This is the story of the Korianan people. They are the magic-wielding caretakers and creators of their world, but long ago they were forced into exile as the result of a vicious, brutal war. While the world outside continued to turn, they were all but forgotten by the other humanoid species. Their culture was lost, their people frozen in time. Now without their magical stewards, the other species left on the planet use war, politics, and sex to shape their world.

The series is epic high fantasy with some erotica. I felt that grown adults commonly have sex, and I wanted to include it, but I didn't feel it needed to take away from the story I was telling. The story is about this culture and this world, and the three parts of it are separated by extremely long stretches of time. I work on the the three books simultaneously, and each one absolutely contains spoilers for the previous one.

Chapter heading format is usually year/person/place.
My body sits unused, as it has for thousands of years. It is only my mind that wanders. It must, because I was not made to follow the normal flow of time. So while it sits, shrouded in protective silence, gathering dust, I watch through the networking of flickering stars. So many mistakes made, so many things I’ll never be able to correct. Yet despite my lack of intervention, the great blackness stays where it is. I have no worry that it will consume us.

A moment, a flickering of one of the stars in the black, comforting void. It attracts my attention and I bring it down to me, watching the moment through the film of the magic that keeps my body hostage. It is a moment almost ninety thousand years after being locked away. Why does it draw me? I get as close as I can, intent on what I am seeing. I line up the surrounding moments, watching them in sequence.

A man stands there. He’s young and tall, with hair as black as the void around me, with eyes the same blue as the ocean he lives near. There’s another man with him, sitting in a chair. He looks tired, dark circles under his eyes. His hair is the snow white color of the very old, his face lined. Even so, he shares the same eyes as the younger man, the same strong jaw, and the same haughty manner. Father and son, then, I think. Yet something is different between them.

I realize with a start that the son is one of my people. How can that be? We have been locked away since the age of war. We should be gone, forgotten. It is true that sometimes one of my own would be born to a human, despite the lack of a Korianan parent, but that too has ceased. Curious. Even more invested in this young man, I pay closer attention. I cannot enter the moment, and so I can’t hear them.

The father leans back in his comfortable-looking chair, a blanket around his shoulders and another over his lap. A fire roars in the hearth behind him, but the son is wearing cooler clothes; the clothes of summer. They appear to be deep in conversation, the son gesturing wildly, clearly passionate. The father looks calm and impassive, but his eyes are two chips of ice, and I can see the resolution in them. Whatever the son wants, the father isn’t willing to give. In frustration, the son stands and goes to a nearby table containing cups and a carafe of some sort of drink. He pours them a cup and sits back down, and they engage in discussion again. They’re calmer now, clearly having moved onto another subject.

I follow the son with interest. Another moment calls to me. I catch a glimpse of him kissing a woman. She’s tall, too, with the same dark black hair and olive skin as the son, but that is where their resemblance ends. Her large cat-shaped eyes are the dark green of winter trees, with a long, prominent nose and apple cheeks. She’s a striking woman, the kind that would often be called handsome rather than girlishly pretty. Squinting, I realize that she is also one of my people. How many of us are loose in the world? Why am I still trapped by the spell? I keep watching, and he draws her to him and they kiss, hands groping. I move on, giving them their privacy, wondering if this is what the father and son were arguing about.

Another scene between the father and son, and my frustration at being trapped and unable to hear them mounts. They’re arguing again, the son looks even more frustrated. This time the father is wearing a crown - black iron with chips of sapphire. A king, maybe? That meant the son was a prince. Come to think of it, his clothes did look well-made. I yearned to know more about them. Who they were, and especially where they were. I knew they weren’t in Creechan, because it never got cold enough for them to need the clothing they were wearing. As I watched, the son stormed out. The father stared thoughtfully into the fire, sipping a drink. The son’s cup sat
abandoned on a nearby table. The father looked weaker than in the last scene. I had no idea how much time had passed between the two moments, I only knew that these moments were the ones that drew me.

Another time, later. The father was laying in bed, the son sitting on the bed next to him. He was propped up by a huge pile of pillows, his hands thin and pale, cobwebs of veins on them. The son was feeding him broth. He took two sips and tried to push it away, but the son pushed it on him, knowing it would help him. Strange, I thought, that the son didn’t look sad. He looked...angry? Angry, but his body language was tense, eager like a coiled snake about to strike. It looked strange on a caretaker, a loving son. The father’s eyes closed, his body going slack. The son put the bowl on the bedside table and sat, silent, watching the father. In a moment, he stopped breathing, and an eager grin exploded across the son’s face. Were I in my body, I would have had shivers down my spine.

I watched him for a moment longer before I heard it. I great, resounding boom. The whole void shook with the feel of it, because there wasn’t really sound in the void. I listened, not moving, not thinking, completely still. Then, it came again, as if the void was a door and a fist was pounding on the other side. Ominous and loud, I felt it in my soul. Memories flooded my mind. Dark, spiked armor, weapons that should never have existed. A people who should never have existed. Technology almost rivaling that of the makers. And war. Bloodshed that nearly ripped the world apart. Screams, so many screams. The memories were filled with noise and blood. Through it all ran the thread of the magic.

Soon, I thought. Soon blood would be spilled on the stone. Soon they would be clawing at the edges of this world, and then they’d break free. I could only hope that someone found me before then.
Danae, Keehaylan

Chapter Summary

Danae is introduced, and we see her relationship with the king. After heartbreak, she runs away to move on with her life.

Chapter Notes

Ugh ok so I'm not sure how much to put in the summary because spoilers. This one is a long one, but Danae is one of the main characters (of several - this first part is easily the most complex of the three books.). She's also, many years ago, the first character I created (my notebook.ai currently has >180, lol.).

This chapter contains two consensual sex scenes, one that is the first time for one of the characters in question. There is angst, but no violence.

If something doesn't make sense (like the mechanics of the magic, or something like that.), give it time. I don't just throw it all out there, lol. Honestly I might decide to completely re-write it later...I did with the other two (I actually finished book 2 and am in the process of completely re-writing it.).

I absently watch the flickering of the fire, listening to the wind whistle past the small windows of this tower room. The ashes of the note that brought me here are in the fireplace, but I have the words memorized:

My love, now that I am crowned, we can be together. Meet me in our room after the ceremony, and I will have an important gift for you.

I’d been waiting to hear those words since I knew what it was to want another person. We’d grown up together, and as soon as the hormones started raging we had been sneaking off to touch each other. Although he’d never penetrated me, and neither of us had ever taken it to completion. We couldn’t, that was reserved for husbands and wives and his father wouldn’t let us marry.

That all changed after his father died. Now I stood, naked, turned towards the door and waiting for him. My prince.

I heard the creak of the metal hinges before I saw him, but when I did, my body reacted as it always did in his presence - a warm flush and damp panties. Well, had I been wearing any they’d be damp.

I see his face first - those dark blue eyes, his strong jaw, olive skin, and black hair. People used to mistake us for siblings because we have the same hair color - deep, dark blue-black hair. My mother called us her little blackbirds.

He enters, his eyes only leaving me to secure the door behind him, a wide smile on his face. He’s
not wearing much either, just soft leather breeches and a loose cotton shirt. Items he divests himself of before crossing the room to me.

He crosses the room, wrapping his arms around me and pulling me to him, his mouth catching mine. His body is already familiar to me - the thick ropes of muscle that come from long hours training with the sword master, his impossible height, the wide breadth of his shoulders, and even the thick, hard length that’s currently pressing against my belly, trapped between us. We’ve been waiting months for this, and as many times as I’ve touched him, I’ve still never had him inside me. I want it so badly that my thighs are slick.

Despite the fact that I am also tall, around six feet, he is easily able to pick me up. I wrap my legs around his waist, and he walks us to the bed while kissing me. He lays me on the bed on my back while standing between my legs, and I blush at how exposed I am.

His cock lines up perfectly with me, and when he leans forward to kiss me again, I feel it nudging my opening. He presses with his hips and I suck in my breath, biting my lip. I was afraid this would hurt, as he’s not a small man, but it doesn’t hurt at all. I feel myself giving way for him as he pushes deeper into my body, and I moan, catching his ear with my teeth.

He stands again, holding my legs around his waist, and he slides backwards, his hard length slipping out of me. We both look down, watching him penetrate my body again. He goes slowly at first, drawing out the sensations, before I beg him to go faster. I need more, more friction, more sensation.

I hear our bodies smacking together with repeated wet slaps, I feel my heavy breasts, nipples achingly hard, bouncing on my chest. Over and over he slides in and out of me, and I can’t get enough of the sensation of his thick cock fucking me. With nothing else to hold onto, I’ve grabbed fistfuls of sheets, my hips writhing to meet his thrusts. Nonsensical noises come out of my mouth, alternating between exaltations and begging for more.

High and higher he pushes me, closer to the edge. Then I feel his thumb rubbing my clit while he thrusts inside me, and I am done. I scream, coming hard around him. My pussy squeezes down hard on him, and he comes with me. I’m filled with beautiful, chaotic warmth, my magic finally coming into its own. Gods know if I’ll be able to use it, I’ve never had any magical aptitude, but it’s there now, but the sensation is beyond imagining.

He spends himself inside of me before rolling off onto the bed next to me, laying there to catch his breath. After a few seconds he sits up and looks down at me. I smile at him and say, “Not bad for our first time.”

He shrugs and stands, “It’s not bad I suppose. I’ve had better. Certainly not worth the nineteen year wait.”

I frown, certain I misheard him. He gets up, starting to tug on his breeches, and I focus on that instead of processing his words, “Where are you going?”

He makes a noncommittal grunt and answers, “Somewhere else? I don’t know.”

“He shrugs and stands, “It’s not bad I suppose. I’ve had better. Certainly not worth the nineteen year wait.”

I frown, certain I misheard him. He gets up, starting to tug on his breeches, and I focus on that instead of processing his words, “Where are you going?”

He makes a noncommitttal grunt and answers, “Somewhere else? I don’t know.”

“He shrugs and stands, “It’s not bad I suppose. I’ve had better. Certainly not worth the nineteen year wait.”

I frown, certain I misheard him. He gets up, starting to tug on his breeches, and I focus on that instead of processing his words, “Where are you going?”

He makes a noncommitttal grunt and answers, “Somewhere else? I don’t know.”

“He shrugs and stands, “It’s not bad I suppose. I’ve had better. Certainly not worth the nineteen year wait.”

“Why not stay here? Surely you’ll be ready to go again soon. If it was bad, we can try again, I can get better!,” he tugged on his shirt.

“No, I’m done. Unless you’re going to let me put it in your ass. Are you going to let me do that? Shove my cock in your ass? I’ve already been in your mouth, so it would be the last bit of you I haven’t claimed,” I was stunned into silence. Where the hell had my kind, gentle prince gone?
Where were his sweet words? There was a buzzing in my skull, and a tiny voice that whispered you know where, but I ignored it. I buried it under the weight of my love for him, and the buzzing got quieter. My lack of answer was an answer for him, “I didn’t think so.”

“But what about the Fire,” I said, numbly. For one of my people the first time was like bursting a dam on our sex drive, and shortly I was about to crave sex so badly that it would be painful. And, if I did not have it, my abilities with magic would be forever stunted.

“You’re a pretty girl, I’m sure you can find a stable boy to fulfil your needs. There is no fire for me, I had mine long ago.”

That was news to me, but I filed it to the back of my mind as sheer panic filled me I flung myself at him, “Please! Please, it has to be you! You know it does!”

He did know. If it wasn’t him, I’d never fully come into my magic. I could be Keth’ra - forever stunted. He gave me a cruel smile, a look I’d never seen on his face before, and said, “I’m aware. The better to keep you pliant.”

“Love would have worked just as well,” I spat. I might not be able to fight, and my magic ability is nil - and would apparently stay that way - but I have a wicked temper and he’d roused it, “I will never be pliant now.”

“Yes. You will be. You have been all these years, and I see no reason for that to change now that I’ve had you,” he left it at that, and exited, slamming the door behind him. I screeched in frustration, pacing back and forth. What could I do? Where could I go? For now I needed to be away from the king, and I needed to find someone to share the night with. As my mind ran through the possibilities, one jumped out at me that might work on both fronts. I grabbed my dress, tossed it over my head, and ran out the door.

I ran out of the courtyard and down the streets. The need, the fire, started to crawl through me. I was dripping wet, and everyone I passed, men and women because I have little preference, looked like food. In my mind, they were all naked, writhing with me, and I wanted to come so badly. By the time I reached my destination I was sweating madly and breathing hard. Need burned through all of my limbs. I stood in front of the barracks, looking in. The guard knew me and so let me pass, and I went directly to the captain’s room. I knew him because I’d been here many times with Caleb while he indulged his gaming habit.

I entered after knocking, and he sat in his chair behind the desk, wearing only his breeches, armor on a stand in the corner. I knew nothing of military rankings, but I knew that he’s highly-placed. He was much older than me, tall and broad with salt-and-pepper hair. He wasn’t old enough that he wasn’t virile though, and he wasn’t old enough that his combat-gained muscled had faded at the edges, nor was he old enough to be unattractive. More importantly, I knew that he wanted me. It wasn’t that he’d been scary or leered at me excessively, it was the opposite - he’d studiously avoided looking at me for most of the last two years while being as polite as possible. Not only that, but I’d been here yesterday and knew he was being transferred to the front lines soon - well away from the city, and from Caleb.

When he looked up and saw me, he was surprised, “Danae? What are you doing here? Where is the king?”

“I’ve, ah,” I fidgeted with my dress, wondering how to ask for what I wanted, “I find myself in a predicament that I feel you can help with.”
He let a few beats of silence pass and then said, with a touch of impatience, “Well? What is it?”

“I find myself in the twin binds of needing to get out of the city and, ah, needing help with...my fire.”

“I’m sorry, what?”

“My boyfriend and I decided to be with each other tonight, and he left before it was finished.”

He saw right through my careful use of the word ‘boyfriend’ and didn’t bat an eye, “I still don’t understand why you’re here.”

I walked closer to the desk, “You’re being transferred to the front tomorrow, right?”

“Yes.”

“Take me with you.”

He looked genuinely surprised, “Why would I do that?”

I walked around to his side of the desk, taking my time and moving while I spoke, “I need to get out of the city. If you agree to take me with you, I’ll steward for you, cook, and all of that, if you’ll teach me how to fight, let me shadow you, and...help me with my fire tonight.”

He sat in silence watching me for awhile as I moved, and then settled on the edge of the desk with my legs next to his chair. He was quiet for a long time, watching me, “I think ‘helping’ you with your fire is beneficial for both of us, so I don’t need convincing on that account. But why do you want to get out of the city?”

I shrugged, not wanting to explain that it was to get away from Caleb. I wasn’t sure if he’d meant what he implied about my compliance with his wishes, but I wasn’t about to find out, “I need out, I’m 19, and I want to get out of the city and away from what’s here.”

He looked me up and down and I could tell he didn’t believe me, but he didn’t press the issue, “Why the military? Why me, specifically? You could have joined up as a recruit.”

I snorted, trying not to laugh, “I don’t want to join the military, I want to work for you.”

“Still, why me?”

Here, it cost me nothing to tell him the truth, “You came to mind because I heard you complaining last time I was here to Caleb. I’ve always noticed the way you studiously avoid looking at me, and despite the fact that you wanted me I always felt safe around you. I ran tonight to someone I knew was safe, who could help me.”

A softening, I could see it, “I don’t need you to cook and clean for me,” I was about to protest when he continued, “But I have other uses for you. I’ll take you with me and teach you to fight and listen. I could use someone on the front who I can trust and isn’t in the military.”

Relief passed through me and I smiled, “Thank you, sir. And about tonight?”

He nodded. I took that for a yes, and pulled my dress off over my head, letting it fall from my fingers to the floor. He looked at me, sitting all too still behind his desk, his eyes traveling my body. He looked at me for a long time before getting up and walking over to me. He stood in front of me, looking down at me. I met his eyes through lowered lashes.
His fingers started at my cheek, his touch delicate, and trailed down my neck. They danced over my collarbone and down the curve of my breast to swirl briefly over my hard nipple. They went between my breasts and down my stomach, drifting lower and lower. They tickled the hair between my legs and then slipped into the delicate, warm folds between my legs. He found the right spot there, swirling around the hard nub of my desire.

“Yes!,” I moaned in assent and relief. He kept moving his fingers, sliding them in circles around my aching clit, making me wetter and wetter. Mentally I begged to have them inside me.

And then he stopped, walking away while I looked at him in confusion. He walked to the door, locking it, and smiled at me. Then he stripped off his shirt and breeches, and any doubt about the arrangement I’d entered flew out of my mind. He might be much older than I was, but his body reflected his many, many hours of working out, and the man was hung; already turned on. I bit my lip, wondering if I’d actually be able to take him, and then discarding any doubts. I was way too horny to care about what was likely to only be a small amount of pain.

He walked back over to me and looked me up and down while speaking, “Someday I’m going to teach you the value of slow, long fucking, and oral sex. But I think you’re probably in no state to appreciate those things right now, if I am guessing correctly?”

“You are. I just want that,” I flicked my eyes down to his hard cock, “Inside me.”

“We’re going to get along just fine,” he gave me another smile, a cocky grin, “Go lay on the bed on your stomach with a pillow under your hips so your ass sticks in the air.”

I nearly ran to obey, grabbing a few pillows from the head of the bed and putting them in the middle. I laid across them, and settled on the comforter, my ass sticking in the air. I could feel it, cool on my dripping pussy. I watched him cross the room to me, and felt the bed dip as he got onto it behind me. I turned my head forward, pressing my forehead to the comforter.

The bed moved as he adjusted his position, and I felt the warm skin of his knees outside of my thighs as he straddled me. Then a moment later I felt the head of his cock nudging my opening, “Last chance to say no.”

“Please...please fuck me!,” I answered, thinking I’d cry if he took his cock away now. Blessed gods, he didn’t. He pushed, slowly spreading me around his thick, hard length. He was so big, but since I’d already had the prince inside me it didn’t really hurt. I moaned as he slid in, relief suffusing my limbs.

“Gods, you are tight!”

“I imagine everyone is a bit tight to you,” I replied, with a little bit of a smirk.

“Fair point. Still, I’ve never been with a woman during her fire. You’re dripping wet,” he slid out, and then back in, getting a feel for how we fit together.

“I think that might just be me,” I sucked in a breath as he moved. This position made all that thick, hard length rub over the spot inside me I’d heard of but never been able to reach on my own. My pussy contracted as he rubbed over my g-spot, and I realized he’d chosen this position for that reason, “Fuck, that feels good!”

“Mhm, that’s the idea,” he added a little more speed to his thrusts.

“Oh, yes...yes! Please go faster, harder!”
“I don’t want to hurt you.”

“You won’t,” I promised, “You feel good.”

I felt him lean forward, supporting himself on the bed, widening his stance. And then he started to move his hips. Not the slow, gentle rocking he’d started with, but deep, hard thrusts that rocked my body forward on the bed. He gradually increased the speed of his thrusts, until the bed was creaking below us, the headboard banging into the stone of the wall. I was holding onto the covers for dear life, his thick cock surging inside me.

This time I didn’t need my clit to be touched before I came. It rushed through me, and I clamped down hard on his cock, screaming my orgasm to the world. I felt liquid splash down my thighs, and squirt onto my ass and lower back as his body splashed it with the force of his thrusts.

“Feel better?,” he asked, slowing to give me some time to recover from my orgasm. I twisted as best I was able to, and grabbed him, pulling him down to me. I kissed him - not the gentle kisses I’d shared with the prince, but kisses that were deep, sucking tongues, and devouring mouths.

“More,” I moaned.

“More, Isandro,” he corrected.

“Please, more, Isandro!”

And more was what I got. He twisted and turned me, showing the advantage of his experience. He made me come with only his cock on my g-spot several more times before showing me other positions. And, after he spent himself inside me the first time, he ate my pussy until he was ready to go again. Over and over he made me come, my well expanding and growing and my magic getting stronger every time he did. Maybe not as strong as it would have been had Caleb stayed with me, but I wouldn’t be one of the broken should I ever learn to cast.

We fell into an exhausted sleep for only a few hours before being woken to leave the city. Mercifully, I was able to ride in a wagon that first day. My poor, aching pussy could not have handled sitting a horse all day. Although the fire hadn’t passed, he somehow managed to keep me sated for the night. I didn’t doubt his ability to fulfil my needs over the next few days as the fire waned.

Our destination was the border, as always. Some trade did happen between the cities, but in truth the hundred years’ war kept trade to a minimum. The roads were dangerous to travel, and not always maintained. Our family’s, or more accurately, Caleb’s family’s, territory borders that of four other tribes’ claimed areas, and that is really all most of us know about it. No one ever passes through the great wall Alledran and out of the city without being part of the military or intent on leaving the country for good.

So when we arrived, the state of the front was a surprise. Tents stretched for miles in either direction, much farther than I could see from my horse. It was loud, and it stank of excrement, smoke, and cooking food. The ground was mud, with planks laid forming makeshift roads. And, most surprisingly, were the amount of children I saw as we traveled down into the camp. They hovered around the edges of the camp, playing in the grass.

I turned to Commander Greyson and asked, “Why are there only tents? The military has been out here for over a hundred years.”

He looked at me sideways, “They’ve really told you nothing of what it’s like beyond Alledran?”
“Not really, aside from ‘bad’.”

“The ground from Alledran to the border of Kellan lands was enchanted by the elves long ago. Nothing useful grows, and no permanent structures can be built. People have tried, only to find that they tumble down of their own accord.”

I frowned. That seemed like a pretty significant detail to have not been told, “And what about out past our borders?”

He shrugged. Already behind us the train as splitting up, going to their individual areas. He seemed to be heading to a specific area of the camp, and so I followed him, “We don’t know. We’ve been able to hold our border, but not do much to press farther. Kellans outside the border aren’t treated well, and the political climate is constantly shifting anyway.”

“How often is there actually battle?”

“Often enough, although every part of the line is different.”

“Every part? You mean this line stretches across the entire border?”, he nodded, and I looked out over the camp again. I couldn’t see the end of it any better now that I was down in it than I’d been able to see the end from a distance. I couldn’t fathom the size of it.

“Yup, up and down the whole thing.”

“Where do all of the people come from?”

“Some are like you, they come from the city, some filter in from the surrounding lands because they think it is safer in our border, but most were actually born here.”

I did a double take, “What?”

“It’s been war for a hundred years. The original army had sex with whores and then had children and so on and so forth. Most of the people here have never even been to the city.”

It made sense, and at the same time, didn’t, “So what you are saying is that we have an enormous army and it just sits here, doing basically nothing?”

He laughed loudly, taking a few seconds to get himself under control. Not exactly the reaction I’d expected, “You know, I’ve been trying to explain that to the general for some time, but he just won’t listen to me.”

“So there is a divide in opinions?”

“Yes. Almost exactly down the middle, some in favor of striking out and trying to bring the tribes to heel, and others say that we would be leaving the border unprotected and that we must stay here.”

