to think what might happen if some herbalist thinks to experiment..."

Reinoehl nodded. "We shall have to see that a proper sweep of the country is done once we finish the war."

"Yes," Erich said. "I will probably put Pancraz in charge of it, unless someone objects."

"He is the most suited," Vester said. "Will he be all right? He seemed most upset."

Erich nodded. "He will be, yes."

"I wonder what the Salharans would do, should they realize that one of their own—and one with valuable knowledge—is Commander of the Scarlet Army," Aden said in amusement.

"They would torture me until I told them all that I had told you," Pancraz said wearily from the tent entrance. "Then they would do their damndest to kill everyone that I ever talked to, no matter how many that meant killing. They left me alive before only because I was a stupid child, and they thought me too broken and nonexistent to be a threat. Indeed, they tried to use me, did they not?" The bitterness in his voice was thick, and he drained his wine in one long swallow as he sat down again.

"What do you mean?" Vester asked.

Pancraz looked startled that Vester spoke to him, but only shook his head. "Nothing." Then he continued in a flat tone. "I know how they would have poisoned two entire countries—and I shudder to think how many people died, or suffered, to see it done."

Erich poured him more wine. "How, then, Pancraz?"

"It must have been right around the time I was... stricken from society that rumors began to float about arcen shortages. Rumors like that always drift about, for arcen is the only thing which keeps Salhara functioning." He laughed bitterly. "This time, however, the rumors proved true. Oh, not for the higher ups, but the violets and blue began to vanish, and even green became difficult to find for those licensed

to use it. I heard a few rumors, from some farmers, that all the low level fields were being taken for red arcen."

Aden interrupted, confused, "What do you mean?"

Pancraz let out a sigh. "Sorry, I forget that I must begin at the beginning. Erich knows much of this, but of course the rest of you would not. Arcen..." He quietly and quickly explained all that he had once told Erich and Ingolf, what seemed ages now, in the snow-covered cabin of a poor farmer and his wife.

"Fascinating," Aden breathed.

Erich snorted, recognizing the gleam in his eye. "No, you may not ask five thousand more questions. Tuck your curiosity away for another time, your Grace, and let us get back to the matter of the plague." Privately, he was relieved to see Aden curious—and about arcen of all things. He shifted his gaze briefly to Reinoehl and could see he was thinking the same thing.

Huh. Erich realized they were wearing matching necklaces. Funny, he had not noticed that before. Beautiful pieces, bearing the symbols of Kria's gods; he wondered, suddenly, just how deeply Aden felt for Reinoehl. Oh, he was going to have entirely too much fun teasing Aden for falling hard and fast when his friend had always been so strictly solitary.

But the teasing would have to wait. "So, now, Pancraz, tell us how they caused a plague."

"They spread the arcen as far as they could," Pancraz said flatly. "The trouble with arcen is that it is a real bitch to grow, but tenacious thereafter. Once made into the serum or powder, it can be put in almost anything. If they grew a great deal of red and used it to pollute fields, water sources, even contaminating the emergency winter stores that all Krians keep, things like that, it would not be hard to see that an entire nation—or two—was severely stricken." He punched his thigh again. "It was right there in front of me!" he snarled. "The symptoms of arcen poison were right *there*, and I never made the connection; I just heard 'plague' and accepted it like everyone else." He raked his hands through his hair, bowing his head, elbows braced on his legs.

Erich wished he knew how to help, but he sensed the agony tearing Pancraz apart was not so easily soothed, and he had no idea what *would* soothe it.

"You could hardly be expected to know," Vester said. "Why would anyone suspect such a thing? If they really managed it, and if all that you say of arcen is true, then they have been plotting this for at least the better part of two decades. Of course they would ensure that even those who should notice would not. What truly puzzles me is why they waited five years to go to war, because it seems clear the arcen plague was meant to cripple us and leave us helpless so they could sweep in and take us with practically no effort."

"The crops must have failed," Pancraz said quietly, slowly lifting his head. "If even a few of the fields failed to yield, it would cripple them. Between poisoning two countries and supplying Salhara, it would not take more than twenty or so fields to fail to ruin what they had planned. Even crippled, Kria and Illussor are a threat. If Salhara devoted most of their basic fields to red arcen and used most of that to

poison Kria and Illussor, and if the fields reserved for Salhara and the war failed, then yes, I could see a setback of at least five years."

His words were met with silence.

"Nausea, rapid heartbeat, flashes of hot and cold, a feeling of urgency, the inability to eat, followed by a sudden weakness, death that could come immediately or with agonizing slowness..." Pancraz sighed heavily. "Those are all the marks of someone who has severely overdosed on arcen at least two grades too high. Salhara has taken a great risk..."

"What do you mean?" Erich asked.

"I mean, that anyone who ingested the arcen they used—and it must have been red, that's the only thing that makes sense—and lived, should be able to handle arcen now to a certain extent. Oh, in a few more years, they may be right back where they started, but at the moment anyone who lived could probably manage as high as yellow without immediately dying."

Aden shook his head. "I do not understand—arcen is deadly if it is not properly taken and the various colors slowly worked up to. How could so many people live?"

"One, it was diluted, and that would have been enough for people with strong constitutions to survive it. Two, as much as we know about arcen, that is nothing compared to what we do *not* know. Not that any true Salharan would ever admit that." His mouth twisted, and he fell silent.

Reinoehl shook his head slowly back and forth. "I wonder what Salhara will do when their arcen is taken away from them."

"A plague in reverse," Pancraz replied. "The lowest levels will survive well enough, though they will not be happy—but the lack of arcen will cause many of the higher levels to suffer, and may even kill the highest. Certainly none of the remaining brotherhood would survive, not the main three. Their eyes, people say, are blackened from the arcen. They cannot live without it."

Erich sighed. "I think I dread the end of this war more than I dread the war itself. I do not envy Ingolf and Reni..." He trailed off, still unable to think of those two together. Goddess, it hurt. He understood, and he would serve faithfully, but...

"I cannot believe she is married," Aden said, breaking into his thoughts. "Reni! Married!"

"And with child," Erich said tiredly. "We received word of that only a couple of days ago. Four months pregnant. I do not envy that child his eventual place in life."

"Nor I," Aden agreed. "I wonder what they will name the new country, and if they will build a new palace."

"Likely," Erich said. "Something that represents the new nation, and it would have to be central to all three countries, since I cannot see us giving Salhara its independence. We're going to need more than four Generals."

Bruno stirred from where he had stood in silence the entire time. "Speaking of such things, Lord General, we should perhaps return to more immediate business. We would be interested to see what advice the Cobalt might lend in regards to our strategies."

"Vester, go and see what you can offer," Reinoehl immediately said. "Aden, work with Bruno to see what counts we have between our two armies."

"Yes, Lord General! They both replied, standing up—Vester to join Pancraz, who was looking distinctly panicked again, and Aden to join Bruno.

Aden lingered a moment longer, however, looking at Erich. "I cannot believe how different you are, Erich. You have not been this way..."

"Since Hahn died, I know," Erich said. "As I said before, I guess it was bound to happen." He smiled faintly. "Any Krian can tell you: Winter always thaws in the face of Spring." He lightly touched his sword, thinking again of Ingolf, wishing so much....

"You're still carrying Lord Dieter's sword?" Aden laughed. "I did not even notice, before. So the legends are true..."

Erich nodded. "Yes, though I can scarcely believe it myself. It is arcen resistant—a pity we stand no chance of ever learning how. Even Pancraz is stumped."

"That is the blade of the Betrayer?" Reinoehl asked, then at a look from Aden, amended, "Your Holy General?"

Laughing, Erich drew the blade and flourished it. "Yes, indeed. Beautiful, is it not? My family regards it as one of our greatest treasures."

"May I?" Reinoehl asked.

Erich handed the blade over.

"It truly is a work of art," Reinoehl said, examining every minute detail of the sword. "Stunning. Even my own blade pales by comparison. The old stories said that the Betrayer possessed the greatest sword Kria ever saw, and that the secret of its making died with him. I suppose that is all too true. I cannot imagine how arcen was infused into the blade, but I can see clearly enough that it was somehow managed."

"Lord Dieter never knew himself," Erich replied. "It was Lord Beraht who realized the truth, and they never learned how it was done. The only man who did was murdered by Kaiser Benno."

"Let's not get into this discussion," Aden said sharply. "We might be brothers, but brothers fight, and we do not have time for that nonsense now."

Reinoehl laughed and sheathed Bright, returning it to Erich. "As you wish. Erich, walk with me, and I will tell you all I know of Saffron and Verdant. Then we shall see what our best options are, strategically. I take it you mean to make a direct assault on Salhara?"

"Yes," Erich said. "Today, we are still just barely in Krian territory. The Salharans watch us, but so far they are keeping quiet, as are we. I fear if we do not change that state of affairs soon, they will, and I would prefer to take the advantage."

"I agree," Reinoehl nodded. "I already have my forces moving out of Eis, and come tomorrow I will send Vester to rejoin them and guide them to where we want them to be. I will join them myself shortly thereafter."

Erich looked at him in surprise. "That is moving remarkably fast. I expected nothing more than a reply from you dictating where we two might meet. I had no reason to believe you would trust so quickly that I was the Scarlet General and not some Salharan trick."

Reinoehl looked at him in amusement. "You also did not know that I had the Duke of Torla in my bed when your note arrived. Let me tell you, I was not pleased to hear him shouting another's man name, no matter the reason for it."

Aden punched Reinoehl hard in the arm, and Erich doubled over with laughter. "Addie! I did not know your face could turn red! My, my, cousin. I was not aware that was amongst the duties of a Chief of Staff." He only laughed harder when Aden punched him, as well.

Bruno rolled his eyes. "I am not going to sleep with you, Lord General, if that is what you are implying."

"No, no," Erich said, still laughing, rubbing his arm where it throbbed faintly from Aden's blow. "No such rule exists for Scarlet. I think it exclusively a Cobalt tradition." He backed away, raising his hands to ward Aden off. "Go do other Chief of Staff things—the kind that mean your clothes stay on."

Aden looked at him in disgust. "Remind me again why I prefer it when you are rude and noisy and wholly inappropriate, cousin?"

"I do not know," Erich replied cheerfully. "Wait until I tell Reni what sort of messages you were delivering to the Cobalt General. This is even better than that debacle with the chickens and the brothel—"

"Shut up," Aden replied, "before I start dragging out your embarrassing stories. If you are going to bring up the chickens, I will more than happily bring up the pond."

Erich grimaced. "Cheater."

"Spy," Aden corrected. "I use any advantage I can find."

"Cheater," Erich repeated. He looked at Reinoehl. "Never gamble with him; he cheats there too. I don't think he can help himself."

Aden shot him a withering look, then turned away. "Bruno, shall we get to work and leave these idiots to make further fools of themselves?"

Bruno laughed then turned it into a cough as Erich narrowed his eyes at him. "Come, we'll go to my tent; all my ledgers are there. I hope the Cobalt has not suffered overmuch since the retaking of Eis..."

"Commander Pancraz?" Vester asked, as Bruno and Aden's voices faded away. "If you will show me to the war tent? How many strategists do you have?"

"Four," Pancraz replied, looking... sort of dazed, as he and Vester walked away, heads bent together as they talked strategy.

Reinoehl turned to Erich. "I could hardly believe it," he said quietly, "when I received a missive from the Scarlet General. We have not had one of those in so long. Technically I suppose it is still illegal to fly the Scarlet banner, but it was the happiest thing I have read in a long time."

Erich shrugged and made a face. "I did not choose it, to be honest. The men chose it for me, and they gave me little choice in accepting it. But I am not sorry I agreed. I only hope it is enough to win this war. The idea of falling to Salhara makes me shudder."

"Yes," Reinoehl agreed. "I wish I could see the faces of the others when we send word that Cobalt and Scarlet are heading toward the heart of Salhara. I am certain it has done the people good to see the Scarlet banner fly. A world without four seasons is a world unbalanced, a cycle irrevocably broken. I am happy to see the balance restored, and you do seem suited to the Scarlet, for all you have the look of a ghost."

Erich laughed. "There are worse things to be than a ghost. Thank you, Cobalt. It is good to have your support."

"If you have the support of the people, then you are a General," Reinoehl replied. He flipped something toward Erich who caught it reflexively and opened his hand to find a ring lying on his palm. It was a beauty; the ruby set in it must be worth a small ransom or three.

"That was made years upon years ago and should have been destroyed, in honor of the Autumn Prince whose banner we no longer carried. But my ancestor saved it, believing it sacrilege not to have a Scarlet General. We have one now, so that ring belongs to you. Wear it well, Scarlet General."

"I will," Erich replied, and slid the ring into place on his right hand.

Chapter Twenty Four

Aden loved the summer.

He might have very personal reasons for regarding winter more favorably than he once did, but summer remained his favorite season.

It was a beautiful day. Bright sunshine, not too hot, a clear sky. It was fine enough he could almost forget they were at war. It was the sort of day meant for riding, fishing... or ignoring the fish in favor of doing all sorts of dirty things to his lover along the bank of the river.

Lover.

His grip tightened reflexively on his sword, heart speeding up just from thinking of all that had transpired of late, of how quickly his life had changed. Just...what? Half a year or more now. Sometimes it felt like years; other times mere days.

He had been a spy trapped in the Winter Palace. He had rescued the Cobalt General in a desperate bid to gain his own escape. Now he was Chief of Staff of the Cobalt Army, fighting for a newly made county, and his sword was named for the very same General he had rescued—and who had backhanded him mere minutes after being rescued.

Shaking his head, Aden pushed away the reminiscing and focused on his present. Being the Chief of Staff meant he had officers to whom he delegated, half a dozen assistants, and every life in this camp was his to account for. It was a far cry from the duties of a spymaster Duke who had always been forced to leave the running of his estates to a trusted Steward.

He was a bit surprised to find he liked it.

As a Duke, technically such a position was beneath him. He was the equal in rank to the Sacred Generals of Kria, but he had never been impressed or persuaded by such things. The Dukes of Torla and Korte were always adopted—from orphanages, the streets, from wherever the Dukes saw fit. Before his father had adopted him, he had been left an orphan by bandits. He recalled very little of his birth parents, having been only three when they died, but he had never forgotten his roots.

So, Reinoehl's Chief of Staff he was content to be for the foreseeable future.

"Chief Aden!" A soldier called out, running towards him. He stood gasping for breath a moment, having clearly chased after him for some distance.

"What is it?"

The soldier jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "Some of the officers are having a bit of a scuffle; the others said to call for you straight away."

Nodding, Aden motioned for the soldier to lead the way, wondering what in the world—

He immediately saw he had not been dragged to the far side of camp to settle a fight. "What is this?" he asked, looking around the space where his highest officers and several foot soldiers were gathered, with Vester right smack among them. "What are the lot of you up to?"

Vester spread his hands in a show of innocence. "The men only wanted to have a word with you in order to express their gratitude, Lord Chief of Staff."

Aden snorted at the honorific 'Lord' tacked on. Though technically it was how he should be addressed, and Vester should be 'Lord Commander,' the nature of their positions put them closer to the men than the Lord General, and so in uniquely Krian fashion, the honorific was typically dropped. It was a peculiarity of the typically more formal Krian culture, the same odd quirk that led them to address superiors by honorific and given name rather than honorific and surname. The same quirk that lent the Krians to address their gods as 'prince' and 'princess'. In any other culture it might be mistaken for affection. "Gratitude for what?" he finally asked.

"For helping to restore honor to the Cobalt after your predecessor smeared our good name," said one of the officers.

"After that bastard traitor ruined everything, we did not think to ever have another chief," said another.

"For bringing back the Lord General," said a third.

Vester smiled faintly. "For giving the Lord General a reason to live."

Aden *really* hoped he wasn't blushing. "That's hardly—"

"You did not see him after the betrayal, Chief," another soldier said. "He was little more than a shadow, all but a dead man. We did not know what would become of him at the Winter Palace—if he would live, if he would bother to fight to live, or if he would just allow himself to die."

Aden recalled the man he had saved several months ago, crying and then so silent as he hung in the birdcage. Still, he had not seemed... "He was in a bad state, I grant you, but—"

"But nothing," Vester cut him off. "Trust your comrades and accept their thanks and gifts graciously, Lord Chief."

Aden glared at him, but could not resist the earnest looks upon the faces of the gathered soldiers, men he was quite literally sworn to protect. "Then I am honored you think I have made so great a difference, but it is enough that you have given me a place here among you."

The men all laughed, and then three of them stood and presented him three simply wrapped gifts.

"You don't..."

"Shut up, pale skin," Vester said.

"Stop bossing me around, sword for brains," Aden retorted, but he accepted the first of the three gifts. It was large and obviously contained fabric of some sort. When he opened it, the contents proved to be a Krian-style cloak: heavy, sturdy, a deep gray on the outside, lined with fur only a few shades lighter, with a deep lined hood of the same.

"We thought you might need it when the snow returns, seeing as you kept stealing the Lord General's," the soldier who had given it to him said with a grin, as the others all laughed.

Aden laughed. "It's true nothing I own can stand against the Winter Princess and her Fortress of Eis." They all laughed again, exchanging pleased smiles, and then the second soldier handed over the next gift.

The second package was much smaller than the first, about the size to hold a ring—which, in fact, it did. "This is... not the ring of the Chief of Staff," he said, puzzled. "That was lost, was it not?"

"Yes," Vester replied. "Given the man who wore it, good riddance I say. That is the new ring of the Cobalt Chief of Staff."

Aden smiled and slid on the ring that matched his necklace onto his right finger, symbols of the gods all connected, made of simple gold. "Thank you."

He accepted the last of the three packages, able to tell by the weight and feel that it was some sort of dagger. Aden unwrapped it slowly, conscious of the eyes upon him and more disconcerted than he liked to admit. He was used to going invisible much of the time and being visible only by his choosing.

When he had the dagger unwrapped, he could only stare in surprise. It looked almost exactly like Reinoehl's sword, right down to the jewel in the hilt. It even had words inscribed upon the blade. "I cannot accept this; surely it belongs to Reinoehl."

"It belonged to her Ladyship," said one of the officers. "She was always good to us, her Ladyship. She ran the Army as much as her husband. When she was taken, she entrusted her belongings to us, and so we can do as we see fit." He grinned. "Seeing as you already have her Ladyship's necklace..."

Aden laughed. "So long as no one starts addressing me as 'my lady'."

The soldiers all laughed. Vester smirked and said, "I make no such promises."

Rolling his eyes, Aden glanced again at the dagger. It was large for a dagger, not quite big enough to be a proper small sword. It was a miniature of Reinoehl's sword in nearly every detail. He read the words inscribed upon it in a beautiful script. *One small snowflake.*

"What is the full saying?" he asked, not recognizing it, but realizing it was clearly only part of some longer prayer or saying. Reinoehl's blade, he knew, had been inscribed with a prayer.

Vester replied, "One small snowflake may seem as nothing, but it is still proof of winter."

"I am honored to be counted amongst the snowflakes," Aden replied, and affixed the dagger to his sword belt. He nodded to them. "I thank you for the gifts."

Vester nodded and pushed away from the tree against which he had been leaning. "Good. Now we had all best return to work before the Lord General comes looking for us."

"Yes, Commander," the men all chorused and, with last farewells and smiles toward Aden, darted back to their duties.

Aden fell into step alongside Vester after they had all gone. "You should not have let them do such a thing. It was completely unnecessary."

Vester only laughed and clapped him on the back hard enough Aden almost stumbled forward. "We are about to launch our first real offensive against Salhara. A lot of men are going to die. I will give them whatever happiness they can find. If that includes embarrassing you, well so much the better."

Aden rolled his eyes. He started to make a retort about exacting revenge one day when he heard Reinoehl call his name.

Ignoring Vester's snickers, he veered off toward Reinoehl, who then turned and led them back to their tent. Aden had barely slipped inside when Reinoehl attacked him, mouth hot and hungry upon his, hands impatient for the touch of skin on skin.

Aden laughed in surprise, but offered no resistance—no, he was more than happy to surrender. "What—brought—this—"

"It is always there," Reinoehl replied, all but growling the words as he finally dispensed with Aden's tunic. The rest of his clothes swiftly followed suit, Reinoehl's joining them in a messy trail across the tent floor. Aden let himself be pushed back upon the bed in the farthest corner of the tent, laughing breathlessly. He gripped Reinoehl's shoulders as his mouth was ravaged, laughs turning into moans as Reinoehl wasted no time finding what he sought, slick fingers pushing inside him, twisting and stretching, the burn reminding Aden that it had been far too long since they'd had time for this.

They probably did not have time now, but then again, Reinoehl would not be calling Aden into his tent specifically for this purpose if they did not have at least a little free time.

Reinoehl's mouth slid across his skin, mouth to jaw to throat, shoulder to chest, nipping and licking and sucking, until Aden would not have cared if they were in the middle of camp doing this—not that this was much more private than being in the middle of camp. Even if they had tried to be more discreet, nothing ever stayed secret in an army camp for long.

He groaned, begged for more, as Reinoehl withdrew his fingers. Before he could move from begging to protesting, Reinoehl was pressing inside, hard and hot. He paused only to be certain Aden was all right before taking up a fast, needy pace that lasted forever and not nearly long enough.

Aden kissed Reinoehl hard to muffle his cry when he came, nails digging deep into Reinoehl's back. Reinoehl followed shortly after then collapsed on top of him, breathing heavily in the aftermath.

"How am I supposed to get any work done now?" Aden asked when he could finally speak again. "I'm going to be getting knowing looks all day."

Reinoehl bit his shoulder and did not look terribly apologetic as he sat up. "Like they don't already know why you have that mark on your neck."

"What mark?" Aden demanded, hands immediately going to his neck. The last time they had done anything had been several days before, and it had been little enough, though Reinoehl had put his mouth to good use.

Snickering at him, Reinoehl kissed him and then slid off the bed, moving around the tent to retrieve their clothes. "Other side."

"But it's been days!" Aden threw a pillow at him. "No wonder they all kept—you're a bastard. Learn a little bit of discretion, Lord General. There is no reason for us to go about *flaunting* it. Bragging is in poor taste. Krians, I swear. You're all insufferable."

Reinoehl only smirked and tossed Aden his clothes before swiftly donning his own. He stopped in the process of putting on his boots, forgetting them entirely as he retrieved something from the floor. "Where... where did you get this?" he asked softly, turning Aden's new dagger over and over in his hands.

"Your men gave it to me," Aden said slowly. "I told them it should go back to you, but they said it was all right to give it to me, and insisted I accept it."

"Of course it's all right, and you should accept it. I'm glad you did," Reinoehl replied. He drew the dagger from its sheath, moving it back and forth in the light to catch the script. "They had it made for her, shortly after she came to live at Eis, to help her feel more a part of the army. She took great care of them, my mother. I think it would please and amuse her that you are collecting all her belongings." He tossed the dagger to Aden, who caught it easily. "So why are the men giving you gifts?" he asked, smiling as he sat down behind his desk. "Should I be jealous?"

Aden rolled his eyes. "I should say yes, but I do not have the energy left to deal with you if you thought I was being serious." Reinoehl only smirked and said nothing. Retrieving the pillow from the floor, Aden lobbed it at him again.

A cough came from the tent entrance. "If the two of you are finished providing fresh gossip for the camp, I have the final reports from out scouts."

"Fresh gossip?" Reinoehl asked in amusement. "Surely our *arrangement* must be old gossip by now, Commander."

Vester shook his head. "Then the good Lord General has no concept of the fodder he provides and probably does not want to know."

"I don't know, it might be—"

"No," Aden interrupted. "I don't want to know." He already had a pretty good idea as to the things they would say and debate and bet upon.

Vester chuckled. "I also brought copies of the reports Pancraz received from his own scouts and word that they are a day and a half out from being in position for their own assault. Assuming nothing happens between now and tomorrow, we can launch our attack come dawn of the day after as planned." He dropped the papers on Reinoehl's desk.

Reinoehl picked them up, frowning in concentration as he read. "I do not know..." he said as he finished two of them. "Does it strike you that the Salharans have been a trifle too quiet? It is not as though we are hiding, or even could hide, our presence here."

"I agree, they've been too quiet," Aden said as he reached the desk, taking the papers when Reinoehl handed them over. "They know we are here; they must be planning something. We know they have been busy, even if the details remain a mystery. I can't imagine they would be doing anything except bracing for our assault, since the city in the valley stands no chance against us unless they can withstand a siege—which is highly doubtful, as they have never had to do it."

"We have seen that they managed to fortify it, but our scouts can't get close enough to learn anything of real value," Vester said. "Obviously they are preparing for us, so the quiet is not necessarily a bad thing, though I agree it's odd. Erich will be in place in less than two days, and we can properly coordinate our attacks. In the mean time, we have scouts out to keep watch should they attempt anything."

Reinoehl stood up. "I do not like it. Send someone to inform Erich we had to attack early."

Vester nodded. "Yes, Lord General. How much earlier are we going to attack?"

"I want my men ready to move within the hour."

"What!" Aden and Vester cried together. "Reinoehl—"

"Within the hour," Reinoehl repeated, tone brooking no argument. "We will go with the wave strategy—a traditional rise and fall."

"Try a hard rise and fall," Vester countered. "I think that will work better since they are so ill prepared for us, and they will most likely anticipate a rising wave and hold back for the third if they do anything. We can hit them hardest in the middle and only need a fall for the last wave."

"So be it," Reinoehl replied. "Ensure my strategists know it and refine it as necessary. I leave the dispersal of the troops to the two of you. Within the hour."

"Yes, Lord General," they both replied, snapping quick salutes.

Vester then immediately departed, barking orders before he was completely out of sight. Aden lingered a moment longer, reaching out as Reinoehl circled around the desk, twining his arms around Reinoehl's neck.

The kiss, slow and deep and thorough, must have lasted for some time, but to Aden it was over in all too brief a moment. His lips throbbed when they finally broke apart. "See you shortly, Lord General."

"Yes, Lord Chief. Go."

Aden went.

He'd already overseen to several smaller skirmishes, fought off ambushes and caught raiding parties, but this would be his first major battle as Chief of Staff, and he hoped to Goddess he did not screw it up. So different, being in the middle of the action, rather than a shadow slinking around the edges.

A hard rise and fall. That was a slight variation on a favorite Krian strategy. A wave typically meant three different waves of attack, the number of men in each wave sometimes the same, but more often varying. This method typically tricked or forced the enemy to waste resources and men on the first and second waves, leaving very little—if any—work for the final wave. If the enemy was a real threat, then a rising wave was used, which meant the number of men in each wave steadily increased, so that while the enemy weakened the Krians grew stronger.

A falling wave meant the number of men in each wave decreased; this was most often used for victories that were all but guaranteed, or when the total number of men was low and victory was most assured by striking hard and fast at the very beginning.

In a traditional rise and fall, the first wave held the lowest number of men, the second wave the highest, and the last the middle grade. A hard rise and fall simply put the lowest count at the end. It was the ideal situation for this situation, where a hard but steady strike was necessary. The troops in the first wave would be primarily light foot soldiers, able to get in quick and make a first solid strike, while the second wave would be predominantly heavy soldiers to take the city once the first wave had broken into it. If all went according to plan, the third wave served mostly as clean up.

Finding Vester and the strategists, Aden consulted with them to fine tune the dispersal and positioning of the troops. Then he went to deliver the orders to the necessary officers. By the time he had finished, his own horse and armor were ready, and he stood impatiently as his ensign strapped him into the lightweight steel and leather armor.

The heavy soldiers would be wearing a great deal more armor, but it was their duty to be as impervious as possible to the Salharan magic. They also carried a great deal more weaponry; it made them slower, too slow for the entire army to be issued such battle gear, but it also made them damned difficult to knock down.

Thanking his ensign, Aden mounted his horse and rode swiftly across camp to join Reinoehl and Vester. "All is ready, Lord General."

Reinoehl nodded, and Aden could see from the set of his face, the way he moved, that Reinoehl was all Sacred General; he would not ease from that mindset until the battle was won or lost. "Vester, you are going with the first wave. Aden, the final. I am going with the second. No arguing." He glared at them both to emphasize the point, and reluctantly Aden bit back any protest. It made sense—the battle was

crucial, the General should be in the second and most crucial strike. Vester had more experience, he would go with the first.

"Move out," Reinoehl said and rode off ahead.

Shooting a glare at his retreating back, Aden spun around and rode off to join those troops he would be leading in the third wave of the war. Handing out final orders, he then settled in for the hardest part of war: waiting.

The oldest of Kria's battle cries went up, echoing across the field as the soldiers took it up. "For crown, for country, for sword!" Then the drums signaled the first wave into motion, and the battle began.

By the time the second wave went, Aden was ready to scream with impatience and worry. Goddess, let nothing happen to Reinoehl or Vester.

As it was summer, full dark was still a few hours off, which worked to their benefit—by this point, the Salharans had probably begun to relax their guard, thinking no attack would come in the late afternoon, while it was still bright and warm. Reinoehl had been wise to strike now. Goddess and the Summer and Winter Princess favor that choice and look after them in the battle.

Just when he could not possibly wait a second longer—he saw the moment he should go, heard the drums up the beat. "Third wave," Aden bellowed, signaling his officers. "Move out." The officers echoed his command through the ranks, and Aden led them to the city that was already showing signs of defeat.

With a roaring battle cry, they attacked.

After that, everything became a blur of action and reaction. There was, as the strategy promised when properly done, very little left for his wave to do. More than anything, it was their duty to prevent escapes, to take over from the exhausted soldiers of the first two waves, bring everything to an end.

The barest sound of movement warned him, and Aden drew his dagger and raised his sword just in time to catch the man who had thrown himself from a nearby roof, clutching a butcher's knife, with brilliant violet eyes that turned dull and flat as Aden's dagger sank into his throat.

Throwing the body aside, Aden continued on his way to the heart of the city. He killed six, maybe seven, more men as he went—some soldiers, two townsfolk, and it was as he turned onto a main street with the central square in sight that the victory cry began to ripple through the ranks.

Kria had won. They had succeeded in taking the first main stronghold of Salhara. The heart of Salhara was not yet theirs, but it was now within reach. The tide of war had well and truly turned.

Wiping blood from his face, Aden joined in the cry, even if the bodies and the blood around him made it damned hard to be happy about anything. He dismounted as he reached the square and handed the horse off. Rounding up several soldiers, he set them to recovery duty, searching for survivors, capturing those who were Salharan, killing those who could not be saved, and collecting information and belongings from prisoners and corpses.

Then he started figuring out where they stood, setting other men to general clean up, discovering that someone else—hopefully Vester—had already set men to rounding up the townspeople, securing any remaining Salharan soldiers from the crowd.

Here and there a few Salharans still tried to fight, but the decisive flash of steel soon reduced them to sullen, fuming prisoners or added them to the body count. Anyone with eyes blue and higher were separated from the rest, and each would be secured in whatever isolated cells could be improvised. Unless they proved uncooperative and refused to take cleansers, in which case they would be killed.

Aden grimaced briefly, and stepped gingerly over and around the fallen, headed toward the tell-tale cluster of soldiers that said someone in authority was taking up a post and handing out orders. Goddess, he hoped it was Reinoehl. He had gone long enough without seeing his lover. But, if the Lord General was dead, the cry would have already gone out, and the noise and bustle of the soldiers said that the Lord General was very much alive indeed.

An ensign beckoned as they saw him, and two other soldiers stepped aside as he reached the massive double doors to what must be a fairly important building.

Inside, he stopped short. It was, indeed, a very important building—a temple. Despite his secret missions into Salhara, he had never been inside one of their temples. He had not even really seen them, except from a distance or in passing. Despite his knowledge of Salhara, he knew precious little of their religious customs. The temples seldom looked any different from other buildings on the outside, and he had always burned with curiosity to know more of the inside.

For all the outside had been unremarkable, the inside was stunning. The roof was made of real glass; the cost of installing so much and in so risky a place, must have been extraordinary. Apparently the rest of the army had agreed, for not so much as a single pane had been harmed. The glass was arranged in small square panels, set in wrought iron—so they could see the stars, he supposed.

The temple was beautiful, if austere, though Aden supposed that austerity was typical of all temples. The benches were peculiar looking, carved so that whoever sat in them would almost be laying down more than sitting up. The stars again, he realized. From the glass to the chairs, the entire temple was built around being able to watch the stars. He wondered what it meant, that a nation so in love with the heavens relied so heavily upon an earthy drug. He wondered if such a thing had ever occurred to them, and what they thought about.

He must be more tired than he realized, for his mind to wander down such paths. He had more important things upon which to focus his remaining energy.

Everything in the temple was black—stone, wood, fabric, the only relief in the dark gray of wrought iron ornamentation. Across the back, at what he supposed must be the Salharan version of an altar, was an elaborate tapestry of the stars. They were connected, some of them, forming odd, nonsensical shapes. They must mean something to the Salharans, but his own knowledge had never gone so far, and it really was amazing that his lack of knowledge in this area had not gotten him caught, his few forays into Salhara.

Religion was not so strict a matter in Illussor, and the Krians were entirely practical. Salhara, took it far more seriously, and perhaps that meant very privately. He could not recall it ever being discussed on his forays. Hmm. Strange that he had never really noticed, or appreciated that, sooner.

An ensign beckoned to him from a doorway off to the right of the altar, and he held the door open as Aden reached it, saluting and positively beaming. "Excellent victory, Chief Aden."

"Yes, and you as well," Aden said, returning the smile and briefly clasping the man's shoulder. "How is our Lord General?"

The ensign started to roll his eyes, then recalled to whom he was speaking. "Um. He was injured, Chief—but not too badly!" the ensign hastened to add when he saw Aden's dismay. "Just bad enough he's going to be, um, very...."

"Aggravating?" Aden finished dryly. "Well, it cannot be worse than dealing with the man after breaking him free of a birdcage." He clapped the soldier on the shoulder again. "Excellent work, again. Go and assist outside, I will take care of our growly Lord General."

"Yes, Chief!" the ensign replied, looking relieved. "Good luck, Chief." He bolted off, not giving Aden a chance to change his mind.

Stifling a laugh that did not really work to bury his worry, Aden continued down the hallway. Halfway down it, he was able to follow the sound of Reinoehl snarling angrily at the healer to hurry up or else. He laughed openly this time, most of his worry easing, for only a man who was going to live could be so damned grouchy and ungrateful about it.

Chapter Twenty Five

Reinoehl snarled at the healer, "Winter's tits, man! Could you possibly do this any slower?"

"Yes, I could," the healer replied. "If the Lord General would hold still as I keep requesting, however, it might go much faster."

Making a face, Reinoehl subsided into silence, gritting his teeth as the healer continued to stitch the deep cut that ran over his left shoulder and just barely onto his back. "Where are my Chief and Commander?" he barked at the nearest cluster of soldiers, and why were they all standing around and not doing anything useful? He was just about to ask them that, very loudly, when a voice answered his first question.

"Here," Aden said, entirely too much amusement in the reply. Reinoehl felt some of his tension ease to see Aden, tired and a bit scraped up, but otherwise unharmed. Extending his free hand, he took Aden's and held fast. "How is it out there?"

"Bad," Aden replied. "But far better than it could have been. What happened to you?"

"A nasty bit of arcen slicing," Reinoehl replied dismissively, even if it hurt something fierce, and he really wished the damned healer would *finish* already. He hissed in pain, not quite able to prevent the sound, as the bastard took his time slathering on the stinging ointment that would speed healing even if it hurt damn near as bad as the wound itself. "I'll be fine by tomorrow."

He ignored the way the healer rolled his eyes and bent to retrieve his discarded tunic and under tunic from the floor—and bellowed in protest when the healer yanked him back.

"Lord General," the healer said tersely. "A moment more of your time, please."

Reinoehl glared. "What?"

But the healer only ignored him, keeping a tight grip on his arm as he turned instead to Aden. "The Lord General suffered a deep wound to his left shoulder. I have stitched it up and bound it, but the shoulder will not be of much use for several days. He must use it as little as possible and avoid tearing the stitches. No heavy lifting, though no lifting at all would be better. It will need to be bandaged daily. I will leave the necessary supplies with you, Chief."

Reinoehl scowled. "Why are you talking to him? I'm right here, and it's my damned shoulder. It will be fine in a day, two at most."

The healer rolled his eyes again. "I am ignoring you because you will in turn ignore everything I say." He turned back to Aden. "I will also leave a powder, should his pain become unbearable. A small pinch in a cup of tea will suffice; never add more than two pinches, and do not take it more than thrice in a day."

"As if I need to be drugged for a pathetic wound such as this," Reinoehl sneered, fed up with them both. Honestly, it hurt something fierce, but it was not *that* bad. He had endured far worse.

Aden accepted the supplies from the healer and gave Reinoehl a look. "He'll behave, or else. Thank you, Master Healer."

"Chief," the healer replied, respectfully bowing his head before departing to tend other patients.

Reinoehl shifted his glare to Aden once they were alone.

"You know," Aden said, "it should have occurred to me that you would make a poor patient. Given you were sore and exhausted and grief-stricken when we met, and you backhanded me—definitely a bad patient. I wonder if this powder will keep you sedated."

Making a face at the reminder of how he had behaved when they had first met, Reinoehl bent to retrieve his clothes again, standing slowly, refusing to give any indication that his shoulder was killing him. The very last thing he needed was for Aden to worry, or for him and everyone else to mother him to death. "I'll be fine. It's a minor cut."

"Mmm," Aden said, obviously not believing a word he said. He put a hand against Reinoehl's chest, to stop him when Reinoehl would have strode past. "I had just a fever, and you would not let me do anything."

"That was completely different," Reinoehl snapped, not needing the reminder of his far more recent bad behavior, and how close Aden had come to dying because of it. "You nearly died. I simply did not dodge quickly enough. They are completely different situations."

Aden rolled his eyes and planted both of his hands on Reinoehl's chest when Reinoehl tried again to move away to clean up and get dressed. "How would you feel if you walked in to see me getting stitched up, and I said it was trivial?"

Reinoehl sighed at that, unable to argue the point any longer, even if Aden was being completely ridiculous. He really had endured worse; why was no one bothering to remember that? He was the Cobalt General for Winter's sake; did they think he needed to be fussed over to death for one stupid cut?

But he dropped his clothes again to lift both hands to cup Aden's head, stubbornly ignoring the way his shoulder screamed in protest at the gesture, pulling Aden forward to kiss him briefly, but thoroughly. "I am glad to see you are uninjured."

"Yes," Aden replied. "If I had to recover from my own wounds while contending with your growling, the entire army would probably kill us both."

"Probably," Vester agreed from the doorway.

Aden immediately frowned in concern, watching the way Vester limped further into the room, favoring his right leg. "What's wrong?"

Vester waved the concern away. "I twisted something when three of the bastards managed to get me off my horse. I'll be fine in a day or three. The healer already gave me something to help it. Unlike the Lord General, I listen to what the healer says. If I had a lover, I would listen to him as well."

Reinoehl rolled his eyes at the words and once more retrieved his clothes, then moved to the small basin of water someone had managed to bring him, washing up before redressing. Then he turned to Vester, who for all his professions of taking advice, was still stubbornly standing. "Sit," he ordered. "Report."

When it looked as though Vester would argue sitting while his Lord General stood, Aden grabbed him and pushed him down, muttering a few choice words about stubborn sword heads. Settled, Vester finally reported. "We have the city residents secured, and the high level users are either caged or secured and awaiting caging, which is being devised as quickly as we can manage. The residents we have confined to their homes or to public buildings as necessary with guards spread heavily."

"I've already set several to recovery," Aden said, picking up where Vester left off. "I've got more on general clean up, and will set more to moving the camp here—unless you wanted to continue maintaining the army outside the city."

"No, move everyone in. We can withstand a siege if it should come to that. I do not think it will; the Salharans should not have any choice but to do what we are forcing—flee inward, to the capital, where we can take them out in one final siege." Reinoehl gingerly tested his shoulder, ignoring the warning looks Aden cast him. "Get me the final reports. I want my strategists here first thing in the morning, as well as the both of you, so we can plan our next move."

Vester yawned, obviously fighting exhaustion now that the battle was won. Aden wondered if he still had trouble sleeping at night and wondered how in the world one person ran on so little sleep. He hated when his duties forced him to stay awake for days at a time. Hated it. "Best to wait and see how Lord General Erich's battle goes."

"Win or lose," Reinoehl countered, "we'll have to press on. If we pull out now, we put ourselves and Saffron and Verdant in greater danger. Anyway, I cannot see Erich losing easily, and he has an excellent advantage in his Commander."

"Yes," Vester agreed. "Salharan, and a very good Commander, especially for one new to the position and who probably did not expect to ever hold such a position. I vaguely recall him from his time as part of the Kaiser's personal retinue. He seems... steadier now, than he did before."

Aden looked briefly amused by something, but the expression was gone so quickly Reinoehl almost thought he had imagined it—certainly Vester had not noticed. He raised one brow at Aden in silent query, and Aden gave the barest shake of his head. Later, then.

"Try to see the men get as much done as possible before dark," Reinoehl said. "We do not want anyone or anything outside the protection of the walls we have gained."

Vester gave him a look, but stood slowly. "Full dark is just under two hours away, Lord General. I will see what they can manage, but I do not think it will be much."

"I'll go," Aden said, glaring at both of them. "I am uninjured, so I will do the walking and the commanding. You do not need to worsen that leg. Sit and rest it." He spun to face Reinoehl. "If I catch *you* holding so much as a handkerchief, you will be sleeping alone for your own good until the stitches come out. Understood?"

"I do not think sleeping alone would motivate me—"

"Then stay here and do not try to use that shoulder," Aden retorted.

"Yes, Lord General," Reinoehl said dryly, ignoring the sudden coughing fit of the orderly who had just entered, bringing two additional chairs.

Vester did not bother to hide his laughter. "Then, Aden, send the men here to me to give their reports. I can take reports easily enough sitting down, and that will free you to see to the moving of the camp into the city."

"I will do that," Aden replied and, with a last warning look for each of them, departed.

Reinoehl made a face at his back, but sat down in the chair that had been brought for him, hiding a grimace of pain as his shoulder flared up again. He was not looking forward to attempting to get some sleep with it hurting the way it did. He thanked the hovering orderly and dismissed him, then sighed into the silence.

"We fought well," Vester said. "The counts are still coming in, but they do seem to indicate that we have not lost nearly as many as we feared we would." Vester did not bother to add that even one loss was one loss too many—but it was war, and losses were inevitable. "We should definitely double the watches from here on in. Salhara knows we are a true threat now, when before we have only been a serious nuisance. They are not ours yet, but we now stand a chance of taking rather than being taken."

Reinoehl nodded in agreement, mouth quirking briefly. "To think it might not be so had a little Illussor spy not deigned to save me."

Vester nodded in agreement.

It was not even arrogance speaking, to say his living made that much of a difference in the war—it simply did matter. Bad enough they had been betrayed, and his parents lost. The Sacred Generals were nearly as revered by the people as the Kaiser himself. They bore the colors and symbols of Kria's gods; if even one of them had fallen with no true replacement to step in—as he had for his father—then it might have simply broken whatever spirit Kria had left. Losing the Kaiser had been bad enough, and he simply did not know how the rest of the country was taking the news of the marriage—if anyone outside the armies even really knew.

Aden's saving him had probably made all the difference in the world for the Cobalt, though he did not doubt for a moment Vester would have done all he possibly could to drive back the Salharan threat. "He saved Saffron, as well, did you know?"

When Vester shook his head, Reinoehl recounted the tale Aden had told him of the Salharans he had encountered and killed.

Vester shook his head again when he had finished, chuckling softly. "I am glad your little spy is on our side, Lord General."

"You and me both," Reinoehl replied.

"I have no doubt you are *very* glad," Vester said with a smirk and started to say more, but he drowned out his own word with a sudden, massive yawn.

"You should sleep," Reinoehl said. "It seems as though you are tired enough to manage it, so go. We do not want you to finally collapse at the worst possible moment."

Vester sighed, but nodded. "I am sorry, Lord General. Believe me, I would like nothing more than to sleep the night through, but it simply does not happen."

"Do not be sorry," Reinoehl said gruffly. "Just go get some sleep." He hesitated, but he needed to help, for the sake of the army—and wanted to help, for the sake of a friend. "Is it your brother who keeps you awake?"

"Yes," Vester said, closing his eyes and bowing his head. He braced his elbows on his thighs, and rubbed tiredly at his forehead. "All I see is him hanging there. Over and over again, and it drives me into waking and does not let me sleep for more than a couple of hours at best. I have killed hundreds of men and witnessed more executions than I care to count—some of those hangings. All those deaths were more brutal by far than my brother's, but I cannot stop seeing him hanging there."

Reinoehl wished he knew what to say. He still saw his father, brutally beheaded, the body tossed away and the head driven onto a spike. He had never felt so low and wretched and broken in his life as when he was strung up in that birdcage and forced to watch his father die, but it was a war, perhaps that made a difference. He had not had time to grieve, past those endless hours in the birdcage. He also was exacting revenge with every Salharan killed, finding justice with every battle won. Being busy, having an enemy to focus on, vengeance to seek—those made it easier to cope with his father's death.

Suicide, however, was not the same thing. Reinoehl had faced much death in his life; it was the soldier's closest companion. There was always a soldier who made that terrible choice, here and there, for try as they might sometimes one went unnoticed until too late, but he could not fathom finding a loved one so, and after so terrible a betrayal...

"It is because you blame yourself," he finally said. "As hard as it is to accept, it was not your fault."

"He was my little brother, and I did not see how deeply his pain ran. Worse, he did not feel he could come to me with it. Perhaps I do not hold all the blame, Lord General, but I do hold some of it." Vester stood up slowly, grimacing in pain. "I will go and attempt to sleep for a little while."

Reinoehl stifled another sigh as he was left alone, wishing he had been better at easing Vester's pain, but he suspected it would take someone other than he to manage it. Standing up, he went to find

someone to bring him food and drink; with Vester asleep—hopefully for several hours—Reinoehl would have to take the reports until Aden returned.

Six hours later, he was ready to sleep for a month straight himself. He dropped his quill and pushed his papers away, wishing that just once the paperwork might be lost in the chaos of battle. Somehow, the paperwork always survived.

He sat back with a hiss of pain as his shoulder protested the movement and picked up his goblet, draining the last of his wine. Then he stood up, wondering where in the name of the gods Aden had gone and when he would finally return.

Restless, he paced back and forth across the room. It was an office or salon or something, at the back of the temple. Interesting things, Salharan temples. So...simple and unassuming, minus the glass ceiling. He could not believe that—the expense must have been great, and this was only a small temple in a small city. He wondered how such a temple might appear in the capital. Who paid for the glass, and was it provided to the peasants? But no, they would have seen such a thing in the few villages they had already raided. More likely, the peasants worshipped outside. Well, it was no matter. They could worship their stars in a field or through glass, the efforts would come to nothing. Salhara would surrender or be crushed.

Autumn Prince, he could not wait to return home and see how Saffron and Verdant had fared on their end. The last word he had received, they were preparing to abandon their hiding places once and for all and wage war with all the force and might which made Kria so infamous.

