



never stop fighting

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Scorpion  
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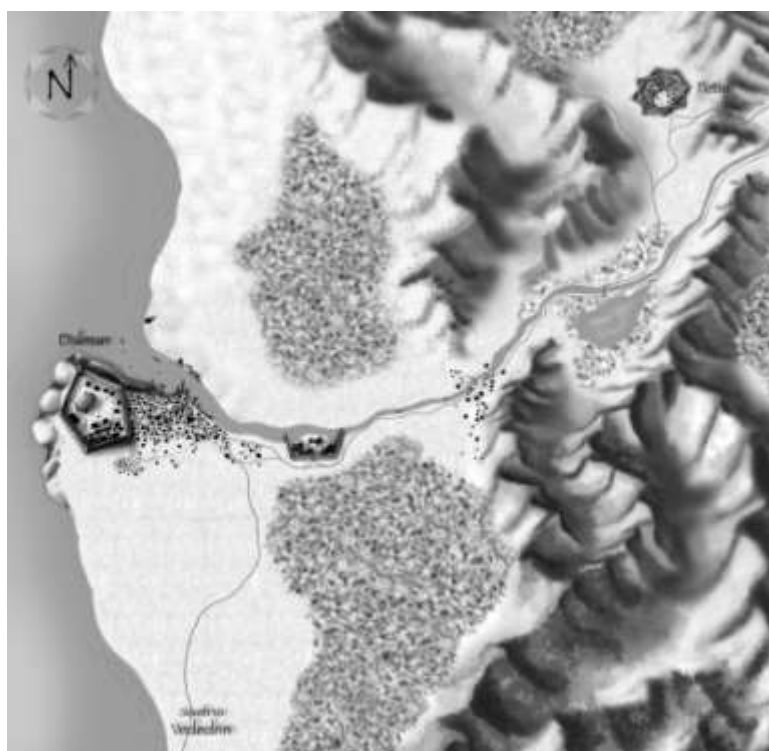
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Because we focused on the snake, we missed the scorpion.

~Proverb

## Dalman and Fetin



## Chapter One

KENDRAS hobbled back on land, teeth gritted so hard his jaw ached. The familiar nausea as he adjusted to firm ground washed over him, and he had to pause to not stumble. That forced him to rest his weight on the bad foot, and the pain seared up to his throat and into his skull. The pain at least burned away the despair that was threatening to settle in him, choking off all strength, and he stood there, knees shaking with strain, searching for anything to rest against. The seagulls wheeling over Dalman's harbor laughed at him. Their comrades on the ground barely bothered to hop out of his way, as if they knew he was no threat.

Another step and more agony.

He suppressed a grunt, made the step as fast as possible, but even taking his weight off the leg hurt. Nothing he could do lessened the pain. Resting the leg or moving it, his only choice was between the sharp knife-edge pain of putting weight on it and the thudding, bone-grinding pain of not moving it. He'd tried burning spirits, which dulled his head but never reached his foot, and being drunk and in pain was worse than being sober and in pain.

When he finally reached the edge of the harbor, he was covered in cold sweat. Leaning against the whitewashed wall of a food shop that wouldn't open for another few hours, he noticed that he was being watched.

A beggar was staring in his direction despite the dirty covering over her eyes that suggested she was blind. A freckled boy and his dog, both accomplished rat catchers judging from the quarry dangling from

a line tied to a stick, glanced furtively toward him. More threateningly, a group of burly stowaways watched him openly, as if assessing whether his weapons and armor were worth taking.

Continue. Do not cause them to think twice. He'd have preferred to stand and fight. Only, of course, he was outnumbered, and he knew better than to put any faith in the reputation of the Scorpions. Reputation prepared the enemy for defeat but didn't cause it, whatever civilians believed.

He turned the corner and hurried away from the harbor, one step after the other, not allowing himself to rest until the sounds of seagulls had dulled. His best bet was to stay somewhere near the harbor. He'd never make it up to Dalman without help. Crossing the wild underbelly of the city between the harbor and the city up on the cliff in his condition would get him killed. He'd grown up there. Too many predators lurked in the crooked alleys.

Opposite, a door flew open. Marines appeared, arm in arm, too drunk for their song to make any sense or possess any kind of melody. They zigzagged from one wall to the other, never letting go of one another as they took turns pushing away from the buildings. Kendras grinned wryly. He'd been like that more than once. Nothing like sharing a bed and puking into the same bucket in the morning. He moved closer to the tavern, which turned out to be just as rowdy a place as he'd expected, but not hostile. At least not hostile to men like him.

Kendras made it through the door and to a greasy bench, where he leaned against the wall. The armor dug into his spine, but he'd lived so long in armor that he ignored it. He'd even slept in armor when necessary, force-marched when ordered. He moved his legs out of the way when one patron was pushed against his table in what promised to turn into a friendly brawl. Last thing he needed was somebody stomping on his foot.

He watched the brawl commence, but everything else blurred into sound and color that simply went on without him, not affecting him, not touching him once. A rather unsettling similarity to the state he sometimes reached in the middle of battle, just without the feeling of being immortal.



When the serving wench brought him ale, unasked, he paid with his last few coppers. As he sipped the watery brew, he noticed a man watching him, another soldier, short-shorn head indicating he was either still engaged or had so recently been released that his back still remembered his sergeant's rough justice.

Kendras held the other man's gaze for a few moments, gauging whether the interest was a threat or a nuisance, and found the expression entirely neutral. When he looked away, the other man stood and headed toward him.

The other soldier sat down, and gestured at the table between them. "Free?"

Kendras glanced up, meeting cool gray eyes. "I'm not a slave."

The gray eyes narrowed with amusement. "I figured."

"Did you?" Kendras glanced toward the door, calculating whether he'd be able to make it there without losing face. The chances of that were pretty fucking slim.

Gray Eyes leaned back, one hand on the table, arm straight, measuring him up. Doubtlessly studying the armor, his build, assessing him, one warrior to another. "You just came from the boat."

Kendras inhaled deeply but didn't allow himself to sigh, instead releasing the breath slowly. "What do you want."

"Offer help." Gray Eyes didn't smile.

"Ah." Kendras pursed his lips. Gray Eyes was clearly a soldier from the way he moved and spoke, but despite the simple, sturdy clothes, this man wasn't just a lowly foot soldier. Maybe cavalry or some elite unit. His relaxed attitude suggested confidence, despite the fact that this was clearly not his home turf and there were no comrades around. Interesting. Normally soldiers banded together for drinking.

"Where's your unit?" Gray Eyes asked.

"Left them before Fetin."

Now Gray Eyes smiled, and Kendras had the uncanny feeling the man knew exactly how that was meant. Too clever to be good company, this one.

“And you’re down on your luck.” It wasn’t mockery or scorn. The sky is blue; you’re on your last coppers, and hurt.

Kendras shrugged, admitting nothing and pretending to not care. What else was there to do? He knew well enough that he couldn’t work with his foot, no healer would treat him without some solid silver or gold in their hands first, and that meant he’d most likely have to sell the armor.

Only, of course, right after a war all the plunder hit the markets and even well-made armor fetched a laughable price. Even the prices for horses and slaves would be all but ruined, so selling himself would be pointless too. Who’d buy an injured slave when much better, younger, and prettier meat was for sale? In his state he couldn’t even become a bandit—and the beggars wouldn’t tolerate him competing for their territory.

Gray Eyes watched him think.

Annoyed, Kendras shook his head. “You don’t seem the charitable kind.”

“Charitable?” Gray Eyes gave a snort. “No, that I’m not.” He tapped his fingers on the table, maybe impatient to be going. Then, out of nowhere, a silver coin appeared between his fingers and came to rest on the worn wood. “Follow me?”

“For?”

“To earn enough that you won’t go hungry while your wounds heal.” Gray Eyes stood. The silver coin had vanished again. The other man held his gaze for a long moment, then turned to go upstairs.

Kendras considered his options, but truth was, he’d already gone through all of them. He did that before a battle, so he didn’t have to think when any thought would have slowed him down.

He pushed himself up from the table and pressed his lips together when he had to move the leg again. Just putting weight on it felt like a sword point entering the sole of his foot and slowly pushing upward, splitting the bone. Gods below, this fucking hurt. Small step by small step he made his way across the room and then supported his weight against the dirty wall as he climbed the stairs.

He had no idea if and how he could get downstairs again, and for one ridiculous moment he thought he'd be trapped. But he'd been trapped the moment he'd been injured. This was just twisting himself tighter into the snares that held him.

He made it to the landing, wiping the sweat off his brow. Gray Eyes stood there, watching him, not offering help or comment. Kendras instinctively estimated the width of the corridor, despite the fact he didn't have his main weapon and whatever happened next wouldn't be fighting. Most likely. A man with those kinds of resources wouldn't attack him.

Gray Eyes opened the nearest door and held it open for him.

Kendras hobbled after him, setting his face in stone to not betray the agony he felt, but his movements gave it all away anyway.

He felt the man at his back when the door closed behind them. His muscles twitched with the movements he'd make to skewer him if they'd been on the battlefield. Standing still in the middle of the room was torture, but Gray Eyes gave no indication of what he wanted.

A movement caught Kendras's eyes. In a silvery arch, the coin was flicked on the bed, where it landed, gleaming. It was an unscarred coin, shining as if minted just today.

"Do you need help with that armor?" Gray Eyes asked.

Kendras tilted his head, then glanced over his shoulder. "You'd pay me for that?"

"Yes." The other man stepped a little closer. Inside striking distance.

"You can get it cheaper than that."

"Would you have followed me without getting paid?"

Kendras huffed. As if he'd tell him that. "Open the hooks at my neck."

Gray Eyes stepped closer, carefully, alert like a wild animal, and then he placed his hands on Kendras's armored shoulders, seeking the hooks that held the scale armor tight together there. He had to pull the scale armor together to take the weight off the hooks, and the familiar

feeling—first of tightening around his shoulders, then the release as the armor gaped open—brought up memories of his comrades readying each other for battle as the mists lay across the fields of Fetin.

Kendras stepped away, despite the pain, and opened the broad belt then loosened the fastenings under his arms. He bent over and pulled. Gradually, slowly, the scale armor slid off his back, then its own weight pulled it down and, like a snake, Kendras freed himself of the scales. He straightened, not sure his foot would allow him to gather and roll up the armor, so he took a moment to find his resolve.

Gray Eyes stepped to the side, studying him in his protective leathers. “More.”

Kendras gave a half-smile but didn’t feel any humor. The man with the money called the shots. Kendras would really like eating and maybe even a medic’s attention. He began to unfasten the leathers, fingers working on their own.

The heavy leather tunic came off, and there was a hiss of appreciation from the side when Kendras bared his chest. He saw the other man cup himself, the half-hard cock was clearly outlined the way Gray Eyes stood there, groin tilted forward.

“Undress completely.”

Kendras tore his eyes away from the strong hand roughly kneading. He’d get to that part soon enough. Too soon. He sat down on the bed, so unspeakably relieved to take the weight off that foot that he’d have done this only to feel this lessening of the pain.

Getting one boot off was easy. The other one nearly made him scream before he relented and used his dagger, cutting into the side of the boot and down to the hobnailed sole. He sat there shaking when he’d finally freed the bandaged, splinted, badly swollen foot. Even with his dark skin, his toes were half-purple and half-black, and he wondered idly if he’d lose them, before he stood again. The foot felt like it would come apart when it touched the floorboards, as if only the boot had kept it together. In that moment, Kendras hated the other man for giving him the order to strip, for demanding to see everything, even the injury.

He pushed his trousers down, sat down, and pulled them off his feet, careful to not touch the bad foot, even though that took longer. He wiped the sweat off his face with his arm, then stood again, this time keeping all his weight on the good side. Without the scale armor, that was a lot easier.

“That what you wanted?”

“Not yet,” the other man said and smiled. He was fully hard now in his trousers.

“You’re mad. You could easily get a couple of boys for that.”

“That’s not my taste.”

Kendras shook his head. He doubted very much that he could fuck the other man in his state.

“Do you suck?”

Kendras shook his head. “Badly.”

Gray Eyes accepted that. He nodded toward the bed, and Kendras got on it. After undressing, what came next wouldn’t be too hard. He could pretend there was no coin lying there. Pretend, pretend, pretend. He’d never done this for money, had never expected anybody would offer him money, either, at least not since he’d become a Scorpion.

Getting on all fours, he placed his leg in a way that the bad foot wasn’t touching the lumpy mattress, which incidentally opened him up.

He glanced to the side and watched Gray Eyes undress. Riding boots, tunic, then his trousers, baring a pale body with sunburned neck and arms covered in golden hair. His dick was certainly adequate and remained fully hard, and Kendras wondered if he’d taken that more like a compliment if he hadn’t been paid. But he didn’t want to think about the man, didn’t particularly care why he preferred a crippled soldier to an eager, good-looking boy who could be had for a handful of coppers.

Gray Eyes joined him on the bed and moved between his legs. The sound of spitting, a practiced hand gliding over his ass, a thumb tracing the crack.

“Fetin, huh,” Gray Eyes murmured. “Which side were you on?”

Kendras couldn't help but tighten. He told himself that was because the wet thumb was forcing entry, because the other man spat again, adding more and forcing the thumb deeper.

"Dalman."

"Oh really?" Gray Eyes didn't sound surprised. "Well, I'll enjoy fucking your ass then, Dalmanye. Like you did us." With that, he forced his way in, and Kendras sucked his breath in and held it, held it to not give anything away. The burn and stretch were hard to ignore. Every instinct screamed at him to shake the man off and kill him for the attempt. But that wouldn't do. He needed the money. Even if it came from an enemy who paid to mock him with this. He'd been wondering about that but assumed the man might have been just another mercenary from somewhere else. A Fetinye. Damn unlucky meeting, under these circumstances. Not that he had any loyalties now. He'd serve Fetin if there was money to be had and if the officer signed the contract.

He pressed his lips together as he felt the other man pause and spit again, clearly struggling to get inside him. There was no point in making this hard for him—it would be over faster if Kendras complied. He pressed against the burning discomfort, that sharp friction that his body remembered well-enough. Not encouraging, just accepting as best he could.

"Oh damn you," the other man said and began to move. He might not be the biggest, but he knew how to use what he had.

Kendras stared at the wall, lifting his gaze away from the coin underneath him, and resisted the thrusts, which, despite the situation, stoked a fierce pleasure inside. Even though this wasn't his comrade and despite the burn, the pleasure was immediate and irresistible. The pain might even have added to it; sometimes rough sex was the only way to take the edge off.

Gray Eyes's thrusts were harsh, but not brutal, and after a few, he paused to add more spit, working it inside Kendras with ungodly skill. Kendras wanted to tell him to not stop, but remained silent. One way to keep face—be the paid whore. Silence was the best he could do.

Finally, Gray Eyes seemed to have found a rhythm and fucked him faster, hard enough to move that ankle a bit, which made Kendras groan.

One hand slid from his hip down to his groin, and there was an odd little sound from the other man when he touched and then took Kendras's hard cock. An admission, some kind of defeat, but Kendras couldn't care anymore when the other man began to stroke him with his thrusts.

Both together were unbearable, too good, and Kendras moved with the thrusts, feeling their skin slide together, sweat mingling as every stroke and every thrust robbed him of thought and control. He could hear the desperation in the sounds of their bodies moving, sometimes perfect together, then resisting, forcing, and yielding. He almost felt alive, and that sudden realization cut to the bone. He might just live. He might just want to go on. Then climax took him, and he only vaguely felt the other man get there, too, coming inside him.

Kendras fell onto the wet spot underneath but couldn't care about it, couldn't move because the other man lay on top of him, his semi-hard dick slipped out but rested against the space between his legs, hot and wet. He relished the soreness in that moment, the exhaustion, and the sheer satisfaction so much that he didn't try to get Gray Eyes to back off. Just a body.

"You've done this before," the other man murmured against his shoulder.

Kendras huffed. He'd have been content to just sleep. "Maybe."

"So I was right."

"About?"

"You doing this." Gray Eyes rubbed his face against Kendras's back like a cat.

"That why you were alone?" Kendras asked. "Seeking your entertainment?"

"Not quite." Gray Eyes pushed himself up and off, then got to his feet but remained close to the bed. Kendras turned his head and ended up looking at an admittedly nice pair of thighs.

“What are those?” The other man reached down to touch the back of Kendras’s hand.

“Scars.” Kendras turned the hand fully and displayed the scarred, tattooed skin. “The officer thought that the tattoos weren’t visible enough. So he cut the outlines.”

“And you call me crazy?” Gray Eyes shook his head. “And that?” He indicated Kendras’s wrist, and Kendras, half-amused, turned it to show the tattoo and scar there too. “Seventeenth? Your unit?”

Kendras shrugged. A Fetinye might not have heard of the Seventeenth or “Scorpions,” and now he likely never would. It seemed pointless to display the symbols now if the people and deeds belonging to them were memories.

The tattoos, not dark enough against his skin, and the raised scars of the etching remained. He’d worn the scorpion on his gloves, but he didn’t know where they were. The glaive was gone. Not that he could have wielded it now.

“Thanks for the money,” he said and saw a smile form on the other man’s lips. Maybe he wasn’t so bad. Maybe he didn’t mind that Kendras had helped defeat his home city. Maybe it wasn’t personal.

But there was still something tickling in the back of Kendras’s mind. If he hadn’t been so tired, he might have kept pondering it, but that, too, seemed pointless. He’d learned a long time ago to sleep when the opportunity arose, and right now, there was a bed and the low hum of satiation, and even his foot was silent. For the first time since he’d gotten injured, rest was a possibility. He closed his eyes and listened to the man dress and then pull the door shut behind him.

He awoke at a touch against his shoulder. He startled to his feet to defend himself—only to scream as pain exploded white in his vision. He reached for the bed, keeping himself upright on the bedpost when all he wanted to do was squirm like a stuck worm. The pain was so intense he retched.

Everything came back: The battle. The wound. And how he’d spent the night.



When his vision cleared, he saw an old woman look up at him with watery eyes. She was so small she could have been a young girl, which, for a moment, disoriented Kendras further. Her soft tsing sound didn't fit a demon, so he was most likely facing a mortal, despite the fact she'd just appeared in the room without warning. Not that any kind of demon would show him any interest.

"What do you... want?" Kendras rubbed his chest, and heard a heavy silver coin fall to the ground. His payment. He'd slept on it. He cursed and reached for the rolling silver disk, but the old woman was more nimble and picked it up before Kendras could reach it.

"Night shadows? It happens to many soldiers." The old woman pressed the coin into his hand, and Kendras flicked it back to where it had been.

"Be glad I didn't kill you. What do you want?"

"Look at your foot."

"Right." Kendras furrowed his brow. "And you are?"

"The Royal Guard's medic," the old woman answered. "Used to be, anyway."

She looked so ordinary and dignified that Kendras believed that outrageous claim. A flutter of hope in his chest, almost worse than being startled.

"Sit down." The old woman picked up a leather bag, formerly of good quality, embroidered with heavy silver thread. "Now lift the leg."

Kendras complied and tried not to look at the mess of swollen flesh, discolored skin and sloppily applied bandages that were dirty and grimy after two days now. "Who sent you?"

"Your boyfriend."

Kendras coughed. "What does he look like?"

The medic gave him a glance that said, "My, aren't you insatiable," then shrugged, accepting, most likely, that it wasn't her business. "A blond soldier."

"Gray eyes?"

“Yes, that would be the one,” the medic added with a hint of humor as she tested a rickety chair before she sat down on it.

Interesting connection for a Fetinye soldier, considering that Fetin and Dalman had just been at war. Why would Gray Eyes know the Dalmanyne Royal Guard medic? Unless, of course, he didn’t and had merely followed the trail to find any kind of medic.

Kendras ground his teeth when the old woman pulled his leg over and settled his knee and calf across her bony thighs. He really, really did not want to watch this.

The medic unfurled a leather roll with steel instruments and hung it from the bedpost by a loop. “Now, let’s have a look at this.”

“I can’t pay you,” Kendras said, realizing immediately after that he’d made a tactical mistake. He could have admitted to that after the treatment.

“You don’t think very highly of your lover,” the medic chided, selecting a sharp, thin blade to cut through the bandages around Kendras’s foot.

“He told you that... what we are. Why?”

“It’s not uncommon to explain such things.” The medic kept cutting at the bandages, loop by carefully selected loop, until they fell away. “How old is this?”

“Two, three days now.”

“The swelling is bad.” The medic put the blade down and ran her dry fingers down the calf, tracing the ankle, following every line there, pressing into the swelling. Kendras groaned.

“The next bit will hurt,” the old woman said, her fingers already creeping toward the middle of the foot. Kendras twitched with the impulse to fight, defend, and kill. Flashes of memories. The Scorpions’ medic tying down wounded men, Scorpions leaning with all their weight to hold a comrade for treatment, wounded men raging like lunatics, pink foam flying from bitten lips. Now he wished he had somebody to hold him down.

“What happened there?”

“Siege engine. The wheel went over my foot.”

“You were already down?”

Kendras indicated the side of his head, where a crust of blood covered part of his temple. The swelling was down, but the first two days the headache from whatever had hit him had been as crippling as that foot. “They thought I was dead. It woke me up.”

“I bet.” The medic’s hands kept testing, prodding his broken bones, and Kendras felt the nauseating pain of broken bones rubbing against each other like walking on glass shards.

“I’m amazed they didn’t amputate the foot.”

“I didn’t let them.”

“Ah, yes.” The medic then proceeded to the toes, but by now the foot felt so raw that even the lightest touch made Kendras grit his teeth and contemplate murder.

“Well.” The medic took Kendras’s leg and set it back on the bed, then rubbed her palms on her trousers. “A few bones seem to still be intact in there, but the others are ruined.”

“What does that mean,” Gray Eyes said from the door, then closed it behind himself and crossed his arms in front of his chest.

“Healing this will take at least six or eight weeks, depending how well he heals and if he has the patience and money to wait it out. Even then the foot might not get as strong as it was.”

Gray Eyes met Kendras’s gaze, then lifted his shoulders. “Amputation will turn him into a useless cripple. I’ve never seen a foot soldier fight well with a peg leg.”

“It can be done,” the medic said. “It would get him back on his feet faster and quite possibly with less pain.”

“I’d rather die,” Kendras said. He would. He had already extended his life by three days. Fetin should have ended it all, but it somehow hadn’t. He was running on borrowed time. How he spent it didn’t seem important anymore. But he’d be damned if he didn’t want to know why Gray Eyes had told the old woman he was his boyfriend.

“That can be arranged, too, if you choose.” The medic’s watery blue eyes seemed oddly compassionate as she offered him death.

“Maybe later.” Gray Eyes moved closer and cast a long look over Kendras’s leg, then up to his groin, chest, finally face. “I’d say do what you can. Bandage him up and give him something for the pain. I’ll move him into a proper place and call you if I need you again.”

“As you wish.” She released Kendras’s leg and slipped from the chair. “We’ll have to set the bones. It were best if he was unconscious.”

“No.”

She glanced at Kendras. “You’d wish you were too. He’ll have to pull the bone fragments apart while I put them in their right places. You’ll thrash like a horse and scream. He might not be strong enough to hold you still.”

If it was that bad, he might even take the bed apart. Kendras gritted his teeth. Did he trust Gray Eyes enough to be unconscious with a medic who offered to kill him if he wanted? He didn’t. He’d have struggled with a comrade, and Gray Eyes wasn’t that.

Gray Eyes watched him. “I can knock you out.” He drew a dagger from his belt, turned it in his hands to use the pommel for striking.

*Try it*, Kendras thought and clenched his jaw harder. Gods below, he didn’t have any other choice. Death, pain, more pain. How tempting.

“Believe me, if you move too much, I could do more damage than good,” the medic warned.

Threatening a medic with retaliation wasn’t wise. Kendras looked at Gray Eyes, and despite everything, gave him a quick nod.

“I’d rather not treat a broken head too,” the medic said before Gray Eyes could move, and dug in her bag for a small round stoneware bottle. “Drink this. It’ll numb you and put you to sleep for a while.”

Kendras took the bottle, broke the wax seal and pulled the cork out. He recognized the smell from something the Scorpions’ medic had used. The same gods-awful bitterness that made most men throw up once they came back. He drank it and handed the bottle back, feeling the oily liquid run down toward his guts, leaving a foul taste in its wake. His mouth numbed first, which was a blessing. He settled back

on his elbows. The numbness spread through his body, and he began to feel heavy and weak. Tired.

“You’ll have to hold the heel and pull the toes away from the ankle. Keep them that way, while I move the bones into position,” the medic instructed Gray Eyes. “Don’t let go until I say so.”

Kendras lay back and closed his eyes. Giving in to the drugs was easy. He didn’t want to be around when this happened.

WHEN Kendras woke, the medic was just pulling a few rolls of fresh linen bandages from her bag and to finish wrapping up Kendras’s foot tightly. “It feels a little more secure now, but under no circumstances should the foot hit the ground.”

“Yes.” Kendras tried to ignore the nausea in his stomach, instead watched Gray Eyes. He’d changed clothes and now wore a clean shirt over his leather trousers and heavy boots. A sword hung at his side, a simple weapon that clearly had seen use and possibly recently.

“This, a pinch of it three times a day or when the pain gets too bad, in hot water. Boiling, not just steaming. Always with something to eat.” The medic pulled a waxed linen bag from her pack. “That should get you through the weeks ahead.”

Kendras didn’t like that Gray Eyes took the bag, but there was precious little he could do. After all, the man had paid for it.

“Let’s get you out of the city,” Gray Eyes said.

“Yes, darling.” Kendras pursed his lips as if amused but gave the man a hard stare. Gray Eyes had the decency to look a little hurt.

Kendras dressed in his leathers, a slow and laborious process when it came to the trousers, while the medic gave Gray Eyes more instructions.

Kendras put on one of the boots, but not the other, then wrapped himself in the leather top, fastening it. He’d done this so often the routine was both calming and disturbing. What about the others? There had been heavy losses, but he couldn’t be the last one, could he? Maybe

they had regrouped and buried the dead. He'd have to find them. Once he could move enough to have any chance to find them. That meant doing everything to ensure he didn't end up a useless cripple.

"Hey." Gray Eyes stepped closer, knife out, and Kendras wondered if he'd attack him, but the man did nothing but cut open the already ruined boot with fast, forceful motions, splitting it into two halves he pried apart before sliding Kendras's bad foot into the boot, hardly touching it.

"Can you ride?"

"Man or horse?"

Gray Eyes laughed. "I have no doubt you ride a man well, but right now my mind's on getting you out of the city. This is no place for you... or even me." He wrapped up Kendras's armor in a linen bag, then offered Kendras a wooden crutch. "I got you this, but you will have to ride. It's a fair way away."

"I'm not going back to Fetin."

"Neither am I." Gray Eyes hoisted the armor on his back then held out the crutch to Kendras. "Come."

## Chapter Two

GRAY EYES helped him down the stairs, out on the street and then onto the back of a horse. Kendras didn't comment on any of this. Wherever Gray Eyes was taking him, it would beat begging on the streets. In his state, he couldn't fend for himself. So he did what was necessary. No alternative. It had served him well before.

Thankfully, their horses were even-tempered well-fed geldings. His might have been a cart horse, as Kendras's inexperience didn't encourage it to do what it wanted. Gray Eyes tied its reins to the other's saddle, but that seemed hardly necessary. Both horses walked side by side like they'd done so all their lives. Like men, horses were creatures of habit.

They drew little attention on their way out of the city. The guard was more concerned with soldiers streaming toward the city rather than away from it. Already, the ocean priesthood had decreed a "fortnight of peace", which meant that anybody spilling human blood inside the city would forfeit their lives. Kendras had expected to see the tidal cages well-filled with corpses when he'd returned, but maybe that had been too early. Men's hunger for other men's blood had been sated during the battle of Fetin. Building fresh appetite might take a few more days.

They followed the road that wound itself up the mountains—the Shoulders of Golgat—that protected Dalman from the land side. Dalman itself was a formidable fortress, surrounded on three sides by the sea, its white walls both attractive and impenetrable. Its harbor lay nestled below the heights by the river, the space between the white

walls and the harbor taken over by the seedy underbelly of the city. Those that couldn't afford the city's taxes lived there in a labyrinth of constantly changing shelters. Riffraff, strangers, criminals, and beggars roamed the streets and were at each other's tender mercies. Sometimes, the city guard showed up for the exercise, breaking a few heads, leaving some bleeding corpses in the streets to keep the lawless in line.

By contrast, Fetin sat further inland between two mountains and the intersection of the northern-southern and western-eastern trade routes. Fetin trusted its walls and network of spies to keep it safe. The two cities hadn't been so much rivals as brothers, with the smaller brother constantly testing his limits, until, finally, the bigger brother brought him low. Part of Kendras hoped Fetin would never recover from the attack. It was not something he wanted to remember.

"How far is it?"

Gray Eyes glanced at him. "We should arrive before dark. Since we're on the road together, you could tell me your name."

"Kendras."

"You can call me Steel."

"I can. Where does that name come from?"

"My eyes." Steel shrugged. "I assume. It works for me."

Kendras fell silent and shifted uneasily in the saddle. He'd hurt tomorrow. Well, worse than he already did. His horse took no notice and merely plodded along beside Steel's.

"Yes, they say people with gray eyes have no soul," Kendras added after a while.

"Nothing to lose then." Steel grinned. "It's a boon in getting hired."

*Clearly a man without soul has no conscience either,* Kendras thought.

The sun was sinking toward the horizon, turning the sky blood red and bruised purple, when they took a path toward a farm. Fields lined the path, but the slaves were already being counted and locked in



for the night. A couple of guards nodded toward Steel and then returned to their duties.

The house at the end of the path was one of those lush estates that fed Dalman, producing the grain and wine and meat that the city needed to live. Why would somebody who owned this trawl the taverns for companions? Who was this man?

“Nice place.”

“It’s not mine.” Steel handed the horse over to a slave girl. He stepped to Kendras. “Take my shoulder. Slowly. That’s it.” He steadied Kendras, holding him around the waist. Then he pulled the crutch free and handed it to Kendras. “Remember what the medic said.”

He walked slowly enough for Kendras to catch up. In the inner courtyard, two men amused themselves with tossing chicken bones amongst the dogs.

“Ah, our glorious leader is back,” the taller, bony man said with a half-assed, semi-drunk salute. “Looks like he brought fresh meat too.”

“Shut up,” Steel said. He led Kendras down toward the guest quarters. Kendras didn’t speak until Steel opened a door for him.

“What is this?”

“What do you mean?”

“Fresh meat? Haven’t been called that in a while.”

Steel cleared his throat. “They were drunk.”

Kendras just gave him a level stare.

“You need a place to heal. Well, this is it.”

“Who owns this?”

“Couple of important people who hired me.”

“And where are they?”

“Off to Dalman.”

“Leaving you in charge? A Fetinye?”

Steel shrugged. “If you don’t believe me...” He left that hanging in the air, then added, “Listen, I’m the best bet you have. Those boys... yes, they belong to me, but they won’t bother you.”

“What are you, Steel?”

“Since you defeated my hometown, I’m a mercenary.”

“You made good use of your time since Fetin’s fall.”

“I didn’t say I was there when it fell,” Steel snapped and looked like he was forcing himself to remain calm. “Right the fuck now I don’t know if my people made it out all right, or who’s raped and who’s dead. Or both.” He swallowed. “Rest up. The slaves will feed you.”

“I raped nobody.”

“I said *rest up*.” Steel exhaled sharply and took another step back.

Kendras withdrew into the room and only heard Steel order a passing slave to look after the guest before falling asleep.

He woke when his door opened, and Steel entered the room. The man paused, stared down at him as if trying to see every detail in the gloom.

“You haven’t come to cut my throat,” Kendras murmured.

“No. Quite the opposite.”

Was this how it would be now? He’d been quartered like a guest, but when the master of the house had an itch, he’d get fucked like a slave. Steel’s erection left no doubt of that.

“So what are you waiting for?” Kendras kept his tone flat, making it a challenge rather than a question.

“Maybe for you to tell me your price.”

No slave, then. A whore. Not much of a step up. Maybe it amused the mercenary to bait him first. Kendras huffed. “I’m here on your sufferance. You said it. I have nowhere else to go.” He was only too aware that Steel could easily pull the covers down and fuck him. He wasn’t in any position or state to fight. And if it had been one of the Scorpions, he wouldn’t have minded, but Steel was an outsider.

He held Steel’s gaze, knowing he’d get fucked in return for a safe bed, meals, and a roof over his head at least until he could travel again. For the second time in his life, he needed a stranger’s kindness to live and maybe fight another day, if his foot ever healed. The last time that

had happened, it had changed his life forever. Compared to the officer, Steel was a nobody.

“You don’t have the stomach for it. Steel.” He added the man’s name as a backhanded reminder.

Steel’s eyes narrowed. “I’m not here to rape you.”

“Oh, really?” Kendras’s grin widened. “If you choose to lie with scorpions...” *You need a taste for poison.* The sentence had never been truer. He wouldn’t dishonor his comrades now.

“Then what?”

Kendras shrugged and pushed the blanket down, baring his chest and stomach, all only hints in the dark. His hand pushed the blanket deeper, down to show off pubes and part of his cock. Steel’s expression almost made Kendras laugh.

“A silver coin bought you once. How much do you charge now?”

“I didn’t charge,” Kendras said. “You offered.”

“Will another coin be enough?”

“Why so angry?” Kendras lifted his thigh and pushed the blanket to the side until it only covered one leg. The one with the bad foot. He had no desire to display his injuries.

“I don’t have my silver here.”

Kendras huffed laughter. “Then fetch it.”

Steel straightened.

*Yes, I’m playing with you. I have you by the tail, and you squirm. How long will you fight? Which one will win out—pride or need? Do you dare the scorpion?*

“Unless,” Kendras added.

“Unless?”

“You take it up the ass.”

Steel recoiled. “No.” He gritted his teeth. “I... don’t do that,” he explained, as if to pacify Kendras. “I could suck you.”

Kendras watched him, as if considering the offer, but didn’t answer.

Finally, Steel asked, “So?”

“Go get your money. You can still walk with that.” He let his hand drop to his groin, tugging his cock, which was now half-hard. He liked the idea of fucking Steel in return—and none too gently, either.

Steel turned to leave.

“And oil,” Kendras added, voice low and level.

By the time Steel returned, as commanded, with oil and a silver coin, Steel was no less hard. If anything, he was harder. Interesting. Here was a man who wanted more the harder he had to fight for it. Kendras could have told him that was a weakness when it came to sex. The easy victories were just as good as the difficult ones. They could easily have gotten together like soldiers often did, but not after the first silver had changed hands. It was his way of settling his scores. Not a chance encounter, no mutual favor. Steel would either take it or pay up. Very easy.

Steel set the oil and the lantern down and turned up the wick. The light tore Kendras’s bandaged foot out of the gloom.

The mercenary let the coin play over his fingers, casting flickering reflections over Kendras’s body, forcing Kendras to give him his attention. Kendras glanced at the coin, then up into his face, and waited.

Would he place it on the nightstand, or flick it onto his body, demanding he turn around, then fuck him hard, with anger? Kendras turned his hand to lie, palm up, on his stomach, and Steel simply placed the coin inside.

That sealed the deal.

Steel stroked lower to touch Kendras’s cock, which hardened fast in his grip. Steel swiftly shed his tunic and trousers so he had both hands free to touch Kendras’s skin. Kendras watched Steel’s face; the man looked like he’d never seen cock. *Maybe not that size*, Kendras thought without a hint of tenderness.

Steel settled between Kendras’s legs, and Kendras opened them, keeping one foot off the bed as the medic had cautioned him. Steel scooted up, opening Kendras’s legs wider and further, exposing his ass.

Kendras only hoped that the fucking wouldn't be harsh enough to unsettle the broken bones.

"I'll have you like that, but not exactly like that." Steel ran his hands along Kendras's inner thighs. "Turn toward the edge of the bed." He tapped him on the knee and got off the bed himself.

Kendras positioned himself, legs in the air, ass exposed over the frame of the bed. Steel took the moment to oil his cock and coat his fingers, then stood between Kendras's legs.

Steel snatched a pillow, jammed in under Kendras's ass to expose him further, and wiped his oiled fingers in Kendras's crack. He plunged into Kendras in one harsh, deep thrust. Kendras grunted at the invasion, but in his position, he was powerless, and his first priority was to keep his bad foot out of the way. Steel, and what he was doing, came a distant second, and Steel seemed to realize that. His thrusts were harsh and desperate, angry, but Kendras knew no man who could just stop. Well, one, but he might be dead.

Kendras took the fucking like he'd take a whipping, in fierce silence, betraying only what little could absolutely be forced from him, breathing harshly not from lust but from the exertion of resistance and keeping his foot out of the way. He didn't struggle, didn't defend himself. He stared at Steel and right through him, withdrawn, far away from this.

Steel had to work hard to get off. The initial anger on his features melted into desperation and was soon tinged with disgust, but by then he seemed unable to stop himself, and he rode it toward completion.

*Just like with a whore, isn't it?* Kendras thought, just before Steel pulled free and wiped the sweat from his face.

Once they were no longer connected, Kendras pushed himself back to lie properly on the bed, one leg down, the other dangling over the bed frame. He ignored his erection, wouldn't touch himself with Steel watching. But Steel stared at it, hunger and exasperation mixing with the slack expression on his face.

Kendras would have liked nothing better than to grab Steel's neck and feed him that cock, or tumble him on the bed and thrust it inside

him, but whores didn't do that. And he might get kicked out on the street for it. The thought sobered him.

Kendras pointedly followed Steel's gaze. "You can have that too."

"You should pay me for it," Steel grouched but climbed on the bed. He kissed Kendras's stomach first, traced his tongue along the V-lines running from his hips toward his groin.

Kendras remained completely silent when Steel took the head in his mouth, slowly, despite how practiced he clearly was. Licking and then sucking on the head, running his tongue around it, offering touch with lips and tongue, sliding it along the slit—Steel concentrated entirely on his cock and nothing else.

Every now and then, Steel took as much as he could, and then pulled back while sucking, resisting letting go of what he'd managed to fit inside. He took Kendras's balls and squeezed them in his hand.

Kendras's stomach and thigh muscles tensed and flexed with Steel's ministrations, and Steel took his cues from the responses of Kendras's muscles, from stomach to legs. He upped the ante, sucking and squeezing now to get him off.

When Steel pulled back, Kendras put his hand against the man's neck, one tensing of muscles away from pulling Steel back onto his cock. Steel blew cool breath over his wet tip, and the hand that had been fondling his balls moved between Kendras's legs, finding his opening.

With the oil and his own seed, Steel pushed two fingers easily into him, fucking him again now, with more skill and more endurance. Only then did Steel resume the sucking. Kendras gritted his teeth, grabbed Steel's sweaty neck harder and pulled him farther onto his cock. His hips bucked upward, the growing need washing his disdain and his stoic calm away.

Despite his best efforts and all his skill (and Kendras had to give him that), Steel choked when Kendras forced his way down into his throat, tried hard to pull away, but Kendras wouldn't let him until his orgasm exploded, and he came into Steel's throat.

Choking and spluttering, Steel had no choice but to take it. He all but jumped back when Kendras, sated and languid now, released him.

“Bastard,” Steel muttered, rubbing his throat.

“You’re right, though,” Kendras said. “I should have paid you for that.”

Steel laughed. “Think I earned my coin back?”

Kendras regarded him from under heavy lids. “Depends what you’re planning to do with that hard-on.”

“Can I fuck you again?”

Kendras shook his head. “Come here.”

Steel came closer. Kendras nudged him to climb on top of him, before Kendras spit into his hand and closed it around the man’s cock. He’d done this a hundred times with a comrade in need of relief. Nothing to it.

Steel thrust against the hand, and, settling lower, against Kendras’s tensed front, soon began to pant with need despite the fact he’d come not too long ago. Steel kept most of his weight off Kendras, supporting himself on his elbows while thrusting. Kendras slung his leg across both of Steel’s, holding the man tighter, almost like a lover or a comrade, giving him more friction.

While sliding flesh on flesh, smells of sweat and sex mingled in one glorious rush of exertion. Kendras humored Steel, getting him off like Steel was the more inexperienced man. Maybe he was, but Kendras never thought of himself as anybody’s “lover.”

With a desperate sound, Steel came, and Kendras kept jerking him off through orgasm, milking his seed from him until he had nothing more to give.

Steel rolled off, but seemed otherwise unable to move. Neither did Kendras. Instead, he let the clean linen bed sheet soak up his sweat and breathed in their mingled scents. Steel lay next to him, close enough that Kendras felt the warmth of his shoulder against his own.

Kendras placed his left hand on his stomach, noticing how the light from the lantern threw the scars on the back of his hand into relief.

The scars outlined the black scorpion tattoo and made it more visible against his dark skin. The scorpion's tail went past the wrist, the pincers on the first and third knuckle.

"I didn't know you could tattoo black skin at all," Steel said, looking at his hand.

Kendras turned his wrist, displaying the "17" tattooed on the inside, right on top of his pulse. No scars here.

"Tell me about your unit."

Kendras glanced at him. "How much have you heard about the battle?"

"Dalman won, much pillaging, rape, and burning in Fetin before the Lady Protector got the king to stop his troops."

"I was not around when that happened." Kendras rubbed the scorpion with the thumb of his right hand, which had the exact same tattoo, only mirrored, the tail curved the other way.

"You were wounded before?"

Kendras just nodded. "We faced the Flames when they led the charge to break the siege."

"They must have been desperate to use the Lady Protector's personal guard. Why you?"

Kendras huffed. "Seems the king thought we were the best he had."

"Then why have I never heard of the Scorpions?"

Kendras shrugged. "We were a small unit, rarely more than twenty men. Those that matter know us."

"How many are left?"

"I have no way of knowing." Kendras's eyes traveled down Steel's front. "What about you?"

Steel scratched his chest idly, as if to gather his thoughts. "I was more a bodyguard than a soldier. Trained by an independent sword master. I do what I do to eat. My eyes are a big asset; it's easy getting hired for the dirty work if people think you don't fear for your soul because you have none."



“Do you share that idea?”

“I couldn’t tell the difference, could I? Maybe I don’t, but I don’t know what it feels like to have one.”

Kendras half-turned to meet his gaze. Steel shifted uneasily.

“The other men?”

“They stick to me because I can find them work.”

“Who are they?”

“Puppy was the man who was asleep. Everybody loves him, hence the name. The long thin one is Stick. They are both hired swords, I know them from my bodyguarding days. And then there’s Widow. He’s... different.”