“But even half this army would be a formidable force. Why not take half?”

The commander looked at her sideways, just a flick of his eyes, “That, my dear, is an excellent question.”

The ride in silence for a few more minutes before another question came to mind, “Does anyone ever leave to go back to the city?”

He shrugged, “Sometimes. But they’ve been out here for three generations now. The great
grandparents of the children playing out front are the ones who arrived here to establish our border. They’ve never known anything else, and their families are here.”

She made a noise of derision, “Once they realize the city has better food than army rations, they’ll leave in droves.”

He just chuckled at her sarcastic comment and the continued on until they reached a large, well-kept tent. Across the way from it was an even larger one, and both had guards posted. In front of the smaller of the two there was an older teenage boy, who walked up to take the horses’ reins when they stopped and dismounted.

“Danae, Petyr. Petyr, Danae,” the commander said by way of introduction. To Danae he added, “If you need to know where anything is, ask him. You can have your own tent if you’d like, but honestly, the only one that’s nicer is the one across the way. You’re welcome to stay with me if you’d like.”

I didn’t even have to think twice about that, “I’ll stay with you.”

“Good. Go with Petyr and help him handle the horses.”

“Yes, sir,” I replied. He went into his tent while I took my horse’s reins and followed Petyr through a few twists and turns to the stables, “So how long have you known Isandro for?”

He gave me an annoyed look, “The commander.”

I shrugged, “The commander, then. How long have you known him for?”

“Eleven years. I came to him when I was six.”

“And you’re his, what, page? Squire?”

“Squire.”

“So,” I paused, a beginning of a plan forming in my head, “He’s been teaching you to fight?”

“Some. Sometimes the other soldiers teach me.”

“Could you teach me what you know?”, that seemed to surprise him, and he gave me the strangest look.

“Why does a whore want to know how to fight?”

“I’m not a whore.”

“What are you then?”

“Someone who came from the city with the commander. It would be easiest if you thought of me as a sister, or a cousin.”

“As long as you aren’t here to take my position.”

I snorted a laugh, “Unless you’re going to start having sex with the commander, I don’t think there’s a lot of crossover.”

He laughed too, and I followed him into the dim interior of the stable tent as we arrived. Enclosed like this, the normal smells of hay and horses were intensified, and it wasn’t the good smells that
won out. The whole encampment stunk, actually. So many people crammed into one area did not make for clean conditions.

I looked around, “So is it true no permanent structures can be built? These tents look pretty well dug-in.”

We took the tack and saddles off of the horses, and he handed me a brush, “It’s true. Every week or so we wake up and a stake will have come out of the ground and we know if we don’t break down the tent and re-pitch it that we’ll wake up with canvas around our ears.”

“Hmm. I guess it’s true what they say, ‘like a house on the Songling’,” he shrugged nonchalantly and I changed the subject, “so how did you come to be in the commander’s service?”

At first, it was just the sound of the brushes stroking our horses’ coats. Then, it was his voice, “My father believes that the military makes someone a man.”

By his tone, I could tell that he didn’t want to be pressed, so I let it go, remaining quiet while we finished with the horses and put them in their pens. As we walked out I said, “Hey, could you show me where some things are? This place is a maze, I’ll never be able to find my way back to the commander’s tent.”

I wasn’t entirely lying, I have a decent sense of direction and knew in which direction it lay, but I didn’t want to get lost. The sun was going down and I wasn’t comfortable enough yet to go wandering after dark.

“I’ll take you back, but I need to cook dinner for us so the grand tour will have to wait,” we headed back to the tent and this time, I paid attention.
Chapter Summary

Here we meet Kay and Bas, close friends and co-workers in an entirely different country than Danae, Isandro, and the king. Kay is a high-paid elven harlot in the chaotic city of Raedanas. Elves are rare in her part of the world, and she's native to somewhere else, so she commands a high price. Raedanas grew up on the shore of Raeenra Lake around the port of entry for the nearby magical floating city of Raedaan. Her life changes completely when a mysterious client hires her for a long-term position.

Chapter Notes

Kay is a character that I created with the intention of her role being small. After I started writing her, she became one of my favorite POVs to write.

This chapter contains public sex in Kay's work place with multiple partners. The people involved are important, but the scene is just for fun. :) There is PIV and anal sex, and definitely some D/s roleplay.

“Princess!,” a man, probably one of the forever rotating stagehands, yells from outside the closed door, “Ten minutes!”

“Got it!,” I yell back, knowing full well it could be fifteen, or twenty, or however long I damned well chose to take. There’s a reason I’m called Princess instead of my given name of Kay.

He’s in luck though, because I’m ready a little early today. I check myself out before I go. I mentally take inventory of myself like I do every night.

I’m tiny, about five-foot-one, slender, and flexible, but my slenderness is balanced with a perfect set of double-D tits, and a cute little bubble ass. My pale white skin hasn’t developed any blemishes or birthmarks, and remains flawless, while my metallic copper hair remains in its easy-messy waves. My plump lips are still a pretty pink, and my milky, bright seafoam colored eyes are a perfect match for my coloring and my heart-shaped face. Yup, I’m still gorgeous as fuck and amazing at my job.

Of course, that wasn’t the only thing that made me perfect for my current job. No, what made me perfect for my current job was the fact that my major kink in bed was fucking in front of other people.

“Hi, I’m Kay,” I think in the direction of the mirror, “and I’m The Veil’s current highest earning pleasure actress.”

My self administered pep-talk done, I walked out to the backstage area. Staying hidden, I peeked out at the audience. The stage is low to the ground and circular, at the bottom of a medium-sized
room with stadium seating. The seating is separated into walled-off pie slices in an attempt to offer the patrons at least some privacy from each other - only the people in your pie slice had any hope of seeing you. The stage itself is almost entirely - save the curtained back stage area - surrounded by a knee high half wall made of smooth stone. It was enchanted so that no one could cross to the performers without their permission.

The center of the stage was mostly taken up with a large circular bed, but there was a well-equipped toy box and some floor space for anything that might require it. It was well-lit with warm-toned lights that I requested because they showed off my hair nicely. Although the seats outside of the arena were dark, I could make out the shapes if I concentrated. From what I could tell, it was a full house.

That was to be expected though. I do two kinds of shows - one involved audience participation, and the other is a show only with no participation. Tonight was an audience participation night, and those sold out as soon as I offered them, no matter what I chose to charge people. *The Veil* was always more than happy to host them for me, given that the high ticket prices easily covered the cost of the extra security.

As I’m peeking out at the audience, I feel an arm wrap around my waist, and a face nuzzle into my neck, “Hey, beautiful.”

I smile and turn to face my partner for the evening, Bas. He’s my favorite partner. Kind, attentive, gorgeous as hell, into the same stuff I am and, importantly, much larger than I am and hung like a horse.

That’s one of the other things that makes me perfectly suited to my job - I like to be tossed around by guys who are bigger than me. The bigger, the better. Even though I didn’t think it was technically possible, I’d masturbated any number of times to the idea of being fucked raw by an orc.

I looked up at him and smiled, immediately going on tip-toe to meet his dipped head for a kiss. It wasn’t a gentle kiss, it was an all-consuming, devouring, let’s-fuck-right-here kiss. His hands cupped and played with my ass under my short silk robe, and I resisted the urge to climb him like a tree. He squeezed the two halves of my ass together and I pulled away, saying, “Careful. I’ve got my plug in.”

His fingers brushed between my ass cheeks, and when he found the thick hunk of silicone there he gave it a firm wiggle before gently sliding it out of me and setting it on a small table nearby. We didn’t need the audience knowing I’d prepared beforehand, “So you do. And that’s the big one.”

“Mmmmmmm. I had one of the stage hands put the lube I like in the box.”

“You always know what to say to get me going,” he grinned, stealing another kiss.

“That’s why we work so well together.”

“Among other things,” he answered, giving me a cocky grin. He gently turned me around, back out towards the audience, “Now go out and get them ready for us.”

I didn’t even bother to reply. My mind was moving to the audience I was about to have, and I stepped out from behind the curtain and into the bright lights of the stage, smiling at the people out there in the murky dark. They replied with applause and whistles, which quieted as I reached the low wall that encircled the stage.
“How are all of you gorgeous people doing tonight?,” I didn’t have to yell, the stage was enchanted to carry sound. In reply I heard a variety of answers, from whistling and screaming, to lewd comments. I started pacing slowly around the arc of the wall, letting them get a good look at how I moved, “As you all know, tonight is an audience participation night.”

I had to pause for the cheering, and my brilliant grin was genuine. I loved being so popular, and knowing the things I was about to do, I was even happier. God, I love my job, “So which of you are going to be among the lucky few?”

I wasn’t just being rhetorical, or playing with them. Bas was carefully watching from the stage, seeing which ones I picked out. We made it look like he did the choosing, but it was all me. He knew my signals perfectly, which was among the many reasons why he was the only performer I’d do this sort of thing with.

There was a loud chorus of shouts to get my attention as I prowled in my cage. Some of it was just for show - a lot of the people in the audience didn’t actually want to participate, and there were women too. Not that I disliked women, I just didn’t like to bed them during my act. I am popular enough, too, that people have noticed certain patterns to the men that get chosen. Proximity to the stage wasn’t that important - each pie slice was only five rows deep. Couples almost never wanted to be chosen - they were almost always here to watch a show while they fucked each other, not me.

“Hmmmm, aren’t you a pretty one;” I purred, gliding to a stop in front of a man with light skin and blonde hair. He was thick, and clearly tall, just the way I liked them, “Why don’t you show me what you’re working with?”

Even through the dimness I could see his blush, and I didn’t give him the chance to be embarrassed, “It’s ok to be shy, honey, I love you just the same.”

I was rewarded with a grateful smile, and then I heard a deep voice shout, “I’ll show you what I’m packin!”

Someone was eager. Hopefully someone was hot. I kept my eye on the audience while I sauntered to the speakers pie piece. Oh, yes, someone was definitely hot. He was even taller and broader than the last one, and the thought of him pounding my pussy for all these people to see made me wet as fuck, “Oh yeah? Do you think you’ve got what it takes?”

He pulled down the waistband of the draw-string pants that are the required attire for my show, and showed not even a hint of shyness as he took out his perfectly gorgeous, hard, thick cock. Oh yes, he would definitely be making it on stage tonight. I leaned forward against the wall, and he answered me, “I think I can compete.”

“Oh? You want me to show you my pretty pink pussy and we’ll see?”

“What do you think?,” he stroked himself and smirked at me.

“I think I can’t let you see it until Sir says so,” Bas is neither my dominant nor my Sir, but he is a dominant, and a damned good one. Add that to the stack of reasons why we do this show together. I leaned against the wall, making my tits strain against the thick silk of my robe. I snaked my hand between my legs and inside me, making a show of riding my fingers and making squelching noises before taking my hand away and holding them out to him, “But I can let you taste me.”

He showed no hesitation in coming down to the stage, making eye contact as he slid my fingers into his hot mouth. Some fancy tongue work later, and he’d sucked my fingers clean. He kissed
the palm of my hand and then let it go. I stood up, wetter than before, and flashed him a smile, “I
don’t make the decisions around here but for you, I’ll definitely put in a good word.”

I stood up again and resumed my walking, “Alright, are you guys ready to get this thing really
started?”

“I know I definitely am,” Bas’s voice came from behind me as he stepped onto to the stage.

“Sir!,” I shouted, making a show of turning and running towards him. I jumped, and he easily
caught me in his arms. I splattered his face with kisses, covertly whispering my seat choices into
his ear.

“Did you miss me babydoll?”

“Oh yes, I’m lost without you!,” my accompanying smirk made sure he knew it was completely
sarcasm. He let me down, our bodies sliding against each other.

“Smartass. Why don’t you get rid of that robe and then go stand by the bed?”

He didn’t need to tell me twice. I untied it and whipped the belt off, tossing onto the bed. The
short robe followed. I whipped it over my head and tossed it into the crowd before declaring, “Ok,
all gone!”

He rolled his eyes at me as I took my appointed spot. He walked back behind me and wound his
hand in my hair, tilting my head to the side, “Let’s say we show these people what they paid for?”

I made a small mewling noise. This was both my most and least favorite part of the show. His
hands slid down the backs of my thighs to my knees, where he grabbed on and lifted, holding me
against him with my back to his front and my knees out. After I was high in his arms, he used his
hands to pry my thighs apart, exposing me to the audience.

The blush that covered my cheeks and the way I turned my head away in embarrassment wasn’t
faked. Being exposed like this to so many people was humiliating - and that’s why I liked it. As
the hot shame poured into me, the wetness poured out of me. This, too, was part of the show. I was
supposed to go from shy and hesitant to completely depraved over the course of the show.

I was always completely depraved when it came to sex, but hey, that’s just another reason I’m
good at my job.

He held me open like that as he walked the perimeter, holding me such that the thick head of his
cock nudged my opening while he walked, taunting me, but never slid into me. I knew from
previous shows that my wetness would already be coating his cockhead, and drops sliding down
the shaft.

As he walked, he made somewhat of a show of choosing, as I had, but not to the same degree. Just
enough to make the audience think it was him that was choosing not me. They were his
responsibility now, all I had to do was be myself. I was free to just feel the sensations. I didn’t
envy him this, but he said he loved the degree of control he held over both myself and the
audience. Judging by the cock pressing against my opening right now, I couldn’t argue. He was
clearly enjoying this.

When he finally set me on my feet, I opened my eyes clamping my thighs firmly shut, even
crossing my arms over my chest to hide my rock-hard nipples. He had three guys lined up on the
stage. One was the guy who’d sucked my fingers. Now that I could see him better under the lights,
he was even hotter. Next to him was guy who was even taller than he was, with night-dark skin,
razor-sharp muscle definition, and an impressive looking tent pitch. Lastly there was a man almost as pale as me, with red hair and dark blue eyes. His muscles were softer, the kind you’d want to cuddle with, and he was slightly shorter than the other two - which wasn’t saying much. They were all true to my tastes: much larger than myself.

Next came the rules. Bas stood in front of them, making sure to speak clearly so they and the audience heard, “Now, gentlemen, I expect a certain standard of behavior from you. The safe word on this stage, for both yourselves, myself, and the lovely lady, is red. If you hear it, you are to immediately cease what you’re doing. If you don’t, you’ll be making friends with our security force in short order. Yellow means it’s time to check in and see what’s going on, although if you wish to do that on your own you can. Now, the important question: Do you consent to participation in this show?”

All three of them said a loud, firm yes. So did I when Bas asked me. Not only was it the law that they all know I wanted this and wasn’t being coerced, but a lot of people got off on knowing exactly how much I liked this.

“Lay back down, Princess, and show the men what they’ve won,” Bas said. And we’re off to the races.

I had to make at least a perfunctory argument, because it was my first reaction, and it was a much-loved part of the show, “N-no, please, don’t make me spread like that again!”

“I’m sorry, is Princess refusing to do what her Sir said?,” there was an edge of danger in his voice that, despite my knowledge that it was a game, got a reaction out of me. I didn’t want to displease Bas.

“No, I, um,” I trailed off.

He was standing next to me, and he grabbed a handful of my hair, using it to tilt my head back, which made me go up on my tip-toes. He smacked my arms away from my chest, leaving my naked breasts exposed. The nubs on them weren’t at glass-cutting stage because it was cold, “Good. Because you know how I get when you displease me.”

I did. Oh boy, I did, “Yes, Sir.”

“Now show the men what they’ve won!,” he didn’t wait for me to do it, he shoved me back onto the bed, and pried my thighs apart again. My hips were pointed towards the three men from the audience, but mirrors in the ceiling surrounded the stage in such a way that I was visible to everyone from all angles. Shame came in waves, and I wanted to come so badly. My thighs were slick and my clit was aching to be touched.

“Now we’re going to play a game. We’re going to blindfold the princess, and whoever makes her come hardest gets to fuck her tight little elf pussy first. How does that sound?,” we’d tried edging and orgasm denial before, and I hated it. Not only did it make me miserable, but I was virtually incapable of it. I came far too easily. Put another thing in the “perfect for my job” column.

The audience cheered, and I whimpered, “No! No, please! I don’t think I can come in from of all the-the people!”

Total fucking lie, I was going to come for all of them probably, and it wasn’t going to take a lot of effort. He grabbed my discarded belt from the bed and I picked my head up so he could tie it in place, and then laid back down. I felt the bed move as he knelt behind me. I knew what he was doing when his next words came out - pointing at the men in turn - but I couldn’t see it, “Einy-
meeny-miney-moe. You sir, come on up.”

After that, I felt him grab my wrists and pin them to the bed with his hands, “No touching, Princess.”

I heard footsteps and then felt the bed dip. I didn’t even know which person I wanted it to be most, but I did know that when I felt two of his fingers making circles on my clit, I moaned in relief. I felt his warm mouth cover one of my nipples, sucking and tonguing it, and then I felt those same two fingers slide into my pussy.

Big men have thick fingers, and they felt so good. While humans have their clit and their g-spot, elves are a little different. Our clits are sensitive, yes, but our “g-spot” is a thick band of nerves around the center of our vaginas. Penetration feels much better for us than it does for humans.

He didn’t waste time, he vigorously finger-fucked me while he sucked my nipple, my whole lower half shaking with the force of his fingers inside me. My wetness made loud, easily apparent squishing noises while he did it, and I felt droplets of my own wetness land on my legs and feet.

Needless to say, it didn’t take long, “N-no, no, oh fuck, yes, oh, god, no, I’m coming!”

I’m loud and vocal when I come, and that isn’t faked. I’m like that in private, too. My pussy clamped down on his fingers rhythmically, and wetness gushed out of me in hard spurts.

“Next!,” shouted Bas.

“No, please, I can’t take anymore!” I’m a little fucking liar. I was just getting started. The unique sounds of sex and masterbation were coming from the audience, and my pussy spasmed again, a tiny jet of fluid leaking out of me.

Bas actually had the decency to laugh, “We’re just getting started.”

Then I felt the mouth on my my pussy, hot, his tongue probing and licking, slurping my fluids. I moaned, squirming towards him. Please, please, please was what my mind and body were saying. My mouth said, “No...no, not so close!”

I could even feel my cheeks burning, and embarrassed flush covering them. It was that embarrassment at being spread out in front of all these people, getting my clit sucked by a stranger, that fueled me. I felt two of his fingers enter me, gentler than the last guy, and I groaned. I heard Bas chuckle at what he knew was my discomfort and extreme arousal, and I begged, “Please, please no, oh god, please don’t make me come again!”

This time it started low in my belly, a trickle that became a figurative - and literal - waterfall. I was squirting again, coming, writhing and screeching, my thighs clamped around the guy’s head. I hoped he knew how to hold his breath. He must have, because his fingers and tongue didn’t stop until I dropped back down to the bed, thighs falling wide open of their own accord. He moved away and I was exposed to the room again.

I tried to close my thighs, but Bas’s warning voice came from above me, “Princess. You know the rules.”

I just made a helpless noise, relaxing my legs, opening them for all the world to see.

The last guy said to Bas, “Can I grab something from the toybox?”

Oh, well, someone has been here before. I didn’t see Bas’s nod, but a second later I heard the guy
rummaging in the box. For the thousandth time I was grateful for Bas and how well we worked
together. Nothing would be coming out of that box that I didn’t like.

I was right. A few seconds later I felt a smooth oblong object being inserted into my pussy. I
knew what it was. I was a goner.

His mouth lowered to my clit, while one hand played with my breasts, tweaking and rolling my
nipples. I heard - and felt - him switch the device on and deep vibrations thrummed through my
pussy.

I came so hard I actually came twice, screaming in pleasure. Whomever this was, this was the guy.
I tapped Bas’s wrist twice to let him know. Although I couldn’t see him, I knew what came next.
He knew I was going to need a quick break, so he capitalized on my love of having people around
while I fucked and went to the audience to get them involved, “What do you think, is it guy
number one?”

There was cheering while I laid on the bed like a rag doll, breathing hard. The cheering was pretty
loud, “What about guy number two?”

Pause, and then cheering, although less, “How about guy number three?”

They erupted in in cheers. Thank god, they had taste, “Ok, step right up!”

He’d turned the egg off after I came and now he removed it. I felt him bend over me, his cock
sliding against, me. I couldn’t tell how big it was, but it wasn’t small. I heard Bas speak again,
“Tease her a little. Let’s see if you can get our Princess to show you what a little whore she really
is.”

In my brain I said ‘thanks, Bas, thaaanks a lot’ because I was already close to begging for it. But
the show must be considered, “Is that your,” I lowered my voice like I was embarrassed, “cock?”

“All eight inches of it, gorgeous,” he crooned. His voice was deep and rich, and it made me
shiver. He slid his cock against my clit, letting the head press against my opening on some of the
strokes. I wanted him so bad that my hips arched, rubbing against him, do you want it?”

I hesitated, and he kept sliding, so he added his hands on my breasts, “Yes.”

“Yes, what?,” more sliding, more plucking of my sensitive nipples. My hips had a mind of their
own, desperately pushing towards him.

“Yes, please. Oh, god, please fuck me!,,” I caved. The desire to be fucked was quickly becoming
need. I let the embarrassment and joy of being watched, of being exposed, writhing and wanting,
to all these people, wash over me.

Bas saw my reactions and knew where I was, “Go ahead.”

Oh sweet mercies, his slid into me finally. He was long, and thick, and I felt the delicious burn of
being stretched by him. He wasn’t as big as Bas, but, well, few men were. I moaned, long and low,
as he penetrated me. His strokes were slow at first, but I couldn’t take it, “Harder, please, please
fuck me harder!”

Thank the gods, all of them, that he complied. His flesh smacked against mine, and he surged
inside me. Bas leaned down and said, “Do you want to see who the winner was? Who’s currently
claiming your pussy?”
“Yes!,” I gasped. I really was getting tired of the blindfold. The man didn’t even stop fucking me while Bas removed it. I looked up, and it was the man from earlier, the one who’d sucked the wetness off my fingers. I grinned at him, and he grinned back.

“It turns out that your word carries weight,” he said, grinning while he fucked me.

“Less talky more fucky,” I said. He laughed, and sped up, smacking hard against me. I bet my lip and tilted my head back, moaning into my closed mouth. His thickness filled me up nicely, and soon I was coming and squirting on him all over again.

As it turns out though, he was more bravado than I prefer. After he made me come he sped up, and with a loud moan, he spent himself inside me. He rolled off, taking a spot next to the bed on the ground, and I looked up at Bas, nodding. It was our signal for ‘I’m good, keep going’.

“Number two!,” he pointed at the dark skinned man, who couldn’t contain his grin as he stepped up to me.

“Roll over,” he ordered. I looked to Bas - he was playing the role of my Sir, and I did nothing without my Sir’s permission.

“You heard the man, roll over!,” he barked. I complied, happy to do it. I loved being taken from behind. I got on my hands and knees, ass in the air, spread for the whole room, and loved every second of it. I looked out into the audience. Most of them were in shadow, but I could see the front row. The shy man had his hand down his pants, hips writhing, hand furiously pumping. I smiled at him, and he smiled back. Somehow I think I would have liked to have him. Maybe I could get Bas to make overtures and--

This was the point at which I felt the head of the new man’s cock nudging my opening, stealing my attention. I circled my hips and said, “Oh, yes, please!”