He looked up at the sound of feet, but knew even before he saw that it was not Aden—too many men, and their steps all wrong.

Instead, it proved to be his top five Scout Leaders. They all saluted, the most senior of them stepping forward to say, "Lord General. Chief Aden sent us here to receive our latest orders from Commander Vester. We did not mean to disturb you."

"Vester is indisposed," Reinoehl replied, waving the words away. "I want three teams to head for the capital, all by very different routes—definitely one sticking to the main trade routes, the other teams less obvious paths. Report back in not more than three weeks. I want another six teams dispersed to the surrounding villages, two more headed back over the mountains to see if word of home cannot be obtained."

The men all saluted again and chorused a resounding, "Yes, Lord General," then immediately departed to see the orders dispersed amongst their ranks.

Barely had they left when another soldier came dashing in, out of breath and with a fresh cut running the length of one cheek. That was an arcan-cut; blade cuts had a different look and feel to them. "What's wrong?" Reinoehl demanded.

"Lord General," the soldier gasped out. "Trouble in the square. We've subdued the magic users and are force feeding them cleansers, but their mayor is demanding to see you, and we could not locate the Chief or Commander."

"I will come," Reinoehl said and straightened his clothes, rolling down his sleeves and smoothing out the tunic. Then he smoothed his hair as best he could and made certain his sword was ready to draw in a moment. He called one of his orderlies and gave orders for a bath to be ready upon his return. Then he finally turned to the impatient, harried soldier. "Lead the way."

The soldier did not argue or hesitate, but turned sharply around and dashed off again, forcing Reinoehl to keep up because he would be damned if he told a foot soldier to slow down because he was in pain.

When they reached it, the square was still rife with tension, anger, and he could tell that if not properly handled, the entire mess would explode. He drew his sword, and everyone froze as they realized who had arrived.

Reinoehl addressed the puffed up, overly plump bird who could only be the mayor. "What seems to be the problem here?"

"Your presence!" the man spat. "How dare you—"

"How dare we?" Reinoehl cut in, laughing coldly. "How dare you do all that you have done. Even if my daring was wrong, I do not answer to the screaming fits of filthy Salharan peasants. You and your men will subside and do as you are told, or you will be killed. It's as simple as that."

The man turned red, and actually jerked free of the soldiers holding him. Reinoehl motioned them back, when they would have gone after the fool again. "Do you know who I am, sir? I am no peasant, and you have no right invading this town, and when my uncle hears of this, he will show you the force of the Salharan Army, mark my words you ignorant sword head!"

Reinoehl laughed again and sheathed his sword. "Just who is your uncle, to threaten a Sacred General of Kria? Does it look as though he has been able to stop me thus far? No. I assure you that if your uncle headed the Brotherhood itself, he would not be able to stop me."

He would not have seen that slight flinch if he had not been watching the man so closely. Reinoehl smirked and motioned to the guards. "Arrest the good mayor here and persuade him by whatever means necessary to tell us all about his uncle in the Brotherhood."

"No!" the man screamed, but he was abruptly cut off as Reinoehl punched him hard enough to lay him out cold on the ground.

"Take him away," he said and glanced at the other Salharans who had come to cluster around their mayor. "Search them all again, right down to the skin," Reinoehl ordered.

"Stupid," said a soldier idly, as he and three others worked on the fat mayor. "Why would he even try something like that? Did he think revealing he was related to the Brotherhood would gain him anything but the interrogation he is about to face?" His comrades sneered in agreement.

Reinoehl frowned. "But he did believe it would matter. Think about it—to these people, the power of the Brotherhood is absolute. We have seen many indications that they believe they live in safety solely because of the Brotherhood. In their minds, their leaders have always kept us back. They have no way of

knowing that it is mostly a matter of Kria never wanting to launch such a full scale war that has kept them from suffering as they are now. If they are in trouble now, still they do not believe the Brotherhood would ever let them down. Once that faith starts to crumble..." He trailed off and shook his head.

War was never a pleasant thing, but at least before it had nearly always been Kria defending its territory, or fighting bitterly over the Regenbogen before it was taken once and for all by Illussor. Now... now they were on the offensive, and it was the sort of offensive that would eventually reach the point where no prisoners would be taken. The war had become too bitter, too costly, to do anything but grow worse—it was all or nothing.

Perhaps it was getting a taste of that which had driven the townsfolk to act so rashly.

He motioned forward the officer who would be in charge of the interrogation. "Do not really hurt him; a civilian could not take what we would normally do. I think he will break easily, anyway, and if his uncle really is tied to the Brotherhood, the man would not be stupid enough to let such a loudmouthed relative know anything of importance. Simply use him to make a point, to keep the people quiet."

"Yes, Lord General," the officer replied, bowing in deep respect before he turned sharply on his heel and strode away.

Reinoehl looked back toward the assembled Salharans. "Do they speak any Krian?"

"No, Lord General. Only the mayor, so far as we have been able to ascertain," answered a nearby foot soldier.

"Find Aden," he said. "I need him here immediately; his Salharan is probably the best in camp." He motioned to the men about to take the villagers away. "Leave them for a moment."

He waited impatiently for Aden to be found and brought, and had just started to worry that something had gone horribly wrong when at last he saw Aden's distinct features appear.

"Yes, Lord General?" Aden asked. He looked exhausted, shadows beneath his eyes, filthy from head to foot, but he managed a brief smile of greeting, before turning serious.

"Translate for me," Reinoehl said. "My Salharan is nothing like yours, and I want the message to be perfectly clear. Inform them that we have no interest in hurting anyone, but we do not want trouble and will not hesitate to enforce good behavior. If they behave and do as they are told, we will relax the guards slightly and give them more freedom to move around. Anyone caught with arcen will be killed immediately, be that person man, woman, or child. Anyone caught trying to sneak out of the city will be imprisoned, possibly killed."

Aden nodded and stepped close to the Salharans, then began immediately to translate. A few of the Salharans asked questions, though Reinoehl could not follow them, but Aden answered quickly and decisively enough. Several minutes later, they fell silent and did not protest when the soldiers finally led them away.

"What did they want to know?" he asked.

"What would happen when we left, if we were going to destroy the city, more in that line. I assured them they would not be losing their homes, that our goal is not to destroy them. We merely want them to leave us alone. That seemed to silence them—at least for now."

Reinoehl grunted. "Come, then, it's extremely late; I am astonished they were even awake."

"Hoping for us to let our guard down? Which it would seem we did, if they managed to attack with arcen and break free of their cells—" He started to turn around and go head hunting, but Reinoehl snatched him back.

"Leave it until morning," he said. "Everyone is exhausted, you included, and no one is in any shape to administer discipline or accept punishment. Beat in heads tomorrow. For now, come with me, or I shall have to bathe alone. I am under strict orders not to lift so much as a handkerchief, you know, and I fear what would happen or not happen to me were I to lift a washing cloth."

Aden laughed softly. "*Nothing* would happen."

"That is what I am afraid of," Reinoehl replied. "Come, you have subordinates to handle the rest until morning. We have a bath waiting for us."

"That sounds almost as good as bed," Aden said, relenting, walking alongside him back to the temple, through the narrow hallway to the rooms at the back, then up a short flight of steps to the room that had been commandeered for his—their—use.

Silence fell for a few minutes as they walked, but letting his thoughts wander reminded Reinoehl of something. "So, that look of amusement when Vester spoke of Pancraz. What was that about?"

"What? Oh," Aden said, looking amused again. "Unless I am mistaken, I believe Pancraz is interested in being far more than a brother in arms and friend to our Commander."

Reinoehl lifted his brows at that then shook his head. "Intriguing. How did you learn that?"

"Watching Pancraz," Aden replied. "He shows all the signs of it and does some hard looking when he thinks no one is paying him any attention."

"I wonder why he does not speak, then," Reinoehl said thoughtfully. "But I guess it is not our place to interfere, unless it becomes a problem. A pity, for I owe Vester much teasing on that front."

Aden smiled and took his hand, squeezing it briefly before letting go again as they reached the temple. He laughed as they reached their room. "I see they did not even bother to ask if my stuff should go with yours."

"Why should they?" Reinoehl asked. "You obviously are mine; where else would you go?"

"Where else indeed," Aden said with a laugh and began to strip off his clothes, casting them aside before he moved to the pails of water set beside the fireplace. "I miss your hot spring at Eis."

Reinoehl agreed with a grimace. "I do hope that in our new country, the Krian bathing traditions become the standard."

"I do not doubt it will," Aden replied. "It will be in my lands, one way or another."

"Where are your lands?" Reinoehl asked, scowling when it hurt too much to get his clothes back off again, but not completely dissatisfied at the touch of Aden's hands as he helped remove Reinoehl's clothes.

Aden smiled. "Near the coast, very far south of here. Beautiful country; we do a great deal of wine in addition to the more usual crops, and of course the fishing is wonderful when we are not troubled by pirates."

"I would like to see it, sometime," Reinoehl said.

"We can go when the war is over, before we have to return home."

Reinoehl blinked. "Home?"

Aden frowned, confused. "Eis."

"Oh," Reinoehl replied and kissed him soundly, happier than he could have thought possible at hearing Aden so absently refer to Eis as home.

"Stop that," Aden said. "I am entirely too tired, but I would probably try anyway."

Reinoehl laughed. "I'm too tired to tempt, believe me. I was just agreeing that it would be nice to be home."

Smiling, Aden walked him to the fire and scrubbed them both clean, taking care with Reinoehl's wound. Then they sat briefly in the enormous bathing tub someone had managed to find, though it did not stay hot nearly long enough.

Finally, Reinoehl gave up and climbed out, and with Aden's help, managed to pull on an older tunic and leggings in which to sleep. Then he climbed into bed, yawning widely. But when he reached out for Aden, he found only air, as Aden twisted away and moved to the small table at the foot of the bed. He poured two cups of tea.

"Don't you dare—" Reinoehl scowled as Aden ignored him and blithely deposited the powder from the healer in one of the cups.

Aden brought the tea to him, ignoring the glares. "I want you to sleep. We need you alert even more than we need Vester, and if he was man enough to find sleep when he could, I expect you to take this so that the pain you are denying does not keep you awake all night."

"Yes, Lord General," Reinoehl muttered, but at a pointed look, obediently took the cup and drank down the tea, grimacing at the overly bitter taste to it. "I resent taking any sort of drug, you aggravating pale face."

"Stop acting like a five year old," Aden retorted. "It's just a mild herb; I used it myself a time or two when I was wounded."

Reinoehl ignored him, mostly because he was simply too tired to bicker even over the fact that just because he was being treated like a five year old did not mean he was acting like one. He closed his eyes, no longer able to keep them open and heard and felt Aden blow out the candles.

Then the covers shifted, letting in cool air, but a moment later a warm body pressed against his, the feel of Aden's hair soft and familiar, his skin more welcome still, and Reinoehl could not entirely begrudge an herb that let him enjoy his lover instead of work hard to deny he was in pain.

Chapter Twenty Six

"How are you?" Ingolf asked as he crossed the room, boots soundless on the deep, plush rugs that covered the floor of the Queen's Sunroom.

Reni laughed and set down her sketchpad, smoothing a hand over her swollen belly. "I'm fine. We're fine."

Ingolf sat down beside her, and kissed her briefly, tasting hints of the tea she always took to steady herself when pain and exhaustion became too great. He looked at her critically. She looked tired, with the barest shadows under her eyes that powder had not been able to cover. He knew she did not sleep well, and that she tired easily—that she was pushing herself too hard, despite the doctors having ordered her into confinement the moment she reached six months in the pregnancy. "You are not fine."

"I am as fine as I need to be," Reni replied firmly, and picked her sketchpad up again, sketching idly as she continued speaking. "Do you hope for a son, a daughter?"

"I hope my wife lives through the labor," Ingolf said. "A child should have a proper mother."

"It will have a good father," Reni said, and kissed him again, then turned away with a soft sigh. "You could be happy about it. We both know how it will end, Ingolf, you could at least be happy about the child."

"Of course I am happy," Ingolf said. "As happy as I can be. Mostly I am scared. I do not want to gain one only to lose the other. It is hard to be jubilant about that, Reni."

She nodded, and sighed softly again, all her weariness for a moment plain upon her face. Ingolf slipped an arm around her shoulders, and held her close, kissing her brow. "I do not care if it is a son or a daughter," he said. "It is our child, that is all that matters to me."

Smiling, she leaned against him for a moment longer, then pushed away and said firmly, "Enough of that. You look as though you are going riding."

Ingolf sighed, but obediently let the matter drop. "Yes. I am heartily sick of being stuck inside. I thought to go riding, clear my head, get away from the yammering for an hour or so."

Reni laughed softly. "They will never stop harassing you to form a new council, Ingolf."

"Then they will continue to suffer," Ingolf replied. "When I form it, my council will include men from every country, so that my new nation is fairly represented on all fronts. In the mean time, Illussor can suffer. They should be more concerned with the war and our men, anyway."

"They are," Reni assured him. "But, they also fear what will happen when the war ends, and they must all learn to play nicely together. What will be the official language? What laws will change? What will become outlawed? What of religion? How will you rearrange the land allotments, who will gain and who will lose?"

Ingolf rubbed his forehead, his seemingly constantly headache flaring up greater than ever. "I know," he said, letting his hand fall away, "but harassing me about it will achieve them nothing. I refuse to make such important decisions before all parties have a fair say."

"You worry too much," she said fondly. "Do not let them get to you. If anyone can rule the new nation being formed, it is you. Have you thought at all about who will form your new council? I can at least seed a few subtle rumors that decisions are being made, and they will be liked."

Smiling, Ingolf reached for the portfolio he had brought with him. "You do have a gift for seeing that just the right thing gets spread around. I have thought about it, a great deal in fact. I definitely want Generals. Kria has always done well with a mix of generals and politicians. The Illussor council was composed entirely of men who have no such experience. My plan is to put twelve Generals in place, four to each country. The same number of politicians. Lands will be redistributed accordingly, with more minor officials beneath each of those twenty-four, to serve in other capacities."

Reni nodded, looking pleased. "A council of twenty-four, spread across the new country, and you to break any ties in the voting. I like it. You have put a great deal of thought into the matter, that is easy to see. Have you given any thought as to who you will appoint? Salhara, obviously, will have to wait until we actually take it...and Kria I would think you would keep your four Sacred Generals." She giggled. "Poor Erich, he will not be pleased. He always hated the council."

"I have a few ideas, but I will gratefully take any suggestions or recommendations you might have," he said, and handed over the portfolio. "These are the ones I am currently considering, but I am certain you will think of things that did not occur to me."

She smiled, pleased to have some real work to do. It drove her crazy, he knew, to sit mostly idle day after and day.

He kissed her again before standing. "Try to stay out of trouble while I am gone."

She nodded reflexively, already immersed in his notes and lists. "Can I interview a few of them?" she asked. "Not giving away the true purpose, of course."

"Do as you like," Ingolf replied, smiling fondly. "Only, do not push yourself too hard, hm?"

"I won't," she said absently, calling for her maid to bring her writing implements.

Chuckling, glad to see her happy and distracted, Ingolf departed. Getting out of the Queen's Sunroom was easy—getting out of the palace was quite a different matter. Reaching the stables and his waiting horse took him another hour, one person after another either requiring his attention for some matter or simply taking advantage of a chance to chat briefly with the Kaiser—which, for whatever reason, they seemed to be calling him. It had been King for awhile, but more and more they all seemed to prefer

Kaiser. He could not yet say whether it was to erect some sort of barrier, or a simple kindness, or a show of acceptance and loyalty. Everyone's feelings on the matter was entirely too complex, especially when it was clear to many now that the Queen was not in the best of health.

Finally, however, he broke free of the palace and strode quickly to the stable before anyone else could waylay him. Sepp was waiting patiently when he arrived, holding the reins of two horses—a beautiful brown mare for himself, and a steel gray stallion of which Ingolf had become fond.

"I was beginning to think I must come and save you," Sepp said, handing over the reins of Ingolf's stallion.

"So was I," Ingolf replied, and swung up into the saddle. "How are you, Sepp? What do you know that people would prefer I do not?"

Sepp snorted. "Sire, why would anyone say such things in front of your personal bodyguard?"

"Oh, is that the title you have given yourself now?" Ingolf asked, amused.

"I was, and am, part of your personal retinue, Kaiser. It is merely a retinue of one for the moment. Though, as to that, it might behoove you to try and find an Illussor to work alongside me in that capacity. When they do not realize I am around to overhear them, that is one of the things of which they complain—that you only trust a fellow Krian with your life, and so obviously do not trust your new people."

"I suppose that it would not occur to them you are my friend," Ingolf said with a sigh, and signaled his horse into motion, leading them outside the grounds of the castle proper and off into the royal forest. "Have you any suggestions, in regards to that?"

Sepp frowned, clearly vexed. "No, though it is not for lack of trying. For all they share an astonishing number of our customs, they still seem too soft. I could be judging wrong, of course, but thus far I have not encountered anyone I would trust with your life."

"Then the matter will wait until you do," Ingolf said with finality. "What else?" They rode at a steady pace which allowed them to converse, and Ingolf listened to the problems which Sepp had rooted out, that no one else would bring to his attention for one reason or another. It all made him tired, but most were things he could fix, and that brought some small measure of peace and satisfaction. So many problems he could not fix, it was good to have some he could.

"I'm not even certain I know what else I am scheduled to do today," he said as the conversation wound down. "I suppose I should listen more closely to what my secretaries tell me."

Sepp laughed. "You never listen to anyone." His lips pursed thoughtfully. "Except, perhaps, Prince Erich."

Ingolf's hands tightened on the reins, and he relaxed them again only with an effort. Hearing Erich's name was always like a blow to the gut. There were too many emotions there for him to deal with, and a constant ache that time only seemed to worsen, not ease. It was not helped at all by the knowledge that Erich was deep in Salhara, waging open war. If the Salharans wanted anyone dead, it was Erich, who

flew a banner Kria had seen for generations and was inspiring the Krians in a way that Salhara could not fight. "We have not heard any recent news."

"Not from Scarlet and Cobalt," Sepp agreed reluctantly. "They are too far into Salhara to get word back to us easily. But the troops we sent to assist Verdant seem to be making a great difference. In a few more months, hopefully by year's end, the Winter Palace and Kria will be our once and for all."

Ingolf sighed. "Any further word on the ambush which devastated Verdant?" Any word should naturally be brought directly to him, but Sepp had lately shown a knack for learning things.

"No," Sepp replied. "Only what we already knew—more traitors in the ranks. Hopefully, they have all now been flushed."

"One can only hope," Ingolf said quietly. A hard blow had struck Verdant a month ago, when a Salharan ambush had managed to assault the camp in the dead of night. Direct Brotherhood involvement was suspected, as only they could singlehandedly kill so many so quickly, but little to no information had so far been obtained. "When will this war be over, Sepp?"

"Not soon enough," Sepp said, "but hopefully by winter. By next spring, hopefully your greatest problems will be taxes and making everyone speak the same language."

Ingolf groaned. "Which one?" he complained. "I will—" he was cut off by a hard shove, and tumbled from his horse, landing painfully in a heap on the ground. He lay there a moment, briefly disoriented. Then he attempted to stand, but a snarled command from Sepp to stay down kept him in place.

Then Sepp was standing in front of him, in a protective stance, sword draw—and an arrow protruding from the back of his left shoulder. If it had struck any lower, Ingolf realized with a sick, cold feeling, Sepp would be dead.

"Sepp—"

Another snarl, which Ingolf took to mean 'shut up'.

"*At least four of them*," Sepp said in a low tone, speaking Krian. "*I do not know why they are not firing again.*"

Then there was a series of shouts, and the brush moved erratically as some sort of scuffle ensured—then one by one, three bodies tumbled into the small clearing. Two were definitely dead, but the third seemed still to be breathing.

A second later, another figure stepped out, and dragged the still-breathing man to his feet. It was, Ingolf realized, a woman. Definitely Illussor...and she bore a passing resemblance to Reni, though there was something a bit harder to this woman's features. Given she had just killed two men, and the easy, familiar way she held her sword, it was not hard to determine where she had gained that hard edge.

Her hair was braided and wrapped around her head, and was that shade of pale blonde unique to Illussor. A small scar cut along the bottom of her chin—that could not have been a fun wound to

acquire. Freckles dusted her nose and cheeks, and he bet she could use them to look deceptively soft when she chose.

Before he or Sepp could say anything, she dragged the captured man along at sword point, threw him to the ground and, keeping a dagger at his throat, knelt and bowed her head low. "Kaiser. I am sorry your man was wounded. I thought I had them, but they managed to get a shot off at the last moment."

"I'm fine," Sepp said, though he looked more than a little pale from the pain. "Who are you?"

"Elena DeVry," the woman said, head still bowed.

DeVry...DeVry..he knew that name..."Oh!" Ingolf said, surprised. "You are descended from Sol DeVry?"

"Yes, Majesty," Elena replied, the pride in her voice unmistakable. "I have that honor."

"What are you doing here?" Ingolf asked, baffled, then added, "Rise, please. You saved my life, you need kneel before me."

Elena grimaced, but slowly stood. "Your man saved your life, Majesty. I just botched an attempt at doing that."

"No," Sepp said. "You are probably why they moved enough I saw them in time."

"Call it a team effort," Ingolf said, cutting them off when he saw they would debate the point indefinitely. "So, why are you here?"

"A favor to the Queen, Majesty," Elena replied after a moment of hesitation. "She wanted you protected, and feared any threats would take your man into account, and so wanted you to have additional—secret—protection."

Sepp grimaced, but said nothing.

Ingolf's brows went up. "I take it no one was going to inform me of this?"

Elena's mouth twitched. "No, Majesty."

Ingolf rolled his eyes and made note to speak with his wife later. "I thank you for your help then, Lady DeVry. You've no reason to risk your life for me, and I am honored you would."

"Nonsense," she replied. "You are my Kaiser, and you make Reni happy. You bring her comfort when otherwise I fear she would slip into fear and despair. My life is yours, Kaiser."

Sepp spoke before Ingolf could respond. "Then would you like to protect him openly? I need the help, and it will please the people here to see him guarded by an Illussor in addition to me, and that alone may spare us an assassination attempt or two."

"I would be honored," Elena replied, looking surprised.

"Then so be it," Ingolf said, knowing better than to argue, though he would never grow used to people risking themselves so for him. "You can satisfy my curiosity, actually. In Kria it is not so unusual for women to take up swords, though it is not a common practice, either. Here in Illussor, however, I thought it was unusual."

"It is," Elena said slowly, as if she thought he might rescind the offer just made. "But the DeVry have always served the throne in a variety of capacities. We are cousins, Reni and I. From childhood, I was good with a sword. My little brother is one of her Majesty's spies. I have always served her as an...enforcer and guardian."

Ingolf laughed. "Then, enforce the law upon this fool who tried to take my life today, Lady DeVry."

"Elena, please," she murmured, then said more loudly, "Yes, Majesty." She bent and hauled the quiet, now terrified man to his feet, knife back at his throat.

"He looks Illussor," Sepp said. "Could be Salharan, I suppose..."

"No," Elena said. "His accent is unique to a region several days south of here. No Salharan could mimic it convincingly. We had word of trouble in that region. I sent men to investigate." She shook the man hard. "I guess it was a greater threat than we realized. It will be addressed." She twisted her hand in the man's hair, making him cry out. "Won't it, you little coward?"

"Enough for now," Ingolf said abruptly, seeing that Sepp was getting increasingly pale and unsteady, though still he had said nothing about the pain he must be suffering. "Secure him. Sepp needs a healer."

Elena immediately knocked the man out, pushing him so that he fell out of the way when he hit the ground. Then she turned to Sepp, sheathing her dagger. "Would you like it out now, or will you wait for the healer to take care of it?"

"Now," Sepp replied, and turned, bracing himself for the arrow to be pulled out. Ingolf held his shoulder, to further brace him, and nodded at Elena.

She grabbed and yanked, wasting no time, and Sepp gave only the briefest cries of pain before cutting it off. Then he waited as she cut away his clothes to bind the wound as best she could.

"Home," Ingolf said when she had finished.

"Let me secure the prisoner and leave markers so the foresters can come and fetch him later," Elena replied, and bent to do precisely that, binding the man with strong rope, then fastening the rope to wooden stakes she pulled from a pouch at her waist. These she then drove into the ground. "I will go get my horse," she said as she finished, and immediately bolted off into the forest.

She returned a couple of minutes later riding a handsome black mare. Ingolf turned to help Sepp into the saddle, then mounted his own horse. Elena led the way out of the forest and back to the palace, sword drawn the entire time. When they reached the gates, she called out in a loud, clear voice, "Open for your Kaiser!"

The guards immediately obeyed, though even at a distance Ingolf could see they were surprised to see her. Inside, Elena immediately dismounted and threw her reins to the nearest stable hand. "Lord Sepp was injured protecting the Kaiser," she said as several guards came running up. "Send for the healer at once, and summon the Head Forester."

"To my rooms," Ingolf interjected. "Go and reassure my lady wife, Elena, before someone else carries the news to her and upsets her needlessly. Then join us in my chambers."

Elena bowed, then turned and strode off. More than a few people hovered, looking at him, Sepp, Elena, and back again. Ingolf ignored them, guiding Sepp inside and up to his chambers. The healer was waiting when they arrived, and wasted no time taking control of Sepp, muttering in disapproval as all healers seemed to do.

When one of his myriad assistants appeared, Ingolf immediately sent the man off to fetch food and wine. It arrived several minutes later, carried by Elena, who set the tray down and then moved to stand at attention just behind and to the left of Ingolf.

"You can sit down," he told her.

"Better do it," Sepp said when she started to protect. "He'll just keep nagging if you don't."

Frowning, Elena nevertheless moved to sit down in a nearby chair. "How is your wound?"

"Fine," the healer said for Sepp. "Especially for an arrow wound so close to the heart. He'll be in pain for quite some time, but he'll live provided he does nothing stupid any time soon."

"He won't," Ingolf said, ignoring Sepp's disgruntled look.

"What of the assassins?" Ingolf asked.

"I spoke with the foresters," Elena said, "before I came here. They should have the bodies and the prisoner to us within the hour. We will know more then. Our early investigations, the ones that led me to send men south, led us to believe that the Illussor in that area fear what will happen to them in a unified country. The town is known for its smuggling and other such illicit dealings. It has been a source of trouble before, but they are as slippery as the pirates we cannot catch them doing business with—and it is has been suspected but never proven that one of the things in which they trade is arcen."

Ingolf whistled. "That would be impressive, if true, especially since they are not even close to the border."

Elena grimaced. "My brother has been trying for years to solve that riddle. So far, no answer has been found."

"We shall have to discuss that later, but it now makes sense. The first thing I'm going to see done to Salhara is the burning of their arcen fields, and passing laws to forbid the stuff. They must know that."

"Yes, Majesty," Elena replied. "Did you want to be present when the prisoner is interrogated?"

"No," Ingolf said after a moment of thought. "I think my presence would hinder more than help. I do want a full report on the proceedings though, on my desk no later than first thing in the morning."

Elena nodded. "Yes, Majesty. How will you want to handle him when the interrogation is finished? Most would recommend making an example of him."

"Let us see what he says, before I make that decision," Ingolf replied. "Often, the killers themselves are but foot soldiers following the orders of some General. If he is only a soldier, there is no point using him to make a point. Killing pawns accomplishes nothing—I want the man controlling them."

"As you command, Majesty."

"How is my wife?"

"She is well, if more anxious for you than ever." Her gaze shifted to Sepp. "She extends her deepest gratitude to Lord Sepp, for saving his Majesty's life."

"I am here to serve," Sepp replied, brushing the words aside. He grunted a thanks to the healer as he was finally released, and moved to one of the chairs, slumping down it and sighing heavily.

Elena stood. "I will go and supervise the interrogation, Majesty, and write the report myself. Shall I ban anyone from disturbing you the rest of the day?"

"No," Ingolf said reluctantly. "That will give the impression I am afraid, which I most certainly am not. Tend to the prisoner, then return to my side. In all likelihood, I will be trapped in the small audience chamber the rest of the day. Find me there." He rolled his eyes at the thought of all he would be putting up with, now rumors of an assassination attempt were circulating. "In fact, you can escort me there, before going to deal with the prisoner." He glared and pointed his finger when Sepp tried to stand. "You are to stay here and rest. You are no good to me if you're too tired to stay on your feet, and the healer said not to do anything stupid. By tomorrow, I am certain you can walk around with me again."

Sepp made a face, but obediently remained seated. Ingolf turned away before Sepp caught him smiling, and motioned to Elena. "I want to stop and see Reni first, then we can go."

"Whatever best pleased you, Majesty."

"Stop calling me Majesty and Kaiser," Ingolf replied. "Anyone risking her life to protect mine need not stand on formality. In public, of course I understand appearances must be maintained, but otherwise you can call me Ingolf."

Elena slowly nodded, and hesitantly said, "Yes...Ingolf."

"See, that was not so hard," Ingolf said with a smile. "Sepp—rest. That is an order, just so we are clear." Then he strode from the room, Elena at his side, her hand resting lightly on the hilt of her sword.

It took only a moment to reach the Queen's Sunroom, where Reni still sat sketching, though now she was also drinking more of her special tea.

She immediately tossed her sketchbook aside and started to stand when she saw him. Ingolf strode across the room and stopped her, making her sit back down and joining her on the sofa, taking her hands in his. "I am sorry to have worried you."

"I am simply relieved you are all right," she replied, closing her eyes and leaning against him. After a moment, she sat back up and opened her eyes again. "I thought Len would just be a formality. I am glad I took the precaution."

Ingolf shook his head, mouth quirked in fond amusement. "All without telling me you were taking it?"

"I knew you would fuss and protest," Reni replied. "Anyway, if you did not know about her, then neither would anyone else. She is, as you have seen, very good at what she does. If they had known about her, they would have chosen a far more dangerous method of attack."

He shook his head again, and kissed her briefly. "I told you to stay out of trouble, not orchestrate it on the sly, but I thank you, milady."

Reni smiled and retrieved her sketchbook, waving farewell as they departed.

Another of his assistants met them outside, bowing low. "Majesty, a great number of people have been seeking word of you. Many believe it would be best if you were to be gracious enough to reassure them of your health in person..."

Ingolf stifled a sigh, and nodded. That was more than fair enough. "You may have to stay with me a trifle longer," he apologetically to Elena. "Though I know you would like to settle the matter of the prisoner as soon as possible."

"He is going nowhere Majesty," Elena said. "I am here to serve you."

"Very well, then," Ingolf said. "Let us go inform my people I am alive and well—and likely to stay that way. Whether they find that distressing or reassuring, I could not say."

"If you did not matter, Majesty," Elena said with the barest of smiles, "they would not be trying to kill you."

"I suppose that is true," Ingolf replied. He shook his head and led the way to the small meeting chamber, barely avoiding rolling his eyes as he saw that he would be dealing the elitist of the elite—of course they would demand a private audience.

Moving down the room, more than happy to let Elena force the crowd to part, he took his place in the seat upon the dais. "As you can see," he said when they all fell silent, "I am in perfect health. My man took an arrow in saving me, but thanks to the efforts of him and Elena here, I am alive and well. What questions do you have?"

"Who did it?" Someone immediately asked. "The Salharans, I'm sure—how did the filthy bastards get this far?"

Ingolf motioned for silence again. "It was not, in fact, the Salharan who attacked me. As much as I hate to say it, I was nearly killed by a band of Illussor assassins."

There were cries of outrage and protestation—but he could read the falseness in more than a few of them. Either they supported the idea of killing him, or at the very least were not surprised to hear that someone in Salhara had tried. Interesting. He glanced at Elena, but saw she had already made note of them the same as he.

"As I am certain you have already gathered, the Lady DeVry has agreed to serve as my second guardian. If she demands or asks something, you are to treat her words as coming from me. That goes for Lord Sepp as well. Do you have protests, my friends?"

He could see that a few of them did have protests, but that they were also smart enough not to voice them. He let them talk and complain and demand for another half hour, then finally dismissed them. Silence fell for a couple of minutes, before he finally succumbed to his curiosity and asked, "Milady DeVry, I cannot think it is only that you carry a sword which makes people so leery of you. Why does your presence displease them?"

"I am an enforcer, Majesty," Elena said calmly. "Rank and station are as nothing to me, when something must be enforced. Many of them have personal reasons to dislike and fear me." Her mouth quirked. "They should fear my brother more, and the Duke of Torla, but their lot is to go largely unnoticed. I am a blunt, obvious tool of the throne. Permitting me to openly protect you, Ingolf, may not have been the wisest decision."

"Nonsense," Ingolf replied, smiling at her. "A hidden knife is a marvelous tool for hurting and killing, but a sword worn plainly at one's hip is good for preventing any need to draw the hidden knife."

Her mouth curved in a real smile, and combined with the freckles it made her look almost delicately pretty for a moment. "Thank you, Majesty."

"How does a lady come to be an enforcer?" Ingolf asked.

"One sort of stumbles into it," Elena said, expression one of rueful amusement. "I never had a talent for subterfuge, like my brother. I have always had a...presence, however, and a very good sword hand. One thing led to another, and an enforcer I became. People like to say I am the Queen's pet, because we are good friends, but..." She shrugged. "We grew up together, the trust between us runs deep."

"Yet I have never seen you before," Ingolf replied.

Elena nodded. "You were never meant to see me, not until the country gained a bit more stability. She asked me shortly after your arrival if I would protect you. I was at my personal estate at the time, and received her letter there. I came here in secret to meet with her and work out how to protect you in secret. If I had not erred today, still you would not know of me, Majesty. Nor do people speak much of me, out of fear and discretion."

"Hmm," Ingolf said thoughtfully, and thought he would have to make some alterations to his notes on who to give what positions when he took over his new empire once and for all. "Come," he said. "You

must be off to your interrogation, and I have other matters to address. Then we will look further into the matter of this problematic village."

"Yes, Majesty," Elena said, and walked with him from the audience chamber.

PART THREE

SOMEONE TO HOLD

ALL THE WORLD FEARS ARCEN, BUT ALL THE ARCEN IN THE
WORLD COULD NEVER CRUSH KRIA.

~Geralt von Adolwulf, seventh Duke of Torla

Chapter Twenty Seven

"Vile traitor!"

"Krian whore!"

"Nameless scum!"

Erich looked up from where he had been conversing with a handful of his men to see what all the shouting was about, taking in the red faces, the crude gestures, the vehement hate the Salharans were displaying. If they had shown that much passion in battle, they might not now be prisoners.

"Stars refuse you for a nameless bastard!"

"Dull eyed mongrel!"

"Sword mongering slut!"

He glanced at Pancraz, whose expression was implacable as the crowds hurled epithets at him. Erich frowned at him, then strode past him and right up to the crowd, backhanding the one who had been shouting the crudest and cruelest of the insults. The crowd recoiled at the display of violence, backing away from the struck man.

Erich motioned for the guards to deal with them and spun sharply to face Pancraz. "What is the meaning of this?"

Pancraz shrugged irritably. "They know I'm native Salharan. My accent gives it away when I speak Salharan. They are trying to shame me. Let them hurl their poisons; it will keep their wrath from focusing on other things."

Erich looked at him in surprise. "That is... remarkably stoic for you, Pancraz."

"They cannot call me anything I have not heard a thousand times before," Pancraz said. "I am what I am, and nothing they say will change that."

"And what are you?"

Pancraz smiled briefly, even shyly. "Commander Pancraz of the Scarlet Army of Kria."

Erich grinned and clapped him hard on the back. "Then see these prisoners are secured, Commander, and find the farmers so that we can see to the arcen fields."

"Yes, Lord General," Pancraz replied and bellowed for his men, setting them to tend the prisoners with the guards Erich had already assigned to the task. "Subdue them however necessary," he ordered, "but

avoid violence if you can. Allow the mothers to remain with their children, but keep the men completely separate. Search all of them down to the skin for arcen and bring me the arcen farmers. They will be the only ones without glowing eyes." He skimmed the group himself, looking for the tell tale signs.

Erich looked himself, but saw only a mass of scared, angry Salharan peasants covered in dirt and dust, sweaty from hard labor, skin dark and weathered from hours in the sun, and nearly all possessed purple or violet eyes. A precious few had blue eyes. Anyone above that had already been segregated or killed.

"There," Pancraz said, pointing to a cluster of men and women off to one side.

Now that they had been pointed out, Erich noticed they *were* apart from the rest of the villagers. There was a definite, if slight, separation. Why was that?

The soldiers pushed their way through the crowd of villagers, swords drawn, and dragged the indicated persons out. To Erich's surprise, the farmers came easily enough—and the other villagers did not seem to care at all, or made no move to help or at least protest.

"So why do we need the farmers to find the fields?" Erich asked. "Surely fields of bright flowers cannot be that hard to find."

Pancraz smiled. "Oh? How many have you seen, Lord General, since we crossed into Salhara?"

Erich frowned in thought then conceded, "Not so much as a single petal. Why is that?"

"We will never find the fields without them," Pancraz said, "because Salhara makes certain to keep the fields hidden. Each farmer knows only where his own field is, and only a small hand-picked few know where *all* the arcen farms lie. The farmers are forbidden to discuss their locations with anyone on pain of death or worse. The rest of society is forbidden attempting to find the locations on pain of the same. Arcen farmers seldom leave their farms; normally only to obtain essentials."

Instead of clearing, Erich's confusion only deepened. "If they are largely confined to their farms, then what are they all doing here? That seems too handy to be coincidence."

Pancraz smirked. "I recommended holding off the attack until today because today is a market day. Farmers always come to the market days—at least one from every farm, to buy things that are more easily obtained at market than any other time."

"What would I do without you?" Erich asked, gripping his shoulder briefly and signaling the men holding the farmers to bring them along. The rest he left to Bruno, who made a face at him but moved to comply.

He and Pancraz assembled with them on the far side of the village, well away from the others. "Will they give us the locations easily?"

"It is hard to say," Pancraz replied. "Arcen farmers hold perhaps the strangest position in Salharan society. They are respected, feared, even awed, but live in greater fear than any other person."

"That's why they were a bit apart," Erich said. "They do not fit in."

"Precisely," Pancraz said, an old sadness flickering across his face. "Neither peasant nor noble. Neither powerless nor powerful. All the secrets of arcen, but never to use it, never to share the knowledge. A great deal of pride and honor, but also a lot of loneliness."

Erich nodded. "Well, ask them. I doubt my Salharan is fit for it."

Pancraz smiled. "No, it is not. Your Salharan is very upper class. It would intimidate them."

Erich laughed and stepped back, motioning for Pancraz to proceed. "Then make known to them our desires, Commander, however you see fit."

Nodding, Pancraz turned and began to speak in rapid Salharan—but a rougher, more uneven variant that Erich had heard in snatches around Salhara. He fully understood perhaps one word in five. He could follow expressions and body language well enough, however. Whatever Pancraz was saying it, it shocked them.

At last the conversation seemed to wind down, and Pancraz turned to him. "They will show us, Lord General."

"Oh?" Erich asked, surprised. "As easily as that?"

"Because they have lost much to the arcen and been given nothing. They are also practical. You will not be so fortunate elsewhere, Lord General, but these farmers will surrender their fields to you. They respectfully request that for their cooperation, you spare them and their families any harm."

Erich looked them over thoughtfully. "Of course I will spare them. We can even ensure they keep their land, provided they do not use it to grow arcen any longer. What do you think?"

"I think you can trust them," Pancraz said. "As I said, they are practical in addition to bitter. Telling them what happened to me brought out their own stories. That helped persuade them. They also appreciate that if we win, the arcen will be the first thing to go, anyway. Better to cooperate now and be given good treatment. If Salhara defeats us, then the farmers can hardly be blamed for being bested by the horrifically violent Krians."

Erich laughed. "Indeed. So be it, then. Pancraz, take what men you need and destroy the arcen fields. You have five days to do it. Bruno and I will refresh supplies and begin preparing for our next move."

"Five days, Lord General," Pancraz acknowledged. "It will be done."

"Good," Erich said and gripped his shoulder again before striding away back to the main part of the village. "Chief," he greeted Bruno. "How proceeds the settling of the village?"

"Well enough," Bruno said with a grunt. "They are not happy, and they are already beginning to complain about needing arcen to see their jobs done." He sneered at this. "Pathetic to need arcen for the most trivial of things—to need it at all."

Erich nodded in agreement. "I guess they will have to learn to do it our way," he said. "Try to avoid killing civilians if you can help it, but do not hesitate if that is the measure you must take."

"Yes, Lord General," Bruno replied. "This just came for you, Lord General. A message from the Kaiser, though it is some weeks old now. The messenger had trouble getting through."

"Thank you," Erich said, taking the message, heart speeding up. "How is the messenger?"

"Resting. He was wounded, though not badly, getting here. He doubts he would be able to make it back home again. Salhara has apparently pulled troops out of Kria to patrol the borders. We may have Salharans sneaking up behind us, Lord General. No one will be getting into Illussor, either."

Erich frowned. "See what men we can spare. Scout the border, get rid of the Salharan patrols as best we are able. If the Illussor soldiers can be reached, they will help. Hopefully, the Kaiser is aware of the problem and is fixing it—if it is already not fixed, given the message is weeks old."

"Yes, Lord General," Bruno said and saluted before turning away and striding off to see the orders carried out.

Erich walked to where men had already turned the chief's house into his headquarters and sat down at a worn and battered table in the kitchen portion of the room. Then he finally broke the seal on the missive. It was written in Westala, and Erich wondered who Ingolf had found to translate the missive for him.

Winter,

I hope this letter finds you alive and well. I detest being trapped in this palace while my brothers wage war; my Krian blood rails against such insult. But I suppose my position means making you do all the work for me.

My lady wife is well and six months with child as of the writing of this letter. Your countrymen find me...interesting.

Verdant and Saffron do well. Take Salhara. Return to me where all the colors meet.

Spring

P.S. I have your ring and keep it safe until you can reclaim it.

Erich set the letter down, eyes drawn helplessly to the date. Six months as of the writing... meaning Reni was well into the seventh month, now. Seven months pregnant. With Ingolf's child.

How was it possible to be so happy and so miserable all at once? He was happy for Reni, happy for Ingolf... but what was the point in finally melting when Spring was then immediately taken from him? How could he even resent it when the woman in question was more or less his sister and only doing what she must? He hoped they were at least happy together, even if he could not bear the thought of Ingolf with someone else.

It would be so much easier if he could hate them both, but he could not. He could not do anything, really, except live in quiet misery and do what must be done. At least running a war was plenty distracting. Sighing, he folded the letter and tucked it away. It would have to be destroyed at some point, but he could hold onto it for a little while longer.

They were not too far now from their goal, though a few key battles yet remained. The capital of Sahara lay at the furthest edge, right up against a mountain range on the opposite side of which was only ocean.

Between them and the heart of Salhara stood twenty cities and large towns, half of which they had now dealt with, but the most major of them yet remained and the first would hopefully be conquered in a few more days.

The Salharans called their capital a word that essentially translated as 'Mother Star'. The twenty cities and towns surrounding her were called the sisters—six Big Sisters and fourteen Little Sisters. Once upon a time, they had discovered, the Sisters had each been guarded by a Brother. Even Pancraz had been startled by that little revelation.

Standing, Erich left the house to return to the bustle outside. Fall was coming steadily; already the leaves were beginning to turn. It was the season of the Autumn Prince. That brought high fortune and favor to his battles. Then again, in war the Autumn Prince had no shortage of falling leaves.

He reached out and snatched one from the air as the wind picked up, twirling the red and brown leaf in his fingers.

A cough interrupted his thoughts, and Erich turned toward the source, seeing a foot soldier dressed in the Cobalt uniform and the marks of a runner. "Yes, soldier?"

"Lord General, I bring a message from the Cobalt General."

Erich held a hand out for it, thanking the man, and broke Reinoehl's seal.

Accomplished. ½ watch.

He smiled and crumpled the note and bellowed for someone to find his Chief or Commander.

Bruno appeared shortly thereafter, looking amused. "What's so funny?"

"Nothing," Bruno replied. Erich narrowed his eyes. Bruno laughed again. "It is only that for a man who never wanted to be a General, you sure have developed a General's knack for bellowing and demanding."

Rolling his eyes, Erich motioned him closer. "Do not make me beat you. I have received word that Cobalt is victorious. They will be joining us at the first turning of the watches. See to it they are made welcome."

"Of course, Lord General."

"How are we on scouts to send to the border?"

"Well enough," Bruno said, "but if we are to meet with Cobalt tonight, I would not mind the chance to consult with Aden."

"And what does he know that I do not where the border of Illussor is concerned?" Erich demanded.

"How to get across it *without* getting captured and tied to a bed?" Bruno suggested dryly.

Erich cuffed him lightly upside the head. "Disrespecting a Sacred General is not wise, Chief. And tell my Commander to stop telling undignified tales about me."

"He would not tell us *how* you were captured, if it is any consolation," Bruno replied. "Though, I had not realized I was not the only incapable of finding all your daggers."

Smirking, Erich replied, "No one ever finds them all. Tell Pancraz that if he does ever tell how I was captured, I will have my revenge."

Bruno sniggered "I will go and prepare for our guest, Lord General."

"Do that."

Laughing, Bruno strode off.

The sound of voices shouting and crying out drew his attention. Erich turned immediately toward the sound, but it took only a moment to deduce the reason for the outcry—smoke. Lots of it. He smiled. "Well done, Pancraz. I should have given him three days. Five was obviously too easy."

Feeling pleased with the world so long as he did not think upon the note tucked away in his tunic, Erich went to find someone to help or yell at.

By the time everything was settled and even the prisoners were too tired to fuss, the first evening watch was nearly over. Just as the start of the second watch was signaled, a call of greeting came out of the dark.

Erich smiled and motioned for the guards to admit their visitors. He and Bruno greeted them enthusiastically, clasping hands and patting shoulders, before ushering them towards the house he had claimed for the duration of their stay. "Reinoehl. Vester. Aden. I am glad to see you all alive and well. Come eat, drink, tell me of your battles."

"I expect tale for tale," Reinoehl replied.

"Of course, of course," Erich said and led them to his quarters. "We have accommodations ready should anyone like to retire now for some reason."

"Not at all," Aden replied. "I do not suppose you have heard any word from home? We have received nothing."

Erich wanted to lie, for some strange reason, but that was selfish and stupid. "Yes. Just earlier today, in fact. Reni is seventh months with child." He waited until they had settled at the table and begun helping themselves to the food before he continued, "When we have taken Salhara and secured it we are to meet the Kaiser at the Regenbogen."

"I see," Aden replied, obviously puzzled by something. "Do you still have the note?"

Erich shook his head, feeling somewhat guilty now. "I destroyed it shortly after receiving it. But he wrote it like a pirate, which I thought you would find interesting."

"I did not think anyone but you could speak that," Aden said, lifting one brow. "You could have kept it for me to see, Ghost."

"No," Erich said loftily. "Eyes of a General only."

Rolling his eyes, Aden drank his wine and then began to decimate his food.