“Not a hired sword?”

Steel grimaced. “He kills because he enjoys it. He called himself Widomaker, but Puppy decided that name’s too long, so ‘Widow’ stuck.”

“You’re not a real unit, just hired swords sticking together because you can find dirty work.”

“To be fair, we’re good at what we do.”

“But you’re not a unit. You’re not a commanding officer.”

“No.” Steel shrugged. “That’s not how it works.”

Kendras reached down to pull up the light blanket and adjusted the pillow, then settled in comfortably. He now knew more about Steel—his weakness. Not an officer, no real skill to lead, no ironclad fist that kept these men together. Under the first onslaught, they’d crumble like a sandcastle licked away by the first wave.

What little he’d given Steel, the man had let down his guard and given him a lot more. To the right man, Steel might be an asset. But when it came down to it, Steel was just a hired sword without much claim to anything, least of all proud military history, or even *any* kind of history.

*We, unlike any other unit in the world, have a memory. We remember everything.*

Kendras jerked awake. He'd almost heard the officer's voice. Not admonishing him, just calmly there. He'd rested enough, indulged his pain enough.

*Never stop fighting.*

He had. Again. He rolled out of bed and let Steel sleep. The early gray light of morning seeped in through the wooden blinds. Farm. There had to be a smithy. He remembered the guard at the gate had carried a pike. The solution was so obvious Kendras cursed himself for not seeing it sooner.

## Chapter Three

WEARING his heavy leathers, Kendras stood next to one of the two anvils, giving the hammer a rest after all the work he'd done. He pulled the front of the leathers open to allow the light breeze coming in through the door to cool him. He pushed the scale armor that hung from a beam to the side to make out whose legs were approaching him.

Steel. He'd slept in. Kendras wondered if Steel had stayed in Kendras's bed and guessed from the man's expression that he didn't like losing the morning. Well, that was just too damn bad. Kendras's hands trailed along the scales that he'd replaced in the last few hours, then adjusted the roll of the pulley to lift the scale armor further up.

He then took the lightest of the hammers and formed a fresh scale.

The armor was his second priority. The first had been to be able to stand without a crutch. The solution was simple. The beggars in the streets of Dalman had provided that inspiration. He'd built himself a peg leg from wood and leather that he'd fastened to his bent knee. If it worked for Dalman's beggars, it sure could work for one of Dalman's finest. Not that he had any loyalties left for a city that had condemned him to die, all those years ago.

The design wasn't perfect, the leather still chafed and the straps were digging into his flesh, but it kept his foot out of the way and allowed him to stand and walk without too much pain. It even gave him enough stability to work, and maybe, later, to fight. Once he could

fight, he'd leave here, but for that, he needed a weapon, which would be his third priority.

Kendras plunged the scale into the water bucket and then released it again to hammer holes into the piece of metal.

"You've been busy," Steel said from the door.

Kendras lifted his head for a moment, then took a different hammer and punched the first hole into the scale. "I woke up early."

"You built a leg, now you're fixing your armor. What's next?"

Kendras nodded toward the pike leaning against the door. "A glaive. I just need to make a blade."

"How did you get the pike?"

"Guard at the gate sold his for half your coin."

Steel leaned against the door, one arm up, hips tilted like he was a whore offering his wares. Getting the work done was more important.

"I thought you were gone."

"You thought wrong." Kendras's lips twitched with a smile. "I'm not healed."

"Last night..." Steel lifted his shoulders.

"Yes." Kendras merely agreed and punched another hole, then examined the scale. "I like it. You're right."

"I knew that. Just..."

"Time to come clean, Steel. I know you're not keeping me around for my pretty eyes."

"Your eyes actually do have something to do with it." Steel smiled. "No. I needed a blue-eyed, black-skinned Dalmany warrior."

"You needed a warrior too?"

"It helps."

"A job you have?"

"Yes. I can't tell you more yet, only that some very powerful people are keeping us ready here until we'll be needed. Then we need to strike hard and fast."

“What’s in it for me?”

“A chance to heal in peace, all costs paid. Food, safety, slaves for your bed. We assume it’ll be two months. Maybe your foot is good by then.”

“If it isn’t?”

“Then I’ve done a good deed keeping a fellow soldier from begging on the streets.”

“You still don’t strike me as the charitable type. Despite how you sucked me off.”

Steel looked about to snap back but then paused when Kendras grinned at him. “Well, you let me sleep.”

“No point kicking you out.” Kendras bent to adjust the leather straps of the peg leg and walked, insecurely but with his own strength, to the armor to examine it, fingers testing the leather and the metal scales fastened to it.

“You can build your own gear from scratch?”

Kendras continued his examination. “Our officer held it that we cannot be slowed down by queuing in front of a smithy. Many pieces of armor and weapons break during war; we cannot wait for days to get them fixed and be toothless in the meanwhile.” Quoting the officer. This truth had been so often repeated it might just as well have been a prayer.

*If you want to wait for the smith to catch up... we have a war to fight.*

“In the end, this armor is my skin. If it is damaged, I am damaged.” Kendras gave him a curious look. “How do you do it?”

“I get a replacement. Plenty of spares after war.”

Kendras smiled. “True.”

There was an understanding between them now, comradeship almost, as if Steel trusted him a little. It wasn’t what Kendras had set out to win, but it did make things easier.

“Well then. Good to see you’re still here.” Steel knocked on the door frame by way of goodbye and left Kendras to his work.

After he'd finished fixing the scales back onto the armor, Kendras wiped the armor down with an oily rag and rolled it up. Movements he'd done a thousand times but did with religious observance. The drill sat bone-deep and doing it haphazardly would make him feel faintly guilty, like the officer would find out and call him out on it in front of everybody else.

He dipped his hands into the bucket, splashed the water over his chest and head, then wiped it off his face with his hand. The rest could dry in the heat.

By now the sun was high up in the sky, and movement on the farm had slowed until the worst heat dissipated.

He crossed the courtyard, noting the position of guards and a whipping post for quick, rough justice, which made his shoulder blades itch.

He remembered his own hands closing around a length of rope that held his wrists above his head. It was nothing he'd ever forget, but worse was the memory of the executioner's touch.

Kneeling on his bed, condemned to die, the brute fucking him with no regard for his pain. If he had wed the ropemaker's daughter the next day or been drowned in the sea, that would have been his last night, fucked bloody and miserable by a man who'd killed more people than he as a soldier ever would.

Hatred had blossomed from the vine of contempt in his heart, flowers of dark, grim splendor.

*Eight years ago*

“HOW much for the boy?”

“He'll die on the morrow.”

“I'm sure we can come to an agreement there. You've drowned a bag of stones before.”

“They will see that the stones are not struggling.”

“Maybe some merciful soul has paid you to strangle him before he goes into the water. They sometimes do that, don’t they, when there is a family to mourn their own.”

“Pay me eight silver and the sack will be full of stones.”

“Ah, but he’s not a virgin anymore after two nights in your house. Six is the most I’d pay for him on the slave market, and that would be for one who could get to work immediately.”

“If you buy him for a whorehouse, I should warn he has no talents for pleasure.”

“The warning is heeded. Six silver, and one to tell no one.”

The first thing Kendras had seen of the man buying him was a broad, dark-clad figure who barely looked at Kendras who was on his belly, naked, legs spread, hands tied to the bed frame.

His ass hurt. The executioner had taken him many times, day and night, until Kendras didn’t struggle anymore. Against a man three times his weight and twice as broad in the shoulder, he’d had to resign himself to the fact he was nothing more than a toy whose resistance went largely unnoticed.

He’d learned why the other street rats had warned him against accepting money for that kind of favor, and Kendras never had, even if his dark skin attracted more than a few suitors.

He’d lived off stealing and later, violence, growing into a street tough, a thug, and a murderer, at times, when the price and the victim were right. He ate when he had money and didn’t when he hadn’t, and sometimes charity got him through a harsh winter, when he could find a bedroll in an attic and wasn’t immediately expelled.

He lived like a street dog, always ready to fight to the death for what little he owned, even for the space where he slept. In the dark underbelly of Dalman, this was how people lived. He’d never known anything else.

He must have had parents, and parents who looked different to most people in Dalman, but he didn’t remember them. He didn’t even know if they had given him his name or whether he’d chosen it by himself.

Then one night he got into a fight with the night watch, who'd attempted to catch him to sell to the army. An army that was running out of volunteers as the seemingly endless war dragged out, resulting in patrician funerals at least twice a week as even the officers began to die.

In all honesty, he'd considered often whether to join up, learn the weapons trade, and have a full belly plus one warm meal a day, but he'd seen the stony-eyed beggars with their unit tattoos and horrific injuries, which, out on the street, festered and often killed them. He never forgot that Dalman's "best sons and daughters" were cast aside after the war and after they had given their blood and a limb or two.

The man who'd bought him pulled dark leather gloves from his hands and tested the knots of the rope that held him, then reached back to his belt and pulled a curved dagger in complete silence. No hiss from the steel or the sheath, and Kendras thought that would be perfect for killing a man in the dark. Then his hands fell to the mattress, lifeless.

Deft fingers cut the loops from his flesh. A strong thumb checked the deep furrow of the rope.

"Move your fingers."

Kendras tried, but it was like his body couldn't remember it had fingers to move. A surge of fear came over him, and he struggled to his knees, wincing when the pain flared up from his ass. Worse was the leer from the executioner, whose bulge told Kendras in no uncertain terms what would have happened again if the stranger hadn't paid for him. He clambered to his feet, nearly crying out when he had to move again.

The stranger had dark eyes and a short beard, skin darker than that of the executioner, but lighter than Kendras's. His palms, when he sheathed the dagger, bore a double scorpion tattoo.

"Did he have any clothes?" The stranger asked.

The executioner sat down at his table, returning to grinding up herbs and mixing medicines. They said nobody knew the human body better than somebody who had to kill it for a living, and during the last two days and nights, many customers had come to ask for aid, women



eager to kill a child in their bellies or men asking to strengthen their manhood.

Kendras didn't know about preventing births, but the executioner's stamina in fucking him had been entirely too great to be normal.

The stranger waited patiently, but when it became clear that no answer was forthcoming, Kendras hoped that the dagger would be drawn again to threaten the brute. Instead, the other man reached to the fastening of his cloak and pulled it off, revealing leathers like those worn under heavy armor and close-cropped black hair. With his ascetic, sharp features and long, thin nose, the man was nothing short of striking, and Kendras's guts tightened at the man's calm air of command. This certainly wasn't a whoremaster.

The cloak fell around Kendras's shoulders, hiding him down to his feet in the wide, woolen folds, and the smell of man and leather still clung to it. Kendras pulled up the hood and then a strong arm encircled his waist, helping him move down the stairs.

The executioner lived in the furthest tower overlooking the ocean—to the jeers of the gathered masses, the men and women condemned to die were tossed into the ocean below, sewn into a rough canvas bag.

Depending on the executioner's choice, they crashed onto the white, bone-littered rocks below, where sea gulls tore open the canvas and crabs and birds feasted on the water-softened flesh. Or, alternately, the bag went down to the deep end, where no rocks held up the descent into the water. Death by drowning or shattered bones was a choice the executioner made, but he'd told Kendras that he accepted favors from those who felt that one or the other was the better way to die.

Of course, once confined in the bag, they had no way to demand that they go to their favored death.

"Can you move your fingers now?" the stranger asked.

"I don't know." Kendras tried, but his hands were numb and didn't respond to any command. Would the man take him back? "They will. I know they will," he pleaded, hating his voice sounding so feeble. "I'll work. I'll pay you back."

“You’re now my slave, boy.” The man gave him a wry smile, but it wasn’t unkind. Kendras fell silent and regarded the man’s leathers. Maybe he’d just care for the armor and weapons and horse. Cook the man’s meals. He hoped he didn’t have to warm his bed. That would hurt, and the thought of being fucked again made him want to die. Then at least it would be over.

“What kind of slave?”

“That depends whether we can get your hands back to life.” The soldier steadied him by the shoulder, leading him along the city walls. Whores offered their services, catcalling the soldier, offering to join them both in bed, boasting skills that Kendras, despite growing up on the street, didn’t know existed. But then, they’d never considered him a paying customer.

The soldier waved them off and took larger strides, ensuring that Kendras kept up with him. They eventually arrived at a town house, where the soldier produced a key.

He locked the door again behind them. Sounds of other occupants made Kendras aware that he was securely trapped. Laughter and boisterous talk sounded through the walls and doors, and the soldier pushed him through the door into a large room.

A dozen or so soldiers looked up from what they were doing, sitting around the fire, eating, talking, drinking, mending their armor, and sharpening their blades. Kendras felt like a lamb pushed between wolves, too aware that he was naked underneath the cape.

The soldier pulled back his hood. “Here he is,” he announced.

There were a few approving nods, which only served to bewilder Kendras further.

“Medic, he’ll need your attentions. Ertas, time to part with some of those extra shirts and trousers you’ve carried all the way from the Gorge. Ah, Selvan, get him a bowl of soup and cut him some extra sausage. Not that he didn’t have enough sausage today, but he’ll need to get his strength back.”

The men laughed, and those he’d called out rushed to fulfill the orders.

A young soldier with a shaved head touched Kendras on the shoulder. "Come upstairs."

"It's all right. He'll look at your hands and your other injuries."

Kendras stiffened, wanted to say he was fine, but if he was a slave now, nothing he said meant anything. Resigned, he followed the young soldier upstairs and shed the cloak when he was ordered to.

The medic rolled out his instruments, then went to fetch hot water and a rag. He examined Kendras's swollen wrists first, bent his fingers and his hands. "All you need is some rest," he said finally, but nevertheless he mixed some herbs into a thick greenish paste, coated some bandages, and wound them around Kendras's wrists. The cool wetness was the first pleasure in ages. Kendras felt so grateful he found it impossible to speak.

"Let's see the rest of you," the medic said. "Get on that bed, on all fours."

"No."

The medic had already dipped the rag into the water. "I won't do the same to you. I don't like fucking a wound."

Kendras shuddered.

"All right." The medic reached to his belt and offered him a bottle. "Two sips of this."

Kendras smelled but could only make out bitter herbs and strong alcohol. "What is this?"

"It'll help." The medic began washing his hands, rubbing the soap deep into his skin. The sounds were too loud in the room. "Don't make me get two of the others and hold you down."

Kendras took two deep swallows of the foul liquid and handed the bottle back. The heat spread immediately in his belly then raced through his veins up to his head. He hadn't eaten in two days, so he staggered as he tried to move.

"Maybe that was a bit too much," the medic said with a shrug before he caught Kendras around the waist and led him to the bed. Kendras felt himself being positioned on hands and knees, facing the

wall, then cool fingers slid between his cheeks and prodded at the source of his pain.

“You’re doing well.” A wet rag began to clean him, every touch secure and soothing through the haze of the strong drink. He shuddered when the fingers entered him, but they were slick and careful, pulling only briefly.

“How’s he doing?” the soldier who’d saved him asked from the door.

“He’s been well-used. Thin soup and ale for a week, then I’ll look at this again.”

“But not broken?”

“Hard to tell. He won’t die from it. But he’s not going to follow in Selvan’s footsteps. Not that we need two of that kind.” The medic chuckled.

“No, I doubt he’s quite as cock-hungry.” The older soldier smiled. “And he’s not here for his looks, anyway.”

“I figured.” The medic washed the blood and dirt from Kendras’s legs.

“I’ve seen him fight three men from the night watch, each one heavier and better armored and armed than him. This one knows no fear.”

“That’s a dangerous trait in a man,” the medic said.

“Oh, he’ll learn fear all right.” The older soldier stepped closer to the bed. Through the haze, Kendras realized he was completely naked and wide open to the man’s gaze. But somehow he failed to get his body to move, as if it all didn’t matter.

The salve the medic had applied felt like bliss, numbing and cooling, and he lay down on his side, head too heavy to think. He noted how the medic dried away most of the water, then pulled a blanket over him.

Much later, another soldier appeared and left him a bowl of soup. Nobody was around to help him eat, but Kendras managed. The herbs,

tiredness, and the most substantial meal he'd had in four days quickly put him to sleep.

The soldiers, he learned, were the Seventeenth, the Scorpions, every single one of them chosen by the older man who'd rescued him. They only called him "the officer," and that was how the man ran his outfit. He saw a criminal condemned to die he liked the looks of, and he bought him. He saw a slave that he thought would make a good soldier, and he bought him. Rumor had it that he had won Selvan at dice, but even though Selvan had become a competent soldier and the officer had offered him freedom and the scorpion tattoos, he much preferred being a slave.

Kendras learned the reason one evening when he had mostly healed and went into the common sleeping quarters to find the medic. The medic, however, sat in the middle of the room, trousers undone, his thick cock spearing Selvan's ass.

The slave moved frantically, his face a distorted mask of lust. Several of the other Scorpions watched, and when the medic jerked and came with a shout, two men pulled Selvan off the medic's lap and fed him two big cocks at the same time, while a third plunged into Selvan's ass. Kendras noted that Selvan's own cock was encased in a hard leather shell, but there was no doubt the slave welcomed the attentions of so many men, sucking hungrily on both and rocking back against the third as much as he could. When those men had finished, more took their places, one at his ass, another fucking the slave's throat.

In the corner sat the officer, watching, legs spread, one hand resting on his groin. Kendras couldn't tear his eyes away from the way the slave was being used until he very nearly collapsed with exhaustion.

When all the Scorpions had satisfied their need and Selvan, dirty, sweaty and defiled, was on hands and knees, shaking, the officer knelt down at his side and removed the cup holding his cock. Kendras had never seen anything like the metal ring that held Selvan's cock and balls tightly, or anybody who was so desperate. The officer's hand closed around the slave's cock, and he did nothing but brush a thumb over the tip. With a cry, Selvan spilled over the officer's hand. The

officer stroked him until the spurts died down and the slave collapsed with exhaustion but still crawled up a few inches to kiss the officer's boot.

Then the officer looked up and noticed Kendras, who did and did not understand.

The officer wiped his hand on a discarded shirt, then headed for the door. "Follow me," he said as he passed Kendras, and Kendras obeyed.

In the officer's bedroom that he sometimes even used, the man turned to him. "While I own you, this is not what you'll do, unless you have the same need as Selvan."

"No."

"No, you didn't strike me as the type. You're more likely to give Selvan more of what he craves than join him on your knees." The officer smiled. "You're very nearly healed, so I will put you to training. If you become a good soldier, you'll receive your freedom and the scorpions. If you become a fair soldier, you'll only receive your freedom to seek your own master and destiny. If you end up a bad soldier, we'll sell you on and fate will have you. It's better than being dead, I understand."

Kendras swallowed. It seemed like the fairest offer he'd received in his life. And so far, nobody here had treated him badly, but there was no doubt that this could change from one heartbeat to the next and without warning, either. "I will repay you the silver."

"That is not why I bought you. We're under strength; you'll soon replace a man we're missing. Silver does not guard your shoulder against the enemy." Kendras noted that the officer never spoke of "an" enemy, but always of "the" enemy, but he didn't have much time to think about it.

His training began the next morning. Over the weeks, his weaknesses were slowly chipped away as he trained with the others, who at the beginning held back for his benefit but soon ran him ragged. It felt like he was fighting for his life all the time. He ended up in the dust a lot, coughing and spitting out blood. But always he got up, took

a mouthful of water, and returned for more pain, as he'd done all his life.

In the night, the Scorpions paired off; some had a favorite, others used Selvan for sport and pleasure. Kendras received what he thought were offers—glances, lingering touches on his shoulder—but even though he was painfully hard when he watched the men fuck, he shied away from those kinds of games. Despite the fascination, the executioner's treatment would last him a lifetime.

One night, though, Selvan crawled into his bed and sucked him to hardness, then climbed on top, fucking himself on him, and Kendras learned how to hold back his own orgasm when Selvan pressed the root of his cock. He also learned how to topple a man and hold him down, the blond slave a more than willing prisoner as Kendras fucked him.

Selvan then sucked him back to life, and they repeated the game until the slave was sore and begging to receive his reward. Kendras removed the cup and stroked him to completion, Selvan kissing his free hand with the adoration of a faithful dog all the while. It was strange to master a man like that, but intoxicating.

He realized that the others felt a strange tenderness for the man who chose to be a slave and endure their pleasure every night. He didn't understand it, but Selvan never protested; instead he cooked and washed whenever he didn't have a cock up his ass, ran errands, and otherwise made sure that the many small tasks were taken care of better than if they had employed two or three servants.

Throughout, the officer watched him, and nothing escaped the man's gaze. While by then Kendras knew all of the men by name and temperament, he never grew close to anyone or struck up a friendship. Most nights he was too tired anyway, and the carousing taxed his stamina further.

"We'll make you one of ours," the officer said one day as Kendras appeared before him, still covered in dust, chest heaving. "I release you. You're your own man now."

"Thank you."

"To make you ours and us yours, there's a detail missing," the officer said. "For three days each, you will serve each of your

comrades. Not as a slave, but as one comrade to the other. You will learn more about them, and each one about you. You will have to trust them to fight at their side, truly one.”

Kendras stared at him. “At night too?”

“Do nothing you wouldn’t do for a friend. They won’t do anything they wouldn’t ask of a fellow Scorpion.”

“No.”

“Kendras.” The officer stepped closer and touched his face, getting him to look at him. “Many just share a life story and warmth. Others will do nothing at all. You’re not Selvan, and you’re not a whore. If anybody forces you, he’ll meet my justice if you can’t fight him off yourself. And I reckon you could. It’s a lot harder to rape a free man than a tied-up prisoner.”

Kendras felt his breath catch at the lingering touch. An invitation? An offer? “What about you?”

“I’ll be the last one.” The officer smiled, but there was something more than humor in his dark eyes. “Believe me. It’ll be hard enough to wait.”

Kendras felt a sudden surge of desire at those words. He’d never seen the officer take his pleasure with another Scorpion beyond a few times when Selvan had used his clever mouth on him. The man briefly touched his lips to Kendras’s. “Trust is hard currency between soldiers.”

“I...”

“You’ll have to trust the others. They will guard your flank and you theirs. The only man in the Seventeenth who is by himself is me.”

“I don’t understand.”

“Maybe one day you’ll command your own outfit. Then you will.” The officer turned to leave. “Begin with the medic today.”

A man who was doing this last test was referred to as “betrothed”, and with their own sense of irony, the other Scorpions gave the chosen couple time and space together, which was embarrassing. He was to



train with his chosen partner, not fighting as a single man, but as a pair against three chosen by the officer.

Kendras learned to anticipate the medic's responses, which erred always on the side of caution, but the man wielded a vicious sword and wasn't any less of a fighter than the other Scorpions. When he counterattacked, he invariably found the weakness and exploited it for full effect. Kendras learned that the opposite held true too—a man taught to heal the body knew how to kill it.

After the training, the medic taught him how to clean and bandage a wound he'd sliced into a leg of lamb, except that the herbs he used were spices and the bandages fat, streaky bacon. After his vivid description, Kendras hesitated for a moment when their patient was served with root vegetables and a lot of fresh bread to mop up the juice.

"And I thought he'd recover," Kendras said solemnly, which made the medic choke with laughter.

When it came time to retire, they moved their bedding into one of the separate rooms, sharing the bed frame. The medic undressed and washed, showing off a fine, muscular body, and Kendras remembered well how he'd treated Selvan.

He stripped, washed with the remaining water, and watched the other man slide into bed. Just talk, the officer had said, but Kendras wasn't so sure that was what would happen.

He joined the medic, saying nothing until after the lamp was extinguished, and then he lay there, just breathing, aware that they were both wide awake.

"I was the last betrothed," the medic suddenly said. "Wandering quack, selling herbs, then beset by bandits. I sold my skin dearly, killed one and crippled two others, but I was left for dead in the end. One of the Scorpions found me while scouting ahead. I've never looked back since."

"No family?"

"I was too young to marry, and my parents know what I do now. I'm earning more money, too, but that's not the reason."

"What is the reason?"

“You’ll know when it happens.” The medic turned to face him in the darkness, reaching out to touch his chest.

Kendras learned that night what “soldier position” meant—cocks together, rubbing against bellies, thrusting against each other. He enjoyed holding a man in the harsh movements of pleasure, liked giving relief and taking it on the same terms. This wasn’t difficult or painful, and he relaxed enough to be able to sleep with another man in the same bed.

At the end of the three days, he genuinely liked the medic and wouldn’t have minded to stay like this, learn from him and fight with him and hold him at night. It was the same with the other Scorpions. Given the opportunity, all of them opted for sex, usually a hand or soldier style or even a variation thereof—fucking a man’s thighs.

Kendras was a willing student once the first strangeness passed, shared heated kisses and even endearments with men who’d be never more than just comrades, but he understood that “comrade” was a magical word, as close to “family” and “kin” as he’d ever call anybody. Some he liked more than others, but three days was long enough to understand just about anybody.

And those that knew him—and that he knew—treated him just like one of the others during the day. One man at a time, he was becoming one of them, no longer a stranger in their midst.

At the end of the period, the officer approached him, and Kendras wondered what secrets the man would share with him in that room. Instead, the officer ordered him to pack some clothes and food.

The next morning, they left the city on horseback, heading along the mountains through pastures and fruit and olive orchards as far as the eye could see. Then they climbed up the mountain along a stony, winding path, eventually arriving at a shepherd’s shelter, housing bags of wool and a simple cot.

The officer showed him how to care for his horse, and then they let the animals graze. The longer they spent together, the more acute the desire rose in Kendras, but he assumed all that would happen at night.

“The Seventeenth was one of the great legions of Shara,” the officer said. “Have you heard of Shara?”

“No.”

“An empire that encompassed all the cities you know. Dalman, Fetin, Vededrin, and the others further inland and across the ocean. It is the reason we all speak the same language, but it broke apart in civil war three hundred years ago. The Legions bore the brunt, as soldiers always do, until barely anybody was left to take up arms. In return for their services to one of the factions, the Seventeenth, or “Scorpions,” negotiated their independence. By the time peace was finally brokered, only a small group of men was left. We resolved that we would be independent and set our own price, but also devote ourselves utterly to the art of war. Scorpions are under arms all year, from the moment they are betrothed to the day when their officer releases them to life or death.”

“You sound like you were around then.”

“I’ve read the notes of my predecessors. We are the only mercenary outfit with a memory. We’re the only men in the world who know what really happened, who backstabbed whom, who reneged on his promises, who broke which treaty.” A gleam shone in the officer’s eyes. “We use this knowledge to understand the game between the cities and decide which side to take and which to leave well alone, however much gold they’re paying.”

The officer glanced up at the mountains, where the sun reflected off rocks littered about, then began to climb, telling Kendras of the Seventeenth and which battles it had fought in, speaking levelly, while Kendras, following him, had barely enough breath to nod.

The officer halted him with a touch against his chest then crouched. Kendras saw movement on the rocks—flecks of black and yellow moved about. Scorpions. His hackles rose, and he looked down at his legs, expecting a poisonous tail lashing toward him any moment.

“Just don’t move,” the officer said, then pointed at a small yellow scorpion. “These here are their young. The poison is no stronger than that of a wasp, but it’s a lot more painful. The blacks are adults.” He reached for one of the large adult insects, catching it with a bare hand

by the tail. The scorpion writhed in outrage, but the officer just lifted it up and held it in front of Kendras's eyes.

"They never stop fighting. That is how I choose the men. There are some men who will fight rather than die, and for you or me, that may seem strange, but most people prefer dying. I've heard it said that death is easy and sure, while combat is hard and unsure. It seems that is why many just go to their deaths without raising a weapon."

"I'd stopped fighting when you found me."

"Yes, and that worried me. I'd seen you, but I was busy on an errand, so I didn't act on my instinct, which said you'd be one of ours. But I didn't forget what I'd seen, and then learned you'd been condemned to die. For what?"

"Fighting the guard. I've done worse, but they only cared about their own."

"Some fighting men are dogs." The officer gave him a grim smile. "Those will fear you and bite out of fear, but they'll never be your match."

The scorpion still squirmed, even though it must have realized that whatever gods-like force held its tail would not release it.

The officer began walking down the mountain, choosing carefully where he stepped lest he crush one of the animals.

Down again near the hut, he ordered Kendras to start a fire, which he watched while holding the dangling scorpion in his hand. After a few moments, he pulled his curved dagger and placed it flat on the ground.

"Come here."

Kendras stood, wondering what the blade was for. After struggling so long, would the scorpion simply be killed? What would be the lesson in that?

The officer changed his grip on the tail, holding it lower, drawing Kendras's gaze to the sting and poison bulbs near it. The officer smiled slightly to himself when he squeezed the tip of the tail, coaxing a drop of clear liquid from the curved needle tip.

Kendras's guts tightened at the expression in the officer's eyes, the clever fingers that he would like to feel doing the same—or something very similar—to him, and he knew that the officer knew.

Carefully, the officer gathered the drop of poison up and left most of it on the blade, then stood again. "Take off my leathers."

Kendras stepped behind him and loosened the straps and buckles holding the heavy leather top, which was darkened with use and sweat and likely cured in the man's blood in more than one place.

The body he bared sped up his pulse. He understood that this was some strange kind of gift, because the officer never showed himself naked in front of his men, and now he understood why. The man's front bore the scorpion that all the men had on the backs of their hands, but it covered his entire front, pincers reaching the small dark nipples on his chest; the lines of the scorpion's armor plates mirrored, artfully, the lines of his stomach.

Kendras's fingers itched to take off the man's trousers and bare the rest of the tattoo, the rest of his body, but the officer shook his head. "Stand opposite me."

Scorpion still in hand, the officer closed the distance between them so that Kendras felt the heat emanating from the man's body. Seen like this, the lesson was clear. The officer was a scorpion. The Scorpion. The very heart and symbol, not unlike a foreign god or barbarian chieftain, master over them all. Kendras wondered if the man would still sleep with him; it all suddenly seemed too enormous to be real.

The officer gave him a wry smile, then opened his lips and licked off the drop of poison before he took Kendras's neck with both hands to share a deep kiss and the taste of the poison, which immediately numbed the insides of his mouth.

He tasted nothing, but the touch of the man's lips dazed him until he realized, with a start, that the officer wasn't holding the insect anymore. He jerked away, glancing around, then out of the corner of his eye saw the black thing sitting on his shoulder, tail raised.

Before he could lift a hand to try and wipe it off, the tail flicked forward, and he felt a painful sting at the side of his neck. The shock

had no time to fully flare in his mind. He went down like lightning had struck him, suddenly breathing in small, labored gasps while his veins, from the largest to the smallest, caught on fire.

“The last test,” the officer said, a blurred, shadowy presence that, in the low light from the setting sun, looked a lot like a scorpion on two legs, but Kendras knew he was imagining things.

He struggled to breathe. Every moment of consciousness was a supreme effort, but he realized if he gave up, he would simply stop breathing and die.

*That is how I choose the men. Those that never stop fighting.*

He gathered his wits about him enough to watch the officer prepare something he didn’t understand. The officer took the scorpion poison and other ingredients and boiled them into a thick paste over the fire. Then he stripped Kendras bare and rolled him onto one side of a large woolen blanket.

Kendras just breathed, teetering on the edge of panic because he couldn’t move. The officer took Kendras’s hands and tied them onto his belly, holding them in place with broad leather straps. When he brought out the needles, Kendras understood.

The tattoos took all night. The officer worked by the light from the fire and the full moon, which cast silver and golden shadows over Kendras’s skin. Near midnight, the paralysis wore off enough that Kendras could see more clearly, breathe more easily, and watch the scorpions take shape.

It felt like his hands were being flayed, but maybe the poison made it all bearable—he couldn’t have said.

Once both hands were done, the officer cut his wrists free and bandaged one hand. He completed the tattoo on the inside wrist with a bold “17”, and then he bandaged the other. “It will feel strange while it weeps, but don’t touch it.”

Kendras made an affirmative sound and pulled his hands close, huddling as much as he could.

The officer draped the rest of the blanket over him. “You can sleep now.” The permission to stop fighting came as a huge relief, and Kendras sank gratefully into the dark.

The following day, the officer changed the bandages on his hands. The tattoos had scabbed over and itched like hell. Kendras’s muscles felt at once loose and too tight. He hadn’t hurt like this in a long time, but when he tried to move too much, the strength and coordination eluded him. Paired with an almighty headache, he preferred just lying there and recovering from the poison, while the officer talked about their history. He spoke of “us” and Kendras now understood that he was part of that “us.”

On the evening of the second day, the paralysis wore off enough for Kendras to move and talk without biting his tongue.

“How many die during this test?” he asked.

“None recently. I’m getting better at choosing.” The officer checked on the tattoos, but Kendras thought the man might just enjoy touching him. Maybe he did.

Despite the “test,” he wanted that touch, and more of it, but wasn’t sure how to ask for it. The officer didn’t sleep with the men, wasn’t married or bonded—and his words about being alone made more sense now. Maybe nothing would happen after all.

“Will you touch me,” he asked, barely more than a whisper, when the officer crouched close to apply some of that cooling salve to the scorpion sting on his neck.

“After making all those promises?” the officer grinned. “What do you think?”

“They must all want you.”

“They do.” The officer’s crooked smile betrayed real amusement at the concept. “Everyone was in your position here. Some never considered a man as a lover before but did with me.”

“What would I have to do to keep you?”

The officer gave a dry laugh. “You don’t even know if I’m any good, Kendras, but your trust honors me.”

“I think I’ve wanted you all the time. All that... since...”

The officer nodded. “Maybe when I am released to life, but I will not have a favorite among the men. That’s the burden of command I mentioned. What you do amongst yourselves is your matter alone, but once it involves me, every man will be involved to some degree or other; my duty is to everybody, not to one.”

“But if you could have one to help you....” Kendras pushed himself up, knew he was daring too much, going too far, but after what had happened, he felt he could trust the man with his thoughts. That, by itself, was a new and intoxicating idea.

The officer’s smile faded and was replaced with thoughtful tension in every line. As if Kendras had turned into a dangerous animal in front of his very eyes, and he was trying to understand how that had happened.

Kendras reached for him and, when the man didn’t resist, pulled him closer. The officer’s whole body felt tense, even his lips when Kendras kissed him.

Desire leaped up when the man responded to him and didn’t fight him off when Kendras pushed the leathers apart and down, trapping him for a few moments.

The officer immediately freed himself, but Kendras saw the flicker in the man’s eyes. Kendras pushed him down on the blanket and bared him completely. The scorpion’s tail trailed down the man’s right leg, he noted, and then his attention was captivated by the cock, which had risen.

When Kendras got on top to do this soldier style, the officer laughed at him and rolled him over, reaching for something in his pack.

“Not so fast.” He pushed Kendras’s legs apart, the strange moment of passivity wiped out but certainly not forgotten. “I’ll fuck you first. Afterward do what you like.”

Kendras hesitated, remembering that pain far too keenly. “I haven’t....” Of course he had, and he felt stupid for even mentioning that. Playing the coy virgin after this man had rescued him from an executioner’s bed was ridiculous.



The officer lifted an eyebrow.

“Of course I have, just not—”

“Without being forced,” the officer completed.

“Yes.”

“Even the medic didn’t show you how good it feels?”

“No.”

“Ertas?”

“I fucked him.”

“Greedy bastard. Him, not you.” The officer laughed. “I can imagine he wanted to feel all that. He enjoys a challenge.” The officer’s hand began to stroke Kendras as if to flatter and reassure him. “I’ll do it good; not everybody likes it, but I’ll give you a fair chance to find out if you do.”

Oiled fingers found his entrance, as skilled and just as businesslike as the medic’s hands, then pushed inside in a smooth motion. Kendras nearly jumped, tensed, but the fingers had already moved, were already fucking him, and touched something that tightened his guts and made his cock leap.

“Yes, you’ll like it.” The officer pulled out and oiled his cock, stroking himself slowly and languidly until Kendras felt nothing but hunger for that cock. He still shuddered when it entered him, but compared to lying paralyzed on the ground, this didn’t cause any discomfort.

The officer entered him only halfway, then began to fuck him, the sensation impossible and amazing, every stroke sparking off desire until he relaxed and only tensed for a moment when the man hit him just right. He pulled his knees closer to his chest, watched the officer’s cock go deeper now—slow, intense strokes—then pull out almost completely to dribble more oil on his length before he pushed in again. Kendras groaned, unable to understand how something that had hurt so bad could feel so good.

The more he wanted it, the slower and more deliberately the officer moved, pulling out now after every excruciating thrust, testing

the barrier of his body every time, until Kendras awaited it, expecting the feeling of the hot cock breaching him, tensing around it, holding the cock tight as it invaded and relaxing as much as he could when it withdrew.

Sweat ran down their bodies; the mild night air did nothing to cool them down, just made this more intimate. The officer sped up, then withdrew, breathing heavily, his oiled cock glistening. “Turn around.”

Kendras obeyed. On hands and knees, feeling a gaping emptiness desperate to be filled however the officer chose. He then felt those fingers again, teasing him inside, and a free hand slid around to stroke him back to hardness.

Kendras hadn’t even noticed he’d lost the erection. It didn’t matter as long as he could have that other feeling. He understood Selvan’s slack-jawed, blissful expression now. Getting fucked until one couldn’t bear it anymore, and then some more, didn’t seem like such a bad deal. He understood Ertas’s groans and demands for more, harder, right there.

Fingers were good, but he wanted something more substantial, something with the full strength of a body behind it. He opened his legs further, let his head hang, glancing at his cock which was being stroked. Between his legs, he saw the man’s muscular thighs flex when he moved. Either way, he was getting to the edge, but he didn’t want to get there alone.

Just as he had gathered enough of his wits to beg for it, the officer slammed his cock inside him and pulled Kendras back, getting him to sit back on him, and the officer held him with one arm around his waist, staying still inside him.

Kendras groaned; the hand brought him closer and closer, and the feeling was impossibly intimate, being held with his weight on another man who was all the way inside him, up to root and balls.

“Maybe you have the strength, Kendras,” the officer murmured near his ear, sounding strained but controlled as he continued to pump Kendras’s cock.

What strength? Kendras's mind went blank as he came, tensing around the cock inside him, which, he could feel, set the other man off. The officer's grip tightened, and his small, rocking motions betrayed that he was also at the end of his control.

Fingers dripping with his own seed pushed between his lips, and Kendras sucked them hungrily.

They stayed like this for several long breaths, and, strangely, Kendras had never felt so safe and at peace in his life.

"What did you mean...?"

The officer breathed into his ear. "You and me, we're very alike, Kendras."

"You mean dark-skinned."

"Yes, but you're purebred. I'm a mutt." The officer huffed laughter. "At least on my skin, the tattoo is visible. I'll have to scar you so the scorpion stands out, but first you'll have to heal."

"If that means we'll do this again, do whatever you like," Kendras said, feeling the man's hand stroking his stomach. He wanted to stretch out under the touch like a cat.

"I'll make it worth your while." The officer pushed him slightly forward and slid out from under him. "And mine. It's not like everything I do is selfless."

Kendras lay down, boneless now without the connection of before. "So should I wait?" He wasn't sure the officer understood this right—but then the man glanced at him and hesitated.

"Maybe." The officer smiled. "But don't hold your breath. If you find something better in the meantime, seize it with both hands. I'm not ready for peace yet."

## Chapter Four

THE man called Widow stared at Kendras from across the table, while Puppy and Stick bantered between themselves, and Steel seemed deep in thought, likely hardly noticing what he ate. Widow was a lean, pale man with shoulder-length black hair that was braided at the sides to keep his face free. He had green eyes that matched Steel's for coldness.

The food was typical country fare—several kinds of olives, candied fruit, honeycomb, white flat bread, goat cheese, and thick slices of bacon covered in a crust of honey and spices. Whatever these misfits were hired for, they were certainly supposed to enjoy the time until they were called to duty.

Kendras noted Widow's gaze on his hands and stilled them to give him a good look.

"So you're a real Scorpion."

Kendras considered not gracing the obvious with an answer. He didn't like Widow but hadn't decided yet whether the man was dangerous or just full of himself. "You know us?"

"I've seen you fight." Widow's sneering tone didn't change, so Kendras knew he was being baited. He shrugged, rubbing the tattoo. Outsiders couldn't understand; there was no point defending his unit against ignorance.

"And?" asked Steel.

“They were good.” Widow turned to Steel. “For an outfit made up of criminals and slaves. They are so fierce because they know that if caught alone, they’d end up in prison or chains again.”

Kendras stood, saw something flicker in Widow’s eyes, and Steel looked at him too.

“Where are you going?”

“To test the new glaive.” Kendras walked out and back into the smithy.

While sharpening the new blade, he decided he shouldn’t have left. But that was how he’d handled any situation that might turn into blows among the Scorpions. Walk away before it got ugly. If the situation persisted, the officer interfered.

Steel was not cut out to be a leader like the officer. Kendras would be surprised if Steel knew himself, let alone other men. Then how could he hope to lead? Right now, he was only a dog with a knack for sniffing out opportunities to make money.

While Kendras ran the stone over the edge, the other soldiers emerged in their armor and with weapons to train together. They all used swords, and sometimes swords and shields, so apparently they knew at least what a combat line looked like.

One against one, all were competent fighters. He liked Steel’s way of moving—he lured out the enemy with a few probing thrusts, then stood firm against the first attack, which, once it began to falter, he shattered with a fierce series of counterattacks that sent the enemy reeling.

Widow fought dirty. No doubt the man was a dangerous fighter on the battlefield, focused only on death and destruction with little regard for himself. Kendras could respect that, however grudgingly.

Puppy was clever and had a lot of heart, not faltering even when he received painful hits. The longer Kendras watched him, the more he wondered if Puppy ever gave up, and the thought made him wince. There was no point in thinking those thoughts. He wasn’t the officer. There might be no Scorpions anymore. What if all that was left now was a cripple and a lot of carrion?

When he'd seen enough, he turned back to work on the blade. The glaive had always been his favorite weapon—the spike at the front stopped horses, the long blade at the top lent danger to a forceful sweep. The butt of the pole could stun and break. The grip of the pole served as a weapon at close quarters—smashed against a bare face or helmet, it often did the job on its own: to stun and ready for the crippling blow, or the kill.

Kendras's knuckles tightened. He remembered breathing with the blows, exhaling sharply just before impact, inhaling when he withdrew. The ebb and flow of battle, the dance of violence. He wanted it back, that sense of unity and purpose. What was he if not a Scorpion?

*Maybe one day you'll command your own outfit.*

Kendras grimaced to himself, felt his hands shake, then realized it was his whole body trembling with something that felt like rage, but lacked the glory and passion of it. A sudden weakness he couldn't explain, that just added insult to injury. What if they needed him? What if nobody was left?