“Well, since you asked so nicely,” he replied, sinking into me. He was bigger than the last guy, though still smaller than Bas. I moaned as he filled me, a hiss of affirmation. He felt fucking amazing. I wish I could see him, because he was particularly beautiful. He stayed buried in me, unmoving, and said, “Hands please."

I put them behind my back, and he gathered them both in one hand. He was careful not to put too much strain on my shoulders, using his other hand to help support me. He held my top half off the bed, and if he let go, I’d face plant into the bed. I was comfortable though, one of the many benefits of being small and flexible.

“I want everyone to see those gorgeous tits swing,” he said, and I could hear the smirk in his voice. Whatever smartass comment I was about to make was cut off by the beginning of his thrusting. Oh, shit, he felt amazing. He went hard and fast, a bright staccato rhythm that punished my pussy in the best way possible. I came, and I came hard, wailing while the liquid sluiced down my thighs.

This one though, he pushed me through a second orgasm, and then gently lowered me to the bed, and I was confused until I looked up and saw the proximity of Bas’s cock. I eagerly reached for it, and the man who was fucking me slowed some to let me get a rhythm going on Bas’s cock. It wasn’t going to make him come and, to be honest, I don’t even know if he can come from oral sex, but it was going to bring him to aching hardness.

I had to stop for a second though as the man brought me a third time. This proved to be the limits of his endurance though, and he shoved himself deep inside me, coming hard. I could feel the
strong pulses of his cock as it jumped and emptied his seed into me. After he joined his friend on
the floor, I gave Bas’s leg three subtle taps, indicating my need for a break. He grabbed a nearby
water and handed it to me, while I sat and drank about half of it down in slow sips. When I was
done, I handed it back to him and he put away.

After the breather, he laid on his back, his feet facing the audience. He held his cock up, thick and
long, and said, “Hop on, Princess.”

I straddled him, facing the audience, and leaned back so my legs were spread wide for them to see.
I sank slowly down onto him, looking right out at them, making eye contact with several. I
moaned a long, low ‘yes’ as he filled me. I always sort of forget how big Bas is until Bas is inside
me, stretching me wide. God, it feels so good. I leaned all the way back, using his chest for
leverage while he grabbed my hips. Our size difference meant that he could get a good grip with
his big hands, holding most of me. We tried once, and he could almost fit his hands around my
waist.

After he had a good grip, he used his hips to thrust up into me. He was so strong that if I hadn’t
been leaning back, I’d be bouncing like a rag doll. Instead, I could let the world narrow down to
the feeling of his thick, hard length inside me, fucking me exactly how I liked to be fucked. I
thought of how exposed I was, how the audience could all see me getting fucked with no barriers,
and I was so goddamned turned on.

I came for him after a few minutes of solid pounding. Cum arched out of me, splattering on the
barrier between us and the audience. Bas didn’t stop fucking me, and I came one more time in
quick succession, wailing and spurting for everyone to see.

He stopped for a moment after that and I gasped, “More, I want more!”

We both looked over at the third man, who grinned. He knew what was coming. His dick was
smaller than the other two, and there was a reason for that: it was going directly into my ass. I
used the plug so prep wouldn’t really be necessary.

I slid, boneless, off Bas and onto the bed, making sure that my pussy was pointed towards the
audience while I rested and he got the lube. When he’d retrieved it, I moved so that the audience
was mostly viewing me from the side, and turned onto my stomach.

In my opinion, double pen is much more fun when both entrances have had something in them, so
that’s where we were going. I heard Bas whisper something to the guy, and I knew he was letting
him know that I’d prepped before the show and he could just go for it. To accentuate that, I
grabbed hold of my ass, and held the two halves open for him.

I felt the cold dripping of lube, followed by Bas’s warm hand. Then I heard the guy slather it on
his cock. The lube snapped shut and ended up on the bed somewhere, while the guy pressed the
head of his cock against my asshole.

He sant in slowly, letting me adjust, which was perfect. Sometimes, even with prep, it can hurt if
they just shove it in there. He didn’t though, he went slow and smoothly. Once he was inside me
he turned to Bas and asked, “Can she come this way?”

“Yes, but don’t spend yourself just yet,” he warned.

“Oh, I won’t,” I could hear the humor in his voice. He slid out of me, and sank back in. I liked a
slower pace, but not too slow. This guy hit it pretty well right off, not fucking me like the second
guy had, but going fast enough that I could lose myself in the sensations. He, too, made me come
before pulling out at Bas’s request.

Bas laid down on the bed again, and I climbed on top of him, taking him deep inside. I leaned forward, presenting my ass to the other man, who joined us. He sank into me too, and then the two of them found a position that gave them both leverage.

Then they fucked me.

I came, I know that much. How many times? I have no idea. At some point the vibrating egg got involved, and I just kept coming and coming. The two of them had stamina for days, and they didn’t spend themselves inside me until I was boneless and non-sensical with pleasure, floating on a sea of orgasms.

Once Bas came, the audience knew that the show portion of the evening was over. The men started to clean themselves up, and Bas found my soft aftercare robe. He held me, cradling me against him, while the next part started.

It’s a little weird, but as part of my aftercare I like to do a Q&A with my audience. It helps me focus and helps me get my feet under me again. I do it from the safety of my robe, a bottle of water, and Bas’s strong body cradling mine. It’s one of my favorite things. It ends when I’m clearly doing fine. Basically, it ends when I say it does.

Bas sets the tone, “Alright ladies and gentlemen, we’ve come to the Q&A portion of our show. Our only warning is this: don’t ask a question you don’t really want to know the answer to. Who goes first?”

I point at a woman with her hand raised, “Are you an Bas married?”

“No,” I reply, “But we are close friends. Ah, well, friends with benefits.”

The crowd chuckles, and I choose the next person, “What other jobs have you had?”

“Hmm, well, a variety of them. Most were menial labor and didn’t make me any real money.”

Next person, next question, “Why sex work?”

I shrug, “Because I love it. I love my job. It keeps me sexually fulfilled and economically comfortable.”

Comfortable was less than generous, I’m pretty wealthy for a harlot. I went through several more questions before ending the session. We left the crowd, headed to our dressing rooms, and said our goodbyes.

As I did on most show nights, I chose to spend the night in my rooms at the brothel, rather than going home. I lived in the floating city above the lake, Raedaan, and I was too tired to bother making my way to the portals and back into the city. Besides, I have a meeting tomorrow and I’d rather not waste the time commuting. So it took very little time before I was cleaned and drifting to sleep.

I woke up the next day at around mid-morning, feeling sore, but good. I checked the clock and realized I only had an hour to get to my meeting, so I dressed and ate quickly. I finished with just enough time to get to the meeting room downstairs.

I pulled open the frosted glass door to the conference room, the light from the floor to ceiling windows making me squint. Bas was already seated around the conference table when I walked in,
and I’d arrived ahead of the client. I sat next to him, at the head of the table, turned to him, and asked, “Do you know what this is about?”

He shrugged, “Not really. The most I could get out of Andrej is that he wants to contract you privately. He knows you and I come as a pair for these kinds of things, so.”

“Here you are,” I gave him a half smile.

He nodded, “Here I am.”

The door to the room opened, and three men entered. Two I didn’t recognize, but they looked strong, and paid me little attention. They took up posts by the door so I assumed they were guards. The third I did recognize, but barely. It was the shy man from the crowd last night. The bright lights of the conference room showed me his light brown skin, and cast few highlights in his longish black hair. He was handsome, amber eyes set in a kind face with a strong jaw.

I stood, smiling and holding out my hand, while Bas did the same. He shook hands with us in turn, and we sat.

“I know we met last night, briefly, but I did not have the opportunity to tell you my name. I am king Phalen Boudreau,” that explained the bodyguards, “These are Chevaliers Courtney and Gael.”

“Nice to meet you all,” I said, dipping my head. I met his eyes, asserting from the beginning that this was my realm, and I was in charge. He should not expect the shy woman from the performance last night to show up, “What can we do for you today, your majesty?”

He leaned back and surveyed me, running his fingers across his lips thoughtfully. I waited, saying nothing. He seemed to come to a decision, although in my estimation he was more pretending to come to a decision, “I’d like to hire you for a private contract with me.”

I nodded, gesturing for him to continue, and he obliged. Most men will always continue to talk if you let them, “I’d like you to come to my castle in Ville Flue, to live with me for a time. During that time, I’d like to engage in performances that are a similar nature to what you do here. I’d like the court to be the audience and myself to take over the role that Mr. Kerrington normally fills.”

This wasn’t the first time someone wanted to take over Bas’s role, “You are aware that Sebastian and I come as a pair, correct? Although in circumstances like this he serves as my bodyguard, rather than as my sexual partner; and he is always present when any sexual interaction takes place.”

“I’ve been told as much by Ms. Delante,” My boss was already informed? And she’d allowed this meeting? He must be offering a fortune, because she only allowed me to take on private contracts when that person was willing to pay at least an amount equal to what I would have made her were I to perform as I normally do, “She mentioned that you’d been privately contracted before when I inquired.”

I nodded, “That’s true. How long did you want to contract me for?”

“A month with an option for six if we both find the situation agreeable,” I pretended that wasn’t a huge length of time, an absurd length of time.

I did arch an eyebrow at him, “Forgive me, but do they not have whores in Ville Flue?”

A corner of his mouth quirked up, “Of course we do. None quite like you though.”
His eyes flicked to my ears, with their elven points, and I understood. There weren’t that many of us outside of the homeland, “I see. Your majesty, what is it that appeals to you about my scenes with Bas?”

Bas knows why I am asking this question, but it’s unlikely the king does. It is how I am gauging his level of experience. He took a moment to gather his thoughts, and then explained, “My last Chicnaede was like you. She enjoyed being shown off, being embarrassed and such. I found I enjoyed watching other people take pleasure in her flesh. I enjoyed directing the experiences - within the boundaries she’d set for me, of course, I know which of you is really in charge on that stage - and I’ve been looking for someone who enjoyed a similar thing since she and I went our separate ways.”

I didn’t push that point. A Chicnaede wasn’t a whore, and it’s likely they’d had an emotional falling-out. I nodded, satisfied with his answer, and stood, “Sebastian and I will discuss your offer and will return when we’ve made a decision. I assume you’ve left payment details with Ms. Delante?”

“Yes.”

“Then please, take advantage of our hospitality while you wait,” I pressed a button under the table and one of the servants appeared almost immediately, “Ryan, take these men to room 1, please.”

He nodded and gave me a smart little bow, then turned to the king and his bodyguards, “If you’ll follow me, please.”

They left together, and when the door closed behind them, Bas stood up, “Six months? Is he crazy?”

“An option for six months, Bas. One to start with. He’s not crazy, he’s rich.”

“I’m leery of rich men,” he was scowling.

“As am I. Men who can buy what they want or whom they want should be treated with caution. Let us go see exactly what he is willing to pay to buy me,” we left, turning the opposite direction from the hospitality rooms, towards the offices where I knew Rosita would be waiting for me.

As expected, her door was open and she motioned us in. I flopped down in one of her comfy office chairs and said, “So, exactly how good is his offer?”

“Damned good,” she says, and hands me a stack of papers that are turned to the one containing the offer. I scan it, my eyes darting to the number. It’s more than generous, covering accounts for my feeding, housing, dressing, and care as separate from the fee for “services rendered”. It also includes an amount to Rosita that was definitely at the high end of generous for the expected intake for the time. I knew right away that she wanted me to take the deal.

I flip the sheaf of papers to the top and start to read. I long ago had mastered the language of my own contracts, much preferring to read them than rely on someone else. This one had provisions for everything, with a heavy emphasis on my own consent. It included a provision for opting out and how the money would be divided should I do that, and it even included a safe word protocol and details of his expectations of my performance. It was nothing I hadn’t done - and enjoyed - before.

I look up ad Bas when I’m finished, “It’s basically perfect. We just need to add the provision for the trial run in there, and I’m happy with it.”
Bas, who hated reading dense contracts, always relied on me to read them for us. So he just nodded in agreement, “Does it specify my role?”

“Yeah. Entirely security, and specifies that you and I are not to engage in intercourse during the period without his permission. It also says that you’re free to engage sexually with anyone you might meet there, as long as both parties are consenting.”

“I told him that you don’t sell your services to private buyers,” added Rosita. That much was true. I might be a whore, but Bas is only a showman. Anything he did off work hours was strictly voluntary. I stood up and handed her the contract.

“I’m going to assume his lawyers drew this up?”

She nodded, “Yup.”

“Ok, can you have them add a bit about our standard trial one night trial?”

“Sure, I imagine they’ll be quick about it.”

I turned my head to him, “Bas, are you good with accepting?”

“Yeah. I think it’ll be some easy money for us. I just have to stand around and make sure your limits are enforced.”

“Ok, then let’s go inform the lucky soul that he’s rented himself an elf.”
Eamonn, Gregaran

Chapter Summary

Eamonn is a surly priest of the ambitious and power-hungry Abimite religion who would be content to spend the rest of his life not having to talk to people. He gets a rude surprise when the leader of his order sends him away to the city of Keehlayhan.

Chapter Notes

No explicit scenes in this one, just another introductory chapter. There's a bunch of those because this story is big and complex and follows a lot of characters.

“Do you know why I’ve called you here, Eamonn?,” asked Robert.

“I do not,” he answered, shifting on his feet. He’d been waiting in this drafty room for more time than he deemed strictly necessary, and he wanted to be on with his day. If Robert wasn’t the Abim-akah, he would have left after the first five minutes. He fidgeted with the sleeve of his robe, waiting for the old man to continue.

“How well do you speak Kellan?”

Eamonn shrugged, “Passably well. Why?”

“And your Korianan?”

“As well as can be expected, given that the bulk of them have been missing for thousands of years. Again, my lord, why?,” Robert, who tried to be politically deft and cunning, was simply boring. What else could be expected from a Gregory? They’d been ruling Gregaran for so long that they’d fossilized. They were all the same, the Gregorys. They ruled like they lived: out of habit.

“I’m sending you to Kelly. Specifically, into the king’s service. You’ll be taking Casey, Dierdreh and a few others, and you’ll be providing the king with spiritual guidance,” the old eyes flicked up and down Eamonn’s person, appraising him, “and any other guidance he might need.”

Keehleyhan? He couldn’t guess Robert’s reasons for the assignment, but he wasn’t going to look a gift horse in the mouth, “May I ask why?”

“The red bitches have someone in the luminite service hall at the castle already, and I need to ensure their efforts are opposed,” he sat behind his desk, the chair making barely any noise at all under the light burden of a withered, old skeleton of a man. He looked off into the distance, staring in the direction of the sunbeam coming from the only window in the circular office. He looked back at Eamonn and said, “We’ve also learned that this king may be more kindly disposed towards us.”

Strange, rulers normally only tolerated the presence of the Abimites in their towns and cities. One
willing to listen to them could be a much-needed windfall, “Are you going to make me ask?”

“He is the anilumietra.”

A simple, explosive proclamation. The first thing that came to Eamonn’s mind was, “He?”

“Yes, the king is a man,” Robert rolled his eyes.

“But the lumietra and anilumietra are not. They’re women.”

“No, there are a few recorded instances of the spirit choosing a man. It’s rare, but it happens.”

“Who is the lumietra?”

“We don’t know, we’ve been unable to locate them. Not entirely unsurprising considering that spirit’s affinity for hiding.”

Eamonn nodded in agreement, “True enough. And what of the current clergy in the Abimite service hall?”

“Are you not abim-wen?”

“Yes.”

“Then act like it.”

“As you say, Abim-akah,” answered Eamonn, bobbing his head in a slight bow.

“Go,” Robert replied, flicking his hand dismissively.

Eamonn went, finding his way back down the drab, twisting stone corridors of the tower that the leader of their religion lived in. He hated that tower. It was cold, dark, and far removed from anywhere else in the monastery. Why Robert chose to live there was beyond him.

Halfway back to his rooms he was intercepted by one of Robert’s pages. The boy handed him a sealed envelope and said, “Excellency said that you left this behind.”

He suppressed the urge to say something snarky because the boy’s words weren’t his own, he was required to relay Robert’s message as dictated. Instead, he took the envelope and nodded, “Thank you.”

The boy ran off and Eamonn continued on to his rooms. It only took a few more minutes of walking for him to arrive. He found his way to his desk and say, grabbing a nearby letter opener and slicing open the oversized manila folio. He pulled out several sheets of parchment and leafed through them. They were all what was expected for the trip: assigned traveling companions, cargo, provisions, and a letter of assignment.

Setting them down, he leaned back, the springs of his leather chair creaking. Being assigned to the service hall in the castle was no small thing, and if the king really was the anilumietra, then the opportunity was huge. He understood why someone would need to be assigned, and he understood why it needed to be someone with a higher rank, but he couldn’t figure out why Robert had chosen him. They’d never particularly liked each other, sometimes openly opposing one another.

Nevertheless, he’d go. It was something he couldn’t pass up. He’d find out more when he got to the city. He smiled to himself, as thoughts of the vices of the city came to him. If nothing else, the
posting meant having a good time.

***

“All I ever do anymore is scowl. Scowl and shiver,” Eamonn commented under his breath, shivering and frowning when the wind cut through his cloak. He was waiting with the rest of the Abimites outside of the checkpoint at the border of Kelly and Llellwyn. There was a fence made from stones that stretched as far as he could see in either direction. It was lined with wooden spikes and soldiers. The stink of the hundred-year army assaulted his nose, and other people trying to get in crowded his space. Refugees, mostly, from other countries. Kelly had the hundred-year war and the hundred-year army, but the others weren’t much for peace either.

“And not a single fair maiden to oogle,” joked Marcus. Robert hadn’t chosen Marcus to join them, but Eamonn made him come anyway. He suspected he’d need to rely on their friendship while in the city, ‘Brother, all you’ve ever done is scowl and shiver. Since we were children. You know the mountain air never agreed with you.”

“You could at least humor me and not be so quick to point it out.”

“I’d be a shit brother if I didn’t take a swing at perfect pitches.”

Eamonn just rolled his eyes, “Two days, Marc. Two days they’ve made us sit out here in the shit and mud with everyone else. How long could it possibly take for them to read one letter of permission and check our transport papers?”

Marcus shrugged, “You’re the one who wanted to wear those lovely emerald robes.”

“It’s illegal to deny us entrance just because we’re Abimites.”

“It might be illegal to deny you, but not to detain you.”

Near the gate, one of the guards came forward and shouted, “Number three-hundred and ninety four?”

“That’s us,” said Amara, another one of his travelling companions.

He nodded in reply, “I’m aware, thank you.”

He crossed the trodden grass to the man. He was dressed in the smart red and black plate of the Kellan military, although he didn’t have his helmet on. He was holding a sheaf of papers that looked familiar. When Eamonn got close he said, “Are you Eamonn Relison?”

“I am,” he replied.

“How many are in your party?”

“Seven.”

He nodded, as if this was new information, “The immigration chancellor has reviewed your paperwork and contacted the castle’s abomite service hall. They’ve decided to let you in. After you cross here, you have three days to register at the gates of Alledran.”
The officer handed back the stack of papers, “Understood.”

He walked back to his camp, examining them. All of the transport papers had the stamp of the Kellan military on them - water below a crude image of the great wall. He folded them and tucked them into a pocket of his robes, re-entering his group as he did so, “We’re free to enter. We have three days to make it through the songling fields and check in at wall.”

He re-mounted his horse and they approached the gate, where a different guard re-checked the re-issued papers. All appeared to be in line, and they were allowed through. Eamonn didn’t fail to noticed the nasty look the soldier gave him though.

The hundred-year camp was exactly as people said it was: a temporary town built entirely around an enormous army. It had roads through the many tents, pens for animals, children running through the streets, women doing the hard labor that all women did, but no buildings. Nothing more permanent than a large tent. Yet here they lived: steel clanged, horses neighed, people yelled and cursed, the smells of cooking mixed with the smells of unwashed bodies and animals, and life carried on. There was no end in sight, and fear coiled in Eamonn’s belly at the thought of this massive beast ever stirring from its defensive position.

“Look at that one,” Marc interrupted his thoughts, his head indicating one of the sparring rings. In it there were two people sparring, and Eamonn suspected that it wasn’t the tall, lanky teenaged boy that Marc was indicating. It was the tall, lanky, olive-skinned, dark-haired woman he was sparring with. Even wearing a chainmail shirt as she was, he could tell the woman was all tits and ass - just as Marc liked them. Eamonn had different tastes, so he shrugged.

“I don’t see the appeal.”

Marc rolled his eyes, “How can you not see the appeal of a pair of soft tittes and a jiggly ass?”

“How can you not see the appeal of a nice, thick, long cock and a tight ass?”

“You know I hate it when you do that.”

Eamonn smiled his first real smile in some time, “I know.”

It took them a couple of hours of riding to clear the encampment. In front of them lay the huge expanse of the Songling fields. The wind blew, rushing through the enchanted grass, making the sound that gave the field its name. It seemed warmer on this side of the army. As they rode, Eamonn looked out over the empty space, trying to spot the Alledran. It was too far away, but the distant mountains that ringed the field disappeared from view towards the center of it. The road went directly for that gap.

As they rode that day, they didn’t encounter more than the odd cluster of soldiers heading east. No civilians, and no one going west. The vast prairie didn’t have any structures and didn’t grow any food. Just endless, musical grass. When the sun set, the night got even colder. Nothing protected them from wind that was howling. Luckily one of the other priests, Fortune, was a fire speaker, and he created a warm flame for them to sleep near.

When the sun rose the next day, they realized they could see the wall in the distance, and as they rode they finally caught up to other westward travellers. There were a few lone refugees, and several long caravans of merchants driving huge wagons full of goods. Because their group was only seven, they were able to pass the slower moving merchants and refugees. Eamonn tried very hard to ignore the signs against evil that were made and the lack of eye contact or the disgusted looks as they passed. He reminded himself that he was going to the capital, into the king’s service,
and he’d see worse. He needed to become hardened to their derision. He needed to take their hate and ignorance and let it fuel him.

So he held himself straight in his saddle, and pretended they weren’t behaving like that. He’d nod cordially and offer polite greetings. Wished them good fortune on their journey. Getting the populace more accustomed to Abimites would be key to more widespread acceptance. One merchant seeing him behave like a normal human being wouldn’t give him the power he wanted, but large numbers could.

We made the wall at the end of the third day. Up close, it was unfathomably large. Running for miles in either direction, from one mountain range to the other. Intricate carvings covered all of the space that I could see. They said that the wall contained the entire history of the Korianans, and that they had carved every major event into it still in sections towards the edges where it still had blank space.