The door opened and they all looked up—and Erich and Bruno immediately stood up. "Pancraz, are you all right?"

"Fine," Pancraz said, wiping ash and dirt from his face. "I beg forgiveness for my late arrival and that it will be several minutes more since I must clean up. A fire caught the wind and nearly got the better of us. All is doused now, however, and I've men set to keep close watch on it through the night."

"Go get cleaned up," Erich said, "then come and eat with us, rest a bit."

Pancraz nodded and turned to leave, and Erich could not determine why he looked so stricken.

"Is your leg all right?" Vester asked suddenly. "That burn looks painful."

"What?" Pancraz asked, startled. "Oh. It's fine, truly."

Only then did Erich noticed the nasty burn on Pancraz's right thigh, and that the whole time Pancraz had been carefully turned away to hide it. "Pancraz—"

"It's fine," Pancraz replied.

"Be certain to fetch the healer," Vester said and stood up, moving around the table and toward Pancraz. "In fact, I have something that might help myself. Fires always spring up at the worst time in battle; I have learned to carry what I need to tend burns." He half led, half pushed Pancraz from the room, leaving it momentarily silenced until the idle chatter gradually resumed.

A few minutes later, Vester returned, shaking his head in rueful amusement. "Your Commander is stubborn—"

"Oh, like you have any right to make that accusation," Aden cut in, giving him a look.

"He had three good burns," Vester said, as though Aden had not spoken. "I assume he is burning the arcen fields as you have been planning?"

"Yes," Erich replied. "I've given him five days to do it. Did you want to help? I would not protest."

Reinoehl looked at him in amusement. "Stop trying to steal my men. But, yes, if he wants to help, of course he may. It will take us that long to get ready for our next attack, at least."

"Speaking of attacks," Bruno interjected, momentarily ignoring his food, "the messenger who arrived today spoke of trouble along the border." Quickly, he related all he had earlier told to Erich.

"Hm," Aden said thoughtfully when he had finished. "I know the likeliest points at which they'll be camping and quite possibly a few they may not know. I can show you on a map, if you've one handy?"

Erich jerked a thumb over his shoulder. "In the back room; they've turned it into my temporary office. Everything you need should be there." He turned his head at the sound of the door opening again. "How are your burns, Pancraz?"

"Fine," Pancraz said, sitting down across from him and going straight for the wine. His eyes flicked to Vester. "Thank you for the assistance."

Vester shrugged the words off. "How proceeds the burning of the fields?"

"I managed to destroy one farm today; it held a good twenty fields, five of them red."

Erich shook his head. "That is a lot of time and money lost. I would almost feel sorry for the Salharans if I did not despise them so much. Still, twenty does not seem a very high number."

"It is higher than you might think," Pancraz replied. "Like I said, the trick is getting the arcen to last one full season. After that first seven years, the rest is fairly easy. Arcen flowers are small and plentiful once they take. The yield of one field of arcen is at least double that of any other crop. So twenty arcen fields is at least forty to fifty fields' worth to anyone else."

"Fascinating," Aden said, looking enthralled. "No one ever speaks of arcen, and you know so much, and offer it so freely. You should compile and record your knowledge, someday."

Pancraz shook his head. "I share it to help destroy it. If I had my way, all knowledge of arcen would vanish from the world entirely."

"If only," Erich replied. "I fear it will not be so easy. We shall do what we can, however, to get as close to that goal as possible. On that note, however, we must speak of our next attack..."

Reinoehl nodded, draining the last of his wine before speaking. "The Fortress Silver. It is a major city built over Salhara's primary river, the one that wends its way into Illussor eventually. A popular trade route throughout Salhara; it will be well guarded. But if we can take it, then that is one of the greatest Big Sisters taken and leaves only a handful left. It will definitely take both our armies to do it, however, and Salhara must be aware of that."

"I worry they are letting their smaller cities fall to crush us at the very last," Vester said. "They could draw us all the way in then trap us. It is what I would do, if I were Salharan and in their position."

Pancraz nodded. "I agree. Salhara does not mind sacrificing people for the greater good, and they know we prefer to take prisoners, no matter the rumors they spread to their people about us."

"Mm," Erich said in agreement and swallowed the bite of roasted fowl he had just taken. "Not much choice, in the end. It is a risk we will have to take and plan for as best we can in our strategies."

"This would be much easier if we were razing the villages as we went," Reinoehl said. "Not very smart in the long run, however, even if we were as heartless as the filthy Salharans claim."

"Speaking of—" Vester started to say, but a sharp rapping upon the door stopped the conversation. The soldier entered when bid and saluted the group. "Commander," he said, looking at Pancraz. "Some of the prisoners appear to be ill, and they seem to be saying as much, but we cannot understand enough of what they are saying to determine what precisely is wrong or the cause."

Pancraz nodded and stood, motioning for Erich to sit when he would have stood to join him. "I'll come address the matter," he said to the soldier, then turned back to the group, "I apologize. I will return shortly."

Erich frowned and set down his wine. "I do not think my poor Commander is going to get much chance to rest tonight."

"I'll go help him," Aden said. "After him, I have the best Salharan. No doubt the peasants are only up to something, anyway." So saying, he stood and left.

"How has your Salharan Commander been faring?" Reinoehl asked. "Being back here is not getting to him, is it?"

Erich shook his head. "No, actually. Just this morning I was noting that his confidence and strength have grown. I think it is only deepening the Krian in him. Whatever good feelings about Salhara might have remained, they are now well and truly gone."

Vester poured them all more wine. "He sounds as though he has had a hard life. I do not know how well I would do in his place."

"Nor I," Erich agreed.

"To go from outcast Salharan to Commander of a Sacred Army of Kria is the kind of story they tell when the snows trap everyone inside," Bruno said with a laugh.

"Remind me to embarrass Pancraz by telling him that," Erich said. "I owe him for telling tales about me."

"Who's been telling tales about what?" Aden asked as he and Pancraz abruptly returned.

"Pancraz has been telling tales about me," Erich said. "So it is only fair I humiliate him in some fashion."

Pancraz scowled. "What? I have not said anything."

"You told Bruno how we met," Erich said.

"Oh, that," Pancraz said and smirked. "You're lucky I left out how we captured you."

"So are you," Erich retorted.

Aden sniggered, reclaiming his seat next to Reinoehl. "Knowing Erich, he probably slipped and cracked his head on the ground."

Erich cast him a withering look, and the table erupted into laughter as they realized Aden's guess was correct. "I *do* have stories on you, cousin. The ones you have *not*, nor will ever, tell your General."

Aden made a face. "True enough."

Reinoehl looked at Aden in amusement. "What stories are these?"

"Nothing," Aden muttered and shot Erich a warning look.

"So," Erich said, "Both you and Pancraz require revenge be exacted."

"I have stories on Reinoehl if things need to be kept fair," Vester offered.

Reinoehl rolled his eyes. "At least half those stories we were in together."

"Yes," Vester said with a grin, "but I have no lover at the table to be horrified by tales of my follies, nor subordinates to see my image ruined."

Aden choked on his wine and doubled over in a coughing fit. Erich looked at him oddly. "Are you all right?"

"Fine," Aden gasped out. "Just fine."

Erich eyed him askance a moment longer, then let the matter drop. "So what was wrong outside, anyway?"

"Arcen," Pancraz replied. "Some of them are not accustomed to going without." His mouth tightened. "Peasants usually take it better than most would, far too used to managing without it when times are tough. But so close to the arcen farms, they are used to having it easily to hand. This is likely the first time most of them have gone without for so long. They will be fine in a few days, and nothing will help them overmuch in the meantime."

"I see," Erich said. "Well, keep an eye on them."

Pancraz nodded then stood up. "Of course. I will go check on the guards I set to watch them then I think I will retire for the night. Good night Lord Generals, my friends." He left before anyone could respond.

Erich frowned after him, completely baffled. "I feel I am missing something."

"Much the way you missed Brion and Carron," Aden replied. "Though, in your defense, you were constantly making woeful eyes at Hahn in those days." He looked suddenly stricken as he realized what he had just said. "I mean—"

But Erich's laughter drowned out his words. "Indeed. I was always making eyes of some sort at Hahn." He smiled faintly. "He was much too fine to look at, and that got me in a great deal of trouble. I was what, all of sixteen then?"

"Yes," Aden said slowly, looking completely astonished. "You were pining for a fourteen year old, you bastard."

Erich flushed, but jabbed a finger in Aden's direction. "I think this is where I tell your pretty General there what you were doing that very same evening with the DeVry twins."

Aden blanched. "I had forgotten about that." He covered his face with his hands.

Reinoehl's eyebrows shot up. "What—"

"Nothing," Aden said firmly, and this time the glare he shot Erich was nothing short of murderous.

Erich snickered and helped himself to more wine. Drinking it gave him a moment to hide the fading of his levity. Brion and Carron were two old friends, a couple of years older than he. Brion had been as enamored of Carron as Erich had been of Hahn. Erich had not realized that, however, until someone had pointed it out to him. Aden's implication, then, was that he was missing someone pining for another. Given Pancraz's behavior...

Suddenly everything made a great deal more sense. He shook his head in silent sympathy, and lowered his wine glass to say, "Shall we discuss actual work or save that for the morning?"

An hour or so later, the dinner finally wound down and everyone departed to find their own beds. Erich bid the guards posted to his door a good night, then wandered upstairs to his own room.

Once upstairs, he did not feel particularly like sleeping—or even really like holding still, but he was no longer free to wander as he might have otherwise. A restless General was not a reassuring sight to his army.

He sat at the old, creaky chair by the one small window in the room, leaning against the edge of it and starting idly out. Across the narrow street below, flickering torchlight just revealed the figures of Aden and Reinoehl...and he could not bear to watch. Turning away with a rough noise, he wandered over to the bed tucked into the corner.

That, at least, made him smile. His men always took care to see he was comfortable, no matter where they happened to be. The bed had been carefully made with his personal sheets—though he still could not say when or how he had acquired his own set of sheets—and covered with his cloak. Ingolf's cloak, really. On a wobbly table by the bed were a lantern and a decanter of brandy and a glass.

He poured out a measure of brandy and drank it in one quick, burning swallow then poured another. Should he feel guilty that it was not Hahn who filled his thoughts? Hahn was always there, but it was Ingolf who had come immediately to mind as he saw Aden and Reinoehl kiss. It was Ingolf he ached to have at his side now, to take to bed. If he had not gone for that Goddess damned walk, would he and Ingolf be together now?

Questions like that never helped. If they did, he might still have Hahn—or be with Hahn in the ground. But he was still alive and well, and Hahn was dead. He was here, the Scarlet General waging war in the heart of Salhara...

And when he reached the Regenbogen, he would return to his Kaiser... but not to his lover. Never to that, no matter what he wished.

He felt cheated, somehow. What was the point of living again when he would never have what had made him want to live again?

Draining the second brandy, he set the glass back on the table, then stripped down to his underclothes and crawled into bed. He blew out the lantern and lay for a long while in the dark until exhaustion finally forced him into sleep.

Chapter Twenty Eight

Erich was hiding something. Aden could see it, but he could not put his finger upon precisely what it was Erich hid.

It was not really in Erich's nature to hide anything. He would try, if he thought it necessary, and he could keep state secrets because those were often a matter of life or death, but when it came to private matters and personal feelings he did not hide them well at all.

Hahn, for instance. Erich only thought he had managed to hide his feelings for Hahn from all and sundry, but everyone had seen it, plain as day, and, for whatever reasons, kept silent on the matter. Hahn himself probably had been the last to realize it, but as close as he had been to Erich, that was only to be expected.

In fact...

Now that he thought upon it—*really* thought upon it... what *had* turned Erich back to normal? What had finally drawn him out of the black grief that had consumed him for so long? Erich had said very little on the matter, only that bit about winter and spring...

That, too, was not like Erich. Generally when something or someone made him happy, not even the Goddess could keep him from expressing that happiness. Hahn's parents might have requested they keep the marriage quiet, but any fool who looked upon them could see how deeply in love they were—it had never been the secret the King and Queen might have wished.

Aden stared across camp from where he rested beneath the shade of a tree turned scarlet and gold with autumn. At the center of camp, Erich was surrounded by Cobalt and Scarlet soldiers, telling them some tale, face animated, arms moving rapidly with the telling. The idiot was probably completely oblivious to the looks of admiration and outright worship on the faces of his listeners. Erich had *always* been oblivious to how people felt about him, that all he had to do to charm someone was smile.

Erich had always been too earnest, too open, to notice or hide anything—yet that was precisely what he was doing. He was purposely hiding whatever, or whomever, had drawn him from his grief. Aden had half-wondered, at first, if Erich had something with Pancraz. That idea had quickly been dismissed, however, for while they were obviously very good friends, Pancraz had eyes only for Vester, and Erich did not look at Pancraz the way he had at Hahn.

So who had gotten to Erich when even his oldest friends had not been able to breach his walls?

The key was in that note, he sensed. Erich normally would have let them see it before destroying it, which meant something in it had been incriminating. Who had sent it? Reni? The Kaiser...

The Kaiser? Ingolf, Aden knew his name to be. He knew the tale, too, of how Erich and the Kaiser had met. If it was the Kaiser, then why...

Of course, Aden thought, and called himself every manner of fool. The Kaiser was married. To Reni—to Erich's sister-in-law. Aden winced as the full impact of what Erich was suffering struck him. No wonder the idiot was hiding it—he must be in a great deal of pain, if the man who had drawn him from his grief was now completely out of his reach. Why had he not figured it out sooner?

What in the name of the Goddess could he possibly say? In Erich's place, nothing anyone could say would comfort him. There was nothing to soothe that pain. Aden sighed and watched Erich with his men, wondering how Erich did not go mad with it all.

He sighed softly as the group around Erich finally broke up, each man returning to his duty or chore. Aden had his own duties to attend, and his break had run far too long.

In another day or so they would launch their attack on the city. Scouts set to observe it had reported very little, but that little was ominous enough. Restlessness in the city, which was normal, but the arrival of three hooded men two days ago was decidedly not. What could the strangers have to hide? Were they hiding from the armies or from the Salharans? Then again, if they went around in such an ostentatious state, hiding was not their primary objective. Intimidation was far more likely, which meant Brotherhood, or persons very close to the Brotherhood.

Reinoehl had said they should brace to receive some form of communication, but two days had come and gone with no word from the city or its strange visitors. They could not afford to delay, to see what the strangers might mean—if they meant anything. The longer they waited, the better chance the city had to prepare a defense.

Standing, sighing softly again, Aden stood and brushed off his clothing. The wind picked up as he walked down the hill, back to the camp proper, causing him to shiver. He pulled his cloak more tightly around his shoulders and thought that he would soon have to switch to his heavier winter cloak. Any day now, they would wake to the first frost of the season. The first day of winter was drawing ever closer, though the Autumn Prince still currently held reign. If they did not end this war soon, winter would trap them in Salhara, and matters would drag on until the following spring. None of them wanted that.

Back amongst the men, Aden fell into the daily troubles of camp life—petty squabbles, illness, gambling, other illicit activities. He was drawn from the controlled chaos by the thundering of hooves as what appeared to be scouts rode into camp amidst a flurry of shouts and curses and dust.

Running into the heart of it, Aden bellowed for everyone to calm down and be quiet and to get out of his way or else.

"Lord Chief!" one of the men on horseback—the Scout Leader, he realized—called out, as he half-fell, half-slid from his mount. He was exhausted, pale, filthy, and trembling. With anger, Aden realized.

"What is wrong?" Aden demanded, even as he sensed Reinoehl's arrival, saw Erich and the others from the corner of his eye. "What happened?"

"They killed one of my men," the Scout Leader replied. "They found us and snuck up on us and demanded a word. When their message was delivered, they killed one of my men as a warning that it be delivered or else—while he was unarmed, when all of us made a show of faith and promised to listen without extending threat. The vile bastards sliced him to ribbons while he stood there in a show of faith!"

Aden's lip curled in contempt, but he kept control of his temper. "They are contemptible, filthy Salharans, Scout Leader. I am sorry your faith was betrayed. What was the message for which your man died?"

"The message is for the Scarlet General," the Scout Leader said, shoulders drooping as his anger left him to be replaced by grief and guilt.

"What is it?" Erich asked, striding forward. "Why me?"

The Scout Leader shook his head, conveying his own incomprehension. "The Salharan said to tell you this: the city of Jessa offers its conditional surrender. The condition is that the Scarlet General must come personally to receive it, and he is not to be accompanied by more than two men."

"No," Reinoehl said flatly. "It's a trap."

"We'll discuss it in the war tent," Erich said and, turning sharply, led the way there.

Aden trailed along behind him, letting Reinoehl and the others go ahead of him, lost in thought. He was distracted as he glanced at Vester, startled by what he saw. "You look rested."

Vester surprised him further by smiling—a smile that held a trace of a satisfaction that only ever came from one source. "The good Commander Pancraz suggested a remedy that proved astonishingly efficacious."

Perhaps hearing his name, if not the entire conversation, Pancraz turned to look over his shoulder at them—and flushed when he saw they both watched him. He locked eyes briefly with Vester, flushing all the more then turned hastily away.

Aden chuckled softly and slid Vester an amused look. "An intriguing remedy for sleeplessness."

Vester shrugged, but the pleased look upon his face did not fade. "I am grateful to him for suggesting it."

"I bet," Aden murmured, impressed that Pancraz had taken such initiative. He had seemed much more the type to suffer in silence, and never speak of how he felt. War tended to make men braver, or at least more reckless, however.

Then they were in the war tent, and personal matters had to be set aside for the far more important business of war.

"You're not going," Reinoehl repeated. "It is obviously a trap; they are not even trying to be subtle about it. If they can kill you, they will break the heart of the army, and nothing will be able to fix it."

Erich frowned. "I think you overestimate—"

"No," Aden said, cutting him off. "He does not. You have the soldiers of two armies idolizing you, Erich. They hold Reinoehl in awe and respect him greatly, but they love you. It was the same way back home, and the Illussor are happily telling the Krians all about the things you've done back home. You are worshipped and too much of an idiot to see it. That's always been the most endearing and frustrating thing about you, Erich. Why do you think the King and Queen tried to keep you from Hahn? They were afraid you would outshine their son. You have long proven that you could seduce a King without even trying—"

He cut the words off, cursing himself for a fool at the stricken look that flickered across Erich's face before Erich regained control of himself. "You're an idiot," he repeated in conclusion. "We are not letting you go. We do not need their surrender, and they know it."

"Capturing that city will cost thousands of lives," Erich replied. "If we can take it without losing them, should we not take the chance?"

"That is precisely what they want," Vester said. "You are invaluable. They know we will spare lives if we can. They play upon what they know of us and tempt us with a chance we dare not refuse—but refuse we must, though it costs us lives."

Erich shook his head.

Reinoehl spoke before Erich could. "You are more important—"

"No," Erich snarled, drowning him out. "I am not." He stepped forward as Reinoehl did the same, both men looking as though they would come to blows should the argument continue to escalate.

Aden stepped between them, placing a hand on each of their chests. He pushed Reinoehl back, giving him a warning look then focused on Erich. "You are the Scarlet General, Erich. More importantly, until the babe is born, you are the crown prince of Illussor. Even when it is born, and if it lives, it will be many years before the child can sit on the throne and rule. Until such time, you are heir to the throne, or the likeliest regent to rule until the child comes of age. You are the most important man in this camp, whether you like it or not. We should not be allowing you to fight, but you *are* the Scarlet General.

"That is enough reason for Salhara to hate you. It would not take a spy to know how motivating your existence must be to Kria. It would take only a meager amount of spying to learn you are von Adolwulf, descended from Lord Dieter himself—and if they can figure out that much, a bit of hard work will tell them you were married to Prince Hahn. I think it very safe to say, Erich, that Salhara knows who you really are, and if they know that much, they must know that to kill you would break the spirit of Cobalt and Scarlet."

Erich frowned, and Aden stifled an aggravated sigh, recognizing the set of Erich's jaw all too well. Erich had fought against his feelings for Hahn at the very beginning, but once they were together, not even the King and Queen had been able to keep them apart. Nothing and no one moved Erich once his mind was made up.

Almost no one, anyway. Aden hated himself for doing it and tried one last time to avoid it. "Damn it, Erich, do not be stubborn—"

"I will not let people die—"

"What would Hahn say if he were here?" Aden demanded, cutting him off. "He would not want you to do something this reckless and foolish."

"Hahn is dead," Erich said, face twisting briefly.

"Fine," Aden said and silently begged forgiveness as he quietly asked, "What would Ingolf say?"

Erich drew a sharp breath and looked stricken. "What?" he demanded hoarsely.

"I know what you look like when you are in love," Aden continued ruthlessly. "It was not hard to determine who. What would Ingolf say if he were here?"

Erich slammed a fist down on the map table, sending map markers tumbling to the floor. Then he turned sharply on one heel and stalked from the tent.

Aden exhaled a ragged breath. "He is going to kill me later."

"How did you know?" Pancraz asked. "He never talks about. I daresay he barely thinks about it if he can help it. He will not even speak Ingolf's name."

"Clue number one, once I started to pay attention," Aden replied. "I was trained from my youth to uncover secrets, and Erich is hardly a challenge. He is practically an open book, once you know the language."

Pancraz shook his head. "He *is* going to kill you, later."

"What..." Reinoehl looked horribly confused, and beside him, Vester appeared equally baffled. "What in the name of the gods am I missing here? Did you say Erich was in love with the Kaiser?"

"Yes," Pancraz said. "They were... bound, somehow, almost from the moment they met. I hated Erich, back then, because he so quickly and easily became the person Ingolf trusted most in the world." He laughed ruefully and looked at Aden. "He seduced a king without even trying."

Aden shook his head and sighed. "And Ingolf is now married to his sister. Poor Erich."

"Quite," Reinoehl agreed. "However, I feel you did the right thing by bringing it up," he said to Aden. "How can a man be so unaware of how much power he holds?"

"That is Erich," Aden said with a shrug. "I think that is no small part of why Hahn loved him so much—Erich never saw a prince, a source of power. All he ever saw was Hahn. I have no doubt Ingolf saw the same qualities." He heaved a long sigh and move toward the tent opening. "I had better go find him and—"

He grunted as a soldier barreled into him, barely righting them both in time to avoid crashing to the floor. "What's wrong?" he barked. "

"It's the Lord General—he's taken his horse and ridden out of camp, toward the city."

"Damn it!" Aden snarled and shoved the soldier aside, racing out of the tent and across the camp to where the horses were kept, snarling for someone to saddle his immediately. He threw himself into the saddle as the other joined him, swinging his horse around to face them. "Pancraz, you're with me."

"What!" Reinoehl said, but stopped when Vester rested a hand on his shoulder. "I don't like it."

Aden wished he could spare the time to dismount and kiss him, but there was no time. "We both speak Salharan and so stand the best chance of catching on to anything they might try."

"We'll prepare for war," Reinoehl said tersely. "Come back alive, all three of you."

Nodding, but not making a promise aloud, Aden waved in farewell and raced off, Pancraz at his side. They caught up with Erich just short of the village. "Goddess damn you, Erich!" Aden bellowed, halting in front of him, forcing Erich to stop. "Why are you doing this? Do you honestly think we will manage with you dead? You have no Goddess damned right to throw your life away when so many people need you alive. Hahn and Ingolf would both tell you to stop being selfish."

"Leave them out of this," Erich snarled. "What they feel does not matter since one is dead, and I will never again have the other! If you do not want me to die, Aden, then come along and keep me alive."

"That's what we intend to do," Pancraz said hastily, before Aden could speak. "No one meant to hurt you, Erich."

Erich sneered and kicked his horse into motion again. "That is exactly what Aden meant to do. A good soldier strikes to kill, but a good spy always strikes for maximum pain without death."

Aden flinched, feeling sick. "That—that isn't fair, Erich. There's no cause to be cruel."

Reaching out, Erich fisted his hand in Aden's tunic, all but dragging him from his horse. "Is that not what you were to me, cousin?"

"I was trying to protect you from yourself," Aden said. "I hurt you because I love you, *cousin*. Haven't too many of us died already? More will die before it's over; I will not apologize for trying to save your stupid damned life."

Erich shook him hard then let him go with a muffled snarl. He turned away and continued on slowly toward the city.

Aden followed, feeling awful, hating the tense set of Erich's shoulders—that he had put it there. He and Erich had always had their scrapes, their viewpoints on the world were too vastly different for them to always agree, but those had always been minor things, mostly two foolish youths clashing on issues that had seemed all important back then, but really were trivial matters.

This... this was different, and he hated it. He wasn't sorry for what he had done, but he was sorry it had upset Erich this much. He had underestimated the impact his words would have; perhaps Erich was more fragile than he appeared.

Which he should have well known, he thought viciously. Erich had been lost in mourning for five damned years. Of course dredging up Hahn and Ingolf in the same breath would hurt him. Aden started to say something—what he did not know, though 'I'm sorry' did not quite seem adequate enough—but then they were at the massive bridge leading into the city, and it was too late for reconciliation.

Five figures stood upon the bridge, three of them hooded.

They drew close enough to the men to talk without having to shout, but not so close they could be easily attacked, even by Salharan magic. The hooded men were in the center, with the remaining two on either side of the central threesome. The left most hooded man pushed his hood back and spoke. *"You are Prince Erich von Adolwulf."*

"I am," Erich answered.

Aden barely kept back a wince. So they *did* know. Goddess damn them.

"What do you want?" Erich continued. *"Where is the promised surrender?"*

The man who had shoved back his hood laughed. It was not a pleasant sound, but Aden would never find anything about the man pleasant, not when his eyes glowed blood red. *"We did promise to surrender, and we will—but we lied about the condition, Highness."*

Erich drew his sword, as did Aden and Pancraz. *"Of course you did,"* Erich replied. *"You are filthy Salharans. What is the condition of surrender?"*

"Your life," the man said, and raised a hand—

Only to be thrown abruptly back, tumbling from his horse, and Aden saw that someone had sunk an arrow right in the middle of his forehead.

Then everything turned into chaos. He charged the nearest Salharan, one of those who had no hood. He did, however, have glowing yellow eyes—and he used a spell Aden had seen before, some nasty trick that used the air itself, knocking Aden from his horse, making him feel as though he had run at full speed into a wall.

He landed painfully on his shoulder and groaned as he struggled to his feet, crying out in pain as something struck him from behind, sending him tumbling again. He fumbled to find his sword, knocked from his hand in the initial fall, but could not find it in the mass of men and horses, magic and flashing steel.

It did not help that there seemed to be too many men of a sudden. Surely there were more now than there had been—and there were. Soldiers from both sides, fighting on the enormous bridge, screaming and shouting, killing and dying.

Aden found a sword, if not his own, and cut down another yellow-eyed Salharan. A sudden scream drew him, and he snapped around, drawing a dagger from his boot and throwing in one smooth motion, taking another Salharan in the throat with it.

Then an even more terrible scream rent the air, and he turned to see Erich collapse.

Screaming himself, Aden raced across the bridge, shoving friend and foe aside, swinging his blade where he must, oblivious to the blows that struck him, reaching Erich even as Pancraz drove back the red-eyed bastard who had struck him down.

"Erich, Erich," Aden said shakily, fumbling for the nasty gash at Erich's side, seeing additional cuts and burns. "You stupid bastard. Live so I can kill you." Tearing strips of fabric, he struggled to bind the wound, stop the terrible bleeding, bellowing for assistance until his throat was raw.

All the while the battle raged on, and he looked up only to see Pancraz fighting ruthlessly against a different man with red eyes. Now, he also saw that the one he had seen before, the one who had spoken, was already dead.

He also saw that Pancraz was badly wounded himself, but Pancraz was also the only one keeping the man from Erich.

"Stay back," Pancraz snarled. "If you think you will get him, then you are an even greater fool than I thought."

"What can you do, little farmer boy? You belong only in a ditch, nameless, or on your back with your legs spread."

Pancraz laughed. *"If I belong on my back, then put me there, little brother."* He lunged on the last word, taking the red eyed man by surprise, knocking him back, off balance—but in the next breath, the Salharan recovered, eyes flashing brighter still as he cast some terrible spell.

A flash of light, and Pancraz screamed much the way Erich had before, but Pancraz did not fall, but continued forward, and this time his sword reached its goal, sinking to the hilt in the Salharan's gut.

Astonishingly, the Salharan laughed, even as he choked on his own blood. He grabbed Pancraz by his shoulders, and said something Aden could not understand. Then he collapsed as Pancraz began to scream again.

This time Pancraz did fall, crashing hard upon the bridge, but the Salharans were in full retreat, chased by a renewed flood of Scarlet and Cobalt soldiers.

"Aden!"

Jerking his head up, Aden realized that Vester had been calling his name for some time. "Come on," Vester said, voice urgent. "We have to get them back to camp. Bruno and Reinoehl will manage the rest."

Nodding stiffly, feeling numb, Aden helped Vester secure Erich while another set of soldiers tended Pancraz. Carefully moving him to the special boards used to carry the wounded off the fields, he then accepted the reins of his horse—how in the world had anyone found his horse in this chaos?—and mounted, following the soldiers bearing Erich and Pancraz back to camp.

Every healer in camp was waiting when they arrived and took immediate control of the two badly wounded men. "I want to—" Aden began, but he was cut off by a growl from the Master Healer.

"You will stay here," the Master Healer growled, "or you will go incur your own wounds out there, but you will *not* get in my way, Lord Chief."

Aden glared at him. "Do not keep me from my comrades."

"I will until they are fit to see anyone," the Master Healer retorted. Then he turned sharply away and barked at his fellows, ordering them to do things that made little sense to Aden.

Feeling helpless and miserable and guilty as Erich was borne away, Aden slammed his fist into the trunk of the tree beside him, then mounted his horse and rode back into the fray of battle. By the time he arrived, it was nearly over. Locating Reinoehl some distance away, he lifted his borrowed sword and charged into the fray, cutting down every Salharan in his path, uncaring if he killed civilian or soldier.

He was tired of it all, sick of it. How much longer 'til it all finally came to an end? Kicking away the latest Salharan to die by his blade, Aden resumed his relentless drive toward Reinoehl. Just as he reached him, however, the victory cry rang out amongst the Krian armies, and the few remaining Salharans outside the city fled back into the meager safety of its walls.

Reinoehl ordered the men to halt when many would have charged the city itself. Across the field before the bridge, Vester began to call out orders to regroup and return to camp. Recalled to his own duties, Aden turned away from Reinoehl without a word and began ordering men to the duty of examining the fallen for survivors and mortally wounded, ordering all corpses thrown into the great moat surrounding the city—diverted from the great river itself.

There was an idea.

Calling for more men, any with strength left, he dismounted his horse and quickly gave them their orders—to stop the water from flowing, to force it to go stagnant. That would cripple the city a bit, when they likely relied upon a moat of running water rather than still. Especially if they further fouled it with the corpses.

Orders given, the men dispersed to see them carried out, here and there calling for others to assist. Aden watched them go, hands balled into fists, stomach knotted with anger and fear. Was Erich all right? What of Pancraz? Goddess damn him, what if Erich died? Why had the fool not listened to him?

A hand on the small of his back made him jump, and he turned around, sword raised—and froze as he realized it was only Reinoehl. Of course it was Reinoehl. Lowering his sword, Aden sighed and did not protest when Reinoehl pulled him into a brief embrace.

"How is Erich? Did I see correctly that Pancraz fell as well?"

"I don't know and yes. They were both badly wounded. I do not know what happened to Pancraz, there at the end. That damned Salharan did something to him." Aden pulled away, suddenly feeling every ache and pain, every bruise and cut acquired in battle. "What happened?" he asked. "Who fired that arrow? After that, everything... just went out of control."

Reinoehl sheathed his own sword and whistled for their horses to be brought. "Vester fired the arrow; we did not trust those bastards for a moment. All three had red eyes, did you know? One of the others orange, the last yellow. At least one of them had to be a Brother, I think."

Aden nodded. "Are we going to attack the city?"

"Yes," Reinoehl replied, voice grim. "As soon as I can gather the men, calm them down. We will likely attack at dawn, if not much sooner. The Salharans are scared; I could see from the way they fought, they did not expect everything to happen the way it did."

"Where did the Salharans come from?" Aden asked. "There was no one else on the bridge, and then suddenly people were everywhere."

Reinoehl took him by the arm and guided him to his horse, waiting patiently for Aden to mount, before he mounted his own horse. "The city gates opened and let out a few hundred soldiers. The goal was obviously to kill Erich at all costs, and it did cost them dearly. I think not more than twenty men fled back into the city. It will not be hard to take now—they set out to break our spirits, but we have instead completely crushed theirs."

"Let us hope the price of that crushing was not Erich's life!" Aden snarled, jerking his horse around and returning to camp as quickly as he possibly could, ignoring it when Reinoehl called out to him.

Back in camp, he flung himself off his horse and raced toward the healers' tents, bellowing for someone to attend him *immediately* or else. A couple of minutes later, just when he was ready to resort to violence, the Master Healer himself appeared.

"Lord Chief," the Master Healer snapped, "stomping around and bellowing like a child will not help anything. They are being treated—"

"So they're alive?" Aden demanded. "They will live?"

"They are alive," the Master Healer replied. "I will not say they will stay that way until they have survived through the night."

Aden went cold and fought to keep the contents of his stomach *in* his stomach. "What do you mean?"

"I mean they were both badly wounded, and it will be a long time before either moves from bed—but they are alive right now, Lord Chief, and I honestly could not tell you which of them is the more stubborn." He gripped Aden's shoulder and squeezed it gently. "They are weak, right now, but not lost. If they live through the night, they will probably live to get injured all over again."

Unable to speak, Aden only nodded. "Can I see Erich?"

"Of course," the Master Healer replied. "Do not disturb him, mind you." He stepped back and motioned Aden toward the main healing tent.

Striding inside, Aden went immediately to the farthest bed where Erich lay far too still, heavily bandaged from chest almost down to his hips. His face was pale, eyes closed, and all Aden could think was that his oldest friend might die with Aden's cruel words the last he had heard.

He sank down upon the stool by the bed, lightly touching Erich's hand. "Wake up, you Goddess damned idiot. I do not want to have to tell Ingolf and Reni that you are dead." Letting out a slow, shaky breath, he bowed his head and simply sat, somewhat soothed by the simple fact that Erich was not yet dead. Surely the idiot would not die in the night. That would be completely unfair.

A sharp gasp drew his attention, and it was further caught by a flurry of exclamations. Turning he saw Reinoehl, Vester, and Bruno all bent over Pancraz. Reluctantly leaving Erich, he wandered over to them. "Is he all right?" he asked, ashamed he had been so worried about Erich that Pancraz had nearly fled his mind.

"He is alive," Vester said grimly, "but when he wakes, I am not certain he will want to be."

Aden frowned at him. "What in the name of the Goddess do you mean?"

Vester pointed, and Aden followed where he indicated to see that Pancraz lay on his stomach. The blankets were pushed down, baring his skin all the way down to his lower back where... Aden's eyes went wide. "That... that cannot be what I think."

"It is," Reinoehl said grimly, fingers pressing lightly upon the mark on Pancraz's lower back—a stylized, seven point stair. The mark of the Brotherhood.

"Why?" Aden demanded. "Why would they make him a Brother?"

"I do not know," Reinoehl replied, and the other two look equally confounded. "I fear only Pancraz can tell us, and there is no telling when he will finally wake."

Aden wanted to punch something, hands shaking as he balled them into fists. "I am sick unto death of those filthy bastards."

"Then let us hurry to finish this," Reinoehl replied. "Go and prepare the men for war. We are going to raze the city and teach them never to take us so lightly again."

Chapter Twenty Nine

Reinoehl wanted blood.

He wanted the streets of Salhara to run red with the blood of the cowards who had taken two friends and his lover—because try as he might, he could not pull Aden from his guilt-stricken state—in one thrust. It was worse even than when Aden had been broken by his accidental use of magic, perhaps because Aden could not bear he had hurt a friend, and now that friend hovered too close to death.

It was poor comfort that Aden had at least gathered himself enough to help lead the forces to the city. Reinoehl suspected it would now be a pathetically easy victory, but he would not arrogantly assume such was the case.

Really, though, Aden's idea of fouling the moat had been brilliant. They should have thought of it themselves, but their energies had gone elsewhere—and until now, they would not have had the chance to do such a thing without being struck down. The chaos of that cowardly attack had provided an opportunity for sabotage that otherwise they would not have had.

He turned at the sound of approaching footsteps, though he already knew by the rhythm of them that it was Vester, who looked more exhausted than Reinoehl had ever seen him. "Are you all right?" he asked, wanting to punch something from sheer frustration. Now was not the time for his Commander to finally falter, not when his fellow General was possibly dying and his Chief and lover was hanging on to his functionality by a thread. Not when two armies were stricken by the near loss of the Scarlet General and the Scarlet Commander they had come to all but worship.

"I am fine, Lord General," Vester replied. "Merely busy getting everything sorted and all the men readied."

The unspoken words being that he was doing everything and Aden was nowhere about to help him. Reinoehl frowned and quelled his anger, though by all rights he should have been screaming at his Chief of Staff to get to work, if not outright disciplining him for such a failure to do his duty.

"Have you decided, Lord General?" Vester asked.

Reinoehl did not immediately reply, instead waiting for the men trying to pretend they were not eavesdropping to quiet. When it was more or less silent, he spoke just loud enough his words would carry. "If Salhara wants to behave like cowards after all the regard we have shown them, then they will be treated like cowards. Do not slaughter, but do not spare the blade either, Commander. Drive the filthy bastards from their homes then raze the city. We attack in a hard wave. Commander, you will take the first wave. Bruno will take the second. Aden and I will take the third. I want nothing left of the city but stone and ash."

Vester swept a bow. "Yes, Lord General." He turned away to see the orders were dispersed through the ranks, but the eavesdropping soldiers would spread it even faster, and they both knew it.

Leaving Vester to his duties, Reinoehl went to fetch his Chief of Staff. As expected, Aden had returned to the healer's tent, slumped on the stool by Erich's bed, the very picture of dejection and misery.

"Aden," Reinoehl said, gentle but firm. "You are needed by your men—by me. You do Erich no favors by neglecting your duties."

Aden nodded, slowly dragging his gaze up. "I know. But—doing my duty is what caused this to happen in the first place."

Reinoehl frowned and moved to kneel beside him. "You did the right thing. Erich was the one who acted wrongly in disregarding what was said and charging off."

"But I—"

"But nothing," Reinoehl cut in. "He should be aware of his station, of the power he holds. The men are discouraged now, the morale is all but ruined. That is his fault, no one else's. A good friend is one who will say what a man needs to hear, regardless of whether or not he *wants* to hear it. You know this, Aden. Normally, you would not falter. Do not falter now."

Sighing, Aden stood. "The last words we spoke were in anger, and he could still die—angry and unhappy. I just..." He shook his head and turned away. "You're right, Lord General. I'm sorry. I'll go ready the men, or help anyway, since Vester probably has it mostly done by this point. What is our strategy?"

Reinoehl ignored the question, instead gripping Aden by his shoulders and dragging him close, kissing him hard and not relenting until Aden relaxed and leaned into him. "You have done nothing wrong," he said when they at last broke apart. "You did what a good soldier would do, you did what a friend would do—he will forgive you, Aden. Knowing what little I do of Erich, I would say he already has, and he would not want you here suffering regardless."

Aden nodded and kissed him again, then turned and strode from the tent, barking out orders before he was even outside.

Releasing a pent up sigh of his own, Reinoehl turned to Erich. "You had better wake up, you gods damned fool." Then he left, striding to his own tent where orderlies waited to help him into his armor. Reinoehl had never favored heavy armor, and he did not favor it now, but he did begrudgingly settle for his mid-weight set.

He was always grim before a battle, but not usually this grim. Always before, back in Kria, Cobalt had been on the defensive. A few skirmishes were at their instigation, but only when Salhara had pushed too far. This... this was different. Kria had never attacked Salhara directly, not in history recent enough for anyone to recall it. So far, they had taken prisoners, taken as much care as they could afford. After all, it did not make sense to do a great deal of damage to people that would be their fellow countrymen at the end of it all, even if only by force. Labor would still be needed; killing that labor was impractical.

This, though... clearly they had been too soft if Salhara had seen fit to take such opportunity, to play such cowardly games. No more. "Winter Princess, lend your strength," he murmured, yanking on his gloves and flexing his fingers to settle them. Moving outside, he tested the fit by drawing his sword,

giving several swings before he was satisfied. He tilted the blade back and forth in the fading light, watching as the inscription shone briefly.

Sheathing the sword again, he strode to where everyone was assembling to go to war. They had, in the end, opted to strike immediately rather than wait for dawn—he wanted his men still angry over the fall of the Scarlet General and Commander, eager for vengeance. He wanted the Salharans still shaken from the failure of their plan, the loss of nearly all of the three hundred soldiers sent out.

He wanted the city to fall, he wanted it to crumble, to further shake those they still had to face. By the time they reached the 'Mother Star' Salhara would be trembling, or he was not the Cobalt General.

Accepting the reins of his horse, Reinoehl mounted and turned to his commanding officers—Bruno amongst them, since control of Scarlet must now fall to Reinoehl. He looked at Aden. "You were apprised?"

"Yes, Lord General," Aden replied, and Reinoehl was relieved to see that he had slid completely into his role as Chief of Staff. "The armies have been properly divided and are being put into place as we speak. We await only your command to begin the attack."

Reinoehl nodded, and drew his sword, moving to where the majority of the massed army could see and hear him. "For Scarlet!" he bellowed and was met with a deafening roar of the same charged words.

Then the drums began to pound, and Vester vanished to lead the first wave.

Night fell swiftly as the sounds of battle rose up, adding a level of terror to the whole that could never be achieved in sunlight. The loss of the sun also brought a chill to the air, but the heat of battle would banish that.

Torches and lanterns were everywhere, and the city itself was soon so well lit with fires that sunlight was hardly required. The beat of the drums shifted, signaling the start of the second wave.

Reinoehl watched motionless from his position on a hill some distance from the city, his army poised for the last strike. In a hard wave, the first and second waves each contained one quarter of the army. The third and final wave contained fully half of the entire army. A hard wave had but one purpose—to annihilate.

He listened to the screams and cries impassively, waiting only for the drums to signal the beginning of the end. The city was a valuable one, and rebuilding it would be a great expense, but Salhara obviously thought them soft, and he would not— could not—allow that assumption to stand. Not when the Scarlet General, the crown prince of Illussor and Kria, hovered close to death.

Just as his patience began finally to wear thin, he heard the distant cry. Then the beat of the drums increased, signaling the final wave forward. Screaming the battle cry, Reinoehl led the way to the city, pounding over the great bridge, fighting through the masses trying to go the opposite way—masses that only grew more panicked as they realized the worst was only now arriving.

It was the screams of the women and children that bothered him most. There were always such terrible casualties in war, and he had given the order to be ruthless. But he did not enjoy it.

The city was a nightmare when they finally reached it—and that was enough of a chore, as people fled the city, desperate to get as far away as possible from the bloodthirsty Krians. At least it all seemed to be going according to plan.

Reinoehl did not hesitate, but cut down every Salharan soldier in his path, every Salharan who seemed to pose even the slightest threat. The rest, he worked the same as his men to herd them out, drive them from the city in a mindless panic.

They continued to spill in mindless, terrified droves over the bridge that was the only way in and out of the city. Normally something so well fortified would take days of work. It had, in fact, taken them days to devise strategies, refine them, and slowly whittle them down to one.

But, those strategies were all void now—minus the assault of the city walls, which Vester had handled easily, as Reinoehl had known he would.

A scream shattered his focus, and Reinoehl jerked hard on his horse's reins, barely pulling away in time to avoid the boiling water that came pouring down from above. But even as he looked up, the culprits were struck down by arrow and dagger, their violet eyes going flat as they tumbled from the roof.

Young men, he observed, but did not let the observation linger lest it shatter his battle calm. Turning away, he dove back into the fray.

How long they fought, he did not know, but when the drums at last began to beat out a victory, it did not seem as though the dark could get any deeper.

Reinoehl brought his horse to a halt and allowed his sword arm to relax. He did not, however, sheath the blade—not that he could have until it was cleaned. At least as much blood and gore covered him, and he could feel all manner of bruises, burns, cuts, and scrapes. As his body calmed from battle, it began to feel the toll that combat had taken.

He wondered where Aden had gone; they had been forced apart almost immediately. Please, Goddess of the cold and snow, dearest Winter Princess, please say this battle had not cost him his lover, his friends...

But even as the fear began to take firm hold, Aden's familiar gait caught his eye as Aden stepped from a mass of smoke and shadow into the uncertain flickering of a slowly dying torch. Dismounting, Reinoehl strode to him, embracing him as tightly as armor and situation allowed before stepping back and reassuming the mantle of General.

"What have you to tell me?"

"The Salharans have surrendered," Aden replied. "All those still in the city are being driven out. I've set men to begin combing every bit of the city. The soldiers have all been informed that they are to be out of the city by sunrise, or they will burn with it."

Reinoehl nodded. "Good. Vester? Bruno?"

"I saw Bruno briefly. He took a minor wound to the head. He'll be fine; it was not slowing him down even a little. Vester I have not yet seen."

"Let us get on with it, then," Reinoehl replied. "At least the men seem to have gotten some of their spirit back."

Aden nodded and turned away, letting out a sharp piercing whistle that immediately brought half a dozen soldiers to attend him. "Someone find my horse. You, go fetch me an update on the conditions of the Scarlet General and Commander. You, bring me word of Commander Vester. Someone find the Lord General something half decent to drink! I also want the initial counts, now."

The gathered soldiers scattered again, each man racing off to see his orders carried out. Reinoehl chuckled and whistled himself, but only so his horse would come to him. Kneeling, he cleaned his sword on the cloak of a dead Salharan soldier, then sheathed it and rose. Grabbing hold of his horse, he swung up into the saddle then moved closer to Aden, extending a hand. "Have you ever noticed, Aden, that your horse is always the first thing you lose? We will have to work upon your horsemanship someday."

Aden smirked as he took Reinoehl's hand and swung up behind him, but did not say anything until he was settled in place, arms wrapped loosely around Reinoehl's waist. "You have never minded the way I ride before."

Reinoehl choked, the innuendo in the words impossible to mistake. "That is *not* the same thing, you miscreant."

He could feel Aden's laughter vibrate against his back and was quietly happy for it. There was nothing he feared half as much as Aden's black moods. Whatever had lifted it this time, he was grateful to it. "That riding," he continued, "we will discuss at a later time." Oh, how he wished his near future included the time and place for such things, and he stifled a sigh against the knowledge it did not.

That thought drove him back to the present, and the present was razing a city and dealing with the bodies that seemed to cover every available surface. His stomach twisted and knotted to see them all—and nearly emptied to see a dead child, not more than seven. More looking revealed women, still more children. Autumn Prince treat them kindly. Sacred General he might be, but he took no pleasure in doing his duty when this was the result.

"Lord General! Oh, Chief Aden, you are still with him. We have your horse." Two soldiers came toward them, one leading the promised horse.