"You look like you've seen a ghost," Steel said from the door, and Kendras glanced at him, briefly so as to not shatter a moment's illusion that the man was a Scorpion too. But that was nonsense. Steel wasn't and would never be a comrade.

Kendras returned to work on the blade, hoping that his clumsiness didn't register with the other mercenary. "Did you ever tell me why you left Fetin?"

"More money elsewhere." Steel sat on the larger of the two anvils and crossed his arms in front of his chest. "What about the rest of your unit? Is everybody dead?"

"I don't know." Kendras put the blade down and rubbed it clean with an oiled piece of leather. "I was shipped off before I could make it back to camp." And why was he telling Steel that? He didn't want to feel the pain.

"Shipped off?"

“Yes, they removed the survivors. The others might have been on a different ship.” Released inland, or further down the coast, told to never come back.

“Did you commit a crime?”

“I wouldn’t be alive if I had.” Kendras stared at him, willing Steel to shut up, but all he saw in the man’s face was genuine interest.

“Then why were you treated that way?”

“A minor misunderstanding about our contract. The survivors should have received the pay of the whole unit. Rather than pay up, the king decided to scatter us to the wind. I don’t know how many are alive. Might be none. I’ve seen....” *Comrades fall.*

Ertas, skull split from a terrible blow from one of the Flame cavalrists. The medic, who’d rushed forward to pull the first man from under a fallen, dying, thrashing horse. The red daze of battle had settled before Kendras could know if the medic had made it.

The most likely survivor was Selvan. He’d have stayed in camp. Or maybe even the officer, but since the man had led them all into battle, that hope came only from the fact that Kendras couldn’t imagine him dead.

Steel was suddenly close. His touch on Kendras’s arm made Kendras want to lash out, roar in helpless rage, but he managed, barely, to constrain himself.

“You’re shaking.”

Kendras half-turned away to guard his emotions and expressions, cursing the leg, the whole situation. “I shouldn’t be here.”

“Where would you rather be? Dead?”

*Maybe later. Not before I know....* Kendras exhaled. “I have to go back to Fetin.”

“To?”

Kendras shook his head. “We had a slave. He might be still alive.” *Unless he’s been captured and sold.* The thought of Selvan in a brothel was disquieting. Or whatever he’d ended up doing.

“If you were shipped off, they won’t take kindly to you just walking back in.”

“As if I could walk.” Kendras bared his teeth. “But yes. I have to look after the slave. You said two months. I will be back next week.” He began to hobble back to his room.

“Stop.” Steel walked at his side, trying to get in Kendras’s way and hold him back. “You are fucking kidding me, right? You’re walking back into a war? There will be brigands; neither side will welcome you. Fuck that slave, Kendras. You’re staying.”

Kendras paused. “He’s a Scorpion.” *As if you could understand what that means, mercenary.*

“So what? You owe me, and I’m calling it in. You’re staying.”

“Fuck you, Steel.” Kendras headed back toward his room, walking laboriously past the training mercenaries. His knee hurt, his hip hurt, the peg wasn’t a real solution to the problem, but it at least helped him move, and better than any crutch.

“Kendras, stop,” Steel ordered behind him.

Kendras half-turned, and was about to tell Steel what to do with his order when he suddenly lost his footing. He crashed heavily to the ground, injured foot scraping over the dusty ground, and he called out in pain and surprise.

Widow stepped back with a grin. “Steel has given you an order, Scorpion.”

Kendras grimaced, blinked back tears while rolling over on his knees. He saw the other mercenaries watch him, Puppy with a mournful expression that would have been irony or mocking if the man had been much nastier than he was.

Stick giggled.

“That hurt?” Smiling, Widow began to circle. “You’re fucked, Scorpion.”

Kendras couldn’t get back on his feet, couldn’t turn, couldn’t react fast enough. A kick between the shoulder blades forced him onto hands and knees, then Widow stepped on him, and, when Kendras held



the weight off the ground with his hands, Widow jumped up, finally pressing Kendras into the ground, hurting, breathing in dust.

“That motto of yours—never stop fighting...,” Widow said, rolling his weight on the balls of his feet on Kendras’s back. “Fight me, Scorpion. I’ll happily cut you down to size. You’re not the biggest, baddest man I’ve broken.”

Kendras tried to push up, lift both himself and Widow, but after a day spent working, and with Widow wearing armor, and the wound bleeding his strength away, he struggled in vain.

Being mocked for the very thing that had always given him courage. He was surprised that cut through the haze of pain and crystallized into hatred, a sharp, jagged spike in his throat. It would be easy to give up. Especially against overwhelming odds.

“Widow. Let him get up.”

“He’ll submit.”

“You can do that when he’s healed. Kicking a cripple is pretty pathetic.”

“What, are you fucking that ugly son-of-a-bitch?”

“Want a piece of the action?” Kendras growled.

Widow stepped off him and danced back when Kendras tried to grab his ankle. Kendras pushed himself back up to kneeling, and almost considered pushing Puppy’s outstretched hand away. But he had very few things to waste now, and kindness wasn’t one of them.

Puppy was strong, helped him pull himself up and adjust the peg leg. Puppy only stepped back when Kendras stood securely, then gave him a few good-hearted pats on the shoulder, like a horse.

Widow snorted. “I say break him now before he recovers.”

Steel’s lips tightened. He clearly bit back a harsh retort, and grimaced. “I didn’t ask you.”

Kendras put his weight on the leg again. The pain was sawing through the good bones in his foot, and drops of sweat ran down the sides of his face. “Is that all?” he asked. If Steel allowed him to leave, Widow wouldn’t dare kick him like that again.

“Go,” Steel said. “I’ll give you the herbs.”

“Yes, thank you.” Kendras limped back into the house, just wanting to get out of the sun and away from watchful eyes.

He managed to get back into his room. Steel left him on the way, but, since the man walked much faster than he did, got back to him before Kendras had made it to the bed.

He sat down heavily and unfastened the leather straps that held the wood to his knee, then straightened the leg, grimacing at the stiffness from the unfamiliar use.

Steel closed the door behind him and offered Kendras a drink with the herbs. The stuff was bitter and numbed the insides of his mouth, but Kendras knew everything would feel much better soon and lay back on the bed, stretching out, waiting for the pain to lessen.

“What now?” Steel asked.

“I don’t have anything to offer.” Kendras closed his eyes. Death would be easier. By far. Struggling until the very end, and then getting snuffed out. It didn’t seem like a bad idea. He’d just follow the others.

“I’m not here to take anything from you,” Steel said. “Gods below, Kendras. Why are you making this so hard?”

“Me?” Kendras laughed, a weak, sardonic sound. “I shouldn’t be here.”

“You keep saying that.” Steel sat down on the mattress, and Kendras opened his eyes again. Steel was too close. Any touch wasn’t welcome. None of it. Not for money, not for anything else. “Fetin? You want to go back and most likely get killed?”

“If killed or broken are my only options....”

“Widow is a bastard, yes. We’re all not sweet gentle maidens.” Steel reached for Kendras’s leathers. “I’ll help you undress.”

“Go fuck a slave. I’m not in the mood.”

“I was going to help you clean up.”

“Fuck that.” Kendras pushed his hands away and sat up. “I’m not your concubine, Steel. I’m not your lover. Leave me the fuck alone.”

The other man recoiled, and Kendras knew he'd struck blood. The gray eyes darkened with something akin to pain or humiliation. Good. More of that would make Steel back off.

"To me, you're nothing. Not a friend, not a comrade. You're some kind of swordsman who wants to use me for some kind of plan, and in the meantime wants nothing more than to fuck me because the others aren't taking it up the ass, are they? Tired of little slave boys? Ah, I forgot, not your 'taste'."

Steel drew back toward the door, fists tight with anger.

"You're not the man to claim me as his slave." Kendras stared at him. "Surprised?"

"I don't want you as my slave," Steel said.

"But?"

Steel frowned, seemingly wrestling whatever impulse moved him. Kendras remembered how the man fought. Lure an attack, stand solid, then counterattack and destroy. He was ready to take the counterattack, expected anything from nothing to a physical attack. Dying while fighting was better than dying as a slave or cripple.

"You said I'm nothing to you."

"Yes."

Steel stared at him as if he couldn't quite believe it, and Kendras wondered what the hell was going on with the other man. Paying him for sex—that hadn't changed anything, had it? Did Steel really think he could buy any kind of bond with two silver?

"I thought we had an agreement," Steel said. "You'll heal, and... help me with what we have to do."

"And I said I have to find that slave."

"What's so important about him?"

"He's a Scorpion."

"And?" Steel shook his head. "I don't... I have no idea what you want, Kendras. To me it looks like you're desperate to die."

“Then let me die.” Kendras felt his throat tighten and realized with surprise that there were tears somewhere, and close. “Just let me go.”

Steel stared at him. “Fuck.”

Kendras turned away, unable to show Steel more than he deserved to see. The medic, who was happy to listen to such things, gone. Selvan, who, in his own ways, dealt with the shadows on another man’s soul. The officer, who’d touch him on the shoulder and drawn him into a rough hug, as he’d done when one of the Scorpions lost his close comrade in a battle. One loss. Even that of the man who’d slept close for so many nights. But all of them? He needed to know for sure.

Steel was suddenly close again and pulled him toward him. *You’re not the officer*, Kendras wanted to say and push him away. *You’re nothing*. Instead, Kendras found himself pressing the other man close. Right now Steel seemed the only thing Kendras could touch, the only, last man alive.

## Chapter Five

KENDRAS left in the gray hours of dawn. He took one of the horses and bribed the guardsman at the gate with the rest of the silver coin. It was madness, and he knew it, riding with his fucked leg into the teeth of the enemy, just after a war. Still. He had to find the survivors if there were any. Whatever Steel thought he had on him, it didn't mean anything when it came up against the Scorpions.

Going by horse made the most sense. Dalman would have most ships commissioned, and he didn't want to answer questions about what he was doing in Fetin. Especially when he wasn't supposed to be there. But the alternative was to leave any survivors to their fate and merely wait to heal to be able to take on and kill Widow.

The sun rose in pale yellow, driving back the night over the Shoulders of Golgat, as he headed inland toward Fetin. The old imperial road cut through the landscape, bending, curving, and twisting when it had to, but across valleys, it was straight as a knife blade, grooves worn into the yellow stone by thousands of wheels. Carts of traders, armies, traveling caravans of nomads, the homeless, and the restless had left their mark, albeit small.

Once he'd left the valley behind and joined the main road toward Fetin, other travelers claimed part of the road. Dalmany traders and warriors, the first to make a profit, the others to guard the traders.

Kendras briefly examined every armed man. He couldn't resist checking if there were any he recognized, or even a surviving Scorpion on the way back, as unlikely as it was. But when none of that slim hope

was borne out, he pressed on. He didn't want to enter any casual conversations. It would have been pointless anyway; with his injured leg, he couldn't have gotten himself hired to protect any of the traders. But this way, he wasn't slowed down by ox carts.

The only way to ride was to take off the peg leg and let the injured foot dangle free. Every movement of the horse seemed to grind the bones together, especially when he spurred it into a canter to get past the wagons.

He halted at the next tavern, paid a few coppers to have the horse looked after. He got hot water from the kitchen and prepared more of the herbs to make the pain bearable. It was madness to ride out in his state, and another shade of insanity to travel drugged when he needed his senses alert. But he simply couldn't deal with the pain.

After he'd drunk the herbs, Kendras settled down on a bench under a wide tree and lifted his leg up, rubbing his knee and lower leg, hoping nobody would take an interest in him. Some meat and olives he'd taken from the kitchen provided a cold, but satisfying, meal while he waited for the herbs to work.

The shade melted away in the sun as it climbed into its zenith. All colors were now covered in stone dust; the only vigorous activity came from the bushes, where cicada songs pulsed like alien hearts.

After a while, a few Dalmany riders came into the yard, and that meant the carts weren't far behind. He finished an apple by handing the rest to the horse, then got back on the mount, feeling sore already from the first morning of riding. Would Steel let him simply go like this?

*You're nothing, Steel. Not a friend, not a comrade.*

Steel wasn't the type who would give up quite so easily. He'd encountered nothing but failure at Kendras's hands, and if he had any pride left after so many years as a mercenary, he'd attempt to make him pay. At the very least punish him for the horse theft.

He'd worry about that when Steel or one of his men caught up with him.

The closer he got to Fetin, the less Kendras wanted to see other people. The sense of threat and unease made him hurry on, taking probably more of the herbs than he should, but it was the only way.

Since the weather was balmy and rainless, he slept outside, a little away from the road, with a brown blanket hiding him well on the sun-parched, brown-yellow ground. He woke a few times from night shades, dreaming of death and fire. War, and pain. A squirming scorpion held by a gloved hand.

Something was driving him, driving him to death or glory, or even both, and Kendras wasn't sure himself if it was the sense of obligation to the officer and his comrades or the fact that they'd lost so many, and it seemed the only way to preserve what the Scorpions meant.

Preserve all that he stood for, everything that was etched and inked into his skin. Was he just a dangerous, wounded animal that would very soon return to its normal life? If not, what else could he do? Strike out on his own?

He might never again be fighting fit. What to do then? And with this haste and the mad dash across the mountains to Fetin, he might be ruining any chance to heal fully. But he had no alternative. He'd already wasted enough time getting well enough to travel at all. If some of the Scorpions were still alive, wounded, taken prisoner, they might not have enough time to wait for him until he was fully healed. And if the gods meant for him to live his days out as a cripple, at least he could fulfill his duty as a last service to them.

Anxiety clenched his throat when he reached Fetin Ridge. The fortress below, straddling the golden, red-streaked rock, looked like a beautiful woman that had been hit in the face by a jealous lover.

Smoke stained the walls, which were pockmarked from stones hurled by catapults. Inside, the beams of burnt buildings looked like ribcages. The devastation would look worse when he was actually riding through the streets.

The Southern gate was where the siege had finally broken through. Kendras clenched his teeth. From up here, it seemed less forbidding, but he remembered only too well. The king had expected

the counterattack from there. The hill was steep, unprotected, a good place for a charge downhill. But nobody had expected to see the Flames—every single one of them—to rush out in an irresistible wave of desperate fury.

Still, a week later, bodies were piled high here. The gate had been half torn down, half battered down by siege engines, one of which had ruined his foot, and the wall had a gaping hole further down, which Fetin's craftspeople were working to close.

The stench of war was still in the air. In that heat, the bodies must be bloated and discolored. Workers—most likely slaves—were digging graves; further downhill, bodies were burned, a plume of acrid smoke rising up from below.

Somewhere down there were the Scorpions—or what was left of them.



## Chapter Six

KENDRAS carefully rode down the rock-strewn hill. The pine trees gave off a strong smell that lessened the stench from the battlefield. He wondered if that was why the officer had chosen the location of their camp. They'd pitched their tents further up the hill and apart from the main body of the Dalmany king's army. Now it seemed like luck, but the officer might just have mistrusted the rest of the army.

*I don't trust a man I haven't trained, he'd say.*

Kendras wiped his face with his free hand. Approaching the camp from here was confusing. There was nothing that could show him the way. He rode down the hill. This group of rocks? The steep incline? He turned around, trying to remember.

It took a good while, but finally Kendras found the small brook and followed it, then, at a group of three dead trees, turned to the left and headed straight on, heart beating painfully in his chest. The tents were still standing. Well, two of them.

Kendras inhaled and closed the distance.

The stench of death overpowered the smell of the forest. The view before him broke his heart.

The Scorpions, one after the other, side by side, stretched out on the ground. The medic, dead, hands around the sword placed on his chest, in armor, gloves showing the scorpions.

Ertas, his head nothing but a horrible, shattered mess.

The last betrothed they'd received into their midst, another Dalmany. Kendras hadn't had time to get to know him properly.

Every one of them. He kept staring at the bodies, then realized they were arranged in a distinctive way—those that had been inseparable during life had been arranged together, lying shoulder to shoulder. Above all, the smell of putrefying blood and flesh.

Kendras shook his head and stared at his comrades. Five men were missing. Fifteen were here. Were they among the piled bodies? Were they survivors? Had they been captured, sold?

He struggled off the horse, impatiently put the peg leg on. Who had arranged them like this? Wrapped them like this in their cloaks, washed the blood off, or at least attempted to clean them up?

He tore his eyes away from the display, then almost jumped when one of the dead touched his ankle. He jumped, staggered and nearly fell over a body but caught himself just in time.

Kendras stared when Selvan blinked up at him. He'd been sleeping among the dead, curled up like a faithful hound, and Kendras felt a shudder race down his spine. Were they all going insane?

Selvan looked horrible, pale and thin, like death was already gnawing on him.

"You're... you're alive?" the slave asked, eyes wide, a fragile hope in them that bordered on madness.

"Yes." *Crippled and useless, but alive.*

"Don't leave me," Selvan said and clung to his good leg, almost toppling him again. Kendras reached down to touch Selvan's matted, blond hair.

"You did this?"

"I couldn't... I couldn't let them lie like this."

"Why didn't you bury them?"

"I couldn't." Selvan's voice was wet with tears, and Kendras couldn't imagine the anguish the slave must have felt. His own concerns were small against that. "Don't leave me again."

“No.” Kendras ran his hand down Selvan’s cheek, that old fondness choking him. If Selvan was the last Scorpion alive, at least there was one. “I’m not leaving. They rounded the surviving mercenaries up and put us on ships so we wouldn’t mutiny and demand our pay. I never wanted to leave you.”

“What is wrong with your leg?”

“I broke my foot. It’ll heal.”

“Do you need anything? I can find food....”

“No. Get up.”

Selvan stood, very nearly cringing in front of him. “I’m sorry, I....”

“Nothing to be sorry about.” Kendras touched his lips to the slave’s forehead. “You’ve been brave, Selvan. Now rest. I have need of you. We’ll bury the others.”

“I don’t want to....”

“No, me neither, but that’s what he’d order us to do, wouldn’t he?”

Mute, Selvan nodded, and dragged himself away to one of the tents. Thirteen dead men. Two survivors. Five men missing. Among them the officer.

Kendras didn’t dare hope, but hope was a resilient thing in his chest.

One had survived. Two. Five more. *Gods below, give me five more. We can be one again. We can recruit new men, rebuild what we were, one man at a time. Find the old strength and fight.*

Kendras wished he’d had prayers for them, or any kind of faith that they’d be rewarded after death. But really the only thing he could do was bury them, and that he was incapable of. He’d have to find men to dig graves—no easy work in the stony earth. Burning them would hardly be less work. But with gravediggers he ran the risk that they’d dig up the dead to strip the corpses.

Kendras went to the first body, the medic's. Remembering the man's laughter over a leg of lamb, the way he sometimes sang to himself while mixing herbs. Invariably, the other Scorpions had fallen silent to listen. While unschooled, he'd had the clear, strong voice of a shepherd lad.

Sometimes he realized he was singing aloud and would begin to laugh and flush, especially if it had been one of the popular love songs. The banter was given and received in good spirits.

*Don't laugh at me, or I'll treat your wounds with salt.*

Tears stung Kendras's eyes, and he managed to get down to one knee, almost losing his balance twice. He reached out and pressed the medic's gloved hand, adjusted the sword hilt between his fingers. Remembering the same hand digging into his shoulder, and the man's joy in bed. Here was one without one evil bone in his body. Selfless, and always fighting.

The officer should be here, holding the rites. He'd find good words for each of them. Kendras remembered the rites for the fallen, but they'd only ever lost one or two, never more than that. And often they died from their wounds because once they received the first wound, the rest of the unit covered them, the medic immediately at their side to staunch the bleeding and the fear.

He only hoped he'd died quickly and with as little pain as possible. For all the relief he'd brought, he deserved no less.

Kendras wiped his face, then wiped his hand on the medic's leather glove.

"I release you to death," he said, feeling his voice weak and hollow like old wood. It was wrong to say this, it wasn't his place, but the man who should say those words wasn't here.

He stood, struggling to straighten up, and felt the terrible weight on his shoulders. He'd have to give them the honors. Each one of them. He'd been betrothed to everyone but the new comrade, but in death, even the new one was a Scorpion. He'd fought and died with them, after all.

He made the rounds, and was exhausted after the last. Each one tore at him. Better men than him had died. He'd just been incredibly lucky and unlucky to be alive when these had fallen.

He limped over to one of the tents, where he saw Selvan curled up in the corner, sleeping the sleep of utter exhaustion but looking better than he had. He'd come round; the slave was much tougher than he looked or acted most of the time.

There, on three bits of bedding, lay more men. Scorpions. One was dead, but had only recently died, his chest half-covered with blood-soaked bandages. So recently that Selvan hadn't put his armor back on to lay him down with the others. Pieces of armor had been cleaned, though, so Selvan might have been preparing him for it.

But the others drew Kendras's attention. One man was asleep, breathing evenly, the other was feverish. Both were wounded, one man in the thigh, the other in the shoulder, but they were bandaged and otherwise unharmed. After seeing so much death, life came like a shock.

Dev, braids slick with sweat, tossed and turned, and Kendras knelt down, which was more complicated than he liked, and wiped the sweat off his face at least. Dev's eyes opened, but didn't see anything, filmed over with fever, possibly infection. He might die, too, and Kendras's heart clenched at the thought. No wonder Selvan was exhausted.

He settled between his two comrades, stretched his leg out and rubbed his knee, which was almost constantly hurting. And Riktan. He wanted to wake the man and tell him they'd both be safe now, but knew that he needed all the rest he could get with those wounds.

They needed a medic. Not that any healer in the area wouldn't have his or her hands full after the battle. Gods below, he couldn't win for losing.

He struggled to his feet and looked around the camp, but they were the last survivors. Three cripples, one slave, and the officer still missing. He headed for the burned-down fire in the middle of camp, then began to dig in the ashes with his bare hands.

Once he'd dug an arm's length into the ground, Kendras touched carved wood. His fingers traced the outline, then pulled the box free and wiped the sand and dirt off. The aged wood bore a carving of a scorpion, inlaid with bone.

The memory. Kendras opened the top of his leathers and slid the flat box inside, then pulled the strings tight again. Four Scorpions alive and the memory intact. Maybe things were beginning to look up.

## Chapter Seven

KENDRAS went back into the tent, where Selvan was still fast asleep. He pulled some bedding closer for himself and settled back against the support beam of the tent. However he turned it, they needed help.

He noticed that Riktan's eyes were open and focused on him. Kendras lifted a hand, tiredly, giving the man a wave.

"How are you doing, Riktan?"

"Feel like... trampled by a horse," the Scorpion muttered.

"Funny you'd say that." Kendras huffed. "Any idea where the officer went?"

"No. Ask... Selvan?"

"He's out cold. Poor bastard held the camp since the battle."

"Always knew the slave had stamina." Riktan grinned, but the tension in his features betrayed the pain.

"Listen, I'll go into Fetin and try to find help. I might be gone for a day or two."

"Understood," Riktan said. "Need some money for that?" He waved Kendras over and pushed the blanket down. A bag of coins was fastened to his belt, so Kendras opened the knot and tied it to his own belt. "Keep an eye on him. He's exhausted."

"Will do." Riktan gave him a grin.

Kendras forced himself back onto his feet, then went to mount the horse again.

He rode carefully into Fetin, where darkness was settling, but work outside continued and neither gate nor wall had been repaired yet. Guardsmen kept an eye on the comings and goings, but Kendras passed through unmolested.

He handed the horse over at one of the stables and proceeded on foot, asking around for a quack. A silver coin later, he had herbs for wounds and pain, a pile of bandages. He even found somebody who was willing to temporarily part with a team of oxen and a cart, but only in the morning.

Kendras settled in one of the taverns, in an uncanny repetition of how he'd met Steel. This time, though, he ordered food, which was too expensive and clearly made from pilfered rations, but with the fields burned and trade disrupted for a few weeks, this wasn't the worst it would be.

He had finished his meal of eggs, ham, and hard dark bread when the door opened again and five soldiers stomped in, in full armor, swords at their sides. Three of them were females, and that alone would have given it away, but the reds and oranges they were dressed in, as well as their high conical helmets with the horse tails were unmistakable. Of all places to rest he would find the same one as the Flames.

Their leader gazed around, and then her gaze fell on him. Kendras swallowed the last bite of the bread and put his knife down. Met the gaze, cautiously. He couldn't afford to be anything less than respectful, even if that woman had killed the medic just a week ago.

She walked over to his table. "Scorpion."

"Flame."

"There are two ways to do this. We walk you, or we drag you," she informed him.

Kendras paused as if to give this some consideration. "What for?"

"We'll tell you on the way."

"Well, then." He stood, adjusted the peg leg and gathered up his supplies. "Lead the way."



The other two Flames looked like beardless youths, but he knew they weren't. These were *tanesh*, the best of Fetin's military academy, who had sacrificed their balls to join the Flames. Kendras hoped it had been worth it. They sure were pretty, not quite men, not quite women. This was one way to get around that old rule that no men could serve in the Flames.

He hobbled along, four of them behind him and around him, the leader at his side.

"You said 'on the way'," he said.

"You're a Scorpion. There are people that want to talk to you."

"About?"

She quirked her lips. "I'm not at liberty to tell you."

They passed through the Horse Tamer Gate toward the Flames' barracks, which were right next to the citadel. Kendras was struck by how many servants and slaves scurried around even at this time of night. The Flames must have had some bad losses themselves, and the slaves and servants were likely looking after wounded soldiers and horses. And that duty, indeed, never ceased.

They entered through a door and continued along a corridor. Polished marble floors gave his peg leg problems, and at the pace at which they had him march, he almost slipped. One of the *tanesh* soldiers grabbed his arm just in time and steadied him.

"We're almost there."

Kendras ground his teeth together, determined not to show any of his discomfort or misgivings. He was reasonably sure that the Flames didn't intend revenge. Both Scorpions and Flames had taken their losses, and the Flames at least were still functional. Strength in numbers.

A last door opened, and his leg found purchase on thick woolen carpets. Kendras straightened, saw the Flames fan out and take positions near the door and in the corners of the room, snapping crisply to attention.

This didn't bode well.

A woman turned around near the fireplace. Wild shadows danced across her dark skin. It was impossible to tell the color of her eyes, but somehow Kendras thought they'd be blue if she came close enough. She was strikingly beautiful, tall, her hair graying, but she was aging like the statue of a goddess in a temple, timeless and ancient.

At least she wasn't the Lady Protector, as he'd feared for a moment. The ruler of Fetin was white and much younger. But this lady's embroidered silk robes, and the sparkling rings on her fingers indicated she was at least a member of the ruling household. Maybe an advisor? A high-ranking courtier?

"They said there was a black man in the city. A Scorpion."

"That would be me, lady."

"Yes, it would." She motioned toward his leg. "Sit. You are uncomfortable enough."

"How long do you require me?"

"Until I'm done with you."

That taught him to ask stupid questions. Kendras glanced around, but one of the *tanesh* had already brought him a chair. She preferred to stand.

"What is your name?"

"Kendras."

"How long since you were betrothed?"

She knew the custom? Kendras frowned. "Eight, almost nine years, lady."

"Ah, yes." She studied him, from his ruined foot to his eyes. "There was only one more black man in the Scorpions, is that correct?"

"No, there's also Dev, but he joined us four years ago. Right now, he's lying wounded. And I'm not much better."

"No, I'm speaking of the other black man."

*You're purebred. I'm a mutt.*

"The officer?"

She inclined her head. "Yes."

“What do you want from him?”

“Many things. Right now, I’d like to know where he is.”

“I don’t know.” What did a lady like her want from a soldier? Especially one that had fought against her home city and her guards just last week. Asking a Dalmanye made even less sense, but then maybe she didn’t know where he was from.

“You would find the survivors, wouldn’t you?”

“That is what I have been doing. A few lived, but he’s gone ever since the battle. I was shipped off to Dalman when the king refused to pay up. They might have taken him on a different ship, or he might be dead. He might be making his way here like I did. I just arrived this afternoon.”

“Do you know why he didn’t fight for Fetin?”

“No. He made those decisions alone.” Between him and the memory. Kendras had asked a few times why they’d taken one job but not the other that paid more. Right now he wished he’d paid more attention to the political dimension of why they served one and not the other.

“Very well.” She nodded to one of the Flames. “Get the other agent.”

Of all people coming through the door, he’d never expected to see Widow here. Let alone see the bastard bend his knee fluidly and bow his neck. And the pale, beardless appearance... was Widow a *tanesh*? Next to the others of that ilk, he looked like one.

“Rise.”

Widow straightened. “Your highness. I may have a lead.” He glanced over his shoulder at Kendras and gave a sharp grin before he turned his attention to the lady. Highness. But she wasn’t the Lady Protector. Family? Not her mother, since the Lady Protector was white.

“I believe the ocean priests have him.”

“What makes you think that?”

“Apparently the priests purchased a number of warriors from the spoils after the battle. He hasn’t shown up on the streets, there’s no

rumor of him, and unless he's dead outside the gates...." Widow shrugged. "It's a hunch, but a good one. I've followed much worse."

"Good. Pursue the lead. We need to know with certainty." She turned to Kendras. "Do you know what interest they have in him?"

"Only that he never took a job from them and kept out of their way." This was getting stranger and stranger, especially as something in either her face or that of Widow told him that both of them knew. Or guessed. "But if the priests have him, we can get him back. The temple guard is a joke. We can break him out by force."

Widow scoffed. "You don't know that the ocean priests own the Dalmanyne king? You break him out, and the next thing you'll know is that the king wants your head—and his. Pickled."

"Widowmaker, do you have a better plan?"

"If it's any better we'll see when it's worked." Widow bowed his head. "The ocean priests have hired a competent mercenary to do something... interesting. I believe it has to do with Dalman's succession, but he's keeping his mouth shut about it. That's how I met Kendras. That mercenary found him for the job."

"A blue-eyed man of Jaishani blood from Dalman. I can see how he'd appeal to the priests under the circumstances," the lady mused.

"Well, the mercenary will be a lot less enchanted now that Kendras here stole a horse and rode away without telling him." Widow grinned. "Even though it gave me a reason to be on my way. I was tasked to bring him back."

"Then this meeting is auspicious." The lady turned to Kendras. "You will rejoin the mercenary Widowmaker spoke of and find out if your officer is a prisoner of the priests. You will free him and bring him here."

Kendras stood, carefully. "I have other duties." He noticed tension on the Flames' features. They were only too ready to attack him if he kept disobeying. "The other Scorpions are wounded. I'm the only free Scorpion who can take over."

"This is easily solved. You will guide the Flames to your wounded. While you are on my errand, Kendras, they will receive care

and food. Nobody will harm them.” Her tone made clear it wasn’t an offer. Hostages. Kendras gritted his teeth. He couldn’t win this. It wasn’t so much a job as the only way to go on.

Selvan wouldn’t be able to cope on his own. Dev and Riktan needed care and rest, possibly for weeks. Apart from Selvan, he couldn’t trust anybody to do it. And he was the only Scorpion who could make that decision while the officer was gone.

“How can I know I can trust you?”

“You can’t,” she responded. “But you can know that I want your officer to be free and whole.”

That was precious little to go on. The smooth, grim faces of the *tanesh* promised him a quick execution in the backyard if he kept resisting. That would help nobody. “If I don’t return, will the others be looked after?”

“Yes. They will be whole and free too.”

It was the best he could hope for. Still, it stung. The officer would have found a way out of the quandary, and would probably disapprove of a Scorpion being forced into anything, but Kendras was nothing if not pragmatic. “I agree.”

“Good.” She looked at the Flames and nodded to their leader. “You will look after his comrades.”

The Flame saluted sharply and stood at the ready.

“I have utmost confidence that you will do what it takes to find, free, and return with your officer, Kendras. Dismissed.”

Kendras gave her a quick nod, then turned, guarded by the Flames. Widow remained inside, probably to receive further instructions.

This had taken a worrying turn, but at least the others would be safe. He glanced to the Flame officer. “There’s digging to do. I hope you have some good shovels.”

## Chapter Eight

HE'D NEVER have imagined that he'd end up one day watching Fetin's finest dig graves, but that was exactly what the Flames did. Kendras sat on a tree stump, watching the soldiers shovel earth and stones.

He'd said his goodbyes, done the rites as well as he could. He was exhausted and in pain, but both paled when he thought of Dev and Riktan, who were still struggling to heal. And Selvan, of course, who knelt on the ground, his face resting on Kendras's thigh.

"We shouldn't be doing this."

"There's no other choice." Kendras ran his fingers through the blond hair. "Much as I hate it."

"And what... about me?" Selvan turned his head to look at him. "I should be with you."

"The others need you more."

Selvan's breath caught, and he curled his fingers tighter into Kendras's trousers. But it was true. He needed Selvan to remember why he was doing this. What he owed his comrades. It was easier being strong when another man was strong enough to be weak.

"Don't leave."

"I'm only leaving to bring the officer back." Kendras bent down and kissed Selvan's brow. "And I'm not leaving Dev and Riktan in the hands of strangers. You'll have to look after them. Like you did with these."

Selvan breathed deeply, clung to him now. And Kendras didn't want to go. Every instinct told him his place was with his comrades or to at least take Selvan, but he didn't want to see what Steel would do to the slave. Selvan was also safer with the Flames. Out of harm's way.

"Are you done playing with your slave?" Widow asked, just jumping off his horse.

"Maybe not. I might take him to the tent and fuck him there before we leave."

Widow measured him. "Is that before Steel fucks you again?" He grinned. "Always told him he has atrocious taste."

"He didn't get me just for my pretty eyes."

Widow laughed softly. "No. Are you packed?"

"Yes." Kendras stood, adjusted the peg leg and bent down to Selvan. "I'll come back, and I'll bring the officer. Just look after the others." He touched Selvan's head again and then slid from the slave's grip. "And show those Flames what being a Scorpion means."

Selvan knelt there for a little while longer, then stood, pensive, a little lost, maybe, but Kendras knew he'd gather himself and do what was expected of him.

*Don't forget that weakness for Selvan is a choice.*

Kendras hobbled over to the horse. He had some money, a new glaive, sword, and other gear that he'd need. He felt a lot less helpless and exposed, even if his foot hurt no less.

The Flames had their orders, and at least he no longer had to watch how they tossed the bodies into the mass grave. Or think about those they'd lost. Returning to Steel would be bad enough—he'd better keep his wits about him.

He climbed onto the horse, then followed Widow down the mountain and back onto the road.

The night was nearly over now. Dawn was gray and joyless. Widow pressed on until noon, and then they paused to rest the horses. Kendras took a lot of the herbs, knowing that Widow would likely not

stop just because he was in pain. The little bastard couldn't wait to get back to Steel.

"How come you're working for Fetin's rulers and Steel?"

"The less you know the better." Widow frowned.

"What about the officer?"

"The priests that hired Steel might have him. There are old grudges."

"They *might* have him?"

"Last thing I heard they did." Widow gave him a low stare. "And that's all you're getting."

"Just spending the time."

"Spend the time coming up with a way how to calm Steel down." Widow pursed his lips. "And explain to him where you were and why. And don't mention your officer, or the man is dead."

Which only served to bring home that he had to trust Widow to not tell Steel the truth. The *tanesh* was a mystery, but it was wrapped in poisonous thorns. Getting too close to that was dangerous, and Kendras saw no value in that.

They rode in silence, only exchanging words when needed. And few were needed. When they had to stop for the night, they paid for beds in a shared hall. At the far end, a group of mendicant priests settled in, their robes and shaved heads giving them away as novices. They spoke among themselves in excited tones while Kendras checked his armor and leathers, as he did every night before he settled in for sleep.

Widow was sitting on the bed across the middle aisle and bent down to unlace his boots. His light leather armor was already shed. Underneath, he wore a white Vededrinye-type shirt, tight at the wrists and laced up to the elbows, then billowing around the upper arm. The shoulders were embroidered with dark blue thread, tendrils of the floral pattern reaching down his front. Well-used, dark brown leather trousers hugged long legs and strong thighs, but they also revealed that Widow didn't have much of a bulge. So they removed everything when they made *tanesh*.



“Save that for when you’re back with Steel,” Widow said, pulling a boot off.

Kendras huffed. “Did it hurt when they cut it off?”

Widow glanced up and grinned. “You’re not nearly as stupid as you look. If you want a piece of ass, take it to the priests. Cock is on their daily diet.”

Kendras laughed loud enough to attract attention from the novices. It wasn’t a friendly laugh. Even in his own ears it sounded grim. Widow lay down flat and folded his arms in front of his chest. He closed his eyes, but Kendras didn’t believe he simply fell asleep like that.

One of the novices piped up, “Once the king has been married to the sea again, all that will change.”

Kendras glanced over, noted how some novices agreed, others disagreed, and the novices showed all the easily inflamed excitement of youth defending their positions. He stood, and noticed two of them glancing over nervously. The novice who’d spoken up drew back physically.

Kendras hobbled over. “They are going to marry the king to the sea again?”

“Well, yes. They’ve been preparing the temple city for weeks now.”

“Do you know why?”

“The gods might have told the high priest that it’s time. The ocean gods are fickle,” the novice said. “I don’t know. I’m not a priest yet.”

“Do you know when?”

“I heard it’ll be in two months. But they’ll let the people know before it happens. The moon phase needs to be right, the stars in alignment.”

“Patient gods,” Kendras remarked dryly, but the novices didn’t catch the irony.

They eyed him warily, maybe not sure if he was a blasphemer, and, more importantly, how to punish him if he was.

“The *Glorious* is currently moored outside Dalman,” one of the novices said. “That’s the most beautiful ship I’ve ever seen.”

So that was the floating temple, already in position. Very interesting. Was that the reason for the king’s sudden attack on Fetin? He wanted it to be done and over with before he was given over to the ocean? Or currying favor before he had to face the gods again?

“I prefer a war ship,” Kendras said, entertaining for a small moment the thought of a pack of Vededrinnye *Hunters* to take on the *Glorious*. Barring acts of the ocean gods, the Vededrinnye marines would make short work of the soft temple guards and the softer priests.

“Yes, but those are made for *mundane* purposes,” one of the novices said, maybe feeling brave now that Kendras hadn’t become hostile.

Kendras smiled slowly and winked at the young man. “There are many purposes. Some are very, *very* mundane.” He measured the novice, whose lips opened. They looked soft and pink. Kendras smiled wider and hobbled outside.

The novice found him at the back of the house, leaning against the wall. He glanced around, momentarily distracted by a sound from the stable, but Kendras assumed that was from a cow rather than a human.

The youth knelt down in front of him without even being prompted. His fingers opened Kendras’s leathers and freed his cock. Kendras inhaled deeply when the young man began to suck him immediately.

And he had a lot of practice, dealing with Kendras’s size like he’d had a lot of cock. Widow’s joke came to mind, but only for a moment, because the young man got him down into his throat, and Kendras took the shaved head, pushing deeper. Hips thrusting forward until those soft lips kissed his groin.

“This mundane enough for you, little one?” Kendras asked, not expecting an answer.

The ocean priests sure knew how to train their own. When Kendras pulled away, the boy's mouth made a smacking sound, and he looked up, eyes wide and pleading.

“Against the wall.”

The novice obeyed, hoisting up his robes, and Kendras spit into his hand before wetting the passage. And spit again, for good measure. The novice very nearly shouted when Kendras pushed inside him, going deeper and rougher than he'd expected. But something told him that was most of his attraction. He got that a lot from this type. Soft-skinned youths looked at him and wanted to be ravaged by the big bad mercenary. Somebody who probably spent most of his time sucking off flabby priests didn't mind a little ravaging.

The novice groaned with pain but pushed back at the same time, taking Kendras with a mix of hunger and determination.

Kendras pounded into him, fast in, slow out, making the youth whimper on every stroke. The novice's cheek rested against the wall, and Kendras could see one closed eye. Gods below knew what was going on in his mind, but he relished the harshness of it, no doubt about it.

Kendras bared his teeth. This challenged him to be harsher, to gauge the depths of debasement and make the youth break. Feel him give up. He slowed and pulled the novice upright by his shoulders, then shoved him, face first into the wall, arm twisted on his back. “Where did they find you, little whore? On the slave market?”

Hard, fast thrusts with every word. Kendras felt the boy tighten around him, struggling to reach climax, but didn't quite manage. That almost got him off, and he fucked into the tightening body that quivered with tension, but was unable to get there. “Your priests have smaller dicks than this, don't they? Does it hurt?”

“Please,” the youth whimpered, gasping, lips open, and Kendras thought for a grim moment how pretty those would look around a fellow Scorpion's cock right now. That thought got him closer, and he took hold of the novice's cock, squeezing the wet tip a few times in his palm as if he wanted to crush it.

The youth came with a shocked, pained shout, and Kendras thrust a few more times into the tight heat. The novice would be sore the next morning, but maybe that would make getting fucked by one of the priests better. Here was one who appreciated a little—or a lot of—pain.

He pumped inside, fucked as long as he was hard enough, drawing out his pleasure even though the boy squirmed and moaned with discomfort now that he'd come. Kendras didn't care.

When he pulled out, the boy collapsed in a heap next to the wall. Kendras didn't move away, just closed his leathers, groin at eye level with the youth, who stared at his hands, eyes bright.

"What?" Kendras asked, feeling a little more charitable.

"Your tattoos..." The youth looked up into his face, reluctantly.

Kendras felt the sweat in his neck cool suddenly. "Yes?"

"I've seen them before," the novice said, and leaned his head against the wall.

"Where?"

"On... a man. A different man."

And why were young men babbling idiots after sex? Kendras reached out and cupped the novice's soft cheek, then forced a thumb between his lips. The boy didn't bite down when he pushed deeper, instead sucking eagerly on his thumb, sending a pleasant tingle into Kendras's groin. He bent down a little and looked right into the youth's dark eyes. "Where is he?" Pulled his thumb free.

The novice stared at him, breathless. "In the temple... in Dalman. He's the sacred warrior."

"The what?" Kendras was about to grab the novice and shake it out of him, when the back door opened and two other novices came out. Their faces lit up in alarm, so Kendras stepped back and raised his hands. Getting accused of using force against a priest, or even something that would eventually turn into a priest, was trouble he didn't need. At least not without a score of his brethren guarding his back.

He walked past the two novices and returned to the sleeping hall, where Widow was lying on the bed, on top of the blanket. The *tanesh* clearly expected an attack, and didn't want to get tangled in the sheets. The bare blade of his sword rested right next to him.

"How was it?" Widow asked, not opening an eye.

"Had much worse."

Widow chuckled. "Seems priests are good for something."

"Did they kick you out of Vededrin for blasphemy?"