In front of us was an arched opening, the doors pushed back. It looked wide enough for ten merchant carts to fit abreast. Here there was activity, people coming and going through the gate, showing their papers to the guards. Unlike the guards at the front, these guards weren’t keeping people out. They checked the papers, gave a stamp, and allowed people through. It only took ten minutes for them to make their way to us, check our papers, and let us through.

The city sat in a bowl between two mountain ranges, one to the north and one to the south. Both could be seen in the distance, with homes on carved terraces along the southern range. The wall was on the eastern side of the city and, although I couldn’t see it, I knew that the smaller western side was a waterfront. This was what allowed the city to thrive - it was firmly seated between the dwarves and elves and acted as a neutral ground that allowed trade. Most of their food came this way too, as they couldn’t grow large enough quantities of their own and the war cut off access to Mannonesha long ago.

The northern slope was dominated by the castle. Nothing else was on that mountainside, just the huge sprawl of the grey stone building. Even at this distance I could tell how large it was.

The city itself did not abut the wall or the gate. There was much more room behind the wall than I’d expected. The land that was between the edges of the buildings and the wall was all farmland. To the left of the road - the south side - was a row of inns and travel shops that made a sort of shanty town that greeted incoming travellers. Guides and horse rentals and food stalls were shouting for business, mixed in with all of the others. Behind them, through sparse buildings, I could see the drag stone wall that closed off the ancient, cursed ruins of Old City. No one entered that section, nor used it for anything, because it had burned in an unnatural fire some two hundred years after the city’s creation. I shuddered and turned away, to the northern side of the road on my right. It was all farmland, from the wall to the edges of the city proper, and north to the other mountains. It was larger than I thought, because I couldn’t see the far edges of it, and the city was still some ways off in the distance. In front of us, farther down the road, lay the taller buildings at the city center.

We stopped, and I got off my horse. I flagged down one of the guides, a teenage boy that looked cleaner than the others. alexi

“What’s your name?,” I asked him.

“Alexi,” he answered, “Rate’s three rat an hour.”

“Do you have a horse?”
“Aye. Where to?”

“That’ll be three rat five ear.”

I dug the money out of my purse, careful to hide the contents, “I can pay.”

“Right, wait here,” he ran away, and returned in a few moments on a chestnut gelding. He took the head of our line, and we followed him down the road.

Even at a steady trot, it took an hour before we reached the city center, and another hour before we reached the castle gate. The road had turned from dirt to stone pavers when we’d entered at the gate, but many of the side streets were still mud. Even so, it was surprisingly clean. Either we didn’t pass through the worst parts, or it possessed some way of dealing with human waste that other cities didn’t. For that matter, it occurred to me that although the hundred year army stunk, it didn’t smell of human waste. I wondered what the Kellans had devised to deal with that reality.

There were more vendors, more inns, more homes, and more of everything. Closer to the castle gate we even passed a theatre. Finally, we cleared the buildings and entered an open square in front of a wall that ran between us and the castle’s courtyard. Because of the castle’s elevation and height, I could easily see it beyond the wall. It was more impressive up close. Now I could make out the carved detail and see how smooth the stones were. I couldn’t see joints anywhere, the thing looked like it was molded out of the mountain. The only spots of color were the deep purple tiles of the pointed roofs of the various towers and their gold spires. From far away it had looked something like a toy. Up close it was elegant and imposing, and not the drab thing I’d expected.

In front of us lay another arched entryway, although this one was much smaller. A guardhouse stood on either side of it, guards in the house and two more standing on either side of the gate. The gate was closed, so we approached the guards. I again took the lead, digging my letter of introduction out of my robes and approaching the nearest guard.

I noticed that his uniform was different. All of the guards wore plain banded plate, with greaves, helmet, and pauldrons. There was little decoration on it, aside from the finished edges of the pieces. The city guards and the army were red and black, these guards wore black and silver. The rounded part of the pauldron had the sigil of the twin spirits on it - white fire surrounding a black globe.

“Good day,” I said, handing the guard my letter.

He looked at me, and somehow it seemed like he was tired. Not sleepy, but tired in the way that makes your eyes itch and your bones ache. His voice matched, “Name?”

“Eamonn Relison.”

He nodded and walked over to the nearest guard tower. I heard voices, but they weren’t close enough for me to eavesdrop. He came back to me after a few moments, “Will you be replacing abim-fa Cal?”

“Yes, after some time. Do you know Cal?”

“I do. I see him in service on holy day.”

He handed me back my letter and I gave him what I hoped was a welcoming smile,”I look forward to seeing you on holy day as well.”
“I try. Welcome to the castle, abim-wen Relison,” he banged on the door behind him, and it started to open. I paid Alexi, got back on my horse, and went through the open door.
Chapter Summary

Two months have passed since Danae ran from home and followed Isandro across the Songling and out to the border where the 100-year army resides. Under his tutelage, she proves to be a quick study of both swordplay and military command, quickly outpacing Petyr. But when something kicks the hornets nest of the 100-year army, she follows it out into the field.

Chapter Notes

This contains, if my memory is correct, two scenes. One of Danae/Isandro, and one of Danae and another partner who is introduced in this chapter (I <3 him, he's one of my favs. I can't resist a good rogue.). If you dislike the May/December thing, the second partner isn't a December. No BDSM in the scenes that I can remember.

This one is also really long. Honestly it should have been two or more chapters, but back when I was writing it I wasn't as good at knowing when to do chapter breaks.

Brain thinks, body follows, wood smashes wood with a loud clack. Or, at least, that’s the idea. The bruises covering my body from these sparring sessions would seem to say that wood met flesh more than other wood. Though more and more lately I’m receiving fewer bruises and losing few matches against Petyr. It’s only been two months, but already I can tell that I’m better than him. Faster, quickly becoming stronger, and more talented.

This time proves to be like the others. He swings, I duck, and then I lunge. My body weight smashes into him and we tumble to the ground, me on top, and I press the “blade” of the wooden practice sword to his throat crossways. Charging him isn’t strictly within the rules, but I don’t care. I want to win.

“Yield,” he says, ending the match. Then, as I get up, under his breath, “Cheater.”

I reach down to help him up, “I’m a woman, we fight dirty. We have to.”

“You opponents won’t fight cleanly anyway, Petyr. It’s good practice.” I turn to the voice, and smile as I see Isandro standing outside the sparring ring. He’s leaning against the bars of the ring, watching us intently. Now, he climbs over and joins us.

“Why even have rules,” Petyr grumbled.

Isandro doesn’t acknowledge it, but turns to me, “You’re learning fast.”

“Am I?”

“Considering that I’ve been training Petyr about two years now, yes. You need a real master-at-
arms to train you, because after you start putting on some real muscle, you’ll be impossible for him to beat.”

“I’m impossible for him to beat as it is,” I grinned at him, “Maybe I’ll give you a run for your money.”

One corner of his mouth quirked up. In private, he was funny, affectionate, and liked to laugh. When we were around other people, he tried to be aloof and stern. I tried for aloof and stern too, but he was much better at it, “Maybe, someday. Petyr, have you figured out yet how she keeps beating you?”

“No,” he admitted, his tone frustrated, “I have more experience, I’m stronger, and my forms are tighter.”

“Danae, do you know why you beat him?”

“I do, sir.”

“Good. Keep it to yourself until he figures it out.”

“Well, I don’t want to start losing, so I think I’ll sit on that info,” I said, my tone sarcastic. He gave me an annoyed look, one I’d come to know meant that I was skirting too close to insubordination, “I mean, yes, sir.”

“Your next match is the day after tomorrow, correct?” We nodded. I trained every other day, in order to give my body time to heal between bouts. It hadn’t helped in the beginning, and I’d been sore all the time, but I was used to it now, “Whomever wins will get two gold solars.”

“A bet, sir?,” Petyr asked.

“No, motivation.”

Petyr’s grin sent shivers - the bad kind - down my spine. Might this be a new, more competitive side? I welcomed it, because sometimes he was far too boring. And two solars was a lot of money.

“Anyway,” Isandro continued, addressing me, “get out of your training gear, I need you to come to a meeting with me.”

“Yes, sir,” half the time when he said that he was being literal, and half the time he wasn’t. I walked over to the side of the ring and pulled off my training helmet and chain shirt. I dumped them in the pile with the other training armor for whomever was on ring duty to take care of. Isandro hopped over the fence, and I followed him. Petyr stayed in the ring, motioning to one of the other squires standing around the ring. As I dropped my wooden training sword into the rack with the rest, he started practicing again.

It didn’t matter, now that I’d figured out how to beat him, he’d never win again. Isandro started walking and I followed him, walking through the muddied paths to the tent that we shared.

“I’ll need you to dress up tonight,” he said as we walked. I’d been acting as his secretary at almost all of his meetings, and when he wanted me to be most ignored he had me look the most ornamental. It wasn’t a strategy I wanted to employ my entire life, but in this circumstance it was proving to be an excellent tool of deceit.

I nodded, “Who are you meeting with tonight?”
“The normal group, but there’s been an incident at the northern section of the border,” I gave him an inquisitive look, arching a brow, and he gave me a small shake of the head, “I don’t know that many details, just that we’ll be going over it in about two hours. Is that enough time?”

“It should be. I’ll go see Jesse and meet you back at the tent.”

He grimaced, “I can never figured out whether I should say him or her. I’ve bloody spent years of my life in this camp and I still don’t know.

I shrugged, “I think that’s kind of the point. I don’t think they’ve chosen one or the other.”

“I’m too old for this kind of brain exercise,” he gave an exaggerated sigh, stopping as we got to the crossroads where we’d need to part.

“Not so old,” I grinned and went on tip-toe to give him a quick kiss on his cheek, “See you in an hour.”

He gave me a playful pat on the ass and we went our separate ways. When I first arrived, I’d gotten lost all the time. Everything looked the same to me, and I kept disappearing for hours at a time. Petyr was no help, so I was late all the time. Finally Isandro told me how to read the paintings on the tents to find my way. Now I knew where I was going without having to check.

I stepped through the open flaps of Jesse’s tent and into the cool interior. Unlike most of the other tents I’d been in, Jesse took the most care with their work area. The bolts of cloth were arranged in neat stacks on shelves line either side of the tent. In front of me is a pedestal and a nearby mirror. Behind that, near the back of the tent, is Jesse’s workbench. They’re sitting at it, engrossed in the project in their lap.

They have a slim built, taller than the average woman but shorter than the average man. They wore clothing that was loose, but well-cut, hiding anything that might be under it. All ateliers wore pants for ease of working, so the style never hinted at their gender either. Short hair and facial features that could be seen as a womanish-man or a boy-ish woman made the vision of androgyny complete. I’d always thought them to be an attractive person either way, partially because of the striking jade color of their eyes against the black of their hair and brown of their skin.

They looked up as I entered and I smiled. They could be kind of dour on occasion, and I liked to poke fun by being as sarcastically cheerful as possible, “Guess what?”

“You need a last minute dress because your boss decided to prance you around like a prize pony at dinner tonight?,” they responded, looking back at their work and fidgeting with something.

“You’re so good at this game. Have you got anything lying around?”

“They have a slim built, taller than the average woman but shorter than the average man. They wore clothing that was loose, but well-cut, hiding anything that might be under it. All ateliers wore pants for ease of working, so the style never hinted at their gender either. Short hair and facial features that could be seen as a womanish-man or a boy-ish woman made the vision of androgyny complete. I’d always thought them to be an attractive person either way, partially because of the striking jade color of their eyes against the black of their hair and brown of their skin.

They looked up as I entered and I smiled. They could be kind of dour on occasion, and I liked to poke fun by being as sarcastically cheerful as possible, “Guess what?”

“You need a last minute dress because your boss decided to prance you around like a prize pony at dinner tonight?,” they responded, looking back at their work and fidgeting with something.

“You’re so good at this game. Have you got anything lying around?”

“Not that you’ll be able to stuff those tits into,” they replied, ever blunt.

“Are you sure? Nothing hidden away in your archives? I can’t possibly be the only woman with big breasts in this whole camp”

“I’m sure, I only had three dresses to begin with, and you’ve worn all those.”

“Nothing you can do some really quick alterations on?,” I pleaded. Isandro would not be pleased if I came back still dressed in my training gear.

“Oh come on, can’t you just drape something around me and call it a dress?”
“No, I--,” they cut themselves off and abruptly stood, “Wait here.”

They rushed outside, presumably to the tent full of clothing I knew was next door. I waited patiently, knowing better than to touch anything. In a few minutes they came back, carrying a lump of light pink fabric.

“Undress and get up,” they said, gesturing to the pedestal in the center of the room. They gently lay the pile of fabric on their work table, and go to tie the door of their tent shut while I undress.

It only takes me a couple of minutes to drop all of my gear and clothes and get onto the pedestal. The first time I did this I’d gotten nervous, but Jesse was so professional that I never felt uncomfortable.

The lump of fabric turned out to be a long, sheer silk skirt with a jeweled waistband. Jesse handed me a pair of stretchy lace leggings first. I pulled them on, and put my arms up. They slid the skirt over my arms and head and let it settle on my hips. Behind me, they pulled the ties, tightening the waist of the skirt closed.

It reached the ground, falling perfectly in delicate folds of sheer fabric. It moved like silk waves every time I turned, shimmering in the candle lantern light inside the tent. Before she started on a top for me, she handed me a damp rag and let me wash the sweat of practice from under my arms and off the rest of my upper body.

Then they produced a long streamer of pink silk and started draping and tying. When they were done, my top was covered - barely. I frowned, “I feel like I’m going to fall out of this.”

“You won’t,” they answered, “I’ve wrapped you and taped you so it just looks like you’re going to fall out. Bend over and move around so you can see.”

I did, leaning forward and bending down. I felt everything move, but it all stayed covered by the silk. What’s more, the silk accentuated every movement, making it all exaggerated. I turned side to side, watching myself in the mirror. I saw hints and curves, my stomach and most of my back were bare, but only the sides of my breasts were showing, “Oh, I am going to make an excellent distraction.”

Jesse smirked, “Well, that’s the idea, right?”

“You’re so good at your job,” I said, hopping off the pedestal.

“Yeah, I am,” they rummaged around on a nearby shelf and produced a drab looking sack for me to shove my swordplay clothes into, “Now try to bring this back without mud on everything, ok? Or any other mystery stains.”

I didn’t have the grace to blush under her glare, “What can I say, your talent turns the commander on.”

“That’s fine, just stop letting him get it all over the dress!”

“Um, er...it’s not him.”

It took them a second before they got it, but they put their head in their hand, “I did NOT need to know that.”

“Then best not ask about mystery liquids on dresses.”
“Duly noted,” I shoved my clothes in the sack and tugged on my shoes and they produced another bag and handed it to me as I stood up, “Heels to match the dress.”

“You’re the best, Jesse!,” I took both sacks and hurried out of the tent. I was careful to hold my skirt up high and out of the mud as I walked back to the commander’s tent.

When I got back he was sitting in the chair at the desk, and I dumped the sack with my own clothes on the far side of the large tent, next to the bed we shared. A bed I knew we’d be making good use of later. I wasn’t kidding when I told Jesse that the commander was fond of her outfits. I was going to get fucked in all directions tonight, and I shuddered in pleasure at the thought.

I took the shoes out and pulled on the delicate, strappy light-pink heeled sandals before I turned around and walked back to his desk, pirouetting in front of him. He watched me, and the look on his face was unreadable. He was still in his armor, so I couldn’t even see his body reacting.

“It’s a lot of skin,” he finally said.

“Too much? You did say distracting. Ornamental.”

“Yes, but I need to be able to think too.”

I shrugged, “Jesse only has so many things sitting around in their cache. This was all that would fit me.”

I walked over and sat on the edge of the desk, across from him, and turned towards him, “You look like you’re going to fall out of that top. It’s very...jiggly.”

I wiggled my eyebrows at him, “That’s the idea. I won’t fall out of it.”

“Pity,” he gave me a smile.

“You can take me out of it later.”

“Keep talking like that, and I’ve half a mind to bend you over the desk and--”

“Now, now we don’t have time for that. Petyr will be bringing dinner in soon.”

“Maybe.”

“And if he were to catch us?”

“Then maybe he’d finally learn something.”

“So you like it then?”

“Yes, I like it.”

“Good,” I answered hopping off the desk. I walked back over to the bed and grabbed my hairbrush off a nearby table, “I should be ready in a couple of minutes.”

He nodded, not replying, but he watched me as I went about the process of brushing my hair and putting a bit of makeup on. As I was finishing, the other commanders arrived, and they took a seat around the large table that dominated the center area of the tent between the desk near the front and the bed near the back.

I looked around at the men, already knowing their names. The tall one to Isandro’s left with the
long, blonde hair was Duncan the Black. Isandro refused to tell me why he was called that, but I
could render a guess. To Duncan’s left was the general, the commander of the entirety of the
Kellan military. He was Isandro’s rival, and the only person who out-ranked him. He’s short and
broad, with deep lines in his tanned face, and hair as red as a luminite priest’s. His name was Bart
Cotton, and the way he looked at me always made me glad of Isandro’s presence. Next to him and
across from Duncan is Andrew Blackfeather, Bart’s own non-military advisor. To me, he was
always a forgettable man, and I think it was partially by design. He kept his dung-brown hair short,
his brown eyes and light skin clear, and his clothes plain and boring. I knew him from these
meetings though, and he was one of the smartest men in the room. Even Isandro sometimes made
the mistake of forgetting that.

Across from Isandro was Kyne Sunkfort, another commander. Kyne was another tall man, with
broad shoulders, and strong, thin build. His thinness showed in his face, in his sharp jaw and bird-
lke blade of a nose. He had hair as black as a bird’s wing, and always wore a cloak that was black
as his hair. Combined with his too-light skin, the whole thing made him look vaguely corpse-like.

Next to him, across from the general, was the last of the leaders of our military. Leigh Craksbury
was the only man aside from Isandro that I could stand. Moreover, he was the only man who saw
through the ornament and understood what I really was. He was a few inches taller than me, and
although he was only in his thirties, he had snow-white hair that he wore in a braid reaching his
hips. He had light blue eyes that matched his light hair, and skin the same sort of sun-darkened
olive tone as mine. He was handsome in a sort of boyish way, and I sometimes joked to Isandro
that if I had to choose someone else - it would be Leigh. Leigh also was frequently Isandro’s ally,
and that made me like him more.

I grabbed the pitcher of wine off the cupboard as they all got settled, and poured them each a glass.
I didn’t get as many lewd stares as normal, so either they were becoming accustomed to me or
something was going on. I bet on the latter, because even Leigh only gave me a passing smile in
place of small talk and a quick joke.

Andrew dropped an arm full of differently sized scrolls onto the table in front of the general, some
of them rolling and bouncing out of reach. Many of them appeared to be letters, or scrolls brought
by messenger birds, others were clearly maps. I took my place at the wall near the wine and
watched.

The general spoke first, “There’s been an attack.”

His voice sounded tired, like he hadn’t the wherewithal to deal with the border skirmishes that had
made up most of his military career. Andrew grabbed on of the large scrolls and unrolled it to
show a large map of Kelly. Mountains to the north, mountains to the south, and between them the
four provinces that share our border: Gregaran, Charias, Llellwyn, and Lecheska. Lecheska was by
far the most stable part of the border, the Lecheskans never bothered to come down out of their
mountains. There simply wasn’t a good enough route to make it worth the trouble. They were
much more interested in harassing Mannonesha, since that’s where the food was. The same
applied to Gregaran. No, our problems almost always came from Charias and, much less
frequently, Llellwyn.

Andrew grabbed several of the rocks scattered on the tabletop that were for exactly this purpose,
and used them to hold down the corners of the map. He pointed at an area near where the
mountains started in Charias, “There. At the Stair Fort.”

The Stair Fort? What kind of a ridiculous name was that for a place? But at the mention of it, Leigh
groaned and the other men sighed heavily. Bart stood and leaned forward to address his
commanders, “A combined force of Llellwyns and Chariasans attacked the line three days ago. It’s been weak in that spot for awhile because of its distance from the main army, and the combined army was able to separate a group and chase them into the fort. Now they’ve got them treed on that damned mountainside and there’s a wide open hole in the line.”

“So we have a choice of losing our men or allowing them to enter through the gap,” Isandro said.

“It’s obviously a trap,” Leigh commented, shifting in his chair.

“Give us the option of sending more troops after the ones in the fort, or abandoning them and closing the hole in the line,” Isandro added.

“For all we know their true objective is to weaken the line somewhere else by forcing us to take people from one place and put them in another,” Kyne rasped out. His voice was strangely like the rest of him, dry and corpse-like. It would never inspire songs.

“And they had to pick the bloody Stair Fort,” the general sounded frustrated, his deep voice laced with disgust. I wondered what it was about this particular fort they all hated so much. I stayed still on my wall, trying to be forgotten, “We’re going to have to--”

He paused as the tent flap opened and Petyr came in carrying a tray with bread and cheeses. The stayed silent as they watched him serve them. Interesting that they were willing to talk with me around, but not him. Either my camouflage works, or they don’t trust him. Either way, it’s an advantage for me. Once he’s gone, the conversation resumes amongst the crunching of bread.

“We’re going to have to go there either way,” Leigh said, resignation in his voice.

“Aye, we will,” the general agreed. Andrew and Duncan’s silence thus far was making me suspicious. And, if I was reading Isandro right, he felt the same way, “And this is the first break in the line we’ve had in years, so I have to send someone I trust to take care of it.”

Alarm bells were ringing in my head. He only trusts one person - Andrew - and he sure as hell couldn’t send him. There was silence as they waited for him to continue.

“Leigh, Isandro, and Duncan. I’m assigning this to you. Figure out how many men you’ll need, and go to the Stair Fort,” There wasn’t a flicker of surprise on Duncan’s face. I could see the annoyed tightening around Isandro’s eyes, and Leigh just scowled. Beats of silence passed.

“Girl! Wine!,” Duncan barked, breaking the silence. I smoothly moved forward, carrying the decanter to pour him another glass. I stood between him and Bart, purposely hoping to distract the general with my ass. Duncan wasn’t susceptible to weaponized sexuality, he’d made that clear the first time I’d tried it. He still discounted me as a stupid slut, and that was useful too. Bart, though, he was more than susceptible. I constantly caught him eying me. If I could distract him, that would help Isandro. I arched my back a little more as I bent to pour.

When I was done, I took my place at the wall again, making sure my hips swayed with every step. When I turned around, Bart was staring at me. He watched me, and I watched everyone. Leigh watched me too, but he was hiding a knowing smirk.

“What are all those smaller scrolls?,” asked Kyne.

Andrew shrugged, “A variety of communications. Letters from scared commanders, mostly. One threat from the Chariasian commander.”

“Nothing important then,” Kyne said, his voice full of confidence. No caution, that one. Isandro
shot him a look that was full of disdain, but said nothing, “Growl at me all you like, old man, but I don’t see why we should risk three commanders and who knows how many men for a couple of soldier who got themselves into a fix.”

Part of me agreed with him. A few soldiers weren’t worth the resources about to be thrown at them. But unlike Kyne, I was smart enough to understand that there must be another reason why Bart was taking this so seriously.