"Thank you," Aden called, and with a parting squeeze, slid off Reinoehl's horse and went to reclaim his own.

The soldiers both saluted belatedly. "Lord General, Commander Vester says he will be along eventually and asks what you want done with the bodies?"

Reinoehl looked around at the mass of bodies. Salharan, Krian—the differences little mattered to the dead. What mattered now was how far he wanted to convey his anger, convey that Kria was not to be trifled with. He wanted to be firm, but he did not want to tip over into cruel. The temptation was there to send an even more brutal message, but not giving in to such temptation was what separated the Krians from the Salharans more than magic and gods ever would. "Burn all the bodies with the city," he said. "Let the dead Salharans go to their damn stars."

"Yes, Lord General," the soldiers said and saluted again before racing off to convey the message.

Just as the two vanished, another one came racing up, gasping for breath. "Lord Chief, the Master Healer says that the Lord General and the Lord Commander are both doing well and uh—he will keep you informed."

To judge by the soldier's hesitation, that was not quite what the Master Healer had said. Reinoehl chuckled and dismissed him. He motioned to Aden. "Let us have done with this, and then you can return to fussing over the rock-headed Scarlet General."

Aden made a face at him, but did not reply. Bidding him farewell, Aden turned his horse and headed off into the depths of the city to guide and supervise the emptying of the city in preparation for its burning.

Reinoehl watched him until he was out of sight then bent to his own duties. The sooner they were done with this, the better.

~~*

The preparing of the city took much longer than anticipated, however, and Reinoehl finally ordered the burning be delayed until sunrise.

On a somewhat more positive note, the city had yielded much in the way of badly needed supplies. The arrival of the Brothers must have kept the city inhabitants from destroying everything Kria might find useful and then Kria had struck before they had had time to destroy much of anything.

He wished he knew how things proceeded back home. The Sacred Generals had always made a point to communicate. Communication was often the difference between victory and defeat. So far from home, and as cut off as Salhara could manage, he had no idea if there yet remained a home to which he might return. The last missive from the Kaiser had been reassuring, but it had also been months old.

Home... he wished more than anything to be home again, buried in the cool depths of Eis, warmed by Aden, with nothing more pressing on his mind than the regular patrols. He also missed a proper bath, oh to be properly clean again...

At the moment, that simple future seemed too far away to be even a remote possibility. He wondered if it would ever seem real.

"Lord General," Vester said, coming up behind him, breaking into Reinoehl's thoughts. He looked as ragged and worn as Reinoehl felt, as they all felt, having not slept or even really held still since the Scarlet General had fallen. "The city is emptied and all is ready."

Reinoehl nodded. Given the size of the blaze to be set, it had been necessary to move the camp some miles away. At present, they were camped in a valley, the hills rising high above—a risk, but one he was prepared to take. The Salharans would not attack them right now, not after so costly a defeat. He stood currently on one of the higher rises, on a precipice that gave a perfect view of the distant city.

Facing the city, he regarded it for several long seconds, watching the flames flickering in the rapidly growing dark, waiting to devour the city. "Burn it."

Just behind him, Vester turned and called down to the signal men. Several minutes later, Reinoehl saw the city begin to burn. He watched a few minutes more, until it was clear that the flames would not stop until they had spent themselves, then turned away. "Inform me when the deed is done."

"Yes, Lord General," Vester replied, and moved to take up Reinoehl's position at the edge of the rise. "Lord General—" he repeated then stopped.

Reinoehl frowned, puzzled. "Did you want something, Vester?"

"I—it is only, I would like to know when Pancraz and the Lord General wake?"

"Of course," Reinoehl said. "Why would you hesitate over such a thing? I will see you are kept apprised, and that Aden or Bruno spells you in a few hours."

Vester nodded, but did not reply, his attention having shifted fully to the distant inferno.

Returning to the main camp, Reinoehl made his way to the healers' tents. He was stopped often, but remained patient as he reassured and comforted, or simply made up tasks on the spot and assigned them as a means of distraction.

Eventually, he reached his destination. Off to one side of the triad of healers' tents, a single tent had been set up for the sole use of the Scarlet General and Commander. Slipping inside, he immediately paused as he saw a third cot had been set out, and Aden was stretched out fast asleep upon it. Mouth quirked in amusement, he glanced toward the Master Healer. "Finally could not stay awake?"

The Master Healer snorted. "I made him some tea that settled the matter. I hope the Lord General will not hold the trick against me or reveal the trick was played."

Reinoehl smiled briefly, combing his hand through Aden's hair. It was long now, well past his shoulders. No doubt Aden would cut it the moment he had real time, and Reinoehl would not protest, but secretly he would miss the length. Though he did not know why he had become fond of Aden's hair long. "I do not, as a general rule, approve of such things, but circumstances being what they are... do not make frequent use of the trick, healer, and my silence is yours."

"Of course not."

Nodding, Reinoehl dropped the matter and reluctantly moved away from Aden to regard Pancraz and Erich. "How are they?"

"Doing very well," the Master Healer replied, a note of admiration in his voice. "I will be honest, Lord General. Such wounds as they have most often kill men. They are both quite strong, or stubborn, which amounts to the same thing in such matters. Pancraz stirred very briefly, earlier. The Lord General..." He trailed off, looking over Reinoehl's shoulder. Then one corner of his mouth tilted up. "The Lord General wakes now. Give me a few moments with him, and then if you want to speak with him you may. Shall I rouse the Chief?"

"No," Reinoehl said. "I do indeed need to speak with General Erich, and Aden will not like what I have to say. Let him sleep."

Bowing, the Master Healer went to tend Erich. Leaving them in some privacy, Reinoehl returned to Aden's side, once more combing through his long hair, rubbing away a smudge of dirt on one pale cheek, tsking at the dried smear of blood on his throat. He could not wait for the day they returned home and willed the Gods to see fit that they did return home.

He stifled a sigh and tried not to think, simply enjoyed the comforting sight of his lover until a soft touch to his shoulder drew him away. Turning around, he glanced at the old, tough face of the Master Healer.

"The Lord General awaits you, Lord General," the Master Healer said, snickering briefly at his own words. Sweeping a formal bow, he then quietly departed the tent.

Reinoehl pulled up a stool and sat beside Erich's bed, regarding him in pensive silence for a minute or two. "How do you feel?" he finally asked.

"Like I got what I deserved for being stupid?" Erich rasped and took another sip of the tea the healer had left for him. He sounded tired and resigned, but his eyes were sharp and full of anger as he met Reinoehl's gaze. "Is that what you want me to say? I feel awful, for various reasons, but any chance to save so many lives was a chance worth taking."

"You are a stupid, reckless fool," Reinoehl replied, unimpressed. "The loss of your life would have crushed our armies in a way that Salhara could only dream. Never mind how much more upsetting it would have been to others back home. Did you think of any of that, Erich, before you charged to meet them? You may not like that you are so important, but it is a fact you will have to accept. "

Erich glared at him, and for a moment, Reinoehl thought he saw what might have appealed so much to Ingolf in those eyes, the fierceness that drove them. Pale as the winter snow Erich might be, but at heart he was all Krian, or may as well be. "Do not dare to—"

"I will dare whatever I like," Reinoehl said sharply. "I am a Sacred General of Kria—and Illussor. That makes you my prince. If I must yell at you to protect you and my people, then I will do so. Aden fell apart after you fell, devastated by your wounds and that you parted in anger. Pancraz nearly died protecting you, and it was all I could do to rally your men. What if you had died? Pancraz would have died avenging you, I do not doubt it. Aden would have lost any ability to properly fight, and your men would have been defeated before they could have drawn their swords. What of Ingolf, if what Aden says is true? Do you think he would take well the news of your death after what he has so far suffered? What of the Queen, who is apparently fragile and has lost everyone else? What of their unborn child? You might like to tell

yourself you were saving lives, but the loss of *your* life would have cost us more lives than those you wanted to save. It would definitely have cost us your friends, in addition to yourself."

For several long minutes, Erich said nothing. Eventually, he looked up and toward the other beds. "Are they all right? What happened to Aden?"

"What? No," Reinoehl said, as he realized what Erich was misconstruing. "Aden is fine. He would not rest for worry of you, and the Master Healer finally put him to sleep. He does not know he was drugged."

Erich winced. "You had better hope he does not find out. What of Pancraz?"

"Like you, we did not know if he would live," Reinoehl said. "What is worse, when he finally realizes what the Brother did to him, he may not *want* to live. Though, he may know already; we are not certain."

"What do you mean 'what the Brother did to him'?"

"He gave Pancraz his Brotherhood star," Reinoehl replied quietly. "He made Pancraz a Brother. We do not know why. Only Pancraz might possibly provide the answer."

Erich sighed. "I do not think it was to Pancraz they meant to give it, though I cannot say for certain. That bastard Brother was trying to do something to me as we fought. Killing me was not his goal; when I realized he was doing something else, I forced the issue. Better to be dead than a Salharan captive."

"It was not a risk you should have taken at all!" Reinoehl snarled. "You are a fool thrice over, and if you ever do it again I will take your head myself, *Highness*."

"I'm sorry," Erich said quietly.

Reinoehl relented slightly. "It is not to me you need to apologize."

"Yes, I do," Erich replied. "You are my comrade, and it was to you my duties fell—and some will still fall, until I can move from this bed—and they should not have been your burden."

Nodding, Reinoehl said, "Simply do not be that stupid again, Erich. You are my comrade, and my prince, but you are also my friend." Erich nodded. "Shall I wake Aden? He will be angry if you woke, and he slept through it."

"Let him sleep," Erich said. "He probably needs it, and we will probably just wake Pancraz with our noise."

Reinoehl chuckled, but then said more soberly. "He was most distraught you might die still angry and upset."

Erich shrugged the words aside. "Aden knows better than that, or should. We never could stay angry with each other very long. Believe me, we tried back in our youth. I think we lasted six hours, and then

simply could not take it anymore." He smirked. "We had to call a truce in order to properly torment the twins."

"That is the second time you have mentioned twins in conjunction with Aden's name," Reinoehl said, burning with curiosity. "Who are these twins, and am I going to have to dislike them on principle?"

The words made Erich laugh—but then immediately wince and pale a bit.

"You should take more care," Reinoehl said. "The Master Healer did not think you would live through the night."

Erich nodded. "I know. He told me. I will be fine—just do not make me laugh. As to the twins, you need not worry. They are friends—Elena and Engel DeVry. Engel is actually a spy, the same as Aden. Elena is... they call her the Queen's Enforcer. Do not make her angry." He grinned. "But, if you wanted some stories with which to harass Aden..."

"Do not even think about it," Aden said from across the tent, making both men jump. "One word out of you, and I will drag out stories of my own the very moment we are before the Kaiser to tell them." Erich flinched, levity fading. Silence fell, then Aden said slowly, "I'm sorry, Erich—"

"Oh, shut up," Erich said, making a face then smiling faintly. "You were right, and I know it. You're always right, and it's completely obnoxious of you."

Aden moved to stand next to his bed then bent to embrace him carefully. "I'm glad you are alive, and will be well, you Goddess damned idiot."

"Me too," Erich said quietly as they drew apart. "I'm sorry."

"Oh, shut up," Aden said. "If you try to mention the twins again, I will kill you myself."

"Later," Erich whispered loudly to Reinoehl, who only laughed and went to call for food and tea while they bickered.

Chapter Thirty

"They will be doing portraits of you soon," Sepp said, snickering as they looked over the portrait gallery, still Ingolf's favorite place to hide away. "Dressed up, looking all fancy and royal—I cannot wait to see them."

Ingolf rolled his eyes. "They have already begun. They did one shortly after the wedding, and I have the palace artists slinking around and following me, so I know they are up to something. I do not think I ever want to see the final results, however. I was never meant for royal portraits." He smiled faintly. "Though, I would not mind seeing the ones of Reni. She would take beautifully..." He trailed off as all the worries and fears he had been attempting to avoid assaulted him.

"How is she?" Sepp asked quietly.

"Not well," Ingolf replied. "Elena rarely leaves her side, now, and Reni prefers...she prefers I stay away." He frowned, as upset by the words as he had been three days ago when Reni has requested she be left alone from that point on. They had been enjoying breakfast together, though Reni now seldom took anything but her tea anymore. He hoped she was all right, but feared that she would never be well again. She was his wife, damn it, she should not be barring him from her rooms. That was *their* child she carried—

Ingolf's stomach knotted, and he raked his hands through his hair, then lowered his head, forehead resting on the knuckles of his clasped hands, elbows braced on his knees. How in the name of the gods was he supposed to raise a child? Especially if he had to do it alone, and despite knowing what he did he still hoped and prayed that he would not have to do it alone...

"Ingolf..."

He looked up at the sound of his name, but immediately looked down again, unable to bear the concern and gentle sympathy on Sepp's face.

What he wanted—needed—was Erich. What sort of bastard did that make him, to want the man he loved while his wife waited to die? He sickened himself.

"Ingolf..." Sepp said again softly. "Is there anything I can do?"

Stifling an urge to laugh hysterically, Ingolf shook his head. "At present, two-thirds of my new country are locked in a bitter war. I cannot bring myself to look at the lists of deaths that come to me every few weeks. The numbers make me sick. I have ordered that two Illussor villages be taken under royal control, and most of the inhabitants put under house arrest for dealing in arcen and attempting to assassinate me. Half the country supports me, half the country hates me. My lady wife lay dying, and there is nothing I can do to prevent her death. The only thing which keeps her trying is the thought of the child she will bear any day now. I cannot even run a country, how in the name of the gods am I supposed to raise a child?"

Sepp gave a strangled laugh, and sat down next to him. "Ingolf, most people would say raising a child is *easier* than running a country. As to that country, I think you do not give yourself enough credit. I would say not even a quarter hates you, and of those most simply hate any sort of change. You are a good Kaiser, especially for one who was thrown into the position as you were. You are a good man. You will be a good father."

"I cannot even save the mother," Ingolf said, voice ragged.

"You would, Ingolf, if there was any way you could," Sepp replied. "Everyone knows this—she knows this. You should know it, too."

"What I know is that I cannot save her," Ingolf said flatly. "All the power of three nations, and I cannot save my wife."

Sepp touched his shoulder lightly. "In Spring hands all things blossom, and in Summer's arms they flourish. When at last they fade, Autumn takes them away, and the rest in Winter find solace until Spring returns."

Ingolf made a rough noise and stood, in no mood for prayers. Neither did he need the reminder of Autumn, as guilt and shame once more made him sick, cold. Still, it was there. He wanted Erich's presence, which had seemed to steady him from the beginning. He wanted the smiles, the way Erich did things simply because he decided to do them.

But what sort of bastard turned to another for comfort when his wife...

He balled his hands into fists, and barely resisted the urge to slam them into something. "Where am I supposed to be?" he asked.

Sepp stood up from the bench where they had been sitting. "Meetings with the lords of the villages you ordered taken over."

Ingolf nodded, and slowly relaxed his hands, putting all his focus upon the mundane matters of ruling. He drew a steadying breath, then nodded again. "Very well, let us go and speak with them. I do not see what they think they will accomplish, but I am certainly in the mood for a fight."

"Just do not fight with your sword," Sepp said, mouth quirked. "It would settle the matter, but perhaps not in quite the manner people would prefer."

"If they would stop being stupid," Ingolf groused, "I would not have to constantly anger them." He strode through the halls, nodding here and there to people, but for the most part ignoring them. He had no energy for niceties today. All he wanted was to see his wife, to make her well.

And Erich, the back of his mind whispered. He wanted Erich to hold him, and make everything vanish for a time, to take some of the weight from him and make it all easier to bear...but Erich was locked in war, and quite possibly dead, and he really did not need more gloomy thoughts to prey upon his mind.

Stifling a sigh, he paused outside the meeting room where he was to speak with the lords in question, and steadied himself. Kaiser, he had to be Kaiser now, and nothing else. His private worries were his alone, and should not come into the running of his country.

Ready, he opened the door and stalked inside, shadowed by Sepp. That almost made him smile. Sepp had always been held in fear and respect by the Illussor, for the way he was close to and protected the Kaiser—but now that he worked alongside the infamous Queen's Enforcer, the respect had almost become more awe. Apparently, few were the men who worked closely with the Enforcer and lived through it unscathed.

Four men were seated around a circular table, each with papers and drinks set before him. All stood as Ingolf appeared, and they bowed low to him, murmuring polite greetings.

Ingolf sat, and motioned that they may do the same.

"How is the Queen?" one man asked.

"She is tired, and ready for the child to be born," Ingolf replied, some of the anger stirred by this problem easing as he was reminded that these men had known Reni all their life. "The physicians watch her constantly, and hopefully the babe will be born very soon."

The men all nodded, and he could see them whispering and muttering prayers, making motions for protection. He felt sicker and more contemptible than ever, for having to hide that Reni had been doomed to die regardless of whether or not she bore a child. She grew weaker with every passing day, as the damage the plague had long ago wrought finally came to an end. All that kept her struggling was the babe.

How could he tell these men that? Tell anyone? It would only make them grieve more, to know it had been hopeless from the start. He could not stand the knowledge himself, and wished that ignorance was a luxury he could afford—but as Kaiser, ignorance was the one thing he could not afford.

He gave them a couple of minutes more, then moved on to business, accepting a portfolio from one of his two secretaries, ordered to be here to attend him. "Gentlemen, we are here to discuss the two villages I have ordered taken over. Do you take issues with my command?"

"We are displeased, yes, Majesty," said one of the men—the first city Ingolf had taken over lay in his territory, and currently seven members of that village were under arrest for suspicion of arranging the first assassination attempt. There had been two more since.

Ingolf laughed, and sat back in his chair, one ankle propped on the opposite knee, fingers steepled. "Displeased? I am displeased that thrice now men have tried to kill me. I am displeased that two villages now have been caught dealing illegally in arcen—something that your friends and comrades are at present dying to destroy, something that has caused this entire continent no end of grief. Does your displeasure outweigh mine? After all the *displeasure* that has been caused, do you think I care about yours? My lady wife, your Queen, is too weak to move from her bed and you bring me here to discuss your displeasure?"

They at least had the grace to look abashed.

"I spoke poorly, Majesty," the first man said. "I meant only that the entire village is not guilty of these crimes. I have been there myself; most are simple peasants and merchants who want only to live quietly. They are no more to blame for a strong criminal element than anyone else. These things happen, no matter what measures are taken. The blame is largely mine, for failing to take greater measures. I will see they are taken, but to hold the entire village under house arrest only causes more harm than good."

Ingolf nodded approvingly. "That is much better said, my lord. However, I will not relent upon the villages until it is made clear to the country that things have changed, and they will not be returning to how they used to be. I am Kaiser, and I rule this country alongside my lady wife. More changes still will be coming, as I attempt to make three into one."

"Have...that is, if we may ask, Majesty...have you decided upon what to call the new nation?"

"No," Ingolf replied slowly. "That is the sort of thing I would prefer to settle with a council, but I have not yet selected a new council and so the matter must wait. Why do you ask?"

The men all shared a look, seeming to have hold some silent conversation, then one of them said, "Well, your Majesty may not be aware, busy as you are with the Queen and matters of state, but the matter of the name Illussor has long been contested. Many seek to change it, be rid of it altogether, since the name of our country speaks of a past we want well behind us, remembered only so that we do not repeat the mistake. Many favor simply joining Kria completely, since so much of our cultural has blended with that of Kria anyway..."

Ingolf looked at them, truly surprised. They were right—he was busy, and that particular rumor had never reached him. "Is that why everyone has taken to calling me Kaiser, rather than King?"

"Yes, Kaiser," said another man, mouth curving in a half smile. "I know of many, lately, who have been attempting to brush up on their Krian. Many are fluent in both languages, though none have the skill that comes with living in Kria. Your Majesty might consider, at one or two dinners a week, that everyone speak only Krian? Such things would be received well, and the challenge and amusement of it might be distracting?"

"I will do so," Ingolf said, and motioned to his other secretary, accepting a second portfolio, this one containing his list of potentials for the eventual council. Two of the men before him he had put on the list himself; two others had been suggested by Reni. He adjusted the lists accordingly, and handed the portfolio back to his secretary. "It may behoove you, gentlemen," he said the lords of the overtaken villages, "to emphasize to your people why the crown looks upon them with displeasure. You might particularly emphasize, in person, that certain persons within their fold attempted to take my life—which means that my unborn child might stand to lose both mother and father, though Gods willing my child will lose neither."

The men nodded. "We will do so, your Majesty. Thank you for indulging us in this meeting."

"Not at all," Ingolf replied. "I had faith it would go well, and that faith has not so far been betrayed. If you are game, you might lend further suggestions to an overtaxed Kaiser, for I like—" He stopped as the door abruptly opened, and felt a cold knot form in the pit of his stomach as he saw who filled the doorway.

Elena, pale and tired, stared at him grimly. "The birthing has begun, Majesty."

Ingolf stood, and did not say anything as he strode from the room, merely stalked through the halls back to the royal chambers. Elena followed closely on his heels.

"How is she?" Ingolf asked quietly as they drew close to Reni's rooms, and he flinched at the sound of her cries. They were the most awful, most terrifying thing he had ever heard.

"Not well," Elena said. "The midwives fear for her greatly."

Ingolf's mouth twisted with bitterness and self-loathing. "Well, they have reason to fear, do they not?"

Elena glared at him. "Now is not the time for recrimination, Ingolf. What's done is done, and she made her choice. Right now, she needs to know you are out here waiting for their child, and that you will care for it—not spend your life hating yourself for helping to create it. She was always going to die." Her own face shattered briefly—for she, like everyone else, had only known that Reni was weak. Only after becoming Ingolf's bodyguard had she been told the truth.

The shouting match which had ensued between old friends had raged for hours, and Ingolf had been grateful for the walls that kept him from the two women. By morning, Elena had been herself again.

Ingolf glared at her, then abruptly stepped past her. "If that is what she wants to hear, then I will tell her myself."

"No—" Elena said, moving to stop him.

Snarling, fed up with being kept from his wife, Ingolf grabbed Elena by the front of her tunic and shoved her into the wall. "I am tired of being kept from my wife."

Elena did not appear affected by the rough handling, merely regarded him somberly. "She does not want you to see her like this, Ingolf. She wants you to remember her...more kindly."

"We made vows," Ingolf replied, and roughly let her go, "and I will keep them." He motioned to Sepp, who until now had stood quietly at the far end of the room. "Break it open."

Nodding, Sepp strode forward and after a few moments, had the locked door open.

Ingolf barely waited for him to step out of the way, and strode into his wife's bed chamber. He ignored the cries and protests of the midwives, the fluttering servant girls—ignored everything but his wife, who was pail and contorted with pain, soaked in sweat, flushed with exertion...

"Ing—" She broke off to scream.

Reaching out, Ingolf took her hand, barely noticing the way her nails dug in as she gripped it hard through an awful contraction. He kissed her brow, never letting go of her hand, even when she tried to withdraw.

"Don't want you—"

"Shut up," Ingolf said, and dredged up a faint smile. "Just shut up."

She managed to return the smile briefly, something in it so sweet that Ingolf felt a sudden urge to cry. The world turned into screams and frantic women and gods why was there so much *blood* he knew a body contained more than it seemed but that seemed more than should be possible. The screams would haunt him for years, if not the rest of his life and his hand was bleeding where Reni's nails had punctured

It must have gone on for hours, but his whole world narrowed to his wife, who looked more ashen and weak by the moment, though her struggles never faltered.

Then the thin, high cries of a baby broke into his small world, and Ingolf jerked his head up, staring at the primary midwife, and the tiny bundle in her arms, the smile on the woman's exhausted face. He turned back to Reni, beaming—

—and saw that somewhere in those few seconds, his wife had died.

His momentary joy died, replaced first by numbing disbelief, then wrenching grief as the stillness of her registered, the slackness of her face sunk in.

"Majesties—"

"Get out," Ingolf said roughly, not looking up, still holding tightly to Reni's hand.

"Majesty?"

"Get out!" Ingolf snarled, glaring over his shoulder, willing all of them to leave him alone.

The room quickly vacated after that, and he was left in a silence that seemed too deep after the so recent screams and cursing. Slowing disengaging their hands, he smoothed back Reni's hair, caressed her cheek, eyes stinging.

Bundling her close, he held her tightly, and kissed her briefly one last time.

Slowly he let her go, laying her back down amongst the bedding. It was hard to stop touching, to stand, to step away. He wanted her eyes to stop being so sightless, he wanted her to move, to give one of her soft sights, smile at him.

Swallowing the curses and cries that wanted out, Ingolf wiped at his face, then clawed desperately for the calm and control of a Kaiser. When he had a hold of it—tenuous, but there—he strode to the door and stepped outside.

Only Sepp and Elena were waiting for him in the sitting room, for which that he was grateful. "The Queen is dead," he said heavily.

"But her son lives," Elena said quietly, crying openly as she brought a tiny bundle toward him.

Ingolf stared at it, feeling...too many things to sort the emotions out. He stared uncomprehending at the baby, the reality of it all sinking in only slowly, as he worked past the cold, hard truth of Reni's death. "I...I don't think I should," he faltered. "I have no idea how to hold it."

Elena managed a smile through the tears. "It. Ingolf, it's your son. You hold *him* like this," she said, and gently gave him the baby, arranging his arms just so.

Some of Ingolf's agony quieted, as he looked at the red, wrinkled face peeking out of all the blankets keeping him warm. Reni lived, but she had died hearing her son cry.

"Do you have a name?" Elena asked softly.

Ingolf nodded, but did not take his eyes from his son's face. "Renn, of course." Silence fell, and he did not know how long it lasted, but finally he forced his gaze up. "Tell...let my people know their Queen is dead, please. I will deal with it all tomorrow, but I cannot take it tonight. See my son...where is the wet nurse?"

"Waiting, Majesty," Elena said softly, and after a moment Ingolf realized she was waiting to take Renn back. Slowly, reluctantly, he handed his son over.

Then he strode from the room, and straight across the hall to his own, and remained there until morning.

~~*

He held Renn throughout the funeral, grateful for the cold that made it so much easier to feel numb. Renn was blissfully, surprisingly, quiet through the hours-long affair.

At least it was not cold enough to snow, though he would not have minded it. Then Erich's face would flash through his mind, and Ingolf would feel guilty and miserable and alone.

The funeral and burial were beautiful, at least, he thought distantly. He had ordered her buried in her wedding dress and entombed with her ancestors in the grandest splendor that could be arranged. If he was reduced to tears again briefly, well, no one seemed to hold it against him.

He held Renn close as the final songs were played, Illussor blending into Krian, back to Illussor and once again to Krian, before ending on a tune that was a masterful blend of both. The ruler part of him made note to have the man who had designed the piece to do more, directly for him. Music always helped to bring people together.

The rest of him was a numbness that was periodically shattered by sharp, sudden pangs of grief and guilt. She might not have been the person he loved most in the world, but there was still love there—

and so good a queen, so good a woman, did not deserve to die young of things so completely out of her control. She did not deserve to die at all.

When the funeral at last came to an end, brought to it by his own final words and a last, sad thread of music, he felt exhausted—but also relieved, in some small, quiet way. Was it wrong to feel such? The hardest part of death was living with it, but that could be done now.

He wandered through the halls of the palace, ignoring everyone, eyes only for where he was going and the babe in his arms.

Now...now he had to what he had known would be hard, but had not know would be *this* hard.

In his chambers, he handed Renn over to the wet nurse, who took him gently and tended him while Ingolf strode on to his bed chamber and there changed from his funeral clothes. Any other day he would be amused by the amount of clothing he now possessed—an amount which seemed to grow daily. Now, he simply could not bring himself to care.

He chose the simplest of his clothes, all of it black in the Illussor fashion—but with a band of red, embroidered with autumn leaves, around his right upper arm, in the Krian style. He tried not to think about who else wore the colors of the Autumn Prince, because he simply could not bear the additional weight of *that* guilt. And ache. Somehow, more than ever, all he wanted was to be in Erich's arms.

Closing his eyes, he stood for a moment in the wardrobe room and drew several deep breaths. When at last he seemed to have regained his control, he extinguished the wardrobe lamps and returned to the main portion of the bed chamber, quickly crossing it to go back out into the sitting room.

Elena and Sepp awaited him, conversing quietly with the wet nurse, admiring Renn.

Ingolf regarded the wet nurse. She had been handpicked by Reni, approved again by Elena. According to them both, the woman could be trusted. Ness, he knew her name to be. She came from a small mountain village far to the south east of Illussor, and that was one of the reasons she had been chosen—she knew that area.

He had not known it was going to be this hard. Only he and the wet nurse knew what he intended...and now he had to send away his last connection to his home, because he would not trust anyone else. Not even Elena, though she did deserve as much trust as Sepp.

Drawing close to them, he did not protest when Elena embraced him briefly, and acknowledge Sepp's grip on his arm with a brief nod. Then he took his son back, with another nod at Ness. Moving to the large chair by the window that was his favorite seat in the room, he settled Renn comfortably and for a few minutes simply enjoyed the presence of his child—his and Reni's child.

Gods willing he raised Renn properly, to take up the difficult life which awaited him.

"You obviously have something to tell us," Sepp said after several minutes.

Ingolf nodded. "Yes." He looked up, eyes turning upon each one in turn. They settled finally on Sepp. "Three attempts have been made on my life. The war is getting increasingly hard, increasingly bitter. My enemies will do all that is within their power to see everything falls apart, once they hear the Queen is dead and that she bore a son. All it will take to break things apart is to kill Renn. People would survive my death, but they would not take losing Reni's child."

Elena shook her head. "That's not true—people love you, or are very close to loving you, Ingolf. You are all that presently united two countries."

"That is not true," Ingolf said softly. "Even now, a man fights who has won the hearts of two nations and all, I bet, without even trying. If I fall, the crown prince would manage just fine until my son came of age."

"Erich..." Elena said softly.

Ingolf nodded, and looked down at Renn again, wondering if he would look like his mother when he got older. "I am not keeping my son here," he said at last, having to force the words out. He wanted Renn nowhere but his arms, where Ingolf could see and feel for himself that Renn was safe.

But that was not an option, and doing what he must was tearing him apart.

He motioned for Elena and Sepp to be silent as he stood up. "I am not keeping Renn here," he repeated. "I need him safe, and the palace is not safe enough. I already made special arrangements with the Grey Monastery. Ness is taking him there, to be hidden and safe, until I send word myself that he may return to me."

"What—" Sepp exclaimed. "But you cannot send her there alone, to some moldering mountain keep. You do not—"

Ingolf again motioned for silence, and summoned all the strength and will he had to put his son into the arms of Nessa, wanting nothing more than to take him immediately back. But surrender Renn he did, and then he turned once more to face Sepp. "I am not sending her alone," he said, meeting Sepp's gaze. "You are going with her, and you will guard my son and Ness with your life."

Sepp's eyes widened in surprise at the command. "Ingolf..."

"Please," Ingolf said.

"You don't have to ask," Sepp said roughly, "and you definitely do not have to say please. My life has always been yours, Ingolf, Kaiser. If you command I give it to the prince, then I give it and gladly. I will protect him with my life, and not even the Autumn Prince will prevent me from seeing him safely returned to your arms." He saluted Ingolf, then swept a deep, formal bow.

When he rose up, Ingolf embraced him briefly, gripping tightly before finally stepping back. "Then go now, while the palace is distracted by grief and feasting. Travel quickly, be safe, and gods willing I will see you very soon."

"Kaiser," Sepp said again, and swept another bow. Beside him, Ness dipped into a deep curtsy.

Then they both left, and Ingolf sank again into his chair by the window, burying his face in his hands.

The soft clink of glass, the sound of something being poured, finally drew him from his cloud of agony. He looked up to see Elena filling two small crystal tumblers with a pale gold liquid—good Illussor brandy, from the smell of it.

She handed him one, then picked up the other herself. Lifting her glass to him, she tossed the brandy back in one swallow. Ingolf copied the motion, and the warm burn of good brandy did steady him a bit. He did not protest when she poured them each a second, only drank it in, keeping the somehow comforting silence unbroken.

"Was she happy, at least?" he finally asked.

"The happiest I've seen her since everyone else died or faded away," Elena replied. "Her son lived, and that meant she died happy."

Ingolf nodded, and set his glass aside. "I will need you more than ever, in these coming months."

"I am your sword, Kaiser, to be used as you see fit," Elena said.

He smiled briefly. "You seem more Krian than Illussor at times, Enforcer."

"Thank you, Kaiser," Elena said. She sat down in the opposing chair, and he was grateful to see such casualness. He was so tired of formality, so tired of the distance it put between him and everyone else. Already he missed Sepp, his last connection to a life that would never again be his. He was Kaiser, and he had a son, and if he had to tear the world apart to rebuild it for that son, then by the gods he would. "What do you intend?"

"The war drags on, and I fear it will for months yet—but I am hoping we might speed some of it by finally making a force of my presence. Some matters must be finished up here, but in not more than two month's time, I intend to march for the Regenbogen. If we must march into Kria from there, then we will, but I am hoping that before long my Generals will begin to return to me. They have all been informed to find me there. Plans are already being finalized for the new palace, and the supplies are beginning to be arranged and gathered. The builders begin in the spring, gods willing."

Elena nodded. "Then we need to finish up the problems here, including the matter of the assassins and the arcen."

"Yes," Ingolf said, "and I suppose I should at last begin to appoint the new Illussor members of my eventual council." He reached out for the portfolio on the small table beside his chair, but his fingers faltered briefly as they fell upon the journal that lie there still; one of Beraht's, which he still found much comfort in reading. Nudging it aside, he picked up the portfolio. Opening it, he pulled out a piece of paper and handed it to Elena. "In the morning, summon those men to my presence. You and no other are to speak to them. I want no indication given that they are to be appointed to my council."

She looked at the list for several minutes, then handed it back. "Yes, Kaiser."

Ingolf nodded, and set everything aside. "Is there anything requiring my presence tonight?"

"No," Elena replied. "Your schedule was cleared through tomorrow, as everyone thought you would spend much time with your son."

"I wish I was," Ingolf said softly. "I miss him already." He sighed, and motioned. "Then, refill our glasses, my lady Enforcer, and let us drink to her honor this night."

Elena immediately obeyed, filling their glasses from a matching decanter. Then they simply drank, and remembered, and mourned, while outside snow began slowly to fall.

Chapter Thirty One

If one more person tried to fuss over him, Erich was going to start knocking heads together. Yes, it still hurt, but he was on his way to recovery and in no danger of falling over dead from the wound. It was healing, it was not infected—mostly it just itched like crazy. Yes, he was tired. Mostly from avoiding people who wanted to mother him to death.

Muttering to himself in frustration, relieved to have finally reached his tent, he stalked through the opening and made for his desk—and noticed halfway there that someone else was already in his tent.

"Erich, for the love of the gods, make them stop nagging me," Pancraz said pleadingly. "I'm not dead, I'm not dying, and I'm not going to kill myself because of this damned mark."

"In their defense," Erich said dryly, "you did seem close to doing precisely that when you first woke and remembered what the Brother had done. Certainly you did not seem stable at the time, and mentioned killing yourself several times."

Pancraz made a face. "I came to my senses."

"If by senses you mean you obviously have a hard time refusing Vester anything," Erich replied with a smirk.

"I have no idea what you're talking about," Pancraz said, but the sudden flush to his cheeks belied his calmly spoken words.

Erich snorted, but did not harass Pancraz further as he settled behind his desk, wincing as his own wound pulled and ached. He really would not mind resting for a bit, but if he showed any sort of weakness his men would worry, and he had worried them enough.

Instead, he flipped without interest through his paperwork, willing it to take care of itself. Honestly, where did it all come from? Where in war did anyone have time to draw up paperwork? He certainly never had time to deal with it.

A soft sigh drew his attention, and he glanced up briefly to see Pancraz struggling not to fall asleep where he sat in a chair near Erich's bed.

That drew faint a smile, but Erich did not break the silence to tease. He really was happy Pancraz was alive—and complaining about being nagged, as shortly after waking from his wounds he had immediately begun speaking of how he needed to die.

Not that Erich could entirely blame him; Pancraz was Krian, but his Salharan roots still slipped through every now and again. Given the sort of childhood he had endured, Erich could definitely understand why those roots most often manifested as despair. He was glad that they—Vester—had been able to overcome that despair.

Salhara's plan, as best they had been able to determine it, had been a clever one. According to Pancraz, their goal had likely never been to kill Erich. It was much more beneficial to sacrifice a Brother to give a mark to Erich. That had made little sense, until Pancraz had explained that the Brotherhood could track one another to exact locations via those marks. Who better to be able to track than the crown prince?

But Erich had realized quickly they had not wanted him dead and had worked to ensure they had no choice but to kill him. With him no longer being an option, the Brother apparently used Pancraz instead.

Pancraz, who had woken and remembered and informed them all he needed to die or the Salharans would always be far too aware of their location and movements, and if any of them managed to survive and evade capture, there was no telling how they would use the mark. Calming him down and convincing him he would not be dying anytime soon had taken them well over an hour—and Vester's reassurances. He, more than any of them, had made the difference.

What Erich really wanted to know, in the end, was Salhara's ultimate goal. He doubted they needed much more than a way to constantly follow him, but Salhara never had just one motive for anything they did, certainly never a *simple*, single motive.

It made him fear their coming battle at the Mother Star would be far beyond even their worst imaginings—and between the commanding officers and all strategists of two armies, they had come up with the most horrific possibilities.

Though it was also clear that killing him and Pancraz would have been adequate compensation in lieu of placing the Star upon Erich.

"What I cannot believe," he said aloud, stopping and wincing as he realized he had jerked Pancraz out of a doze, forgetting that he had been falling asleep. But when Pancraz only looked at him expectantly, he repeated, "What I cannot believe, is that you really believe they thought we would kill you for having that mark."

"It makes perfect sense," Pancraz said in that calm, level, accepting tone that Erich positively hated. No one should so calmly accept such terrible things, but Pancraz did it nearly as naturally as breathing. It made Erich wonder what Pancraz had suffered as a child that he would never speak of to anyone. It made him hate Salhara all over again. "I quite firmly believe they meant to give it to you. Salhara must know by this point that they are losing the war. I am certain the Brothers remaining have no intention of saving their country, only themselves. To that end, marking the crown prince of the new nation would be useful for various reasons, not only the more immediate of seeing where you are so they can avoid you and the army.

"Having me is poor recompense, really, but still useful to them. To judge by what that Brother said before I killed him, they know who I was and what I have done to help Kria. They must know I have been extremely useful in taking Salhara, but they also know I would realize the full significance of the Star. They can track me; they will always know now where I am. That means they know the location of the armies at all times. We cannot surprise them any longer. They know I am with you because I am useful, but that with a Star I am too much of a risk. To a Salharan mind, that means killing me."

Pancraz drew a breath then continued, "Under any other circumstances, Lord General Reinoehl would have killed me. If there was no Scarlet... no you... Lord General would have done what was best for his army and ordered that I never wake up. I would not have blamed him—no one would. As I already said, I am too much of a liability now. Your presence makes all the difference."

Erich dismissed the words with an impatient gesture. "Without me, they would never have attempted such a thing to begin with, so your argument is flawed."

"Kria is not heartless the way Salhara is," Pancraz argued. "But neither are they stupid. Reinoehl, or any of the other Generals, would have killed me if they thought it absolutely necessary. No one expected a Scarlet Army, and certainly no one expected a Scarlet General like you, or that I would be too damned useful to kill, even with a Star."

"What?" Erich asked, suddenly angry. "We did not spare you life because you are *useful*, Pancraz. You are my damned friend—you are *our* damned friend. You are one of the best Goddess damned soldiers in two armies. I did not make you Commander of my army because you are useful. I did it because you were doing it anyway, because it suits you! Because you deserve it! You fit as seamlessly into Commander as I seem to have fit into General. You are not *useful* to me, you idiot. You are important. You are my friend."

Pancraz looked at him, clearly taken aback, then dropped his gaze to his hands that were clenched into fists. Silence reigned for several minutes, before Pancraz finally spoke in a low voice "You're my first real friend, you know. Everyone else knew what I pretended to be while I balanced between Salhara forcing me with my own revenge, my past, my present... if anyone liked me, they liked a lie. You have known me for what I really am almost from the start, and I all but hated you when we first met, but you call me friend anyway. I—I suppose I am not used to that."

"Get used to it," Erich replied gruffly. "Especially since I would be dead if not for you." Pancraz shrugged the words aside. "How are your wounds?" Erich asked with a snigger. "You must still be close to death, if you were forced to sneak into my tent to hide."

"It was the only place they wouldn't look for me," Pancraz muttered, then said more clearly, "I am *fine*, but to hear them tell it, I am still on my deathbed. I think they are trying to find ways to hide my sword and armor." He grimaced.

Erich grinned. "If they could confine me to quarters, I am certain they would, but no one can manage it, and they know it."

"Yes," Pancraz said, glaring at him. "I tied those knots myself, you know, back when we stole Bright from you. I know for a fact that you were secured to that bed; I am still annoyed you got free so easily."

"More experienced men than you have tried to tie me to every known piece of furniture and more besides," Erich replied with a smirk.

"I do not want to know."

Laughing, wincing briefly as it caused his wounds to pull and hurt, he slowly stood and crossed the tent to sit on his bed, to be closer to Pancraz while they conversed. "So is the Cobalt Commander going to steal you away from me, Pancraz?"

"What? No. It's—not like that," Pancraz said.

Erich watched the emotions play across his face—longing, misery, confusion. He wanted to ask more, to press the matter, but he knew when a man wanted to be left alone about certain things. Weeks later, he still hated the way Aden had brought out the matter of Ingolf.

Ingolf...

No, he was too damned tired to think of that headache, that heartache. Tired of picking at that wound. He would face it when he faced Ingolf, and that was likely still months and months away.

Letting the matter of Vester drop, for he had only ever meant to tease, not upset, he returned to their wounded states. "So do you think—" He stopped as he heard someone yelling for him. Both he and Pancraz immediately leapt to their feet and strode to the tent entrance just as the foot soldier calling for him reached it.

"Lord General" The soldier gasped, having obviously run hard and fast. "There is a messenger from Illussor, come on urgent business. He awaits you in the Lord General's tent and will not speak until all of you are gathered—especially you, Lord General."

"Of course," Erich replied, confused and more than a little alarmed. Especially him? That could only mean this was a royal matter, for that was the only element which separated him from his comrades. He strode past the soldier, Pancraz beside him. They crossed the camp with remarkable ease, given that by now everyone must have know that a messenger had come with urgent news.

The walk took several minutes as the war camp was massive, and he and Reinoehl had agreed it would be better they were not close, so that it was harder to attack both Generals at once. When they reached Reinoehl's tent, he could see that the others were already gathered. He glanced at Aden and immediately felt scared—Aden was pale and tense, his expression shuttered. The entire atmosphere of the tent was grim.

He turned at Pancraz's sharp, soft intake of breath and immediately saw why. The messenger was dressed entirely in black, save for a band of scarlet around his right upper arm. Mourning, in both Illussor and Krian tradition.

"Oh, Goddess," Erich said faintly, feeling cold and scared. He moved to stand with his friends, taking up position beside Aden, and Reinoehl finally motioned for the messenger to speak.

The messenger, already kneeling upon the tent floor, bowed his head low and said in somber tones, "Your Highness, it grieves me to bring you such unhappy news, but I must inform you that her Royal Majesty, Queen Reni of Illussor and Kaiserin of Kria, has passed away, precisely four weeks ago today."

Erich felt as though he were being stabbed all over again. "How?" he whispered.

"By childbirth," the messenger said, head still bowed, but it was obvious from his choked tone that he was still fighting his own grief. "I also bring news that before she died her Majesty gave birth to a healthy son, Prince Renn, crown prince of Illussor and Kria."

"Thank you for bringing these messages to us," Erich said, hearing his own voice as though from far away. Reni...Reni...

A hand wrapped hard around his upper arm, digging in painfully, and Erich immediately took it in his own, turning around and tugging Aden into a tight embrace as the messenger's words played over and over in his head.

Reni. Dead. Oh, Goddess...Reni was dead. How could Reni—and in childbirth—

Erich held tighter to Aden, feeling the way Aden shook just as badly as he did. Reni was dead. She had been his sister long before marriage had legally made them siblings. They had grown up together; he had teased and tormented her in a thousand ways. He had watched her grow from Princess to Queen, admired the strength it must have taken to overcome so much tragedy. He had admired her strength, when he had not been able to overcome his own grief.

Now she was dead, had died giving birth to her son. Ingolf's son—

Ingolf. Oh, Goddess, was Ingolf all right? He must be taking it hard and was probably blaming himself for all of it. Did Elena and Engel know? How was the country taking it? Poorly, he was certain; everyone had loved Reni.

Damn it, he should not be here—he should be home, he should be helping—

He pulled away some time later, hating the loud silence all around them. Wiping his eyes with the heels of his hands, Erich commanded hoarsely, "Assemble the men. They need to know that their Queen is dead." He laughed bitterly. "Who better than the Scarlet General to announce a death?"

Striding from the tent before anyone could reply, he strode back across camp to his own tent. He clasped one hand absently against his wounded side, oblivious to the throbbing pain. Back in his own tent, he stripped off his tunic and fumbled through his chest for his more formal one—a gift from his men, and he still did not know how they had managed to have such a thing made while they were buried in Salhara and fighting a war but he was grateful for it now.

Tossing it on the bed, he cleaned up as best he was able at the basin in his tent, then pulled on the fresh clothes. So terrible an announcement deserved all the dignity and honor he could manage. At his hips, he settled Spring and Bright, hands lingering over the hilts of both swords. When had he become so used to wearing two swords? But he dare not let Bright leave his sight...and Spring...

He made a rough, agonized sound as he realized the greatest barrier between him and Ingolf was now gone—but he would rather have had that barrier firmly in place, than see it removed in so terrible and final a fashion. He did not want Reni to be dead; despite the agony tearing him apart, he had been looking forward to seeing Reni with her child, to teasing her about bearing someone who would drive her as crazy as they had all driven their own parents.

Reni... she had died giving birth to a son... He wondered if the child was all right. The messenger had said the boy was healthy, but was he safe? Erich could not imagine anyone was taking the matter of two countries becoming one lightly, especially when it was likely Salhara would join the fold. A new crown prince was a serious matter.

Erich realized he was not crown prince, not any more. That should have come with a feeling of abject relief—he had never enjoyed the burden that came with being one step away from the crown. He did not want the crown; he still could not believe he was the Scarlet General, even after all this time.

Sighing softly, he finished dressing and pulled on his winter cloak. The snow had come upon them abruptly, shockingly hard and fast given their location deep in Salhara. If the weather continued to be so foul, then war or no war, they would not be returning home until spring. The thought depressed him even further. He was tired of the war. Tired of being far from home. Tired of being far from Ingolf.

It should bother him, he supposed, that he was so fiercely attached to someone he had known only weeks, but there had been something between them, right from the start, and Ingolf had helped him in a way no one else had. Ingolf was his home, but he wished he was not going home to a widower.