"What? You think I'd insult a bunch of power mad assholes who hear voices of invisible, all-powerful beings and worship them by taking more money from those too stupid to see through the bullshit?" Widow opened one eye. "Nah."

Kendras laughed and stretched out. "You're a bastard, Widow."

"My pleasure," Widow said, baring all his sharp teeth for a moment.

*He's the sacred warrior.* What on earth did this mean? Kendras wasn't much of a believer. Most of his life he'd done his damned best to stay invisible to all authorities, and that included temple guards and priests. He'd only fought when cornered, and only ever moved his lips in prayer when desperate, but he'd never really expected an invisible hand to reach from the skies or below the sea and put things right. The officer had never attacked a priest, never plundered a temple—at least since Kendras's betrothal. He, too, stayed well away from matters of faith.

If anything, when they'd been hired by priests, the officer had treated their employers with a mild generosity that was otherwise reserved for the village idiot or small children. The only thing that Scorpions believed in was the officer and the code and memory that bound them all together.

"Do you know your way around the ocean cult?" Kendras asked.

"Why not ask your little cock boy?"

"Not attracting undue attention."

Widow huffed. “What could they possibly do to you? Smite you with their soft little hands?”

*Not me*, Kendras thought and turned, restless. He might be fooling himself, but the dull throbbing in his foot was less bad these days. Or maybe his spirits were simply up, knowing the officer might be alive.

He woke in the early dawn. For a moment he simply lay there, listening, wondering what had awakened him. There. Another knock. Metal on wood. Kendras sat up, began to tighten his leathers, which woke Widow.

Heavy footfalls. Armored men on the wooden floor of the guesthouse. The metallic rustling of chain mail.

“I don’t like this,” he said, and Widow nodded, slipping into his boots and reaching for his sword belt. The novices were gone, the couple traders were still asleep.

“Anybody looking for you?”

“Apart from you? No.” Kendras pushed his foot down into the boot and put the peg leg on.

Not a moment too early, as the door to the sleeping quarters was punched open so hard it slammed against the wall—and would have bounced back shut if not for two heavily armored warriors, one of whom stopped the door with a gauntleted fist.

The blue and silver of their tabards gave Kendras pause, but he stood already. Widow, the quicker of them, reached for Kendras’s glaive and tossed it to Kendras. While the low beams crossing the ceiling and the wooden pillars holding the second floor limited what he could do with the long weapon, he’d still be able to defend himself.

The temple guardsmen eyed Kendras warily. “You the Scorpion?”

“Do you need to get stung first to know the difference?” Kendras asked.

The guardsman pulled himself up to his impressive height. Kendras crouched to gather more tension and to more easily burst into movement. Strutting and puffing his chest out betrayed a man who

wasn't cautious enough to win a fight. He held the glaive in front of him with both hands, centered, ready to lash out.

For a long moment, the guardsman seemed at a loss for words, and Kendras realized what they'd really wanted was to find him unprepared. Facing a Scorpion who was ready to stand his ground unnerved this man.

"What do you want?" Kendras grinned. "Apart from wishing us a good morning."

Reluctance lingered in every line of the man's body, echoed in the way his companion held the hilt of his sword—like a talisman, not a weapon. *Gods below*, Kendras thought, *they've sent two cowards to take me on.*

Widow at his side laughed. "I'd hate wading through guts to get breakfast. I'm in a foul mood in the morning."

The guardsman blinked, even more disturbed by the fact that Widow was clearly *tanesh*, then looked at Kendras. "You raped a priest."

"I did no such thing. First, he was a novice; second, he begged me for it. Seems your priests' dicks aren't big enough. I'd wager *you* hardly feel them when you bend over."

"You bastard," hissed the man and drew his sword.

Kendras crouched lower, hoped the peg leg wouldn't slip in the next movement. He'd simply not trained enough with the contraption, so he couldn't be sure he'd not land on his back.

"You willing to die over a novice's ass?" he asked.

Widow next to him pulled his short sword free, and Kendras felt his heart beat fast and strong. Fighting side by side. Even with a bastard like Widow. He didn't doubt for a moment that they could make short work of the two guardsmen.

"Now, if he'd fucked your high priest, I'd get that...." Widow teased, grinning like a storm harpy on a bad day. "Making the high priest squeal—for cock—yes, that would work. But a novice? Aren't we all too grown up for that?"

Apparently not. The first guardsman lunged forward, heavy chain mail rattling as he moved. With one leg as immobile as it was, Kendras could do precious little but meet the man's challenge straight on.

He noticed the clang of blade on blade to his side, knowing Widow was fighting, then blocked the ambitious overhead swing of the first guardsman's blade with the grip of his glaive, stopping most of the impact dead, and then changing the angle, sweeping the bladed end down.

The guardsman had clearly never fought a glaive fighter. The hook at the back of the long blade found the guardsman's heel and another twist of the bar swept him off his feet.

Kendras turned the weapon rapidly in his hand and delivered a punch with the blunt end against the scrambling man's chest.

Chain mail was nice and good against a blade, but a solid punch from a reinforced ironwood stave went right through the woven metal and delivered all its force into the body underneath.

The guardsman coughed and sputtered. Kendras stepped back and glanced quickly at Widow. Who had the tip of his short sword under the other guardsman's jaw, digging into the soft flesh underneath.

"Leave it, or he gets it," Widow said, voice stone cold. No joking, no fun, not even provocation. Kendras would have loved to have seen this particular bit of sword craft, but he'd always known that Widow was a lethal bastard. What he lacked in cock and balls, he had in sheer glee over destroying and humiliating other people.

"You'll regret this," the guardsman said and pushed himself up. His comrade said nothing. Any word would have driven Widow's sword into his mouth.

"Wrong thing to say," Kendras said calmly. "That can only make us kill you to spare us the trouble of you returning with more men."

He watched the guardsman consider this. They would be better off just killing them here and making their escape before anybody linked them to the corpses.

"I did not rape the boy. But if you want me to toss you a silver as sacrifice for your insulted gods, I can do that."



The guardsman stared at him. "They will strike you down."

"They better be better at that than you," Kendras said, weighing his weapon, ready to hit the guardsman again. He'd struck true; the man was pale and sweating, fighting nausea. Getting punched in the solar plexus did that to a man.

Widow slid closer to the guard he was keeping under control, close enough to look intimate, then brought his knee up in a harsh movement, crumpling the man to the floor.

Kendras bit back a wince. He'd not expected a eunuch to do that.

"Let's go." Widow pushed the short sword into its sheath. He grabbed his saddlebags, threw Kendras his, and they made their way unmolested out of the tavern.

They took their horses, prepared and saddled them as quickly as possible.

"Well, this way we're getting an early start," Widow said. "And next time we meet some soft-bottomed boys, keep it inside."

"You enjoyed that," Kendras retorted.

"I said I hate spilling blood before breakfast. Makes me testy."

"Wasn't it 'wading through guts'?" Kendras grinned. "Want an apple?"

Widow huffed but took the apple Kendras had fished from his saddle bags.

## Chapter Nine

THEY made haste, just in case the priests sent more ill-prepared temple guards. Having seen him fight for real, Kendras found Widow easier company. Kendras could respect him, as much of a bastard as Widow was. Kendras appreciated a lethal warrior like that, who came out on top and cracked acidic jokes as he did so.

Kendras would prefer to not turn his back on Widow, but knew he could trust him as long as it suited Widow that Kendras was alive. Kendras much preferred a cold-blooded, calculating killer to a high-and-mighty man with principles and honor that made no sense. Maybe, in the end, he shared a lot more with Widow than things that set them apart.

Late the next day, they arrived at the farm and rode through the gate arch. Kendras felt the anticipation down in his balls, tightening them. “Any idea what he’ll do?”

“No.” Widow shrugged. “He won’t kill you.”

His tone said “I won’t let him” rather than “he wouldn’t do that”. Not a great thing to look forward to. Kendras glanced at Widow, wondering what it meant. “It’ll be easier to get the officer out if I’m alive.”

“No doubt,” Widow said. “Besides, I have to trust you about meeting the lady.” He slid off the horse and handed the reins to a slave. He did nothing to help Kendras off his horse. At least to onlookers, it looked like nothing had changed between them.

Steel didn't take long to appear. The mercenary remained a little distance away, his arms crossed in front of his chest. His cold eyes gave nothing away. Kendras kept his jaw tight and got off the horse.

"Brought him back," said Widow.

"Where did you find him?"

"Just off Fetin. He was looking for the corpses of his 'brothers'," Widow sneered.

"Find any?"

"Yes." Kendras turned toward Steel, adjusted the leg and limped toward him. The man's reactions to him had changed completely. No touch, no smile, no warmth at all. Whatever Steel had thought they had, was gone. Might have been strangled in Steel's anger. That was it. Steel was angry, but cold. A vengeful aloofness radiated off him in waves.

"They are all dead. Even the slave."

"Really?" Steel didn't even lift an eyebrow. "And what do you think you're doing?"

"Widow brought me back. As ordered. As I promised."

Steel stepped closer. "And you think I'll just take you back?"

Whoa. He was hardly a runaway lover or wife. Kendras wasn't sure how to play this, but he saw that Steel watched him sharply, maybe for a mistake or a weakness. Or a lie. Steel was even more dangerous than he'd assumed.

His first gut instinct—that Steel was too clever—came back. He should have stayed the fuck away from this man, but here he was, deeper and faster entangled than he'd ever thought he could be.

"What would you have me do, Steel? I can't kneel." Kendras held the cold gaze, saw it narrow with anger or speculation. It was hard to tell with Steel. "You wanted me. Here I am. Not too late to do your job, am I?"

"No." Steel moved close enough that their breaths mingled. Steel smelled of rich spiced wine and olives. "Take off the leathers. Bare your chest."

Ah. Seemed Steel had made up his mind. Kendras wondered if the man would come to him again in the night for a quick fuck.

He lifted his hands and began to open his clothing, pulling the leather cords loose, then spreading the stiff leather flaps, baring his chest and most of his stomach.

“Take them off,” Steel ordered, gaze fixed to Kendras’s pecs like he’d never seen muscle before.

Kendras opened the cords at the wrists and upper arms, then pulled the middle ones as loose as they’d get and pulled the whole thing off. He held it in his hand, noticed Steel’s gaze riveted to the muscles of his arm, his shoulder. As long as Steel’s eyes held that hunger, he’d live. He didn’t think Steel was the type to fuck a corpse.

“I’m dusty and sweaty from the road,” he said, hoping Steel read that as an invitation to join him in the bath. He could do that. He’d slept with men for worse reasons than survival.

“You’ll be a lot sweatier after I’m done with you,” Steel said, voice grim. Clearly not about sex, then.

Puppy and Stick appeared behind Steel. Widow stood to the side, expression mocking. He’d have to trust Widow. What a thought.

“I invited you. I paid you. I offered you a place to heal in return for your services.” Steel stepped closer. Kendras felt him shudder when their chests touched. The man desired him still. That—alone—was his best ally now.

“And I’m here now.”

“How far are you willing to go to show me you won’t betray me again?” Steel asked in a harsh whisper.

Kendras swallowed. Steel was his best bet to find the officer. How far would he go? “Whatever it takes.”

“Then kneel down.” Steel’s gaze was unforgiving, cold, unreadable. “Submit.”

*Never stop fighting. Never stop.*

Kendras struggled. He didn’t laugh, because, clearly, Steel meant it. Last time, he’d left Kendras’s pride intact. All he had to do was

allow himself to get fucked. That alone was pretty harmless. Kneeling, though, or worse, being taken as a slave... was different. Was it just a dare or what were Steel's intentions? He breathed deeply, winning time, clearing his mind.

Steel just watched him, the demand unyielding.

"What do you want, Steel? A comrade or a slave?"

"That's my decision, not yours."

Kendras never broke eye contact. "I can't. I swore never to kneel to another man."

"Then I'll help you to do it." Steel nodded to the guardsmen. "Bind him. If he fights, kill him." He drew his sword. Puppy and Stick pulled their swords too.

Kendras cast a quick glance around. Widow did nothing. *Nice ally.*

One guard moved closer, holding rope. Kendras saw him sweat—of course, he was the man who'd die first if Kendras fought.

Slave. Animal. If he allowed himself to be bound, he couldn't defend himself. No choices, no strength. He'd just about accept slavery.

*Never stop fighting.*

"What will it be, Scorpion?" Steel asked.

Kendras balled his fists. Eight against one. He was surrounded, and he was unable to run away. He might fight, might go down fighting, but if he did, he'd never free the officer. And he didn't trust Widow to accomplish that alone.

He looked at Widow, and saw his fingers briefly touch the dagger at his side. Blade cuts rope. He didn't want to trust Widow that far.

*Gods below, but what else?*

He stared at the guardsman. "Scared?" He offered his wrists with a courage he didn't feel, and had them tied. Roughly. Fast. The guardsman checked the knots like he'd check the restraints of a dangerous animal that could tear his throat out if he lingered too long or the knots came loose.

At least, he could feel everybody relax a little. They were still afraid of him. *Good.*

Steel pushed his sword back in, leaving some of the blade naked as if to signal he didn't quite trust the peace.

"Now tie him to the post."

Kendras felt the guard's hand between his shoulder blades, pushing him toward the whipping post near the house. Unruly slaves were whipped there, he assumed. He hadn't watched any whippings, wasn't sure how harsh discipline was here.

The guardsman pushed him into position, then pulled his hands up and tied them to an iron ring above his head. Kendras's hands were fists—in part because that was the only thing that kept him from fighting to the death, and in part because that tightened the tendons and muscles of his wrists so that the rope didn't cut too deeply.

Would Steel actually go through with this? Possible, but he couldn't quite believe it.

The guardsman stepped back. Kendras twisted his neck to look at Steel.

The mercenary came closer, running his fingernails down Kendras's exposed back. Kendras wasn't sure if he'd prefer getting fucked or whipped now. And from Steel's pensive expression, he doubted the man had made up his mind which *he* preferred. Steel reached his hand out, and a different guardsman gave him a long coiled whip.

"You don't have to do this, Steel," Kendras said, realizing that he was scared.

"Maybe not. But I think I do." Steel traced a line diagonally across Kendras's back, from the top of his shoulder to the hip bone. "You will submit to me. Because, Kendras, I'm not 'nothing'. If I can't be anything else, I'll at least be your master."

Kendras shuddered. He shouldn't have told Steel the truth. Should have been craftier, cleverer, misled him better. He'd been weak to admit any of his thoughts or goals. This would not happen again. He knew Steel would make sure he'd remember this lesson. He inhaled,

held the breath, then gave a small nod, accepting that he'd be punished now.

*You learn the wisest lessons from your enemy. If you live.*

When the whip traced exactly the line that Steel's finger had drawn, it felt like fire, a shock of impact, rocking Kendras forward with the force.

The pain felt like an opening wound, and Kendras half-expected the flesh on his back to part. Hot, cold, pain, burn. He realized he'd caught his breath and struggled to continue breathing. Gods below, this hurt.

He expected the next blow to fall, and had no idea how to take that pain. How on earth did anybody withstand a whipping? But there was no second blow, and he just struggled on to breathe again, while his back burned with slowly spreading pain.

"One," Steel said, out loud. "I should make you count, Kendras. But I don't think you could do it."

Too true. Kendras suddenly remembered something he'd learned when a blow to the sternum had killed his breathing reflex.

*If you can't breathe in, breathe out.*

He pushed what little air he still had in his lungs out in a hiss, and once his lungs were empty, they filled of their own volition.

The second blow made him cry out. It seemed impossible to resist the pain once it bit, and the sensation was as overwhelming as it was terrifying. He felt the heat explode across his back, completing an X of pain.

"Two," Steel said. When Kendras turned his head, he saw the whip dangle into the dust. He couldn't read anything but grim determination in Steel's face. Yes, this wasn't over, not by a long shot.

Blows three, four, and five zigzagged over his back, drawing lines in fire. Kendras arched, suddenly glad for the support of the restraints. His sweaty chest pressed against the wooden pillar, which must have witnessed things like this a hundred times. Kendras closed his fingers around the rope holding him. He didn't trust his legs to support him for much longer, so his arms would have to keep him upright. He'd seen

whippings, had seen flesh explode open under blows from a bullwhip like this.

And when the next blows came, he wasn't sure if it was blood or sweat running down his back and between his cheeks under the leather trousers. Every blow seemed to sap his strength more. He was bleeding—if not blood, then willpower.

The next blows almost knocked his legs out from under him. He didn't have the strength to stand, didn't trust his shaking legs, the knees that seemed suddenly boneless. The pure terror of being unable to escape the next blows clawed at his mind like a rat trapped in a burning cage.

"Fifteen." Steel paused. Kendras saw he was changing hands, maybe getting tired. He just wanted this to stop, his whole back one raw sore wound, or that was what it felt like. The wounds already crossed in several places, and that felt like fire and burning grit burrowed inside him.

His guts had all turned liquid; he fought to breathe, but breathing out saved him from simply collapsing. He remembered to hiss when he was hit, just like in training, just like in combat. Breathing out tightened his muscles, gave additional momentum, channeled strength from the core of his body.

He was swaying on his feet after twenty blows, exhausted, and ready to do whatever it took for the pain to stop. But he still couldn't admit it. Couldn't beg for mercy. He had become a spark of consciousness in a body that only consisted of pain and terror. He'd rather have faced the Flames again, or buried his dead comrades. No. Not that. Never his comrades.

"I think he's had enough," Widow said. "Give him more, and he's going to piss himself."

"What? You suddenly his friend?"

"I didn't bring him back so you could kill him under the whip," Widow scoffed. "When we all know you'd rather fuck him than kill him. Well, if you ever want to fuck him again, then think about how much more he can take."



Steel paused. Kendras didn't manage to turn his head, could only imagine the scene. Riling Steel wasn't helpful. Gods damn Widow.

"He's fucked you, right?"

"I'd have torn his guts out if he'd tried." Widow laughed. "Whatever, Steel. Kill him. But then don't come crying about how much you want that bastard. Or how useful he'd have been if you'd been able to keep him alive. I'm bored. I'll go fuck some slave bitch. That's exactly what you should be doing too."

Kendras tensed. Widow gone meant he had no protection whatsoever. Even if Widow hadn't raised a hand to help him.

The next two blows were the worst of the lot, the most forceful and close together. So bad that Kendras felt his legs give out. Widow had known exactly where his breaking point was. He was approaching it right now, could taste defeat.

It didn't matter anymore. Nothing did. Just the pain. The weight pulled on his arms, and he fought to support himself with his wrists and hands, struggling to get back on his feet, scrabbling against the pole like a mouse trying to climb the steep incline of a milk bowl. Ultimately pointless, helpless, and still struggling.

"Now... will you submit?" Steel asked.

*No.* Kendras just mutely nodded, knew he couldn't take even a single blow more. He shouldn't. He knew that. It was against everything the Scorpions had taught him. *Never stop fighting.* But he, too, had always been damaged. He'd given up before. He wasn't as strong as the others. Pity, then, that it was him who was still alive.

"Tell me."

"I sub... mit."

A harsh blow against the pole freed him. A blade or axe had severed the rope between ring and wrists. Kendras's knees didn't hold him. He fell. The protesting pain in his foot was sharper, piercing, but somehow smaller than that of any of the blows from the whip. He pushed himself up with his hands, half-sitting, half-kneeling on the ground. Even his arms shook from the exertion of not simply collapsing in a heap.

His back was agony. Even a breeze hurt now.

“Say that again.” Steel moved into his view, standing there waiting, cold and detached. Kendras just looked at his legs, the strong thighs, then lowered his gaze, because he didn’t want to see if this had turned the mercenary on.

“I submit.” It got easier now. Not a lie. He did. Whatever Steel wanted to do with him, or to him, he could do it.

Steel moved closer, and Kendras bowed down, cowering like a beaten dog.

“You should never forget that I gave you your life. If you cross me again, you’ll die under the whip. You had a taste of that. I’ll whip the flesh from your bones and then leave you to the dogs if you ever so much as think about crossing me again. Do you understand?”

*No, I don’t. Why me?* Kendras nodded. “I do.”

“And never forget it.” Steel dropped the whip. It was wet and glistening with blood. Kendras felt his stomach rise at the sight.

At some invisible signal, two guardsmen grabbed him by the arms, and half-dragged, half-carried him off. He was brought back into the room where he’d slept before. Somebody gave him something milky to drink, which made him dizzy. Hands removed the rest of his clothes, and stretched him out on the bed on his belly. Alive. Barely.

But for the moment, he’d have to accept defeat.

## Chapter Ten

“HE STILL craves you,” Widow said and sat down near Kendras’s bed. Kendras wasn’t sure he wanted Widow anywhere near him. It was strange to have a visitor. He’d been looked after by slaves who’d tended his wounds, bandaged him, fed, and cleaned him. He’d spent the first two weeks of that time flat on his belly on the bed, and the days afterward doing some light exercise to keep flexible and strong. He’d never wanted to leave the room, not once. All he’d done was wait to heal and then just wait until he was needed.

“What are you doing here?”

“Telling you to get going again.” Widow grinned widely and slapped something dark on Kendras’s bed. It was a pair of gloves. “These are for you. Wear them. You can walk now, can’t you?”

“How do you know?”

“I’ve seen you practice. You still limp like a whore after a double shift, but you’re walking.”

Kendras glared, but Widow remained unimpressed. “Steel still not over himself?”

“Well, if you wonder if he’s ridden with guilt over whipping you to the blood, I guess he figures he’d rather have fucked you in revenge, but no, he’s doing fine. It’s just that he still wants you bad.” Widow crossed his legs and grinned.

“So?”

“Figured you might be interested.” Widow uncrossed his legs. “He shouldn’t know he’s not the man you want. Now that you’ve submitted to him, and he thinks you’re his slave. As my uncle used to say, a smile doesn’t cost you anything.”

“Steel’s not after a smile.”

“In a manner of speaking.” Widow grinned. “We have a guest. When you see a pretty little thing run around the courtyard, do yourself a favor and don’t fuck him.”

“Who is he?”

“Not an ocean priest novice. This one’s a noble.” Widow stood and seemed to consider how much to tell him. “Good to know you’ll soon be able to fight. You’ll need to heal as fast as you can. Keep limping around the room, soldier. You’ll need all the practice you can get.”

“Why?”

“The thing Steel wants you for is about to happen.” Widow stretched his neck. “I guess the priests will want to see us soon. That’s when you’ll be able to have a look around the temple city.” Widow grinned. “So, keep practicing.”

“Understood.” Kendras waited for the *tanesh* to leave, then sat up. His shoulders and back were still tender, but no longer a mass of raw meat. He kept his foot tightly bandaged to support the bones that still felt brittle, but yes, he could walk. He preferred not to, because it was painful, but after weeks and weeks of making do, his body finally mostly obeyed him again.

He’d used the enforced rest to read the memory, despite the fact that he had struggled to make out the words, at least at first. Reading had never been his strongest skill.

The most fascinating thing about it was that many officers had written this. His officer was only the last one in a line of men that couldn’t have been any more different. Rare glimpses of humor, of world-weariness, of snarling determination—battles, and lines of dead and new recruits, in the barest of notes. Who had been betrothed when,

where they came from. Hundreds, no, thousands of names—comrades that Kendras had never met but felt bound to.

Their lives, their deaths as Scorpions bound him ever tighter to the few that were still alive. He read the sparse words of the previous officer about “political complications” regarding the recruitment of the new officer. It was all cryptic, and the sentence “It may be more politically expedient to keep this to the bare minimum” intrigued him. No other Scorpion was shrouded in the same mystery. Not only that. One name had been scratched out on the heavy vellum—the name of the current officer. But who had done that? Who had dared?

*Nobody tampers with the memory.*

There were no other secrets. The memory served as a letter to every new officer, containing drills, rites and instructions, warnings, and the name of every Scorpion, alive or dead, who had made it through the tests, and those who’d died in the attempt. Why then was this an exception? What was different about the current officer? It didn’t get any more mysterious than this.

The memory ended on the eve of battle at Fetin, and the last entry read:

*We have taken the commission to fight for the Dalmanye king against Fetin. It is the same game of the three cities again. Vededrin stands aside, but I know the Elder watches. And the Dalmanye king—is he the one to resurrect the Empire of Shara? I can’t say I like or trust him, but he is a decent enough general. For all his failings, I believe he has the vision to do it. And clearly, it needs to be done.*

*He will have to subjugate Fetin and Vededrin first, the first to control trade, the second to control the ocean. Lord Protector Ashangul of Fetin made the last attempt to impose his rule by war. But I don’t see Fetin as ruling Dalman. Dalman is stronger, its population more numerous. Dalman is the old imperial city—Fetin just a grown up garrison town. It might not be wise to fight against Fetin, but I need to put my personal feelings aside.*

That was it. No names of the fallen and wounded. Kendras’s fingers itched to complete the chronicle up to now, but that was clearly

the task of his officer. Adding what had happened since would be to pretend the officer would never come back.

Kendras pried one of the wooden floorboards loose and pushed the book underneath before he hammered the board back in place with the palm of his hand.

He put his leathers back on. The stiff material sat harshly on his sore back, but it also gave him strength when he pulled the laces tight. It forced him to straighten, pushed his shoulders back, and felt like the embrace of an old comrade. Something he could always rely on. It gave him strength to face Steel.

Favoring the bad leg, he limped down the corridor. The first time that he'd left the room for anything but a bath. The first time he'd done so in daylight.

When he stepped outside into the small courtyard where Puppy and Stick often hung out, the banter between the mercenaries ceased. Steel sat there, knife in hand, a piece of white cheese sat pierced at the tip, while he sucked on an olive stone, before he placed it, gingerly, into a bowl.

“Look who’s visiting.”

Widow was cutting bread and smirking, but said nothing. Which might be wise, considering that half of what Widow said was vulgar and the rest was blasphemous. At the same table, somewhat ill-at-ease, sat a number of ocean priests in their robes of silver and blue.

And there was the “pretty thing” that Widow had mentioned. A pale young man wearing embroidered casual clothes sat amongst them, his black hair artfully braided and adorned with silver jewelry. He was still in his teens, a certain softness in his features betraying a pampered life, but he kept himself as upright as if he’d been a guard captain.

Kendras sketched a bow to the priests and in the general direction of the youth, then settled down next to Puppy on the bench and reached for the cheese and bread as if he belonged there. He was glad that Widow’s gloves hid the scorpions on the backs of his hands.

“Does he belong to you?” one of the priests asked. A bald-shaved man with a pinched face.

“Yes.” Steel leaned back. “Isn’t he perfect?”

“Yes, very good.” The priest’s words could have been spoken about an animal. “Will he be able to fight?”

Steel glanced at Kendras, then picked a green olive from the bowl, scraped half off with his teeth, and sucked off the flesh, before he turned the olive and chewed off the rest. The stone landed in the bowl with a ping. “Maybe not tonight or tomorrow.”

The priest cast a glance at the young noble, a cold glint in his eye. Kendras wasn’t sure what any of this meant, but it felt a lot like a conspiracy. Yet another reason to keep his head down until he knew what he was doing.

“Well, thank you for your hospitality, Master Steel. I’m afraid we will have to return to the temple... at least for the time being.” The priest turned to the noble. “You, young man, will remain here. It is a lot safer here. We cannot yet afford to show you to the world.”

The young man scowled. “As you say.” He wasn’t really obedient, just did what he was told. That spelled trouble, but Kendras didn’t move a muscle.

“Steel, bring him to the temple in a week’s time. The stars are in alignment; it’s clearly the will of the gods.” The priest lifted his hands up, palms pointing to the ground. “The powers of the ocean rise; soon it is time.” The priest shot Steel a glance that said “don’t ruin it,” then turned on his heel and marched toward the exit.

“Your will be done,” Steel said. “And that of the gods, of course,” he added with a hint of sarcasm.

The young noble leaned back, looking petulant. Kendras wondered what he’d look like with legs in the air and spread. If he read Steel’s expression right, that image wasn’t too far from the mercenary’s mind, either. But he remembered Widow’s warning. While he was one of very few survivors, he couldn’t afford to draw the ire of the ocean temple.

Steel glanced at Puppy and Stick and nodded to the young noble. The two mercenaries indicated understanding with a nod.

“Kendras, a word.” Steel stood and walked off. Kendras followed, slower, but just being able to walk was a pleasure, despite the lingering pain.

They walked toward the vast garden behind the kitchen. Herbs buzzed with insect life. The heat of the day was on the retreat. Kendras felt the tension down in his balls, but forced himself to remain calm and unmoved. What else could Steel possibly do to him?

*He still craves you.*

Steel led him further away, into the orchard, then leaned against one of the trees. “Can you fight?”

“Yes.” Kendras indicated his foot. “I can walk. That means I can fight.”

“What about your back?”

“I’ll wear armor too.”

Steel hesitated and studied him. Kendras knew he was waiting for more, at least for more than he was giving him, but he refused to acknowledge it. He lowered his gaze and kept it to the side. Not subservience, not modesty. He didn’t want to give Steel anything—no angle of attack, no weakness. That was done. They’d crossed that river. Kendras kept his gaze lowered, just like any slave.

“Gods below.” Steel’s voice betrayed unease, maybe even pain. An ironic thought, considering what he’d done.

Kendras didn’t respond.

“What am I to you now, Kendras? What?”

“My master.” Kendras kept his gaze low. “You speak, I obey. It’s easy.”

“Fuck this.” Steel stepped closer, lifted a hand, and placed it on Kendras’s chest. “You know exactly what I want. You forced my hand. I didn’t enjoy whipping you.”

“Neither did I.” Kendras huffed but met Steel’s gaze now. That same hunger he knew. Gods below. The best Steel could hope for was a foot of his namesake through his guts. “I’ll obey.”



“Maybe we can....” Steel struggled with words. “Not right away. I’m not... forcing you. I won’t treat you like a slave.”

Kendras swallowed the rage that was welling up. *He still craves you.* Play him. If the officer could see him now. “I have nowhere else to go.”

“No. Now you don’t.” Steel slid his hand up to Kendras’s shoulder. “Stay here. I’ll treat you well. All I’m asking is respect. Just do what I say, and we’ll get along fine. And maybe....”

“Maybe you’ll love me back,” was what Kendras could almost hear in the man’s voice. *On your mother’s bones*, he thought, but just gave a silent nod.

“What is this job? Who is the boy?”

“Ah, yes.” Steel nodded. “The boy is the future king of Dalman.” He laughed. “Vistar An Grekaran.”

“*The An Grekarans?*”

“The very same.” Steel grinned. “The priests chose him to be king, so we’re guarding him until all the rites are done. It’s one wonderful sleight-of-hand trick, not unlike the Vededrinnye snake charmers in the market.”

Pulling a viper from the sleeve of a coat to make it dance. Very interesting way to put things. Especially talking of a scion of one of the oldest, richest families of Dalman.

“What about the current king?”

“Don’t tell me you’re sentimental about him? He pitted your unit against the Flames, wiped them out to a man, and he set my home city aflame. Would you miss the bastard?”

“No.”

“See. You’ll get your revenge, Kendras. I promise you this.”

## Chapter Eleven

IF THIS was the future king, the palace servants would have their hands full. Kendras saw more of the young An Grekaran now since he was spending more time in the yard, working the glaive and his muscles to recover his strength.

*Train as if you had to bring the horse down, not the rider. Fight bulls, not men, and men won't best you.*

He stretched out his muscles first, then went through the old exercises. Pushing against a wall, knowing he'd never push it over, but trying nonetheless. Fighting hard to do the impossible.

He remembered with a smile how they'd done this as a unit and succeeded once, dazed and coughing in the dust, but laughing, their eyes gleaming with fierce joy at their strength. Like boys out to play. Kendras gritted his teeth and pushed harder, until his strength gave out, then he stretched again.

He gathered up the glaive and went through the basic movements: push, thrust, parry, sweep, swirl of the glaive, beginning with basics like a musician first warmed the instrument and played a few simple harmonies before turning to the more complicated tunes.

His body was buzzing when he went for the last part of morning training—fighting a man he only imagined, then two, then riders harassing him, who forced him to duck, move as fast as he could, and roll.

*Don't defeat your shadows. Keep them undefeated or they'll lose their bite.*

Like invisible servants, Kendras dismissed the imagined foes. Maybe they'd found a better target, an easier enemy. Maybe they were called back by their commanding officer.

He wiped the sweat from his chest and noted that Vistar An Grekaran was watching him with that petulant glare that was quickly becoming the boy's defining characteristic. Had the young An Grekaran ever been tested to the end of his strength and beyond? What would the officer see, looking at him?

"Good morning, my lord."

"I think I will make you one of my guards," Vistar decreed.

*Will you now*, Kendras thought. "I'd be honored, my lord."

"What is that weapon?" The young man drew closer. He was perfumed and smelled of lemons and thyme. *Like a chicken*, Kendras could hear Widow comment on this. He turned his head, but if Widow kept an eye on him, he was discreet.

"It's a glaive." He went on to explain the reason for the pike, the blade, the hook and the metal butt at the end, thinking it was strange that the future king of Dalman knew nothing about war. Where had they raised him? In a library?

"You sound like a Dalmanye, but you're really a Jaishani, aren't you?"

Kendras straightened. "You mean my parents or where I grew up?"

"Didn't you grow up with your parents?"

"No." Kendras would have turned away, but insulting a noble was only a little better than insulting a future king. They could get really unpleasant about things like this, and the last he wanted was another whipping to soothe a ruffled sense of self-importance.

"It seems my parents were Jaishani." And gods below knew what had happened to them. He didn't remember, didn't know, and had

never tried to find out. All he knew was that children of two Jaishani could have blue eyes and were as dark as he was.

He wasn't the only one, either, but just rare enough to attract some attention at times. Jaishani traders had fathered enough children along the trade routes that they weren't that rare. Others were slaves, like, no doubt, the Jaishani kept pale slaves in their own country. Kendras had never crossed the ocean to find out. Dev had been a runaway pit slave, and there were other Jaishani that made their way. Such as the mysterious lady at Fetin. He wished he'd paid more attention to such matters.

"So you're Dalmany?" The noble clearly didn't understand.

"In a manner of speaking." Kendras glanced around, hoping for an interruption, but Widow, even though usually a pest, didn't show up. Nor did Steel. "Can you fight?"

The young man looked him up and down. "What do you think I am?"

"The future general of Dalman?"

To his credit, the boy hesitated. "Do you think there will be more war?"

"There's always more war." Kendras smirked. That, at least, he could be sure of. As long as nobles coveted each other's fortunes and men and women took up arms for silver or love, there would be more war.

"He who masters war, masters life." Kendras spoke the officer's words without thinking, only then realizing that he'd just told the youth he was incapable for life. Gods damn those nobles, they were the best reason to not speak one's mind.

"A soldier would say that," the noble scoffed and plucked a speck of dust from his long sleeve. "He has no other pride in life than to bleed for others."

The comeback wasn't half-bad. Widow, of course, would have parried that blow and eviscerated the young noble, but Kendras decided to guard his tongue better now.

“As long as noble and commoner both know their place.” Kendras took the glaive up and stepped to the side to return to his parries and attacks against invisible foes. He worked until he was dripping with sweat, then emptied a bucket over his head and wiped the water from his face with one hand.

Now Widow made an appearance. Kendras blinked a stray drop from his eyelashes and gave Widow an ironic salute. The *tanesh* laughed and nodded toward the boy, who’d settled down in the shade, fanning himself with a delicately carved wooden fan.

“If you’re trying to drive Steel wild with desire, you’re making good progress,” Widow stated and drew closer, adding under his breath, “I have a little gift for your officer. We’ll only have to get it to him when we get to the temple.”

“Is he there?”

“Yes. I hear he’s their ‘sacred warrior’.”

“What does that mean?”

“Ah, they can’t kill him, so they’ve enslaved him, of course. Don’t tell me you know absolutely nothing about the cult that runs your home city.”

“The king....”

“The Dalmanyne king is a puppet. He leads the armies because the priests aren’t allowed to spill blood, and they prefer to have the nobles believe their opinion matters shit inside those walls.” Widow sneered. “You can’t be that stupid.”

“The king is married to the ocean gods.”

“Yes, well, you’ll see how that works.” Widow turned toward the noble, addressing him in a silky voice and with pleasant face, solicitous as a courtier. Somewhere inside that polished façade, Widow was laughing like a maniac. Kendras could just about hear it.

*They can’t kill him, so they’ve enslaved him.*

He couldn’t wait to get his hands on those priests.

When they met for a meal in the courtyard later that day, he noticed tension and anticipation surrounding the mercenaries. Steel had the wine watered and kept an eye on how much all of them drank. Kendras pretended not to notice and merely ate his bread, cheese, cured meat, and olives.

Steel pushed the food away and stood from the table first. He gave the others a nod, and they stood, too, Puppy and Stick eagerly, Widow last, first swallowing his last bite and finishing his watered wine.

Kendras glanced up. “You leaving?”

“I’d take you along, but I can’t risk your foot getting worse again,” Steel said.

Kendras shrugged and took another olive from the bowl. “Anything I should do?”

“Keep an eye on the kingling. If you see him outside, get him back into his quarters.”

“How clever is it to tell him that?” Widow snapped.

“Kendras is part of this. Not this, but the rest,” Steel said and stared at Widow. “Careful, Widow.”

Widow raised an eyebrow and spat on the ground. “I’ll get the horses. And hire a couple men to shout it out on the next few marketplaces.” He sauntered off.

“Sometimes, I want to whip him,” Steel ground out between clenched teeth. Yes, a lot more tension than usual.

“You’ll fight?”

“Yes.” Steel gave a tight smile. “Expect me back with the dawn. Make sure the little noble bastard stays indoors.”

“Yes.”

Steel paused, as if about to say something or expect something from him, but then he stalked off.

Not much later, Kendras watched the mercenaries mount their horses. Their faces were covered with rags, eyes blackened, cowls

drawn into their faces. They wore leather armor and were armed with swords and crossbows when they rode out of the gate at a gallop.

He remained behind, but without regrets. He wasn't much of a rider, and whatever job this was seemed more likely to be a quick ambush. Quick in, quick out.

As a foot soldier, he preferred more ordered combat. Especially in the dead of night when friend and foe were impossible to tell apart once it got frantic.

He did some more exercise, pushing walls, then crouched low and held his weight with his legs alone. The leg with the broken foot gave out first, and he spent a little while sitting on the bench near the whipping post rubbing the cramp out of his muscles. He would get there. He was doing better every day. In no small part because of Steel's generosity, which he reluctantly acknowledged, but the need to get ready soon only strengthened his determination.

He checked on the noble, but Vistar An Grekaran was asleep. He waited outside the door for a while, but there was no movement beyond the woven door. When he heard metallic clanking and hoofbeats from the yard, he knew that Steel and the others had returned. He went into his room, undressed, and listened for the sounds of the returning mercenaries.

He was about to doze off when the door opened. He recognized Steel by the color of his hair in what little moonlight came into the room. Oh. Kendras felt too lazy to ask him what the fuck he was doing here. They both knew.

The man came closer, then crouched near the bed. "Are you awake?"

"Yes." Kendras kept his breath slow and deep, despite Steel reaching out and touching his naked shoulder. He smelled war on Steel. Sweat, metal, and blood, with a whiff of smoke. Violence. Fear. Steel's eyes looked wide.

Kendras recognized the look. It had been close, maybe much too close. He reached out, took Steel's shoulder in his grip and pulled him close. The man had whipped him, attempted to claim him as a slave and

in every other way that mattered, but he knew what Steel felt. More alive than ever now that he'd faced death and come out intact.

Steel even tasted of ashes and smoke as they kissed, clinging together like drowning men. Kendras struggled to get Steel's armor off, and Steel pulled a dagger and placed it in his hand.

The leather straps gave immediately to the blade, and Kendras pushed Steel down on the bed, making the mercenary groan with need. He pulled the leather off, simply ripped the sweaty cloth underneath, and bit the muscles of his shoulders. Steel pushed himself up with his hands, and Kendras for a moment thought it would cost nothing—nothing at all—to cut the man's exposed throat now with this same dagger.

He ran his hands over Steel's naked back, to his ass, between his legs, to his balls and cock. Whoa, the man was so hard he had to be desperate, groaning at the lightest touch.

"Get me... off," Steel muttered, opening his legs further. Kendras reached for the oil that had seen its last uses not when Steel had fucked him, but when he'd relieved himself and drawn out his own pleasure, lazy in bed.

He took Steel's balls, rolling them in his hand, feeling them move and slide in the tender skin, then paused only long enough to oil his own cock. Steel realized too late what he was doing. Kendras was already lowering his weight on the man, holding him with one arm, guiding himself with the free hand.

Steel bucked when Kendras began to enter him, clenching up, but Kendras's legs were strong enough to keep him open, and he slid the tip of his cock into the clenching opening.

"Gods... below... no."

Kendras held him down. "I'll get you off, Steel." He reached for Steel's cock, which returned to full hardness in his oily fist.

"Gods damn you...." Steel gritted out, but didn't fight, merely resisted. Pride, Kendras figured, or maybe pain. He did feel tight, and maybe Steel had spoken the truth when he'd told him he didn't do this.



Kendras knew that he was fairly large. Not too large, just possibly difficult for a virgin. If a man with Steel's looks was a virgin.

"You're man enough, Steel?"

"Fuck you," Steel groaned, and gasped when Kendras pushed deeper, then ran a finger along the stretched muscle holding him so tight. "You'll taste the whip for that...."

Kendras laughed. "Fair enough." He pushed deeper, grimaced, because it wasn't easy. Steel felt like a particularly unforgiving fist. Everything in that man resisted, his mind, his body, but the thing that obeyed was the man's cock, which Kendras now rewarded with more strokes.

Steel cursed and squirmed, breathed loudly, and, very gradually, relaxed a little.

Kendras didn't plunge inside, merely moved a little back and a little forth, allowing Steel to get used to it. The hissing noises were breaths through clenched teeth.

Kendras was willing to bet that Steel regretted having come to him. He was also willing to bet that while Steel would gladly whip him for this, he wouldn't. He sat back on his haunches and pulled Steel up to sit on his thighs and his cock.

Very reluctantly, Steel sank back, took more of him inside, breaths pained. Kendras merely let him find the best way to take it, his hand teasing Steel's cock, sliding, every now and then tracing a fingernail down the length, then used all his fingers again.

"It's not so bad now, is it?"

Steel moved into his hand and gave a choked sound that meant that he was fucking himself on Kendras. Kendras ran his free hand along Steel's belly, up to his chest and his throat.

Steel shuddered, moved faster, maybe to get him off, but Kendras felt that he was relaxing, taking him better. It might still hurt, but not necessarily in a bad way.