“Kyne,” began Isandro, “They’re kicking the anthill. We need to go find out why.”

“Then,” said Bart, standing, “I will leave you to your strategy.”

He took a last swig of the wine, grabbed his hunk of bread, and left. Andrew followed in his wake.

“I see no reason to be here,” Kyne drained his glass and stood, “I’ve got things to do.”

Good, I was glad he was leaving. He made my skin crawl, even more than Duncan did. Now it was just Leigh, Duncan, Isandro, and myself.

“We’ll take a hundred men,” growled Duncan, in his ruined voice. I wondered what happened to his throat to make him sound that way. There were no marks on his throat.

“No,” Leigh replied, “That’s not enough.”


“That’s more than they routed,” Duncan disagreed.

“It will make us safe if it’s an ambush,” replied Isandro.

“They’re not going to ambush us with a small number of men, they’re hoping will send more.”

“Then we send more. The numbers they ambush us with will not change.”

“A hundred, and fifty Weavers.”

That gave Isandro pause. I didn’t know what Weavers were, but clearly it meant something. Leigh interjected, “That might work. Where can we take the men from?”

“The safest place would be the Lecheskan border,” Isandro answered.

“But we don’t have time for that. Next best is to pick them up here,” he pointed to a spot on the border of Llêlwyn that wasn’t near anything.

“That could work, there’s nothing for miles and it’s of no importance. It will be thick with men and have them to spare. We’ll take ten Weavers from here and ten more from each heavy encampment along the way.”

“Not leaving any too light on Weavers,” Isandro nodded, “That will work. We’ll leave in the morning.”

Duncan stood, leaving his wine and bread on the table, “In the morning then.”

That left only myself, Isandro, and Leigh. Because it was just them I grabbed the pitcher and a spare goblet and plopped myself into Kyne’s abandoned chair across from Isandro. I poured myself a glass and took a deep draught.
“Well,” I said, “that was interesting.”

Isandro leaned back and crossed his hands across his stomach, “What did you see?”

“Duncan already knew everything. He didn’t even flinch when Bart told you what was going on.”

“What else?”

“Kyne is an idiot,” Next to me, Leigh snorted a laugh, “Well, he is!”

“I don’t disagree, it just amuses me to see a lady speak so baldly,” Leigh chuckled.

I rolled my eyes at him, “Oh my, ladies have thoughts!”

“Oh, I’m aware. And you, in particular, have a great many thoughts. About all manner of things,” Our eyes met and his gaze held something else, something just barely predatory. Something that drew me in, called to the part of me that chased danger. I don’t know what my face held, but it was Isandro clearing his throat broke our gaze.

“Did you notice anything else?,” Isandro said.

“Something about this all seems off. I get why he sends you and Leigh, he wants to keep his rival away, and Duncan is going along to spy. But why give you the chance for glory? Glory that could cause you to be raised in rank? No,” I mused, staring into space contemplatively, “Something else is at work here.”

“I’d thought you would say that, and my instincts agree. Your observations have proven to be far too accurate in the past.”

“If Duncan insists on choosing where to get the men from, we must find a way to undermine him,” Leigh interjected.

“Agreed,” replied Isandro, “I’m just not sure yet how to do that.”

“Duncan doesn’t trust you. Let that be your reason, and he won’t be surprised,” I suggested.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, simply say, ‘I’ve brought my own men because I mistrust you’. He won’t be surprised and he doesn’t have the feelings for offense.”

The two men were quiet, contemplating the task in front of them. It was me that broke the silence, “What are Weavers?”

“Shadow weavers. Mages, of a sort,” Leigh answered, “They fight with sword and magic combined, stepping in and out of shadows. They’re particularly deadly.”

“And the Stair Fort? Why does it have such an odd name, and why do you all seem to find it distasteful?”

Isandro chuckled, “You’ll see in a couple of days.”

“Oh, I’m to go with you?”

“Yes, I expect so. You and Petyr. I can’t very well leave you here. If we’re right, and something
is off about this, having you left behind with the general will likely prove a liability. And you’re of more use to me on the journey, given how adept you’ve proven yourself to be at reading people.”

“Well, I’m glad that’s one less argument we’ll have to have,” I smiled sweetly, innocently. He knew better, obviously.

Finally, the last to go, Leigh stood. He inclined his head to both of us, “Don’t stay up to late.”

He gave me a knowing smirk and left, and I reached under the table to take the heels off. I hadn’t even been standing long, but my feet were already aching. We both got up, leaving the table, and I helped Isandro get his armor off. He helped me remove mine, hands gliding over my skin, and we tumbled into bed.

Later, we lay there, my back to his front, guttering candle light playing across our skin. His fingers traced abstract patterns across my hip. His voice was soft in the semi-darkness, “You can sleep with him if you want.”

“Hm?,” I said, roused from my drousing and confused, “Who?”

“Leigh.”

I turned over in his arms to look at him, “Why would you say something like that?”

“I’m not so old that I don’t recognize flirting when I see it. He’s a decent man, he won’t hurt you.”

“I don’t want to leave you,” I assured him, the idea of it making me distinctly uncomfortable. And yet, I had on more than one occasion wondered what it would be like to bed Leigh.

“I didn’t think you did. But I know what you are, and I know your needs are greater than mine. Our partnership is one of mutual convenience, desire and, I hope by this point, affection. But we are not in love, and we are not promised to each other. What I require from you is loyalty, not monogamy. Can you do that?”

“I can. I never think of betrayal,” and it was true, my partnership with him was far too advantageous to me. And I did feel affection for him, besides. I hoped I’d never have a reason to turn against him. This was a thought I’d had before, in the day time. I never trusted thoughts that came in the dark of the night, especially not after I was sated and comfortable in bed. Thoughts that came in the night were wild and quixotic, not rational. I never made my decisions with them.

“Then I don’t need to hold your body hostage, do with it what you will, so long as your mind stays loyal.”

I kissed him, “Thank you for saying it.”

My body was, of course, always mine. But I liked knowing that I didn’t risk my alliance with him by seeking extra pleasure elsewhere. Soon, sleep claimed me, and I drempt.

I was back in the castle, walking down a gallery near a courtyard garden. Trying to run, but not being able to, in that strange, syrup way of dreams. I heard laughter behind me. I recognized it and stopped trying to run, stopped trying to leap or fly. I stood still and waited.

I was in Caleb’s bedroom. He was on the bed, naked, erect, waiting. I heard a faint buzzing in my head - my subconscious trying to remind me how he’d hurt me. My skin tingled, a thousand tiny nettles running along its surface. I stepped closer to the bed and I was there with him, under him.
The buzzing was louder, but I ignored it, pushed it away. Buried it deep. I would not let the doubts take him away. He moved inside me and I cried out.

I startled awake, thighs soaked. I had no idea what time it was, so I listened for movement outside the tent. I heard it, the very early morning sounds of sleepy footsteps and men stirring in the pre-dawn light. The lights had gone out, and it was dark - the moon had set. I was wrapped in Isandro’s arms, the furs heavy on top of us. I snuggled deeper against his warm body, wiggling my behind against his crotch. I could feel him, morning hard, pressing into my backside.

He stirred, nuzzling my shoulder, kissing it, and he ran his hands over my body. Over the curve of my ass, his fingers dipped between my legs, finding the dream-induced wetness. He grabbed hold of his cock, and I tilted my hips, presenting him with my wet, waiting opening. I liked this best, when he had me without words. When the need overwhelmed me.

He slipped into me, and we both sighed as he slid home. He rocked his hips, sliding in and out, slipping so easily.

“Harder,” I whispered. He obliged, his hips smacking against mine. He was so big in the mornings, he filled me perfectly. I came, quickly and easily, fingers digging into the mattress. He shifted, rolling so that I was face down in the bed and he was straddling my thighs. He pinned my arms down at the wrists, and his hips pushed him deeper inside me. In and out he went, and I couldn’t stop moaning. He felt so good.

Finding the angle a little difficult, he pushed up so he was kneeling. I don’t know if he could see or not, but I know he liked to watch my ass bounce when he fucked me like this. I fucked him back, grinding my hips, urging him on. His fingers dug into my ass cheeks where he held on. Then one hand let go, and came down hard, palm open, on my ass. I squeaked and jumped.

“Please!,” I begged, not knowing what I was begging for. Release, maybe, or more pain. Much more pain. What I got was another smack. Then another, and a few short, lighter slaps. And I came again, harder than the first time, screaming into the pillow. A few hard, deep strokes later, he buried himself in me, filling me with cum that leaked out and dripped down my slit.

He pulled out of me and flopped back down on his side of the bed. It was still dark yet, and we could sleep another hour. The dream’s effects banished, I let him pull me close, cocooning us under the warm blankets. I didn’t want to think of Caleb now, or ever, and I pushed the thoughts away, falling back to sleep.

***

Morning - real morning - came too soon. I hadn’t sunk back into the dream, but I was still tired and I hadn’t bothered to clean anything last night so I was a cold, sticky mess. I pretended to sleep until Isandro got up and called for Petyr to bring him some hot water. When I crawled out of bed after it arrived, he wordlessly handed me a washing cloth. When I wasn’t cold, and I got enough sleep, I was fine with mornings. This morning I was both exhausted and cold. He stoked the flames of the furnace that resided in the center of the tent while I cleaned myself.

We got ready wordlessly. Years in the military had not conditioned the hatred for early mornings out of him, and it was still early enough to not be fully light out. Between our respective grumpiness, we knew it was best not to speak. When I was at least mostly covered, Isandro
shouted called Petyr in from where he was waiting outside the door.

“Breakfast, sir?,” Petyr asked.

“Yes, and ready horses, one for all three of us.”

“Three, sir?”

“Yes, Petyr,” Isandro’s annoyance at being questioned was clear. Definitely on more of a hair trigger than normal, “You, me, and Danae. If you haven’t eaten yet, make sure you do, and be ready to go when we’re done.”

“Where are we going?”

Isandro sighed, “It’s too early in the morning for twenty questions, just do as I say.”

Petyr wisely kept his mouth shut, nodding his head and rushing out. I pulled a pair of leather riding pants over the warm woolen ones I was wearing, as late fall on the Songling was likely to be damned cold. I’d been training with chainmail, so I decided to wear it today. I yanked a warm cotton gambeson over the thin shirt I was already wearing, tying it tight and strapping on a belt. I didn’t have my own armor yet, but gambesons were much cheaper than sets of armor and Isandro acceded to my request for my own when I started training. I blushed a little as I saw Isandro eyeing me critically.

“I thought --,” I started.

“You had a good idea. We’ll stop at the armory on our way out. You’ll need a sword too, and we’ll need to take a few training swords with us so you can continue to practice on the trip.”

I pulled my heavy boots on over my leathers - another gift from Isandro - and stood, “Good. Should we pack our things? How does this all work?”

Instead of making fun of me, he remembered that I came to him with no experience and the clothes on my back, “We’ll pack a trunk and Petyr will take it to be packed into the wagon with the rest of the things that will be brought. Food, mostly.”

“I suppose it’s good that I travel light,” I joked. I only had my small clothes, a brush, some soap, and a change of the light clothing under my heavier clothing. The rest would be on my person.

“One of your many virtues,” he replied, kissing me lightly. I wanted heavier kisses, and our bodies wrapped up, naked, but we didn’t have time. For once in my life I wished it was possible for me to be sated. It wasn’t, though, that feeling only lasted moments. Once the afterglow faded, I wanted more. I must have arched against him, or given some signal, because when he pulled away from me he continued, “And we need to find you another kind of teacher.”

I frowned, “What do you mean?”

“Spellcraft,” he replied, “It’s been two months and you haven’t cast a single spell. Someone needs to teach you your language, or what’s left of it, and how to use your power.”

The thought made my stomach tie in knots, and an all-too-familiar buzzing faintly rattled in my head. I hadn’t even thought about it. What kind of Korianan doesn’t try to cast magic? Me, that’s what kind, “I don’t think that’s necessary. My fire got interrupted and I don’t think I can do it anyway.”
He shook his head, “Nevertheless, you’re going to try.”

I sighed, knowing that arguing with him, especially before breakfast, was useless. He was stubborn as the day is long, in a gentle, reproachful way. He just quietly refused to move when he believed he was in the right. And it could be that he was in the right, I simply didn’t relish the idea of learning to cast magic, “Where are we going to find one, anyway? My kind are so rare these days.”

There was time when we’d been plentiful, as numerous as any other kind. But then - in a time so long ago that there was no real record of it - they all disappeared, and would have been forgotten if not for a sudden reappearance of us a little more than a thousand years ago. Korianan always gave birth to korianan, no matter whom we mated with, but it was also possible for one of another species to give birth to one of my kind. That was what happened with me, and with the king. As far as we knew, we were the only two in all of Kelly. There must be others in the other provinces, but as far as I knew he’d never encountered another of our kind and neither had I.

“I’ll worry about that,” He said. Petyr opened the tent flap, interrupting us. I noticed he’d changed into a gambelon, too.

“I’ve eaten, and after this I’ll go get the horses ready.”

“Good,” Isandro replied, “I’ll have your things packed, just worry about the horses. We’ll meet you at the stables in an hour.”

“I’ll be there,” Petyr replied, and left. He and I sat down and shoveled food in, finishing quickly. We tossed our respective things in a trunk, which took him far longer than it took me. While I waited I tied my hair back into a braid that went from the crown of my head to the small of my back. It was easy for an enemy to grab, but more functional for me. I thought, for the thousandth time, about cutting it short.

After we were packed, Isandro flagged down a passing porter and got him to take the trunk, then I grabbed my belt, we tossed on our heavy cloaks and gloves and headed towards the armory.

Although the blacksmiths weren’t located in a tent, the products of their efforts were. The guard let us in, knowing Isandro on sight. Because we were taking soldiers with us, the lamps were all already lit for the day, and some of the stocks pillaged. He led me over to the racks of chain. Horizontal poles were stuck through a vertical pillar at different intervals, slightly offset from the one above it, and the horizontal pole went through the arms of the chain shirts, allowing for the space-saving organization of the armor.

He seemed to know how everything was stored, and he went directly for the smaller sizes. Although sizing didn’t need to be exact, there still was only so much room in a chain shirt. He slid one off of a pole as I took my cloak off and laid it over a nearby rack. He helped me get it on over the gambeson, sliding it into place. It came down to the tops of my thighs, allowing me to still easily move in it.

Next, we went over to the racks of swords. He looked at me and gestured, “Pick one.”

“Any one that I’d like?”

“Aye. It’s on loan though, like the other soldiers’ weapons.”

“I’ll try not to lose it,” I ran my fingers over the pommels as I walked down the row, thinking about what I’d like. Nothing too big, because I wasn’t large enough to handle something like a
long sword. A bastard sword, then, for length. I didn’t want to go too much shorter, because I still wanted the reach. I rifled through them and selected one with a lighter, thinner blade that appealed to me. I attached it to my belt and got it on, and we left.

From there, we made our way to a meeting point on the outskirts of camp, near the stables. The ten men we were taking were there with their horses, along with two porters to manage our gear, Duncan and his squire, Leigh, and Petyr with our horses. I didn’t pay the soldiers much mind for the moment, instead noticing that Duncan looked particularly sour and Leigh somehow still managed to look bright and carefree despite the cold and the early hour.

We were the last to arrive, although we arrived as the porters were finishing with the cart. Duncan nodded to Isandro in greeting and Leigh waved from the back of his horse. The rest of the men, noticing Isandro’s arrival, mounted up. I thought that was odd, and wondered what about Isandro’s arrival signaled to them that we were leaving immediately.

Despite my confusion, I followed suit, swinging myself up into the well-worn saddle of one of the army’s geldings. He snorted and shook his head, hot breath clouding as it puffed out of his nostrils. I gently patted him, stroking his neck. He was smaller than I’d like, but the truth was that I knew nothing about riding the large war horses that the cavalry used. I’d wanted one since I’d first seen them. Isandro explained that the Kellan military was strange in that way - most war horses were smaller destriers, and that I would probably do better on a smaller animal - but I still wanted one of the huge beasts once I’d trained in fighting on horseback.

The porters quickly finished their work and climbed into the driver’s seat. Isandro started off without comment, and Petyr was right beside him. I was next to move, and the rest fell in behind us.

After we were clear of camp, we left the road and started off across the open Songling. I was right about the wind. It came cutting across the open field from the distant mountains, blowing cold daggers into our faces, and making the gentle whistling noises that gave the field its name. With the other tents acting as a breakwind, and being at the center of a camp that was as large as ours was, I hadn’t really ever heard the noise of the Songling. Now I did, and although I didn’t find it entirely unpleasant, I missed the more human noises of the camp.

Still, I’d expected all of this. The thing I hadn’t expected was the endless tedium. Here, in front of the men, Islandro couldn’t give me the attention he did in private. Petyr was never good for entertainment because he lacked any sense of humor, and annoying him for fun was something I only engaged in when the time was right. A long trek was not the right time. So I was bored. Extremely bored, and only had the Songling’s noise and my own thoughts for company.

Fortunately, about two hours in, Leigh rescued me. He rode up from behind us and settled into place next to me, “Good morning, my lady.”

I shot him a sideways glance, “You can call me Danae.”

He nods in acknowledgement, a congenial smile on his face, “You look different than last night.”

“I can’t spend all my time in pretty dresses.”

“A pity,” he jokes, his voice solemn, “How are you enjoying our little outing thus far?”

“The grass is green and the air is fresh, but the constant tedium and stink of horses prevents me from recommending this particular pleasure cruise. The directors could have come up with better activities.”
He snorts a laugh, “I didn’t know there was sarcasm hidden under your usual silence.”

It occurred to me then, that most of the time he saw me I was either standing in the corner like an object or playing student to Isandro’s teacher, “There’s much hidden under my usual silence.”

“And here I thought it was all just pretty wrapping.”

I slide my eyes sideways to look at him, “It’s not kind to lie to a lady, and we both know that’s not true.”

“I thought you weren’t a lady?”

“I didn’t say I wasn’t, I said not to call me one.”

“So which is it? Pretty wrapping or keen wit?”

“It’s both. I’m both.”

“A dangerous combination.”

I gave him my best venomous smile, and his expression dropped a hair, “See? You’re learning.”

“I think we’ve both found our means of entertainment on this trip.”

“Have we? I hadn’t noticed,” I had. Verbally sparring with him was a welcome distraction from the tedium. I switched the subject, “Tell me, Leigh--”

“I did not give you leave to call me that.”

“You didn’t? I hadn’t noticed. Tell me, Leigh, why do you always agree with my lord commander?”

“Your lord commander is usually right. And as he rises, so do I,” He shifted subtly in his seat, adjusting his position.

“Can you not rise on your own?”

He shrugged, “Not as well as he can. I’m far younger. Too young for my position, really.”

“How old are you?,” I’d taken him to be close in age to Isandro because of their positions, but now that I looked at him I realized that his face was much smoother than Isandro’s, his hair less coarse and it was white, not grey.

“Twenty-five,” this surprised me as he was close in rank to Isandro. My surprise must have shown on my face because he chuckled a little, “See? Too young for my position.”

“And what position is that?,” I asked, making sure my tone conveyed the double entendre.

“I think I’ll keep you in suspense on that front a little longer,” he replied, clearly having caught my flirtation.

“Is it private information?”

“Very,” he replied, his voice low and teasing.

“Then I will have to ask you later,” I paused, “In private.”
He laughed, “Oh, you are going to be fun.”

I smiled back, and switched the subject again, “Tell me about Commander Duncan. Isandro refuses to go into much detail.”

“That’s because the detail isn’t fit for a woman’s ears,” he sounded serious, and I gave a snort of derision to show what I thought of that, “He’s dangerous, and there’s something not right about him.”

“What do you mean?”

“If the general needs someone tortured, he calls Duncan. I’ve seen him work in battle before and he’s a competent fighter, but he’s not a standout, not like I am,” a ghost of a smile before he continued, “His real talent is in his dispassion. His talent for inflicting pain. He prefers to use heat and fire, and he is called ‘the scarmaker’ because of the marks he leaves.”

“Marks?”

He nodded, “Brands. There’s more than one person wandering around out there with one of Duncan’s tool marks on them”

“He brands them?”

“Yes. And that is the most I know of it, because I find him - and his work - distasteful,” he sounded irritated, but I suspected that his irritation was at Duncan and not myself. I didn’t have time to ask him though, because Petyr arrived.

Ignoring me, he said to Leigh, “Isandro and Duncan request your company at the head of the column.”

Without answering Petyr, he said to me, “It seems our conversation is to be cut off prematurely.”

“Pity,” I replied, almost entirely meaning it. We exchanged smiles, and he rode off with Petyr, leaving me alone with my thoughts.

The land rolled by slowly, and the rocking of my horse lulled me into a hypnotic sort of boredom. So when we stopped to rest the horses and water them, I didn’t realize how far we’d come. The break passed too quickly, and we were back in the saddle. Another mind-numbing ride, and we turned back east towards the ever-present line of the army. They’d been there the whole time, off in the distance, just out of earshot. I knew that the army covered every square foot of the border, but seeing it was another matter. There were places where it was thicker and thinner, but it was ever-present. We approached a camp that looked much like our own, with several hours till to go before sundown.

As we were dismounting and handing out horses to the groom, Isandro came to speak with me, “How are you feeling?”

I shrugged, “Bored, stiff, and a bit saddle-sore.”

“I’d forgotten how boring the ride can be. Not much to look at on the Songling. Listen, I’m not going to need you to be at meetings with me very much. It’s more important to me that you practice with the sword when we make our nightly stops. You’ve basically outgrown Petyr as a sparring partner, and the experience with different masters-at-arms along the way will be good for you. Better than counting troops with me, at any rate.”
“Probably more fun, too,” I smiled.

“Yes, yes, I’m the boring old man and you’re the bouncing young woman,” I could hear the gentle teasing in his voice, and I bounced for comedic effect. It got him to laugh, and that’s what I cared to do.

“I’d be happy to go practice after a long day of doing nearly nothing. It will feel nice after riding,” because we were essentially alone, I leaned forward and kissed him, “Then I’ll come to our tent, and ride some more.”

He growled and nipped at my ear, then playfully pushed me away, “Go practice.”

I did, seeking out the master-at-arms. It took me several tries to track him down, but when I finally found him, he was already sparring with Petyr. I watched them both fight, glad of the chance to watch someone unfamiliar fight. Once he beat Petyr three times, I interjected, “Petyr, Isandro sent me to practice too. Let me have a go.”

He laid on the ground, his clothes and face splattered with mud. He looked tired and, for once, did not argue, “I’ll gladly miss the practice to watch you finally get knocked onto your ass.”

He picked himself up and left the muddy patch of dirt that they were using for a ring. The soldier wasn’t wearing a helmet, and so I didn’t take one either. Head shots were prohibited, then. I took Petyr’s blunted practice blade from him as he passed out of the ring, and stepped in.

“I am Danae,” I said to the man, inclining my head.

“Ash,” he replied, “Who has approved your training?”