Reni was dead, which meant the only surviving member of her family was now her newborn son. Blood was not a crucial thing in Illussor, but it still made him sad to think a family with so long a history was all but wiped out now, and all of them so tragically.

Striding from his tent, resisting the urge for a strong drink, Erich made his way back across camp to the field beyond, where the soldiers were already lined up and waiting—record time, and any other day he would have been amused.

Climbing up the platform from which they spoke to the assembled soldiers, he glanced briefly toward the others gathered with him, but looking at Aden was nearly his undoing. Aden had been closest to Reni, especially after she became the one to whom he directly reported.

Gathering himself, Erich stepped forward and pitched his voice to carry as far as possible. "Comrades, brothers, noble soldiers of Illussor and Kria. I am afraid I have assembled you for unhappy news. We have been informed this day that our beloved Queen Reni is dead. Four weeks ago, Queen Reni died in childbirth. She gave birth to a healthy son, but regretfully did not live to hold him."

After that, he gave up speaking for a bit, as the cries and shouts of the soldiers drowned out all attempts. When several minutes passed, and he still could manage nothing, Erich gave up entirely. More than a few of the men had glanced up at him, and he was suddenly tired of the formality. He leapt neatly down from the platform and into the crowd below.

Immediately Erich found himself surrounded by soldiers—foot soldiers who had known the Queen only from afar, but loved her the same as all Illussor, Krian soldiers who were curious about the Queen they would never meet, and who was obviously deeply mourned. He was also approached by several of his officers, many of whom had known the Queen as he had, if not quite as closely. They were lords' son, or actual lords, who had grown up alongside Erich, Aden, and the others.

A flurry of movement caught his eye a couple of minutes later, and he saw that Aden had joined him in the crowd and was just as quickly surrounded. They moved through the masses of men slowly, sometimes together, sometimes apart. They grieved with and comforted their comrades, telling anecdotes and stories, the words making the familiar smile with memory, painting images for those who would never know their Kaiserin.

He spoke until his voice began to grow hoarse with the effort and was nearly forced to call a halt when the coming of dark did it for him. Even then, the soldiers were slow to disperse. They eventually did, however, and the stories he and Aden had told were carried on by others, growing in proportion, and Erich wondered with amusement if they had inadvertently set Reni on the path to legendary. It would have made her laugh and shake her head and tell them to go bother someone else with their silliness.

As he walked slowly back towards his tent, he could hear strains of music begin—a mix of Krian and Illussor tunes, all of them for mourning. He also saw, in flashes of torchlight, that more than a few soldiers were already wearing armbands. How did they do such things so quickly? But, he could see they were a mix of black and red, and the immediate and seamless meshing of two cultures made him smile. Reni would be happy to know the cultures were merging, and would not resent at all her death had helped, but it only made his grief cut all the deeper.

He wondered absently where the others had gone, but was not particularly interested in finding them. All he wanted at that moment was Ingolf, to hold and be held, to comfort and be comforted. The lack of Ingolf was a physical ache, made all the worse by the fact there was nothing he could do to ease it.

Since he could not have Ingolf, all he wanted was solitude. He and Aden could speak later. At the moment, Aden was hopefully finding solace with Reinoehl.

Erich stopped, surprised, as he entered his tent. The messenger knelt in the center of it, patiently waiting for him. "Was there something further?"

The messenger looked up then respectfully bowed his head low again. "Yes, your Highness. I was ordered by his Majesty to deliver this directly into your hands, and in strictest privacy. It is meant for no eyes but yours." He held out a letter, the wax marked with Ingolf's personal seal.

Erich's heart began to speed up where it was lodged suddenly in his throat. Slowly he reached out and took the letter. "Thank you."

Head still down, the messenger said, "He bid me wait for a reply, but urged me to tell you that none was expected, should you not be able to send it for any reason. He knows he takes too much risk, as it is, in sending the letter."

"Find me in the morning," Erich replied. "I will tell you then if I have a reply."

"Yes, Highness." The messenger smoothly rose and, after a last respectful bow, departed.

Erich stared at the letter then set it down on his bed. Stripping out of his formal clothes, he slipped back into more basic attire. Then he snuffed all the lanterns but the one by the bed, and informed his guards outside he was going to bed and not to be disturbed save for emergencies.

Laying his cloak—Ingolf's cloak—over the other blankets on his bed, he finally broke the seal and opened the letter.

Winter,

I miss you. I feel your absence constantly, and it hurts more every day.

I am sorry for your loss, all the more so because I share some blame in her death. She was going to die regardless, something I believe she never told anyone, but bearing the child sped that death. It is only one more reason for you to reject me, even quite possibly hate me. Life has become quite complicated.

Her child is a healthy boy, with lungs of a force I am told is normal in babes, but is quite beyond me. I know of no grown man who can be so loud. I have sent him off to a place of safety, a location I dare not relate should this letter fall into the wrong hands.

It might interest you to know that an old friend of yours stands as my bodyguard now. She kept my wife company, in her final days. She is a good woman.

I ramble, I fear. My only goal in this letter was to say that I am sorry for your loss. Knowing me has, I fear, brought you a great deal of trouble. But, knowing you, you will never hold it against me.

My wife is only three days in her grave, and I write to you. Part of me thinks she would understand, and not hold it against me for loving you more than her, but grief and guilt do not a clear head make.

Live. That is all I can and will ask, and I do not care how selfish it is.

I can only conclude by saying again I am sorry she is dead. She spoke of you, and the others, often. I wish I was there to express my regrets in person. Soon, I hope.

Spring

Erich reread the letter at least three times, feeling happy and upset and worried and soothed and alone—

Life has become quite complicated. Only Ingolf could reduce such a mess to so simple a sentence. He laughed shakily, amused and miserable all at once. He knew that guilt all too well. But... he thought Reni would not mind, would even be amused. Then again, Ingolf was right—in his current state of mind, he could judge nothing fairly. He wanted Reni to approve, because that would ease his own guilt, but that did not mean she *would*.

So the crown prince had been taken to safety. He wondered who Ingolf had sent to protect the boy. Was Sepp still with him? If so, that would have been Ingolf's first choice. Erich smiled briefly, thinking of Sepp, who had been the sneakiest one all along, and they had been too busy watching Pancraz to realize.

He wondered what he would do, when he finally returned home—well, to the Regenbogen, which he sensed would become home. It made the most sense, given the new nation. His mind whirled with

possibilities, from the simplest to the dirtiest—it would seem even amidst guilt and grief, he could still think of such things, and what was there to say to that but to sigh?

In the end, though, he thought he would merely hold Ingolf tight and not let go until someone forced the matter.

Live, Ingolf asked. He would certainly do that. After five years of being all but dead and his far too recent brush with death, he found all he really wanted to do was live. Goddess, please *please* let the war end soon.

They were close, which heartened him. All they had left now was the assault on the Mother Star. Once the snow let up enough they could travel without too much difficulty, they would make that final march and take Salhara once and for all. Even the stars in the sky would not save Salhara from its fate.

He should feel happier, thinking such things. Jubilant. Triumphant. All he felt was weary.

Opening the letter, he read it through twice more, emotions flaring, but none so brightly as the warmth that pulsed through him at reading the simple *loving you*—even guilt could not dull the happiness those words brought. He knew it, did not need to read it, but it made him happy all the same.

The smart thing would be to burn the letter. He should not put his own feelings over the safety of the army, and such a letter would tell the enemy just how important the Scarlet General was to the new Kaiser—it would not be hard for someone to determine the persons involved in the letter. But he could not bring himself to do it. He had destroyed the one other letter he had received, but he could not destroy this one. Tucking it away in his tunic, pressing against it briefly through the layers of fabric, he finally snuffed his lantern and lay down.

Ingolf's cloak smelled only of sweat and blood and steel, now. It smelled like war, like long, hard use. Even knowing that, as his fingers dug into the fur lining and trim, he could not help but think he could still smell a hint of Ingolf in the fabric. The remembered scent chased him into dreams and kept them from being unpleasant.

Chapter Thirty Two

Aden bit his lips against crying out as Reinoehl thrust into him hard, gripping Reinoehl's back, encouraging the movements, hating that circumstances necessitated quiet. When Reinoehl shifted to kiss him, he accepted it gladly, using the sloppy, eager tangle of mouths to muffle those cries he could not hold back as they both found release.

They lay panting in the dark, listening to the sounds of a sleeping camp beyond the thin walls of Reinoehl's tent. He groaned as Reinoehl finally withdrew, running his fingers over sweat-slick skin, eager—desperate—to keep contact. Reinoehl brushed a soft kiss over his mouth, still tasting of them, of sex. Aden kissed him languidly back, in no hurry to let his mind return to a state of grief.

"You should try to sleep," Reinoehl said quietly after several minutes.

Aden nodded against him, but could not make himself settle—or move, which he really should do. It was poor form indeed for his men not to be able to find him in his own tent, in his own designated section of camp. He nodded again and made a half-hearted attempt to get up, disentangle himself from Reinoehl and the blankets, shivering as cold air washed over him.

Then Reinoehl's arm tightened around him and dragged him back down into the warmth of blankets and body heat. "Stay," Reinoehl said. "I think no one would begrudge you a night with me, not with circumstances being what they are."

"Grief or not, I am the Chief of Staff," Aden replied quietly. "Safety requires I be in my tent, not yours."

He could feel Reinoehl smile against his skin, felt soft puffs of laughter. "I'm in command of the tent, and I do not think it wise for my Chief of Staff to be left alone right now. I can already see you are racked with guilt in addition to the grief. Stay, Aden. The world will not end if you spend one night with me."

Aden gave up, gave in—it was precisely what he wanted, why should he keep arguing? He settled in, keeping his focus on Reinoehl, on the sound and feel of his heartbeat, trying hard not to think about poor Reni.

Though he rather thought he felt sorriest for Erich, who must feel levels of guilt Aden could not bear even to contemplate.

But poor Reni, to die so tragically and alone. He felt the worst about that—that so many of them were so far away, and she alone with a husband she likely never would have met if not for the damned war. Of the royal line, only her son was left, Aden realized. The thought made him sad. So many wiped out so tragically.

He should be home to help in any way he could, not hiding from his responsibilities by playing Chief of Staff to the Cobalt Army. He was a spy master; he should be spying. An empty recrimination, and he

knew it. Spying would not have saved Reni, and he was helping here. Round and round his mind went, and it accomplished nothing except to make him feel all the more awful.

"Sleep," Reinoehl said, voice husky with exhaustion. "You must sleep, Aden and stop being angry with yourself. Her death was not your fault."

"Stop reading my mind," Aden muttered.

Reinoehl snorted in amusement and squeezed him gently, brushing a soft kiss to his brow. "I simply know the thoughts. Do you think I hated myself any less for allowing my parents to die? I could do nothing but watch as they executed my mother and scream in futile protest as they executed my father and staked his head. Even now, his head is somewhere upon the stones of the pavilion of the Winter Palace. If I could have prevented it, I would have. I do not feel I am half the General my father was. But I do know now that their deaths were not my fault. Reni's death was not your fault, either."

Aden grimaced in the dark. "You seem to be a wise and all-knowing General to me. You've come quite far from the man I freed from a birdcage."

That earned only another snort. "Hardly, but I thank you. Go to sleep, Aden."

Nodding as best he could without drawing away, Aden settled down again. He relaxed in small increments, listening as Reinoehl's breathing evened out, relishing the simple joy of sleeping with his lover—his only real lover since taking up the role of spy so many years ago. Then he felt guilty, for being happy when the news of Reni was not even a day old.

His thoughts were broken off at the sudden, unexpected sound of someone calling his name. "Lord Chief!"

Sighing, Aden crawled out of the warmth of blankets and Reinoehl and fumbled for his clothes in the dark. Finally dressed, he went to the entrance of the tent and slipped outside. "What is it?"

The soldier sketched him a hasty salute and replied, "Chief, we think there are Salharan scouts in the area. We haven't been able yet to find them, but the northeast watch swears they saw something. They've sent out scouts, but we thought it best to fetch you and the Commander."

"Where is the Commander?" Aden said, even as he motioned for the man to lead him to the northeast corner of the Cobalt camp.

"Already on his way, Chief," the soldier replied. "We—" His words were drowned out by the sudden sound of screaming and shouting. Aden realized the words being shouted were a mixture of Krian, Illussor, and Salharan.

He drew his sword and started running, barking out commands for the camp to be roused, all guards on high alert, the safety of the Lord Generals seen to *at once*. Then he bellowed for his men, his personal retinue of soldiers.

Just as he reached the northeast corner, more screams and shouts erupted from the opposite end of the camp—right where Erich's tent was pitched. Swearing, Aden forced himself to trust Erich's safety to Scarlet and threw himself into the more immediate problem of the ravaged northeast corner.

It was a disaster. Men lay dead all around him, those still alive fought bitterly, angrily, against the sudden deluge of Salharan soldiers.

They had gotten arrogant, Aden thought furiously. Victory over Salhara was almost absolute—they should have focused more on the *almost* and less on the absolute. Swearing, he cut down three more Salharans, grunting in pain as one of them got a last strike in before he collapsed choking on his own blood.

Aden grimaced and clutched his side, feeling blood, but the wound was shallow and therefore negligible. He would tend it later. Reasserting his grip on his sword, he bellowed for more light and threw himself back into the fifth, looking for eyes that glowed in the dark.

How long the battle lasted, he did not know, though it was still pitch black when everything at last seemed to still. "Light!" he bellowed again, voice hoarse from battle. "Someone bring more light, Goddess damn it!"

When more light was at last brought, he demanded, "The Scarlet General! How—"

"I'm fine," Erich called out then suddenly he was at Aden's side, haggard and blood-spattered, but alive and well. "Aden—you're bleeding. Healer!"

Aden flinched at the abrupt shout. "The wound is minor," he said, and moved away then fell to his knees as dizziness took him.

Erich swore and knelt beside him. He smiled, even as tired and worried as he looked. "Now it is my turn to worry about you, hmm?"

"Shut up," Aden managed, then passed out, slumping against Erich.

~~*

"I cannot wait until this damned war is over," Aden groused, wincing slightly as his stitches pulled. He glared at a sergeant who looked poised to ask if he was all right. If one more person asked him that... He tamped down on his bad mood with effort. "Where is Reinoehl?"

"He's in Lord General Erich's tent," Chief.

Aden nodded and thanked the man, then trudged across camp to Erich's tent. When he arrived, Erich, Reinoehl, Bruno, and Vester were all crammed inside, bent over a map and cheerfully bickering. They paused as they caught sight of him. "Finally awake, I see," Erich said. "Should you be moving around yet?"

Casting him a disgusted look, Aden chose to ignore him in favor of accepting Reinoehl's kiss. "I'm glad you're well," Reinoehl said softly. "I'm sorry I could not sit with you."

Aden waved the words aside and smiled. "Nonsense. We're in a war; far too busy for bed sitting. I'm well. What are we plotting?"

"The fall of the Mother Star," Erich said, beckoning them to return to the table. "The strategists have offered a handful of scenarios. Come and tell me what you think, Chief Spymaster."

Nodding, Aden stood at the table and looked over the map. How the Krians had obtained a Salharan map and then improved upon it, he could not even begin to guess. It was a map of the capital city of Salhara, the Mother Star herself. Somewhere in there resided the last of the Brotherhood, and with their deaths Salhara would at last fall.

"It will be a hard city to breach. No foreigners have ever been within the walls of the Mother Star." He pursed his lips in thought. "Honestly, it would be best to do this *my* way, at least to start. Sneak a small team—Goddess, not more than two men, really, inside. They can ensure the troops will be able to make it into the city. We stand no chance if we simply attempt to overcome the walls."

The walls of the Mother Star were too high, too thick, to fall to siege. The only way they would break the city would be by getting inside it, and to do that, they would need men inside to open the gate.

Erich smirked and shot Reinoehl a triumphant look. "I told you that's what he'd recommend."

"I did not argue," Reinoehl said sourly, looking at Aden. "I just didn't like it, because the next thing he's going to say is that he should be the one to do go, and I cannot argue the validity of that."

Aden winced. "I'm sorry." Reinoehl shook his head and said nothing, but Aden could see they would speak later in private.

"So who will you take with you?"

"Pancraz," Aden replied immediately, then frowned. "Where *is* Pancraz?"

"Scouting," Vester said with a frown of his own. "He went out with our best scout team to see what he could see."

Aden nodded. "Do we know when he's due back?"

"Any time now, I would think," Erich said.

His words were nearly drowned out by a sudden burst of racket outside. Aden strode from the tent and barely avoided colliding with a frantic looking messenger.

"Chief," the man said, executing a hasty half bow. "We just stopped another attack in the southwest corner."

Aden swore. "Rouse any man who is still asleep, triple all watches. The Salharans are clearly acting with desperation, and desperate men are ruthless. They will not catch us unawares again."

"Yes, Chief!" The runner said and raced off again.

"We'll take care of the troops," Vester said from behind him. Aden turned and saw Vester standing with Bruno. "You have other priorities, and Pancraz is just returned."

"How do you know that?" Aden asked.

"I just saw him arrive," Vester replied and motioned across camp.

Aden turned around, and sure enough, Pancraz and two other men were just visible in the light of torches. As they watched, Pancraz rode through camp toward them, dismounting neatly when he reached them.

"How is everything here?" Pancraz asked.

"It will shortly be better," Vester replied. He strode up to Pancraz and gripped his arm briefly. "Be careful." Then he was gone, Bruno at his side, as they set out to settle their armies.

Pancraz, cheeks flushed, stared after Vester for a moment before he shook his head and turned to Aden. "Be careful? Why would he say that?"

"Because you and I are going to break into the Mother Star."

Pancraz sighed and nodded. "I wondered if it would come to that."

"We need to make our plans, come," Aden replied and led him into the tent. "Did you learn anything of note while scouting?"

"Killed a couple of shadow killer parties," Pancraz said, turning to face Erich as they entered the tent, giving his report. "Saw nothing else of note, but I do not believe for a moment that they plan on leaving the area. They have nowhere to run at this point, and they know it. Speaking of that, the men I just killed may help us breach the city."

Aden looked at him and guessed, "They'll help us come up with a suitable cover?"

"Right," Pancraz said. "Steal their clothes and equipment, and I think I know how we'll get in."

Erich frowned. "But what about your Brotherhood star? They will know you are there."

Pancraz smiled crookedly. "I know. Hiding my presence will be impossible. We're not even going to try."

As easily as that, Aden saw what plan Pancraz had already devised. He wanted to protest, insist they find another way, but the spymaster in him knew it was their best chance, and only friendship had kept him from coming up with it sooner himself.

"Why do the two of you look so damned grim?" Reinoehl asked.

"Because they're going to do something stupid," Erich said sourly. "Let's hear it, then."

Pancraz turned to look at Erich and said, "Aden is going to capture me and take me to the Mother Star. Once I'm taken into the hands of proper authorities, he'll have a chance to let in a small band of men. Those men will be able to secure the main gate and let in our armies."

"And what about you?" Erich demanded. "Goddess damn you, Pancraz—we did not come through all of this just for you to die now. There has to be another way!"

"There isn't," Aden said, refusing to back down when he was suddenly the sole focus of Erich's wrath. "I will get the men inside, and then I will go save Pancraz. He will not die, not if I can help it."

Pancraz shook his head. "Finding me will not be easy. The Brotherhood meets in secret, and it's said the main three live in those secret places. I assume that is where they'll take me, once they have me in hand."

"I will find you," Aden vowed. "Erich is right. We've come too far to lose you now."

"Then I will trust you to get me out," Pancraz said.

Aden nodded. "Then we are going. Erich, have men waiting close to the Mother Star. I will signal from the bottom of the right tower, five passes. I will let your team in, and they will help me take the towers and open the gates."

"We'll be ready and waiting," Erich said, and beside him Reinoehl nodded. "Go." Silence fell as he finished speaking, and Aden looked at Reinoehl, silently communicating.

"I'll get the horses," Pancraz said abruptly and slipped out of the tent.

Erich snorted in amusement and said, "I guess I'll go find something to do and leave you two alone."

Aden rolled his eyes, but immediately strode to Reinoehl once they were alone, wrapping his arms tightly around Reinoehl's neck and dragging him down for a long, thorough kiss. "I'm sorry," he said eventually.

Reinoehl shook his head. "You have no reason to be sorry. Do what you must, but come back to me. I have no intention of losing you. Cobalt needs its Chief, and I need you most of all."

"Then I will see you in a few hours, Lord General," Aden replied. He kissed Reinoehl one more time, hard and deep, so that he would feel it for a little while after they parted. Then he let go, turned away, and left the tent before he found an excuse to stay just a little longer. This was why he had always avoided attachment. It was so much easier to be a spymaster when the walking away did not hurt so damned much. Goddess, he could not wait for the war to be over.

Outside, Pancraz waited with two horses and an ensign. He gave the reins of one horse to Aden then mounted the second horse, the ensign swinging up behind him.

The man was probably along to carry their things back to camp—smart thinking on Pancraz's part. "I need to stop by my tent briefly," Aden said.

Pancraz nodded and swung his horse around and lead the way to Aden's tent. In his tent, Aden quickly stripped off the trappings of the Cobalt Chief of Staff. From his trunk, he pulled out clothes and equipment he had not worn for months and quickly slid back into the trappings of spymaster. They felt foreign on him now, but he knew that all too soon he would feel right at home in his old skin.

Back outside, Aden mounted his horse and followed as Pancraz led the way out of camp. They rode quickly, not stopping for anything or anyone, leaving camp and vanishing into the surrounding forests. Vision was limited, but their pace did not slow, and Aden trusted Pancraz to know the way.

Several minutes later they came to a stop amidst the remains of a small camp. Aden dismounted his horse and looked around. Three men lay in their bedrolls, throats slit. A fourth, his throat also slit, lay sprawled in front of a tree. He had clearly been standing watch, sitting against it, when someone had come up from behind and silenced him before he could give any alarm.

Aden doubted the other men had ever woken enough to know they were dying. Impressed, Aden said, "You managed to get them while they slept. No small feat."

Pancraz shrugged as he neatly dismounted and joined Aden at the edge of the campsite. "Minus the guard, but he was not nearly as on alert as he should have been. They were probably the last wave of shadow killers, meant to attack well after we thought the danger dealt with. The other group we caught was already on the move, headed toward our camp."

Nodding, Aden moved amongst the dead men, rifling through their belongings, stripping off suitable clothing, until he had cobbled together a uniform that showed every sign of his having only barely won a fight with a Krian Commander. Stripping off his own clothes, but keeping his necklace so as to identify himself later, Aden pulled on his disguise and tucked his tools and weapon into it. His long hair he pulled into a tail, then tucked up under a cap.

Dressed, he looked like a battered, bloody foot soldier lucky enough to have caught a prize worthy of a name change. Name. Turning to Pancraz, Aden said, "I don't have a name. The last time I used the one I'd gotten from a fugitive Salharan, I was nearly killed."

"Be nameless," Pancraz aid. "That's the only safe bet. There's always a few nameless in any Salharan army, and no one keeps tabs on them because they don't legally exist." He smiled bitterly. "Trust me, no one would try harder to capture me than a nameless."

Aden hid a wince. However hard his life had been at times, he could not fathom how much more difficult Pancraz's must have once been. He did not doubt for a moment that of all of them, Pancraz was the strongest. His curiosity got the better of him, however, mind still focused on the matter of names. "So if you were once nameless, how did you come by your name?"

"I named myself," Pancraz replied.

"Fitting," Aden said. "So I am nameless. Why do I think that will be hard to carry off convincingly, even for me?"

"No offense or disrespect intended, Aden, but you've always existed. Even when you were pretending to be one person or another, you existed. It's hard to explain what it is like not to exist in the eyes of others. Criminals have names; even whores have names. The lowest people in any other society still have names, identities—I know of no place that has the equivalent of being a nameless in Salhara."

Aden nodded. "No offense taken; what you say is very true. I'll do my best."

"Don't look anyone in the eye," Pancraz aid. "Do what you're told without question or delay. Brace yourself to be treated roughly, even cruelly. You will no doubt be subjected to unwelcome attentions. No one cares what is done to a nameless. After they take me away, they'll probably cast you aside, or have a bit of fun first and then cast you aside."

Nodding again, Aden said, "I can handle that. What of my eyes?"

"If you can stomach a blue or green, then do it. Otherwise, say your arcen was needed by your superiors and you depleted what you had already drunk. But they will be more likely to believe you if your eyes glow, and if you are out they will insist that you go and get more from requisitions."

"Which I dare not do," Aden finished. He reached into the right breast pocket of his jacket and pulled out the vials of arcen he had collected from the dead men. Mostly it was yellow, but there were two vials of green and one of blue amongst them. Picking out one of the green, he tucked the second green and the blue away to help add to his disguise. The yellows he dropped to the ground then crushed beneath his boot.

Looking at the green he still held, Aden said, "I fervently hope this is the last time I have to take this vile stuff." He did not want to do it now, but— He startled when a hand covered his and looked up in surprise at Pancraz.

"You will be fine," Pancraz said. "You've gone this long without ever feeling the crawling need for more, right?"

Aden nodded. "Thankfully, yes."

"And the magic you used was because of panic and instinct," Pancraz said. "I highly doubt you will do that again, and even if you did—the use of magic does not necessarily make one evil or weak, whatever Kria might think. Magic is only as evil as those who use it."

Laughing, Aden said, "Thanks, Pancraz."

Pancraz smiled in that crooked way of his, and Aden had a sudden, sneaking suspicion that Vester was drawn to the bittersweet nature of it. "You will be fine," He repeated. "Act humble, a bit pathetic. Let them grab your ass; hopefully you will not have to let them grab anything else. They'll probably seize me

almost immediately after we're through the gate; it won't take them long to realize who you have captured. They'll ditch you shortly after they've taken me. I'm afraid I cannot help you beyond that point. I know nothing of the Mother Star beyond the usual rumors that I already told everyone."

"A gate is a gate," Aden replied. "The basics do not really change from one to another, and it will not take me long to learn the fine points. I've learned more difficult details in less time and under trickier circumstances."

"Like how to break a Lord General out of a birdcage in the middle of a city, in full view of the Winter Palace?" Pancraz asked dryly.

"I think the stories floating around have probably tarted up the actual events."

Pancraz laughed. "I think the story was not the only thing tarted up." Aden rolled his eyes. When Pancraz's laughter finally eased, he said, "I suppose it is time to get this over with."

Aden eyed him critically. "How shall we rough you up?"

Making a face, Pancraz tapped his forehead with one knuckle. "I think a head wound would be the only way you'd stand a chance of catching me, maybe another wound to my arm or leg. I would have had to be seriously exhausted and wounded for a green-eyed soldier to get the better of me."

Nodding, Aden considered his options, tucking away the vial of green arcen for the moment then he lunged, swinging a punch that just barely clipped Pancraz's jaw.

Pancraz looked startled for a moment, but then comprehension dawned, and he started to fight back, holding back nothing.

By the end of it, they were both soaked with sweat, dripping blood from minor wounds, covered in dirt and grime, and grinning a bit more than they probably should have been.

"You put up a good fight for someone with Salharan blood," Aden said, still panting for breath, wiping the dripping sweat from his brow.

Pancraz laughed. "Not bad yourself, pale skin." He started to wipe away the blood dripping from his forehead, but hesitated before withdrawing his hand and leaving it. "Best bind me, now."

Nodding, Aden bound Pancraz, but left off gagging him for the time being. Then they managed to get him up and over the saddle, where he then strapped Pancraz to it. "Sorry, but you're going to be rather uncomfortable for a bit."

"I'm going to be even more uncomfortable once Salhara gets hold off me," Pancraz said, clearly trying to shrug despite his awkward position. "All will be well by morning, ideally."

Grimacing, hating that he had to be directly involved in sending Pancraz to what could very likely be his death, Aden pulled out the vial of green arcen. Goddess willing, they would both live through this. If

Pancraz died, he would never forgive himself. "It will be well by morning, Pancraz. I vowed to save you, and I will keep that vow."

"I know," Pancraz said.

Aden smirked. "And when I do, I am certain Vester will be more than happy to show you how overjoyed he is by your survival."

Pancraz made a choking sound then gave a soft, shaky laugh. "I would not mind that. Not at all."

Smiling faintly, Aden said, "Then I will get this over with, and then we're off." So saying, he uncorked the vial and threw back the contents before he could think too much upon it.

Ugh. He held the back of his hand to his mouth, willing his stomach to stay where it belonged, and the contents in it where they belonged. "How do they stand this stuff? The taste is positively vile, and the way it makes me feel ..." He shuddered, and shoved the empty vial into his pocket with the full ones.

Pancraz laughed. "You know, when I first started eating Krian food, I wondered the very same thing. I can only assume that like the food, arcen grows on a person."

Aden snorted in amusement. When his stomach finally seemed to settle, and the first horrid rush of the arcen thrumming through his system had eased, he strode to the horse and mounted. "Anything else you need to say before I gag you?"

"No," Pancraz said. "I've told you all I know, and knowing you, it's more than enough to see the matter through to the end we seek. They will take me into the main castle; from there, I cannot tell you where they might go. But if I had to guess, I would say it's where there is no light. Matters of secrecy are always done where the stars can't watch."

Aden nodded. "Where the stars can't watch. I will remember."

"Remember also that you do not exist," Pancraz said. "If you forget that, they will suspect you."

Aden remembered the night he and Reinoehl had fought over his using arcen. The way he'd accidentally used magic, the despair at knowing Reinoehl loathed him, was disgusted by him, could not even bear to look at him. He had never felt so low, so wretched, in his life. "I think I will manage that just fine," he said quietly, and pulled out a strip of cloth torn from the uniform of one of the dead soldiers. Leaning down, he said, "Stay alive until I can come for you, Pancraz. Now here we go." He gagged Pancraz, made certain that and all the bonds were convincingly secure, then sat up straight again.

He took a deep breath and sank slowly back into those moments of hurt, of despair, of no longer knowing who and what he was, Reinoehl's revulsion, the anguish.

When he was confident in his role, he kicked his horse into motion, and they rode off toward the Mother Star.

Chapter Thirty Three

Reinoehl wanted to pace. To *move*. Hitting, slashing, or stabbing something would make him feel even better.

But he would not feel *right* again until he had his lover back, safe and sound, and was holding him tightly. Tits of the Winter Princess, where was the—

Even as he wondered, though, the signal came. A lantern passed five times across the bottom window of the rightmost tower. Aden had succeeded. Reinoehl felt relief wash through along with the hot rush of satisfaction. The battle was far from over, but when they won it, they would have won the war.

"Go," he ordered Vester, who rose from the shadows along with a dozen hand-picked men.

Reinoehl wanted to go himself, but could not. He was a General; he must lead the Cobalt Army. He should not be sending Vester, either, but the operation was important—if they failed this part, they stood to lose the entire battle. So if he could not go himself, he would send Vester.

"Take the gate, Vester, by whatever means necessary. Then find our comrades."

"By whatever means necessary," Vester echoed and sketched a brief bow in the dark. "Lord General, we will see you in the Mother Star." Then he turned, signaled to his men, and off they rode.

Scattered around the forest surrounding the Mother Star, two armies waited for the gate to be taken once and for all, waited for their chance to attack. He and a portion of his army would lead the first assault, the beginning of a hard rise and fall. The second wave, containing the most number of men, would be the entirety of the Scarlet.

Lacking the Cobalt Chief and the Commanders from both Armies, Bruno would be leading the remaining Cobalt in the last and smallest wave, winding down what was going to be a very swift, very brutal, very merciless taking of the Mother Star.

Reinoehl's wave was tasked with securing the entirety of the wall and truly setting the city into a panic. The more panicked and disorganized the Salharans were, the faster they would fall.

Gods willing, after hundreds of years of war, Salhara would fall.

He wished his parents had lived to see this day. Reinoehl hoped he would have a victory with which to honor them and all the others who had fallen in this struggle.

Standing to get a better look, but carefully keeping to the shadows where guards or scouts would not see him and alert others, Reinoehl recited, "In Spring the trees flower, in Summer they thrive. In Autumn the dead leaves fall, and in Winter the barren trees rest."

Beside him, still crouched, another soldier softly murmured another prayer. "May the Autumn prince pass by our trees this night, and Winter embrace us tomorrow."

They all froze in joy and fear and anticipation as, at the gate, Vester's signal came. Standing, Reinoehl cried, "For Crown, for country, for sword! In the name of the Winter Princess—Cobalt forward!"

The rallying cry echoed down the ranks as his soldiers rose and followed him from the forest, racing across the open field, charging across the great bridge and into the heart of Salhara

~~*

War was never pretty. Never easy. Never anything less than every imaginable nightmare brought to life.

When the battle-haze finally lifted, Reinoehl wanted to weep for the bodies strewn everywhere, the battle that still raged, the still more bodies that would pile up before it was all over. Cobalt. Scarlet. Salharan soldiers. Civilians. The children were always the worst, and knowing that such tragedy was inevitable never made it better.

He cut down three more soldiers and pushed through to the main castle. All around him men fought, screamed, two countries bitterly determined to end one another.

Somewhere, he thought he heard Erich. Good. It was up to Erich to control the battle while Reinoehl took care of the castle. Looking up, he wiped blood and sweat from his face and stared with some measure of awe at the glistening white stone of the stronghold of Salhara.

It would never be real, on some level. Kria and Salhara had hated each other for longer than anyone could truly remember. They had tried to annihilate one another countless times, and almost a year ago, it had seemed like Salhara would succeed. The fall of the Winter Palace had seemed to spell Kria's end.

They had murdered his parents, put his father's head on a pike alongside so many other noble men, and thrown Reinoehl in a birdcage to completely demoralize Kria.

Then he had been rescued by a clever, beautiful Illussor. Now here they were, razing the Mother Star.

And somewhere in that castle was the King of Salhara, the remaining Brotherhood who controlled the King and the country—and his Chief of Staff.

He turned sharply at the sound of someone coming up behind him, raising his sword to attack—only to relax when he saw it was Vester. "How are we doing Commander?"

"Well, Lord General. The Scarlet General and Chief Bruno are managing the troops. You'll have several well-earned promotions to hand out when this is over."

Reinoehl grunted. "Promotions and honors. Assemble the men. Let us take the castle."

Nodding, Vester turned and motioned to the soldiers awaiting his command. "Your orders, Lord General?"

"Spare the children," Reinoehl said. "Take the King into custody. Kill everyone else. Find our men."

Vester nodded again then turned back to the men he had assembled and echoed Reinoehl's orders. "On your mark, Lord General." Lifting his sword, Reinoehl gave the battle cry and charged the castle, cutting through the few remaining soldiers who had stayed at their post defending it.

But once through the few remaining guards, the castle proved to be surprisingly empty—deserted, even. The final Salharan stronghold—the Salharan should have been gathered there to make a final stand. Then again, they had probably never expected the mother star to be breached.

They cut down more soldiers as they appeared, and a few civilians with eyes too high in color to be safe to keep alive, as they cleared the castle room by room. But the people remaining were definitely low civilians and had been left there to distract Reinoehl and his men. "Spread out," Reinoehl ordered. "Get more men in here, whatever can be spared from the main battle. If there is no one here, the fighting out there will not last much longer. We need the King! It's possible they've got a secret passage leading out of the city. Find it! I want the escapees found and killed, and I want the King! And someone find my Chief of Staff and the Scarlet Commander!"

"Yes, Lord General!"

Leaving them to it, Reinoehl signaled five men to follow him. They moved easily through the largely empty castle, killing a few soldiers here and there, cutting down three women who came up from behind them in a failed surprise attack. The throne room, when they reached it, was far too easy to breach and predictably empty.

"So the heads of state fled, leaving their people," Reinoehl said thoughtfully, contemptuously. Even when the Winter Palace had fallen, and they had tried to save the royal family, they had done their damndest to protect the people as well and get as many of them out into the open country, where they could vanish into the various little towns and villages that would take Salhara months to find.

Here, it felt as if the people had been abandoned.

"Tits of the Winter Princess," Reinoehl snarled. "Find me that secret passage!"

"Lord General!"

Reinoehl snapped around as a foot soldier called for him and stalked to where the man stood in front of a door. He followed the soldier into what proved to be some sort of antechamber behind the throne. At the far end of the wide room was an archway that led to what looked like stairs. There were three other doors, evenly spaced, against the back wall. Two soldiers were posted at each door.

"This way, Lord General," called a soldier at the middle door. He was covered in blood, his uniform torn, hair plastered to his head with sweat and more blood, but Reinoehl could just make out the insignia of a Lieutenant on his chest. "We came up those stairs," the man explained, "and found these rooms. You'll be pleased by what else we found."

Opening the door, he revealed what seemed to be nothing more than a peeing chamber, complete with odor. "I don't recall saying I need to take a piss," Reinoehl said dryly.

The soldier coughed to cover a laugh. "No, Lord General. My family has always been builders. We've repaired many of the fortresses of Kria, and my ancestors helped to build many of them, including the Regenbogen. I've seen tricks like this before." So saying, he knelt and grasped the grate in the floor, then heaved it up and threw it aside.

Sure enough, the opening revealed proved too large for a mere refuse drain.

The stairs were also an indication.

Reinoehl slapped the exhausted lieutenant on the back and said, "Well done, Captain."

The man startled at the sudden promotion, then snapped a bow. "Lord General!"

Smiling briefly, Reinoehl said, "Summon my Commander and find us some torches!"

A few minutes later, Reinoehl and Vester were ready to descend into the secret passage below. "Lead the way," he said to Vester. "I'll cover us." Turning to his new Captain, he said. "You're in charge here, Captain, until the Scarlet General arrives to relieve you of duty."

"Lord General!"

Drawing his sword, Reinoehl gestured for Vester to go then followed him down into the dark.

The stairs went on for what seemed like ages, Reinoehl's tension growing with every step—but they did at last end. They stopped at the foot of the stairs and examined the hall in which they stood. It was just a large, square chamber where four archways intersected. The walls were lined with stone bricks, though they were so old they were cracked, lined with mold, wet.

If he had seen a tunnel in such a condition in the underbelly of Eis, Reinoehl would have had the heads of maintenance and then immediately set to repairing the damage. Left unattended, it was only a matter of time before the walls eventually caved in.

Vester moved forward, taking the left most archway. Reinoehl stayed close behind, ever mindful of hidden soldiers. At the end of the tunnel was a set of stairs leading up. Reinoehl motioned, and they left it alone for the time being. Going up served them no purpose. Hopefully no one else would be coming down.

Returning to the intersection, they walked across to the archway opposite, to the left of the door from which they had originally come. At the end of the long hallway was a door that proved to be locked. They braced for trouble, though they could hear no sound. Vester studied the door for a moment, then broke the old lock and kicked the door open. They charged inside—

Only to find an empty room.

Keeping his sword at the ready, angled so his back was never completely to the door, Reinoehl examined the room. It was clearly an audience chamber; there was plenty of room for roughly fifty or so men to assemble, a raised dais on which were arranged three chairs. Thrones, he half thought.

A deep red rug covered the dais trimmed in bands of orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, and violet. Behind the chairs, high on the gray stone wall, were three seven point stars. In the middle of each star was a blood red arcan blossom.

"The heart of the Brotherhood," Vester said in disbelief. "I never thought I would live to see the day."

"Only the audience chamber," Reinoehl said. "When we find Pancraz and Aden, then we'll have found the heart."

Vester nodded, but still looked around the chamber in awe and disbelief. "Goddess above, who of us ever actually believed we would see such a thing?"

"Not a one," Reinoehl agreed. "Let's see what else this room might offer."

Nodding again, Vester moved slowly, carefully around the room, exploring every stone and crevice. Reinoehl watched the door, constantly alert to any threat. Down here, in such confining spaces, it would be all too easy to ambush them and trap them. He should have sent soldiers down here, not risked himself and his Commander.

But he could not, would not, trust Aden to anyone else.

"I do not think there's anything further to this room," Vester said at last. "It seems straightforward. I still cannot fathom it—once upon a time, all twenty-one of the Brotherhood would have met here. What must have that been like, do you think, Lord General?"

"Contemptible," Reinoehl said. "When we are through with this place, these rooms should be sealed off forever. No good ever came from the men who used these chambers."

"Yes, Lord General," Vester replied.

Reinoehl took point as they left the room and retraced their steps to the main intersection again. From there, they took the archway opposite the stairs down which they had first come, making their way slowly down another long hallway.

They were halfway down the hall when the door at the end burst open, and two figures came rushing out with swords out—

Only at the last moment did the swords register, and all four of them froze mid-swing.

"Aden," Reinoehl said, relief hitting him so hard his hand shook as he sheathed his sword.

"Reinoehl," Aden replied, bloody, battered, bruised, but his smile was bright as he threw himself into Reinoehl's arms and clung tightly.

Reinoehl held him even tighter, closing his eyes and saying a silent prayer of gratitude. Drawing back, he cupped Aden's face, wiping a smear of blood away with his thumb. "I'm glad you're well."

"Me too," Aden said with a laugh. "The only underground chamber I want to be in ever again is your spring in Eis. But Pancraz is now the only surviving member of the Brotherhood. When he dies, hopefully many, many years from now, the Brotherhood of the Seven Star will cease to exist."

"Good," Reinoehl said kissing him softly. "I'm glad you were able to kill them and get away. Are you badly hurt?"

Aden shook his head. "No. Pancraz is a bit beat up, but he'll be all right."

Reinoehl looked reflexively toward Pancraz at that—then his mouth dropped open in shock to see his stoic, reserved Commander kissing Pancraz as if their lives depended on it. He looked back at Aden and said dryly, "I think perhaps I missed something."

"You think so?" Aden said and laughed. He kissed Reinoehl briefly then stepped away. He coughed, causing Pancraz and Vester to jerk apart. "Come on," he said and pointed a thumb over his shoulder. "We'll show you the home of the Brotherhood."

Nodding, Reinoehl followed Aden, pausing only to shoot Vester and Pancraz a look, smirking at their embarrassment.

The room they entered was somehow anticlimactic. Reinoehl did not know what he had expected, exactly... but somehow the boring, innocuous nature of the room did not fit with the centuries of dark, bloody tales that surrounded the notorious Brotherhood of the Seven Star.

They stood in a large drawing room, the walls made from the same white stone as the royal palace above them, covered in tapestries and paintings, crystal braziers on the walls. There was even a fireplace, and Reinoehl wondered what it had cost in money and men to build this place.

A table occupied the space before the fireplace, three chairs around it. In the chair with its back to the fire, a man was slumped forward, covered in his own blood, throat slit. He was old, frail looking, but even in death his eyes retained their arcen-red color.

Two more men were on the floor, one in front of a set of bookshelves, the other in a doorway across the room.

"They thought Pancraz was unconscious," Aden said. "While they were torturing me, he killed that one." He pointed to the man at the table. "His abrupt demise threw the other two off balance, and I managed to kill the one by the bookcases while Pancraz went for the one who tried to flee that way. We don't know why, but if he thought to run away, there must be still another secret passage that way."

"We also found this," Pancraz said and stepped over the dead man into the room beyond. Reinoehl heard a yelp, followed by several muffled words, and then Pancraz reappeared. He dragged a heavily-bound man into the room and threw him on the floor, then braced his foot on the man's back.

Reinoehl did not need to ask the man's identity. To judge by the diadem on his head, the finery he wore... "The puppet King of Salhara."

Pancraz nodded, "His Royal Majesty Aracelis Sanctius the Tenth. Only the Kings pass down a name. I believe his wife died shortly before the plague, but she bore him a daughter."

"Gone," Aracelis spat. "You will not find her."

Reinoehl looked at Pancraz. "How old is the girl?"

"She would be five now, or thereabouts."

To Pancraz Reinoehl said, "When we return to the palace proper, begin a search for her. A girl that young is still malleable and need not necessarily be executed." Aracelis jerked, but said nothing, only glared furiously, hatefully, at Reinoehl. Reinoehl only regarded him implacably. "Your daughter can still become a fine Krian citizen, though unless she is adopted, she will never again be a Princess. Your life may be spared, with my good word, if you formally surrender Salhara to Kria."

In reply, Aracelis only continued to glare. Reinoehl suddenly realized something and looked at Pancraz again. "His eyes are only blue."

Nodding, Pancraz replied, "Blue is as far as you can go before the arcen gets dangerously addictive. Combatants and certain government officials are permitted to consume green or higher, and the special license must be granted by the Brotherhood, a new license for every color upgrade. Only Brothers and those with very special license use orange, and only Brothers use red except with rare exception. He is King, but not a combatant or otherwise needed for things requiring more powerful arcen. So, his eyes never go past blue."

Reinoehl grunted. "Stand his Majesty up."

Stooping, Pancraz shifted his foot and obediently yanked Aracelis upright.

"As I said," Reinoehl repeated, meeting the glowing blue eyes, "you have a chance still to spare your life and see your daughter again. Formally surrender Salhara."

Aracelis sneered. "I would sooner be refused by the stars than surrender my kingdom to a bunch of pathetic sword fuckers."

Reinoehl backhanded him. "We do not need your permission, Majesty. Salhara belongs to us, no matter what you do. The Brotherhood is dead, the Mother Star has fallen. But you could still act with honor and decency and formally surrender. We are willing to hear your conditions of full surrender; we are not the brutes you call us after."

In reply, Aracelis laughed. "The Brotherhood is not as dead as you think, sword fucker. You've only killed the last two, not the last three. And why should I surrender, when as we speak, the last of the Seven Star is poised to kill your precious Kaiser? I will never surrender my Kingdom, least of all to a Krian."

Snarling, Reinoehl swung, punching him hard, sending Aracelis toppling unconscious to the ground.

"He's right," Aden said grimly into the silence from where he knelt alongside the dead man by the bookcases. "This man had red eyes, but he does not bear the Seven Star mark." He grimaced. "I made an assumption—an amateur mistake. Tits of the Winter Princess!"

"So the last one probably snuck out of the area weeks ago, headed straight for Illussor," Pancraz said. "We cannot stop him or reach anyone in time to warn them. Our Kaiser is in serious danger; he would have taken men with him to see that the deed was done no matter the cost. No one in that party will have less than orange eyes, and given it is probably a suicide mission—they will all have red."

"Winter's tits!" Reinoehl snarled.

Aden rose. "So what do we do?"

"Nothing," Vester said. "As Pancraz said, we have learned this far too late. We will have to hope that the Kaiser will be able to take care of himself, and of that he is more than capable. He might have been bastard born, but he was every inch the Kaiser's son when he had a sword in his hand."

Pancraz snorted. "No kidding. I bet he has been chafing at the bit, trapped in a palace and nary a battlefield in sight. I half wish I could be there to see the fight."

Reinoehl grunted. "True enough. I never saw anyone take him easily. Until Erich, I never knew of anyone who could breach any of his walls."

"Speaking of Erich," Pancraz said, "we should get topside and see how he and Bruno are fairing. With all of us down here, I'm sure they could use help."

"No doubt," Reinoehl replied. "Come, then. Let us go help our Scarlet General secure the new territories of Kria."