"It'll feel better and better...." Kendras murmured into Steel's ear and sealed the promise with a lick across the ear. "I could have taken

you in battle and made you my prisoner. I'd fuck you like this until you'd crave it so bad you'd call *me* 'master'." He laughed when he felt Steel move more eagerly.

"I don't... I'm not...."

Whatever Steel was about to say, it didn't really come out, because Kendras was now thrusting up, small rocking movements that gave Steel more of what he was beginning to need. And he did. Kendras could feel that if he wasn't careful, Steel would come before he did. And he wouldn't let him.

"That's good... you're learning fast... feel me deep, don't you?"

Steel groaned and shook his head but reached behind himself and touched Kendras's arms and sides, changed the angle ever so slightly.

Kendras spread his legs further, opening Steel even more and now got his cock fully inside. Sweat made his grip slippery, and he thrust up harder, but soon this wasn't enough.

He pushed Steel down flat on his belly, legs as far apart as they could go and fucked him hard and fast without mercy, holding him down by his neck. Every thrust pushed Steel's cock into the mattress, and Kendras felt him come, violently squirming when passion broke.

He fucked more, harder, deeper, filled with grim joy that Steel had come, before he pulled out and came over Steel's back and ass, finishing himself off with a few more strokes.

He remained on his knees for a while, watched Steel, but the man didn't move, did nothing but breathe, the panting slowly returning to normal.

Kendras stood and went to piss, then came back to find Steel had turned on the bed, but not moved. Kendras walked around the bed and slid under the cover, leaving his chest bare.

Steel's eyes were open, but only stared into the darkness.

"What happened?"

"Stick got it." Steel sighed. "A guard killed him before we could help."

“Did you bring the body?”

“No, we left... all the bodies there. Burned the house down. We had to move fast.” Steel turned away, as if to sleep, and Kendras moved closer, chest to back, groin to ass, his thighs touching Steel’s. The man shuddered and clenched his ass.

“Don’t worry, I don’t recover that fast.” Kendras chuckled and placed a hand on Steel’s damp belly, splayed his fingers there. “So, no rites, no goodbyes?”

“What for? We’re mercenaries. We know what’s waiting.”

Nobody released Stick to death. He’d be just a charred skeleton in the ashes and twisted beams of a ruin.

“With the Scorpions, that is... was... different.” Kendras ran his fingers up to Steel’s chest, caressed the man’s small tight nipple, heard no protest and merely cupped the pec in his hand. “That is why I had to go back and look after their bodies. That’s how we used to do it. I owed them that.”

Steel gave another sigh and closed his eyes. “No, we don’t. I don’t.”

Not a unit. Not an officer. No loyalty, no ties. They were just meat to each other. Steel had nothing to offer to him. However this would play out, he’d return to the Scorpions and rebuild them, all of them. Their rites, every heart, every weapon, every ounce of courage and strength.

“I don’t understand this,” Kendras murmured, pulling Steel tighter against his body. “What do you want from me? It’s not the eyes. It’s not even my ass.”

“Ah, fuck.” Steel shook his head. “Can’t you let it lie? Just ignore it. Say it’s that I’m a man short now. That’s it.”

“That’s why you came to me after the battle?”

Steel tensed. “Yes.”

“Liar.” Kendras chuckled. “Being alone after a battle isn’t as easy as it sounds.” He knew only too well. But at least he was no longer the

only survivor. He had reasons to go on and get up and fight. “So, what are you fighting for?”

“I like fighting. I like winning.” Steel trailed his fingers along Kendras’s arm. “Sometimes I need other men just to make up the numbers. But I’m best on my own.”

“And you’re working for the priests?”

“I got involved in this particular racket with the last Dalmanyne succession. The priests realized that killing me after the deed was a waste of my talents, so I stayed in their pocket. It’s nice and cozy there.”

Kendras chuckled. “What I’ve seen so far from temple guards, I’m not surprised they can’t use them to do the dirty work.”

“Temple guards are pious; they get paid badly enough and sometimes not at all. Why else would they do it? Most are cowards and are more interested in wearing new impressive armor and weapons than in using them. Useful idiots who are mostly for show, if you ask me, but often not even useful.” Steel huffed. “I could become an officer in the temple guard at any moment if I wanted, but I don’t.” Steel looked over his shoulder at Kendras. “After this, we could stay together. If you don’t like Widow and Puppy, I’ll send them away. A man like you could make good money. We could be good together.”

“Maybe.” Kendras pressed closer, felt the lust return, and knew that Steel felt it when the man stiffened in his arms. “Let me think about it.”

“That’s not thinking.”

“No, it’s not.” Kendras took him by the shoulder and pushed him back onto his belly.

Steel shuddered; he was reluctant, but again didn’t protest. It wasn’t need that drove him, or maybe a different kind of need that didn’t come from his body.

Kendras used plenty of oil, knew the man was already sore after the first fuck, but the thought that Steel would feel a fair measure of discomfort now made his desire grow.

He rubbed the oil into Steel's ass, fucked him with two fingers until he was so hard he was begging for a touch, and then fucked him again, slowly, teasing him to the brink, but not allowing him to come. Kendras just held him until the man's shudders subsided; then, when Steel asked him to, he fucked him hard and to completion, just like before.

He did the same in the morning and didn't mind that Steel struggled against him. Steel needed to be subdued first, but he never said "no", just struggled wordlessly and then asked for it once Kendras had fucked him raw again.

Maybe Steel thought he was being punished.

Maybe he thought the whipping was forgiven.

## Chapter Twelve

JUST two days later, Steel told them to pack whatever they needed, and that they would most likely not return soon. Kendras didn't own much, and what he owned fit into a pair of saddlebags. Widow traveled light too. Puppy seemed to own more than either of them, with Steel second. Those two shared a mule to carry additional things.

Vistar An Grekaran traveled with them and had a mule to himself. Decked out in bright clothes that were richly embroidered in silver, he could have been a young noble sent traveling to explore the world. Few could doubt the ornate dagger at his side was just an adornment, surrounded as he was by tough-looking bodyguards.

And Vistar certainly acted that part. The youth ordered them around and found that Puppy was the most patient of his minders. Puppy, by inclination good-natured, followed Vistar's whims, while Kendras professed injury, and Steel responded to requests with a "did you really just ask that of me?" look. Widow had fallen deaf to anything said by any noble, whether future king or not.

Whenever something didn't immediately go as desired, Vistar would take a deep, exasperated breath and begin "at home..." to continue with a detailed account of just how his wishes were heeded at home—immediately, without reservation, and without any stupid questions.

*A man proves his worth not by that of his father or mother.*

Once, a noble had told the officer to treat him with more respect because of his "worthy" family. Normally, the officer was more

diplomatic than this; Kendras remembered that the officer had said it with a smile, like the outrageous concept it was, truly. Men had been whipped and hanged for less insolence. When they arrived at Dalman, they turned eastward to the temple city. Dalman stood on the cliffs above the sea, but the temple complex was built in the lowlands, next to the river. In old times, even before the Empire of Shara, Kendras had learned, the city of Dalman had been a fortress into which the priests fled when they were attacked. The temple complex had once been just Dalman's harbor and trading outpost. Now Dalman had grown large and the new harbor occupied an area near the temple city.

The tripartite structure of the city served it well, however. Any army that attacked merely one of them found its back and flanks wide open to counterattacks from the others.

Kendras had never set foot into the temple city. As they waited in line with pilgrims and traders bringing their wares to the temple, Steel produced a signed letter from the priests. The temple guards at the gate examined it, then bid them to wait.

More guards appeared and guided them inside. Blue banners hung from the beams of the houses everywhere, flowing in the breeze like waterfalls. The cobbles were scrubbed clean by an army of devotees, and, strikingly, there was not a single beggar visible. Temple guards patrolled the streets, and everybody who was not a guard or a pilgrim was a priest. The pilgrims came with flowers in their hair and seashell necklaces or ornaments, and seemed to do nothing but dance and sing.

"The festivities are about to begin," said Steel. "They are all crazy."

Widow turned in the saddle and grinned wolfishly. "I'd show that wench over there there's more to dance about."

"As if you could do anything with her...", Kendras muttered.

"There are other—better—ways to fuck a woman," Widow shot back. "As if you had any clue. Or are you going to dress Steel up and have him paint his face for you?"

"Widow." Steel's voice was cold.

"Touchy? And why's that?"

“Let’s do this and fight afterward.”

Widow grinned. “Wasted opportunity....” He winked at Vistar, who looked scandalized at their rough talk. “No worries, your lordship. None of us is going to fuck you.” The way he said it left it open to interpretation whether he’d placed more meaning on “us” or “you”. Kendras decided it was yet another dig at the priesthood.

Again this made him wonder where Widow was from. While he sounded and dressed like a Vededrinye, he didn’t think that Widow would have grown to be an adult in that city. Vededrin took its gods and goddesses very seriously. They executed more blasphemers than criminals, for one.

But it wasn’t entirely clear Widow was from Fetin, either, despite his obvious history with the Fetinye lady and the fact he fit in well with the Flames. But it wasn’t a question to which Kendras expected an honest answer from him.

They followed along a wide canal that cut through the city, fed by the river. The banks were polished stone, and on the last few hundred paces, the ordinary gray stone was replaced by white marble, inlaid at intervals with blue-toned mosaics, telling the myths of the many ocean gods.

Every now and then, one rose to prominence, and Kendras knew that to the priests, all these gods were just different faces of one god. Still, they were sometimes thought of as the main god’s children or servants or slaves.

The unknowable, the great mysterious depth of the sea, the priests would call it. To Kendras, it sounded like they had no idea what their god was like at all and just claimed he or she was so far under the surface of the ocean that he or she couldn’t possibly be known. Why then worship that god on land?

They moved toward the main temple complex, at which they handed over their horses and the two mules. More guards appeared, and Kendras hoped none of them would turn out to be the ones who’d attacked him and Widow in that tavern a few weeks back.

Once they passed through the arch, there were many small and larger springs, brooks that ran in beds of marble. Water flowed



everywhere, down a wall over ribbed stone, or dripping from pipes spanning the street.

As a result, the temple complex boasted plants and trees, creepers, flowers like Kendras had never seen in a city, and the air was washed clean of dust. It would have been a pleasant place, but Kendras didn't like it. To him it felt too much like an enemy fortress—and no amount of sweet-smelling flowers and smiling pilgrims could change that.

Too many temple guards. They must have a few hundred men under arms here. Did they just kept the pilgrims in line, or did they actually have any worth as a fighting force? They didn't have a great reputation for martial prowess, but what if their numbers were large enough to make a difference? They sure wore the blue and silver armors and tabards well.

They passed the River God Arch, which was covered in flowers and was being touched and kissed by pilgrims like it could feel anything. The soft cooing noises of the pilgrims were barely interrupted when the guards nudged them to the side with their lances to allow Vistar and the others to pass. Like sheep, the pilgrims shuffled to the side without even looking up.

The river god was responsible for fertility, so just about every infertile man and woman in the world came here to beg for children. Kendras thought that those that were missing children could most likely find some feral ones in the streets of the city above—but the river god likely knew nothing of them.

"This works really well," said Widow with a sharp grin, and glanced around. Sometimes, his eyes lingered on a naked shoulder or calf, and Kendras assumed he meant to go out hunting for company later. It should be easy to find among the pilgrims. Kendras refused to imagine what Widow looked like with another person. As far as he knew, Widow preferred women, and he assumed Widow had found a way to get pleasure out of an encounter, but the thought of how *tanesh* had sex with women was not one he wanted to linger on.

They passed through the main portal of the temple. It opened far and wide, soaring pillars were carved to resemble water fountains and waterfalls, everything seemed to ripple, which had a strangely

disorienting effect. Kendras liked this place even less than the rest of the city.

Toward the back, a man stood in robes of silver and blue. The sheer amount of silver on his clothes and on his skin marked him out. Striking features, eyes as blue as summer noon, with sharp features and handsome in a way that a clean, sharp blade was attractive. Kendras had no doubt that this was the high priest.

“Welcome, young An Grekaran,” the priest said and even took a few steps toward Vistar, who, noble as he was, took that sign of respect in stride. He certainly had the manners of a king.

The priest’s eyes flickered over Vistar’s body. “The gods have told me of your arrival... and the terrible tragedy that has befallen your family. My heart goes out to you, my son.”

Vistar’s eye narrowed. “What tragedy?”

“I’m afraid...” The high priest took Vistar’s shoulder with a bejeweled hand and pulled him toward his chest. “Your family was murdered by brigands two nights ago. Doubtlessly godless creatures of mayhem that thrive on the pain of others. They may even have been sent by the forces of darkness to harm you. I rejoice to see you alive, my son.”

Vistar staggered, and the high priest pulled him closer into a very ceremonial embrace. Kendras caught the glance between high priest and Steel.

Steel straightened a little and touched the hilt of his sword like an obedient bodyguard. Kendras glanced at Widow, who bore that half-grin, half-sneer that suited him well.

“Guard, take the young noble’s entourage and make them comfortable. An Grekaran and I have much to talk about.”

With a wave of a bejeweled hand, they were dismissed. Steel lingered, but Puppy, Widow, and Kendras were guided into the guest quarters.

The splendor of mosaics, marble, exotic furs took his breath. Rarely, if ever, had he seen such exquisite furnishings. Kendras rested the glaive in a corner and shed his heavy armor. He held it, unsure

where to put it here. The wooden chairs and boxes would most likely scratch. These weren't quarters for a soldier. Finally he spotted a lamp holder, took the lamp off, and hung the armor on the fastening nailed into the wall. He pulled his leathers apart and found a place for the memory behind one of the delicately carved boxes.

He pushed the blinds apart. Below, pilgrims were milling about, paying homage to the many holy sites here. They'd brought all these riches, Kendras realized. Every pilgrim sacrificed to the gods and paid for food and a bed. This had made the priests rich.

A servant inquired meekly if he wanted anything, and Kendras asked for a bath. They prepared it in the room next to his. Rarely had Kendras bathed on his own like this, servants filling the tub with hot water, and they even assisted with washing him. When his eye fell on one of the youths, the others withdrew smoothly, and the youth stripped and joined him in the tub. The young, smooth, sleek body writhed on him as the slave took him all in.

Kendras traced lines of water over the slave's chest and offered him a hand to fuck. He felt mellow and generous toward the young man who clearly enjoyed this kind of duty. The slave ran his hands over Kendras's chest, marveled at his skin, and Kendras indulged him and allowed the slave to set the pace, take him as slow or fast as he liked, and held him tight when he came.

The slave left the tub with wobbly legs, gave him a grin, and waved him out too. Getting dried after a bath and then finally oiled and massaged was the height of luxury.

Kendras noticed that the youth was sliding against his body then, hard again, so he merely opened his legs and enjoyed the decadent pleasure of getting fucked by a vigorous young slave, too sweet and gentle to be a threat, which was the only reason why he could enjoy this the way he did.

He paid the boy a silver for his services and lay naked on the bed, resting afterward, until a different slave brought him food and wine. He dressed in his leathers, but didn't fasten them across his chest, and settled down to eat.

A knock on the door announced a visitor. Widow. The *tanesh* wore his light clothes, no armor, but daggers and a short sword at his side, black hair braided at his temples and tied together in the back of his head. “You worked it out, didn’t you?”

“What? That our new king’s an orphan? Yes.” Kendras motioned for Widow to sit down. “That’s Steel’s game? He keeps an eye on the future king for a good job in the next king’s army? As a royal bodyguard?”

“You actually believe Steel has morals? After you’ve seen him act?” Widow laughed and plucked a few grapes off their stems. “Doesn’t matter what his plan is, as long as you keep in mind what his game is.” Widow chewed, looking thoughtful. “Of course, the old An Grekaran squealed like a pig. You’d have enjoyed the killing.”

“Maybe.” Kendras shrugged. It had certainly weakened Steel. Now he only had to worry about him and Puppy, if worst came to worst. “Why are you here?”

“Get you to join the meal in the main hall. We’re expecting interesting guests. You’d miss half the fun.”

Kendras set his cup down. “Such as?”

“You’ll see.”

He tightened the leathers across his chest and at his throat. “Will Vistar be there too?”

“No, he’s taken ill to his rooms. You’ll have to forgive him. He’s still reeling. Doubtlessly he believed his father when he told him that the An Grekaran family would rule Dalman. Well. Not *quite*.” Widow grinned. “You gotta laugh at the nobles for fucking each other up like that.”

“Better than fucking us up,” Kendras agreed. “Well, lead the way.”

Widow guided him through the inner temple, down the stairs and up other stairs, sometimes commenting on a piece of tapestry or a brass ocean god as was his manner.

Finally, they stepped through large carved doors into the main hall. The priesthood had to be assembled in its entirety. The high priest

sat at the raised table to the back, holding a speech about the ocean's bounty and whatever god or goddess was responsible for feeding the faithful. Steel sat at the high table, close to the high priest, and Puppy, as well, if farther to the side.

Widow led Kendras toward the table, and Kendras settled right next to Steel, who glanced at him, but smiled.

Widow sat next to Kendras on the other side and began plucking away at a grilled piece of fish, even though nobody else ate. Kendras gathered what he wanted to eat from the plates in the middle—grilled fish, white bread, grilled vegetables and honeyed fruit, and small birds filled with nuts and raisins. He poured rich, red, spiced wine into his cup and waited until the high priest was done.

Then the doors flew open. Kendras very nearly spit his wine out when he realized who stood there. Widow only chuckled.

## Chapter Thirteen

THE king of Dalman wore as much gold as the high priest wore silver, but both wore shades of blue. Kendras's fist tightened around the knife. That bastard was responsible for the death of his comrades.

The last time he'd seen him, he'd sat astride a huge white charger, but he'd never charged anything, just ridden past his soldiers and tossed silvers and cheap praise to those who toiled to win his war.

*Put the Scorpions in the center with half of the other foot soldiers.*

*Only if you guarantee us that your men will stand firmly,* the officer had said.

In the end, they hadn't. The onslaught of the Flames had pulverized them like a hammer of war crumbled a bone into nothing.

They'd been flanked and slaughtered very nearly to a man, while the king's cavalry took its sweet time to arrive, and the reserve didn't make it in time. The Scorpions were more suitable for special tasks, like capturing a general by slaughtering his or her guards, but the king had scoffed at the idea and insisted on using them like he had. While the officer hadn't liked it, Kendras doubted that even he had anticipated how bad it would be. After the Flames' charge, nothing but pain, and then the humiliation of being driven onto the ship like cattle and then abandoned in the harbor of Dalman to fend for himself or die.

"Ah, the chosen of the gods," the high priest said and stood from the table. "Please, sit with us, anointed one. Do us the honor."

The king glanced around, but didn't seem to recognize anybody. His guard, made up of half men, half women, in burnished brass armor plates strapped to leather armor, saluted smartly when he waved them off. They wore mask helmets that froze their features into impassive, polished beauty.

Kendras saw Widow study the breast plate of one of the female guards with a thoughtful expression and leaned over to him. "They say the king's responsible for several of the females not fitting into their armor."

Widow grinned. "Guess that's not from feeding them sweets."

"Not sweet. Salty," Kendras added, and Widow laughed tonelessly.

A few of the high ranking priests shot them baleful glances, and Kendras schooled his features into indifference, while Widow was clearly still inwardly laughing.

High priest and king went through an uncomfortable series of welcomes and thanks and even an embrace. Much like cat and dog might do if the owner was watching. The priest who sat next to the high priest stood and offered his place, and slaves scurried to remove all crumbs and put down a clean plate and knife and cup. The king sat down, then the high priest joined him.

Kendras noted the tension at the table. A few of the priests tried to strike up a conversation, but all efforts failed. The high priest, on the other hand, guarded his emotions and thoughts carefully, keeping a pleasant, blank face.

"Thank you for joining us for the festivities," the high priest said, finally, plucking a crispy wing off one of the small birds.

"I have urgent matters to discuss with you."

"Indeed."

"Beyond getting married to the sea—again." The king glared at the priest. "There are much, much more urgent matters to attend to."

"The gods have chosen the time and the place." The high priest daintily plucked off the crisped meat from the bird's wing, then put the

bones down. “Who are we to tell them we don’t have the time to do their will?”

“Even with what’s going on in Fetin right now?” the king asked. “I was mustering more troops when you summoned me. We need to strike at Fetin again, and very soon.”

“You wield the power of the material plane, while we converse with the spiritual plane,” said the high priest.

“Yes, all this... looks very spiritual to me,” the king muttered and grimaced. “Well, the material plane of these three city states has more urgent problems than an odd little rite that you insist on.” He lowered his voice more. “Fetin is preparing for war.”

“But you just defeated them.”

“Yes, their army is broken, the defenses of their city torn down. Right now, though, they are repairing the walls, and there’s a large Vededryne group in the city. My spies tell me that the Lady Protector is about to marry the Vededryne Elder. This will not only give her all the troops she needs to attack us this time, but will also mean that Vededrin will make another bid to introduce its ridiculous gods. I don’t want to be forced to worship a million gods with names nobody can pronounce without developing a stutter.”

The high priest tensed. “That is bad news indeed.”

“Ah, so you are finally willing to listen. I say, let’s postpone this ritual, and let me go and show that bitch that she can’t fuck with me. I’ve sent her a dozen ambassadors to sign the treaty we agreed to when Fetin had to surrender. The bitch will claim she’s too busy getting married—and from then on, her husband will make the decisions. And you can just about imagine what the Elder thinks of bending his knee to Dalman... or you.”

The high priest pried open the bird carcass, examined it, then placed it gingerly down. “I will talk to the gods about this. In their endless wisdom, they might decide that they can wait. But I will have to obey their command, and you, too, your Majesty.”



“Yes, the mob will get what it craves. A spectacle.” The king audibly ground his teeth. “I trust you’ll make a convincing case to the gods.”

“Of course,” the high priest said pleasantly.

Steel kept his head down and ate, and Kendras decided that was the most sensible thing he could do. He wasn’t surprised that the king spoke so candidly. He had to believe he was among allies, which meant enemies of Fetin, and he assumed that Widow knew better than to challenge the king. At least he hoped so.

Widow mopped up the juice of his meat with some of the white bread, then chewed, looking thoughtful. Kendras took the gloves from his belt and put them on, hoping that didn’t draw attention. But it was important he hid the scorpion tattoos. It wouldn’t do to allow the king to understand he was actually in the company of enemies—and several of those were armed and dangerous enough to attack him before he could hope to be rescued by his guard.

Kendras balled a fist in the leather glove. He was tempted to do the job himself, to avenge his comrades, but again, the officer was more important. Even though he didn’t doubt anymore that Widow would be able to save him on his own. There were few things that he thought Widow incapable of these days.

The high priest waved another priest closer, whispered something in his ear, and, once the other priest had left, stood suddenly. “The *sacred warrior* will fight today to remind us of the might of the gods.”

Servants opened large doors to the side of the hall, and priests and guests streamed through the doors. Kendras exchanged glances with Widow, who nodded. They headed outside; the balconies led to the seats of an arena.

The semi-circle backed onto the river, where the *Glorious* lay moored. The king threw himself into one of the chairs, which were richly adorned with silver and gold leaf, and the high priest sat down next to him. While only a few guardsmen joined them there, Widow and Kendras claimed seats close by.

It was getting dark, and slaves lit large fires around the arena, while pilgrims streamed through the gates.

Then a large gate to the side opened, and one man stepped outside. He wore a silver helmet and a blue *leshta*, a garment that was rather too similar to a skirt for Kendras's taste. Flowing blue linen held together by a heavy embroidered cloth and leather belt around the narrow waist. High, sturdy boots were plated with silver.

In the light of the fire and the full moon that was beginning to rise, the man's strength and beauty tightened Kendras's heart. In this light, the scorpion on the officer's chest and belly was invisible—just a deeper shadow where deep shadows reigned.

Alive. As proud as ever. Kendras gripped the arm rests of his chair. He wanted to jump into the arena, fight by his side. He couldn't bear the thought of watching him fight while he was condemned to do nothing.

"The sacred warrior has been summoned to strike down our enemies. Sent by the gods themselves, he has come to deliver us from evil," the high priest intoned.

"Fuck no," Kendras muttered.

"You don't have to watch this," Widow said softly. "He's only going to kill some criminals and whoever else they want to get rid of today. He'll be fine."

Kendras blinked in surprise. "Are you drunk?"

"Just because I see you're in distress about him?" Widow laughed. "Just don't show Steel who really owns you."

Kendras gritted his teeth. *I wish they'd taken me*, he thought. *Wish they'd taken me, not him*. He glanced over at the high priest and hated the smug bastard with every breath in his body. Enslaving his officer to kill off some criminals and call that a sacred duty was... probably no worse than planning to get rid of the old king while sitting right next to him and smiling. Of course, he'd already hired Steel to kill Vistar's family. This was just one of many deeds that made the high priest enemies.

"No. I'll watch it."

"Good choice," Widow said, but didn't look at him. "Haven't seen him fight in a long time."

Kendras stared at him, but then saw movement in the arena and didn't respond. A temple guard handed the officer two swords and stepped back.

Kendras shook his head. Two swords was flashy, impressive, but the best weapon of every Scorpion was the glaive. Most carried a short sword for work at close quarters and to finish off the wounded, and he'd also trained with the large shield and sword to protect a comrade's shoulder when fighting in formation.

Another warrior entered the area. Criminals, Widow had said. Kendras would have expected somebody who was too flustered and scared to fight back, but the man who strode in with two swords was anything but flustered. Instead, he looked every inch the professional warrior or fighter.

*Calm, Kendras told himself. He'll be fine with this.*

Kendras held his breath, plotting a dozen ways how to prevent the fight from happening and reining in his anger and frustration at the spectacle. The opponent took position opposite the officer, who had both swords deceptively lowered. The officer fought like that—he often appeared unready or unwilling to fight.

*Wait until the enemy's hand turns the stone. Then kill him.*

Emboldened by the “sacred warrior's” reluctance to fight, his opponent tested him with a few playful lunges, finding nothing but lazy parries and lowered blades. The officer stood there, nearly slumping, head lowered, but Kendras knew he was watching from the corners of his eyes.

*Don't meet their gaze; they will see your intentions. Kill them from an angle they did not consider.*

Kendras whispered those words in silence. His kind of prayer, his way to reach out to the man in the arena who'd kill or be killed today, for the amusement of his enemies who had brought him this low.

“Why can't they kill him outright? Why this?”

Widow chuckled. “Why do some men keep tigers in cages? Lust for death.”

“Philosopher, are you?”

“Just used to having my own thoughts, is all,” Widow said. “Besides, your officer makes me want to keep a tiger myself.”

The opponent in the arena lunged again, now tapping the lowered sword, teasing, prodding for an attack since he hadn’t managed to hit the officer’s chest or arm or leg.

Kendras felt the onlookers getting restless, wondering, like everybody else, why the sacred warrior remained passive. The clang of sword on sword sounded loudly. A woman’s laughter rang out, the whooping laughter of a prostitute, maybe. Kendras was about to turn his neck to look up and spot her, but then he saw, from the corner of his eye, how the officer moved.

Another teasing prod by the enemy had made contact with his sword, the left one this time, and the officer suddenly rose up, stretching, lifting both swords like the pincers of a scorpion, and plunged both of them into the man’s shoulders, pushing them down with his own weight, deep into the torso. Kendras knew he’d hit the hollow of the collarbones with the tips and pressed in, severing the big veins that ran along there. A spray of blood erupted, a terrible gasping breath rattled out as the enemy’s lungs collapsed.

The man looked for a moment like he’d grown crippled steel wings, and then he collapsed, legs kicking the ground in what was his dying dance.

The officer regarded him impassively, then knelt down, took one of the man’s swords without guarding himself against any blow—the enemy didn’t have enough control anymore to harm him—placed a hand over the man’s eyes, who strangely relaxed under the touch, then pushed the sword into the man’s heart without losing a beat.

“Gods fuck me,” Widow muttered. “Good work.”

It was just an execution, though. As skillfully as it was done, Kendras sensed no heat in the officer, no desire, no hunger. He did it because he had to. He functioned, but this wasn’t war or battle. As far as the officer was concerned, this was nothing.

And yet, to see him alive—and fight and win—soothed Kendras’s mind. It would soothe him the same way to see Dev conscious and

Riktan on his own two feet, or Selvan smile. He longed to hear the medic sing again, too, but that was over. Done.

Whoops and chants erupted from the pilgrims. The high priest rose again and spoke of the forces of evil having been vanquished by the chosen warrior of the gods to guard the faithful. Kendras forced himself to sit through all that, and watched as a guard stepped closer to the “sacred warrior” and motioned for him to hand over his swords, which he’d pulled free from the corpse.

The guard didn’t seem at all sure he’d receive them, however; there was a look of fear in his eyes that the onlookers could have seen if they’d wanted to.

The officer dropped the swords in front of the guard and turned to walk back into the iron gate from where he’d come, head held high, blue *leshta* flowing in the breeze.

Widow tapped Kendras’s arm lightly and headed out.

The man led him into the guts of the arena, navigating the maze as if he’d done it before. After a while, they came to a corridor with heavy iron doors.

A table and a chair stood there, a temple guard sitting in the light of a candle, cleaning his fingernails with a toothpick. He looked up and seemed to recognize Widow, since he didn’t seem alarmed in the slightest.

“The fighter... what do you people call him? The warrior.”

“Yes?” The guard stood, but kept the toothpick in his fingers. “You want to see him?”

“Yes.” Widow grinned, and Kendras wondered if it could really be this easy.

“That way.” The guard pointed and followed with a heavy key ring.

## Chapter Fourteen

THE door consisted of nothing but iron bars welded together. Beyond was a cell that would normally have been sparse, like that of a prisoner, but there were a few soft cushions and a throw on the cot. On a table stood flowers. *Gifts*, Kendras noted with shock. And he was getting heartily sick of the color blue.

In the cell, the officer. He wore heavy manacles around his wrists and thick iron chains ran through a metal hook in the wall. The chains then combined into one and ran to the door, where the guard could shorten or lengthen them by hooking them into a steel hook that was welded to the door.

A flame danced in a bowl of oil and lit the windowless room.

“Just a moment.” The guard took the chain and jerked it, forcing the officer to step back, out of reach. He pushed toward the door, his arms behind him, chest bared and stretched. Kendras swallowed.

“There he is,” the guard said and grinned. “Pretty impressive, huh?”

Widow licked his lips. “Oh yes.”

“You can have him for a gold.”

“Gold!” Widow laughed. “He’s just a slave, not the fucking Lady Protector. Not even if he shaved.”

“He’s the *sacred* warrior,” the guard said. “And you’re two.”

“Pay him,” Kendras said.

“Get us some oil at least. Won’t do if he can’t fight tomorrow.”

“Of course.” The guard grinned. “Just a moment.” He weaseled away, and Kendras stared at Widow, who just grinned, then glanced at the officer, whose face was impassive, as if he didn’t recognize him in the gloom. Maybe he didn’t. It was better the guard didn’t realize they knew him, anyway.

“Oh, I’ll enjoy *you*,” said Widow with a dirty chuckle that tightened Kendras’s balls. He wasn’t entirely sure it was all a ruse.

The guard returned with a flask of oil, much like those used by any warrior who had to keep metal parts of armor and weapons free of rust. He put it on the table and held out his hand.

Widow flicked a gold coin into his palm. “For a gold, I want you to leave us alone.”

“Sure.” The guard grinned. “I heard he’s worth it.”

Kendras’s gut clenched, but he forced himself to smile. Breathlessly, he waited for the guard’s steps to move away. Widow glided to the gate, and peered through. “Seems the air is clear. Stupid armor is too loud for him to sneak. Idiot,” he muttered, then turned to the officer.

The officer blinked, his eyes narrowed. “Kendras,” he said, too softly to carry beyond Kendras’s ear. “Thought I’d imagined....” He grimaced and glanced at an empty wine cup. “Drugs. Nothing... nothing is real.”

Kendras kicked the table in sudden rage—the cup spilled the wine, a plate broke, the cup rolled into the far corner. “I am real.”

“Yes, maybe.”

Kendras hissed in wordless rage, and stared at Widow. “What now?”

“I said I had a gift for him.” Widow reached to the cuffs of his tight Vededrinye-style shirt and pulled out a long, thin blade. “Can you open the manacles with this?”

The officer nodded. “And kill a dozen men.”

“Good. Thought you might have forgotten,” Widow said and placed the thin blade on the table. “How much do you hear down here?”

“The cell’s near the river. I can hear the machinery. They control the water level down here.”

“Good. Can you hear the pilgrims?”

“Faintly. There’s an opening somewhere on the corridor.”

“If they begin to scream and panic, get out of the chains and run. If you have to kill a man or two on the way, enjoy yourself, but not too much. Won’t be good to have you distracted or too late; we need you for something else. Understood?”

“Where should we meet?”

“We’ll be waiting outside the gates to the east with horses.”

“Good.” The officer balled his fists. “I’ll be there.”

“No doubt,” Widow remarked wryly and turned to walk away.

“What are you doing?” Kendras asked.

“Keeping an eye on the guard and leaving you to fuck him, that’s what I’m doing.” Widow lifted a sarcastic eyebrow and left.

Kendras wanted to take the chains off the officer. He stepped close and took one of the wrists. The officer stepped back, winning more freedom of movement that way, and his arms came down, but he turned his wrists outward.

“I saw you fight,” Kendras said.

“Today? That was nothing.”

“Yes.” Kendras agreed on both counts. He met the officer’s brown eyes, noted that they weren’t as clear and sharp as they had been just a few weeks ago. So much had happened in the meantime. The battle, Dalman, Steel, the race to Fetin, and then all the dead bodies. The dead Scorpions. He checked the wrists, which were fine.

*Move your fingers.*

He paused but kept the officer’s hand in his, remembering how the officer had saved him from the executioner’s bed. He swallowed, feeling suddenly shy and brittle. “Will you be able to get out of these?”

“Yes. They are coarse. The guard... doesn’t expect it.” The officer pulled his hand away and showed Kendras his other wrist. “I can fight.”



"I've seen that." Kendras still ran a finger along the pulse and turned the wrist in his hand. The skin was unbroken. No swelling he could feel. But he didn't want to let go, wasn't sure he could meet the officer's gaze again. Seeing him like this hurt worse than having a siege engine roll over his foot. It crushed his spirit. "They are... all dead," Kendras said.

"Not all." The officer took his hand away from Kendras and placed it against Kendras's cheek. The chain dangled against Kendras's chest, which made him want to flinch away.

"When I left them, Dev was feverish. Riktan was hurt bad. Selvan shattered, exhausted."

"That's four. Five," the officer corrected, "who are not dead."

"We've never..."

The officer chuckled. "The Scorpions began with one man."

Kendras inhaled deeply, smelled the officer's body, felt his breath against his cheek. He didn't feel like he'd done a particularly good job being a Scorpion. He'd stopped fighting, he should have fought harder, shouldn't feel all that guilt and despair, especially not now. He'd achieved at least this. With help, but here he was. He'd found the officer.

"Please." *Please tell me I did good. Please tell me it was the best I could do. I want to believe this.*

The officer's hand slid to his shoulder, gripped him tightly by the muscle between neck and shoulder. Kendras heard the leather sigh under the firm grip. Strength. Power. Authority.

"You're limping."

*Not right now*, Kendras wanted to say. "I broke my foot."

"You didn't. What happened?"

"Siege engine. I went down, lay there senseless like a corpse. Woke when the wheel crushed my foot."

"Ah." The grip tightened. Kendras wanted to go to his knees, and understood Selvan, who'd do this immediately, to lean his head against a man's thigh and offer to suck him off, too, with a pleading glance. He couldn't do it. He'd never felt like a slave, and never less than right

now, while the officer was in chains. It seemed weak and self-indulgent.

“I don’t know what Widow is planning.”

“Neither do I, but he’ll provide diversion.”

“You know him.”

“Nobody knows the Widowmaker.” The officer laughed. “And he likes it that way. He once tried to join the Scorpions, but I knew if I’d taken him up to the place of scorpions, he’d have stabbed me in the back. No, the Widowmaker is exactly where he belongs.”

“Who is he loyal to? Fetin?”

The officer smiled at him. “What a question.”

So, nobody. Possibly himself. Kendras shook his head. He didn’t understand, but it was more disturbing that even the officer didn’t seem to know more.

“And how did you end up their ‘sacred warrior’?”

“They wanted to kill me, but they couldn’t. Not without breaking their little faith.”

“Why?”

“Delusions of priests, Kendras. I certainly don’t feel like one of their gods has claimed me.” The officer’s smile slowly melted away, his dark eyes suddenly intense. “They felt I’d serve them one way or the other. I declined the one way, so they did this. The high priest can be a stubborn man when thwarted, and his sense of vengeance tends to be ironic.”

“He’s planning to kill the king.”

“That was a long time in coming. The king’s no longer his plaything.” The officer relaxed his grip and took Kendras’s other shoulder in his hand too. “He has to kill the king to ensure that he’ll never wield his own power. All power comes from the temple. This is how it’s been for a long time. The king’s bid to destroy Fetin was not part of the plan. He wants to take Fetin so he has his own power. He’d be Lord Protector of Fetin rather than the high priest’s puppet. But he hasn’t quite succeeded yet. He was making a play for Emperor. Take those off.”

Kendras opened the leathers and slipped out of the top. He hesitated and grimaced.

“Drop them.”

Kendras’s fingers suddenly had no strength left. He felt naked, worse than on that day when the medic had spread him open to inspect his torn ass. Following orders was easier than making up his mind.

“Come closer.”

Kendras returned to the place in front of the officer, felt how close they were, the heat of their bodies warming the little air between them. The broad, tattooed chest; small, taut nipples; the man’s breath that made the scorpion’s armor plates move. Hypnotic. He could stand there for the rest of his life and watch the man breathe.

The officer studied him, the dark gaze traveled from Kendras’s eyes to his throat, his chest, his heart, which beat faster, to his stomach, to the leather trousers. They stayed there, and Kendras began to harden, just from the way the man completely focused on him, the gaze more erotic than whatever Steel had done to him. Steel wasn’t even bad as a lover, Kendras reflected, but Steel wasn’t important now.

“You paid for this,” the officer said, and Kendras wasn’t sure he meant the gold. He just knew he couldn’t move away or decline when the officer’s hands opened his trousers, and then he went down to his knees. Kendras was dizzy with need, felt himself being pulled closer by his clothes.

“You can keep one hand against the wall,” the officer said, then his mouth was all over Kendras’s cock and balls. The comment was helpful. Kendras managed to reach for the wall with one hand, the other found the officer’s head, but the lips made him incoherent.

The officer serviced him like he was indeed a slave. And, gods below, he was dedicated to the task. Kendras didn’t want to think about how many pilgrims had enjoyed the attentions of the “sacred warrior.” Who they’d been. The thought could make him murderous, and right now, all that counted was the slide of lips and tongue, and his struggle to not thrust, to stay in control, when the officer was the only man he didn’t want to be in control with.

“Gods... below... stop.”

He didn't expect the officer to obey the order. Who was he that he ordered him to do anything? But he did. Kendras fought to control his breath, willed his cock under control, which was not easy, right next to those lips.

"It's more believable," the officer said, breath ghosting over Kendras's wet cock. "You paid to fuck me, remember?"

"I..." He didn't want to do this just to fool the guard.

"No you don't," the officer answered his own question. "You have me in chains and that's all you do?" He glanced up, eyes laughing at him. "Come on, Kendras. It might just as well be your last night. Or mine."

"No." Kendras pulled him up, heard the officer laugh and crushed him against the wall, chains clinking with the sudden movement. "No. You won't die. You won't. Hear me, you won't!"

"Force me."

*If you'd lie with scorpions, you need a taste for poison.*

A wave of frantic rage blanked every thought from Kendras's mind. Taking the officer by the shoulder, ramming him against the wall. Oil from the table.

He'd breached the man, full of rage and anger and a desperate, choking, brutal tenderness before he could stop himself, and then he really couldn't stop this. Every thrust, every bite, every clawing of his fingernails screamed you won't die because you're mine, and he wasn't sure which of them was groaning and hissing like an animal. Maybe they both were.

The fuck was as savage as it was desperate, strength pitted against strength, and it felt like breaking inside. Kendras was beside himself with rage, anger, fear, and at the same time, wouldn't have blinked if the officer had ripped his throat out. There was no doubt the man could have killed him if he'd wanted.

When he came, he couldn't move away, just jerked deeper and harder against the officer's body, barely aware of the officer's frantic movements that finished him off too.

Reason returned, slowly, with breath, and he noticed the bite marks on the dark skin, remembered the taste of that skin, the feeling of

hard muscle between his teeth. He shuddered and was about ready to beg for forgiveness when the officer's semen-covered hand reached for his hip and held him right there. And he suddenly realized that this was exactly what the officer had wanted. Maybe needed. From him.

"Why?"

"Because I was tired." The officer chuckled. "And so were you." He moved away and turned, leaning his shoulders against the wall. "We're five, Kendras. That's enough. Don't give up on me now."

"No." Kendras closed his trousers, shuddering with the memory of the officer's lips there. He'd want that again. Wanted the man again, wanted to hear those sounds again. It wasn't the worst thing to fight for. "I don't know when Widow will make his move."

"Soon." The officer pulled him close again and placed a kiss on Kendras's lips. "Once they turn the stone..."

"... the scorpion is ready." Still dazed, Kendras gathered up his leathers, then realized that his dagger was missing. How on earth the officer had taken it, he didn't know, but the man merely gave him a grin.

"Makes more sense, doesn't it."

Yes, if he'd been anybody else, the officer could have gutted and killed him without even breaking a sweat. He didn't believe that anybody had forced the officer into anything down here. Maybe he'd chosen to play along, maybe he'd scratched an itch, but the officer wasn't and would never be a slave that anybody used.

## Chapter Fifteen

“THAT sounded like fucking wildcats,” Widow said when Kendras came back from the cell. “He still alive?”

The guard next to Widow looked a little worried.

“I just prefer them when they have a little spirit,” Kendras said. Widow gave him a strange look. It took a while until Kendras realized that what he’d seen in Widow’s eyes was respect. Sick bastard.

“You got enough?”

“Yes, for the moment.” Kendras tightened the strings of his leathers near his groin, noticed that the guard stared and then hurriedly looked away. He took his time to fasten the strings, longer than strictly necessary.

Widow huffed laughter. “I’m thirsty now.” He sauntered off, and Kendras followed at a distance. He hated leaving the officer behind, but he’d already tested his luck today. “When will you act?”