“Commander Isandro Blackstreet, same as approved Petyr.”

“He is in the habit of training girls?”

I shrug, somewhat accepting of this sort of attitude. I hadn’t come across many women who fought this way, “I don’t know if he makes a habit of it, but he has chosen to have me trained.”

“I’ll not go easy on you.”

“Please, don’t.” I replied, settling into form. He did the same, and we traded a few testing blows. He was moving too slow for me, and I’d already watched him fight, so I upped the ante by snapping around his guard and landing a blow to his arm. Not too hard, just enough to let him know I was serious.

It worked, and soon we were sparring for real, and he was testing me; giving me advice about my form and technique. He won the first three times, as I’d expected. I learn quickly, but I hadn’t developed any sort of muscle memory yet and I still wasn’t as strong. Two months just wasn’t enough time to gain the muscle mass I needed to trade hard blows. My height and build promised more power in my future, but for now, I had to rely on speed and unexpected actions. My biggest strength right now was that I rarely repeated a mistake and felt no qualms about exploiting another’s weakness.

The men simply didn’t fight dirty enough. Why would they? They’ve rarely been the lesser. They don’t walk through the world vulnerable like women do. They can’t muster the same survival instincts.

I was constrained by no such rules, which is how I nearly won the last round. I smacked the flat of
my blade against the back of Ash’s head. He roared, angry, and swung wildly in my direction. He missed, and I lunged, and we went down in a heap. It was a near thing, but he pinned me.

When it was clear he’d won, he threw himself off me, cursing. He rubbed the back of his head where I’d smacked him and I couldn’t help but give him a cruel smile, “Oh come now, Master Ash. I didn’t hit you that hard.”

“Ye broke the rules!,” he spat, his docks district accent coming out. Interesting that he was stationed so far from home, and that he felt the need to hide his accent. Or perhaps he’d been here so long it had faded.

I picked myself up out of the mud, and I heard Petyr laughing from the sidelines, “I tried to warn you before, Master Ash. She cheats. You didn’t believe me.”

“I didnae believe ye that I’d have ter fight a stinkin’ girl!,” he said, the disdain clear in his voice.

I retrieved my blade and turned back to him, ignoring his comments, “Again?”

“No! I’m going tae get cleaned off and eat my dinner,” he stomped out of the ring, muttering about me under his breath.

“Does anyone else want to spar?,” I asked the small crowd that had gathered to watch us fight. Some took me up on my offer, and I sparred with the soldiers until the sun set. I only won once, but that was ok. What I learned by fighting partners besides Petyr was invaluable. I knew once we returned to our own camp that I’d make more of an effort to spar with others beside Petyr.

I returned sore and bruised, but happy. I found our tent by asking around, and found it empty of Isandro. His food was waiting for him, and I ate most of it. I knew if he wasn’t here now, he’d find food elsewhere and there was no sense in wasting the meal. I stripped and fell into bed, not even bothering to dress after I washed. I was so tired that I fell directly to sleep. I barely noticed when Isandro joined me, happy to curl into his warm body and go back to sleep.

We left early the next morning, as the sun was rising. Mist clung to the ground, and fog floated in clouds in the distance, obscuring the mountains. I was barely awake enough to get back on my horse, aside from being stiff. I made sure to stretch before getting back up there, or I knew I’d be in more pain than I needed to be from keeping a poor seat while riding. The tight leggings under my pants were holding up well, serving the dual purpose of protecting against chafing and keeping me warm, so my skin still felt ok.

We had more men with us now, so Isandro had clearly gotten what he needed the night before. We rode in a line, going even further afield from the main border encampment. More wagons joined us, too, with extra provisions.

The second day’s journey was much like the first - long and dull, with the occasional interesting conversation with Leigh. We camped again, and I headed to the practice ring at our destination again. This master-at-arms, a large man named Joyce, beat me soundly. But our fight drew a bigger crowd than it had in the last camp, and this time it included Leigh. He watched silently from the side of the ring, looking the most solemn I’d ever seen him. Afterwards, he left without any flirting or teasing, and I went to the tent I shared with Isandro. I ate his dinner again because he was not there, and passed out in his bed.

The third passed as the second had, and the only change was Isandro’s presence when I dragged myself in from the sparring ring. I was so tired though that I only made perfunctory small talk before passing out.
The fourth day was a repeat, although I was feeling more and more tired. More tired than I reasonably should, and I couldn’t figure the reason for it. When we arrived at camp on the fourth day, I headed straight for the practice ring and the master-at-arms, as usual. There was already a crowd, and I recognized most faces.

The man that was waiting for me in the ring was about my height, and thin. Thin usually meant fast. That held true in this man’s case, but he wasn’t skilled. How he became master-at-arms was beyond my comprehension, because I fought him three times, and won all three times. At the last, I pushed him into the dirt and, in my frustration, yelled, “Can no one give me a challenge?”

“I can.” came a quiet, steady voice from the crowd. It was a voice I recognized from our daily conversations. Leigh was offering to fight me, and I grinned in genuine pleasure.

“Step to, Master Leigh,” I couldn’t help but be cocky. I knew how good Leigh thought he was, and our familiarity made me jovial. He took the practice sword discarded by my previous partner and stepped in beside me. His ornate, shining armor glinted in the late afternoon sun, and I realized that I was already at a disadvantage.

“Good luck,” he said, sliding into position. Then, he struck, and I barely got my sword up in time. It was in that moment that I realized I was in for an actual fight. Leigh was not going to go easy on me.

I barely managed to hit him in the first fight. He was so much faster than any opponent that I’d faced, he easily blocked all of my swings. The reverse was not true, and he landed many blows. He seemed to do all of this easily, without trying. Almost as if he was laughing at my ineptitude.

I was not pleased. I was getting more and more frustrated, and finally my frustration made me forget that Leigh was my friend, and start really fighting back.

“Yes!,” he yelled, “That’s it, good! Be angry with me. Let it sharpen your senses.”

He was right. Blood was rushing my ears, and I resorted to the same tactic I always used: fighting dirty. But Leigh had been watching me for days now, and he knew it was coming. He was simply too skilled to fall prey to it. And, like me, he didn’t follow the rules. He didn’t hold to the same stiff forms the others had. He kicked and elbowed and used his whole body, just like I did. Unlike me though, he had time to develop muscle mass and memory. His sword was an extension of himself, and mine was not.

He wasn’t correcting my form, he was teaching by showing me what to do. When I attempted a swing, he dodged, and then did it back to me in the correct fashion. We were dancing, and I was the partner stepping on his toes, but by the gods it was exhilarating. We were partners in this, and knowing it would not end in blood made it more fun. It was joyful to revel in skill, to learn, to see him move like that; and the crowd melted away into only the two of us and our dance. I knew in that moment that I was born to have a sword in my hand.

I lost, as I knew I would. There was no way I could have beaten him, and his breath was only slightly labored as he silently followed me to the armory to put away the practice swords. We entered the tent together and simultaneously dropped our swords onto the pile.

I don’t know who moved first, but I do know that I yanked him down to me by pulling on the neck of his armor. His mouth was on mine, hot and needy, and his fingers dug into my ass where he pulled me against him. Our tongues mingled and I couldn’t kiss him hard enough, deep enough. Our breath was sucked hard through our noses as our mouths were otherwise occupied. He broke the kiss to suck and kiss my neck, making me groan.
“I’m running out of room in my armor,” he mumbled.

“Then take it off and fuck me,” I demanded. That got me a moan and thrust of his metal-covered hips against mine.

Then he was gone from me. Pulled away, though not very far.

“No,” he gasped, breathing much harder than he had been when we got off the practice field, “Not like this.”

“What? What do you mean?,” my body was realizing I hadn’t had sex since we left the main camp. That was why I was so exhausted. I needed energy, and now that I realized it, my pussy was dripping and my brain was sex-fogged.

“We’ll do this in private, where we can take our time. Where I can take your clothes off and see all you, and not rush it to completion,” he ran a hand through his hair, stepping back, “And what of Isandro? I wouldn’t take what is his.”

I scowled, “I’m not his, I am mine.”

“You know what I meant.”

I relented, “Yes, I do. We’ve already spoken, and he’s given me his consent.”

“Good. Come to my tent tonight, just after sundown.”

I grinned, “What should I wear?”

He grinned back, “As little as possible.”

He left, I followed him out, and we went our separate ways. I cleaned in my tent, taking my hair out of its braid and washing day’s worth of road grime off of me. I brushed my hair to shining, and went to his tent clad only in my under-leggings, shirt, and cloak. I’d have worn less, but I didn’t have it. I hadn’t brought anything pretty with me, and it was cold out. I left Isandro a note, letting him know where I was, and went to Leigh’s tent.

The sky was a dark sapphire blue, almost full black, when I scratched on the door flap of the tent. He yelled for me to come in, and I slipped inside. Like all of the tents we traveled with, it wasn’t large. It only had room for a trunk, a small table, a fire, his armor on its stand, and a bed. The bed was covered in soft, fluffy furs, and blankets on top of those. It looked inviting.

Although not as inviting as Leigh, who stood before me wearing nothing but a pair of linen breeches. The fire light tinted his white hair and olive skin orange, casting inviting shadows over the muscles of his chest and stomach. He had the body of a fighter, broad shoulders and a trim waist.

He watched me appraising him, and I saw a smile playing at the corners of his mouth as he took in my reaction to his body. I took off my cloak and he took it from me, draping it around the shoulders of his suit of armor. I thought the effect was amusing. I heard a few low, whispered words, and saw him touch the door of the tent.

“So no one can hear us,” he explained, smiling.

After that, he stepped over to me, took my face in his hands and kissed me. It was different before, lacking the same urgency, but still conveyed his desire for me. I jumped, giggling, and he caught
me, letting me wrap my legs around his waist and my arms around his shoulders. We kissed as he walked us over to the bed, laying me down on my back.

He reached between us as we kissed, him bent over me, and undid my pants, then pulled them over my hips. He pulled away and pulled them off. I laughed while he smiled at me, sitting up and pulling my shirt over my head and tossing it to the ground. He bent back down and caught my mouth with his.

He tasted me, slowly, luxuriously, and I let him. I enjoyed it, the dance of our tongues, running my hands over his chest and shoulders, feeling the silk of his skin under my hands. Isandro wasn’t much for kissing, and so I was content to do it and enjoy the feeling.

His mouth moved away, and I let my head fall back on the bed as he kissed his way down my body, peppering my collarbones and neck with kisses before mounding my breasts with his hands and sucking on one nipple and the other. He licked and sucked them, tongue lashing the sensitive flesh, taking his time to give them his attention. They were hard nubs, and I was dripping wet, breathing heavily, when he let them go and looked up at me.

He stood up and said, “Go ahead and lie back on the bed.”

I complied and settled back on the pillows while he reached into a bag that was across the room. In his hands he brought out a small bottle with an amber liquid in it, “What’s that?”

“Oil,” he replied, “Roll onto your stomach.”

I did as he asked, and I heard him fidgeting behind me, and then I felt his warm hands on my back. They were strong and calloused, rubbing the muscles of my back and shoulders. I groaned as his thumbs pushed their way up my spine.

“I know the toll learning to fight must be taking on your body and, as much as I like him, I doubt Isandro has thought of the ways he could help you recover from that.”

My voice was a groan as he worked the muscles on my back, “He is a kind man, but you’re right, this kind of detail would not occur to him.”

He didn’t reply, he continued to work the muscles with his slick hands. The oil smelled good, like vanilla and cinnamon, dark and smoky and sexy. I started to relax under his hands, blissfully floating in a cloud of scented oil.

This is when he chose to move his hands lower, starting again at the soles of my feet and moving up my legs. I was paying keen attention to them now, as the approached my hips.

The kneaded the soft mounds of my round backside, hands dipping further and further between my thighs each time. Unthinking, I arched my back, thrusting my butt in the air, begging him silently to touch me.

His fingers brushed my sex, brushed my electrified and tingling clit, eliciting a small, excited gasp from me. He ran his hands along my inner thighs, purposely teasing me. I was so wet, so turned on. I just wanted him to pay some real attention to my sex.

Finally he did. His deft fingers rubbed me, generally and in large circles at first, and then honing in on my clit. He rubbed circles over the hard nub, and I moaned. He didn’t apply pressure for too long, instead slipping one finger into my dripping pussy.

He stroked the front wall inside me, sliding in and out, applying pressure until I was breathing
heavy and moving my hips in time with his finger. Then, he withdrew it and stood. I felt him get back on the bed after a moment, his pants gone. He laid on my back, and I felt the tip of his cockhead near my opening.

He leaned over, near my ear, and said, “How do you want me?”

It took a moment of thought before I answered, “On your back.”

He laid down next to me on the bed, and I pushed myself up, looking over at him. He moved to the center of the bed, and I straddled him, bringing my pussy near to where his cock lay against his stomach. I slid myself over it, burying its length between my wet lips, sliding and grinding against him, teasing us both.

He wasn’t as thick as Isandro, but he was longer, making his length something to be reckoned with. I shuddered as I ran myself over him, root to tip. He watched where our bodies met, his hands resting on my hips. He watched as my pussy lips repeatedly obscured his cock, then watched the head of it reappear.

The friction on my clit was driving me closer, but that isn’t how I wanted to come, “Hold yourself up, I want to feel you inside me.”

He did as I asked, and I sank down onto him, moaning as his length was buried inside me. It was a good ten inches long, and so I could not fit the entire length, but I took as much as I could, feeling the satisfying ache as he filled me completely.

I leaned forward some and rode him with my hips, sliding him in and out of me while I ground my clit on his pubic bone. I went as fast as I could, feeling the satisfying plunge of his cock in and out of my wet, dripping pussy. I moaned loudly, knowing I could not be heard. I was approaching orgasm fast. When it hit I was loud, and I pushed off of his cock so he could see, rubbing my clit to extend my orgasm. He looked down, watching as the gushing spurts of hot cum drenched his cock and rolled down his hips and between his legs.

“Oh, fuck,” he groaned, sitting up and clutching me to him. He was kissing me again, our bodies pressed together, his cock pressed between us. I shifted my hips and used my hand to take him into me again. I couldn’t help moving, sliding back and forth on his lap.

“Yes!,” I gasped between kisses, “Yes, more!”

“Let me fuck you,” he demanded, voice low and tantalizing.

“Aren’t you already?,” I snarked.

“Cheeky,” he answered, grabbing me and flipping us so I was on my back. He put my legs up so they rested on his shoulders. It would have been uncomfortable for someone less flexible, but for me it was ok. He started to move inside me, the length of him feeling thicker because of the position, “Fast or slow?”

“I don’t care, make me come for you again,” I met his eyes and I saw the promise there. I would be coming. Several more times.

I was his, for just this evening maybe, but in the moment, I was his. He used his body to squeeze pleasure from mine. He made me come in this position, then in a different one. Then from behind, my ass in the air, he made me come so hard my legs were shaking, my whole body was shaking. Words flew from my mind, and it was only the two of us, our bodies, and the feeling of his cock plunging in and out of me.
When he finally came, as close as he could to my last orgasm, it was like nothing I’d ever felt. I screamed with the force of it, and the magic crashed over me in great waves. I felt like a desert being washed away in a great flood of shining magic. Filled, sated, with the warm, joyful glow. In that moment I knew what he was, and he knew me for what I was. He laid between my legs, looking down at me, his expression confused.

I touched his cheek gently, “You and I. We’re the same. We’re both Korianan.”

“I didn’t know.”

“Neither did I. I didn’t know it was better with someone of my own kind.”

“I did, but it’s been so long,” his voice broke, and he touched his forehead to mine ,”We’re so few now.”

“Does anyone else know?”

“Isandro. Now you. That’s it.”

“Of course. Isandro said he’d find me a teacher. He must have meant you. No wonder he was ok with us being together. He knew,” I was overcome with affection for Isandro in that moment. He knew what we both needed, and he’d quietly let it come to pass.

“Tomorrow. We can speak tomorrow,” he leaned down and kissed me. Deeper and deeper he kissed me, and I felt him swell inside me. We had each other twice more before falling asleep, wrapped in the furs and each other.
Kay, Charias

Chapter Summary

Kay has arrived at the place where her new employer lives - the city of Ville Flue, in Charias; and lived there for some time now. Instead of an easy job, she finds a court of horrors in an isolated, impoverished nation with a cruel and sadistic leader. But when she finds a single ray of hope, should she reach for it, or is it a trick?

Time in these stories is a difficult beast, and a lot of things are happening concurrently. This happens around the same time as Danae’s chapter starts.

Chapter Notes

HERE BE DRAGONS. I'm warning you now, shit gets dark. I do not, and will not ever, portray on-screen rape or sexual assault. However, it is heavily implied and spoken about, as is torture and sadism (not the fun-for-some kind, either.). Kay is not in a good place, and I do try my best to delve into the trauma and psychology of it. I didn't want to have bad things happen and then be treated like they were nothing. This is trauma and there are aftereffects. So heavy trigger warning there.

There is no sex in this chapter.

I remembered when I arrived. My hand clutched Bas’s in muted excitement as I’d stared wide-eyed up at the shining white castle. Ville Flue was charming, beautiful and old, with wide streets, fanciful stone facades, and colorful roof tiles. Two rivers ran alongside her, she settled into the V between them. Phalan told me the story as the carriage drove us through the city. His family, the Boudreaus, had fought a battle for the land against a long-forgotten family, winning and claiming the land. They built the city, and their victory so pleased the Korianans that they helped build the family the great, white castle. Stoneriver, they called it, sentinel of the two rivers. He said you could see all the way to Gregaran and Llellwyn from the highest spire.

It was in the center of the city, surrounded by high, smooth, white stone walls. The walls housed expansive lands, enough for a large garden, courtyard, stables, with plenty of room left over. I’d been enchanted with the sun striking the glittering walls of gold-tipped spires that rose in front of me. I wanted to walk on the high archways that spanned between some of the thin, delicate towers. It was like no castle I’d ever, it was built for beauty and not defense. It didn’t need to be ugly, it had walls and rivers and a city to defend it.

Phalan showed me to my room, and Bas to his. He was just down the hall from me. My room white and gold, like the castle. All of the furniture was dark, black wood, to contrast the white stone walls and the white stone floor. The white made the sun that streamed in the windows and balcony doors twice as bright. I try to always remember the joy and wonder I felt that day.

Now I stood next to Phalan while he sat on his throne, the white stone crown resting on his brow. He slumped, relaxed into the hard white seat perched on the dais. It was molded out of the floor,
and the chair molded out of it. Delicate white stone swirls with golden details, it was as ornate as everything else in this place.

The room was bright, the whole long expanse of the open chamber lit by sun through the high windows. It shown off the same gold and white that was everywhere else. Here, though, the floor was polished to a smooth, reflective surface, to echo the ornate vaulted ceiling. Bright, quiet, and cold. Phalen’s sisters were here, and they cast a pall over the whole court. Sirene stood mute, unmoving, staring at a sunbeam. She was skinny and tall, and her skin was the palest. They made it none the better by dressing her in a white gown. Her hair was light, silvery-blonde, and her eyes were light blue. She looked a pretty little ghost, and wandered the halls like one too, never speaking.

On her left was Thérèse. Short, with dark, shining brown hair, and a face like a thundercloud. She was the angriest sister, and I didn’t know anything about her save for how she looked. She was the smallest of the three, and the darkest, and looks and personality. Her sister’s shadow. Thought she was pretty, her anger made lines in her face. When she spoke, her words were knives. She was a weapon.

On Sirene’s right was her other sister, Adélaïde. She was the oldest, and the kindest. Her hair was red, kissed by the flame of the human God’s light face. Like the others, her skin was light, though not as light as Sirene’s. Her face, like her sisters’, was pretty; but she, too, wore her personality on it. Stern and neutral, never giving any emotion up. Though she was the kindest, she was not kind. She gave advice when asked, but had only once offered conversation without prompting.

None were married, and the wives of the court called them the three witches. The court believed they held Phalan in thrall, but I knew better. When the wives left and the husbands remained, I knew who the monster was. Rumors of incest plagued Phalan, but my arrival had laid some of them to rest. Conversation turned to marriage for the oldest two. I didn’t know enough about the political climate to begin to guess, but my estimation was that those two weren’t going anywhere they didn’t want to go.

Court was deathly quiet, not even the rustle of clothing or a cough broke the brooding silence. The court was split below us, men to my left and women to my right. The center of the room was clear, and a woman knelt on the floor. She hid her face against the floor, hair unbound and splayed across the shining tile. She wore a rough brown shift - dungeon clothes for criminals. I’d seen her last week, pink-cheeked and smiling, wearing an opulent gown. Now she knelt, in the lowest position she could manage. I couldn’t see her face, but moments before I had, and it had been pink-cheeked and sobbing. She was young, I thought, too young to be in this much pain.

Behind her stood her husband. He was old, grey of hair and of beard. Judging from his clothing, he was wealthy. He’d purchased the young woman on the floor, of that, I had no doubt. He had a great fat belly and a homely face, a red nose and squashed-looking lips. Everything about him was soft, squished, and unappealing. She didn’t choose him. Who would? It didn’t matter.

I shivered. The hanging moment passed, and I felt Phalen’s eyes on me. He reached out, roughly gripping my ass. The sound of the smack broke the silence, and he used that hand to force me around the front of the throne, and into his lap. I couldn’t help sitting ramrod straight, perched naked on the end of his knee.

I was always naked. Clothes were a memory of a time before I came here.

His breath was in my ear, hot against my cheek, “What should we do with her, sweet little elf?”

“What is her crime, your grace?,” Legitimately not knowing. She’d been crying when I’d arrived.
I’d heard him shout ‘bring me my Toy!’ Those words played over and over in my dreams.

“Ah, you see, little flower, she has broken trust with her husband and was found in the bed of another,” mention of the other was not made, but I had no doubt that he was safe and sound. He was not terrified and sobbing in front of Phalen, “A most grievous offence, don’t you agree?”

“Yes,” in theory, I did. But I knew just enough about his court to know that if her husband wasn’t lying, then she’d cheated for good reason. It was a risk, and she must be unaccountably brave. It didn’t matter.

“Then what shall we do to her?”

His hand rested on my breast, fingers laying menacingly by my nipple. If he didn’t like my answer, I wouldn’t like its action. I defied him once, when he’d taken Baz. I wasn’t brave enough to do it again, so my reply made my conscience cringe, “Hurt her.”

“Yes, but how, my sweetling?,” the cloying in his voice meant he already knew the answer, but I didn’t. If I didn’t hit on the right answer, or a better one, he would include me in her punishment.

“Share her?,” I hated myself for saying the words, but I was so weak. So hurt and tired. I didn’t want to be his toy anymore, if only for one night.

His hand lowered and he kissed my shoulder, resting his chin on it. It took all I had in me not to shudder in revulsion. I hadn’t been able to control the impulse when I first arrived, but I learned quickly. The scar on my left thigh reminded me. ‘Don’t be my sister!’ he’d shouted at me. ‘You are not be Sirene!’

I could not be his sisters. I could not be strong, angry, or broken. I must be whole and willing, he paid me to be willing.