He led the way from the room and swiftly back down the hall, then up the never ending staircase. Back in the throne room of the palace, he turned to the other three and said, "Go, see where you are needed. When you are able, report to Erich and me. Keep what we have learned between us and find the princess. Pancraz, I will leave it to you to secure his Majesty."

The three men nodded and then departed quickly, immediately calling men to them and learning what was going on and where they needed to be. Reinoehl smiled briefly, thinking of what would come soon, after the Mother Star was secured and the journey home began.

"Where is Erich?" he asked a passing ensign.

"Just outside, Lord General," the ensign replied, bowing respectfully as Reinoehl walked on.

Outside, Erich stood as the eye at the center of a storm, calling out orders to everyone who came within ear shot, taking the reports that were brought to him, sending back out every man who came who was not badly injured.

"How do we stand?" Reinoehl asked.

"Exceedingly well," Erich said. "Once we took the major part of the city, the rest of it fell. Right now, we're securing the townspeople and destroying all the arcen we can find. A temple has been commandeered for the injured. Pancraz and Aden?"

"Already back to work," Aden replied and updated Erich on all that had transpired below.

Erich grunted when he had finished, expression closed as he dealt with more soldiers. But finally he said, "Ingolf will be fine. He has a son; he'd walk through fire for Renn. No doddering suicidal Salharan will get the better of him."

Reinoehl nodded in agreement. "We need to find her Highness."

"Where is the King?"

"Here," Pancraz said from behind them. "I thought you might like to see him, and to be honest, I cannot find a suitable location in which to keep him. I cannot spare the men to watch him around the clock, and I cannot do it myself, and if we leave him unsupervised for even a moment, someone will spring him. The others have the soldiers well in hand, or will shortly. I was going to concentrate my energies on the Princess once I secured his Majesty. Hopefully, she is still within the city."

"We'll find out," Erich said. "The men are securing the citizens. Commandeer as many men as you need, but make certain they can speak or at least recite passable Salharan. Have them inform all citizens that we want the Princess. She will not be harmed, but we do need her. If she is not brought to use by sunrise, then we will begin confiscating all children until we find her. Leave his Majesty here; we'll deal with him."

Reinoehl took the king as Pancraz handed him over. He glanced at Erich, whose expression was unreadable, but Reinoehl suspected he knew what Erich was thinking anyway. Turning back to Pancraz, he said, "Find Vester, and if he is not already mired in something, bring him here to run point. Erich and I will be in the throne room with his Majesty."

"Yes, Lord General," Pancraz said. He bowed then raced off.

"Apparently he was tortured," Reinoehl said idly, watching Pancraz until he vanished. "If he is in pain from the ordeal, he does not show it."

Erich nodded. "Pancraz is good at hiding things when he feels he must. Come on, let's see what we're going to do about his Majesty."

He sighed, and Reinoehl was inclined to agree with the unvoiced thought—this was the ugly part of their job. Unless by some stroke of fate... the king's life could be counted in minutes.

In the throne room, he ordered everyone out, to either rejoin the efforts in the city or secure the contents of the underground chambers. A few minutes later, it was simply him, Erich, and Aracelis. Reinoehl deposited Aracelis on his throne then slapped him to wake him up.

When Aracelis was awake and aware enough to resume his hateful glaring, Reinoehl smiled with cold cheer. "Well, Majesty? You've had time to reconsider. Do you still choose not to cooperate?"

"I would rather die," Aracelis spat. "Would that I had taken myself and my city long before you sword-fuckers arrived to destroy everything. But your Kaiser—"

"Is safe and sound," Erich interjected. "If you think a few red-eyed bastards are enough to kill our Kaiser, then you will look down from your stars in deep disappointment."

Aracelis said nothing, only sat in hateful, sullen silence. So different, this king, from the man that Reinoehl knew Ingolf to be. Ingolf had never been intended to take the throne, but Reinoehl knew he was fit for it. No sniveling coward, Ingolf, like this bastard puppet king here.

Reinoehl started to speak, but remained silent when Erich motioned. "Let me put this to you plainly, Majesty," Erich said. "Your kingdom is lost. Salhara is part of Kria now. While you will no longer be royalty, we are willing to keep you as a high-ranking noble. Your help would be appreciated in creating a new country. As a prince of Illussor, and so a prince of Kria, I can offer my solemn word—"

"I do not give a stars-rejected damn for the word of a Krian," Aracelis spat. "Once upon a time, the Brotherhood of the Seven Star rose up to drive back the ruthless, blood-thirsty Krians. I will not betray that ancient vow by siding with you now."

Reinoehl snarled and shoved Aracelis back down when he would have stood. "You want to bring up ancient history, Salharan? Because from what little I know of those long-past days, your ancestors would be ashamed of you. Your words are empty drivel. If you love your people, then live and help them."

Aracelis shoved him back, eyes blazing brilliant blue. "I would rather—" The words ended in a wet, choking cry of pain. He collapsed in the throne, blue eyes wide with disbelief as he stared at Reinoehl, fingers flexing in a futile effort to remove the dagger lodged in his throat.

Then the eyes went dull, and Reinoehl yanked his dagger free. He cleaned it then sheathed it. Pulling a handkerchief from his tunic, he wiped away the blood which had sprayed across his face.

"You did not have to do that," Erich said quietly.

It could have been a reprimand, but Reinoehl knew it was not. "Better I kill him than you, Highness," Reinoehl said pointedly. "A nice idea, that he would cooperate, but all three of us knew this night would end with his death. He should be grateful we did not make of him a spectacle." The way they had made a spectacle of the dead Kaiser and his family—and Reinoehl's parents.

Erich nodded. "Still, killing a king is no idle affair."

Reinoehl shrugged. "War is war, and death is inevitable." He smiled briefly, "Besides, if family legend is true, once upon a time, an ancestor of mine killed an Emperor."

"I wonder what will become of the princess," Erich mused. "Children should not pay for the sins of their fathers, but surviving Salharan royalty is no small matter."

"Time alone will tell," Reinoehl said, though he had a sneaking suspicion he knew exactly what Erich would do with a dethroned, no doubt scared to death little princess. "I will take care of his Majesty's body. You go and finish the claiming of the Mother Star. It is long past time we went home."

Chapter Thirty Four

Ingolf had not been a foot soldier for a very long time. Even amidst the seriousness of the situation, it amused him to be marching along with the masses rather than riding his stallion surrounded by the other high-ranking persons.

Elena had not liked the idea, not one little bit. Neither had Ingolf; it was sneaky, and he preferred direct means. Neither of them had been able to out-argue the council, however, not when they had reminded Ingolf he had a son who needed him, and his Krian arrogance needed to step down.

So here he was, playing foot soldier, hidden amongst the two hundred soldiers whom Elena had hand-picked to be his honor guard as he marched to the Regenbogen.

Just a few more months, he thought. Winter was coming steadily on again; by spring his armies would have returned to him. He hoped.

He looked again toward the group of riders well ahead of him. Ingolf had no problems pretending to be a foot soldier; however, he was wracked with guilt over the man pretending to be him. Should they be attacked...

The man played the role well, though, Ingolf gave him that. No one took it amiss that the Kaiser was withdrawn, hiding in his hood against the bitter cold that was a prelude to the masses of snow that would soon cover the landscape. Not when his wife was recently dead, his son sent away—

Ingolf turned away from the fear and pain that surfaced with that thought. Gods above, see that his son was protected at all costs.

They were only a couple of days from the Regenbogen now. Nearly all of Kria had fallen to Salhara months ago, but the Salharans had never managed to get as far as the Regenbogen, the notorious field and fortress where so much of the long feud had taken place.

Though the Regenbogen had been claimed by Illussor long ago, if the Salharans had managed to take it, the loss would have been as unbearable to Kria as the loss of the Winter Palace—worse, perhaps, because, although Illussor had taken the Regenbogen decades ago, Kria still indentified strongly with it.

He wished they were there now, instead of still marching on. It might be mildly amusing to pose as a foot soldier, but the danger they were all in was no laughing matter. Salhara had lost the war, but battles still raged on. Until they managed to bring all of Salharan to heel, they would only continue to fight and grow increasingly desperate.

Unable to win the war, the Salharans still resisting would settle for crippling the new Empire by whatever means possible. Killing the Kaiser would be the best way to destroy the fledgling Empire. With Erich miles away, locked in finishing the war, Ingolf's sudden demise would create a panic that Erich would not be able to return in time to fix.

But they were close to the Regenbogen, and so far all was proceeding as smoothly as he could dare hope—almost too smoothly, but he refused to be more pessimistic than he strictly had to be. Of course, that was when it all went wrong.

One moment, they were marching steadily along. In the next, the air was filled with screams and chaos and the stench of blood and death, and he felt the unmistakable crawling sensation of magic on his skin.

It seemed to come from everywhere—the sides, the rear, the front, of a strength and suddenness he had never seen before. Ingolf shoved away a dying soldier threatening to collapse on top of him and take him down then pushed through the crowd of soldiers, snarling for his officers to control the men. He raced toward the core, keeping his eyes on Elena. He saw Elena move—then he saw her fall, knocked from her horse. Then the fake Kaiser fell.

Snarling, Ingolf shoved through still more panicked soldiers, knocking heads and ordering them back into line. Finding a commanding officer, he grabbed the man by the scruff of the shirt and snarled, "You are not allowed to panic. Get these men back under control, or when this over I will take your head."

Throwing the man toward his soldiers, Ingolf pressed on, making his way through the panicked soldiers, bringing order where he could, but never stopping in his goal to reach the front of the line.

When he finally broke through the ranks, he saw why the men were panicking. Six Salharans stood before them, all older men with graying hair. Five of them had orange eyes; the sixth had red eyes, the dark red of blood from a wound that could not be staunched.

Ingolf drew his sword and attacked, screaming a battle cry as he lunged at the men attacking him. He only managed to kill one of them, however, and injure the other before the man struck him, sending him crashing down, screaming in pain.

Grunting, dizzy from the magical blow, bloody and bruised now, Ingolf struggled to his feet, but a sudden, searing pain tore through him, making him scream again, and he dropped once more to the ground, struggling not to pass out.

As suddenly as it had struck, it was gone again. Nauseous, disoriented, Ingolf looked up into eyes so dark a red they were almost black. Had they gotten darker? "And the real Kaiser reveals himself. I knew it could not be the man on the horse, not as easily as he went down. I cannot believe you traveled with so small an escort. Only two hundred men? Paltry, Kasier. I was told you were smarter than that."

Ingolf reaffirmed his grip on his sword and bared his teeth at the man who could only be a top member of the Brotherhood of the Seven Star. "Nothing about me is paltry, Salharan. *You* have lost the war, you and your polluted compatriots who grasp at straws. When will you learn that all the arcen you can acquire will never be enough to destroy Kria?"

The red-eyed man laughed and flicked his fingers, and Ingolf braced for the pain that struck without mercy. It almost bowled him over again, but he grit his teeth, bit his lip, and forced himself up despite the agony tearing through him, the blood dripping from what felt like hundreds of wounds, but was probably only a few. He would not fall again. Not when his men were scared to death, not when Elena had fallen. He felt the pain like knives, but refused to stop.

Somewhere in the pain, the agony, it became easier to push on, easier to keep going despite everything. Giving it everything he had, facing it for Reni, for Renn, for Elena, for Erich, for all the people who called him Kaiser, Ingolf pushed on, and finally the Salharan seemed to realize that his efforts were failing, and he faltered.

Taking his chance, Ingolf screamed a battle cry and lunged at the red-eyed Salharan, shoving his sword into and through the bastard's gut. They both went tumbling to the ground. Fumbling for a dagger, Ingolf grasped it and plunged it into the Salharan's throat, finishing him off.

Pushing off and away from the dead body, he tried to stand, but only collapsed to his knees again. Men came forward, and Ingolf allowed two of them to help him to his feet. "The rest of the Salharans?"

"Dead, Kaiser. All of them. We took no prisoners."

"Good," Ingolf said and looked around, wiping blood from his eyes. "Where is Elena?"

"Here, Kaiser," came Elena's voice, as ragged as his own, but she was alive. Relief poured through him. The crowd of soldiers parted to let her through, and she dropped—fell, almost—to one knee before him. "I am sorry I failed to protect you, Majesty."

"Forget that," Ingolf said gruffly. "I am glad you are alive. The man who posed as me—"

"Dead, Kaiser," Elena said sadly.

Ingolf nodded, feeling weary. "Secure his body, treat it with dignity. He is to be buried with honor at the Regenbogen. Bury the Salharans; never let them see their stars."

Men immediately moved to obey him, while others bent to bringing order back to the soldiers. Ingolf motioned to another group of men. "Secure our dead for proper burial. Bring me my horse."

No longer able to stand, he sat down hard on a tree stump. Elena followed, cradling her left arm against her body gingerly, though her sword was still in her right hand. "I hope this is the last of our adventures for a time, Kaiser."

Ingolf looked out over the results of the battle; the bodies, the blood, the shaken men, the solemn air that would be hard to lift. "Me too," he said with a sigh. "Me too."

~~*

Two days later, everyone was still more tense than not. Though Ingolf suspected the Salharans they had faced had been a last, desperate strike to get rid of the new Kaiser, and that they would see no more, it was hard to actually believe that.

Of the two hundred men who had been hand-picked as his escort, a full third were dead. Still more were wounded. The Salharans had nearly killed them all, and he could only wonder and be grateful that Salhara had chosen never to give such power to more of its people. Yellow and green had been enough

to deal with; he did not think they would have won this war if they had had to face more orange- and red-eyed bastards.

But the price of such power was obviously high. Without arcen, those men would have died. As many times as he had faced the Salharans, as many time as he had asked himself and other why, he still had no answer. It would forever baffle him why the Salharans would hurt themselves simply to possess magic.

He looked at Elena, bandaged and battered, riding alongside him. Her left arm was in a sling, having taken the worst of her fall from the horse. "How are you faring?"

"Mostly, I'm just mad at myself," Elena said. "I should have seen or sensed something. But I didn't, and now—" She cut off, then said quietly, "He should not have had to die, even if he volunteered to take the risk. You nearly died, and that is unforgivable."

Ingolf grunted. "I am not dead. I will not be dying any time soon." He had too much to do, now. Too many people who needed him. He had a son to raise and a country to build for Renn, because he would not leave Renn to lead a country still in turmoil. Nor would he die before holding Erich in his arms again. All Ingolf wanted was to hold him, feel him, know that Erich was safe and alive.

"I am sorry—"

"Do not apologize again, Elena," Ingolf said. "We were ambushed by a group of Salharans with orange and red eyes. I recall no battle in history with so many high-level Salharans in one place. They gambled everything they had left, I would wager, on crippling the new Empire before it could find its feet. They lost the war, but no doubt hoped to destroy the new empire they would never see."

Elena sneered. "Then their lives were a waste, beginning to end."

"I'm sure their mothers never thought so," Ingolf replied quietly. "But I do hope that is the last serious battle we will face." Turning to the others in his retinue, he asked, "How far are we from the Regenbogen?"

"Not long now, Kaiser," said one of his advisors. "We've sent out scouts to announce your arrival. The fortress will be ready for you."

"Any word from the front?"

"No," said another advisor. "But, between the weather and the demands of taking Salhara and reclaiming the Winter Palace, that is to be expected. Snow will have already fallen in the northern regions. I would wager that by week's end, we'll be seeing snow ourselves."

Ingolf nodded. "Supplies are sufficient for the weather, and to accommodate the massive influx of people we will soon be sheltering?"

"Yes, Majesty," said a third man. "Most supplies were gathered from Illussor villages and the merchants at the harbor. The cost was not modest, but we are prepared."

"Good," Ingolf replied and subsided, falling into his own thoughts while the others talked quietly around him.

By early spring, all of his armies would be at the Regenbogen. Those at the Winter Palace should arrive much sooner, but it was very likely the weather might prevent it. It was probably all to the good, really, if they were trapped at the Winter Palace until spring. Though he had just been reassured they had ample supplies, Ingolf was not certain how well anyone had thought to plan for any Salharan refugees seeking shelter and assistance. Certainly the toppled Salharan government was not going to strain itself to see its people taken care of properly.

Never mind that supplies had a bad habit of running out faster than even the most thorough and meticulous plans dictated. It did not help, either, that people had a bad habit of showing up in greater numbers than anticipated.

That aside, this was his first real outing as Kaiser, and the first time Kria would actually see their new Kaiser. He was woefully unprepared for the attention he would soon be receiving; it still discomfited him how much attention he was paid just in the royal palace of Illussor. He really wished he had someone who was better at all of this than he.

Reni. Or Erich. But thinking about either of them still hurt too much.

Soft laughter drew him from his thoughts, and he quirked a brow at Elena. "Something amuses?"

"Ingolf, if you do not stop worrying yourself so, you will have a head of gray hair before your next birthday. While I do not doubt you would look quite dashing with gray hair, I do not think you need rush into it."

Making a face, Ingolf replied, "I think if I were to stop worrying, I would not be a very good Kaiser."

"I suppose that is true," Elena conceded. "Still, you must find ways of calming yourself a bit. You've too much to do, to exhaust yourself with worrying. You're already a good Kaiser, and I do not think it will take long before you are a great one. Reni had absolute faith in that; you should too."

Smiling faintly, sadly, Ingolf said, "I suppose for her, I can try."

"Good," Elena said. "Because you've an entire fortress full of people eager to lay eyes upon you and hear whatever encouraging words you can offer."

"Wonderful," Ingolf muttered. Even back when he had been preparing only to someday be Verdant General, he had loathed speeches and other such things.

All Ingolf had ever really wanted was the life of a simple soldier. He had never wanted this sort of power, this level of authority. To serve Kria and his father faithfully and to otherwise live a quiet life had been his goals. That was all.

But, it was long past time he stopped bemoaning what would never be. "If we can simply reach the Regenbogen without further incident, I will give whatever speeches are desired, and gladly," Ingolf replied. "I wish—"

"Kaiser!"

He stopped short as someone shouted for him, not at first seeing the source of the cry—but then a scouting team broke through the trees and raced toward him. "What's wrong?" he asked.

"Salharans, Kaiser," replied the lieutenant who was scout leader. "I'd say right around two hundred of them, maybe more. Refugees from a village they say was devastated in the fighting and recently sacked by Salharan soldiers who were headed here. Men with red and orange eyes."

"Probably the group we killed yesterday," Ingolf commented. "Bring me their representatives, then."

"Yes, Majesty," the lieutenant replied and motioned to two of his scouts. They immediately saluted then rode off back into the forest.

Ingolf turned to the lieutenant. "Give me your opinion of the refugees."

"They seemed honestly in need, Kaiser," the lieutenant replied. "They've been suffering for some time, I think. Not a one has glowing eyes, and they all looked hungry. The children did not even have the energy to act like children. I'd wager there's plenty more just like them out there. Casualties of war, and all too soon they will be casualties of winter."

Nodding in agreement, Ingolf beckoned one of his counselors forward. "What have we done to prepare for whatever refugees that might come our way?"

"We've tried to estimate the numbers and plan our supplies accordingly, Kaiser," the counselor replied, "but it's hard to prepare when we do not know the Salharan population to start, or how many of them are refugees."

Ingolf frowned, thinking. "So we probably do not have enough in the way of supplies if we get hit with armies, our own civilians, and Salharan refugees."

"We would certainly be forced to look for creative means by which to stretch our supplies, yes, Kaiser," the counselor replied. "We have done our best, I vow it, but we simply cannot anticipate the Salharan numbers, and this late in the season the supplies we *did* obtain were already difficult to obtain."

"I understand," Ingolf said, soothing the man. "I do not doubt for a moment that you've done your very best. The reality is that we are probably going to have too many people, if we have just encountered two hundred refugees and my scouts are anticipating plenty more."

He fell silent again, thinking, then finally nodded and motioned to another counselor, this one in charge of his scouts and his runners. "Summon my best runner. Send him with all possible haste to the armies at the Winter Palace. He is to inform my Generals that they are to remain there through the winter if they can at all manage it. They are not to come to the Regenbogen until spring. Inform them that we are

taking in refugees and cannot take in armies as well. I regret it and apologize to my faithful armies, but I must trust them to look to themselves as I know they can."

Another counselor frowned at the words. "But Sire, we have not even reclaimed the Winter Palace yet. How can you order them to remain there when we don't even know they will take it back."

"They will take it," Ingolf replied, holding back a scathing retort. "That victory is not in doubt. The Salharans still holding it are trapped and know it; they have no country to flee to, and with a hard Krian winter already upon them they will not be able to go out for supplies. They have trapped themselves. Our victory is not in question; it is merely a matter of time. The only question that need concern you, counselor, is what we are to do with the homeless citizens of our new empire."

Still another counselor chimed in, his expression pinched. "They're Salharans. We have greater concerns, and our supplies are too precious, to waste on those drug-addled fools. If you ask me—"

"But I did not ask you," Ingolf said coldly. "You were not invited into this conversation, and you are dismissed from my presence until further notice, counselor. Make yourself useful and select men from my honor guard to help escort the refugees to the Regenbogen."

"Yes, Majesty," the counselor said stiffly.

Ingolf watched him go then turned back to the others, pitching his voice so that he could be heard by everyone in the field. "Let me make this clear to everyone. We are no longer three countries, torn by war and strife. The days of old hate and endless fighting are ending. We are one country and must learn to live as brothers, every one of us. Old hate has no place in our new empire. This continent is now the Empire of Kria. We are *all* Krian now. If you see a brother in need, remember that wounds do not heal by constantly tearing them open. Help one another. I will not tolerate continued fighting. Am I understood?"

Silence was the only reply, at first, until the lieutenant scout leader thrust a fist into the air and bellowed, "Long live the Kaiser! Long live Kria!"

Across the field, others took up the cry, until the field seemed to shake with the noise. Smiling, pleased that at least some were willing to listen and obey, Ingolf motioned them to silence and said, "Long live Kria." He started to say more, but a crashing from the trees drew their attention, and Ingolf watched as the two scouts reappeared, accompanied by three Salharans.

One was a man of fifty or so years; the two men with him appearing to be in their thirties. By the look of all three of them, they were father and sons. The older man had the look of a village leader. Ingolf beckoned them closer and greeted them, "*Good day to you. Do you speak Krian?*"

"*Only a little,*" replied the older man. "*And that, I speak very poorly.*"

Ingolf smiled. "*Very well, we will continue in Salharan. I am told that you have no village to call home and need somewhere to go.*"

"That is correct, Sire," the old man answered. "Our village did not fare so well in the war, and their lordships took the last of our supplies for their own use." He lowered his head, clearly not certain what else to say. He obviously knew that the orange- and red-eyed Salharans had been on a mission to destroy Kria.

"I am sorry to say your countrymen are dead," Ingolf replied and left it at that. These villagers would have had nothing to do with the matter, and they'd been punished aplenty for crimes they had not committed. "We are more than happy to offer you refuge at Regenbogen Fortress. However, you must understand, there will be conditions at the beginning."

"We are grateful for whatever you are willing to offer us," the old man said stiffly, meeting Ingolf's eyes, drawing himself up to his full height. His pride was battered, but not broken, though it must cost these Salharans dearly to ask for help from a country who had been their enemy longer than anyone could remember. "We will meet the conditions without protests."

Nodding, Ingolf said, "I appreciate the cooperation, good sir. First and foremost, we demand that any arcen still in your possession be destroyed, and that anyone still with arcen in his system takes a cleanser. I am afraid that we have zero tolerance for the drug, and it is not permitted within the walls of the Regenbogen."

"Yes, Sire," the old man replied. "Our arcen ran out days ago, anyway. There's not a drop left."

"You will have to be searched, nevertheless. You understand? No offense is meant, good sir."

The Salharan shook his head. "No offense is taken, Sire."

Smiling, Ingolf continued, "Then the last condition is only that you remain segregated for a few days, to ensure once and for all that no threats to the crown have insinuated themselves amongst you. Other than that, good sirs, you and yours are most welcome. You will be given shelter, food, and whatever additional supplies you need. When spring comes, we will see about finding you a more permanent location, even rebuilding your village if that is your preference."

The faces of all three men filled with shock and disbelief, and one of the young men spoke. "But—that would be glorious. And you have no further stipulations?" He fell silent, then abruptly realized his error, and hastily added, "Majesty."

Ingolf laughed. "Yes, those are my only stipulations. And the segregation will not last long; it is merely a formality. I do not anticipate trouble. However, if you are amenable, I have a few requests."

"Of course, Sire," the old man said cautiously, but without all the weary cynicism he had earlier shown.

"If there are any arcen farmers amongst you, we would like their assistance with locating and destroying the arcen fields. I know this is not a task that pleases you—"

"We will help, Sire," said the last young man, silent until then. "I know the farmers, I will speak to them."

"Thank you," Ingolf said. "We would also like some volunteers, to aid the army in locating other refugees, so that we can find and assist them before winter makes it completely impossible. You know your land best and would greatly speed the process."

"We'll help, and gladly," said the other young man. "Thank you, Majesty. We are grateful."

"It is I who am grateful," Ingolf replied and nodded in parting, then turned back to his men. Facing the scout leader, he said, "Lieutenant, I am placing you in charge of locating any refugees and seeing that they are adequately sheltered for the winter. Make whatever improvisations you must in that regard. Take what men and supplies you need. Return with these men; they'll give you volunteers to help locate the refugees. See that the arcen farmers are sent back to the Regenbogen."

"Yes, Kaiser!" the Lieutenant replied and swept a remarkably graceful half-bow from the back of his horse. Not wasting another moment, he turned his horse and motioned to his men and the three Salharans, calling for additional horses.

In very short order the group was gone, along with half of Ingolf's remaining guard. Turning to his advisors, he said, "Make certain my lieutenant is properly promoted. Assign him a proper supply clerk, and good runners. Reassemble my remaining men; I want to reach the Regenbogen before full dark. Send a new scout team to inform the Regenbogen of the additional people we will be taking in."

"Yes, Kaiser," echoed down the line, and Ingolf nodded to them in thanks. Then he returned to his escort, Elena at his side.

"Well done, Kaiser," Elena murmured, once they were on their way again. "Very well done, indeed. I think perhaps I was gravely mistaken in my earlier assessment."

Ingolf frowned. "What do you mean? What assessment?"

Elena laughed at him. "You are already a great Kaiser."

Ingolf waved the words aside. "When my country is unified and war nothing but a memory—then we will decide what manner of Kaiser I might be. Until that day comes, I am nothing at all."

"Yes, Kaiser," Elena said with a smile.

Chapter Thirty Five

Erich strode through the halls as quickly as he was able, but short of learning how to be invisible, quickly was simply not possible. Everyone, it seemed, needed his opinion or signature on something. If this was how busy he was here, he was not certain he wanted to know how much worse it would be when he was home again.

Home...

He wondered how different life would be, how much busier, returning a General, actively taking up his role as Prince—and he would be returning to Ingolf in mourning over Reni's death, with everything that he had known reshaped, and as Scarlet General. It made his stomach knot and his heart pound, and then he was not terribly sorry for the constant interruptions.

Though he had begun to doubt that he would ever reach his goal, he did finally reach the royal library where he had been told Pancraz had last been seen. Thankfully, he saw at a glance, Pancraz was still there.

Before he could speak, however, his attention was stolen by the sight before him. "What in the world are these?" Erich asked, looking at the enormous tomes spread out on the central library table. The entire library was immense and impressive. He could feel the history in the place, smell the ink, the paper, the leather bindings. A large fireplace overtook the center of what seemed to be three full stories. The ceiling high above was an elaborate mural of the stars; he was honestly surprised the ceiling was not made of glass like those in the temples.

In the entire library, however, it was the table and the special shelves around it that were by far the most astounding. He rather thought his bed could fit on the table twice over, and he knew for a fact that his bed could comfortably sleep three men.

A great many books currently occupied most of the table, and he could see that not all of them had been set out. Each one was the length of his forearm and half again. Spread open, they were nearly as long as his entire arm.

The pages were of the highest quality he had ever seen, the rich scarlet-dyed binding and covers equally impressive, so too the dark blue ink in which they were written. Erich was not certain he had ever seen a treatise or contract made with such quality and care.

On each page were two large sections with a name across the top of each section. Below the names were more names, set slightly inward, and with notes of some sort alongside each. There were all manner of notations, symbols, and numbers that he could not make sense of.

"These are the Books of Naming," Pancraz told him, turning from where he stood speaking quietly with a man in ornate red and gold robes. Pinned to the front of his robes was a medallion of some sort—a seven point star, a gold quill sticking out of the top, as though the star were a bottle of ink.

Pancraz motioned to the man and said, "This is the Chancellor of Names. He and his deputies are charged with the holy duty of tracking *all* the names in Salhara. Any given name must be signed off by his hand before an individual may formally lay claim to it.

Erich's brows rose. "That sounds a cumbersome undertaking, especially for one man. So many citizens, how do you keep track of them? If you must sign for every single name, people must be left waiting weeks, even months."

"There is a system," the Chancellor said stiffly. "I also have deputies who are approved to sign until I can affix my personal seal."

"I'm impressed," Erich said. "I always wondered, given how seriously Salharans take names, how they managed them all. So these are the master logs?"

"Yes," the Chancellor replied. "Every name currently in use, from the first name given to all the name changes, with notations for how long a name was in use, when it was last put into circulation, where the previous uses can be located—"

Erich lifted a hand to stop him. "Truly, I am impressed. That is a great deal of information to track. Never mind the sheer amount of paper involved." The Chancellor said nothing, but his scathing expression made his feelings plain.

Amused, but knowing better than to show it, Erich shifted his attention to Pancraz. "What shall we do with them, do you think?"

Pancraz shrugged. "Historically, they've invaluable. It would be a pity to destroy so much history, however ..."

"Destroy them!" The Chancellor burst out. "Blasphemy! And you of Salharan blood! Clearly you do not deserve to be a child of the stars! I suppose that is why you fled to these violent, bloodthirsty heathens!"

Pancraz regarded him coldly. "Guard your tongue, Chancellor. I can have it removed in a moment." Sneering, the Chancellor nevertheless subsided.

Erich flipped casually through one of the books, marveling at the names, the amount of effort, the information that was tracked. He wondered how the Salharans had come to such a cumbersome tradition—but even if they knew, he sensed they would not tell him. Instead, he simply said, "Salhara no longer exists. Your naming conventions will not be retained by the Empire."

"And what will become of us once there is no one to properly track our names?" the Chancellor demanded. "Names should not be so crassly treated; without a name, a bestowed identity, a man does

not exist. What will happen when no one tracks the names and men wind up with the exact same name, and the stars cannot tell them apart? You cannot expect us to simply give up our names, our traditions!"

"Everyone will learn to adapt," Erich replied, as gently as possible, but not at the sacrifice of firmness. "The rest of the world has always managed just fine; Salharans will learn. I think the nameless amongst you will be grateful for the chance to possess names that were always denied them."

The Chancellor sneered. "The nameless are what they deserve to be—non-existent."

"What is your name?" Erich asked, truly growing angry now.

"I am the Chancellor of Names."

Erich frowned and looked to Pancraz. "His title is his name," Pancraz explained. "It's considered an honor. In the history of our country, precious few have possessed that name. To be the Chancellor of Names is no easy thing. He would have started in childhood as Apprentice of Names and climbed up the ranks through the years."

Turning back to the Chancellor, Erich said, "That is your *name*. Your name is your identity, and your name is a title. What in the world do friends and family call you? What would a lover call you when—"

"That is quite enough!" The Chancellor snarled. "I do not give a damn if you are a General, I will not tolerate such disrespect! It is enough that I must endure talk of burning books and damning people with repeated names! And naming the nameless, who deserve nothing! You Krians might have won, but you will never be anything but savages, and Salhara will not tolerate your savagery forever!"

"You may not care that I am a General," Erich replied, "but you will respect that I am a prince of the Empire and right now control your city and every person in it. You are alive by my good grace, Chancellor. Upon my word, these books can and will be tossed into that fireplace you stand before. Push me too far, and my orders will extend to throwing you into the fire as well. You do not have to like me, Chancellor, but you will remain civil."

The Chancellor said nothing, merely glared hatefully.

"Now," Erich continued when it seemed certain the Chancellor was not going to say anything further. "Here is food for thought. Salhara is no more. We are not retaining Salharan naming traditions. We no longer have need of a Chancellor of Names. Your position no longer exists. I believe, by your tradition, that means you no longer exist—you are, as of this moment, nameless. Do you still believe the nameless deserve to be nonexistent?"

The Chancellor paled as the realization struck him and looked, for a moment, as though he was going to cry or be ill.

"Think upon that, Chancellor, for the rest of the day and night. You and I will speak again tomorrow, before I must leave. If your words then are reasonable, we will see what might be done with you. If you persist in hostility, then I am afraid I shall have no choice but to put you in chains."

Leaving the Chancellor to stew over it, Erich signaled for Pancraz to join him and led the way out of the library. He motioned to two guards standing sentry duty. "Call for two more men, see that the Chancellor is watched at all times. If he tries to leave, follow him, and notify me of where he goes."

"Yes, Lord General!" the soldiers replied and one of them darted off to fetch more men.

Erich walked on and said to Pancraz, "I will leave the matter of the books to you, Pancraz. Most such decisions, I am leaving to you. Given your unique history, I feel you should be the one to decide what is kept for posterity and what should be burned."

Pancraz's eyes widened, but he just shook his head and laughed softly. "Yes, Lord General. Was that why you came to the library? Or did you need something further?"

"Something further," Erich replied. "I've been told they have finally located the princess. I want you to be a translator, should it be necessary. My Salharan has been fine so far, but one never knows."

"Of course," Pancraz said. "I'm glad she's been located. This means you can finally begin the trek home and maybe reach the Winter Palace before the weather gets much worse."

Erich nodded in agreement. "It will be good to be home." He fervently hoped so, anyway, even if his feelings were too tumultuous to properly sort out. He still wondered when, in all of this, he had started to think of Kria as home more than Illussor—not that there was an Illussor, anymore, but his change in attitude had come much sooner than that.

But the answer to that was obvious: Ingolf. That was really all the home he needed, whatever the complications and heartache that arose when they were finally reunited. "I am sorry you cannot come with us—"

"Do not be," Pancraz cut him off. "Someone must stay behind to watch and safeguard everything here and get the Salharans comfortable—or at least peaceably resigned—to the fact they are now Krian. Come spring, the remaining arcen fields must be found and destroyed. Word must be spread to the outer reaches that we are no longer a Kingdom, but an Empire. I am honored you would trust me with so important a duty."

Erich smiled faintly, thinking of what was to come later. "Who better than my Commander and best friend? Never mind that you are becoming quite the legend in your own right." He slid Pancraz an amused look, adding to his embarrassment by concluding, "And I was just informed that Commander Vester has agreed to stay on as well, to assist you however he may."

Pancraz tried to glare at him, but the expression simply could not hold, and instead he smiled, ducking his head. "Yes, he told me." Erich snickered. "Oh, be quiet," Pancraz said and elbowed him in the gut.

"Oof," Erich replied. "That's no way to treat a General. Or royalty." Pancraz snorted at that, but did not bother to further reply. Erich grinned, but had no time for further comment as they spilled out of the quiet side hallway and into the busier, louder great hall that led to the throne room.

Inside, at least a hundred people milled about restlessly. Krians, Illussor, Salharans; soldiers, clerks, servants, court officials—all of them clamoring to know what was about to be decided now the princess, the last heir of Salhara, had been found.

Erich was all too aware that his decision was pivotal. As a Prince of Kria, he was the Kaiser's voice here. The people present in this room would spread word of all that was said and done here, and that would largely determine the tone of Kria's complete takeover of Salhara.

Unfortunately, he had no idea what he was going to do.

A more cold-blooded ruler would take the logical path and have the princess killed. But even if he could stomach flat out murder, Erich had no stomach for killing children. With her father dead and Salhara stripped of its sovereignty, she was technically no longer a princess. He could simply let her go, to live whatever normal life she found.

But there was no telling what Salharan rebels would do with her, then.

Erich nodded to several people and gripped arms with Reinoehl. "Where is my cousin?"

Reinoehl's mouth curved in an amused smirk. "Who do you think finally found her?"

"Of course," Erich muttered and wondered why he had not questioned Aden's absence of late. He had simply assumed Aden was settling the city and nearby countryside like the rest of them.

Leaving Reinoehl, he finally climbed the steps to the dais and sat on the throne. He had never thought to be in such a situation, even though that was abjectly stupid. Hahn had been Crown Prince of Illussor. If tragedy had not struck, he would have one day been King. It was the primary reason Hahn's parents had been so angry about his marrying so young. A future king had no reason, no business, settling down so young. It had not helped that while Hahn could have done much worse than the Duke of Korte, he also could have done much better.

Being married to Hahn, Erich would have been Regent some day. If he had not been rendered unfit by grief and apathy, and Reni had not been so willing to take the throne, he should have been King upon Hahn's death.

Of course, such thoughts just made him think of Ingolf again. He shoved them aside.

The door opened, distracting him, bringing him back to the matter at hand. Aden stepped inside, followed by a Salharan woman in royal livery. She carried a girl in her arms; the poor girl could not be a day over five. Her hair was still a child's white-blond, a tangle of soft, delicate curls around a pale, tear-stained face. She wore a pretty gown of green with white and gold lace, but no shoes, only stained white socks.

Erich beckoned them forward, motioning the murmuring people in the room to silence. At his side, Pancraz called out, *"It's all right, madam. Bring the child; she will come to no harm."*

Slowly, with heavy reluctance, the woman—a nursemaid obviously—walked the length of the throne room. At the bottom of the dais steps, she knelt, still clinging to the princess. Weeping openly, she looked up at Erich and said in broken Krian, "The child. Do not kill. I beg of you."

"I have no plans to hurt her," Erich said in Salharan. *"Let me see her, please."*

Clearly not believing a word he said, but in no position to refuse, the nursemaid approached. She whispered to the girl for a couple of minutes, then slowly lowered her and turned her around, urging her toward Erich.

The girl looked down at her feet, hands buried in the ruffles of her dress. She really was a beautiful child, and Erich suspected she would only be more stunning as a grown woman. He stood up, then knelt in front of her and held out a hand. *"Hello, little princess. What is your name?"*

"Princess," the girl replied, still looking at her feet. For all her reticence, however, her voice was remarkably clear.

Erich frowned then looked at Pancraz. "Is this another custom?"

"Children normally are not named until they are five," Pancraz said. "I thought she would have had a name, given that the formal records say she is nearly six."

"The King had not decided upon one yet," the nurse said. *"He was having trouble deciding and then dealing with the war became too important. Now, there is no one left to name her properly."*

"I see," Erich said, then switched back to Salharan and addressed the girl. *"It's nice to meet you, Princess. I am Prince Erich."* He reached out and took one of her hands.

She reached out with her free hand and lightly touched the back of his, then slowly dragged her gaze up. *"Are you a ghost?"*

"Princess!" the nurse exclaimed.

Erich motioned her to silence, laughing as he said, *"Some have called me that, but I am very much alive, I promise. I am no ghost."*

The princess nodded, but did not look entirely convinced, her free hand slowly tracing back and forth along Erich's, clearly fascinated by his pale skin.

"Did your nurse tell you that your father is gone?" Erich asked gently. *"I am in charge of his castle now."*

Slowly she looked again and then blinked at him. Her eyes were stunning; a clear, pale blue. He wondered if they would stay that way as she got older; if so, she would probably intimidate many a person with the clarity of her gaze. *"Papa is always gone."*

Erich's mouth twisted in a sad smile. *"Well, he is dead now, which means he is gone forever and will never be coming back. I am sorry."*

The Princess shrugged and looked again at the floor. Erich frowned, mind whirling, hating her indifference—how had she been raised in this palace, how little had she seen her father, that she did not seem surprised or upset that he was dead.

It struck him as horrifically lonely; he could not fathom it. He had grown up in constant company, with people always there. Only when Hahn had died had he felt alone, but it must be much worse for a child, who did not even really understand.

Giving in to a sudden impulse, liking the sound and feel of it, he said, *"I am going to be your father from now on. How does that sound?"*

"Erich—"

"Lord General!"

He motioned everyone to silence, glaring in warning when Pancraz and Aden would have spoken anyway. Shifting his full attention back to the princess, he asked her, *"What do you think?"*

She stared at him, eyes far too somber for a child then asked, *"Will you be gone too?"*

Erich smiled. *"Sometimes, but I will always tell you and take you with me when I can. Would you like to go with me? And when I am not there, my friends and family will keep you company for me. I have a lot of them. Would you like that, to come with me and meet them?"*

"I never go," she replied. *"It's not allowed. I stay here."*

"Well, I am changing the rules," Erich replied and gently squeezed her hand. *"Do you want to come?"*

She kept looking at him, obviously thinking hard then asked, *"Can I have a name, too?"*

"What name do you want?" Erich asked.

Again, she only stared at him for a long moment, before saying in her quiet, too-pensive way, *"Papa promised to name me."*

"Then a promise should be kept," Erich said softly. *"Since I am your father now, it is up to me to keep the promise, isn't it?"* He thought for a moment, tugging on a strand of her white-blond hair, so similar to his own, though over time hers would likely darken into blonde or brown. Smiling faintly, he finally said, *"How about Hanna?"*

"Hanna," the Princess repeated slowly, blinking at him.

"If you like it and decide that I may be your new father, then your name is Hanna von Adolwulf, and you are now Princess of Kria," Erich informed her. *"Do you understand?"*

"Yes," Hanna replied. *"I am Princess Hanna. You can be my father. I will go somewhere new. Nana can come too?"*

Erich smiled. *"Of course."*

The nurse was weeping openly, hands covering her mouth to muffle her sobs. When she saw Erich looking at her, however, she lowered her hands and bent over, bowing. *"Highness, you are most kind."*

"Nonsense," Erich replied, smiling. *"What else could I do? A princess is a princess."* Standing, he picked Hanna up then set her in the throne. *"Now, sit there, my princess."*

"My name is Hanna," she corrected.

Erich laughed and tousled her hair. *"Of course, Hanna. You can stay here with me for a little while, and then go back to your room with your Nana. Tomorrow we are leaving for the new place."*

"Can I have some milk?"

"Once you go back to your room," Erich replied and stroked her hair one last time before turning to the nurse. *"Madam, you may come up here and sit with my daughter; I'm sure she finds comfort in your presence. How much Krian do you know? What of Hanna?"*

The nursemaid looked at him wide-eyed, but then obediently rose to sit beside the throne on a stool that someone had brought her, holding fast to Hanna's hand. *"I know only a small bit, your Highness. The Princess knows a little, too, but does not speak it comfortably."*

Erich nodded. *"That will have to change. I will set your tutors while we travel to the Regenbogen. Can you handle the journey?"*

"I will," the nursemaid replied.

"Good," Erich said approvingly and smiled at her. *"Pack tonight, for we are leaving early tomorrow. What is your name, good lady?"*

"Um—Marianna, your Highness. I will see that all is made ready," Marianna said and folded over in an awkward bow.

"That is settled then," Erich said and after patting Hanna's head one last time, he moved on to the next matter to be addressed.

The hall was quickly growing more packed than ever as soldiers earlier bid to arrive at an appointed time began to appear. The massive doors were completely open, more people crowded in the hall beyond.

Erich signaled Reinoehl, who swiftly climbed the dais to join him. They shared a smile, pointedly ignoring the confused looks sent their way. Reinoehl stepped back, standing just behind and to the right of Erich. Facing the assembly, Erich drew Bright. *"Commander Pancraz, Commander Vester, approach and kneel."*

Looking startled, sharing a brief look, Vester and Pancraz obediently moved forward and knelt before Erich at the base of the dais.

"The Empire of Kria has grown in size and strength," Erich said. "Only days ago, we took the vast lands of Salhara into our fold, and Illussor months ago joined Kria by way of marriage. Three countries who have spent the entirety of history as bitter enemies now have become one land. We must learn to live together, to be one people. To that end, as Prince of the Empire of Kria, I am appointing new leaders to watch over the new lands here in the former country of Salhara.

"In these new lands, I designate these two men to be the voice of Kria, to bring together our new countrymen, to repair the damage done by war, and to help make Kria whole." He touched each of Pancraz's shoulders with the tip of Bright then did the same with Vester.

"You kneel before me faithful Commanders, your integrity, loyalty, and bravery proven time and again. You have the strength, the wisdom, and the honor. In reward for these deeds, and to help you in your duties, I bid you rise, Lord General Pancraz of the Onyx Army and Lord General Vester of the Slate Army."

The room exploded with noise, but Erich barely noticed any of it, his attention solely on the two men standing before him, expressions dumbfounded. He fought a grin, but doubted he succeeded.

Reinoehl did not bother to try, laughing openly as he presented Vester and Pancraz with their new tunics. To Vester went a tunic of dark, steel gray that suited him. Embroidered across the chest was his new crest—storm clouds cut by a bolt of lightning. To Pancraz went a black tunic, the crest three silver-white stairs forming the points of a loose, off-set triangle.

"Wear them in good faith and serve Kria as honorably as you have always done," Erich concluded. "Congratulations, Lord Generals."

Vester bowed. "Yes, Highness. Thank you." Pancraz only nodded, clearly too moved to speak.

"The assembly is dismissed!" Erich bellowed over the noise, amused as he was grumbled at in reply, though slowly the crowd did begin to trickle out. He handed Hanna over to her nurse, promising to come see her in a short while, reminding the nurse that they would be leaving in the morning.

Eventually, there were only the four of them left, plus Bruno and Aden. "Well done," Bruno said, grinning. It turned into a smirk as he looked at Pancraz and said, "So can you speak yet?"

Pancraz shook his head and just stared at his tunic for a moment. He looked up again after a moment, and started to speak—but it came out a rough sound, and he stopped to clear his throat then tried again. "I can't believe—am I really a General now?"

"I need men I can trust to watch over Salhara," Erich replied. "The more authority you have, the better. And who better to make Generals than you two? We'll be adding more, you know. Four Generals always watched over Kria—I think, unless there is some objection, we will eventually have twelve to watch over the new Empire. One of your duties while here is to find two more fit to be Generals of this area. I think it will be best for all if they are Salharan, and I think you are the best one to pick them out. So keep alert, both of you, for our new Ivory and Umber Generals."

"We will," Vester replied. "Thank you, again." He turned to Reinoehl. "Thank you, Lord General. I—it is not something I ever expected. I was happy as your Commander."

Reinoehl smiled. "I will miss you, Vester, but this is where you should be. I think, too, that you can cease to call me Lord General." Vester laughed and nodded.

Erich motioned. "You can pick your men from amongst the present troops, though you will have to fully flesh out your armies from Salharans. I do not think you will struggle much, though. I think you already have volunteers aplenty waiting to mob you, and the Salharans will sign on for food and coin, if for no other reason."

"If you can help select your replacements, that would be appreciated," Reinoehl said, looking thoughtful. "I have at least a couple in mind for Cobalt, but you would know better, as would Pancraz as regards the Scarlet. Given we will be travelling hard right as winter strikes—well, you are lucky I do not take back that tunic and make you come along after all."

They all laughed, then Aden slung an arm across Vester's shoulders and indicated Reinoehl and Bruno should follow. "Come on, I want to buy the new Generals a drink before I am at last forced to pack."