“I’ll have a look around the city first.” Widow tapped the side of his nose. “It’ll have to happen when they are distracted. A running herd is easier to prod into a panic.” He grinned sharply. “Don’t worry about it. You’ll be quite busy yourself. Just make your way out of the city. I’ll find you.”

“And he?”

“We’ll both find you. Your officer isn’t a beginner, you know.”

“I know,” Kendras muttered.

They arrived back at his quarters, and he saw two temple guards waiting outside. Kendras was tempted to just keep on walking and pretend he wasn't the man they were waiting for. But the way they turned their heads told him that particular ruse might have worked on their grandfathers, but these knew how to suck eggs.

"See you later," he said to Widow, who strolled onward and past the soldiers, without seemingly a care in the world. Knowing Widow, that just meant he was planning something really, really unpleasant.

"Kendras," the larger of the guards said. "Follow us."

Kendras obeyed the order. They didn't seem unfriendly so much as inexperienced. No guard worth his leathers would just turn around, making it easier to kill him—and both of them did. These men didn't expect a dagger or a kick. In their world, people obeyed their orders just because they wore shining polished armor with blue.

They led him down the corridor and further up. Two sets of stairs, and Kendras sank into rich carpets. Gold and silver leaf covered almost all surfaces. Marble gods held water basins that overflowed into open artificial brooks that crossed the ground.

One of the guards then knocked on a door, announced him, and then very nearly pushed him through.

Inside, in a room that was wide open to the warm night, were several men. Steel stood near the balcony, looking watchful. The high priest stood, a wine cup in his hand, and wearing lighter, more casual robes that were wide open at the front, displaying a lean, very nearly bony chest and a large blue precious stone in a silver medallion. His wide, long sleeves brushed the ground when he moved.

In the chair, the only man sitting was a large warrior clad in burnished bronze, who turned toward him. Kendras lifted his eyebrows in surprise.

The man was Jaishani, dark-skinned, pure-bred, with blue eyes. On the table in front of him stood the mask helmet he'd worn. The visor was finely made to look like the man's features, just more handsome and silver rather than black. The ornate shoulder pieces of the bronze armor were a contrast to the rest of the king's guard.

This was the captain, who was called Smoke or Old Smoke on the streets of Dalman. Kendras didn't know where the nickname came from, only knew the man was as accomplished a warrior as he was loyal. He'd almost died in a fire once, protecting his king, and looking at the scarred side of his face, Kendras could believe that. Kendras managed to not nod at Old Smoke in recognition—to the captain, he was nothing but some mercenary, or worse, a common street thug.

“Captain, this concludes our little conversation about the security of the king,” the high priest said softly. “I assure you that your king is in the best hands imaginable.”

Smoke's gauntleted hand suddenly jerked, and he hit himself on the armored chest. He choked; his fist hit his chest again.

“Ah, yes, the wine.” The high priest turned a glittering gaze toward his own cup. “I better not drink more of it than my body can withstand, shall I?” He smiled the sweetest, coldest smile that Kendras had ever seen. “It is rather bad for the heart, I've heard.” The smile remained in place as he motioned to Steel. “Finish him off if you would. I can't see him suffer needlessly. The poison takes a while to kill.”

Steel drew a short sword and stepped to the captain, who staggered to his feet. “Let's not ruin the armor,” Steel said, then took the captain's arm, lifted it, and plunged the short sword into the gap in the armor in the man's armpit, deep into the body, making Kendras almost wince.

The movement was smooth and deadly, and Steel stepped to the side and released the sword, knowing that nothing could save the captain now.

Nevertheless, Smoke tried. He reached across his chest and tried to dislodge the sword, pulled it half-free, then stumbled and fell. Again he fought, fought to get to his knees, pushed himself up, coughing, spluttering, reached for the table but didn't quite manage.

The high priest watched him with faint interest. “As I was saying... but those hands aren't yours, captain, I regret to inform you. And wherever you are going now, and if there is reason where that is, you might wish to prepare for the arrival of your master.” The high



priest watched as the captain finally collapsed with rolling eyes, metal-clad hands scraping at the floor. The sounds kept up for a little while, and then the man relaxed.

A shudder passed through Kendras. Another man dead who wouldn't give up. Brought low by poison and a cowardly blade, from men he hadn't suspected. There was a lesson in that, but it was grim.

"Which now brings us to you," said the high priest. "Thank you for joining us. I'd offer wine, but the last of your kind didn't seem to appreciate it much."

"I'm not thirsty, master," Kendras said, adding the last word more smoothly than he would have expected.

"Ah, but he is perfect." The high priest looked at Steel. "You chose well."

Steel just gave a nod.

"Now, Kendras. Steel here has brought you to my temple to do one deed for me. I will have to ask a few questions, upon which I will decide if you are suitable for the task."

"Understood."

"Good. Do you believe in the gods?"

Kendras glanced at Steel, but the man's face was blank. He wasn't sure which answer was right. The last thing he wanted was to give himself away and have to fight his way out of the temple. Even temple guards could pose an obstacle if there were enough of them.

"No."

"You won't fear the wrath of the gods, then? Or eternal punishment?"

"No."

"Very good." The high priest seemed delighted. "The king, does he arouse any passions in you?"

"He's not my type."

"Wonderful." The high priest smiled even wider. "Because you will kill him."

Steel breathed, relaxing a little across the shoulders.

“I hear you enjoyed one of the temple slaves. He’ll be yours—tonight and ever after—as well as a purse of gold, if you do my bidding.”

Kendras frowned. He didn’t like the thought that the boy had been sent as a first payment, but that couldn’t be helped now. The slave at least had enjoyed it. Some things were very hard to fake. “And my silence?”

“As a kingslayer, it’ll be in your own best interest to keep silent. The king’s anointed. Nobody of the right faith can lay a hand on him.” The high priest shrugged. “But you, of course, don’t fear the gods, so to you he’s just a man.”

As insane as it was, there was a deranged kind of logic in those words. Kendras looked down at Old Smoke. “I’m to impersonate the king’s guard captain?”

“Yes. Tomorrow in the afternoon. It’s a foggy night, we can expect a foggy day as the season turns. The king will take you along to the rite. At my signal, you will stab him, but be subtle. Nobody should see any blood or any suspicious movements.”

“A thin blade into the lung and one in the kidney will do it.”

“I knew you’d agree with Steel on the solution.” The high priest smiled warmly at him. “After all, Steel did it for the last king we were getting tired of. Didn’t you, Steel?”

Steel shrugged. “I should have done the one before that too. That didn’t go too smoothly. But Kendras won’t disappoint.”

“If the captain had been white, you could have done it again. But he’s not.”

Kingslayer. Kendras watched the bickering conspirators and noticed blood spreading from the guard captain at his feet. Yet another. He couldn’t betray his emotions. The blade and the poison were too close. They were watching him for signs of weakness.

*Nothing is as deadly as the scorpion. Sting and poison are your birthrights.*

Kendras breathed deeply and pushed all compassion, all senses of brotherhood, aside.

*Force me.*

He could claim his officer—he could kill a king.

“What about the body?”

Steel waved at him. “The armor will be cleaned. Just be ready tomorrow. I’ll be there, too, just wearing temple garb.”

Kendras nodded. “What if the king can tell the difference?”

“He won’t,” the high priest said. “Or rather, he better not. He’ll have other things on his mind.”

*I bet*, Kendras thought. “Well. Do you require me for anything else?”

“No. Rest and prepare.” The high priest smiled at him. “You will need your strength, Kendras.”

Whether that was a threat or promise was impossible to say. Kendras didn’t chance it to ask. He wanted the king dead, too, if for different reasons, even though his gut instinct told him the man had to live if these two wanted to see him dead. He touched his chest in a soldier’s salute—they didn’t know he was saluting the fallen comrade rather than the conspirators.

## Chapter Sixteen

KENDRAS was so restless he could only sleep after doing his exercises. The room he'd been given was large enough, so he tired himself out. A bath loosened the tired muscles, and, right on cue, the bath slave appeared. Kendras pushed him away, though, when he attempted to do more than wash and dry him, telling him with a smile he'd need his strength.

He shaved his head, though and scraped off the whiskers on his face too. Much like the guard captain had kept himself neat and tidy. It wouldn't do to alarm the king.

He rested more than he slept, for a few hours, at least, listening to the night sounds in the temple city, far-away chants carried on the breeze, and thought of the officer, down there in that hole.

*The Scorpions began with one man.*

It took only one. And Kendras would die to save him. However the day would play out, he was ready to die. Ever since he'd been saved from the executioner's bed, he'd been ready to die for the man who'd stilled the advance of fate.

*All men die, Kendras. Better get used to it. And then fight until the end, with every breath, every heartbeat, every single, last thought.*

He rose at noon, did his exercises, cleaned himself up and gathered his resolve. In the afternoon, he heard armored men in the corridor, and was on his feet and ready when the temple guard entered.

They carried the armor of the king's captain between them. Two young priests stripped him and then dressed him in the dead man's

clothes, from loincloth to fine padded gambeson. Kendras would much have preferred his own leather. The guard captain's armor was heavier and stiffer than his scale armor. This wouldn't be a joy to fight in, if worst came to worst. He wasn't used to it.

The priests seemed to know better where every strap and armor piece went, from the bronze sheaths that covered his boots to the chest plate, the arm guards, and the gauntlets with their fine inner leather gloves. He adjusted one or two straps. The dead captain had been wider in the shoulder and chest, but not by much. Steel had a good eye; he did match the dead man well. Smoke's personal armor, doubtless made to exactly fit him, didn't get in the way.

Kendras stretched out, lunged a few times to test, then nodded to the priests, who girded him with Old Smoke's twin swords. He adjusted the double weapon belt for himself, and then one of the priests offered him two long, thin blades. Kendras slipped them into his gloves and tested how best to pull them. Easy. They were made for this.

They fastened a wide blue cloak to his shoulders and draped it around his shoulder plates to look formal and imposing.

Kendras only wore a cloak when he was worried he'd get too cold in the armor, and he already hated it. Maybe he was simply "testy," as Widow called it. He lifted his arm, but the hole in the armpit had been mended. The leather was still damp there after the blood had been washed out.

Another temple guard stepped in, and Kendras recognized Steel. Strange that he wore that blue and silver so well. He could easily have been trained as a temple guard, or at least played one very believably.

"Yes, that works."

"Aren't you glad," muttered Kendras.

"I am, actually. We'll show them today." Steel took the helmet from one of the guards and handed it to Kendras. "Put that on."

Once the metal came down over his eyes, Kendras barely saw anything. "I'm blind and deaf now."

"Still, enough to do your job." Steel gave him a loud rap on the shoulder plate. "Captain. Follow me."

Kendras gritted his teeth. He'd do this. He'd just follow Steel's lead. *For once*, he added with a hint of irony.

As Steel had told him, he went to the king's quarters and interrupted belated preparations. Two very good-looking, nubile women stretched out in the king's bed, skin flushed, and they didn't do much to cover themselves.

One of them was half-Jaishani, and Kendras regarded her dark skin for a few moments as if it would remind him of something before he realized that it didn't, and wouldn't. He assumed the king had chosen her and the blonde for the contrasts of their skin.

"Fucking slave-trader," the king muttered and tossed on a light robe. "Why the fuck can't they just speak their few words and be done with it?"

Kendras gave a silent shrug and watched the king dress himself. His sandals were covered in gold leaf, the straps crisscrossing up the muscular calves. He had a nicely sized cock, no wonder the two women looked pretty pleased, and unlike just about any noble Kendras had seen from up close, the taut stomach and formed chest of a warrior. If he hadn't been the king, he could easily have been a warrior or even a comrade. Kendras frowned under the mask.

The king closed the blue robes with a belt, keeping his chest and most of his legs bared, then, after a moment's thought, left a diadem he'd reached for. No royal insignia, just the bearing and manners of a king. *And a bodyguard*, Kendras thought. The king clearly thought he didn't need all the trappings of his status. Depending on the ritual, anything more than that might just encumber him.

"Well, ready." The king blew his cheeks out and gave a heavy sigh, then glanced back over his shoulders. "Keep yourselves entertained, my dears. I'll be back in a few hours." He gave a lazy wave and left the room. But immediately, a hard edge returned to him, one Kendras had seen before.

"Be very careful, just in case. If any priest so much as touches me, kill the bastard."

Kendras nodded silently. Hopefully, Smoke hadn't been more willing to offer his thoughts. Bodyguards were usually men who were

all about watching and not speaking. Discretion was half the job—the rest was boredom, drudgery and the willingness to die and defend at once. He could imagine Steel doing this, come to think of it, without the dying bit. He couldn't see Steel laying down his life for anybody.

“Damned pity that I can't have them all killed. With Vededrin sharpening its claws, I just can't risk the civil war. If the bitch of Fetin had played according to the rules....” The king gave an angry, frustrated sigh, but that was when they stepped outside and were suddenly engulfed in noise.

The pilgrims were chanting, singing, and dancing like this was the new year celebration. The king suddenly smiled and waved, walking through the small opening in the mass of people that were all cheering for him, stretching out to reach him regardless of the temple guards.

Kendras moved up closer, ready to attack if a weapon appeared in any of the many outstretched hands. Many pilgrims wore blue—blue arm and wrist bands, blue skirts and shirts. Some had even painted their faces blue.

The king strode past the pilgrims, a wide smile on his face, like he was just one of thousands that were celebrating. The bright joy of the celebration stood ill at ease with the gloom of the late day.

Heavy fog was rolling inland from the sea, and Kendras heard some people mutter about the sea gods of death. From what little he knew of this faith, the color of the ocean hinted at which gods were most likely to hear prayers. And fog and dark gray were the signs of the gods of death. That alone didn't have to be an omen, otherwise Kendras didn't believe that the king would proceed so calmly.

They walked toward the ship, the *Glorious*, which lay moored in the channel. Blue flowers and silk pieces were laid out to guide the way. A priest stood waiting, and the king paused in front of him and lowered his head so the priest could place a garland of blue flowers around his neck.

Kendras had often seen people sacrifice blue flowers to the ocean. Or criminals condemned to die. If not for the officer, he'd have been among them. It made him queasy, and he usually wasn't the

superstitious sort. He simply didn't like this. It had nothing to do with the gods or superstition. Maybe just an ill-timed memory.

He glared at the priest, then followed the king up the gangplank. On deck, the high priest was already waiting, wearing gray robes that, Kendras assumed, had to do with the fog and the particular gods.

"Welcome, anointed, chosen of the gods," the high priest said and raised his hands in blessing, then addressed the pilgrims. A hush settled immediately. "The gods have sent us this king, and the gods demand that their beloved returns to them so they can assure him of their favor, and he can pay homage to those who have invested him with sacred powers."

Kendras pushed the words away, merely stood there, guarding the king's back as if a dozen assassins were lurking. He spotted Steel standing to the side, a faint smile on his lips. The kind of expression that said that everything was going according to plan. Kendras didn't particularly like that one, either.

The ship was prepared while the high priest spoke, and then they were gliding down the canal toward the harbor and the river.

The banks were lined with pilgrims; a few pushed through the throng of people to follow the ship. Kendras had never seen so many people in one place, not even in the battle for Fetin. And all of them stared at the ship with wide open eyes and mouths, struck dumb by the *Glorious*, the king, and the high priest.

In the hazy light filtering through the fog, Kendras spotted a number of contraptions on the banks, like barrels and bundles of sticks. Servants stood next to each of those.

The ship then anchored, and for a few moments, Kendras watched the fingers of fog drift over the calm sea. Then he heard the high priest again, chanting rather than speaking.

Steel signaled the king, who, reluctantly, it seemed, walked toward the back of the ship. There, a platform hung suspended over the water. Steel nodded toward it, and the king stepped on it with an air of indulgent annoyance.

Kendras hesitated, knowing that if he fell off that platform, the heavy armor would drown him. That would be a very easy way to kill



the killer. He wondered if Steel would allow that to happen. If Steel had indeed shed his attraction and need, he might just be a dead man. If not....

Kendras stepped on the platform and stood behind the king as the high priest came closer. The king opened his belt and the robe gaped open. The high priest smiled, oddly fondly, and poured oil into his hand, still chanting. He wrote something across the king's chest in oil, then touched the king's lips, cheeks, and forehead.

"Fuck you," the king said, barely more than a whisper.

The high priest signaled, and the platform was lowered. Kendras caught the high priest gazing at him, and he nodded. Kendras nodded back and stepped into position. It would have to happen now, or very soon.

The rope creaked as it was lowered, and the chanting and dancing on the riverbanks was reaching fever pitch. The gods would very soon take their groom.

Kendras pulled the thin daggers from his gloves and inched a little closer, moving very carefully on the swaying platform. The king stood right on the edge now, ready, waiting for the ritual to be completed.

Then, fireworks went off.

Kendras stepped closer and quickly plunged the daggers into the king's lungs. No scream. Not now, not ever. He pulled the daggers free immediately and jabbed them both into the king's kidneys, deep enough to bury both weapons to the hilts, making them vanish. The king lurched forward and fell over the edge.

There was a huge cheer from the crowd. The king had met the gods.

Kendras stepped carefully back, and peered up to the ship. He saw Steel watch him intently.

The crackle and flash of the fireworks filled the air now, blue lights streamed up into the sky and exploded, muted by the fog. Kendras imagined somewhere under water, a heavily bleeding man was drowning. He'd never make it back to land with those wounds.

He watched the river, then felt that the platform was lowered some more, until it was very close to the surface. Kendras waited, tense, imagined that this was how the real captain would have reacted. Smoke would have grown worried, and then frantic, and then demanded answers. Or remained silent if he was smart.

“Don’t do anything,” Steel told him.

Kendras peered at the mercenary, then turned, just in time to see somebody swim toward the platform and pull himself up. Naked. Not injured. Water running from a youthful, much more slender body. Vistar An Grekaran.

The young man pulled himself up and raised his hands like a victorious runner. Fireworks continued, but the cheering became ever louder. The gods had returned the king. Since most pilgrims had never seen the king close-up, they didn’t know the difference between the two men, and the high priest would keep it that way.

Kendras gathered up the blue robes of the dead king and draped them around Vistar, who gave him a wide, nervous smile of thanks.

The platform was pulled up again, and up on deck, the high priest spoke blessings and ancient prayers. Kendras felt Steel move at his back and his shoulder blades itched. The new king was ushered under deck by some of the priests, and the high priest went last.

Steel stayed close. “Do you want to fuck him?”

“Who?”

“The king.” Steel laughed. “That’s what they’ll do. There will be lots of wine and herbs, so all anybody is going to remember is that they were fucked by and fucked gods. Some kings end up believing they did indeed marry the gods, when it was just priests dressed in blues.”

Kendras swallowed dryly. He didn’t think Steel was lying. “That the reason why the king was so angry at the high priest?”

“What do you think? There you are, at the height of your ambition, but your power’s worthless if the high priest says so. But yes, I’ve noticed that the kings tend to be young and good-looking. Never mind we haven’t had a queen for a long time in Dalman, at least not while the current high priest’s been in power.” Steel chuckled.

"I'll pass." Kendras reached under the helmet and loosened it, then pulled it off with no small measure of relief. "What about you?"

"Not my type. I told you that."

"The blue and silver suits you."

Steel laughed. "I think you should get rid of yours. I much prefer you naked."

"When can we go back?"

"The priests will do their—"

An explosion from the riverbank stopped Steel's words. The celebratory cheering and singing suddenly turned into shrieks of panic. His eyes could make out more when the fog tore apart, and he saw that one of the barrels had exploded. Its contents must have been liquid—it was spilling everywhere and burning with a bright, yellow flame.

Steel stared at the scene, then recoiled as the next barrel exploded. And then the next. The pilgrims turned like a herd in a storm, racing, shouting, surging first this way, then that. Those who weren't fast enough in changing direction were trampled. Screams of pain and anger echoed along the river.

"Fuck. Sabotage." Steel's gaze whipped around, and then he punched Kendras's shoulder plate. "Keep an eye on the river. It might be a diversion. I'll pull the high priest off our new king."

*If they begin to scream and panic, get out of the chains and run. If you have to kill a man or two on the way, enjoy yourself, but not too much.*

The screams and explosions would easily carry to the officer's cell. Kendras realized that he didn't want to get swept up in the chaos, let alone be around when Steel returned. He'd done the job Steel had recruited him for. But Steel wouldn't let him go. He'd made that much clear. *We could be good together.*

*No, we can't.*

He hurriedly stripped the unfamiliar armor, thankful that at least the undergarments weren't the heavy leathers that would pull him down. But the thought of actually swimming filled him with dread.

He'd never been a strong swimmer, and the river had powerful currents.

He dropped the armor to the ground, but before he could get everything off, Steel reappeared, temple guards in tow.

Kendras jumped into the river.

The shock of the cool water rushing over him and immediately pulling at the armor pieces he hadn't managed to shed sharpened his senses.

He kicked back against the water, pulled the straps of the shoulder plates free, amazed himself how cold-bloodedly efficient his moments were while he was sinking low. He still felt the weight on his legs and arms, but he now began to swim, heading toward the boom of more explosions. That way was the riverbank, and safety.

With every movement, the two swords got in the way, but he was more concerned about keeping his head above water. From behind him, he heard shouted commands, the clang of armor, and the hammering of armored boots. He stretched further against the current, which carried him toward the sea rather than toward the temple.

Finally, his feet touched ground, stones, and plants as he made his way through the reeds and up the river bank, water running from him and chilling him in the cool evening.

He pulled a knife and cut the remaining armor pieces off. Trying to open the leather straps now wouldn't be any easier, and he had to get away.

A high-pitched sound made him duck, and a long arrow passed above him where his throat had been. No doubt Steel had given the order.

Kendras gritted his teeth, stayed down, hoped the reeds gave him a little protection, then moved sideways, looking for the best way to vanish into the fog.

Crouched down, he rushed along the riverbank toward the shouts and screams, and then bounded up toward the trees.

Priests and temple guards were out in force trying to calm down the pilgrims. The words Kendras heard again and again were "sign

from the gods,” and he didn’t envy the priests having to explain this mess.

The fact he wore no armor anymore gave him anonymity. He could have been just one of the many pilgrims if he hadn’t been carrying two swords, but he wasn’t willing to leave them behind.

On the way, he found a discarded cloak, and even though it was much too short, it served well to disguise the fact he was dripping wet—at least to anybody giving him no more than a cursory glance while he moved between the pilgrims who were now streaming back to the city.

There was an eerie silence now. People looked pale and didn’t resist being herded. Most just seemed glad to be taking orders as the temple sought to get everything back under control.

Kendras left the stream of pilgrims behind and moved further inland, toward the gate of the temple city. High above on its rock perch was Dalman, guard fires indicating where the walls were in the fog. He didn’t want to get too close to the gates, so he kept to the fog and darkness, but finding somebody was not as easy as vanishing.

He might have wandered east for an hour or more when he heard the snort of horses. He paused and then moved toward the sound, crouched, then moved again. When the horses appeared from the fog, he breathed a sigh of relief. In the ghostly silence, he made out two men and three horses.

One of the men was Widow, leaning forward on the saddle, impatient but silent; the other was the officer, who turned his head to look at him. He reached out and touched Widow’s shoulder, and Widow straightened.

“Finally.”

Kendras shrugged. “I had to make my escape too.”

“Let’s go.” The officer held the reins of the third horse, a resigned-looking chestnut, and soon they were on the road to Fetin.

## Chapter Seventeen

THEY sneaked away with a brisk step, then broke into a canter once they were out in the open and away from prying eyes. Widow rode first; then followed the officer. Kendras guarded from the back. Not the best situation to talk, but Kendras found himself staring at the officer's shoulders, his head, as if he could reach out and touch him, make sure he was all right, check him for wounds. He knew that the officer wouldn't welcome the fussing. Just the fact that the man had been captive brought out all kinds of protective feelings, but Kendras knew well that the officer could look after himself. In the end, he'd freed himself too.

He was relieved when Widow led them off the road and toward a hut which was protected by trees. It was one of the places shepherds used when they lived with their herds.

Sparse, but enough for soldiers, and they even found a dusty cloak for the officer. Normally, these shelters would be occupied, but Widow didn't seem overly disturbed by the idea. He'd either killed the inhabitant somewhere quiet and out of the way or paid him off.

In silence, they looked after their horses, then returned to the hut. Widow handed out cold cheese and bread, but nobody started a fire. The less visible they were, the better.

The silence continued. Widow didn't seem too bothered by it; the man exuded a sense of unpleasant satisfaction. The officer seemed thoughtful, withdrawn as he sat there, cross-legged, and ate with the slow deliberation of a man who knew the next meal could be a while

off. And the longer the silence went on, the less Kendras felt able to break it. Maybe it was the fog outside, or that they were on the run, or maybe there simply wasn't anything to say.

"I got your book," Widow said when it seemed that speaking had almost become impossible. "Reckoned it was important."

Kendras looked up, suddenly shocked he'd left the memory behind, but there it was, wrapped in a leather bag. "How...?"

Widow grinned. "It's the only book you boys have. And we weren't coming back."

Kendras took it, ran his hands briefly across it, then offered it to the officer. The man gave a small nod and opened it, dark fingers brushing the pages as he sought the end of the entries. His eyes quickly traced the last few lines, and then he closed the book and put it back into the bag. "Have you read it?"

"Yes."

"What do you think?"

"I... don't know."

Widow rolled his eyes and got up. "If you are going to fuck, be silent, will you? Some of us have to sleep," Widow muttered and climbed up to the sleeping quarters.

Kendras and the officer stayed below, the book between them. He found no good response to that. It seemed a reasonable request, but after the things he'd learned that day, Widow generally seemed quite reasonable.

He didn't know what to say, so he stood, too, and got rid of the still-damp clothes, hung them up and wrapped himself in the cloak. He'd at least be able to sleep like that.

"What do you think of the book?" the officer asked again.

"It makes me want to fight harder. All those Scorpions...."

"Yes?"

Kendras shrugged, unable to find the words for that sense of obligation that ran deeper than his own desire to live. He'd have died to

free the officer. But he hadn't freed the man for himself, but the *others*. He remained silent, grateful that the officer didn't keep asking.

"Who whipped you?" The tone was calm and low, but Kendras's hackles rose.

The officer must have seen his back while he'd gotten undressed. He grimaced, unwilling to talk about Steel. "Nobody important." *I stopped fighting. Yet again.* But it was the only way to win in the end. Only that this wasn't the end. The end would be when they were back to full strength, healed, armed, and ready to take on all comers. And that, too, wasn't the end.

"I killed the king."

"They've done it again? Seems the high priest isn't ready to share power anytime soon." The officer gave a short, low laugh. "Well, let's see what we can do about that. Who whipped you?"

"A man called Steel." Kendras was bone-weary, and any place to stretch out was as good as any other. He spread a few woolen blankets that smelled of sheep and lay down on the ground. He was about to turn onto his side when the officer moved on top of him on hands and knees. Kendras reached down to take the man's cock which grew larger and harder, and took his neck with his free hand. The kiss numbed him, then fired up all his senses.

Kendras pulled him closer, but when the officer seemed reluctant, tried to topple him. It didn't work, the man was rock-solid, not a weakness on him. It was like trying to topple a tree.

They both laughed when the wrestling and pushing didn't yield any results, and Kendras gave up and just kissed him, stroked him, enjoyed the strong, aroused body so close to his.

"Who's he?"

"The mercenary that Widow was with. A gray-eyed man. They say he has no soul." *And while I'm not quite sure that's true, I prefer to think of it that way.*

"Ah, old Gray Eyes playing kingmaker again." The officer chuckled, but there was no humor in his voice. "He whipped you?"

"He felt I betrayed him."



“Fool.” The officer bent down to kiss him again, and Kendras took both their cocks into one hand, relishing the feel of the officer’s cock against his and in his hand. Alive and desiring him. He’d always longed for that, longed to break the officer’s self-imposed restraint. Dismissing Steel with a “fool” was dangerous, but right now it gave him confidence.

“I’ll fuck you,” the officer said, which made Kendras’s blood surge. He added with a smile, “Give me a day or two until you take me again.”

“Sorry....”

“No. It tore me from the drug haze.” The officer went back on his knees and opened Kendras’s legs. He paused, then rifled through the saddle bags that were resting at his side.

Kendras laughed breathlessly at the thought that the officer had rescued that bottle from his cell when he hadn’t even been wearing many clothes. It showed at least what he thought was important.

“What?”

“Just... go on.”

“You’ve been treated badly too often, Kendras.”

Did that mean the officer always saw the scrawny injured youth he’d rescued when he looked at Kendras? Still? After so many years? “I don’t... care.” Kendras drew breath sharply when the oiled fingers pushed inside him, and he opened his legs wider in invitation.

“Yes. But I do.” The officer took his own cock in an oiled hand, and continued to prepare Kendras’s opening. Kendras grew more impatient as the fingers reached deeper and further, teasing him, promising a pleasure he knew well and craved more than ever.

Kendras opened his lips and grinned at the concern. Oh, this was good. “More than ready,” he murmured.

The officer chuckled and pushed his legs further up, angling him just so, and then wiped the oil from his fingers on Kendras’s thigh, before he closed the distance and plunged inside.

Kendras groaned at the invasion, needed it, craved it, but bent like this all he could do was take the fucking and clutch at the officer. It was strange to be bared like this, watching another man's face like this, the dark features, dark eyes that spoke of nothing but fierce joy at being alive and fucking Kendras with relish.

The sensations washed over him in waves, the pleasure fierce and intense with every stroke, and he barely remembered to remain silent. Widow. Even though, if the man had any soldier senses at all, he was probably awake and waiting for them to finish.

He reached down to stroke himself, the pleasure impossible to contain. The officer's thrusts got much harder and faster, rocking him on the ground, but that was exactly what Kendras needed.

Kendras tightened, stroked himself, riding his own pleasure and that of the other man until he felt the officer come inside, burrowed balls-deep inside him, weight and strength and fierce pride. Their sweat ran together when the officer moved again, but this time, he leaned in closer, staring into his face while he took Kendras's hand and helped him jerk off. Kendras kept the contact, but closed his eyes in a reflex when he finally came, unable to bear the attention as his own pleasure washed everything else away.

Another kiss, gentle, slow and intense, tore him out of the deep, contented satisfaction that was about to pull him under into sleep, and he lowered his legs and rolled onto the side. The officer lay down beside him and pulled Kendras closer. He came to lie on the man's arm, and the officer watched him. But all Kendras could think was that it was good this way, and he could sleep now.

"LET him sleep a bit longer."

"We should get to Fetin before half the temple's on our asses."

Kendras breathed deeply, then opened his eyes. The officer stood there, wearing very little apart from that cloak, but Widow was fully dressed. The officer towered over Widow, yet Widow didn't seem intimidated so much as uncharacteristically polite.

“I’m awake.”

The officer turned toward him and tossed him an apple. “We’ll prepare the horses. Come when you’re ready.”

Kendras groaned and stretched, then stood. They were right. They’d better get a lot more distance between themselves and Dalman. He gathered his clothes, which were less damp than yesterday, dressed, took the sword belts and closed one around his waist, then ate the apple in a few hungry bites.

The morning was crisp and clear, which lifted the spirits, but wasn’t good for hiding. He found the officer and Widow behind the hut, Widow saddling the horses while the officer checked the horses’ legs.

Kendras handed the second sword belt to the officer, then one of the saddlebags to Widow, and fastened the other one himself. It would be much easier to take a boat up the river, but again, that was also the easiest way to run into temple guards.

They traveled in silence for the most part until they encountered a trader selling cloth, and a little bartering got them a full set of clothes for the officer and a cloak for Kendras. Widow paid without hesitation or so much as a foul word.

They attached themselves to the trader’s guards, who seemed nervous over three obviously armed and dangerous men, but even they had to realize that they wouldn’t have paid for their clothes if they meant to rob the merchant. It simply drew less attention.

That something was amiss was evident in the number of couriers. Dressed in blues and silvers, several times per day a courier would race past at breakneck speed. Kendras was tempted to shoot one down and see what missives he was carrying, but the officer reminded him that the letters were most likely coded.

“Who are they talking to?” Kendras asked.

“Maybe other temples. The king’s allies. Spies in Fetin....” The officer shrugged. “We know what they’ll do, so we’ll just have to be ready.” He turned to Widow. “How far are they with repairing the wall?”

“Making good progress last time I saw them.” Widow shrugged. “Fighting on Fetin’s side next time?”

“That remains to be seen,” the officer said.

“They have Riktan, Dev, and Selvan,” Kendras said.

“I know. Still. I can’t sacrifice the last Scorpions if there’s a chance we’ll lose.”

“I’m sure they’ll pay you what you’ll ask,” Widow said. “Beggars can’t be choosers.”

“I fail to see how five Scorpions can make a difference.”

“I’m not talking of the other four,” Widow snapped. “Fine. None of my business.”

## Chapter Eighteen

“THE wall might hold,” the officer said as they rode into Fetin. The damage to the city was still dramatic, but the gate was repaired, even though the gap in the wall wasn’t completely closed yet. The supporting structure of wood, filled with stone, debris, and earth was erected, and masons worked on the stones. Bricks were being fired, all watched by a number of Fetinye soldiers, who doubtless reported progress to the Lady Protector.

One of the soldiers turned at those words, brow dark. “How dare...” he paused, his face twitched, then emptied.

The officer’s lips curved into a smile. “Yes, get the Flames.”

The soldier barked an order to that effect, looking flustered at the officer’s presence. “We are working as fast as we can, my lord,” he said.

“I’m nobody’s lord.” The officer waved. “Get more men, these walls will very soon be tested. Pay the masons what you must... no other piece of construction is as important as the walls.”

The soldier swallowed dryly. “I will present this to my commanding officer, s..., eh.” He faltered, clearly wishing to not act against a direct order not to call the officer lord or sir. Kendras wondered if that excessive respect was because of the officer’s bearing, his reputation, or because he was originally from Fetin and the soldier recognized him. The officer had mentioned his personal feelings in that last entry in the book.

The Flames were upon them like a hornet's swarm. They refrained from attacking, but Kendras felt their anger. Ten warriors to control three—five on horseback, five on foot. They either planned to intimidate them into compliance or thought too much of their strength.

“Follow me,” the officer, a *tanesh*, told them.

They dismounted and left the horses with the guards at the gate. Kendras and Widow took their saddle bags and slung them across their shoulders. None expected to have to fight, even though the Flames' anger was tempered only by their harsh discipline. Of course, they had to know that the officer was a Scorpion. Yet, Kendras didn't spot the same hostility from the officer.

They followed the Flames on foot into the city. The damage here was being repaired, but what struck Kendras before they passed through the Horse Tamer Gate was how many Vededrinye were in the city. Just on that short way, he saw at least four, if not five.

*The Lady Protector is about to marry the Vededrinye Elder.*

Kendras didn't like the thought. If he had understood correctly, the three city states had always been in an uneasy balance with each other. Skirmishes were common, but overall, everybody kept their independence and let the others be. Marrying the Elder meant upsetting this balance. With the old king dead, what would the new king do about this? Dalman would have to attack before Fetin and Vededrin became one.

This time, they weren't guided through the back of the Flames' barracks, but walked toward the main entrance of the palace citadel. Kendras lowered the saddle bags off his shoulder and tried not to stare at the soaring spirals of the palace.

Courtiers and guards eyed them, and Kendras could imagine what they looked like. Three bedraggled, road-weary warriors being paraded by the Flames.

“They must have news from Dalman,” one courtier said to another as they passed.

They were ushered further into the palace, past a barrier of Flames, and then came into the Round Chamber, which was clad in

wood on one side and opened to the city on the other, covered by fine stone work, the stone broken in a thousand places, like honeycomb, providing protection against the city while at the same time opening the throne room to its surroundings. Flames inside and out watched that nobody exploited this.

In the throne room stood, just as before, the dark-skinned lady, who handed back a white cat to a servant when they entered.

Widow knelt, and Kendras assumed now that he could move again, he should do the same, so he knelt as well. The officer seemed torn for a moment whether to kneel or stand, then knelt too.

“Rise, Adrastes.”

Kendras half-expected this was Widow’s name, but the officer stood. “Mother.”

Kendras stared at both of them, and saw what he had missed all along. Each resembled the other. The lady was as tall and imposing as the officer was. Both carried themselves with a pride and calm that few people possessed. Her skin was darker, but that only meant that the officer’s father had been white.

Kendras stared, then shook his head. He was a fool. He should have seen it but hadn’t.

“Rise,” the officer said, half-turning to them. Kendras glanced at the lady, who gave her son a harsh stare but didn’t protest. Widow stood, fluidly, a pinched smirk on his face as he took a step back. Kendras thought that was wise and stood next to Widow, leaving the nobles to their games and the fight that was clearly in the air.

“I have summoned you for a purpose, Adrastes.”

The officer inclined his head briefly. “There will be another battle with Dalman.”

“Yes. The Lady Protector plans to marry the Vededrinye Elder.”

“She can’t be that desperate,” the officer said, “To give up the city like that.”

“And what else would you have me do?” a woman’s voice asked from behind Kendras. He turned and saw the Lady Protector enter the room.

She must have just come in from weapons practice. Her fine gambeson was dusty and had sweat-patches on the back and under her arms; her blonde hair was tied back, but individual wisps had come loose during the fight.

“Good work finding him,” she said as she passed Widow, who for a moment touched his heart with splayed fingers in a strangely devoted gesture. “Not that I’m entirely convinced it’ll make a difference,” she added with a long look at the officer. “Brother.”

The officer bowed. “I was prepared to live my life as nobody’s brother... or son.” He indicated the lady. “But my mother didn’t see that quite the same way. While I understand I follow her summons, I’m amazed that she chose Widowmaker to convey the message.”

The Lady Protector grimaced as if she’d bitten into a bad fruit. “Widowmaker follows his orders.”

“Yes. Yours.” The officer shook his head. “Thank you for your help.”

“Believe me, we had long discussions on whether we should just let you rot. Much better, more loyal men died during the last battle with Dalman. The king had our officers killed or sold into slavery. Fighting the next war without generals...” She balled her hands into fists, raised them, then dropped them in a show of frustrated anger.

“What about the academy?”

“You’ll agree that fighting a war with a few almost-graduates is not the way to win it.” The Lady Protector crossed her arms in front of her chest. “I told your mother that you’ll do what you’ve always done—pull your tail between your legs and go into hiding, pretending it’s not your business. You’re a coward, Adrastris. So. There’s the door. If you’re not standing with us, then there’s the door. You can take your tattooed criminals and riffraff and pretend you’re just some mercenary. We don’t need you here. Your men are hale and hearty. They can leave the moment I tell the Flames to let them go. But if you go, you have no right to interfere with my decisions. If I marry that scaly old reptile, it



is none of your business. At least I do what it takes to keep my city safe.”

“Are you done?” the officer asked.

“Just about,” she snapped back. “What do you have to say?”

“Nothing.” The officer lifted his shoulders. “Can I think about it?”

She snorted. “Sure. It’s your home. Your quarters are still free. You know where mine are, when you’re ready.” She glanced at the officer’s mother. “With your permission.” It was mere politeness. The real power in the room came from the Lady Protector.

When the older lady nodded, the Lady Protector turned and, walking off, tapped Widow on the shoulder. Widow lowered his gaze like an obedient courtier and trailed behind.

“She’s glad to see you alive,” the lady said when both had left the room.

“I know.” The officer chuckled. “And I did leave her alone with all this. There are enough hard feelings to fight a war with. Which might be exactly what we need in this case.” He stood there for a moment, as if listening to an invisible voice, thoughtful and withdrawn, then bowed deeply. “Allow me to rest and think about it. First I need to visit my men.”

“Granted,” she said, reached out and touched his head. “They will be brought to you.”

“Thank you.” The officer took her hand off his head and kissed it, then let it go. He gave Kendras a nod as he passed, and Kendras followed, too stunned even to think. The old Lord Protector must have had two wives—first the lady who had given birth to Adrastes, then a white one who’d born him the Lady Protector, whatever her name was.

Kendras would have never assumed the officer had had a life before the Scorpions. None of the others ever wanted to return to where he’d come from. A fair few of them never spoke about their origins. But now that old life claimed the officer back, and Kendras could see that this troubled him deeply.

Servants led the way to rich and wide quarters in the palace. Kendras was stunned by the opulence. There was enough space here to drill a unit of men without having to move a single piece of furniture. It began to sink in that the officer was indeed Adrastes, older brother of the Lady Protector of Fetin.

“At ease, Kendras.” Adrastes closed the doors behind them. “Wine, food? Do you want anything?”

“To understand.” Kendras cleared his throat. “I want to understand.”

“Yes.” Adrastes made an inviting gesture. “Just a moment.” He turned to a servant who’d stood so quietly in a corner that Kendras hadn’t spotted him. “Fresh clothes for myself and Kendras. Prepare a bath, and bring scar oil. Watered wine, and something to eat.”

The servant stepped forward and bowed. “Shall I take the bags, Your Highness?”

*Gods below. Your Highness,* Kendras thought.

“No. Go.” Adrastes turned to Kendras. “Ask your questions.”

“You’re her... older brother.”

“Half-brother. Yes.” Adrastes shrugged. “None of us can choose to whom we are born. My father was the Lord Protector of Fetin. My mother a Jaishani noblewoman. I was conceived during a “sacred marriage.” The Jaishani believed that his powers were waning, so they replenished his life force with a son of their blood. Of course, he then had to accept me as his own even though he wasn’t married according to Fetinye custom. But he honored his word, even though it wasn’t politically expedient.”

Kendras couldn’t begin to imagine what those words meant. Merely that Adrastes indeed had a claim on the rulership of Fetin. *A city, he reminded himself, on the verge of a political marriage to an enemy and besieged by yet another, possibly worse, enemy.*

“He must have been a strong leader.”

Adrastes nodded. “He did what needed doing.”

With every revelation, with every word they spoke, the distance between them increased. He was a nobody. Adrastes was a ruler's son. Firstborn. A noble. Well, not nobody. He was a Scorpion, but what did that mean when the officer, their leader, would be forced to leave?

Would he? Who would the man choose to be? The "officer," the man the Scorpions followed without question to death and beyond, or Adrastes of Fetin? He couldn't imagine the answer.

He walked toward an armor standing in the corner. It looked a lot like that of the Flames—the high conical helmet with horse tail—but instead of burnished copper, this armor had been burned dark, almost black, but with a reddish tinge. The plates of the armor underneath were nearly black, too, but finely adorned with beaten silver around the edges. This armor was a masterwork, the best Fetin could do. It also was nothing like any of the Scorpions wore or could afford. Not even the officer.

"I understand nothing of this," Kendras said.