“Very good, Toy,” he crooned, “Adélaïde, come here. I don’t wish to see your disapproving stare whilst I have fun, so take Toy to her bath. It is time for the wives to leave.”

I got up as fast as my sore, bruised body allowed me to move. Once he was done with me, I was not to linger. The wives started to exit the throne room. Adélaïde moved with all the slow, stately grace she could manage. Not for the first time I thought she would be a much better ruler than her brother. She took hold of the long, thin silver line attached to the silver collar around my neck, and led me out of the room. Relief shuddered through me. It would not be me that left that room, rent and needing a healer. Covered in bruises and fluids, abused. She would scream tonight, not me. It was twisted, sick relief.

Adélaïde brought me to my room, and took me to the bathroom. I had a maid, but some things could only be shared by those of us who knew. I hadn’t bathed since I’d arrived as punishment, and my right answer to his question meant I could finally be clean.

The water flowed into the bath by magical means, filling with steaming water. We didn’t speak as she poured bath oils in. She motioned at the water, and I got in, sinking up to my chest in the hot water. I dunked my head under, getting my hair wet.

“How long?,” I asked her.

“He’ll be playing with that one for most of the night, so as long as you like, I suppose,” I nodded in acknowledgement and grabbed the soap. It was thick and creamy, made of oils that we didn’t have at home, and it smelled good. She sat on the edge of the tub, watching me. I stared at the bar, absently noting the tiny bubbles on the opaque pink surface. The swelled and popped. She
watched me, and I watched it, like I’d forgotten how to use it.

“I need a cloth,” I said. I heard movement and then there was a piece of washing cloth dangling in front of me. I took it and rubbed it on the soap. I was moving in slow motion, somehow I thought that if I could just move slowly enough that I could avoid the thoughts in my head. Could avoid what I’d just done.

That woman. I knew what I’d sentenced her to. It is the same that he’d done to me my first night here. I gripped the soap thinking about it, tighter as I got angrier. Angry at myself for not listening to my mother. If I’d listened to her I’d be safe at home with my own kind, in Liandayen where the only men we saw were Luminite priests and other elves. If I’d listen to her, I would have learned the ways of our magic, and I wouldn’t be powerless. He might have been able to take my clothes, make me dirty, take my dignity, and abuse my body, but the Whisperers needed none of that. They only needed a tongue and I had that.

And I’d used it. To condemn her. No longer one of the wives, she’d become like I was. I knew that even this exact moment, while I sat in a hot bath beside his sister, they were tearing her apart. I’d seen men, I’d been with more than I could count. I’d seen their ugliness, I knew what they were. I knew that their best used weapon was their cock. Only Bas wasn’t, and he was...well, he wasn’t here. I couldn’t hear her screams, but I knew they were happening. It was my fault. Mine. I’d done that to her.

The guilt was all I felt. It washed away the anger. I couldn’t afford anger, because anger wants action and there was none I could take. I was impotent in my bath. I wasn’t a Whisperer, I was a whore. An exotic dancer, and outsider. I was nothing. I’d done this to myself. If I hadn’t let him pay me. If I hadn’t been so attracted to the money, I’d still be safe in Raedanas. If only. Regret.

I was sobbing and I didn’t remember starting to cry. I was shaking with the force of my sobs, with the horrible knowledge of what I’d condemned her to. I thought I was a good person, but I wasn’t. I’d condemned another woman to the worst pain she could feel just so I could stop the abuse for one night. Why wasn’t I stronger? I couldn’t breath I was sobbing so hard, coughing.

I started to scream. Howls of pent up regret and guilt. All of my humanity and sanity was leaking out through my mouth. I was never going to stop. I’d scream till I couldn’t anymore.

But I didn’t. I didn’t notice the sounds in the water, but I felt the strong arms around me. Not to hurt, no, this was for comfort. A voice whispering soothing things in my ear. I stopped screaming.

“I survived him by being stronger than him,” Adélaïde said, rocking me, “Thérèse survives him by being angry all the time. The well of her anger has no bottom. Sirene survives him by shutting down. He did that to her, do you hear me? She was his favorite. It is not you, it is him, and you must find a way to survive him too. If you don’t, you will die.”

“And if I want to?,” I could barely speak.

“Then you do what you must, but know this. It will not last forever. Something this horrible can’t go on forever.”

“Of course not. Phalen is only human. He will die someday.”

“Do not become a broken girl, Toy.”

“Kay. My name is Kay.”

“Good. Hold onto that. Remember who you were before you came here. Remember it as long as
you can, but do not show him.”

She was right, but not in the way she expected. If these things were going to happen to me, they would happen to Toy, and not Kay. I would not be Kay Aryn here. She could not survive this. I will put her aside for now and become Toy. Toy, who does not care. Toy, who must pretend to consent. Toy, who will condemn another woman if it means that her broken body gets a night of real, true rest.

Time passed and I said, “Thank you.”

She let go of me and climbed out, dripping onto the marble floor. She stripped out of her thin, sopping gown and I noticed the scars that crisscrossed her body. These were not a delicate tracery of fine white lines, the memory of thin, polite cuts. These were battle scars. Thick and ugly and raised from her skin. He’d marked her as his. Even when he died, she’d be covered in the memories. She slipped another bathing robe over her skin, covering them.

“When did it start?,” I asked.

She was quiet, her back to me, for so long I didn’t think she would answer, “When I was twelve. He was nineteen, and he’d been anxiously awaiting my flowering. When it happened, he immediately took me to his bed. The others followed in due time.”

She had to be at least twenty-and-five, which meant that she’d suffered him for thirteen years or more. And she was still here, not screaming in her bath. I could follow her example, I could find a way. I would do what I needed to in order to survive.

She turned to leave, and then thought better of it, stopping in the doorway to turn and look at me, “It’s not random. He acts in specific ways, almost as if he has rules. If you can uncover them, you can survive.”

She truly left me then, knowing I was no longer a danger to myself. I finished bathing, and found the bed of my gilded cage. When Phalen joined me, hours later, he was exhausted and spent. He fell into bed beside me, not bothering to subject me to his cruelty.

Rule number one: if he exhausts himself with someone else, he has no time to abuse me.

I woke long before he did, relieved myself, and returned to bed. I’d already learned that not being accessible when he woke was cause for punishment. As I waited for him to wake, I thought on my conversation with Adélaïde yesterday. She said he acted according to his own logic, and that I could use that against him to survive.

I didn’t want to just survive, I wanted to find Bas and get out of this cursed hell of a country. If I could reach the border, any border, then I could get home. One thing I knew about Charias is that Phalen had turned his homeland into an isolated place. He had no ambassadors, and he’d filled the courts with those like himself. He encouraged the worst in men. It could be that this was a weakness I could exploit.

Right now, though, now there was nothing I could do. Especially not while being trapped in this room all day, and not while not being allowed clothes. It would be winter soon, and I preferred not to die of exposure. I also had no idea where the king was keeping Bas. I was told he was alive, and he was being used as a threat. If I did not comply, Phalen would hurt Bas, so for now I had to assume he was still alive somewhere in the castle. I’d never find him if I was confined to the room.
I rolled over in bed to face Phalen while he slept, considering him. He was handsome while he slept, not speaking. Pale skin, silky blonde hair, a pleasing face, and a strong jaw all topped a well-made and muscled body. In fact, if I didn’t know how terribly cruel he was, I’d think he was beautiful. But even asleep, his depravity made him repulsive. Still, I made myself look. I had to get used to looking at him directly, I couldn’t learn anything if I was afraid to watch him.

And as I was watching, he opened his eyes. The urge to avert mine was strong, so strong. My instinct was to make myself as small as possible, to go unnoticed. I see threat in blue eyes now. Under the sheets, my nails dug into my own thigh and I used the pain to focus myself. I managed to not look away or shrink in on myself. I stayed still, not moving, not letting an expression cross my face. I would let him say something first, to see exactly how cruel he was feeling today. In my mind was a single refrain, a comforting rhythmic litany: I am Toy, be Toy.

I don’t know who Toy is yet, but I know she isn’t as scared as I am. Kay is terrified, Kay is weak. I can’t be that person now. I love being Kay, I love being soft, and gentle, and vulnerable, and pampered. I am none of those things here. He will destroy Kay, she’s like tissue paper before him. There is one tool I have, and it’s my mind. I cannot let him take it.

There was silence for a few minutes, and I watched his eyes focus. Then he said, “I will have you on top this morning.”

And so I complied. The only good thing about it was that he tended to lack stamina on waking. But when it was over, he seemed almost relaxed. Was he like this after he abused me, too, or was there something special about last night’s activities? I had to know.

“Your grace seems to be in a light mood this morning,” I commented.

“What of it?,” there was suspicion in his face, he was looking for the trick.

“If something gave your grace pleasure, I would like to know what it was, so I may serve you better,” I replied. I started to relax into the role. I am a whore, I know men. I know men, and I know my role. I can flatter better than most.

He was still guarded, I could tell. He was tense, but he answered, “Let us just say, our entertainment last night was especially fulfilling,” he smiled at me, a brittle, threatening thing, “But don’t worry, little Toy, it’s nothing I’d subject you to. Not until I’m done playing with you.”

He hopped out of bed, abruptly ending the conversation by going to the bathroom. I stayed in the bed, not allowed to leave it until he was out he was out of the room. He came back and started to dress. His eyes flicked to me as he did so.

“I won’t have need of you today.” He watched me, seeing how I would react. I tried to give nothing away, even as relief flooded through me.

“As your graces wishes,” I replied. I thought about whether or not I should try to press his good mood. I hesitated, and it showed on my face before I could school my expression.

“Say it,” he commanded, a very specific edge in his voice.

“I was wondering if your grace would be willing to let me take a walk around the palace,” I didn’t elaborate as to why. Let him think my head was empty.

“I don’t think I’d like to take the chance of you getting lost,” he said, “One of my sisters will escort you.”
“Thérèse?,” I asked, letting some hope leak into my voice.

“So you can conspire with her? I think not. I’ll send Adélaïde,” I smiled a small, kind, grateful smile.

“You are most generous.” Rule two: it might be that he could be manipulated into doing what I wanted by presenting him with a less palatable option. I would much prefer Adélaïde to Thérèse.

He waved his hand dismissively, “You are to be back here before dark. And Toy?”

“Yes?”

“You are still not allowed any clothes. If you wander, you’ll do it exposed,” he opened the door and left, the closing of it booming in the empty room.

I decided in that moment, that if he was going to force me to walk around naked, then I was going to have to learn to be comfortable that way. If I was always naked, then I’d make my skin my armor. Kay wouldn’t be able to do that, Kay associated public nakedness with kink, with happiness, with Bas. Toy couldn’t. I got off the bed and cleaned myself up. His seed made my skin crawl, and I could only pray to the Sylanthiel that I did not conceive a child.

It did not take long before Adélaïde arrived, and I was sitting on the edge of the bed, waiting for her. She looked at me, unclothed, and said, “Are you sure you’d like to walk about like that?”

“I’m sure,” I stood and faced her, meeting her eyes. I noticed for the first time what a strange shade they were - purple. A strange mix between grey and blue, I supposed. Purple was not a color humans could have. I wondered how I could have missed it before.

“Then let us go,” we left the room. Instead of turning towards the throne room as I always did, we turned the other way. I remembered, from my first day, that the room Phalen had assigned me was not so far from one of the main thoroughfares within the castle, and we were heading that way. There would be people, so I steeled myself.

I stepped out of our side hallway into the larger corridor, and it was full of women. Adélaïde turned and I followed her. I saw the women, standing in groups, their colorful gowns looking like bouquets of flowers. Their conversation quieted as I walked by, and I heard some well-hidden laughter. I recognized some of these women - they were the wives, for some reason thrown out of court again. I knew that if there was another woman being shared Phalen would have taken the opportunity to force more abuse on me, but he hadn’t. He’d given me the day to roam free. So why were all of the wives out here?

I noticed how Adélaïde was walking next to me. She stood tall and proud, only staring down the occasional glare from one of the wives. Her red hair was braided into a crown atop her head. It didn’t matter that she was Phalen’s victim, too, she was still above these women. This was her castle. I imagined that I was like that. Strong, proud, owning myself and my surroundings. I stood taller, ignoring my nakedness. I couldn’t meet their eyes like she could, I’d not had a lifetime of practice, but I could pretend that I was wearing a gown just as ornate as theirs. I paid them no mind, instead looking at the hall itself.

I noticed how Adélaïde was walking next to me. She stood tall and proud, only staring down the occasional glare from one of the wives. Her red hair was braided into a crown atop her head. It didn’t matter that she was Phalen’s victim, too, she was still above these women. This was her castle. I imagined that I was like that. Strong, proud, owning myself and my surroundings. I stood taller, ignoring my nakedness. I couldn’t meet their eyes like she could, I’d not had a lifetime of practice, but I could pretend that I was wearing a gown just as ornate as theirs. I paid them no mind, instead looking at the hall itself.

It was long and white, with a wide red running in the middle. Blue thread made small whirls around the edges of it, calling to mind the eddies of the rivers that joined just behind the castle. The ceiling was high and barreled, with huge windows that let in the bright morning sun. In evenly spaced alcoves along the entire length, there were statues of men.
“Adélaïde, does the castle have a name?,” I asked. I remembered it from Phalen, but it was a way of opening the conversation.

“Stoneriver, although often we call it the Sentinel because of its place on the rivers.”

“Who are these men?,” all of the women were listening to our conversation. In that moment, I realized how much an object of interest I was.

“They are the kings of Charias. My family is the oldest on the continent,” I met her eyes and gave her an ironic sort of smile. Elves evolved before humans did, “The oldest human family. These statues go back to the founder, Arno Boudreau. They’re all over the castle, many are so old the detail has been rubbed off, but we try to take care with them.”

“Did he build the castle?”

“No. We don’t know who built the castle, not really. There is a very old, magically preserved, ceiling fresco that shows the building though.”

“May I see it?”

“I don’t see why not,” we took a turn down a nearby hallway, away from the wives. I trailed along next to her down a long series of twisting hallways, until we reached a quiet, dark section of the castle. The floors were dirty and everything was covered in dust. The windows were covered, but were so moth-eaten that sunlight shined through them. Dust motes floated in the sunbeams.

She stopped in front of an old wooden door. It heavy black hinges were rusted, and it looked ominous. I started questioning my request. She reached out and placed her hand on the handle, holding it there. As she held on, the metal glowed briefly before allowing her to open it. I wondered what happened, but I didn’t think asking was a great idea. I’d had a few good conversations with her, but I didn’t really know her. In a place like this, trust was dangerous.

The door opened easily enough despite the age and decay, and we stepped into the murky grey light beyond. It was an enormous library. We stood in the center of it, with a compass inlayed in gold into the white stone of the floor. Long halls of books stretched in every direction radiating out from the compass. There was a second level, too, with more rows of books. I couldn’t even see any of the walls, save the one behind me.

The light in the room didn’t come from any windows that I could see, but from windows along the edge of a high dome that was over the compass. I looked up and Adélaïde explained what I was seeing, “You see the people to the left of the half-formed castle? In red? They are the mages. The ones in purple on the left are the korianan who helped them raise it.”

“What does the lettering around the edges say?”

“I can’t read it because it’s written in ancient Charian, but when I was little I was forced, like every Boudreau to memorize the scholar’s translation. ‘We came together this day, five hundred of our magi and a thousand brother korianan, to raise this castle from the bones of the earth. To the Boudreaus, and all those that come after, till they no longer be worthy’.”

It was an interesting way of phrasing a dedication. Clearly there was no longer any magic at work there, because Phalen was worthy of nothing but death, “Is it a prophecy?”

She shrugged, “Some have thought so. Some have thought it a mistranslation. It includes a date of founding, as well, but they counted time differently then and we don’t know what year the date corresponds to.”
I studied it, the colors still bright after so many years. It was the kind of beauty that fed the soul, and I drank deep. When I was finished I asked, “Is there anything else of interest here?”

She smirked at me, “It’s a library.”

“I can’t read Charian though. I suppose I’m lucky that you and your family speak Daraan.”

“I speak Kellan, Mannonish, and Llellwish besides. Even a small amount of Verdryl elvish.”

“No, only I took such an interest in language. I like to curse Phalen using words he can’t understand.”

I couldn’t help it, I laughed, “And I wonder the penalty if I started cursing him in elvish.”

“As long as you tell him they are words of praise, he won’t know the difference,” we smiled at each other in amused understanding. It was so difficult to not think of this as a budding friendship. She was showing me kindness, and in all of the darkness here she was a small amount of light. It was tempting to cling to that, but trust here could kill me. Especially the sister of the king.

I looked around at the books, “Why does no one use this place? It seems like a waste to have all this knowledge sitting around.”

I saw the sadness in her face as she also surveyed the room, “It is a relic of a time when the castle was a beacon of learning. We even have a school in one of the central towers that hasn’t been used for years. Phalen values strength above knowledge.”

I could tell by her tone that she wouldn’t give me more information than that, but I could surmise the real reason. An educated populace is harder to control, “There are many different kinds of strength.”

We exchanged a look, and I didn’t press it further. She turned towards the door, “Let me show you grounds.”

We left the neglected sections of the castle, and I found that my bare feet were starting to ache. I refused to go back to the room though as I hadn’t left it for two weeks, “This place is so large. Why was it built so big?”

“Our family is expansive. All kings take multiple wives to ensure that a worthy successor lives. A family that large needs a large place from which to run the country,” she made it sound so simple, but something else about her comment struck me as odd. Phalen didn’t have any wives, let alone multiple ones.

“Has there ever been another king that didn’t take multiple wives?,” I asked.

“Not as far as we know. They are memorialized in the Hall of Queens. It’s full of painted portraits of them in groups. All show at least two wives,” the implications hung in the air, and I did not know her well enough to pursue them. Where are their cousins? Aunts? Uncles? Other siblings? I didn’t want to think about it. She probably didn’t either.

She pushed open the next door, and sunlight poured in. I blinked, my eyes adjusting, as we stepped outside. I hadn’t been outside in weeks and I stopped where I was, turning my face to the sun. I could smell the river just behind us, just out of view behind the wall. Adélaïde stepped off the smooth grey path that we were on and onto the grass, so I followed. It was soft and damp beneath
my feet, and the coolness of it soothed my sore feet.

“Come, I’ll show you my favorite place,” she walked, and I followed. She cut across the ground, south towards where I could see the top of the smooth, white wall surrounding the castle behind the row of trees planted against it. Their green was made greener by the whiteness of the backdrop.

As we got closer, I could see that we were walking towards a section of wall that wasn’t white. It was a great wooden gate, and it was currently closed. We crossed back onto the path, and between two trees on a smaller, more hidden path. This led to a door in the wall. Adélaïde’s hand on the knob made it glow again, and she easily pushed it open.

On the other side lay the river’s bank. To my right, where the large gate was, stood a dock. The pylons were made of the same stone as the castle, but the dock itself was wooden. Several barges were moored, along with a huge flat-bottomed river boat. It made sense for there to be a way to supply the castle that wasn’t the front gate.

In front of us was the great river. I knew, from maps I’d seen before arriving, that the Charías river emptied into the Euwain river here, where the two rivers formed a sort of V shape. The city was between the two rivers, and the castle was at the very tip of that V. This didn’t appear to be that meeting point though, because this simply didn’t look large enough. Oh, it was large enough to swim across, but I didn’t see both rivers.

“Which river is this?,” I asked.

“The Euwain,” she replied. That meant we were on the south side of the castle, slightly north of the meeting point, “When it is warm, I like to swim in the river. We can’t now, because it will be cold. The spell that keeps the grounds comfortable doesn’t extend to the freezing river water.”

“I don’t know how to swim,” I admitted, “But the spot is peaceful.”

“As long as there are no merchants making deliveries, yes,” I could see why she liked it so much. But for me, I was staring at freedom, and unable to flee. We stayed for awhile, anyway. Then we walked through the gardens more before returning to my room. As she turned to leave, so hesitated, looking up at me, “My brother gave you this day as a gift. You would do well to know that my brother’s gifts are never given for the pleasure of the recipient, only for his own.”

I didn’t know what to do with that information, but I thanked her all the same. I found out though. The turn outside, the tiny measure of freedom, and an afternoon in Adélaïde’s company had been better for me than I realized and my mood was the highest it had been since coming here. Phalen’s was not.

He abused me then, taking particular pleasure in chasing my good mood from me. It lasted hours, but it felt like days, and I passed out from the pain more than once. I noticed, as the healers came to cart what was left of me down to their quarters, that his mood had greatly improved. My blood specked his bare chest, and he was smiling. It was genuine, it always was genuine when he was hurting me, and I thought to myself that he looked like he’d taken all the good from me and stolen it for himself.

Then I passed out again.
Eamonn, Keehlayhan

Chapter Summary

Eamonn has made himself comfortable in the city, and fallen in with the king's fixer, Eben. When Eben leaves on the king's command, Eamonn finds himself in the perfect political position.

Chapter Notes

Ok, so back across the country to the city (I STG when I'm done uploading these chapters I'm going to post the map.). There's no sex in this one, but TBH it's likely I'm going to come back and add it later. I don't think it's fair that the straight ships get these nice, intense scenes and the LGBT ones don't just because I'm straight. So it's likely I'll come back and add it, I just have to be in the right mood. I want it to be good, y'know? Oh, also, being the anilumietra is more complex than just "evil", but it's going to take some time to properly show it. In other words - Phalen and the king are not the same.

Oh, and yeah...there are LGBT chars in my world. A good 50-odd % of the chars are some kind of LGBT. Eben is gay, Eamonn is gay, tons of other characters are gay or bi (hehehe spoilers.), Jamie is genderqueer. Just give me some time to get there, ok? :) I've been writing this series since *2006* and I know a lot more now than I did then.

“I have a surprise for you.” Eben said. I looked up from the book I was reading to look over at him. He say in a window seat in only his breeches, sun shining on his smooth, pale skin and highlighting the red in his otherwise dark brown hair.

“Is it your cock?,” I grinned at him, “Because I’ve have news for you: it’s not a surprise.”

He hopped down off the window seat and sauntered over to the chair I was sitting in. I was wearing a long shirt, and between us we had one outfit. I watched him move, as I always did. He was lithe and graceful and moved like a dancer, “No, Eamonn. I’ve decided to take you to court today.”

Finally. A month of languishing in this damned castle tolerating the presence of that idiot Cal and I might have a chance to act as an Abim-wen. I looked up into Eben’s eyes, trying to discern his motive. The king’s younger brother usually meant well, but could be a bit of a troublemaker, and this might be no different, “You’ve been resisting my urgings for weeks. Why now?”

“Because I am in a good mood,” I decided not to push it. Whatever he had planned would stay his secret for now. It wasn’t that strange - our arrangement was a physical one, not an emotional one.

“Well, I won’t argue with a gift,” I stood and kissed him before letting him go. We both got dressed; I in my emerald green robes, and he in his leather pants and brocade jerkin. His way of dressing always straddled the line between feminine and masculine, and it worked for him. We’d
already eaten breakfast, so we left my quarters and made our way to the central castle.