They left, leaving Erich and Pancraz alone. "You don't look very happy," Erich said, smiling faintly.

Pancraz swallowed and shook his head, ducking his head in a futile attempt to hide tears. When he spoke, he seemed torn between crying and laughing. "I hated you, Erich. You were ready to kill me in a moment, and I deserved it. I went from nameless to a spy who named himself, only to escape the death I was sure I was headed toward and wind up Commander of the Scarlet. I do not understand any of this; I keep expecting to wake up. What caused all of this to happen?"

"You made it happen," Erich replied. "You, Ingolf, Sepp, me—this will teach you to steal things from the house of von Adolwulf."

Pancraz laughed. "Indeed. I really did hate how easily you gained Ingolf's trust, but now—"

"But now we are brothers, you and I, and I will miss you sorely while you are here and I am back at the Regenbogen. You will have to write and keep me informed of how all transpires here, outside of your formal reports."

"Of course," Pancraz replied.

Erich smiled. "Good. Now, let's see how the new tunic looks.

Pancraz looked startled, as if it had not occurred to him to actually put the tunic on. Shaking his head at himself, he handed the tunic momentarily to Erich, then unbuckled his belt, sword belt, and then pulled off his Scarlet tunic. Taking back the Onyx, he pulled it on then buckled his belts into place again.

"Looks good," Erich said, and it did. Against all the solid black, Pancraz's Salharan features were all the more striking, and the three seven-point stars across his chest could not be more suited.

"And this," Erich said. "A gift, for my brother." He handed over a small velvet pouch, still pleased that amidst all the chaos of securing such a large city, he had still managed to find a jeweler.

"Erich—" Pancraz stared at the ring in his hand, a handsome square cut onyx, surrounded by small diamonds, set in white gold.

"All Generals should have rings," Erich replied. "Come on, then. Put it on, and then we shall go see how much of an army I have left after they all leave me for you. Then you can buy me a drink to console me."

Pancraz laughed. "I think you exaggerate, Erich, but I'll buy you the drink all the same."

"Good," Erich pronounced and slung an arm across Pancraz's shoulders, leading him from the throne room.

Chapter Thirty Six

Aden missed Vester. Not simply because Vester had been damned good at his job—thought he sorely missed that too—but primarily because it simply did not seem the same with one corner of the Cobalt triad forever gone. He could see it on the faces of the men that they missed Vester too; many from Cobalt had chosen to remain as part of the new Slate Army, so loyal were they to Vester.

He wondered when, precisely, he had gotten so used to working with others rather than alone. That journey with Pancraz into the Mother Star had definitely been his last foray as a spy. He could not bear to return to that life.

The wind kicked up, making him shiver, drawing him back to the matter at hand. It had snowed heavily in the night, and it was falling intermittently now. He really could not wait until they reached the Winter Palace. But the journey was only two weeks in, and they had roughly three more to go. Ideally they would reach the Winter Palace right before the worst part of winter struck. If not, they would have to hope for the best and hunker down in the open. Not an ideal situation, but they needed to be back in Kria.

He had scouts in all directions, at all times, working hard to do what little they could to keep the villagers settled and calm until everything could be properly dealt with in the spring. Across Salhara and into Kria, people would be restless, anxious and eager to hear word of what would happen when winter finally surrendered to spring.

Come the much-anticipated spring, the armies would have quite the undertaking before them. There were laws to change and fields to burn. Not to mention the lack of arcen would make many sick and simply kill others. War was also brutal on supplies, and between the Salharan and Krian armies, stores had been picked clean. As it was, they would barely have enough to tide them over until they reached the Winter Palace. It would take years for the villages to replenish what had been lost.

Flakes of snow landed upon his gloves, larger and fatter than they had been so far that day. Aden looked up as the rate of fall increased slightly and wondered if they were going to be treated to another storm. This far north, it never took long for the snow to start falling with a vengeance. He half wished they could have remained in Salhara, but even if that had been viable, he would not have wanted to be the one to tell Erich he must wait almost an entire year more before he could Ingolf again. Aden glanced reflexively up, toward the Scarlet who marched in their own lines not too far off.

Honestly, Erich never changed. It made him smile, even as he wanted to give Erich a good shake. A daughter—he could not believe Erich now had a daughter. He should have simply taken the girl, Hanna, to Ingolf and let her fate be decided then, but then he would not be Erich, and the idea was not without merit.

Such a solemn little child, too. The only one of them to be so serious so young, had been Engel. Only Elena had been able to draw her twin brother out for years upon years. Where was Engel now, Aden

wondered idly. Engel had always been fond of hunting out the pirates. The stories they would have to tell him, when Engel eventually reappeared. It made Aden laugh.

The sound of others laughing drew his attention, and he half-turned on his horse to see what the men were about—

Only to be caught full in the face by a handful of snow. A snowball.

A sudden, horrified silence fell as the culprits realized their error. Aden scraped the snow from his face, using his sleeve to dry the bits that had started to melt and motioned to the responsible parties, who if not the brightest, at least showed enough sense to give themselves up straight away. Breaking rank, he led them to a copse of trees and stared down at them from his horse.

Four men looked at him sheepishly, not quite meeting his eyes.

"Bored are we, gentlemen?" Aden asked dryly.

"Apologies, Chief," said one of them. "That shot weren't meant for you."

"I should hope not," Aden replied, "but that won't save you. We are still in potentially hostile territory; the Salharans around us have no reason to believe we mean no harm when only weeks and months ago we were causing them harm. Your attention should be on your surroundings, not on playing games in the snow."

"Yes, Chief," the men chorused.

Aden motioned. "To the front, relieve the point guards. You'll remain there until I send others to relieve you, and you may forget your beer rations tonight."

"Yes, Chief," the men repeated and dutifully ran off.

Shaking his head, Aden kicked his horse and rode quickly back to his place in the line. No sooner had he done so, however, when a runner came up to him. "The Lord General desires your presence, Chief." Aden nodded and again broke rank, riding up to the front lines where Reinoehl rode.

"Do I want to know why my point guards have suddenly been relieved by very guilty-looking men?" Reinoehl asked, amused.

"They were throwing snowballs," Aden replied. "They might have gotten away with it, if they hadn't been laughing and then accidentally hit me full in the face with one." Reinoehl burst out laughing, turning it into a poor attempt at a cough when Aden struck him. "Do not encourage them," Aden said and hit him again. "Is that all you wanted, Lord General?"

"I wish I had seen your face when it happened," Reinoehl said with a smirk. "But no, that was not all. Erich has sent word that there is a village nearby, about two hours away, where we can rest for a day or two. Fields aplenty for the armies, and we can wait out the storm that is going to strike before much longer."

"So you feel it too," Aden replied and looked up at the sky, the heavy, dark clouds that seemed to promise the gently falling snow was only a bare indicator of what was to come.

"It will not make for easy going," Reinoehl said, then smirked again. "On the other hand, fighting through snow that reaches their hips will keep the men too busy and exhausted to throw snowballs at my Chief of Staff."

Aden made a face. "Keep it up, Lord General, and you will find yourself the victim of a face full of snow."

Reinoehl tsked him softly. "Now, really, Chief of Staff. We are going to be sleeping tonight in a real house, ideally in a real bed. I expect you to find more productive methods of spending your time and energy."

Aden smiled, slow and hot. It had been too long since they had last had real time alone, and where they did not need to be overly cautious or on alert. "Yes, Lord General."

"Get back to your post, Chief. That will be all for now," Reinoehl replied, smiling at him in reply, shifting a bit on his horse.

Snickering, Aden rode back to resume his position. He looked to the man who rode beside him and said, "Spread word we are to be making camp at a village about two hours march from here. And no more snowballs." Coughing to hide his laughter, succeeding about as well as Reinoehl, the man sketched a hasty half-bow and rode off to see his orders carried out.

Aden smothered a smile of his own and tried not to think about what he would do with Reinoehl, a bed, and real privacy. But if he wanted to keep travelling in relative comfort, it was best *not* to think about such things.

But thinking of what to do with Reinoehl resurrected thoughts of what he would do after the war was really and truly over, and he would have to finally figure out what to do with his land and title. He wanted to stay with Reinoehl at Eis. His own estates, however, were on the opposite side of the country, right on the seaside. As of yet, he had found no easy way to reconcile the two, short of surrendering his title.

Granted, he had never been a very good Duke, but he was proud of his lineage and loathe to surrender it. If he remained Chief of Staff for Cobalt his only choice would be to split his time between the two locations and several weeks of every year would be spent just in travelling.

So it would have to be one or the other, and he would choose Reinoehl without hesitation, but it would hurt. Still, the matter was a few months away, and he had yet to speak to Erich, who might suggest something Aden had not thought of.

Around him, the snow began to fall in earnest, and he saw the signal come down the line to march faster. He signaled his own officers who carried word further down the line and urged his horse to a faster pace. The storm was clearly coming up faster than anticipated.

Now they had to hope they could move thousands of soldiers before the storm stranded them in the middle of nowhere.

~~*

Three long, miserable hours later, Aden was giving serious thought to convincing Reinoehl to move with him to Castle Torla. He was officially done with snow and would like spring to arrive. Sliding off his horse, stumbling as his frozen legs faltered supporting him, Aden fumbled through a thank you to the soldier who caught him and handed off the reins to his horse.

"This way, Chief," said another soldier and took his arm, leading him back to the stable door through which he and his poor horse had just come. "There's a rope, just outside. Hold fast and follow it across to the house; the Lord General should be waiting for you."

Aden nodded and gripped the soldier's arm in thanks, then pulled up his hood and plunged back out into the world of wind and snow falling so thick and fast he could see nothing. The wind howled, snatched at his cloak, made him dizzy and disoriented.

He held fast to the rope, even as the wind and snow fought him, determined to get somewhere *warm*. But then the wind seemed to snap, and snow flew sharply in his face, at the same moment Aden stumbled and he went down, hand sliding free of the rope.

Frantic, heart beating wildly, he forced himself to stay calm. Reaching up and out, he trembled with relief as the back of his forearm struck the rope. Reaching out with both hands, he grabbed hold and heaved himself to his feet then strode on. A moment later, he struck a wall and nearly fell down again. Clinging to it, he fumbled for a doorknob, *something* and then the door opened, and he crashed to the floor in a wet, frozen, shaking heap.

"Aden," Reinoehl said, voice thick with relief, warm and reassuring. "The storm is far worse than even I anticipated. The Winter Princess is going to be brutal to us this year, I sense. But come on, drink this."

Too cold and stiff to respond, to do anything but slowly and awkwardly obey, Aden drank from the earthenware mug that was pressed to his lips. Mulled wine, he realized after a moment. When the trembling of his hands eased off sufficiently, Aden wrapped them around the mug, hissing at the warmth, loving it.

When he had finished the wine, Reinoehl tugged him to his feet and led him to the fireplace that took up much of the far wall in the large open room. Aden noticed only two doors—the entrance and what must lead to a bedroom. "Out of the clothes," Reinoehl ordered.

Not needing to be told twice, Aden began to strip, casting aside his snow-caked clothes. Reinoehl took all of it, hanging it up on special hooks close to the fire. Aden moved as close to the fire as he dared get, sighing in relief as the wine and fire slowly worked to warm him inside and out.

"All the men are accounted for and safely sheltered?" he asked when he could trust himself to speak without chattering. He had done his best to see to the entire army, but after a point, he could only deal with the half that was assigned him and trust the other half to Reinoehl.

"Yes," Reinoehl said. "All is well. Hopefully none will go out in this weather and get themselves lost." He held out fresh clothes which Aden quickly pulled on.

Reinoehl urged him to sit on the pile of furs and blankets arranged before the fire. Until then, Aden had not really paid them any mind, but he was all admiration as he finally rested amongst them. "Where are we?" he asked, gesturing to the cabin.

"A town elder surrendered his cabin to us," Reinoehl replied.

Aden frowned. "Where is he staying?"

"With the village chief, who had rooms aplenty," Reinoehl replied. "They had prepared for us well in advance and were already hunkered down before the storm struck. The villagers are fine."

"Good," Aden said and drank deeply as Reinoehl offered him more mulled wine. "This is remarkably good, for Krian wine."

Reinoehl rolled his eyes, but said, "I lucked out on the wine. The elder said I might help myself as I please, and I'll compensate him handsomely. It's very good stuff. The mulling spices are my own, however."

Aden's brows rose at that. "You drinking mulled wine enough to contrive your own spice blend is new to me."

Laughing, Reinoehl explained, "The Salharans drank or destroyed all the good mulling wines when they took Eis and destroyed most of our spice stocks as well. It was only while we were in the Mother Star that I managed to obtain all that I needed. I'm glad you like it."

"I love it. I'm glad that you're able to make it again." Finishing the wine, Aden set the cup out of harm's way, then pushed Reinoehl down into the bedding, straddling his hips. "So how long do you think this godsforsaken storm will last, Lord General?"

"Until spring," Reinoehl replied dryly, hands smoothing up Aden's thighs, curling around his hips. "Hopefully we can make it to the Winter Palace, because our only other options are to remain here or camp wherever we are next forced to stop."

"Neither of which are viable options," Aden finished, then leaned down and kissed him hard, ending the discussion for the moment. He was tired of being Chief of Staff; for the night, at least, he wanted only to be Reinoehl's lover.

Reinoehl grabbed hold of his hair, tangled his fingers in it, held Aden firmly in place, feeding ravenously on his mouth. His other hand fumbled with Aden's clothes until at last he found skin, raking his nails across Aden's back, making Aden gasp and jerk.

Tearing away from the kiss, Aden nibbled at Reinoehl's jaw, his throat, sucking up marks. "Too long."

"Far too long," Reinoehl groaned then took his mouth again.

Aden moaned and bit down on Reinoehl's lip then sucked on it before slowly shifting to nibble along his jaw, his throat, biting down and sucking up a mark. He really could not wait for everything to truly be over, for peace to settle in, and for them to have time to be lovers. He wanted to know what it would be like to be Reinoehl's lover without war over their heads.

He was abruptly shoved off and attacked, and he laughed as Reinoehl fumbled with his clothes again, laughing all the harder when Reinoehl stopped to glare at him. "Stop laughing and help me, you brat, or you will be taking care of yourself tonight," Reinoehl said.

"You're awfully whiney for a Lord General," Aden replied, still snickering even as he stood up and slowly stripped off the clothes he had just put on. He shivered briefly in the cold air, but then Reinoehl was pulling him down, back into the warmth of the nearby flames, the blankets, and Reinoehl's own naked body.

Making a rough sound, Reinoehl pushed him into the bedding and began to feast on his skin, sucking up a mark on Aden's throat to match the one Aden had put on Reinoehl's, nibbling and licking his chest, moving slowly, so damned slowly, down Aden's body, until at last he seemed to reach Aden's cock.

But then he only bit at the soft skin of Aden's inner thigh, teasing and taunting, until Aden finally swore and made to hit him—but Reinoehl only shoved him back down and stole a hard kiss, before at last putting his full attention to Aden's cock.

Teasing at an end, he wasted no time taking Aden in, sucking hard. Aden's head slammed back, and he was grateful for the blankets that cushioned the blow, sinking his fingers into the thick furs for purchase, hips moving in silent plea for more, thrusting into Reinoehl's hot, wet mouth, but Reinoehl only grabbed his hips, held him in place, and forced Aden to take only what Reinoehl gave him, when he gave it.

Aden dragged his head up, only to meet Reinoehl's hot gaze, groaning and falling back again, panting as Reinoehl continued to suck, fingers so tight on his hips that Aden suspected he would find bruises in the morning. When he finally came, he shouted loudly enough that he froze, too used to having to keep quiet.

Then he remembered they were completely alone, and the snow beyond the walls would muffle any sound that might have otherwise been heard. Reinoehl let go of his cock and slowly climbed up the length of Aden's body, pressing soft, wet kisses at random points.

Aden looped his arms around Reinoehl's neck, dragging him down for a long, slow kiss. He smiled as they parted. "We should do this more often."

"Indeed," Reinoehl said with a soft snort. "Once we are back home at Eis, I am certain frequency will increase tenfold."

"Good," Aden said with a laugh, ignoring the anxieties that tried to rise up. He wanted to go to Eis; he wanted that to be home. He would get over no longer being the Duke of Torla. "So are you going to fuck me?"

Reinoehl nipped at his lips. "Never doubt it." He stole another quick kiss then suddenly was gone, fumbling through his discarded clothing, returning a moment later with a small bottle. Opening it, he slicked his fingers, then once more spread Aden's legs and settled between them.

Aden hissed at the initial press of Reinoehl's fingers—it really had been too long since they had been able to do this. But only a couple of minutes later, the burn began to turn to pleasure, and Aden began to plead noisily for more, writhing and moving until Reinoehl obliged. Pulling his fingers free, Reinoehl lined himself up and thrust inside.

Aden swore, groaned, eagerly returning the hungry kiss Reinoehl gave him, then demanding, "More, now."

Reinoehl laughed. "Yes, Lord General." Flicking his head to get his shaggy, overgrown hair from his face, he grabbed Aden's hips and began to move. He started slow and easy, giving Aden time to adjust, but the rhythm quickly moved to hard and fast, sweat gleaming on his skin, dripping on his face and chest.

He was so hot now, Aden found it hard to remember that only minutes ago he had been half-frozen. Only moments later, he was shouting again, crying Reinoehl's name, vaguely hearing his own, and then they were little more than a sweaty, sticky, tangled heap on the bedding.

Kissing his brow, Reinoehl said, "I have truly missed doing that."

Aden laughed and nipped his jaw. "I should hope so."

Reinoehl moved away, returning with a cloth to clean them both. Then he stretched out properly, pulling Aden close, and pulled the blankets up over them. It really would be nice, Aden thought, when falling asleep together once more became normal, not simply a rare and treasured exception.

His solitary life seemed so far away, now, though it had not been so long ago when he had been content with that lot. It never took long for something to change—only a moment. One simple rescue in exchange for passage out of the city; that had been the moment when his life had changed forever.

"You've seem troubled lately," Reinoehl said into the silence. "I have tried to figure out the reason, but I confess I remain puzzled."

Aden stiffened, surprised, then slowly made himself relax. "It's nothing," he said. "Only trivial things that will no doubt work themselves out in time."

"What things?" Reinoehl asked and sat up slightly, propping himself on his elbows, staring down at Aden. He shifted again to free one arm and gently brushed strands of hair from Aden's face.

Aden had realized ages ago that Reinoehl like his hair long, though he had never said a word. Though he still had plans to cut it, he would not cut it as short now as he might have once. The thought still made him smile, even now.

"You seem the most tense whenever I mention going home," Reinoehl continued quietly. "But—you've said before you want to return to Eis as well. Unless—"

"I do want to return to Eis," Aiden said firmly, feeling awful. He should have remembered how astute Reinoehl could be and that he would notice—and misunderstand. "I want to be with you and go home to Eis. But doing so will likely mean that I must surrender my title. Without the excuse of war, it is virtually impossible to be both the Cobalt Chief of Staff and the Duke of Torla."

"And you don't want to surrender your title, of course," Reinoehl said. "You should not have to, and certainly you should not surrender it take the lesser position of Chief of Staff."

Aden smacked him lightly. "There is nothing *lesser* about being your Chief."

"It's a step down from Duke, especially given the lineage of your particular title. I am sorry; I should have realized."

"Why?" Aden asked. "It is not as though it has ever been a problem, and it's not a problem now. I am a little sad to surrender my title, it's true, but you cannot simply walk away from being the Cobalt General, and I would rather be with you."

Reinoehl kissed him, sliding a hand into his hair, cupping the back of his head. "I would be sad to surrender my place as General, but I would to be with you—so it should have occurred to me what you were facing. I am sorry."

Aden rolled his eyes and kissed him again. "No need to be sorry. I certainly do not want you to cease being General."

"Well, I do not see why you should surrender your title; not just yet, anyway."

Frowning, Aden asked, "What do you mean? We will be turning to Eis before too long."

"I am not so sure of that," Reinoehl replied. "As Erich mentioned before we left, we have many Generals to add, and the territories need to be reevaluated, the lines redrawn. I think that the Cobalt Army, at least initially, will be of more use to the Kaiser if it is closer to him. Eis has always been remote because it was Cobalt's primary duty to defend the mountain border regions. But there are no more borders, no more wars. Eis is already becoming obsolete as a battle fortress. Once I select my new Commander, I will send him and a portion of the army home. I do not see why I cannot volunteer the remainder of my army to help the Kaiser in Illussor. That will put you closer to home, and give you more time and opportunity to settle the matter of your title. Besides, I would like to see your home, learn more about you."

Aden touched his face. "But you've talked of nothing but returning to Eis of late."

"Eis is not going anywhere; it will be waiting for us whenever we return. You are much more my home than my fortress, Aden. So we will stay south for a year or two. Better than retreating to a remote fortress and falling into old patterns. I would rather actively participate in the building of our new Empire."

Pulling him close, Aden kissed him until they both were gasping for breath. "That sound perfect, Rein. Thank you."

Reinoehl kissed the corner of his mouth. "I am relieved that was the problem. I admit I was beginning to drive myself crazy with the idea that with peace looming, you were—that you had changed your mind."

Aden smiled softly. "Idiot."

"Then—" Reinoehl looked suddenly anxious. "I have a question for you."

Curious, Aden lifted one brow. "What?"

"Now that we are all one country, I have been thinking of all the laws that will be changing. Salharan naming customs are being discarded, the coliseum will never be rebuilt—" He broke off, uncertainty growing.

Aden frowned. "And?"

Reinoehl sighed, clearly frustrated with himself. "I could not help but think of certain Illussor laws that Erich mentioned will be kept."

Only growing more and more confused and increasingly nervous over Reinoehl's uncharacteristic fumbling and roundabout manner, Aden prodded him gently in the chest and said, "Such as?"

Drawing a deep breath, Reinoehl said, "Well—adoption laws. And—and marriage laws."

"What?" Aden asked, eyes popping open wide. Whatever he had expected to hear, it was not that. Did Reinoehl mean...

Reinoehl regarded him cautiously, eyes the most focused that Aden had ever seen them outside of battle. "Under Illussor law—Empire Law—I'm allowed to marry you. So—I was wondering—may I? Marry you, I mean."

"I—" Aden could not believe what he was hearing. It was not a question he had ever thought he would ask, or be asked. Never had a simple question made him happier. Laughing in delight, he threw himself into Reinoehl's arms and held him close. "Yes," he said.

Laughing with him, clearly relieved and ecstatic, Reinoehl pulled Aden closer still and kissed him deeply.

Chapter Thirty Seven

Reinoehl seldom gave into tears, but looking at the ruins of the Winter Palace, he came very close. More than a few of the men in his party had begun to quietly weep, some trying to hide it, others not bothering.

He did not pay it any mind or encourage them to stop. He could hardly blame them, looking at the devastation all around them. The bastard Salharans had done their very best to destroy the Winter Palace once and for all. It did not seem that so much as a single outhouse had escaped destruction. The Salharans had clearly made it their dying mission to take as much of the Winter Palace with them as they could; buildings were broken, burned, covered in filth. Even the streets had been destroyed in places; any and all vegetation was uprooted. If it had been made of wood, it was now ash. Statues had been broken into pieces, bath houses fouled—

It truly made him want to weep.

The Saffron and Verdant Armies had already cleared away the bodies, at least, and were working as diligently as the cold weather permitted to clear away and clean up other signs of the Salharan contamination. All over the city, soldiers and civilians struggled in the snow to clear away debris and make roads bearable for the winter.

Though he should order them to stop, to not endanger themselves simply to clean, Reinoehl could only sympathize and leave them to it; leaving the Winter Palace in ruins would be like holding back while a loved one suffered.

As he walked by them, people paused to bow and gawk. The only one they started at harder than Reinoehl was Erich, and he was in the palace proper trying to settle what was to be done with the few Salharan prisoners and other such matters.

His steps slowed as he reached the pavilion he had been doing his level best to avoid. It seemed a lifetime ago, the nightmare which had taken place here—and yet, it seemed like only yesterday. He still remembered all of it so vividly.

They had been defending Eis with everything they had, fighting off the Salharans sneaking over the borders, holding out tenaciously despite the odds, the knowledge that no help would be coming. They had been struggling along, but it always seemed like the polluted bastards were one step ahead of them.

Then his father's Chief of Staff had played his hand, revealed himself an arcen-obsessed traitor. Reinoehl had been forced to watch in horror as he had slaughtered so many Cobalt, so many men who had looked up to, admired, and honored the Cobalt Chief of Staff.

He and his parents had been captured, abused. Reinoehl could still feel the blows, the slaps, the agonizing bite of magic when he had refused to go meekly or obediently. He could still hear his mother's screams, his father finally breaking, begging for them to leave her alone.

Then they had all been bound and taken to the Winter Palace where they were hauled through the streets like pigs being led to slaughter. The Salharans had killed the Chief first, and Reinoehl had laughed to see the moment when the backstabbing bastard realized just how stupid he had been. After that, the beatings had resumed. His men had tried again and again to get him out, but the Salharans who guarded them had proven, regretfully, to be anything but stupid.

The only consolation he had was that he had managed to keep hold of his mother's necklace after they had torn it from her neck. For reasons still unknown, the Salharans had at least killed his mother mercifully.

As he and his father were led out to the pavilion, Reinoehl had convinced his father that he would get free. He had not wanted his father to die hopeless, even if Reinoehl had been certain then that he would not live to see the next day.

By then, the Kaiser had been dead a few days, his head and those of his family rotting on pikes. Seeing them, Reinoehl had nearly broken himself.

He had struggled when they put him in the cage, when he realized what his own fate was going to be, but at a look from his father, he had stopped. But he had sobbed uncontrollably when they murdered his father and rammed his decapitated head on a pike. Then they had jeered and taunted him and left their prize songbird to sing until he died.

After he had finally been left alone, when even his guards had grown bored of taunting him, Reinoehl finally let the despair sink in. His men would never be able to rescue him from a birdcage in the middle of the main pavilion of the Winter Palace. Such a thing had never been done.

He had tried feebly, for a time, to see if he might rescue himself, but his heart had not been in it. Why should it have been? Cold was numbing him from the outside, and grief numbed him from within. Every reason he had to escape was dead, or would shortly be, and he was hardly fit to be General.

Until he had noticed his men, purely by chance, at the far end of the pavilion. They were dressed in peasant clothes, but he knew them. Only then did he realized that not everyone was dead, not everyone had given up—only him.

But that realization could not undo the reality of his situation. He was still in a birdcage in plain sight. There was no way to escape, no way for someone to reach him.

He had gazed helplessly around the pavilion until he noticed a man who seemed glaringly out of place. Reinoehl remembered that moment clearly because stare as he might, he had not been able to tell then what was off about the man. The way he stared back, met Reinoehl's gaze, had certainly been unusual. He had been annoyed, and for some strange reason disappointed, when Reinoehl had not even realized, until much later, that the man he had seen then was the Illussor who had later rescued him.

The man he had backhanded only minutes later. The man to whom he had given his mother's necklace and yet had refused to really trust, time and again. The man he had nearly lost to his own stupid pride. And, by some miracle, the man who had agreed to marry him anyway. Weeks later, Reinoehl still could not believe that he had actually—finally—managed to ask. He could not quite believe that Aden had said yes.

The idea had come to him one night when he and Erich had been discussing the new Generals to be created, the way various laws would change or cease to exist altogether. Though much of it was supposition, because it was ultimately Ingolf and his counsel who would make the final decisions, it was not hard to tell that Erich understood Ingolf and so was probably right about much.

Somewhere in the middle of their discussions, Erich had made an offhand remark about Illussor's much broader laws regarding adoption and marriage. Reinoehl no longer remember why, he just remembered the way the idea—the realization—had struck him. It had taken his breath away.

It had never occurred to him, probably would never have occurred to him, if Erich had not mentioned it. He had counted himself fortunate simply to be able to love Aden openly; his men had been remarkably accepting, and that support had helped as much as Aden to keep him going.

Reinoehl would have remained content simply to keep Aden close, and he had been terrified of late that perhaps that was not meant to be so. The moment Erich had put the idea in his head, however, he had been unable to let it go. He knew nothing of marriage law or tradition in Illussor, and he had not known who to ask without giving his intentions away.

But since thinking of it, he had tried what seemed like thousands of times to ask and failed every single time. He could fight and kill with ease, he could order a city be razed without flinching, but he could not ask one simple, stupid question of the man he loved without panicking like an untried soldier on his first day in the army.

He had not felt so insecure in longer than he cared to think about, had not felt so vulnerable except perhaps when they had put him in that damned cage.

Nevermind that Aden had seemed increasingly unhappy about something, but would not speak of it, which had only fueled Reinoehl's doubts and second-guessing. Despite knowing better, he had been terrified that, with the advent of peace, Aden was changing his mind about them. He would hardly be the first, or last, as everyone slowly grew accustomed to a life without war.

So Reinoehl had tried to shove the matter to the back of his mind, to deal with at a more suitable time. There was time enough, after all. Besides, if the war had ended with three countries rather than one empire, and by some miracle Aden had chosen to remain with him in Kria, marriage would never have been a possibility. The idea would never have occurred to him, in such circumstances. It never would have made a difference, never would have mattered.

So it hardly should matter now. He had Aden, the rest was details. But after realizing that he really was being a paranoid idiot, hearing Aden *call* him that in that affectionate tone, Reinoehl had not been able to hold back any longer.

He just wished he could have asked with a bit more grace, instead of reducing himself to a bumbling idiot. He would not complain too much, however, because idiot he might be, but Aden had said yes.

"Think it will ever really be our city again, Lord General?" The question jerked Reinoehl from his meandering thoughts, and he shook his head, trying to bring his mind back around to where it should be. He looked to the Colonel who had asked the question then around at the other officers who had the same question painted on their faces.

He looked around the pavilion, the ruined stones into which pikes had been driven, the dark stains left by the blood of countless bodies, the remaining scaffolding from where the birdcages had hung.

Then he turned back to his men and said, "This is not the first time we have lost the Winter Palace to our enemies. The first time was a very long time ago, and as you men can clearly see, we took her back. The Winter Palace belongs to Kria, and now in Kria's arms she will forever remain. This time next year, we will hardly be able to tell that she was ever hurt." Their demeanors eased as he finished speaking, but Reinoehl knew the doubts lingered. But, he also knew that action cured all ills. To that end, he said, "See that all we can safely do in this weather is done. Take extensive notes as to what will need to be done come spring. Keep an eye on the men and keep them busy."

"Yes, Lord General," the man all chorused.

Reinoehl nodded at them. "Good. Then I will leave you here. I am returning to the palace proper; send word should you have need of me." He waved in farewell then walked back alone to the palace. He took his time, pausing frequently to speak with soldiers, civilians, whoever approached him, seemed in need of encouragement. He did not want to see people downcast.

The war was over; winter was the time to rest and heal. Come spring, he vowed everyone would be smiling again.

When he at last reached the palace, Reinoehl nodded in greeting to the Verdant soldiers currently on duty. "Oh, Lord General!" One of them exclaimed, as though suddenly reminded of something. "Your Chief said you were to find him upon your return and that he should be in the library at least until dark."

"Thank you," Reinoehl replied and headed straight through the gates and up into the palace. He wondered why Aden had issued the summons; he would have sought Aden out immediately, anyway. Now he was curious as to what Aden wanted that he was so eager to see Reinoehl, but had not sent someone to fetch him from the city.

Reaching the library, cringing at the mostly-empty shelves, the bare places on the walls where maps had once hung ... so much ruin, damn the polluted bastards he must now learn to call brothers. The very first thing he would beat into their fool heads was not to burn books or maps.

The sound of voices struck him, then, Erich's familiar rumble and Aden's smoother tones. He followed their voices until he came upon them at last in a secluded corner, sitting in chairs with mugs of mulled wine and a pitcher of the same between them on a small table.

Smiling, he said by way of greeting, "Do I want to know what you are up to, that a pair of troublemaking cousins must hide in a corner to speak? What state secret are we discussing?"

Aden laughed and tugged Reinoehl close, making him lean over so Aden could kiss him. "No secrets. We are merely discussing how best to give the people, the city, back their spirit."

Reinoehl sobered. "Yes. I have been walking the city for the past few hours and tried to encourage people as best I could, but even I cannot stand to look at all the devastation for very long. I think in the face of such ruin, it is hard to look past it."

"Which is why we were pondering how to make looking past it easier," Erich. "I think if they were able to focus on something else for a few days, it would be easier to then look to the future."

"What sort of something else?"

"A celebration," Erich replied and sipped his wine. "We have agreed that a celebration of some sort would be just the thing."

Reinoehl nodded. "But a celebration of what? I think no one can muster much cheer for the usual traditions, lacking so many of the things we normally eat and normally enjoy. The coliseum will never be rebuilt, and it was always central in winter celebrations. I am afraid there is very little else worth the sort of celebration you want. I cannot see much point in celebrating the end of the war; there would be too much solemnity there."

Erich laughed. "No, I have something else entirely in mind."

"What?" Reinoehl asked.

Still laughing, all the harder when Aden kicked him, Erich said, "All right, all right. I was thinking that nothing could be more effective—more perfect—than celebrating the wedding of the rather famous Cobalt General."

Reinoehl opened his mouth, then closed it again, not at all certain what to say. Eventually, he managed, "I suppose that really should have occurred to me."

Erich snickered and finished his wine, then stood up. He clapped Reinoehl on the shoulder and said, "It really should have, but I think that you are to be forgiven as the nature of your marriage is hardly traditional for Krians." He smirked and drew himself up to his full height, then said with mock solemnity, "I do grant thee permission, Lord General Reinoehl von Hostetler, to marry my cousin." He laughed as Aden kicked him again. "And by the way—if you do agree to make spectacles of yourselves, I will be officiating."

"Wonderful," Aden replied. "Just make certain you follow rote and do not improvise your parts."

"Yes, cousin," Erich replied and dodged out of kicking range, then left them alone with a careless parting wave.

"It's probably stupid of me," Reinoehl said, taking the seat Erich had vacated, "but I had it firmly in mind that our actual marriage was some months away. I assumed such things took time, and that there were other things which required our attention in the immediate future. Not that I do not wish to put our marriage first, but..." He sighed. "I know my parents' wedding took the better part of a year to plan; my father loved to complain about it and make my mother laugh."

He smiled faintly, thinking of it. Happy memories were a good thing to have back; for a long time, he had not been able to see past those last few terrible weeks.

Aden smiled. "Not stupid. I was already thinking it would be nice to hold the wedding next winter, or the one following, depending on all that transpires come spring."

"Met in winter, married in winter?" Reinoehl asked with a soft smile.

"That, and the Winter Princess is your patron god, after all," Aden added. "It would not do to marry any other seasons, I think."

Reinoehl nodded in agreement. "Nothing else would fit. I —I was in the pavilion and remembering how we met. Do you remember the first time we saw each other? I recalled thinking you looked out of place, but I could never pinpoint why, when you looked Krian enough."

"The first time..." Aden tilted his head. "When I rescued you?"

"Before that," Reinoehl said. "I did not realize until days later that it was you, staring up at me so directly, when everyone else who passed through there was too ashamed and terrified to look in my direction, nevermind meet my gaze."

Aden's expression cleared, and he smiled. "I remember. You had the bluest eyes, especially for a Krian. I could not forget them. I was trying to work out how in the Goddess' name I was going to get you down."

"You managed it though, and shortly thereafter I backhanded you," Reinoehl said, shaking his head. "Minutes later, you had a knife at my throat."

Laughing, Aden drank his wine, then set his empty cup aside and leaned forward. "We did not have the smoothest of beginnings, did we?" Reinoehl stood up, then knelt between Aden's legs, settling into the arms that twined around him, leaning up to take a kiss. Aden smiled when they broke apart. "It was never any easy thing for you, I know, to love a spy."

Reinoehl shook his head. "Loving you was never the hard part, Aden. I just let other things get in the way of that, instead of letting that guide everything else."

Smile widening, cinnamon eyes warm and bright, Aden kissed him again, long and slow and deep. When they finally pulled apart, his voice was husky as he said, "I found something, earlier."

The words took a minute to process, not being what Reinoehl had expected to hear, dragging him reluctantly from thoughts of taking Aden to bed and remaining there as long as they possibly could. "What?"

Laughing softly, Aden kissed him again briefly then reached into his tunic and extracted something. He pressed it into Reinoehl's hand.

'It' proved to be two things, actually—rings. Reinoehl felt his chest go tight, and his vision blurred. He could not believe what he was seeing. "Where—" He coughed, cleared his throat, then tried again. "Where did you find these?"

"So they were your parents?" Aden asked.

Reinoehl looked at the rings, twin bands of white gold set with sapphires and diamonds all the way around. "Their marriage rings," he said and turned them to see the inscriptions inside. The words were the same in each rings: For Love & Winter. "I cannot believe you found my parents' marriage rings. "They—they refused to take them off and were finally left in peace over the matter, though we all thought they would finally cut off their fingers or hands. When my parents died—" He held the rings tightly then resumed speaking. "I thought them lost forever."

"We found piles of jewelry and other riches in the treasury," Aden explained. "There must be thousands of pieces, and the gods alone know the total value of such a collection. We are slowly sorting through it and attempting to find proper owners, but it will likely take years. I saw these this morning, though, and someone mentioned that they looked like the von Hostetler rings. I kept them to show to you, to see if that was true."

"I cannot believe it," Reinoehl said softly, then smiled faintly. "I suppose I cannot give you one until our ceremony."

Aden laughed. "So are you all right with holding our ceremony exceptionally early and with very little planning and making of it quite the spectacle? I think Erich has been plotting this since I told him you had proposed, but if we say no he will cease and no hard feelings. He, better than anyone, knows how much marriage means to people and how much it hurts to have people interfering."

Reinoehl shook his head. "No, it is a good idea. I would do anything to help Kria, and everyone here at the Winter Palace is so broken-hearted. I have risked my life thousands of times to defend them; a wedding seems a fine change of pace. But when? Surely it will take weeks—"

"Weeks Erich has already had," Aden cut in dryly. "I told you; he has likely been plotting since I told him. I assure you he already has everything arranged, and it will only take a handful of days to set it all in place from the moment we tell him we agree."

"I see," Reinoehl replied, rolling his eyes, but smiling. "Well, we had best tell him that his planning has not been in vain." He thought of something then and sighed softly. "I wish Vester could have been present, and Pancraz."

Aden nodded in agreement. "It will be lacking somewhat without their presence."

"I hope that Kria is ready for such a nontraditional wedding," Reinoehl added, only then realizing just how out of the ordinary this wedding would be. "It may be too much Illussor law at once."

"I think that people are ready for something happy, something tangible to celebrate," Aden replied. "The details do not matter so much."

Standing, Reinoehl pulled Aden to his feet and kissed him soundly. Then he tucked his parents' rings carefully away and took Aden's hand and led the way from the library. He stopped to ask a guard where Erich might be then they walked on to the main throne room.

Predictably, Erich was inundated in people, somehow managing to carry on six conversations at once, in at least two languages. How he made it look so easy, Reinoehl would never know. Given how deeply—even madly—so many people loved their Scarlet General, Reinoehl suspected that Ingolf would have very little trouble integrating his people so long as Erich was by his side.

Erich caught sight of them and broke into a smile, motioning for them to join him. Then he gestured for everyone to be silent and threw his arms around Reinoehl and Aden as they joined him. "I would like to make an announcement," Erich said. "It is my pleasure, my honor, to announce that my idiot, good for nothing cousin has not only managed to make of himself a respectable Chief of Staff—"

He broke off briefly as Aden hit him and the room erupted with laughter. When it finally settled down, he continued. "Lord General Reinoehl has asked my cousin to marry him, and Aden has consented most gladly. They are to be married here, at the Winter Palace, one week from today, so that they might celebrate with their brothers and fellows and pay proper homage to our Winter Princess."

The silence lingered for a second—then suddenly Reinoehl found himself drowning in noise, and besieged by so many people at once that he reached reflexively for his sword before it registered that he was being assaulted by nothing more than well-wishes and congratulations.

Laughing at himself, sharing a sheepish smile when Aden gave him a knowing look, Reinoehl relaxed his grip on his sword and began to shake hands with the men and women congratulating him, smiling as their excitement mingled with his own.

Chapter Thirty Eight

There was very little left of the coliseum. The Salharans had done their damndest to see to it that the Krians would never again be able to use it for their brutal games. Much of what remained had been taken to help rebuild the Winter Palace. Erich had recently granted approval to dismantle what remained standing, and use it all to rebuild homes and buildings farther afield, or all new buildings.

The Empire was fledgling, but already it was growing, changing. In just a few months, no sign of the coliseum would remain. How long before it was forgotten entirely? When all traces were gone, what would rise up to take its place?

He stood in the center of the ruins, turning slowly in a circle, examining the broken pillars, collapsed archways, the shattered stairs which had once led up to the Kaiser's special box. Even the endless rows of seating had been broken and destroyed, men working carefully, meticulously, to recover all the good stone remaining.

Still more men worked to haul up what could be salvaged from below—stone, metal, even weapons and armor that could be refurbished or melted down and turned into something else. Absolutely nothing was being left behind.

Erich tried to picture the way the coliseum must have looked back when it was still in use, when Kria dragged in dangerous criminals and prisoners of war to fight to the death for the amusement of the nobility. Illussor and Salhara alike had always frowned on the practice; foreign nations would have frowned as well, had the practice carried on. He'd never favored it himself; the one part of Kria that he truly disliked.

But he had always been curious, nevertheless. The Holy General himself had once fought here, after angering the Emperor one time too many. He had been stripped of his title and thrown into a fight he never should have won—only to be saved by the one person who had no reason whatsoever to save him. After that, the last Scarlet General of Kria had fled to Illussor, never to step foot in Kria again.

Now here stood Erich, descendant of that man who eventually came to be the Holy General of Illussor, flying the banner of the Autumn Prince.

It was all to the good that the coliseum was being completely demolished, once and for all, but some part of him was still sad to see so pivotal a piece of history vanish forever. What would replace it, he wondered again. Would the Winter Palace expand, take this land over? A new building? Or would the fields and forest eventually reclaim it? It would be interesting to see, as the years passed.

Though the gods alone knew where he would be in ten years, or even five. Gods willing, he would be with Ingolf...

Sighing, he gazed up at the sky—clear, blue, beautiful. The breeze was not too hot, not too cool. Spring was firmly arrived, thawing Winter and making way for Summer. Erich was chomping at the bit to be on

his way, but there were still a few things to wrap up here, and getting four armies ready to march was no simple matter.

But soon, very soon, they would be marching to the Regenbogen.

Ingolf...

He barely dared to think about Ingolf, now that his deepest, fondest, most desperate wish was only weeks away now from coming true. Their one night together, before one strange twist had taken them down separate paths, was stronger than ever in his mind.

But they also reminded him what Ingolf had found at the end of his path. "Reni," he whispered softly, still feeling so wretched and guilty where she was concerned. He wished she were alive, to see the grand results of all that she had worked for—to see that her hopes had been fulfilled, her plans had come to fruition.

He did not like to think about the fact that were she alive, he could not have Ingolf. He would rather she had lived. But she was dead, and he had accepted that, mourned her. She was five months dead now, nearly six. She would not want them dwelling, staying unhappy, because of her.

Goddess, she had tried five thousand times to tell him Hahn would not want him to mourn forever. He'd never listened, then. He hadn't been able to. But he could now, and wondered what she would think of that.

Erich could not wait to meet the son she had given her life to bear. He wanted to see Renn grow up, see what he would become.

Of course, thinking of the infant crown prince brought to mind his own new family member, his little princess. He could not wait to see the reactions his adoption caused, once he was back among the people who had known him his entire life.

He looked over the coliseum one last time, committing the broken image of it to memory. Then he turned and left, picking his way carefully through the ruin, steadily making his way back to the Winter Palace.

Once within the walls of the city, though, it took him well over an hour to get through it, as he was frequently stooped to chat, give requested advice, assist with something, or simply to encourage and admire.

Upon reaching the palace proper, he was unexpectedly greeted by the object of his thoughts.

"Papa!" Hanna cried, breaking away from her nurse to bolt toward him, laughing in delight as Erich swept her up and spun her around.

"Saw you coming from room," Hanna said proudly in slow, awkward but earnest Krian.

Erich hugged her close, and kissed her cheek, then spoke slowly and clearly as he said, "I see, how very clever of you. And your Krian is better than it was yesterday! You must be working very hard, I am very proud."

She smiled and shyly hugged him, small arms tight around his neck.

"Are you done with lessons?" Erich asked, still speaking slowly enough she could follow.

He suspected that by the time winter came around again, she would require no such special treatment—already her Krian was growing by leaps and bounds. Though children often picked up languages far more easily than adults, Erich suspected she had an ear for them. Then again, he could already be turning into a doting parent.

"Yes," Hanna declared. "Can we explore?"

"Of course," Erich said, and turned to the nurse, nodding and smiling at her in polite dismissal. Then he turned back to Hanna, and asked. "Where would you like to explore today, Hanna?"

Her face scrunched up in an expression of deep concentration.

Erich smiled and waited, because she might pretend to think about it, but she always chose the same thing when he left the decision up to her.

"Swords!" Hanna finally, predictably, declared.

Laughing, Erich nodded and slowly lowered her to the ground. "Then to the sword smithy we shall go, my little princess. What did you learn in lessons today?"

"There are four gods," Hanna replied. "Spring, Summer, Autumn, Winter. You are Autumn."

Erich smiled. "I *represent* Autumn, sort of like I represent the Kaiser."

"Oh," Hanna said, not really getting it. "I liked Summer, she's pretty."

"She's very pretty," Erich agreed. "If you want to join an army someday, you could join the Army of the Summer Princess—the Saffron Army."

Hanna pursed her lips, pondering this, then slowly shook her head. "I want to make swords."

Erich laughed again, and ruffled her hair, before taking her hand again. "A sword-smith, huh? Well, you'd probably be good at it. You're very good at getting dirty, aren't you?"

At these words, Hanna made a face. Once out of the Mother Star, she had settled rapidly into camp life—and proven to be nothing at all like the winsome, delicate princess she had first appeared. After the first week, Erich had given up trying to get her to stay clean. Children, after all, were children. He wondered sometimes how much she must have disliked her old life, given what he had learned of it from her nurse.

He was glad she was now getting a chance to be a child, before the opportunity passed her by.

Though, he had never expected her to become so fascinated by the making of swords. If anything, he had expected the heat and the fire and the intensity of the work to frighten her. Instead, he'd had to tell her repeatedly not to touch something for fear of injury.

She broke away from him as they neared the shop, beaming shyly at the people who bowed and waved to her, before striding right into the sword-smithy and calling an imperious yet still shy hello.

"He's found something interesting, Highness," said an elderly woman who lived across the street and seemed to know everything that went on in the area. She smoothed back her hair and bowed politely to Erich. "The smith, I mean. His son broke the wall, and there were things inside it."