"You wouldn't. You're too pure." Adrastes stepped close to him and placed a hand between Kendras's shoulders. "You're pure Scorpion. Maybe the best of them."

Kendras shuddered; the desire was instantaneous and gut-wrenching. "You're the officer. That can't change. It's been like that forever. You... can't." He swallowed. *You can't leave us. Me.*

"Kendras. Look at me."

Kendras turned with difficulty. He didn't want to give away how he felt. Couldn't possibly express what he felt.

*What would I have to do to keep you?*

*Maybe you have the strength, Kendras.*

*It only takes one man.*

"I'm not pure without you," Kendras murmured. "I'm nothing. And I won't be anything if you leave." Breathing was suddenly hard, but he plowed on. "You said I might have the strength. I want to. I want to be what you need."

Adrastes blinked, and then, on an impulse, pulled Kendras close in a tight embrace. Kendras couldn't do anything but respond by holding him just as tight. Unwilling, unable to let him go anytime soon. "Let me try. Just let me try. Please."

"You'll stay here. Don't worry. I... I will find a way." Adrastes kissed his temple, then took his face in both hands and kissed his lips. "Stay here, in my quarters. It'll help me think. And remember what else there is."

Kendras relaxed, or maybe this was just sapping his strength. He'd much rather face superior numbers on the battlefield than try finding his way through this dilemma. And he didn't even have to make this kind of choice. He'd always be a Scorpion. He didn't know how to be anything else.

## Chapter Nineteen

“I DON’T believe it—you did it, Kendras!” Riktan shouted when a pair of Flames led him, Dev, and Selvan into the room.

“You thought I wouldn’t?” Kendras said, but grinned. The surprise and joy on Riktan’s face suddenly filled him with pride.

“No, it was that the Flame bitches”—Riktan lowered his voice when he caught a glance from one of the Flames who were now leaving them alone in the room—“didn’t say a word where they’d take us. I was half-expecting they’d kick us out of the city gates or try to kill us.”

“No, that won’t happen,” Adraustes said calmly and stood from the table. He crossed the distance to the other Scorpions, and embraced first Riktan, then Dev, and allowed Selvan to kiss his hands. “It’s good to see you.”

“And you, officer,” Dev said. “What happened? We thought you were captured.”

“Yes, I was prisoner of Dalman. Kendras found me and bought my freedom.” Adraustes’s tone was even, offhanded, as if there really wasn’t anything more to the story.

While it wasn’t too far from the truth, it troubled Kendras. Yet, the officer had never told them anything, even before. He had never lied outright, merely abbreviated the tales as if they weren’t important. Even the memory didn’t hold the whole story, what with its erased names. But of course, Adraustes’s name would have been rubbed out, since he was a ruler’s son. Nobody had been supposed to know. Even now, Adraustes didn’t mention it.

Yet—he himself didn’t share his whole story, either, Kendras thought. Maybe he’d write down the most important events in the memory. But the fact that Widow had found the book and could easily have read it gave him pause there. A complete memory also made them vulnerable. What if all that secrecy was just to protect them?

Adrastes bid them all sit at the large table in his quarters, which was stacked high with food and drink. He’d dismissed all servants and slaves, so they filled their plates and mugs themselves. Only Selvan sat at his feet, and Adrastes let him, feeding him by hand. “Kendras said you’d been wounded.”

“The Flame medics took care of us. Before that, Selvan found us on the battlefield. Lucky bastard didn’t even get scratched.” Dev smiled. “Riktan and me ended up in the Flame barracks. Selvan made sure the medic didn’t put us out our misery or castrate us to become honorary Flames.”

Riktan snorted. “Yes, they didn’t like that. Seems the order came from the very top.” He fixed his gaze on Adrastes for a few moments too long, clearly asking for an explanation.

“I asked them for this favor,” Kendras said. “Since I was running their errand in Dalman.”

“You’re mixing with the lords and ladies these days, Kendras?” Dev slapped him on the shoulder. “Never struck me as anybody’s errand boy.”

“Yes, I thought being wounded is bad enough, but waiting here, for something we didn’t know would ever happen, not sure what had happened to Kendras, or you...” Riktan shrugged. “Seems we were all prisoners.”

“Well, you’re free now. They will return your weapons to you too.” Adrastes reached for a large flatbread and tore it into several large pieces. “I’d say, this calls for a celebration.”

When Dev, Riktan, and Selvan had left, Kendras stood from the table. He glanced across the remains of the meal: the empty wine cups, the crumbs of food. A hint of the old times, laughter, joking, and Selvan who’d kissed the officer’s hands over and over, so grateful for his return.

Seeing Adraestes say goodbye to them at the door, smiling at them and trading a few half-drunken jokes, Kendras wondered why Adraestes hadn't told them the truth all evening. Who he was, why they were still alive, and what role they were supposed to play. Was the officer merely humble, or political? Did he not trust them?

He wanted answers.

"Who's Widow?"

"Widowmaker? He's my sister's." Adraestes's steps were heavier than they had been before the wine, and he sat down at the table again. "When she took power, the Elder of Vededrin sent him to kill her. Or spy on her. Well, he fell in love with her. Apparently, the only thing that finds the path to that foulmouthed bastard's shrunken heart is a woman who won't take his vile temper."

Kendras shook his head. "And... she?"

"What do you mean? Whether she loves him too? I'd think so. They've been sleeping together for, what, ten, eleven years now."

Kendras was astonished, but it made sense. She didn't seem the woman to be intimidated by Widow's fouler moods. But he did wonder how Widow felt about having his woman marry another man. Worse, marry the man he had betrayed to be with her. That couldn't be easy, even for the cold-hearted bastard.

"She sent him because she knew that if anybody could find me, it's him. Widow is a first-rate assassin and spy." Adraestes shrugged. "Not much of a soldier, but he's outstanding at what he does."

"And he knows who you are."

"He thinks he does, yes." Adraestes opened the tunic he was wearing. They both wore simple black tonight, but the clothes were finely made. Nothing like Kendras had ever owned or plundered. He felt more at ease in his leathers, but he'd left those behind. Adraestes had told him not to worry—he'd receive new ones, a new armor, new weapons. That would take a week or two, Kendras assumed. Which meant he'd stay at least for that long. He didn't want to think further than the next breath.

Riktan and Dev had no idea of the choice. They'd simply assumed that life would go on. The officer would choose the new men; they'd train them and take them in and then go and find a war to fight, somebody to protect, something to destroy.

But what were they without the officer?

Kendras stood, leaned in, and kissed the hollow under Adrastes's throat. The man opened his arms and chuckled. "Forget about the titles tonight. I don't like seeing you spooked like this. You're not a horse, Kendras."

Kendras opened his mouth and scraped his teeth along Adrastes's throat, feeling the man's breath hitch. During sex, they were only two men. That had to suffice for the moment. Whatever the officer decided, whatever he would push from his life. Not yet. There was still time. If he could find a way to shed the pain, replace it with a different feeling that was more intense. "Tell me. Why did you leave? What happened?"

"I was supposed to follow my father. Yes, I would have been the Lord Protector." Adrastes pulled Kendras's tunic over his head and discarded it. "But something happened... and I reconsidered. I wasn't ready. I didn't have the courage. I met the Scorpions and their leader, the officer. My predecessor."

"And?"

"I was only looking for diversion. He didn't know me, hadn't heard who I was, so he didn't rush to do my will, and he didn't plan to use me for his own ends."

"That must have been different."

"You have no idea. It opened my eyes. I'd meant to seduce him into my bed, but he seduced me into his life. I hadn't felt anything like that for another man. Skin and bones, inside and out, he made me his, and then taught me what it means to be a man, rather than a political pawn and spoiled princeling. He said it ruins a man's character to begin life as an officer." Adrastes shook his head. "My sister believes that is where I went wrong. But I know that is where I went right. I proved myself. I was just one man among others. A humbling experience, but one that made me see more clearly who and what I am."

"Like you did with me."



The officer breathed deeply. “That was what I hoped to do, yes.”  
“For each of us.”

The officer huffed. “I’m not a god, Kendras. I have my own doubts and fears.”

Kendras looked up and met the man’s eyes. Endless, deep calm was what he saw, but no doubts. He did understand the high priest’s petty vengeance to make him a “sacred warrior.” That strength and peace was something Kendras wanted to claim and own and have to himself. He’d always wanted to be special to this man among his brothers, had wanted to be singled out as the man’s lover. But beyond that one, tantalizing almost-promise—*maybe you are strong enough, Kendras*—there had been nothing. They’d all been equals to him. But this might just have changed. Dev, Riktan, even Selvan, who all the Scorpions treated with indulgent fondness, had left, and Kendras was still here.

“My predecessor showed me what the Scorpions could be if led right. I’m following in his footsteps.”

“What happened to him? You only wrote he died?”

“Infected wounds. We buried him on that mountain.” Adrastes touched the side of his face. “You are worried that I’ll become Lord Protector. My sister says Fetin doesn’t have enough officers, but what she needs is a general the troops will follow. My sister can command that kind of loyalty, but it might not be enough against Dalman.”

“It is your city.”

“I fought against Fetin before. I didn’t want to feel that kind of family obligation... pretended my only obligation was to you and the others.”

Kendras felt his heart pound. Saying “you” had been very deliberate. Adrastes could have said “the Scorpions,” without singling him out at all.

“But my family is asking for help. Have I run long enough? I feel I cannot run any longer. What do you think?”

Kendras swallowed hard. The end of the Scorpions. If the officer left.... “Then let us fight at your side. Even if... that’s the end.”

“You think it is?”

“We’d be only four. Three, if you don’t count Selvan. If some fall in battle, then... that’s it.”

“You’re doing it again.” The officer’s lips quirked in a melancholy smile. “You’re giving up. Don’t, Kendras. Nothing’s been decided yet.” He leaned in for another kiss, gentle, playful, as if to rouse Kendras from his despairing thoughts. “Come to bed.”

## Chapter Twenty

LIGHT streaming through the windows woke Kendras, but Adraestes was gone. He propped himself up on his elbows, amused at how the soft mattress tried to swallow him when he moved. He wasn't used to so much comfort. He sat up and freed himself from the opulent bed with its embroidered cushions and blankets.

Adraestes stood in the far corner of the room. He was beginning to put on the black armor, and Kendras moved there, silently, and knelt down to fasten the armor plates to the officer's legs.

"Hmm, a naked squire. I should make that a habit."

Kendras licked his lips. "Your Highness."

The officer laughed. "You make that sound dirty."

Kendras stood and made sure that the armor sat right, then took the helmet and studied the metalwork. "Riding off into battle?"

"No. I was merely checking if this still fits me." Adraestes crouched and straightened and went through the full range of movements. "Yes, it does. I am planning to make an entrance at today's Round Chamber meeting. The Elder will be there too."

"I don't have armor."

"You will. If you're willing to stand through what is undoubtedly going to be a torturous amount of politics."

"Not as bad as a siege engine breaking my bones. Barely." Kendras handed Adraestes the helmet. "I'll be there. So will the others, apart from Selvan."

“Very well.” Adrastes placed the helmet under his arm and gave a crisp salute that made Kendras smile. “I will have a word with my mother and sister, but I’ll come back here before we confront the Elder.”

All this meant he’d made his decision. Kendras couldn’t help but feel a lurch at seeing him in that armor. Last night, though, Adrastes had been his, and Kendras didn’t doubt that Adrastes had felt the same about him. They’d pleased each other, fucked each other, touched and held like they’d never be parted. Kendras’s heart clenched at the memory of how much tenderness could be in something like that, a secret, treasured moment that had nothing to do with being betrothed or another man’s comrade.

This ran deeper and hurt more. He should embrace the pain. As the medic would have said, pain meant he was still alive. Only the dead felt no pain. The fallen Scorpions were beyond that, wherever they were. Apart from listed in that book. The memory. What remained.

The officer ran a gauntleted hand down Kendras’s belly, but kept meeting his eyes. “I will get you in the afternoon. Take what clothes, weapons, armor you need. They’ll know to serve you.”

“Why?”

“As my companion, Kendras. We’ll see about everything else in due course.” Adrastes pulled him close. The cold metal of the scale armor pressed against Kendras’s body, but he didn’t mind. He pushed the helmet hard against Adrastes’s chest. “If you don’t come get me, I’ll find you.”

Adrastes laughed. “You would.” He took the helmet and left the room, strides wide and purposeful. Seeing him walking proud ran like warm water across Kendras’s skin. A feeling he could relish, despite what it would mean.

He cleaned up, shaved, and then servants brought him trousers, a tunic and a belt that could hold weapons but didn’t. He wandered the princely quarters aimlessly afterward, touched this and that, but he really was only circling the book on the table.

He settled down to read, read about the previous officer and Adrastes’s exploits, then how he’d joined. The flowing handwriting

seemed to stall when it said “Kendras was betrothed”—thoughts guiding hand, or maybe emotion. But what kind of thoughts or emotion?

Kendras had a servant bring him a sheet of vellum and ink, and he sat there, scratching uneven letters on the soft white surface in ink as black as blood. He wrote down the names of the dead, and once the line was completed, his hand felt tight and tense, and he had to relax his fingers around the steel pen. It wasn’t his to do—it was the officer’s task to ensure that the memory told the whole story, but Adrastes was occupied with politics.

Servants came and measured him, asked him what kind of armor he wanted, and that preoccupied him. He told them all he wanted was a simple dark scale armor, and what kind of protective clothing underneath. His leathers. A glaive. Gloves with the scorpion embroidered on them. They first brought him a sword, which was adequate, if unfamiliar, but more strikingly, only the Flames were allowed to carry weapons like this inside the citadel. And, of course, the ruling family.

*My companion.*

Kendras had Dev, Riktan, and Selvan brought to him. The others clearly had questions, but none asked them yet. They had to know that Adrastes was more than he’d appeared, but they seemed to wait for somebody else to say so. Kendras had too many questions himself, so he just took them outside and put them—and himself—through their paces, working hard until they all were encrusted with sweat and dust and needed a rest.

They cleaned up and had a meal together, the awkward silence now softened with tiredness. Selvan had clearly soothed both Riktan’s and Dev’s minds, the bond as strong as ever. Kendras watched them and tried to hide his own worries.

“There might be a fight,” he finally said and put the rest of his bread down. He wasn’t that hungry anymore.

“Finally,” Dev said, baring his teeth in a grin.

“The officer will challenge the Elder of Vededrin today. He won’t like that. We’ll just have to cover his back.”

“Who is he,” Selvan asked after a quick glance to the others. It was maybe a slave’s right to break the silence. “He’s... not the same.”

“He is the same.” It wasn’t like the officer had suddenly turned into the prince. He’d always been the prince, the future Lord Protector. “But yes, we might lose him.”

The others sat in stunned silence. “They want him to lead their army when Dalman attacks again. I’ll be there too.” Simple, and still not the whole truth, like speaking it made it all real. Kendras felt like a traitor for saying it, and for remaining silent.

“And me,” said Dev. “Fuck them. We’ll fight again.”

“Me too,” said Riktan, and Selvan, never a fighter, nodded.

“Keep your eyes open for recruits. We’ll have to build our strength.”

“There’s one,” Riktan said. “He had his balls taken, but he’s a fierce little fucker.”

“A Flame *tanesh*?” Kendras lifted an eyebrow. “Are you sure he’s interested? They do get those nice armors, and what I’ve seen of their barracks....”

“Just because he doesn’t have balls....” Riktan grinned. “Yes, he was interested.”

“We can always try him out.” Kendras laughed when Riktan leered. “But don’t forget you’ll have to share him.”

“I’ll share anything with my brothers.”

*I won’t*, Kendras thought. *Not anymore*. He did enjoy the fact that the officer kept him closer than the others.

“Is it because their skin is so soft? You tired of a real man?” asked Dev, shaking his braids in clear challenge.

Riktan laughed. “I take what I can get, Dev. You should know that. I even took you, you ugly lump.”

They laughed, and for a little while, Kendras forgot the lies and fears.

## Chapter Twenty-One

THE Elder of Vededrin was an old man, white hair falling to his shoulders like the hood of a cobra.

Kendras felt his chest swell with pride when Adrastes strode into the Round Chamber, and he followed with the others. Lockstep, their strides in unison like those of well-drilled soldiers. Kendras noted one of the Flames raising an eyebrow at their display. Black armor, plates, and scales. Adrastes wore a little gold, but other than that, their simple black stood out in the room.

“With your permission, Elder, I’ll join the war council,” Adrastes said, but there was nothing amused about his tone.

The Elder looked up from the planning table, surrounded by a number of priests and two generals. His dark eyes seemed to look far beyond, as he stared through everybody, even Adrastes. They were planning the defense of the city against a force that was probably meant to be Dalman.

“I’m Adrastes of Fetin, firstborn of Besh of the Jaishani, and firstborn of Lord Protector Ashangul, who, in his time, was called the Wise, the Strong, and the Gods-Blessed, depending where he was.” A minuscule smile appeared on Adrastes’s face. “And I’m the Lord Protector of Fetin.”

“Are you?” The Elder glanced at Adrastes’s sister, who nodded.

“He is. Adrastes was thought dead, but he has returned.”

“Interesting.” The Elder glanced between them. “So will you challenge each other for the power in Fetin? I understand that a Lord—or Lady—Protector never retires.”

“And you would forge an alliance with the survivor?” asked Adrastes.

“As far as I’m concerned, this is an internal matter of Fetin. I’m here as a bridegroom, however. But if you, Adrastes, carry off victory, we could find a way to assert Fetin’s standing in the eyes of the gods.”

Whatever that meant. Kendras kept his face expressionless, but he watched both men closely. He didn’t want Adrastes tied to any other man and didn’t believe that Adrastes would be any man’s slave, certainly not that of a Vededrin with his innumerable bizarre gods.

“You are right in that Fetin cannot afford strife. And we would prefer to call you a friend.” Adrastes clearly arranged the words very carefully before he spoke them. “But there will not be a fight between my sister and me.”

The Elder watched him with cold dark eyes. “What is your proposal?”

“The only way to prevent civil war is for me to marry my sister,” Adrastes said. “Which, unfortunately, leaves you a bride short. We do have many well-bred ladies who would be blessed to take my sister’s place at your side, and she would show our friendship and devotion to peace between Vededrin and Fetin.”

The Elder straightened, and his lips grew tight. “Brother marrying sister is against the will of the gods.” He seemed genuinely outraged. “The custom is barbaric. Our ancestors did away with that blood shame.”

Adrastes nodded. “I understand this goes against what you believe is right and in accordance with your gods. However, after reading the letters exchanged between Fetin and Vededrin, I noticed that there is no written record stating whom you’ll marry. The letters only state that Fetin will ally with Vededrin through marriage. Take your pick among our women.”



The court was silent, breathless. Nobody moved. No general, soldier, Flame, or Scorpion. Kendras could see the Elder thinking, weighing his possibilities, and still, his expression spoke more of disgust than anger. He accepted the logic of the proposal but railed against its immorality. A tightness around Widow's features betrayed that the spy watched with utmost concentration.

"You know, Adrastes, that not even you will be able to turn the Dalmanye tide by force."

The choice of words implied the ocean priests too. Kendras read it as the threat it was.

"Maybe not. If you join ranks with them, I won't."

"I'm not fighting with those heathens." The Elder's lips twitched with disdain. "And I rather suspect they will be enough to finish Fetin. At which point I will be upon them like the sacred raven."

Adrastes nodded again. "One of the three cities will resurrect the glory of Shara once the other two are subjugated or brought in line. The king of Dalman has made his bid, and it is time to respond to the challenge. I bear you no ill will, Elder. You were ready to help us in our hour of need—which has now passed. I thank you and offer you safe return. You and your people can leave the city unharmed, but you will leave before the sun is down."

"In return for your generosity, I shall offer you a chance to reconsider once Dalman has beaten you."

"Thank you." Adrastes straightened, clearly expecting the Vededryne to leave. The Elder took his time gathering his wide robes, and his entourage did likewise.

The Elder paused briefly to nod to the Lady Protector, but only in courtesy. There was no warmth there, and Kendras wondered what kind of marriage she had just escaped. Likely nothing else but to be presented as the Elder's wife, losing her own power out of political necessity.

Once all the Vededryne had filed out of the room, the courtiers breathed a sigh of relief, and a few clapped their hands.

Adrastes acknowledged it with a smile, but then stepped up to the planning table and took off the units that represented Vededrinye troops. He handed them to a servant to return to the Elder's generals, then with a few sweeping gestures cleared the area of troops.

Both hands flat on the table, neck bowed, he stared at the map, the river, the city and the fortress inside for what felt like forever, then began to place the units. The Lady Protector stepped to his side and between them, they began to talk about strategy, how to defend, how to attack, and Kendras felt that the courtiers needed this show of unity. Whatever else had gone on or would go on between the two Protectors, it would no longer be public. Now they were just two generals planning the defense of their city.

"Widowmaker, you find out the strength of the king's army and its composition. My idea is that he will throw everything he has at us, leaving Dalman vulnerable," Adrastes ordered.

Widow bowed deeply, as always, with a lot more irony than most people could afford. "Immediately." He sauntered out.

Kendras expected an order, too, but none came, so he stood and waited, watching Adrastes and his sister discuss possibilities. He'd never been nearly as excited about strategy or tactics—if it couldn't be done with a unit of devoted men, he wasn't good at it. Adrastes, of course, had been trained to lead armies.

Kendras was at a loss about what else he could do, and as the afternoon turned to night, more and more courtiers were sent away on one errand or other. The Protectors' main concern was the wall, but others were sent away to report on the amount of grain available in the city and to do everything possible to get more. They clearly expected another siege. That was, if the wall held.

"It's madness to hold the celebrations when war is coming," the Lady said tersely.

"I disagree. The city expected a marriage feast. They shall have one to lift their spirits, but this kind of union will mean that nobody will fear that we'll become the thrall of Vededrin. The people will want to celebrate our freedom while we have it."

"And then? Will we rule together?"

“No. You can keep the city. I have other plans,” Adrastes said. His sister seemed not to believe him or maybe refused to be so easily lured. Kendras felt his heart lurch inside his chest, but stayed silent, standing in a corner like any other guard.

“Return to the road?”

Adrastes seemed to consider. “I won’t run from my responsibility.” He straightened and surveyed the map. “Hopefully, none of this will be necessary.” He turned toward one of the courtiers. “Make it known tomorrow that whoever places the last stone in the wall will be a rich man or woman.” The courtier glanced quickly at the Lady Protector, who nodded. Only then did the courtier leave.

“We don’t want shoddy work.”

“No. But it can’t do harm to make the masons work harder.” Adrastes breathed deeply. “Dalman’s siege engines are the best in the world, but they will have to build them first. We can delay their work for a fair while. I hope the battle is decided before.”

The Lady Protector lifted an eyebrow. “Get some rest, brother. If you will marry me tomorrow, you better be rested.”

Adrastes laughed. “Indeed. I’ll see you tomorrow.” He gathered his cape and walked toward Kendras. He touched him on the armored shoulder, and Kendras walked by Adrastes’s side back to the Lord Protector’s quarters.

The thought of the marriage made him uneasy, but he understood it was political necessity. It displayed unity in a time when strife would break the spirit of defiance that the city would need to resist the Dalmanye onslaught.

“It’s maybe wise that you sent Widow away.”

“Oh yes. He’d put a poisoned dagger into my back if he was anywhere close.”

“Do people know about him?”

“Know what?”

“That he’s... with the Lady Protector?”

“Some courtiers know. Such a long relationship is difficult to hide.” Adrastes pushed the doors open and closed them behind Kendras. “The court will know that my sister’s and my own affections are with different people, but to the commoner in the street, we’re just one of many brother-sister pairs that shared power. It wasn’t uncommon in the past. Our ancestors in Shara believed in marrying brothers and sisters to breed truly outstanding individuals. Sometimes it worked, sometimes the offspring was deformed, but those never made it beyond the gates of the citadel.”

Kendras wondered if Adrastes planned to have children with his sister, but he struggled with the idea. He’d never considered that Adrastes felt drawn to women. Many of the Scorpions were, and several had been “released to life,” when they’d settled down with a woman or a craft that wasn’t war. A couple had even come back after a while. But what on earth was Adrastes planning?

“And then?”

“I have a vague idea,” Adrastes said. “Wait and see.”

“Don’t you trust me?”

“I prefer you not laughing at me if it fails.” Adrastes’s smile was gentle. “Maybe I do want to look like the infallible officer in your eyes, whose plans always work out and whose judgment is always correct.”

Kendras laughed. “Really? And why?”

“Maybe if you believe in me, I can believe in myself.”

Kendras fell silent, too stunned to say anything, not even banter or confirmation of those feelings. He’d never stopped believing in the man, nor could he imagine he would. No matter how this turned out, even if he left the Scorpions to defend his city, or came back like a comrade who found that life outside was not what he’d imagined.

“We are looking for new Scorpions. We need to replace the fallen.”

“Good.” Adrastes smiled at him. “Keep an eye open during the battle. I will also give the prisoners the chance to fight for their city. You’ll recognize a Scorpion who’s waiting to be born. They stand out.”

“You’ll have to take them up that mountain.”

“When the time comes,” Adrastes said, and Kendras felt he was evading that part of the duty.

But it was hard to care when Adrastes took him to bed. He found that he was willing to do whatever Adrastes asked, accept any of his decisions, even if it was painful or went against his own wishes. Obedience, duty—mixed with a tenderness that took away all other considerations. He trusted Adrastes to do the right thing. Whatever that was and whatever it meant.

He still felt strange just a few hours later when, on the stairs of the citadel, surrounded by courtiers and cheered by the people of Fetin, Adrastes knelt before the Lady Protector and slid an iron ring on her finger, and when she then knelt in front of him and placed another iron ring on his finger. Flowers were thrown at their feet as they stood there, clasped hands raised to show the rings, and took the applause of the crowd.

“The marriage of day and night,” said one courtier and made a pious sign.

Kendras could see why. Adrastes in his black armor and dark skin, and the fair-haired Lady Protector in her polished steel armor.

A strange shudder coursed through him at that image. Maybe the hand of fate. In moments like this, he could imagine that Adrastes was more than human, maybe one of those heroes that minstrels sung about. He’d always been that for the Scorpions, but seeing now hundreds—no, thousands—of people’s eyes shine with hope and joy because he promised them protection and leadership, promised to fight side-by-side with the Lady Protector, Kendras couldn’t help but believe all this himself. The man went into his blood like spiced wine, and every time he saw him like this, his own emotions cut deeper, and deeper, until he could feel that bittersweet pain in every bone and fiber of his body.

There was a public feast with song and dance, musicians playing, the market places in the city lit with torches. Adrastes and the Lady Protector mingled with the commoners on the street. Kendras followed, watched them banter and chat with the people, share wine, accept toasts and cheers gracefully while clasping hands. There was no doubt they were close, and Kendras spied the occasional, if not affectionate, then

caring, gesture as they offered each other wine or sweet meads. To everybody else, they could have been a couple in love, or at the very least, good comrades.

After several hours, they returned to the citadel for more celebration, now with the courtiers. Morning dawned, and still the sounds of carousing echoed up from the streets when Adrastes and the Lady Protector retired.

Kendras returned to Adrastes's quarters, worried that the man might not come, feeling strangely alone in that wide, too-soft bed. He fell asleep waiting.

And woke from a touch on his back. He was bared, the blankets pushed down, and immediately a hard cock pushed inside him, thankfully oiled, but it felt almost like an attack. In the morning light, he saw a dark hand with a dull iron ring clasp his, and he opened wider to the harsh thrusts that claimed him with half-pain and half-pleasure.

The hand released him and began to jerk him off, forcing his pleasure with little tenderness, all fiery need. Kendras groaned, knew this was a fight he'd lose. He didn't want to fight or resist, just wanted to take it all and repay it in kind the moment he had the chance.

"I want to fuck you like this every night," Adrastes said.

Kendras huffed, half of that the air being driven from his lungs with those thrusts. "I'll... fuck you... like this every morning, then."

Adrastes groaned. "We got the order wrong...." Kendras bared his teeth in a grin, almost laughing now, and every thrust stripped the bitterness and worries away. He was truly, madly, fiercely happy to be what Adrastes so clearly needed and desired. Right now, they belonged together. Whatever else happened would happen later. He pushed back, demanding more cock and more pleasure, and came helplessly when Adrastes pushed him down onto his belly, one hand on his throat as if to stifle the groans.

Adrastes followed soon, coming deep inside, seemingly forever, making sounds full of lust and need. And maybe more than that.

Kendras caught his breath and reached behind himself, stroking the sweat-damp flank. Adrastes on top of him relaxed, kissed his neck,

the side of his throat, then his breath deepened, and they fell asleep like that.

The next days went as Adrastes has promised him. After the day ended, Adrastes fucked him. Kendras paid him back in the morning, before the day began. During the day, Adrastes belonged to politics, mustering troops, overseeing preparations for the defense of the city—counting pigs, barrels of grain, war horses, men and women in arms, and holding speeches in the city's war academy. The city was restlessly active now, expecting the worst that Dalman could offer. During the night and early morning, though, Kendras and Adrastes belonged to each other.

## Chapter Twenty-Two

“THEY are taking the temple guard as well. The high priest fancies himself some kind of general,” Widow scoffed. “The temple guards need that. The fucking cowards wouldn’t go to war without some priests telling them what to do.”

“That’s where they get the superior numbers,” Adrastes said and stared at the map. “That’s good news. The more temple guards, the better.”

“They are turning all of this into something of a holy war.” Widow lifted an eyebrow. “Good news?”

“Yes. Very good news. Their superstition will work for us.” Adrastes nodded to the courtiers. “When do you think they’ll arrive in meaningful numbers?”

“Tomorrow. They are coming by ship; a short march inland, then they’ll be right outside the gates, waiting until their equipment has arrived. The vanguard will begin harassing Fetin as soon as they can.”

“Cut off the road and access to the river and deny us any more supplies.” Adrastes nodded. “We’ll decide this quickly.”

“A battle outside the gates?” Widow glanced at the Lady Protector. “I thought you’d wait behind the walls.”

“We don’t have enough supplies to withstand months of siege. No, we’re just waiting here until the king arrives.” Adrastes smiled, his expression that of a cat that saw a mouse coming out of its hole after a long time of hiding. “Well done.” He turned to the Flames. “Close the



gates tonight, and then don't open them for anybody but couriers and our soldiers. Have the guards on the battlements collect as many arrows as they can store."

"Do it," the Lady Protector confirmed, and then looked at Adrastes. "I will defend the walls. You lead the counterattack."

Kendras felt a ripple of worry, but he realized that this had been agreed between them. It wasn't the Lady Protector getting rid of a co-ruler. And the choice was good. Adrastes was much better suited for attack than defense.

"We should choose a few good men and attack the temple city... burn it to the ground. Kill what priests we can find..." Widow said. "If they strip the temple of protection, we could attack their faith."

"It's a good thought," the Lady Protector said. "We wouldn't be waiting for an attack but carrying the fight to the enemy."

"If I had the full number of Scorpions, they could go and do it," Adrastes said slowly, his gaze resting on Kendras, who felt that gaze like a weight. "But they paid enough blood. And they are weakened. I'm not going to lose the last four I have."

"I'd do it."

"I know, Kendras." Adrastes shook his head. "But don't. I need you here."

A murmur rose among the courtiers, others fell silent. Kendras bowed. "As you wish." Doing nothing was beginning to drive him up the wall. Doing nothing while he was healing was one thing, but this began to feel like there was nothing he could do, like he was kept safe rather than sent into battle or entrusted with a mission. What had he turned into? The pleasure boy of the Lord Protector? He swallowed that anger and schooled his features. He had to trust Adrastes to trust him and make use of him outside the bed chamber. It wasn't easy.

He left the Round Chamber once he could and met up with Dev and Riktan to train and fight. Afterward, he retreated to the quarters he shared with Adrastes for a bath to relax his tired muscles. Restless. He needed the battle to start. Soon. When the door opened again, he

expected Adrastes, but it was merely a group of servants, bringing him the completed armor.

Simple black and made to fit him perfectly just like the leathers, which were even padded where most of the armor's weight would rest on his shoulder and collarbones. Patterns had been worked into the leather, which was much more finely cured than the old leathers he'd been wearing. The padding on his shoulders had seams that formed the pattern of two scorpions crawling toward his neck from both sides.

Kendras smiled with the memory of how Adrastes had placed that scorpion on his shoulders so it would sting him. He still vividly remembered the pain and would never be able to shed that memory. It reminded him that death could come from an angle he hadn't expected and took no longer than a heartbeat. Above all, it told him he'd die if he ever stopped fighting for his life.

"Do you like it?" Adrastes asked from the door.

"Scorpions?" Kendras pointed at his left shoulder, the leathers hidden under the armor. "Are we still?"

Adrastes hesitated. "You'll always be a Scorpion, Kendras. Me, I'm not so sure anymore." He grimaced. "I'll find a solution to this. But... stay with me."

As if he could leave. Kendras lowered his hands to the belt and tightened it one hole and adjusted the sheath of his sword.

"It will suit me well for battle," he said, aware that wasn't an answer, let alone what Adrastes wanted to hear. But what kind of life could he have here? In Fetin, all he could be was the man who warmed the Lord Protector's bed. Not that there weren't men who would have been satisfied with that.

But what about the Scorpions? What about their long history, the rituals? Would the dead approve of them sitting here and waiting until all they'd been flickered out like a candle that had devoured itself? "I'll show it to Dev and Riktan. And Selvan."

Adrastes hesitated. "Are you coming back?"

*Are you coming with me?* Kendras thought. *Are you?* He shrugged. “It might be late.”

“I’ll be here.” Adrastes motioned a servant to prepare him a bath, and Kendras walked out.

RIKTAN and Dev had settled in a part of the Flames barracks that the Lady Protector’s guard seemingly didn’t need.

Selvan was there, too, looking after them as he would, and there was a *tanesh* that had to be the one that had caught Riktan’s attention.

Defiance flashed in green eyes under short-shorn blond hair when Riktan, half-joking, gave him an order and a pat on the rump, and Kendras felt a trickle of excitement in his guts. The *tanesh* was sinewy and strong enough to wear the Flame armor. He should be good enough to wear the kit of a Scorpion. But above all, he could see Riktan’s grudging respect to a man who wasn’t quite a full man anymore—doubtless, that respect had been earned in some way that had nothing to do with lying on his back.

“Ah, Kendras has come to drink with us,” Dev said and tossed Kendras a wine skin. “Seems the officer’s now too good to do that.”

Calculation flashed in Dev’s eyes when he said it. Testing the waters. Mutiny? Kendras weighed the wine skin. Pretend he hadn’t heard it? He’d appear like a coward. Confront Dev over what could just be banter? If they did have to fight tomorrow, internal strife was the last thing they needed.

“You’re talking shit, Dev,” he said with a grin and took a deep draught from the wine, which was spiced and sweetened heavily to mask the sour taste. “Takes a special man to listen to the fawning courtiers all day. I don’t envy him.”

Dev gave him a sharp grin, as if he understood perfectly what went on in Kendras’s head, and Kendras didn’t mind. He wasn’t a spy or a courtier. He told it as he saw it. His way of lying was to remain silent.

But that night, he drank with them and joked, telling old stories mostly for the benefit of the *tanesh*, who seemed intrigued and sharp-witted. When they'd run out of wine, Dev offered to get more, but returned after a while admitting that he was too drunk to find his way around in the dark.

Kendras slept in the quarters with them, and listened to Riktan and the *tanesh* fuck, too lazy to join them, even though Dev apparently did. Their whispers kept him awake, and he thought he saw their bodies intertwine. He didn't look too closely—the mutilated cock and balls of a *tanesh* still filled him with unease—but judging from the sounds that Riktan made, the *tanesh* did just fine without.

It took a while to piece the image together in the dark, but apparently the *tanesh* was fucking him with his tongue, and when Riktan was desperate enough to beg, Dev used his cock on Riktan, but didn't finish, and before long, Dev was fucking the *tanesh* from one end and Riktan from the other.

When they had fallen silent, Selvan came into his bed to take care of him. Holding the shuddering slave after the sex, Kendras thought he couldn't simply leave them. In too many ways, this was where he belonged. He was a warrior, at least until he'd be too old. He was one of them, and not a courtier. Just watching and doing nothing—being kept away from danger and combat, even—was not what he was. It didn't make any of this easier.

## Chapter Twenty-Three

“LOOK at that,” Riktan said next to him.

Kendras wished he didn't have to. First, the sun was awfully bright, but even as he stood there on the battlements, there was nothing down there he liked. Just beyond reach for their arrows and crossbow bolts, the first Dalmanyne troops were beginning to set up camps while cavalry guarded them on the open plain. Considering that this was the exact same spot where the other Scorpions had died in blood and gore, he felt a dark dread creep up into his throat. Like a taste from a night shadow. He didn't like it. He still awoke too often with the knowledge they were all dead. Still smelled the rotting blood and remembered the putrefying flesh of his comrades. Last night's wine felt sour in his stomach.

“Seems they're not sure what to do,” he murmured and nodded toward a Flame officer who was quite clearly arguing with the Lord Protector. Did she want to ride out and crush them? Felt they should do it now before the Dalmanyne had made themselves a nest? Kendras agreed with her, or at least, he could feel the same restlessness burn in his muscles.

Riktan narrowed his eyes. “There's plenty of time to clear our heads before we have to slaughter those assholes. Let's get more wine.”

They found a tavern that served a decent enough wine and solid food, which helped lift the haze from Kendras's brain. He listened to the nervous chatter of the serving girls and other patrons, two of them

traders that were anxious to leave the city again while swilling their beers.

“What are we going to do after this, Kendras?” Dev asked.

“First we have to survive this battle,” Kendras murmured, staring into the rest of his wine. The red liquid looked dull and viscous at the bottom of the mug. He pushed it away. “We’ll go on. What we’ve always done. The officer might just release himself to life. It happens.”

Dev glanced between them. “I don’t like it.”

“Who does, Dev?” Kendras asked.

They trained together again, watched closely by the *tanesh*, who took up one of the practice weapons and worked with them. He was fast and precise, and gave Kendras a grin when he told him that to join the Scorpions, he would have to fight two.

“He managed that alright last night,” Riktan grinned.

Kendras laughed, and saw that the *tanesh* took it in good humor. The more he knew about him, the more he liked him. Balls or no balls, he’d make a good addition.

Which brought up the question who would decide that. As long as Adrastes was not only tied up with politics, but doubting, they were locked in this situation. Somebody had to make those decisions, but Kendras didn’t like the feeling they were looking to him to make them. Or maybe they merely expected him to talk some sense into the officer. They needed a new recruit—or really a dozen—but somebody had to do it.

He left the others to clean up and relax after the exercise and went back into the citadel. He found Adrastes in the Round Chamber talking to Widow, who wore dark riding clothes, had a length of rope slung across his back, and was just slipping two long blades into the cuffs of his shirt. They looked up, and Adrastes nodded to Widow. “That’s really all.”

Widow looked between them. “Do you need any heads as proof?”

“Your grin will be proof enough,” Adrastes said. “Until tomorrow, Widowmaker. Be safe.”

“Enjoy,” Widow said dryly and walked off.

Adrastes waited for a moment, then concentrated on Kendras. He opened his mouth to speak, then closed it and just invited Kendras to sit down. He didn’t speak, just sat down himself.

“He’s off to kill people?”

“He volunteered. Seems some of us are going stir-crazy.”

Kendras nodded. “Yes, we are.”

“Where were you last night?”

“With the others.” *Where you should have been*, Kendras thought, but managed to hold the rest back. “Riktan has found a recruit.”

“What do you think of him?”

“He’d fit. He’s currently with the Flames but seems bored by it.”

“Then take him to the side and explain.”

“You should do that.”

“No, Kendras, I shouldn’t.” Adrastes inhaled, then exhaled audibly. “I won’t be the same, ever again. I can’t be both. This place needs me. You don’t need me.”

“No!” Kendras snapped, aware he’d almost shouted, and he stood and stepped back. He lifted his hands. “No. Don’t say it.”

“The Scorpions can go on without me. I can’t lead them like they deserve. I’m not much of an officer right now, and I can’t even tell how long this will last. If everything goes according to plan, I will not be able to do it anymore.”

Kendras stood dumbstruck, then his mind raced ahead, and back, across memories and wishes and desires he’d had. What he’d wanted to return to was now forever in the past. He couldn’t go back.

“It’s not right to lie to you, Kendras.”

“What am I supposed to do?”

“What you’re already doing. Lead them.”

Kendras shook his head. He wasn’t. He’d just... well, maybe he had. But it was not something he enjoyed.

“They’ll follow you. You’re the oldest survivor, but above all, they will follow.”

*And what about us, then?* Kendras felt his guts tighten and turn to stone. The wine had made him nauseous, or maybe the training in the heat outside. “The Dalmany arrive in force... when?”

“Tomorrow.” Adrastes rubbed his face. “Sleep with me tonight.”

No use fighting over this. The decision was made, and it certainly couldn’t be changed before the battle was decided. And it would be unnecessary to change anything if one of them died in battle.

He followed Adrastes into his quarters. Sex was slow and deliberate. A few times Kendras tried to change that, because there was still something in his heart like fierce anger, but Adrastes wrestled him down onto the bed and continued to tease him. When Kendras didn’t give up—and wasn’t that ironic—Adrastes tied him down, spread-eagled on the bed.

Lovemaking with his hands and legs bound was nothing Kendras knew, and he should have been disquieted, but somehow with Adrastes, the memory of the executioner didn’t matter. It was strange to arch and groan into those touches and kisses, and watch his lover please him, but nothing he did seemed to matter in the least. Adrastes took his fill, kissing, licking, sucking and stroking, relaxing his body and then gradually making him tense up again until he knew that the slightest touch to his cock would set him off.

He asked for that touch, and Adrastes lay down on top of him, kissed him and jerked them both off at the same time. In the haze of orgasm, Kendras heard “I love you,” but couldn’t respond, too overwhelmed and then too exhausted and too sated to say anything.

They were still getting ready in the morning when a Flame soldier knocked and entered, not blinking even once when she saw both of them still getting into their leathers. “The Dalmany ships have arrived.”

“I’ll be there shortly,” Adrastes said and dismissed her, then turned to Kendras. “Take the memory. Write what needs to be written. Then talk to the new recruit about what it means.”



“I’m still following your orders,” Kendras said.

Adrastes grinned. “That is because you enjoy that.”

Kendras bared his teeth and pulled the leathers tighter. It was only too true. Power was a game in bed at least. And while Adrastes came hard when he was being pushed down and fucked like he was nobody special, he, too, could enjoy the exact same thing. Maybe that meant they’d never fight seriously—because they could struggle and strain in bed and then accept the result, whichever way it fell.