"Another one?" Erich asked, amused. The Salharans had all but destroyed the Winter Palace, but in repairing the damage—sometimes by finishing the job and starting from scratch—people all over the city had discovered secret caches, hidden rooms, all manner of secrets that time had eroded from memory. Skeletons, treasures, papers, paintings, jewelry—a veritable trove of secrets and wealth was still popping up across the city.

He was somewhat surprised that nothing had been unearthed in the coliseum, but it was not yet entirely demolished.

"So what was inside the wall?"

"He hasn't opened it, Highness. He was waiting to show you."

Erich's brows shot up at that, curiosity filling him. "Well, thank you for letting me know. Take care, my lady." He smiled, and nodded, then went to go see what that mystery was all about, and save the smith from his over-eager daughter.

"Good day, sir," he greeted as he entered the smithy. "How are you?"

The smith looked up and smiled in greeting, then bowed his head. "Highness. I've got something interesting to show you."

"So I've been told," Erich said. "Hanna, that's not a toy."

"I *know*," Hanna informed him, but set down the jewel she'd picked up, laying it next to the sword it was obviously meant to be part of soon. Moving away, she went to examine the swords in a long rack.

Shaking his head, Erich turned back to the smith and said, "So what have you got to show me, Ralf?"

"I left it all in the wall," Ralf replied, and wiped his hands off on a rag, then strode over to a bit of wall surprisingly close to his forge. "Her Highness is not the only one overeager to begin learning my art; my son managed to get hold of a hammer. I don't know how he managed to pick the damned thing up, but he did, and next thing I know there's a hole in my not so stone wall."

Erich snorted in amusement and knelt before the hole. It wasn't overly large, the length of three hands in width, and the same again in length. Reaching inside, he extracted a heavy, dark wooden box. It was cracked, fragile, warped with age, but not as bad as it could have been. Being sealed up had obviously helped preserve it.

Taking the box, he moved to the front of the shop where the light was better—and drew up short, startled to see the royal bear of the Kaisers carved into the top. The warping distorted it, but Erich knew the symbol well enough to mark it despite that.

"This it the symbol of the House of Kria," he said, looking up.

Ralf nodded. "That's why I left it alone."

Erich examined the lock, frowning thoughtfully. "Have you something to break this open? I think even if I had a key, the lock is too rusted for it to work."

Nodding again, Ralf wandered away, and came back after a moment with one of his smaller hammers. Adjusting the box, he swung—a hard, dull, metallic bang echoed through the smithy, and the lock fell to pieces on the counter.

Moving them out of the way, Erich opened the box. It was lined in black velvet, still in astonishingly good condition. Inside was a small, black leather pouch of the sort meant to hold jewelry, and a small dagger sheathed in beautifully tooled leather depicting all four symbols of the gods.

He picked up the dagger and drew it—then nearly dropped it in shock.

It shimmered. The damned thing was a miniature version of Bright. Erich examined it more closely, dumbfounded, but he was not mistaken. The dagger truly was a smaller version of the Holy General's sword. But what was it doing here, hidden away and forgotten inside of a wall, in a box bearing the Kaiser's seal?

"Beautiful blade," Ralf said, and Erich gave it to him while he turned his own attention to the pouch.

Pulling it open, he glanced inside, frowning when he saw only what appeared to be sand. But that couldn't be right. He tipped the contents into one hand, and again shock jolted through him. It wasn't sand—unless he was mistaken, it was arcen powder.

But the Salharans hadn't bothered to use arcen in a powder form for decades; the liquid elixirs were far more efficacious a means of gaining magic.

Erich could not believe what they had come upon. Only one man in history had ever been able to infuse swords with arcen. History had always maintained Bright was his only creation—but only now did Erich realize that made no sense. Even the most brilliant of men never got anything right the first time. And no man would have wasted time and materials on making failed sword after failed sword.

But a dagger—that would be the perfect test before making a sword. Erich bet this dagger was the first real success. He took it back as Ralf finished looking it over, and gave him the bag of arcen powder. "Throw that in the fire."

"Yes, Highness," Ralf replied, and without hesitation or question, strode to his forge and threw the pouch into the flames.

"Thank you," Erich replied.

"Oh! What's that!" Hanna demanded, and took the dagger from him. "It looks like your sword, papa."

Erich smiled. "It is just like my sword, see, it even has the same maker's mark here," he pointed to a small symbol just under the guard. "That makes this dagger very important."

Hanna nodded. "Can I have it?"

"Daggers aren't toys, Hanna, and you're too small—"

"No, I'm not!" Hanna said, pouting with all the might that only a little girl could muster. "It matches papa's sword, I want it."

Erich sighed, and said firmly, "We'll discuss it later, Hanna. Not now."

Still pouting, Hanna nevertheless subsided and gave the dagger back when Erich held out his hand. He bucked it to his belt, and moved to close the box—then stopped, seeing that he had missed something.

At the back, along the edge, the velvet lining gaped. It might have simply been worn by time, but for the packet of papers he could now see. Pulling them out, he riffled gently through the dry, fragile papers. Letters, all of them, tri-folded, but the wax seals broken.

Two different seals, he noted. One was of costly gold wax, the seal pressed into the Kaiser's bear.

The others were sealed with plain, cheap red wax. Opening one of these, Erich could only stare in disbelief. Even the dagger, amazing as it was, could not compare to this simple letter.

Father,

I am writing as ordered. The latest battle at the Regenbogen went well. Losses were minimal. The General himself says I will Captain before much longer, and he anticipates I will make Commander in ten years easily, if I keep showing myself so well. I will, of course, require far less than ten.

Since mother will of course ask, the cloak does keep me very warm. The General admired it. He naturally admired my sword more.

They say we will begin the journey home at the end of the week. I have obtained the items you bid me find and purchase, while in this area.

Dieter

Unable to believe what he was reading, Erich folded the letter again and carefully tucked the entire packet away in his tunic. Turning to Ralf, he said, "Thank you, good sir, for letting me see this box. It's proven to be quite the bit of history."

"Oh?" Ralf asked, frowning.

"Indeed. Were you not aware this smithy was once used by the father of Lord General Dieter von Adolwulf? These are his belongings, including letters from his son and lover."

Ralf's eyes went wide. "Never say."

"I say," Erich said, and grinned, clapping him on the shoulder. "Whatever you want to call him, hero or traitor, the Scarlet Wolf himself once lived here. Good day to you, Ralf. Princess, it's time to go home. Tell Ralf thank you and good evening."

Hanna pouted again, but obediently slid down to the floor and curtsied. "Thank you, Master Ralf. Good evening."

Ralf chuckled. "Good night, princess. Come 'round again anytime. Good night, Highness."

"Good night," Erich said, picking up the box and nodding. "Thank you again."

Then they left, making their way steadily back through the city, Hanna chatting idly, switching between Krian and Salharan.

It still surprised him how different she was from the quiet little girl she'd been only months ago. Much like the world around them, she was coming to life with spring.

Spring...

His chest tightened, ached, with the sudden thought of Ingolf. He lightly touched the hilt of his sword, then curled his hand into a fist. He wanted to be home, already. Just a couple more days, and they could depart. Then, it was only a two week journey to the Regenbogen. He had waited this long, he would wait two weeks more.

As they reached the palace, he knelt beside Hanna and kissed her cheek, then gave her a gentle, playful push. "Go and find your nurse, my little princess. I will see you at dinner, all right?"

"Yes, papa," Hanna replied, and smiled at him, then dashed off through the halls.

Chuckling, Erich motioned for a guard to follow her. When they had vanished down a hallway, he turned down another one to go in search of his cousin, who was no doubt being ridiculous somewhere with his spouse.

He smiled as he thought of Aden and Reinoehl, the ceremony which had gone over better than even he had dared imagine it would. Ever since, the city had been much more alive, and the clawing despair always just under the surface had vanished entirely. It was the day after the wedding that men had suggested using the coliseum to rebuild the city—an idea that should have occurred to someone sooner, but Erich was just glad someone had thought of it.

The perpetually falling snow had not stopped anyone either, once they had been truly inspired to repair their home.

It pleased him more than minus the pale skin, it was hard to tell the Krians from the Illussor, and the smattering of Salharans who had found their way here and sought refuge.

He eventually found Aden in the room he had commandeered for an office—Reinoehl oddly absent. "Where is your spouse?" he asked. "I did not think you could bear to be apart."

"Haha," Aden retorted, setting aside his pen as he looked up at Erich. "That is rich coming from you, when we literally never saw you and Hahn apart." He smiled suddenly, and asked, "Do you remember that time I tried to be him?"

Erich laughed. "Yes, because he was completely crestfallen when he realized that we were so attached, I could not be absent from the party or people would suspect the ruse for certain. He had it planned out as a chance for us to sneak away."

Aden snickered. "So why did you come to harass me, cousin?"

"This," Erich said, and set down the wooden box. "Ralf found it in his wall. Look at the crest."

"The Kaiser," Aden said, looking at the box, face filling with the sharp curiosity that had first put him on a path to being Spy Master. "Why was this in a sword smith's wall?"

Erich grinned, and set the dagger and letters on the desk. "Because these and a pouch of arcen powder were inside it."

"What!" Aden said, head snapping up, comprehension flooding his face. "Never say—are you serious?"

"Read the letters if you don't believe," Erich said, still grinning. "The red wax letters are from the Holy General himself, to his father."

Aden picked one up, and read it, shaking his head in wonder as he set it down again. "I cannot believe it. Such a find! And hidden in a wall this entire time. The value of these—and you said there was arcen powder?"

"I had Ralf throw it in the fire, but yeah, it was in the box with all the rest. It must have been left over from making the arcen-infused weapons? I only knew it was arcen powder from the shimmer."

"Fascinating," Aden said, unsheathing the dagger and examining every minute detail. "Exquisite. A test, you suppose, before he made the sword?"

"That was my thinking," Erich replied. "Hanna is insisting it belongs to her."

Aden laughed. "Maybe when she's older; right now I shudder to think what that not so quiet princess would do with a real weapon."

Chuckling, Erich accepted the dagger as Aden handed it to him, and reaffixed it to his belt. "A pity we'll never know how it all wound up in the wall."

"Yes," Aden agreed. "I'd love to know the story that no one knew was there to tell. I can't wait until I have real time to read all those letters. Take care of them, cousin."

Erich nodded. "I will." Picking up the packet again, he returned them to his tunic. "So where is your spouse?"

"Out checking on my plans," Reinoehl said from behind him, chuckling. He moved across the room and around the desk to give Aden a kiss in greeting.

"What plans are those?" Erich asked, amused watching them—and happy. Aden had always been the loner amongst them, vanishing for weeks and months, reappearing suddenly, remaining briefly before vanishing again. Aden happy and settled was not something he had ever expected to see, but he was damned glad to see it. There would never be another spy master quite like Aden, but Erich fervently hoped the days of needing them were largely past.

Reinoehl smirked at him. "Travel plans, of course. As of this very moment, Highness, we are ready to depart."

Erich stared at him in surprise. "What—really? But we should have needed a few more days, how did I not know we were ahead of schedule?"

Aden laughed. "Between tending your daughter and managing an entire city? Come now, Erich, it is not that hard to mislead you."

"My entire army is keeping secrets from me, wonderful," Erich said, making a face, a smile tugging at his mouth. In his chest, his heart kicked up to beat a furious pace.

"So shall we leave in the morning?" Aden asked, smirking knowingly.

Ignoring it, Erich only said, "Yes, at sunrise. Have the men been informed?"

"Yes," Reinoehl replied. "They've been given orders to be ready to march at dawn. All is ready for us to return, Highness. And this arrived for you, I took it from the messenger and said I would see it delivered." He held out a letter.

Erich saw immediately that it was sealed with Ingolf's personal crest. Accepting the letter, he murmured absent thanks and farewell, then left, breaking the seal on the letter the moment he found a quiet corner to himself.

Erich,

Just before penning this letter, I sent Elena to retrieve my son. He should arrive not long after you. I am eager to meet the daughter I am told you now have. I hope our children get along.

The sun is bright, the days are warm, and flowers are blooming. Yet, still I am waiting for spring to arrive. How long will you keep me waiting?

Ingolf

Grinning, too full of energy to hold still a moment longer, Erich strode off to see that he and Hanna were packed and ready by morning.

Chapter Thirty Nine

Ingolf was going mad.

He *hated* waiting. It had become his least favorite thing to do. The last time he had been forced to wait for something, it had been his son, and nine months of hell had ended in that son—but also in his wife's death.

Spring had arrived, but still he waited.

Not that he did not have plenty to keep him busy while he waited—being Kaiser kept him busy enough for three men, easily. Every day, more people arrived at the Regenbogen, eager for aid, for a home, for food, or simply for confirmation of the rumors already spreading across the continent. Ingolf knew that there had been moments in his life when he had been bored, but he could not remember what boredom was like. He was even forgetting what it had been like not to be Kaiser, and was not certain what to make of that.

Ground had been broken for the new palace weeks ago, and the work was proceeding at a rapid pace. Building supplies arrived at least daily, and portions of the Regenbogen itself were being torn down to go to the new palace—soon, the former would fall entirely, and the new rise up to represent the Empire for what he hoped would be many generations. Every day, they brought him updates and modifications to approve or reject. He did not think it would take more than a couple of years for them to finish the palace, as vehemently—passionately—as everyone was working to build it. Seeing everyone so motivated was encouraging.

Scouts had been sent out in all directions, to take proper accounting of his empire—the land, the people; he had ordered them to make note of every last single detail. Like everything else, the reports arrived daily, drowning him in paperwork. He read them all, though, and met with his council to work out what men and supplies to send where, in what quantities, and for how long.

When he was not reviewing plans and reading reports, he was arguing changes to government with his council—redrawing and reassigning territories, which laws to throw out, revise, add, leave alone—

And there were nightly banquets, intended for everyone to 'relax' together, that were really just more political and social games, only a hint of what he would be enduring when Kria finally entered the international scene in another couple of years. He preferred to avoid thinking about that headache; he had more than enough to deal with just getting his Empire in shape.

By the end of his day, when he was finally allowed to fall into bed, he barely had the energy to pull up his blankets before falling dead asleep, too tired even to dream.

Still, in the midst of everything, as busy as he was—every trumpet blown made him look up eagerly, and every messenger who arrived to see him made him tense with anticipation, and whenever he stopped

thinking about everything else for a moment, his mind went immediately to Erich. It was getting increasingly difficult *not* to think about Erich.

A week and a half ago, he had received word that his armies were finally on the move, marching home to the Regenbogen. The journey between the Winter Palace and the Regenbogen was roughly two weeks—and of course the fact that the full military might of Kria was marching as one would probably make it take longer.

Still, in another week or so, he would at last have his army back—have Erich back. Not long after that, his son should be back in his arms, and Sepp standing with Elena at his side again. Soon, very soon, all the people he cared about most would be with him again.

It felt like a fragile dream that he dare not focus on too hard, for fear of shattering it. He only wished Reni could be here to see it, too.

Ingolf shook his head at himself, and tried to focus on the reports he needed to get through before his meeting in two hours. He took an absent sip of wine, and then went back to reading, forcing himself to concentrate. He needed to get through the latest stack of reports before his meeting in three hours.

Unfortunately, food stores would be dangerously low—even nonexistent in some portions of the country—for the next few years. Too much had been used or lost in the fighting, and due to the devastation of the population by the plague, there hadn't been enough people to keep stores at the levels they should have been maintained everywhere.

The aftereffects of war, it always seemed, were so much worse than the war itself. Ingolf shook his head and jotted down several notes, then set the grain reports aside and started working upon the livestock.

So it continued, for the next hour and a half, as he steadily worked his way through the towers of parchment covering his poor desk. He really needed to get around to appointing secretaries, but he would feel better when he had Elena back to consult with on the matter.

The door opened just as he was starting on the latest set of possible territory-redistribution reports, and he was not at all sorry for it—arguing with stubborn nobles about land made him want to either draw his sword and end the fighting in true Krian fashion or go to bed and suffocate himself with a pillow.

"What is it, Corbinian?" Ingolf asked, hoping he did not look as relieved as he felt at the distraction.

Corbinian, the man Elena had hand-picked to guard him while she went to fetch Sepp and Renn, stepped into the room and sketched a quick bow. Smiling faintly, he said, "Majesty, there is a messenger just arrived to see you with an important message."

Ingolf nodded and beckoned. "Send him in."

Nodding, Corbinian slid from the room and a moment later the messenger entered. He dropped to one knee and bowed his head, and at Ingolf's bidding, reported, "Majesty, I have come to deliver the news that your armies are but hours away, and will arrive no later than sunset this very day." He lifted his head and grinned openly, formality slipping as his excitement took over. "Prince Erich sends a personal

message, Majesty, that he expects you to greet your armies with a celebration worthy of their glorious victory."

Ingolf laughed, and slapped a hand on his desk, too jubilant to hold still. "You bring me news I have long waited to hear. Thank you. The rest of the week is yours to do as you like."

"Thank you, Majesty," the messenger said, and rose, bowing before he strode out of the room.

Standing, Ingolf strode out to his antechamber and beckoned Corbinian close. "I have an announcement to make. See that everyone who is able gathers in the courtyard."

Corbinian nodded, and strode out into the hallways, speaking with the soldiers standing guard. A few minutes later, he returned and bowed. "Shall we go to the courtyard, Majesty?"

Shaking his head, amused that he could never get Corbinian to use his name, Ingolf signaled an affirmative. Corbinian turned and led the way, never more than a step ahead of Ingolf, one hand resting lightly on the hilt of his sword.

Though it had only been a few minutes since he had issued his summons, by the time he had reached the enormous courtyard of Fortress Regenbogen, overlooking it from the balcony, it was half-full. Twenty minutes later, it was packed to overcrowding, with still more people sitting on the walls, stairs, leaning out of the guard towers, lurking in the gates, and outside the surrounding wall. If anyone was bothered by the badly cramped quarters, though, they gave no sign of it—they seemed only eager to hear the news, as though they already knew what Ingolf was going to say. He supposed they did, though; there was only one reason he would have to gather everyone immediately.

Ingolf raised a hand to signal for silence and waited a couple of minutes for the noise to die down, then spoke as loudly as he could, saying, "People of Kria! Our Sacred Armies are but hours away, and eager to reach us. Let us ensure they are given a welcome worthy of the glorious victory they have taken for us! Wrap up whatever duties currently occupy you, and turn instead to readying the Regenbogen to welcome home the Sacred Armies of Kria! Make haste!"

The noise that erupted the moment he finished speaking was so loud it kicked his headache up from mild to severe, but it was well worth it to see so many people so happy.

Some of the Salharans in the crowd were, for obvious reasons, less enthused—but many were just as happy as their Krian and Illussor brothers. Problem still cropped amongst them all, from time to time, and still more problems would arise for a long time to come—but that was part of building a new country and integrating the defeated. Already, it was going so much better than he could have dared hope.

"Go!" Ingolf said, dismissing them, signaling the various persons in charge to see that all the plans they had made were carried out as perfectly and precisely as possible. The welcome home banquet had been planned during the winter months, refined in the thaw—banners, dancing, a feast, drinking—

And in a few short, but oh so agonizingly long hours, he would see Erich.

Determined to preserve his sanity, Ingolf bent to keeping himself even more occupied than usual, though that was hard now that he had ordered all ordinary duties set aside. Reaffirming with those who asked that the afternoon meeting was indeed now canceled, he then returned to his office, Corbinian on his heels. There, he neatly filed away all his papers, locked them up, tidied up his desk, and then locked the entire office.

Then he went to his bedroom, briefly marveling as always at its size. He had been a soldier, if the bastard son of the Kaiser—all these months later, he still occasionally found it hard to believe all these luxuries were now rightfully his.

"Corbinian," he said, "would you call for a bath?"

"I already did, Majesty," Corbinian replied. "It should be in your bedroom."

Ingolf laughed. "Always one step ahead of me, of course. I should have known. Thank you." Striding through his sitting room and into the bedroom, he saw that a bath was indeed waiting. Stripping off his clothes and casting them aside, Ingolf sank down into the large tub and simply rested a moment.

Thoughts of Erich filled his mind, making him excited, nervous, restless—even his headache could not distract him from Erich.

Finally moving, he began to clean up, scrubbing and cleaning until he could get himself no cleaner. Standing up, he climbed out of the tub and quickly dried off, then strode into his dressing room. Looking at his options, the vast array of jackets, tunics, cloaks, and other assorted clothing that belong to him, Ingolf finally settled on green. He could think of no color more apropos.

Ready, he returned to the sitting room, smiling to see that Corbinian had managed to get himself cleaned up as well. "Shall we, then?" Ingolf asked, and they returned to the main sections of the palace. There, Ingolf was immediately inundated in demands for his attention, to sample food, approve decorations, decide on music, wine, beer—

He answered the questions as best he could, then handed off the duties to his Master Steward, who had obviously been trying to do so for some time, but had been ignored by overexcited workers.

The Great Hall had been transformed, the walls covered with the twelve banners of his Generals, old and new—Scarlet, Saffron, Verdant, Cobalt, Umber, Slate, Ivory, Onyx, Indigo, Violet, Azure, and Bronze. They had all been designed by Erich and Reinoehl—Ingolf had never been happier to give his signature to approve a change. Ingolf could not wait to see all twelve Sacred Armies in place, see the ways they would shape his new Empire.

He had been surprised, at first, to learn Onyx and Slate had already been designated. But then he had learned upon whom the banners had been bestowed, and his surprise had faded. He only wished they were here, to join in the celebration. Hopefully, they would be able to visit in a few more years, perhaps when the country had stabilized enough to celebrate that very stabilization. That very unity.

Ingolf continued to admire the banners, hoping it would not take too long to find fitting candidates for each of the new banners. Thinking of Generals also reminded him of Cobalt, and the fact he had

congratulations to extend to Reinoehl and Aden. Elena had shrieked, so uncharacteristic of her, when he had read aloud the news of their marriage. He hoped she and Sepp returned soon, and not merely because they would be bringing Renn home at last.

All in all, his Empire truly seemed off to a better start than he could have dared hope.

Left alone for a moment, Ingolf strode up a set of short steps to the dais that overlooked the rest of the hall, where the high table had been arranged for him and those who would sit with him. His seat in the middle, and to his right, a seat nearly as finely appointed, because it should be worthy of the Prince who commanded just as much respect—and Ingolf did not doubt in some respected Erich commanded more—as the Kaiser. Especially when that prince was also the Scarlet General.

He started to ask the cook, summoned to look over the hall fires, how dinner was coming along—

When the sudden, deafening call of the trumpets heralded the arrival of special guests. Ingolf smiled, amused at the choice of call, and left the high table to stride down the hall and out the doors.

Heart thudding in his chest, Ingolf looked out over the courtyard, over the walls, where he could see the armies marching. Well ahead of them, marched the Generals, their Commanders and Chiefs, the banner bearers. The trumpets sounded again, and he could hear the armies' drums beating out a quick, steady march.

A few minutes later, the heralds began to cry out, formally announcing the armies, the Sacred Generals. The four generals rode through the gates, followed by eight more men. As they crossed the courtyard and reached Ingolf, who stood at the top of the long, deep steps leading up into the Regenbogen, the Commanders and Chiefs hung back, dismounting and kneeling at the foot of the stairs.

The Generals dismounted, then continued on, stopping at the second to last step and kneeling there, heads bowed.

Then Erich looked up and smiled, and Ingolf had never found it so damned hard to breathe. "Kaiser, your Generals returned to you, proud and victorious, this twenty-third day of the Spring Prince."

"Welcome home, Sacred Lord Generals," Ingolf replied. "You do your country proud, you honor the gods you represent, and we are all honored by your service and sacrifice. Rise."

As one, the Generals stood, and at Ingolf's signal turned and faced the courtyard, arrayed with so many people that he was amazed there was room enough for anyone to breathe. Beyond the fortress, on the walls, on every available surface, more people watched, eager for every word Ingolf spoke. Over the low roar of whispering and talking, Ingolf bellowed, "People of Kria! Welcome your Generals home!"

The noise that erupted then would leave his head aching for hours, if not days, but Ingolf cared not one damn bit. He smiled as everyone cheered, moved forward to congratulate the Generals, the Commanders and Chiefs, the soldiers themselves.

Erich turned and looked over his shoulder, smiling in a way that spoke a hundred different promises. Ingolf returned it full measure, and then they were both drowning in people, taken in different directions.

Ingolf did not protest as Corbinian finally recaptured him and dragged him back inside, leading him to the high table to begin the banquet. Ingolf obeyed, content to be swept away by the celebration, the joy. There would be time enough, later, to see Erich for a private reunion.

~~*

Ingolf clapped people on the back, gripped their shoulders, clasped hands, murmuring good night and other niceties, but did not stop on his way to the back door of the hall though many tried to stop him.

He was tired, head heavy from wine and sore from noise, and he had not seen Erich milling about for a good hour now. He fervently hoped that meant Erich was somewhere to be privately found, but more than likely he and Erich would have to catch up tomorrow.

On his fingers, he rubbed his thumb over his own wedding band, moved to the widow's finger, and Erich's ring.

Finally reaching the door at the back of the hall, he smiled ruefully at a patiently waiting Corbinian. "I bet you will be grateful to go back to your ordinary duties, Sergeant."

"It's been an honor to serve as your bodyguard, Kaiser. Lady Elena's faith in me is humbling, and I am grateful to have been given the chance to join your personal retinue for any length of time."

Ingolf smiled and gripped his shoulder tightly, as they slipped out of the hall, revelers more or less oblivious to their Kaiser's quiet departure—and the few he had brushed off had quickly found other distractions. "Well, as I am only getting busier, and more and more people are around me, and all of you are so paranoid of assassination—"

"Hardly paranoid, given that attempts *have* been made," Corbinian cut in dryly.

Smothering a grin at the way Corbinian had forgotten to tack on 'Majesty', Ingolf replied, "Anyway—with all these threats, real and imagine, I think it would be a good idea to permanently increase the size of my retinue. What do you say? Would you still consider it an honor to be stuck babysitting me, if you were to do it indefinitely?"

Corbinian's eyes snapped open wide with surprise—he clearly had not anticipated the offer. Ingolf laughed. "I will take your silence as a yes, Corbinian, so if you have objections, speak them now."

"No—no, Majesty. No objections. It would be an honor."

Ingolf nudged him, earning a reprimanding glare. "Then call me Ingolf. My personal retinue does not stand on formality. "Go on," he coaxed. "I know you're an Illussor originally, but your Krian is perfect. You should have no trouble saying it."

Corbinian rolled his eyes. "Ingolf, then. I sense we should just call you 'brat'."

"Probably," Ingolf agreed, as they reached his bedroom. He reached out to grasp the door handle—

Only to be yanked back. "No lights should be on in your front room. Stand back."

Ingolf smiled faintly. "I promise he's no threat." At Corbinian's look, he shrugged and said, "Go, make yourself feel better. I'll wait here."

"Stay," Corbinian repeated, clearly not believing him. Drawing his sword, he slipped inside the bedroom.

Leaning against the wall and folding his arms across his chest, Ingolf patiently waited. He smirked when Corbinian appeared only a moment later and cast Ingolf a withering look. "Goodnight, Ingolf. Pleasant dreams. I trust you will summon me when needed. Until then, I leave you in the care of the Scarlet General."

Ingolf grinned. "Good night, Corbinian. Sleep well."

Rolling his eyes, smoothly sheathing his sword, Corbinian walked off, throwing up a hand in farewell without bothering to look back.

Chuckling, Ingolf slipped into his room, closed the door and locked it. Across the sitting room, in a chair by the fire he had lit, Erich sat reading a book. He closed it and set it aside as Ingolf drew close, smiling softly. His pale skin and hair seemed almost golden-orange in the firelight, save where the firelight missed and he instead fell into shadow.

"It's been a long time," Ingolf said, and slipped off his jacket before sitting down on the sofa.

Erich laughed briefly. "Indeed. Next time, remind me to pay more attention to which cloak I grab. I never knew a world could turn on one's choice of outerwear."

The words drew Ingolf's laughter, loud and hearty, echoing through his sitting room. "As you say. Speaking of rightful belongings—" He pulled Erich's wedding ring off his finger. "I believe this belongs to you."

Erich plucked it from Ingolf's palm, smiling in that sad, soft, sweet way of his. Then he tucked it away in his jacket, draped over the table by his chair. "Hanna will love it."

Ingolf smiled. "She's a sweet little girl. I'm glad you adopted her."

"She's feisty," Erich said, but smiled, pleased.

"Feisty doesn't mean she isn't sweet," Ingolf replied with a laugh.

Erich nodded, smiling faintly as he thought of his daughter. Then he nodded at Ingolf. "So you are the one wearing a widow ring, now. I hope—I hope she was happy, despite everything."

"She was," Ingolf said softly. "I could not have had a better wife. I believe she was all the happier, for knowing what would be accomplished after she died, what her son would someday inherit." He looked at his ring, and sighed. "Forget grabbing the correct cloak—I am never again stealing a sword from a von Adolwulf. The legends do not lie—you're a family full of trouble."

"I cannot disagree," Erich said with a grin.

Then they lapsed into silence, looking at each other, and Ingolf did not know where to put his thoughts. There seemed to be too much in his head.

Finally, though, he said, "You look good in Scarlet, Erich. I do not think I ever got a chance to tell you that."

"Well, it's your fault I'm wearing it, so I had better look good to you."

"You know you do," Ingolf said quietly, meeting his eyes. "I've missed you. If the gods never again listen to my pleas, I will be content, because they listened long enough to bring you home to me."

Erich made a rough sound, and moved, and suddenly Ingolf was being pushed down in to the sofa, a hard, heavy body pressing against his. He had tried over the months of their separation to hold on to the memory of how Erich looked and felt and smelled and tasted.

He had managed to hold onto a tiny piece, but that piece was nothing like the whole. Like before, once Erich began, he did hesitate or reserve anything—he gave full measure. Ingolf moaned and held him even closer, wrapping his arms tightly around Erich, their kisses too eager and greedy to be smooth.

"I fervently hope we are not going to be interrupted," Erich said, and drew back, standing up to begin discarding his clothing.

Ingolf lay there and admired him, loving the sight of him, all that pale skin, the well-formed muscles—the heat in his eyes.

When he realized Erich was looking at him expectantly and trying not to laugh, Ingolf finally replied, "Corbinian will see we are not disturbed, and he will say nothing of you until we want something said."

"Mmm," Erich said, and bent to yank Ingolf to his feet. "Shall we take this to bed, then, Majesty?"

Ingolf laughed, and yanked him close, taking a long kiss, running his hands along Erich's smooth skin, tugging playfully at the breeches he still wore. "Bed sounds divine," he said, nudging Erich back and striding past him, leading the way through the door to his bedroom.

Erich grabbed him from behind, tugged Ingolf's jacket off and cast it aside. His teeth grazed Ingolf's neck, making him shiver. Erich had not been shy, that one night—but he had not been quite this predatory, either. Ingolf liked it; he wanted more than ever to take back complete control, pin Erich to his bed, and fuck him until they were both senseless.

Whipping around, he jerked Erich close, kissed him hard, then turned them around and half-shoved, half-tossed Erich down on his bed.

Stripping off the last of his clothes, he then yanked off Erich's pants. Then he crawled up onto the bed himself, on top of Erich, taking a kiss, grunting as their cocks rubbed together.

He broke the kiss, then began to lick and nip at Erich's skin, almost but not quite distracted as Erich's hands explored his body. "I feel I should probably admit that I have pictured you tied up in my bed a time or two."

Erich laughed—then grabbed, twisted, and suddenly Ingolf was the one on his back, staring up as Erich straddled him. "I seem to recall that tying me up in bed was one of the first things you did to me."

"Yes," Ingolf said dryly. "And one of the first things I learned is that you always carry at least one more dagger than anyone can ever find."

"Always at least one more," Erich agreed, smirking, then bent and too his mouth again, letting go of his arms to run his hands over Ingolf's body, teasing, taunting. He laughed, voice husky. "I cannot believe I am actually here—that we are here, in your bed, at the Regenbogen. I was afraid some days that I would never see you, or home, again."

Ingolf pulled him down, kissed him until they both needed desperately to breathe. "I ordered you to live, and return to me. You are too good a General to disobey my direct orders."

"True," Erich agreed, smiling at him, eyes warm and fond, though the heat remained.

Seizing his chance, Ingolf flipped them again, then moved to his bedside table and fetched the bottle he needed. Moving back to Erich, he opened the bottle and slicked his fingers. He trailed his wet fingers down Erich's chest, loving the way it made his pale skin glisten.

When he reached Erich's cock, he wrapped his hand around it and stroked firmly, just long enough to make Erich groan and curse and try to glare at him. Then he finally reached for his goal, pushing one finger inside Erich's body, groaning at the warmth, wasting no time in moving to two fingers, then three, stretching him thoroughly.

"Enough," Erich bit out

Smirking, but not arguing, Ingolf withdrew his fingers and lined up his cock, pushing in slowly, taking it easy—

"Do not make me flip us over and take control, Ingolf," Erich said, eyes hot with the promise that he would.

Tempting as it was, Ingolf liked where he was. Bracing himself, he began to move harder, faster, thrusting in, pulling nearly all the way out, only to thrust back in with still more force, pushing and pushing until it was hard to breath, hard to see past the sting of sweat in his eyes—

Then Erich came with a cry, tightening around him, fingers digging into Ingolf's shoulders with enough force there would probably be bruises.

Ingolf came himself in the next moment, harder than he could remember coming in a very long time. They lay together in a sweat, momentarily sated pile.

"So did I provide a suitable enough welcome home?" Ingolf asked several minutes later.

Erich laughed, and playfully nipped his shoulder. "Not if that is *all* the welcome I am getting."

Ingolf snorted. "If you want that much 'welcome' you are going to have to go find a younger Kaiser to accommodate you."

Laughing again, Erich reached down and grabbed Ingolf's cock, which gave a hard twitch. "I think you will suffice."

"Maybe," Ingolf muttered, smiling, settling closer. He took a kiss, stifling a sigh, neither of them feeling like voicing the thoughts they were both thinking—that Erich could not stay. It had not even been a year yet, since Reni had died. He would not disrespect her, and all the people who had loved their Queen, by immediately turning around and openly taking her brother in law as his lover.

Reni would not give a damn, but Ingolf would not make everything more difficult by ignoring the way his people would feel on the matter.

Erich was home—that was enough for now.

"I should leave soon," Erich said, breaking the silence.

"Soon," Ingolf agreed, then added with a soft kiss, "but not quite yet."

Erich drew him into a longer kiss, slow and sweet.

"Thank you for coming to me, Winter."

"Thank you for warming, Spring," Erich replied, and relaxed against Ingolf's chest. Within moments, he had drifted off to sleep. Ingolf let him, content to watch Erich. In a little while, he would wake Erich up, before finally sending him off to his own room.

Settling more comfortably, he stared up at the ceiling, seeing nothing, mind on the only piece his life still lacked.

~~*

Ingolf groaned and pulled his pillow over his head as someone pounded at his door. When it didn't stop, he removed the pillow just long enough to bellow, "Go away!"

He was tired and sore from being up with Erich all night, because they were so busy settling the armies and sorting out who was to go where and when, that they did not get to see each other save at bed time. His head throbbed from lack of sleep and overwork, and he had vastly underestimated just how much he would come to hate having to ultimately sleep—and wake—alone.

When the only reply to his shouting was the sound of the outer door opening, Ingolf burrowed even deeper into his blankets, determined not to get up. He had purposely arranged this day to give himself some extra time in the morning, and they could just carry on without him for a bit.

But then he heard Erich's laughter, other familiar voices—including a strong Krian voice, Hanna's mile a minute chatter, and the unsteady sound a baby's laughter.

Jerking up, staring in disbelief, Ingolf for a moment could only think that it was a good thing he had bothered to put on sleeping pants after Erich had left. He threw back the blankets and climbed out of bed, and strode to the man standing closest to his bed.

"Sepp," he said gruffly, and embraced him tightly. "I'm happy to have you home. Thank you, for seeing to Renn all these months. How are you?"

Smiling, tired but obviously happy, Sepp replied, "Well, Ingolf. It's good to be home."

Nodding, Ingolf clapped his shoulder, then embraced Elena. "Milady, thank you as well. It's good to have you back where you belong. I hope they all behaved as you escorted them home."

"Your son is a handful," Elena said with a smile, and kissed his cheek. "Much like you."

Ingolf laughed, then turned to Erich, patiently waiting with a squirming bundle in his arms. Tousling Hanna's curls, telling her good morning, he kissed Erich and finally took his son. Renn immediately stopped squirming, and stared wide-eyed at Ingolf.

"He's gotten so big," Ingolf said softly, sitting down on the bed, eyes only for his son. "Look at you, Renn. You were so tiny when last I held you. But I suppose you still have a long way to go, don't you? And now you can grow in safety."

Renn burbled and cooed, and smiled at him, toothless and sweet. Ingolf laughed and held him close, kissing his brow. Then he looked up at everyone arrayed around him, and smiled, happy to at last have all his family back with him.

Epilogue

"Arms up," Erich ordered, then knelt and began to search out and remove all the daggers Hanna had tried to hide on her person. "Nice try, little princess, but I meant what I said—no daggers at the ball. I'm not stupid enough to let you have deadly weapons around people who irritate you."

Hanna stuck her tongue out.

Rolling his eyes, Erich handed the seven daggers he'd found off to a patiently waiting servant. "I hear you are doing very well in your dueling classes. Lady Elena says very nice things about you. She also says you must learn to watch your temper."

Making a face, Hanna pronounced with twelve-year-old wisdom, "Boys are stupid."

Erich grinned, and tugged on one of her curls. "Indeed. Tell them they had better keep their stupidity to pulling your hair and stealing your armor, or we shall have a long talk, them and I."

Hanna rolled her eyes again, and did not reply to that obviously idiotic statement.

"How are your dance lessons coming?" Erich asked, knowing full well she had been skipping them. "Are you learning to waltz, when you are not beating up stupid boys?"

Looking suddenly guilty, Hanna shifted restlessly and fussed with her dress, looking down at her feet. "I don't care about stupid dancing."

Erich shook his head, but did not let his amusement show, keeping his voice gently stern as he said, "You promised me you would practice."

"I did," Hanna said hotly, looking up at him—then hastily away again. "Just not lots."

"Well, that's all right," Erich said. "I'm sure all the stupid boys, who have been practicing lots, will be more than happy to show you how to dance, since by now they can do it better than you."

"They cannot!" Hanna shouted, stamping one foot. "I can do everything better than them!"

"Then I suggest you keep your promise and practice your dancing like you said you would," Erich said. "All right, princess mine?"

Hanna heaved a long sigh, but dutifully recited, "Yes, father."

"Good girl," Erich said, and kissed her check, smiling as she kissed his. "Now, run along. Go find your sister, and teach all those dumb boys how to dance. And no daggers!"

"Yes, father," Hanna repeated, rolling her eyes again. She gathered up the skirts of her dark red dress, hiking them just high enough they were out of her way, and took off running down the hall.

Shaking his head, sharing a look of amusement with the servant still holding the daggers, Erich dismissed the man and left the room to make his way to where Ingolf and the others were waiting for him. One last piece of business, and they could begin the celebratory ball welcoming their new guests.

He was, as always, stopped frequently as he made his way through the halls of Regenbogen Palace—by servants, guards, nobles, even a few of the foreign guests stopped him for a word of thanks or a question.

Erich slowed to a stop yet again, this time more gladly, as he encountered four men clustered near the top of the stairs that lead down to the grand entryway. Vester, Pancraz, Aden, and Reinoehl all looked up as he approached, smiling and nodding. "I see I am not the only one late for a meeting," he greeted. "I hope you lot are not starting the fun without me."

"Half the fun involves seeing what you'll do next," Aden commented dryly. "We were placing bets as to how late you would be, actually."

Laughing, Erich slung an arm across Pancraz's shoulders. "What can I say, between running an empire and managing four children, I am never on time for anything."

"Fair enough," Reinoehl conceded with a smile. "So will we see you at all, this evening? Or will you be spirited away for matters of state?"

Erich snorted. "After this little meeting, the only matters of state I intend to address are the royal wines and my spouse."

They all laughed, exchanging suggestive comments and talking idly for a few more minutes, before Erich reluctantly said, "Come along, Pancraz, Aden. Let us get this meeting over with."

"As you say," Aden replied. They bid Vester and Reinoehl farewell and walked together further into the palace to a state room where several other people awaited their arrival. Ingolf sat against the far wall in one of two chairs, Elena and Sepp on either side of the chairs. Around the rest of the room were a handful of other people, two Krians and two foreigners. Only three years after Kria had taken control of the continent, other countries had begun to approach them, and Kria was set to make its mark on the international stage by promising to do whatever no other country had ever managed.

"My apologies for arriving," Erich said to the room. "My daughter required my attention."

Ingolf laughed from his seat. "Like father, like daughter?"

"Quite," Erich replied, sliding into the seat next to him, leaning over to give Ingolf a brief kiss on the cheek.

Then he looked over the others gathered in the room, nodding to Sepp and Elena, seeing Pancraz and Aden settle. He nodded to the Krians as well—one was Engel, Elena's twin brother. The other was a man from the northern coast, a remote village with an interesting history.

Finally, he nodded politely to the two foreign men. They were reserved in manner, but unfailingly polite and friendly when they felt comfortable enough to let their reservation drop. The elder of the two, the Duke of Keyes, had been sent as an emissary from the kingdom of Elamas. He had seemed intrigued and amused by Kria's plans, and offered to help once he had secured his King's permissions.

For a man who relied heavily on magic, he was not all that bad—and he alone was the reason the other man was here.

"Thank you for meeting with us," Ingolf said. "I promise we will not keep you overlong. I know everyone is looking forward to tonight's revelries, and we are honored by our guests from abroad."

Erich picked up the thread as Ingolf finished, "As I am sure most know, but a few do not, we are here to discuss the pirates. Kria is six years settled now, and we are graced by our visitors from the wider world. We are finally in a position to address a matter that has plagued the world for centuries now. These past few years, Pancraz and Aden have worked in their respective holdings to see what intelligence their men could gather. We have thorough reports from the long relationship former Salharans once had with the pirates, and Aden's holdings lie close to the coasts and so he's had much to offer. In addition, his grace brought us still more information."

Sketching a bow, Keyes said, "Information gathering is a specialty, Majesty, and Elamas relies more heavily on trade than most. Pirates are a very painful thorn in our side. We are happy to help, if it means you will succeed where others have not. To that end, I present to you an old friend of mine, arrived only this morning. Majesties, I present Lord Summer Artherton, Earl of Brenneke. He was once kidnapped by the pirates, and held hostage for nearly a year. He knows more about them than any other living person."

"We appreciate your help, the sacrifice you make in returning to those who harmed you," Ingolf said, nodding respectfully at Lord Artherton. "Intriguing, that your name is Summer. To bear as name that season is fortuitous, I would think. I hope our Summer Princess looks after you, as you help us in this quest."

Summer's mouth quirked, and he said in slow, careful, heavily accented Krian, "Thank you, Majesty. I am happy to help."

Ingolf nodded, and gestured to Engel and the man beside him. "Lord Engel is our spymaster; he has spent many years studying the pirates. Sergeant Lamprecht is a man of the sea, and hails from a village to the north where pirates have occasionally washed up upon the shore. He therefore has knowledge that few would."

The three men approached Erich and Ingolf, and knelt before them, bowing their heads low. "You three are a team. Together, by whatever means necessary, you will infiltrate the pirates, locate their king, and bring me his head."

Engel laughed. "No one knows who he is, what he looks like, or where he hides. Even if we were to find a way to infiltrate the pirates, and stay with them long enough to be trusted with anything—most of *them* do not even know the face of their king. We will never break the ranks of those who do know."

"That might be true, of ordinary men," Erich replied, "but none of you three is ordinary, and together you are something else again. Between you three lies more knowledge of the pirates than anyone else in the world likely possess. Use it to accomplish the impossible."

"Yes, Majesties," Engel replied, the other men echoing him.

Ingolf motioned. "Then rise. You leave tomorrow. Your ship awaits you in the harbor, you may alter the crew as you see fit, and your purse is unlimited. Kria, and the world, thanks you for your service."

Lamprecht grinned as he stood up. "Save the thanks until we've actually managed the impossible."

Laughing, Ingolf tossed Engel a bag. "Those rings will see you get whatever help you require, whatever shore you land upon. You also will have the necessary papers. Bring us that head, gentlemen, and you may name your reward."

"Kaiser," Engel said. "We will not fail."

"I know," Ingolf said, and dismissed them, along with everyone else. "Go, enjoy the ball, my friends."

"Majesties," everyone chorused, and slowly departed.

When the room was empty, Erich turned to regard Ingolf with a soft, fond smile. This was the first time, in a long time, that they had been alone together long enough to do more than simply fall asleep. He leaned over their chairs again, and took a far more intimate kiss than he had earlier.

Ingolf made a soft, pleased noise and sank a hand into Erich's hair, holding him fast. When they finally broke apart, he said, "It has been far too long since I have been able to do that."

Erich laughed and nibbled at Ingolf's bottom lip, then took another long kiss. "I have missed you, Kaiser. A pity we cannot skip the ball."

"Don't tempt me," Ingolf muttered, reluctantly tearing away after another kiss. "I am grateful you and your team pick up all these languages so easy, have I mentioned that? When they speak anything but Krian, I begin to get overwhelmed. I hope this venture with the pirates succeeds."

Erich stood up, then bent over Ingolf's seat, bracing his hands on the arms of it. He kissed Ingolf soundly, hard enough to bruise their lips, then said, "We have a few minutes alone, spouse mine. Stop talking about work."

Ingolf curled his hands around Erich's hips, smiling faintly. "My apologies."

"As you should be," Erich said, returning the smile. He stepped back, and tugged Ingolf to his feet, then wrapped his arms around Ingolf, pulling them flush, and took another kiss, wishing they might remain alone in the state room indefinitely.

But this ball was important, for it formally welcomed many visitors from around the world, showing off Kria in a way the world had never seen. It would not do for the Kaiser and his Regent to skip it.

"We could probably slip away early," Ingolf said, as if reading his thoughts.

Erich smiled. "Sounds divine. Hopefully our children do not impede our plans like they did last time," He added dryly, thinking of the last time they'd been foolish enough to gather Hanna, Renn, Sigi, and Aleit in one place without suitable supervision.

"Their nurses have been spoken to," Ingolf said firmly. "I have plans for you later. If they interrupt those plans, I will lock them in a tower and throw away the key, I vow it."

Snorting, because Ingolf was always the first to give in, he settled for stealing one last, long kiss. He would never grow tired of holding and touching and *having* Ingolf. He had been blessed enough, to have had Hahn. "Come along, Kaiser. Let us show the world the greatness of Kria, and then we shall slip away to bed."

Ingolf smirked, and took his hand as they left the state room and made their way to the great ballroom. "Do not leave my side too soon. I have plans to dance with you before everyone else steals you away and I do not see you again until they're all drunk."

Erich laughed briefly, before fading off to a fond smile. "We will begin it and end it together, Winter, as ever."

Fin