They headed to the battlements, and saw the main Dalmanye force wash into the camp borders. The sun gleamed on polished helmets and the wind tugged at blue tabards everywhere. The ocean priests had to have mustered most of their troops, or maybe they’d dressed up mercenaries and standard Dalmanye soldiers in the blue of the gods to increase their numbers. Even so, it was an impressive display.

A speck of red was moving between the troops, and Adrastes spotted him at the same time.

“The king’s there. That’s excellent.”

“Thought you’d have him killed,” Kendras said.

“No.” Adrastes smiled. “To the contrary.”

The Lady Protector arrived on the battlements, her heavy helmet tugged under her arm. “Good morning. Do you think they will make an attempt on the walls today?”

“Maybe. I can’t see them building siege engines, but that might be for different reasons.”

“Is that what you needed Widowmaker for yesterday?”

“Let’s say there are now more engineer widows and widowers than there were yesterday.”

They’d struggle replacing those. Building siege engines was complex and required a lot of experience. Only a handful of people possessed that knowledge at all.

“Good thought,” the Lady Protector said. “What now?”

“Now I’ll try my hand at diplomacy.”

She lifted an eyebrow. “Seriously?”

“Yes.” Adrastes smiled. “If you would lend me a few of your Flames.”

“You can have them.”

“Thank you. Kendras, summon the other Scorpions. We’re riding out to meet the enemy.”

Kendras snapped a salute and turned to get Dev and Riktan, who were itching for a fight and followed him in a rush.

They mounted horses outside the citadel, where a dozen Flames were already mounted and ready. Adrastes led them outside the gate, but he ordered the guards at the gate to keep them open, in case, as he put it “they might return faster than expected.”

Guards in the enemy camp blew horns in warning signals. They rode slowly, no faster than a man would walk, then stopped at half the distance between Fetin and the Dalmanyne camp, waiting and watching for arrows being cocked, or a cavalry charge that would seek to sweep them up and then crush them.

Finally, a single unarmed rider came toward them. He must be a novice in the temple, Kendras thought.

“What... who are you?” The boy asked.

“Adrastes, Lord Protector of Fetin. I wish to speak to the high priest and your king.”

The boy stared at him, mouth agape, but eventually recovered enough from his surprise to turn the horse and gallop back to camp like he’d seen a demon.

“Should I be flattered?” Adrastes remarked, more to himself, but Kendras couldn’t hide the grin.

It seemed to take much too long, as if there were fierce disagreements in the Dalmanyne camp, but finally a group of riders assembled. For every Flame and Scorpion, there were at least two temple guards, but in their midst rode the high priest and the king.

Vistar An Grekaran looked pale, like he hadn’t slept in a long time or found the burden of command too strenuous. Kendras

remembered what Steel had said about the relationship between the king and the high priest and decided he didn't want to think about it.

Speaking of Steel—the temple guards all wore helmets, but Kendras assumed that one of them might be Steel. If he were the mercenary, he'd definitely want to be out there when the leaders talked.

"You say you're Adrastes of Fetin," the high priest said.

"I am Adrastes of Fetin, first son of Lord Protector Ashangul, husband and brother to the Lady Protector."

The high priest paused, studying his features. "You have changed a lot since then, Adrastes." There was a twisted tenderness and warmth in the man's voice.

"It's good that you recognize me, finally." Adrastes's lips quirked, but the smile was cynical and sharp. "Or at least acknowledge it."

"Well...." The high priest spread his hands. "You were a good fit as the sacred warrior. Gods-hallowed fighter, an inspiration to the faithful."

"I must be such a disappointment to you."

"More a frustration."

Adrastes laughed. "That boy is not quite the same, is he? Or the one who came after? Do you have them killed when you grow bored of them?"

Kendras's fingers tightened on the reins. His horse felt his sudden unrest and shifted on its feet.

The high priest lifted his hands—it could have been a blessing or a defense. "Adrastes. Adrastes. Dalman needs the guidance of the temple. Don't tell me you'll miss the previous king."

"Well, he took the position after I saw what your game was. Whatever he suffered from your hands would have been my fate."

The high priest stalled. "I didn't come here to have you throw unfounded accusations at me. I am willing to negotiate for the life of you and those loyal and dear to you."

"In return for the city."

“Exactly.”

Adrastes nodded as if he had expected exactly that. “I’ll think about it. But if we meet here again for battle, you and your soldiers should know one thing. I’ll be wearing an unmarked suit of armor, and I will fight in the first line. You know what they say... no faithful man or woman can spill the blood of an anointed without rousing the wrath of the gods and thus bringing down the temple. Any man who strikes me down will lose his soul and will be condemned to drown for countless years as the gods tear his soul apart.”

Now the temple guards became restless. Clearly, none of them cherished the thought, and Kendras thought that once they returned, the news that the enemies had an anointed with them would demoralize the rest of the temple guards.

Who would want to fight at such risk to themselves? Especially all the faithful would struggle with this, which meant that the same stranglehold that the temple had on Dalman and its troops would keep the temple guards from fighting.

Maybe. Unless the high priest found a way to reassure them.

“What does this mean? How can you be anointed? *I* am anointed,” Vistar said.

“Your Majesty, when I was about your age, there was an attempt to make peace between Dalman and Fetin. The Lord Protector’s eldest son was sent to Dalman to become anointed and king of Dalman. One gray-eyed mercenary killed the previous king under the pretext of the “marriage to the sea,” but before they could pull me out of the water as the reborn king, I fled. I did not, in the end, end up on my back, legs high.” Adrastes smiled softly. “Unlike you.”

Vistar spluttered, but Adrastes looked back at the high priest. “You’ll play this game at your own risk. Turn around now, and you keep Dalman. Until I’m strong enough to take it from you. Fight, and you’ll lose everything. You cannot lie with scorpions, and I’m the deadliest scorpion you’ve ever seen. I will kill you and destroy everything you’ve built, priest.”

Kendras hadn’t thought it possible to have goose bumps in his face, but he’d been clearly wrong. Right now he wanted nothing more

than to take Adrastes to bed. Those words had the same power and authority as any order Adrastes had ever given him, and right now, he was a scorpion, beautiful, deadly, uncompromising. He'd fight to his last breath, that stare said.

"Those are my terms."

The high priest swallowed. "Well spoken. I'll just have to find a man who has no soul." He raised his hands again. "May the gods show you the error of your ways, Adrastes of Fetin."

Adrastes touched the hilt of his sword. "May I be the man who kills you." He turned the horse, and Kendras made sure that the Scorpions immediately closed the gap at Adrastes's back. It would be too easy to kill him now.

They rode faster back to the gate than they'd come out. The gates slammed shut, Adrastes tossed the reins to a servant. "Keep the horse here. I'll be out soon," he said and rushed up to the battlements.

The Lady Protector awaited him. "What did you tell them? They're preparing to attack down there!"

"Yes. He'll have to try to save face. It might not happen."

"Why not?"

"Because I'm anointed, and I'll be out there."

"You're mad."

Adrastes shrugged. "Maybe. Maybe it'll work. Kendras, your armor."

Kendras didn't like having to change armor now. Wearing an unfamiliar armor annoyed him more than wearing the armor of the Lord Protector, which might draw a lot of attention from archers, those that didn't believe in the gods, or even Steel, who wouldn't hesitate to kill another king to please his masters.

The first wave of attack rolled up the hill while they were still getting ready, and Adrastes barely managed to put his helmet on before he rushed up to the battlements. He quickly surveyed the situation, then nodded to his sister. "You keep the wall safe. I'll flank them."

Kendras ran after him, back on the horses, and a number of cavalry were already waiting at the gate when they arrived. A number of light Dalmanyen cavalry was watching the gate. But the archers on top of the gate forced them into retreat before they could sound a warning. Then the gate opened, and the cavalry all galloped out like a wave of iron and fury.

They drove among the waves of infantry, and then the grisly dance of war began anew. Kendras hacked at the foot soldiers with his sword, keeping the horse under control as best he could while caught in a maelstrom of chaos, bloodlust, and noise. Thankfully, his horse knew better what to do in the cavalry charge, staying with the other horses and disposing of foot soldiers with kicks, while Kendras struggled to both stay on its back and fight. He buried the sword so deep in the shoulder of a soldier that he couldn't pull it free fast enough when his horse turned wildly, so he pulled out the war hammer that was fastened to the horse.

Attacking heads, shoulders, arms, swinging the short weapon close to the body of the horse against anything he could reach, anything attempting to harm him or the horse.

Then a horn sounded, and Kendras looked up, quickly, barely seeing anything through the slits of the helmet and the sweat burning in his eyes. A counterattack. The enemy cavalry was there. He disentangled himself from the fight. His horse stepped on dying bodies and kicked out against those who attempted to keep him surrounded.

Once having escaped the throng of bodies, breathing more deeply when he was finally free, Kendras spurred the horse on to return to the gates.

Before the enemy could reach them, the gates slammed shut. The silence was exhilarating. The short, swift combat burned in his veins, but even though he wasn't much of a rider and would have much preferred to fight on his own two feet, he had to admit that this plan had worked like a charm.

Another horn sounded, and suddenly there were cries outside. Men only sounded like that when they were wounded.

“Archers,” said Adrastes, pulling the helmet off and grinning like a demon. “They came within reach of the archers I placed in the forest.”

Grimly amused at the obvious glee in Adrastes’s eyes, Kendras huffed. He handed the horse over, then climbed up to the battlements where he saw that the cavalry charge had been stopped dead. Wounded horses whinnied.

He couldn’t see the archers, but assumed they were perched up in the trees to prevent an attack by soldiers or cavalrists and deny the enemy the forest to use for wood or protection. Kendras wiped the sweat off his brow, took some water he was offered, and caught his breath to get ready for the next attack.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

KILLING men was hard work. Three more attacks and counterattacks on that day, Kendras always in the thick of it, always near Adrastes, who did indeed fight in the first line, as he'd promised.

The other Scorpions were protecting their flanks, and Kendras didn't question when, for the last battle, the *tanesh* joined them. Riktan's assessment that he was a "fierce little fucker" proved true, and Kendras itched to have him join properly. While the Flames guarded their Lord Protector in a loose outer ring, it was the Scorpions that bore the brunt of the attack whenever the circle was breached, and that happened a few times.

Yet the men they were fighting against were the men of the king. The temple guards were reluctant to fight, or were kept in reserve. Were they really that worried about their souls? Kendras couldn't believe their luck. Of course he expected one man to show up and kill the anointed. One man had done it before. Steel had no soul to lose.

He was weary down to his bones when darkness fell and the duty of protecting the city moved onto the shoulders of the Lady Protector, who oversaw the guards on the walls. He peered back at the camp of the enemy, where tired soldiers would now seek food and a place to sleep near the fires.

Selvan helped him undress in the Scorpions' quarters, face solemn when he looked at the dusty armor that was soiled with blood. Kendras could have lifted his arms to take off the armor but was grateful that he didn't have to.



"I'll clean this," Selvan promised eagerly, and Kendras smiled at him. He was perfectly willing to be led to a bath not nearly as fine as the one he could have had in Adrastes's quarters, and they'd all use that water and not mind it one bit.

He wrapped a piece of cloth around himself when he came out of the bath and sat down on one of the beds. Too tired to think or do anything, he merely watched the others settle, silent and exhausted. Dev was already snoring, the *tanesh* stood near Riktan, his fine white skin less an invitation as a reminder of what he was. Kendras hadn't watched him bathe, but knew he'd have to accept the state of that man's body eventually.

He stood, as much as it cost him, when all he wanted was to fall back on the bed, feet still on the ground, and wake up when the sun rose again. "What's your name?"

Riktan glanced up, a strange expression in his eyes.

"Kiran, sir."

"Don't sir me." The *tanesh* knew his name. After all, Riktan and Dev called him that all the time.

Riktan nudged Dev awake. The man woke like a soldier. He was awake immediately and ready to fight, but he relaxed again once he had his bearings.

Kendras was too aware that they were watching. "I'm the officer," he said, the words choking him. "Or I will soon be. Once I have released Adrastes to life." It was still a monstrous thought, and he hated it, but Kiran needed guidance and an officer to refer to. They couldn't be leaderless, and while this wasn't ideal, it would do.

"Officer." Kiran bowed.

"We are the Seventeenth, the Scorpions, what remains of one of the great legions of Shara," Kendras said, feeling every word resound in his chest. The words gave him confidence. The long list of officers and the dead, guarded and remembered every time they opened their brotherhood and accepted another man. "I would put you to training to test you, but we are at war. You have proven to be a good soldier today. You earned this by blood. You stood ready to spill yours for us."

Kiran licked his lips. “I was. I am.”

“We are only a few survivors, so we need you to fill up our ranks, add your strength to ours so we will honor our past and those who have come before us.”

Dev’s lips spread in a slow smile. Kendras took that as approval.

“To make you ours and us yours, you will serve each of these. I understand you’ve already passed that test with Riktan.”

“What? Don’t skip me,” Riktan protested.

Kendras smiled. “You will serve each one as a comrade, fight at their side, spend the night. On the fourth day, it will be Dev, for another three days. By then, this war might be over, and we can complete the rite. Until then, you will be betrothed.”

He saw speculation in Kiran’s eyes and gave a small nod. He’d complete it, as weird as it might be to accept a *tanesh* as a lover. At least for a night. He, too, would have to accept and trust the man. Whether the mutilated body aroused him or not. If he’d learned one thing from Adrastes up on the mountain, then, the officer was selfless and served his men.

Riktan clapped the *tanesh* on the shoulder. “Congratulations. You’ll get the scorpions soon. Ken... the officer’s going to take you up the mountain and teach you the rest.”

Kendras glanced at Dev, who just grinned. They all had noted the slip of the tongue, and there was no protest, not even from Selvan, who sat on the ground, religiously cleaning the pile of armor. Kendras noted that Selvan’s unease was gone. Maybe, to the slave, life had returned to its normal order. Maybe he’d seen it coming. Maybe that was exactly what he’d expected.

Maybe, as the officer, he’d have to get used to the feeling that his men knew the important things before he did. It might just keep him humble.

In the morning, he went to Adrastes’s quarters. The servants and guards always allowed him entrance. Adrastes stood there, talking to Widow, who looked his usual smug self but also held a letter.

“Ah, Kendras.” Adrastes waved him closer. “Seems they are already losing the taste for battle.”

“What is this?”

“The little king is making an offer.” Adrastes waved for Widow to hand the letter over.

Kendras took it, but returned it after a few moments. This was court script, he didn’t know what half the letters were. He’d never get past the salutation. “What does it say?”

“He challenges me, man against man.” Adrastes scoffed. “Or rather, man against boy.”

“That’s not his plan,” said Widow. “It’s the high priest’s.”

“Of course.” Adrastes took the letter and folded it. “I’m tempted.”

“He might have realized that without the troops of the temple and sufficient siege engines, his army is too weak to take the walls by storm. Meanwhile, Dalman is defenseless. We split their strength.”

“And now they are trying to weave it back together. You’ll have to die, Adrastes,” Widow said. “The high priest might think the boy might live. Most importantly, an anointed can kill an anointed. I assume. It’s never happened. Normally there’s only one, because they kill the other before he becomes a problem.”

“So that’s how they weasel their way out of the situation,” Kendras murmured.

“It only took them a day to decide.” Adrastes slid his sword into the sheath at his belt. “If killing one man stops the war, I’ll do it.”

“It’s too obvious,” Widow muttered. “Maybe they’ll poison the sword. So he doesn’t have to best or kill you and merely strike blood.”

“Yes. But he won’t strike blood.”

“What about archers? Crossbow men?”

“We’ll meet out of reach of either.” Adrastes lifted an eyebrow. “It sounds like you’re worried about me, Widowmaker.”

Widow huffed. “Sparing your sister the inconvenience of having to bury her husband. Nobles are always desperate to kill each other. Sure, enjoy it.”

Adrastes chuckled. "I'll send a messenger and tell them I accept."

"Will you do it, or should I?"

"Changing armors again, Kendras?" Adrastes smiled. "No, I'll do it myself. The king doesn't look like a fearsome warrior to me."

"No, he's not." Kendras shook his head. "But he has balls. Especially since he's not much of a warrior. Maybe they taught him some dagger work, but he's not a soldier." And that wouldn't have changed in the few weeks since he'd seen the boy in the yard of Steel's farm.

"For a dagger he'd have to come a lot closer than I'll let him." Adrastes took his helmet. "It's decided. We'll end this war like in the old times. King against king."

"Fool against child, more like," Widow muttered as they trailed behind on the way out into the courtyard.

ADRASTES'S messenger returned shortly after to the Round Chamber. He was accompanied by a messenger from the enemy. The enemy demanded to have the duel in the late afternoon.

Adrastes refused. The sun would be too low and cast long shadows. One of the fighters would be at too much of a disadvantage with the sun in his eyes.

Every time a detail couldn't be agreed upon, the messengers scuttled back and forth, until it was almost noon. Heat danced over the land, but the king seemed impatient for the fight, so it was agreed they would fight at noon.

Both armies gathered on the slope leading up to the main gate. The Lady Protector stood on the walls behind them when Kendras accompanied Adrastes outside.

Widow was with the other guards and fell behind like them when Adrastes reached the arranged point, equidistant between the two armies. Kendras carried a second sword, as agreed, in case Adrastes lost his.

From the other camp emerged a warrior in red and gold, accompanied by a man in plain, unmarked armor. Adrastes's eyes narrowed. "They are wearing their helmets already." It was against the agreed-upon rules, but Kendras felt that Adrastes didn't mind whom he killed.

"You think it's not the king?"

Adrastes nodded.

"Should we refuse the fight?"

"No. If it comes out, it'll humiliate them, and anger will make them stupid. I'd have expected a poisoned blade, but I don't care either way."

Or maybe both. Kendras breathed deeply to relax. Seeing the snake in the grass was always better than only suspecting it was there.

"Let's see who I'll kill," Adrastes said low under his breath. "Keep an eye on the witness." He took his helmet and put it on, fastened it, then pulled his sword. Kendras took a step to the side, but stayed close enough to watch everybody.

There was no salute, no taunting. Adrastes wasn't a man to wait for an attack. He lunged forward, attacking the red warrior's side.

The enemy was startled. The jerk with which the other managed to get the sword in the way of Adrastes's weapon didn't spell anything good. It looked clumsy. Scared.

Or the other had been too surprised to react with the speed and grace of a trained warrior. Kendras looked back at the witness in the unmarked armor and almost felt the man's stare on him. Steel? Wouldn't it make sense to put Steel in the king's armor and let him fight Adrastes? But could Steel really be so clumsy, and could the king really be so calm to just stand aside? If the king was involved at all. For all Kendras knew, the high priest might have rounded up the two best warriors in his camp and one of them was merely scared to kill an anointed.

Adrastes pulled back after that first hit, or appeared to, then lashed out. The sword, on the way out, flicked back, aiming at the red

warrior's other side. The opponent jerked his weapon around and very nearly stumbled trying to block the sudden attack.

Kendras wasn't sure where to keep his attention; he expected some kind of nasty surprise from either of those two men.

Adrastes kept testing the defenses—and that was what those attacks were. Tests. Probes. The first attack might have killed, the second wounded. Now, however, he was only teasing, attacking the sword rather than the man wielding it. If Kendras had been in the enemy's position, that toying would have goaded him into a berserk rage.

"Do something!" the warrior in red shouted. Kendras recognized the petulant voice.

It did ruin the surprise. Suddenly, the witness had the reserve sword in hand and lunged. Kendras stepped to the side, reacting before any thought could crystallize in his mind. He half-turned and took the wrist with the sword, jerking it upward, then barreled into the man with his armored shoulder.

A breathless huff sounded from under the helmet, and Kendras turned again, twisting the wrist he still held and bringing it down in a low arch, using his shoulder as leverage. The man stumbled forward, circled around him, and once at Kendras's front, kicked him in the chest, making him fall back.

Immediately, Adrastes was on him, and the next thing Kendras saw was Adrastes's sword poking through the witness's chest at him. Adrastes took the sword with both hands and ripped it upward with cartilage-busting violence.

There was no scream, just some kind of sound, halfway between a surprised grunt and a chilling death rattle.

"Give the gods of the underworld my regards," Adrastes said in a low, cold voice. "Gray Eyes."

He jerked the sword up a little more, which made Steel drop his sword. He was frozen in the vicious embrace, both men as intimate as lovers now, Adrastes holding him with his sword and a hand on his shoulder.

Choking, almost clicking sounds came from under the helmet. Kendras stepped closer and opened the helmet straps, then tossed it onto the ground.

Steel. He was drenched in sweat, pale as impending death, blood running from the corner of his mouth. His features were frozen in a mix of pain, shock, and horror. His colorless eyes were glassy, but became clear again for a moment, turning toward Kendras.

“... knew,” Steel said. The word made no sense, but Kendras saw that Steel was running rapidly out of strength and will to speak. “... love.” More blood, bright red, coloring Steel’s chin and running into his armor. He lifted a gauntleted hand and touched his chest, then turned it, but lost strength before he could touch Kendras’s chest.

He closed his eyes, but Kendras thought Steel was on the verge of tears. With pain, or fear, or something else. He couldn’t tell. Didn’t want to.

“Finish him. He’s done.”

Adrastes pulled the sword free, causing another terrible, breathless, choking sound from Steel, who dropped onto his knees.

A clean, precise sweep took off his head.

An anguished shriek sounded from the young king, and Adrastes turned toward him, sword dripping.

“If you run, I will kill you,” Adrastes said.

“Don’t... don’t....” Vistar dropped his sword, took off his helmet and let it fall on the ground. “Please. Mercy.”

“Kneel.”

Vistar was shaking like Kendras had never seen anybody shake with fear, but he managed to fall to his knees and looked on the verge of scrunching his eyes shut and wishing himself far, far away from here.

“Who made me the offer of single combat, king?”

“I... I did.” Vistar looked up like a puppy that felt its master’s cold hand on its neck. “I... wanted the dying to stop.”

“What about him?”

“He promised... he promised he’d help me... against the...”—Vistar’s voice became a whisper—“the high priest. I don’t... I don’t want to be that. I’m of the An Grekaran blood... I’m not....”

Adrastes’s sword dropped lower, but Vistar shuddered. From his point of view, he was looking at a lot of exposed, dirty blade. Kendras had seen men lose control of their bowels in that same situation.

“I can’t fight. I’ve never been taught to fight. He said he’d protect me,” Vistar said, and Kendras had to admire that now that his life was seemingly over, the boy found his balls. He visibly collected himself, still pale and tense, but not grabbing Adrastes’s legs and begging for mercy.

“I wanted it to stop,” Vistar said.

“The killing or...?”

“Both. Either... way. One would have stopped the killing, the other... would have sent me to my family. And... I’d be gone. There’d be only one anointed left. You can have Dalman. I don’t want it. I just want it to stop.”

Adrastes pushed his sword back into its sheath. “Rise. And follow me.” He glanced toward the enemy camp. “Before they realize what’s going on.”

“Why? You’re not....”

“I hate doing what the enemy expects.” Adrastes grabbed the boy’s arm and pulled him up, then pushed him toward Fetin. “Run, Vistar An Grekaran.”



## Chapter Twenty-Five

THE army opened before them and closed behind them, swallowing them whole. “Take him to the citadel,” Adrastes ordered, then turned.

Kendras glanced back and saw the enemy cavalry charge. His hands itched for his glaive at the sight, and the last thing he wanted was to leave now that Adrastes needed him to fight. He spotted Riktan and Dev behind the lines. “Follow him,” Kendras said and guided the king into the city and toward the citadel.

He had no idea where to take Vistar, or to whom, just wanted to return to the battle that had broken out. He headed for the Round Chamber, but the place was deserted, then decided to order a slave to get comfortable living quarters for a “diplomatic guest.”

The slave glanced at him as if he thought Kendras was stupid but followed the order and led them into a comfortable room.

Vistar stood there, still tense and pale, but looking more exhausted than afraid. Kendras faced him.

“You’ll be safe now,” Kendras said for want of anything better to say. He didn’t think that Vistar looked much like a king at all, just a forlorn, well-bred young man with a lot of promise but none of that kept yet.

“Do you know what he”—Vistar gulped—“wants?”

“Not the same as the high priest.” Kendras shrugged.

Vistar shuddered, then turned toward the window, but this window pointed to the eastern wall and toward the mountain.

The sun glared down, making the air around the mountain hazy. Eagles soared, circling against the cloudless sky, gathering prey to feed the nestlings. Kendras was at loss for what to say. He assumed that Adrastes wanted him to stay with the boy to ensure he'd be safe. He'd be valuable as a hostage in any case. Anointed. Sacred blood. It was spilled at a terrible price. How much power had that belief over the king's own troops. Or Adrastes. Adrastes didn't seem to believe in anything.

The young man struggled with his armor. Clearly he'd never put it on—or taken it off—all by himself. Kendras didn't feel like helping him. The sooner the boy learned the better.

Eventually, Vistar shed the last piece of metal and stood there in his padded gambeson. He put the sword belt around his hips again, the long belt went around twice, and adjusted the sheath. At least he knew how to look like he knew what he was doing.

“You used to be with Steel.”

“Yes.” Kendras sat down on one of the chairs, aware of his own weight in the armor when the wood gave a tired creak.

“I thought you were one of his mercenaries.”

“I'm surprised you remember my face,” Kendras said, mostly to lure the king onto a different path. He didn't want to talk about Steel. Didn't want to remember those last few words. If he didn't dwell on them, maybe he'd forget them faster.

*I knew love.*

Not something a soulless man would say in death. His lips tightened. Worst of all, he doubted he could have killed Steel. Maybe in defense. To protect Adrastes or his own life. But Steel hadn't really threatened him. Maybe Steel hadn't been able to do it, either. Maybe he'd just spotted the rival. Maybe he'd been following the high priest's orders to kill the one anointed the high priest had no use for.

“It’s hard to forget a face like yours,” Vistar said, more tired than affronted.

“Oh, really?”

“You’re a purebred Jaishani. You look like one of their gods.”

Kendras laughed. “I’ve had enough talk of gods for today.” The thought amused him grimly. He knew almost nothing about the faith of his parents. Where they’d come from, and why on earth they’d left him behind. At his age, he didn’t care. They were as unknown to him as if he’d never had any parents, as if he’d just come into being on his own. And the Jaishani lived too far away to simply go and ask them.

“How do you know what their gods look like, anyway?”

Vistar rolled his eyes. “You don’t? What kind of fool are you?”

“Try Dalmanyne street-rat orphan.”

“They killed your parents?” Vistar stared at him, suddenly a lot less petulant. Of course, the death of his own family had to still smart.

“They might just have died of a fever.” Kendras hoped for any kind of disturbance now. Widow was good at this. Or Adraestes. Or any of the Scorpions.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Vistar said. “Forgive me.”

Kendras waved it off, then realized something. “Sorry to hear about yours.” Gods below, he felt like an idiot. People died all the time. Nothing anybody said or did changed that one whit.

“Thanks.” Vistar’s voice was thick.

Kendras wanted to shrink back, leave the boy to his grief. He didn’t even particularly like him, though he had to admit that the young noble hadn’t lost his nerves too badly when faced with a superior foe. It took courage to do that. He gave a helpless nod and half-turned at the approach of heavy footfalls toward the door. He willed the steps to stop and the person to enter and saw his wish fulfilled.

The Lady Protector came in, glanced at them both, then walked closer.

“King Vistar. I understand you are requesting aid and protection.”

Vistar straightened himself. “I would be much obliged, lady. I’ve found rather unforeseen sanctuary here.”

“I believe it,” she said dryly, but not without kindness. “My brother should return shortly. He’s merely seeing off the attack from one of your overeager generals. I would request your presence on the walls to show you’re alive and well.”

Vistar hesitated. Of course, they’d show off a hostage. It did sound like that. But there was precious little that Vistar could do. He certainly couldn’t fight it if she decided to take him outside at sword’s point. Her politeness hid the same hard edge that her brother possessed.

“I will gladly reassure my soldiers,” Vistar said with a fair amount of dignity and followed her.

The battle was dying down when they reached the wall. A horn sounded, and several arms went up to point at the king, who lifted his hands and leaned a little forward.

Below, the fighting was almost over, but the last opponents now separated. This last attack had cost at least fifty dead, and Kendras didn’t count the wounded.

Adrastes reached for the saddle of a horse that another soldier brought him and rode back into the city. Kendras turned on the wall and watched Adrastes ride past the soldiers. Some men reached out to touch his horse, his boots, his thighs, and Adrastes brushed hands where he passed, before he dismounted in front of the tower.

A little later, he appeared on the wall to the same reverence from the soldiers. Men backed away and bowed, others drew closer, like shy suitors. Kendras felt his heart beat hard in his chest. He’d been like that.

“Vistar.” Adrastes gave a friendly salute that suggested no subservience whatsoever. “I have an offer to make.”

“You can have it. I don’t want Dalman. I don’t care for it. It has cost me too much.”

Adrastes stopped. “But it’s also the only thing you have left.”

"I'm not dying for it. I'm not... doing that again for it."

"You'll never have to do *that* again," Adrastes said. "There's a way to end the war. Forever. And none of us has to die. Not even you."

Vistar lifted his chin. "Don't mock me."

"I'm not." Adrastes's smile paled and then left. "I can adopt you as my son. This would make me king of Dalman. And you will be my successor. It will give you time to become the man I know you could be, if given time and training, and we'll end this."

Vistar stared.

"It's also the one thing the high priest will not expect us to do. The one thing he'll hate seeing even more than seeing Gray Eyes die without having achieved what he sent him to do."

"But why should you... do that?"

"Because I won't have children with my sister. Besides, it can be safely assumed I will not have children at all." Adrastes shrugged. "And it is highly unlikely that my sister will have children, either, with her choice of bedmate." He kept a straight face, mostly, apart from a twitch in the corner of his mouth. "We will return Fetin to the fold of Dalman. You will rule both cities when you take the crown."

"What about the high priest? The temple? They'll not accept this."

"Well. There will be one more war," Adrastes said grimly. "But to win it, I'll need your soldiers. And you might have to finish the task."

Vistar looked thoughtful. "You'll destroy the high priest?"

"I promised him. I'd hate to break my word." Adrastes smiled and offered his hand to Vistar. The youth took it and clasped it hard, torn between righteous indignation and hope. It suited him.

"Come. I need you to write a message for your generals."

Kendras watched Vistar write a missive for his generals, with Adrastes only present, but leaving the boy to find the right words, and

the fire in Vistar's eyes meant that he found them. Nobles were good at that.

"Kendras, you'll guard the messenger. With the others."

Kendras paused, but yes, maybe, the messenger might be attacked on the way. "I can take the letter."

"No." Adrastes shook his head. "Just listen. Listen to what they are saying. Get the message safely back to us."

Kendras gave a quick salute and waited for one of the messengers to pick it up, then followed when the messenger left and summoned the other Scorpions. The *tanesh*, Kiran, was with them. Five now. Another ten or fifteen to find. Kendras acknowledged Kiran with a nod. "What about your position in the Flames?"

"There is no shortage of applicants. I can give it up anytime."

"It's different with us. I'll have to release you to life—or death. Which one doesn't matter."

"Yes, officer."

Kendras mounted the horse and waited for the others, then nodded to the messenger. "Lead."

On the way, Kendras studied the remains of the battle. Dark patches of blood on the grass, trampled earth, bodies. Medics had taken in those who'd live and gravediggers took care of the rest.

They were challenged at half the distance between city and army camp. Armed riders appeared, lances held high, shields lowered. The messenger pulled the letter from her side pocket. "We have word from King Vistar for his generals."

The riders were wary, but clearly, four armed men were nothing to be overly concerned about. They were guided to the generals' tent, where the three leaders of the Dalmanyte army were gathered.

The high priest was present too. Kendras moved between the high priest and the messenger, who, according to custom, took the letter with both hands and, bowing deeply like it was an object of worship, slowly placed it on the table and then stepped away, mute and reverent.

Kendras knew the two men and one woman by office, if not by name. The commanders of the infantry, cavalry, and supply train. It was hard to decide who had more power. The general of the infantry was widely seen as the more cautious, while the cavalry commander tended to think there was no tactical problem that a full charge couldn't solve. With the quality of Dalmanye cavalry, he wasn't too far off.

The cavalry officer took the letter first and read it, flushing with what might be embarrassment or anger. "This is preposterous!" he shouted.

The high priest drew closer. Or slithered. "Have they taken him hostage?"

The infantry general plucked the letter from her colleague's hand, and swiftly read it. "As it stands, these are orders," she said, levelly.

"Then why did we go to war with Fetin at all?" the cavalry general demanded.

"Good question," said the infantry general and glanced at the high priest with a meaningful pause.

"Clearly, Adraustes of Fetin is forcing Vistar of Dalman to accede to his wishes. We need to attack the city to save him from a fate worse than death," the high priest wheedled.

Kendras's fingers itched for a dagger.

"If we combine forces now, we can bring them down," the high priest added.

"It's not *our* men who aren't fighting," snapped the cavalry officer.

"I first have to consult the gods on this. Spilling the blood of an anointed is a serious transgression. The one man who could do it safely is dead. But I'm sure the gods will send me a sign how to avoid doom and destruction for all of us when Adraustes of Fetin dies."

"Simple. Use a weapon without a sharp edge," the cavalry officer snapped "A club, or strangle him with a rope."

The high priest's eyes lit up. "Of course," he muttered. "I will... consider this." He rushed off, doubtless to soon present a solution from the gods.

Kendras gritted his teeth.

"How serious is this... captain, is it?" the cavalry officer asked Kendras.

"As serious as death." Kendras took the helmet off. "Just call me officer."

The man lifted an eyebrow, then looked at his colleagues. "It is an order from the king."

"Vistar of Dalman will be the legal heir of the Lady and Lord Protector of Dalman. All three are tired of the war." Kendras wished they'd ask the messenger, but for whatever reason, he stood here to vouch for it. "Next will be the priests. Adrastes's patience has run out with human sacrifice and the murder of every new king's family. The An Grekaran family died at the hands of hired assassins on order of the high priest. Adrastes is a man who was born to privilege, but made his own way as a common soldier. He is less willing to spill the blood of a good soldier for a bad reason even than the temple guards are willing to spill his."

"Damn right," said the supply general, who looked after the wounded and dead.

"So this fellow is genuine, is he?" The cavalry officer blew out his cheeks. "Show of hands, who prefers standing with an untested king over that bastard high priest?"

Three hands rose.

"Very well," the cavalry officer said and nodded to Kendras. "Tomorrow we will return to Dalman. King Vistar can bring his new... father into the city to convince us he's genuine. We will hold Dalman if the priests decide they'll attempt any mischief. Not that I think they have the stones to do it."

Kendras straightened. "I don't doubt that they will follow the summons."



“Saves us going to war with each other,” the cavalry officer said, indicating his colleagues. Kendras knew that wasn’t a joke.

“No message in writing,” the infantry general said. “Give the message in your words only... officer.”

Kendras saluted and put the helmet back on. “We will see you in Dalman.”

## Chapter Twenty-Six

“I THINK I’ll adopt him formally in Dalman,” Adrastes said when Kendras had reported.

The other Scorpions had come along, and Kendras was aware that they stood behind and around him rather than around Adrastes. He didn’t quite know how it had all happened, but he’d accepted it for what it was. It was very hard to say “no,” now. “We’ll stand by you,” Kendras said.

Adrastes glanced up and flashed a smile. “It will be good to have the Scorpions guard me.”

Kendras pressed his lips together, then nodded to himself. “Adrastes of Fetin,” he said and noticed the sudden tension in his chest and in Adrastes’s shoulders. He pulled his dagger, weighed the blade for a moment.

“Give me your hand.”

Adrastes lifted both, palms toward the ground.

“I have to trust that I will not lose my soul now.” Kendras gave a wink, but he felt nervous for other reasons. The gods had nothing to do with it.

“Adrastes, I release you to life.” The dagger moved across the black flesh, tracing a red line across both of Adrastes’s hands. Blood welled up immediately and dripped to the ground. “We sever all bonds with this dagger cut. You are free to live and follow your own will now. We will remember you.”

Adrastes pulled his hands back and balled them into fists, but hid the pain well. Kendras wanted to take them and reassure himself that the cuts weren't too deep, but hardened himself against that notion.

He pushed the dagger into its sheath and saluted Adrastes when he realized that Adrastes wouldn't say anything in return. "Lord Protector. By your leave."

"Of course, officer."

Kendras nodded to the others, who left first, and felt Adrastes's hand on his armor. "Come to me tonight."

The desire punched him in the gut. He nodded mutely, then walked off.

Now that Adrastes was released, what else could there be between them? The connection, the comradeship, was gone. He'd leave the man to politics—to bringing back the glory of Shara, uniting the cities by guile and force. As he'd already done with a marriage and promised adoption.

He could easily picture the traditional rite, probably in the throne hall. Adrastes would wear a cloak, and after the promises were made and repeated, he'd envelop Vistar in the cloak, holding him close for a while. He'd then symbolically feed and dress Vistar—upon which Vistar would promise to be an obedient son. That oath made Adrastes king by custom.

Kendras trained with the others, using the games that they always played with the new recruits. Forcing them to fight and defend more than just themselves, but the comrade as well. He'd take Kiran up the mountain as soon as possible and complete the rite. What he needed to know was written in the book, and besides, he remembered the rite as if it had been yesterday. Now his task was to find enough men who never stopped fighting.

He returned to Adrastes's quarters with a heavy heart and waited inside for the man to return from his obligations. He sat down, poured himself wine and pulled the memory closer where it sat on the table. His now to guard. Ever since he'd found it, but he had been too blind to see it.

He opened the last page and wrote the names of the fallen, which made his hand cramp up. He recorded that Adrastrates of Fetin had been released to life, and Kiran of the Flames had been betrothed. He left it open to dry the thick ink and sat back with a sigh.

"It gets easier," Adrastrates said from behind him.

"How long were you here?"

"I didn't want to disturb you. Sometimes, that book's all that will keep you sane."

Kendras shook his head. "Yes. Maybe." He turned when he felt bandaged hands against the sides of his neck. "What now? You're free."

"Free to unite the known world under my banner." Adrastrates laughed. "That should be interesting."

"What about the Scorpions? We're not enough to help you much with this."

"Do you want to?"

Kendras breathed deeply. "How much good are we?"

"Don't give up on me now." Adrastrates moved closer and placed his arms around Kendras. He leaned back, reveling in the other man's strength and closeness. He never knew who gave whom strength. Maybe they just shared what they had.

"You're a Scorpion, Kendras, but that's not all there is. There is no choice involved. My sister has the Flames, and there is the palace guard in Dalman. But I will need men I can trust. You could be the captain of my guard. Rebuild your strength... and then go wherever it pleases you."

Captain of the guard of Dalman. He remembered Old Smoke choking to death on his poisoned wine and held the memory for a long while. He found that if that would be his fate, he didn't mind.

"Captain of the guard?"

"Officer of the Scorpions." Adrastrates leaned closer and breathed into Kendras's ear. "I could never resist the officer of the Scorpions."

Kendras swallowed hard. "Why?"

“Because.” Adrastes released him and sat down on the table before him. “Only the officer has the courage to tell me the truth. Only he will never betray me for his own gain. He would die for me.”

“I would.” Kendras released the tension in a hissed breath. “Gladly.”

“Men like you make empires possible, Kendras. We’ll build something much larger than the Scorpions, I promise you that. And you, my lover, at my side, guarding my path. Because it’ll be a very dark night before the new day breaks.”

Kendras knew he was ready for it. Adrastes could achieve anything. And if Adrastes needed him for it—gods below, if he wanted for him to have part of it—he couldn’t refuse. Didn’t want to.

“Seems the future emperor of Shara has a taste for Scorpions.” He shrugged and decided that he could think those heavy thoughts when he was alone... or later, and let Adrastes kill his doubts.

“You think I can lie with Scorpions, then?”

Kendras grinned. “We should test that.”

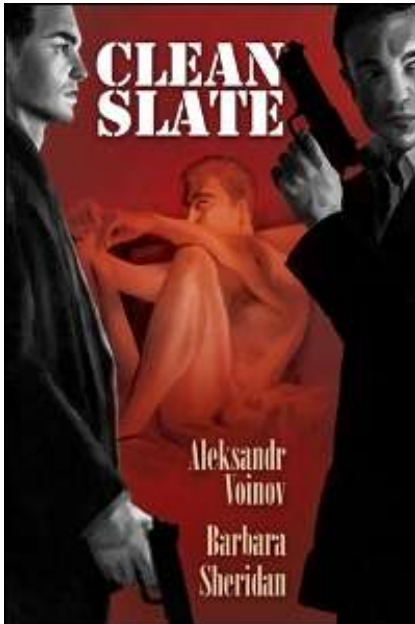


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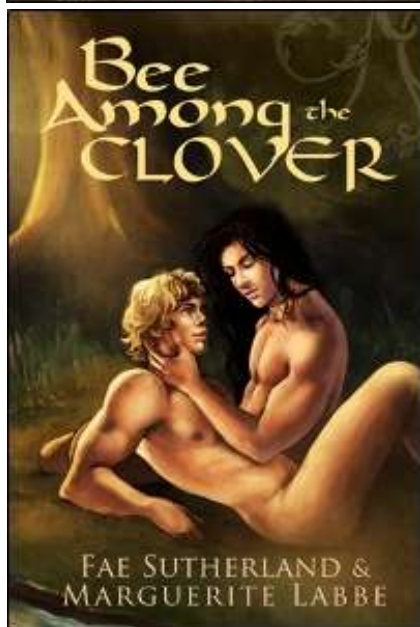
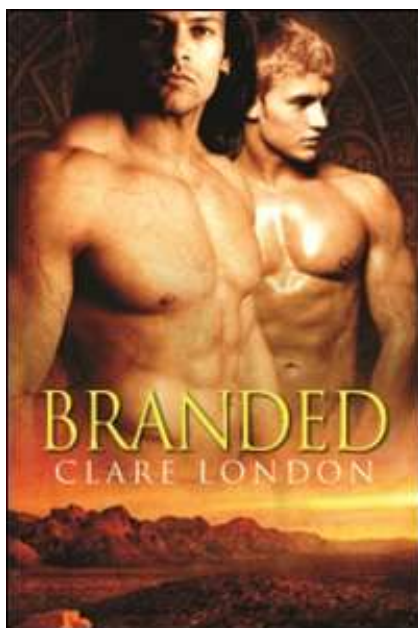
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