As we neared the huge, carved throne room doors we could already hear the yelling. I flinched as something banged against the other side. Eben noticed and said, “Don’t do that inside. He senses weakness. He might be cruel, and he might be stupid, but my brother is surprisingly good at sniffing out weakness. And he’s been in a black mood ever since Danae left. It’s enough to think he almost liked her.”

I didn’t know how Danae was, and I didn’t ask. If she was of any importance, I’d find out somehow. When we reached the doors, the guards opened them. They’d been closed to me the whole time I’d been here, but they opened so easily.

Inside, the last words of the king’s shouting became clear, “--that wretched human!”

I couldn’t make sense of what he was shouting at, so I took a quick look around the huge room. The throne was at the front, huge and elaborately carved from dark, black wood. It shone in the light from the high windows that ran along the top of the wall. The pillars and walls were all made of the red striated stone that came from the mountains the castle sat on, and the floor was more of the same. Tapestries covered the walls, but I didn’t bother to take in the scenes. The people interested me more.

The king was standing on the dais, front of his throne, face red with anger. He had a long, prominent nose and deep-set eyes, thick, dark brows that matched his longish dark hair. His mouth, that might have been sensual under other circumstances, was twisted into an angry scowl. Even in his anger he was beautiful. Dangerous, too, I could tell. There was something about him, some power I could feel. It rolled off him, wild and uncontrolled.

The rest of the room was sparsely populated. It could fit hundreds of people in it, at least a hundred abreast, but there was a small circle of five men standing up near the dais. The only one I recognized with Abim-fa Cal. He looked frustrated.

I needed to replace Cal and find my way into that circle of people, and the fastest way to do that was to find out what the king wanted - and give it to him. Eben had a long stride that ate up the long distance between the door and the throne, and I trailed in his wake. The circle parted for him.

“Brother,” he greeted the king, “How goes your afternoon?”

His tone sounded relaxed, but I’d spent a lot of time with him. His body language said he was on guard. The king ignored his question, “Are we bringing playmates to council meetings now? If so I’ve several whores who would be interested in affairs of state.”

“This is my secretary, Abim-wen Eamonn,” Abim-fa Cal paled some. He knew I was no secretary, “He was sent by the Abimites. They thought one secretary was good, two is better.”

The king waved his hand dismissively, apparently accepting my presence, “Whatever. Have you any ideas on the matter we last spoke about?”

“Some. I’ll require your leave for a few days though. I have a lead, but I must follow it to be sure.”

“Whatever it takes, just bring her back.”

“I’ll do my best. While I’m gone, I am going to leave my secretary to handle my affairs and stand in my place on the council,” it was in that moment that I realized I’d drastically underestimated the prince. Whether that was to my detriment or not was, I suspected, up to me.
The king evaluated me again, more closely this time. I was a rat under his gaze, and it was a feeling I neither liked nor could explain. Was this what it was like to be near the anilumietra? I wondered if his brother knew what he was. I stood in place, as calmly as I could as he evaluated me, “He’ll serve. Go, prepare, and take your secretary with you. He can come back tomorrow after you have left.”

Eben gave the slightest of bows, “Your grace.”

He turned and left, and I also affected a quick bow before following him. Once we were in the hallway and the doors were closed turned to me, “I’ll be leaving tomorrow morning, so come with me to my offices and I’ll catch you up as best I can.”

I nodded, because I knew that being able to function in his absence was the best chance I was going to get to replace Abim-fa Cal and get close to the king. Whilst technically an Abime-wen is ranked higher in our order than an Abim-fa, is it not our way to use administrative commands to change posts. Richard may have sent me here, but it is by my own cunning and actions that I must remove Abim-fa Cal and take his place.

I followed Eben to a part of the castle I’d never seen before. He’d always come to me, so I’d never even been to his rooms. This part of the castle had far more people, all of whom looked very busy. Guards were everywhere, too. He led us down the largest hall, and then turned into a smaller offshoot. He went to the last door on the left and opened it, leading me into his office.

“My brother’s offices are across the hall, but he prefers to work in the study attached to his rooms, so it’s unlikely you’ll see him much,” he said, I looked around the room. It was more comfortable than most rooms in the castle, because three of the four walls were covered with wooden shelves. Mostly the shelves contained books, but some contained interesting objects. The back wall had two large stained glass windows, each with a comfortable looking window seat. A large wooden desk and comfortable-looking chair dominated the center of the room, and two smaller chairs for visitors sat in front of it. To the left of the door was a huge globe, sitting in a stand on the floor. I could see all of our continent mapped out, and the uncharted vastness of the Erestinian Ocean. To the right of the door, against the wall, was a plush couch.

“Except at, what was that, a council meeting?,” I replied. He walked around the desk and plopped into the chair, indicating one across from him. I sat, leaning against the back of it.

“Daily torture session? He calls them touchstones. Isn’t that ridiculous? Who uses a noun to describe a verb, anyway?”

I shrugged. Definitely about my station, “He’s king, he can call them whatever he wants, I suppose.”

“Yes. Anyway, he has them once a day, in the mornings. Never at the same time, either, to ‘keep us on our toes’. I show up when I want, because I’m his heir. You should endeavor to be there on time. They’re never earlier than an hour after sunrise.”

“Who were those men?”

“The big fat one is Cesare, the small one is Anjelo, the boring one is Thomas, and the cute one is Emri. Oh, and you already know Abim-fa Cal, but I suppose he isn’t long for that room,” he gave me a knowing smile and moved on, “Emri and Cal are the Voices of the People, Anjelo is the bank master, Cesare is Caleb’s secretary of state affairs, and Thomas is First Justice. Trust none of them.”
“Surely one of them, in a crisis?,” I trailed off. I didn’t really think they could be trusted, but I was interested in his response.

“None means none. No, if you really need help you go down to the docks and you seek out The Kraken.”

I stared at him blankly, “The what?”

“Not a what, a whom. Go to the docks and find the Kraken. I suspect you’ll need the help fairly often, because I can’t impart all my knowledge on you before I leave. There is one other thing,” He dug a long chain with several keys on it out from around his neck. I’d seen it before, but never paid much attention. Now I noticed there were six keys, all a different color. He dangled it between us, “Black is the dungeons. It opens every door down there. Yellow is a master key for the castle, it will open any normal door. Red is my rooms and this office, and I give you leave to enter if you need to. Gold is this desk. Green is the records room - you can find it at the back of the royal library, not the public on. This iron one I’ve never found a use for, it came with the key ring.”

A key to every room in the castle? The power that was on this chain. I slowly reached for it, reverently taking it from his hand and putting it around my own neck. I slipped it under my robes, the weight unfamiliar. I had so many questions and, yet...he’d given me the tools I needed to thrive. The rest I’d have to learn, save one thing, “All of the others have titles corresponding to their role. What’s yours?”

“You mean aside from being a dashing, handsome prince?,,” he gave me a sarcastic grin, “I’m the king’s Fixer. I solve problems. Now you are the king’s fixer while I’m am out solving what he considers to be his biggest problem.”

“Right, some girl? Dana?”

“Danae. She’s, well, I think of her as our sister but she’s not. Her mother was our wet nurse, and then our tutor. We all grew up together. But they’ve been in love since they were old enough to know what it was. Father kept them apart while he was alive, or tried to, but when he died a couple of months ago, well...”

“They were married?”

“No, no, nothing as extreme as that. I doubt he can marry her, even if he wanted to marry anyone. She’s not nobility. But something happened between them the night he was crowned, and she left. Without her he rages, and doesn’t know why. He wants her found and brought back.”

“Why?”

He shrugged, “I don’t think he even knows why, but I think he loves her to the extent he’s able. I want her back though because she calms him, makes him easier to deal with. More level-headed and, frankly, a better king.”

“The truth - how volatile is your brother?”

“Volatile enough. He seems to like anger, and he certainly likes to hurt people. It seems to make him stronger somehow,” that is because he is the anilumietra. He literally gained power from hurting people, “He doesn’t seem, to me, to be insane. He is deliberate, he knows the consequences of his actions when he takes them. He just enjoys upsetting people.”

“I see,” I replied, not having more to say. It did seem that the best way to keep the king calm would be to not react to him. I’d need to be careful, it a dangerous kind of exploration.
“Enough of that, though. There’s one more place I need to show you. The best part of the tour. My rooms.”

I knew where this was going, “I’ll not argue with that.”

We left the office, and I locked it behind us. His rooms were another floor up, not such a far distance from his office, and we entered through the door to his bedroom. As soon as he closed the door behind us, we were on each other.

Some time later we laid in bed, naked and limp and covered in sweat. I looked over at him and started laughing a little.

“What?,” he said, a lazy smile on his face.

“See this? This I’ll miss.”

“Mmm, I just bet you will.”

“Is this going to be dangerous for you?,” I wasn’t in love with him, but I did feel a certain affection. Fondness, maybe. I didn’t trust him more than anyone else here, but I did like him.

“I hope not. Even so, I’m good enough with a sword.”

“Good enough with your sword,” I snorted with laughter at my own stupid pun. We dissolved into laughter, and then laid there for a few more moments. The afterglow passed, and I sat up, “Are there any other people I should know? Maybe anyone who works for you?”

“You’re replacing someone. I had a woman named Beth working for me, and she left to go have a child. That is all I suppose. No one else really works for me, beyond my own personal relationships. I can’t transfer those to you.”

“No, no. Of course not,” he was right, I’d have to build my own network. I’d done it before though, and I could easily do it again. It was a normal part of every new assignment I received. I had Marcus, too, even if he was off doing who knows what. His playing usually proved to be fruitful though, so I would have to call him in to meet with me soon.

I was already planning as I walked around the room collecting my clothes and dressing. When I finished, I turned back to Eben, who was lounging on the bed, watching me dress, “Good luck, my prince.”

“See you soon, I hope,” he replied. I nodded, and left the room. There was work to be done.
Danae, The Stair Fort

Chapter Summary

Danae and her party arrive at the site of the conflict - The Stair Fort. They touch base with the commander there and learn more about what's going on. All seems in hand until everything goes sideways.

Chapter Notes

No sex in this chapter.

However, there is character death. Not saying who, but I hope it makes you Feel Things if you've been gracious enough to read the story this far.

“So that’s why it’s called the Stair Fort,” I said to Isandro, looking up at the mountain in front of us. We stood on the songling where it abutted the mountains, on our side of the border. Isandro, Duncan, Leigh, Petyr, and myself sat on our horses, in the front of the line. The men we’d brought joined the men who manned this portion of the border, and in the distance I could see a group that had the bottom of the fort guarded. It was colder here near the mountains, the wind rushing off the icy peaks to meet the open Songling. I pulled my cloak tighter, wishing I’d been able to perform the warming spell Leigh tried to teach me.

The fort was in front of us, pressed into the mountainside. It was a grey extension of the mountain itself, placed on a flat, cleared ridge. It was high up the mountain, and the only obvious way in was the set of hundreds of switchback staircases that ran up the flat face of the cliff. Though we were still some ways off, I could tell from here that they weren’t very wide.

“Can we teleport in?,” asked Petyr.

“And who would do it?,” Replied Duncan, disdain dripping from his voice, “Can you open a portal, boy?”

“No, but the Shadows can,” that was what he’d taken to calling the Weavers due to their propensity for dressing entirely in black. I thought of them as the sickle moons, because at night the only visible part of them were the silver arakhs they carried.

“They can’t,” Duncan spat back at him, “And if they could, teleportation is a good way to get ye’self killed. Why go after an army if they come to you, one at a time? No, we’re not getting any up there, we’ve got them good and treed.”

He an Isandro exchanged a look that then bounced to Leigh, who nodded. Ignoring the look for now, I decided to take a crack at it next, “Can we wait them out?”

“No,” replied Isandro, “I doubt it. They’re likely waiting for more of their own to come get them. If we stay too long we might find ourselves facing and actual army, and we won’t start a war if we
Sometimes the men were too cautious for their own good. We had the largest, most powerful army on the continent. Charias did not. I didn’t see the problem with taking the risk. But, then I wasn’t in charge.

“What, then?,” I asked.

“Don’t know yet,” said Leigh, “We need to go down and talk to the commander down there.”

“Agreed,” replied Isandro. He spurred his horse forward, and the rest of us followed.

The camp was, like all of the others, orderly. But here it lacked the lived-in feel. The paths between tents weren’t worn to dirt, and there were far fewer tents and many more small camp fires. There was cavalry too, horses lined up for easy access, and defenses dug in around the edges.

The commander’s squire met us at the entrance to the camp, and we all dismounted. Isandro sent Petyr to deal with the horses, and had me come with him to the commander’s tent. I looked around as we entered, noticing the strange smell to the place. It was tangy and acidic and vaguely off-putting, like anise. It likely came from the smoke rising out of an incense burner on a small side table. Even though this was easily the largest tent in the camp, it was difficult to fit all four of us inside it.

The commander himself sat behind the desk. Even sitting, I could tell how tall he was. He was rail-thin, with long, thin fingers, a blade-like nose, a sharp chin and jaw, and dark brown eyes that peered out from a pronounced brow. His hair was a dark auburn red color, and his armor, cloak, and clothing was all snowy white. I realized with a start that he was a luminite priest. No, not a priest, a Morning Star; probably contracted by the army. Although I, like everyone else in Kelly, knew who they were I’d never met one. I cast my mind back to the lessons I’d taken with Caleb, trying to work out his rank from the sigils that held his cloak to his breastplate. The bust of a singing woman with her hair flowing around her, I squinted at it, and it finally came to me. He was a Siren, one of the seven, reporting only to the Great Mother herself.

He should have made me feel safer, but something about him immediately put me on edge. I couldn’t figure out why, but he made me want to turn and run. I stood my ground, grinding my teeth and telling myself I was being stupid. It wasn’t often I ignored my instincts, but I had no reason to fear him and every reason to stay exactly where I was. I shot a sideways glance at Leigh, but he seemed to be relaxed, as was Isandro. Only Duncan seemed to be upset - he was twitching his fingers.

“Siren Gregory,” Isandro greeted him, holding out his hand. The Siren rose and shook hands with Isandro, Duncan, and Leigh. I hung back, so although he clearly noticed me, he realized I was not of the same rank and importance as the other three and passed me over.

“Commander Blackstreet, Sir Craksbury, Sir Goodspirit,” Duncan’s last name was Goodspirit? Oh, the irony, “Shall we get to business?”

He looked pointedly at me, but it was Duncan who gave an annoyed snort and said, “Don’t bother. He brings his wench with him everywhere.”

“She has an eidetic memory,” Isandro replied, “A most useful secretary.”

I don’t, but it was interesting that Isandro used that as his excuse. The Siren waved it off, “Then let’s begin. What do you already know?”
“Some of our men are trapped in the Stair Fort with some of theirs after a small skirmish. What I don’t understand, though, is why they haven’t simply killed our men,” Isandro said.

“My best guess is that they want to buy their way out without being harmed. I’m inclined to wait them out. No one’s used the Stair Fort in living memory, so they can’t have much food - although we surveyed it when I took command a few years ago and there is water. Not much else though.”

“Then why did you send for help?,” Duncan asked. I wondered if he had a tone of voice that didn’t imply annoyance.

Unless I was imagining things, the Siren looked uncomfortable for a moment before saying, “Because they have both of my Sisters.”

All seven of the Sirens were assigned two Siren Sisters to help them. If they’d been Morning Stars like him, or the magic-using Firestars, they likely either wouldn’t have been taken or would have already left, so I spoke up, “They’re Keepers, aren’t they.”

He had the grace not to look surprised, “Yes.”

Leigh cursed in Korianan - curses were the only part of the language I was having an easy time with during our lessons - and added, “Why would they take a couple of book lovers?”


“Right, again,” the Siren said, sounding vaguely put-out that I was stealing his thunder. I resolved to quiet myself. I learned more that way than when I was showing off my deductive skills, “That’s why they believe they can bargain. Sister Myriah, especially.”

There was silence for a few moments while we turned the problem about in our minds, but it was Isandro who spoke, “I feel we might be more successful with a stealth than force.”

He made eye contact with Leigh, and I could only guess at the meaning of the look. Leigh took over, “Over the years I’ve learned some small magic. I could cloak a small party well enough to get up the steps. Four or five people, including myself. How many of their people do you think are up there?”

“We don’t know exactly,” the Siren replied, “But we think no more than twenty.”

“I assume that they have more hostages than just yer Sisters?,” Duncan asked.

“Yes. They have seven of our men.”

“Seven men if we can free them, plus myself and four others. Those are decent odds. Almost even,” Leigh added.

“So who goes with Leigh? Certainly at least one or two of the Weavers we brought with us,” asked Isandro. I was wondering the same thing. That was a lot of steps, so it had to be someone who was extremely fit. With a limited number of people, the best fighters needed to be chosen. Stealth would be important, too.

“I’ll be going,” added the Siren. There was something in that deep baritone of a voice that let us all know arguing was useless. He was going to retrieve his Sisters.

Duncan grunted in acknowledgement, “I’ll be going too.”
“Why you?,” Isandro asked and, though it was subtle, I could see the suspicion on his face.

“Are you plannin’ on goin’?”

“No, but--”

“None of that. Someone from main command needs to go, and if you’re not willing to go then it’s going to be me,” I kept it to myself, but Isandro’s lack of bravery bothered me. Agreeing with Duncan made me even more uncomfortable, but I kept it all to myself and tried to keep it off my face.

“I believe I count as ‘someone from main command’,” Leigh interjected.

“Can you fight and keep us hidden at the same time?”

“No, but keeping us hidden should mean we don’t have to fight, and--,” I tuned out. I knew that tone, I’d seen these dick-measuring arguments before. Leigh didn’t trust Duncan and he didn’t want him along. Isandro didn’t want to go, for reasons I didn’t understand.

It took time, but they settled it. Duncan, Siren Gregory, Leigh, and two Weavers were going. Isandro and myself were being left behind as command in the camp. It was only an hour until sundown, and supplied were hastily gathered. I was still arguing with Petyr over the grooming of our horses when they left camp.

After the horses were sorted, I joined Isandro in the command tent where our evening meal was waiting for us. I sat across from him at the small table, and we ate in silence, each in our thoughts. It took me until the end of the meal to work up the courage to ask Isandro about is cowardice.

“Isandro, there is something,” I hesitated, trying to summon the words, “That I didn’t understand about the meeting this afternoon. Why did you not volunteer to accompany Leigh?”

He looked at me, evaluating me before wiping his mouth and setting the napkin on the table, “Because Leigh wanted me to stay behind. He wants to take Duncan up onto the mountain.”

“I see,” I knew there were politics going on amongst them all that I wasn’t privy to, that stretched back much further than my arrival. I rolled this thought around in my head, unsure of how comfortable I was with it.

“And should Duncan be killed by a Charian soldier,” he met my eyes, waiting for me to catch up.

“Then,” I began, slowly, “Cotton - as undiplomatic as he is - will march on Charias as retribution. There will be war.”

He didn’t reply, but I could tell from the look of satisfaction on his face that I’d guessed right. I knew, in an abstract way, that he favored using the army that sat on our border, but I didn’t know he’d been planning this, and I didn’t know it was so close to fruition. How had I missed it?

He interpreted my look correctly, “It isn’t that I don’t trust you, it’s that you’re young, and on the surface of it - I’ve only known you a month and a half. I wanted to bring you in slowly, not toss
you into an action that might be treason.”

“It’s only treason if you get caught,” I quipped. Then, I thought of Caleb. Would he really think of war as treason?, “Besides, the king is more likely to take your side in the matter. If someone had given him the idea he might have done it himself.”

“I suppose you would know,” he hesitated a moment, “What is your relationship with him?”

“We grew up together. We, well, I was, maybe am, in love with him. We’d been waiting until his father was dead - on account of my lacking both money and a family name or guild - to marry. There’s no law against it, strictly speaking, but his father threatened to disinherit him if he married me.”

“You’re the queen?,” he asked, his eyes widening.

“No, no. We didn’t marry. We just,” I shrugged, the emotional pain of that night still fresh. I’d been making love, I hadn’t expected Caleb to just leave, “Fucked.”

“And he left you after the one time, before your fire was done,” he wasn’t really asking, he knew that part, and his tone was laced with gentle understanding. Sympathy for what Caleb had done.

“He’d always had a mean streak, ever since we were kids. The more I think on it the more obvious it seems. I just,” I shrugged, “didn’t expect him to turn it on me. I was too in love to see that I was playing with fire, and I always wrote the incidents off to whatever was the handiest excuse.”

“What drew you to him then?”

“Other than proximity?,” I gave a sarcastic smile.

“Proximity doesn’t mean love.”

“I know,” I thought about it, touching those feelings again after all these weeks, “I’m not drawn to kindness, really. The sword play, coming to you on a whim, inserting myself into your life, sleeping with Leigh, playing military political games that I have no business playing? Risk makes life interesting and I don’t like being bored. So I suppose there’s a part of me that is always attracted to the thing that’s worst for me. I’ll always be pushing for the next thing, the next challenge. Caleb has always been a challenge, and has never been boring.”

“Am I boring?,” he seemed to really just want an answer, not as if he’d take that answer personally.

“Not yet. But see, even though I have you to distract me, I needed to have two men at once,” I grinned at him, “Thank you, again, by the way. We’ve had little headway, but Leigh has been trying to teach me.”

He leaned back in his chair, relaxing, “You’ll get it, I’m sure. I--”

He was cut off by a loud, long horn blast from outside the tent, and his head snapped up. He jumped out of his chair, grabbing for his sword belt. Luckily, the danger of being exposed on this field meant we were both still fully dressed in our armor. I caught his urgency and jumped up too.

“What is it?”

“The alert horn from the outriders. Something’s coming, grab your sword,” even as he said it I heard noise. There was shouting, and hooves thundering. We strapped on our sword belts, drew,
Outside the tent was chaos. The alert riders had allowed our calvary to get at least partially mounted, but the night attack meant that even on alert at least some of the men were sleeping. Sleeping meant slow moving. There was fire, some ours and some theirs, bathing the scene in an orange glow. Men clashed swords around me, with horses and men battling each other.

Isandro started shouting commands, and I followed him as he did. I saw the Weavers working, and their deadly efficiency chilled and fascinated me. They flashed in and out of view, one moment in front of their foe, before disappearing and reappearing behind them. Their silver weapons glowed, and their voices rose in Weavers’ song. I’d never heard them speak, it was a queer sound, unhuman. It scraped against the inside of my skull and chilled my spine, but I could see how effective their song was. They darted in and out of shadows, and men fell before them.

More than one man came after us, screaming out of the orange hue, and Isandro dispatched all of them. He was protecting me, and it was holding him back. I did my best to help him, dispatching several myself, but I didn’t know where we were going or what he was trying to do. I heard a boom behind is, but when I tried to turn and see what it was, Isandro yanked me around again. We continued forward until the men started to clear and the smoke wasn’t as thick.

I looked up into the clear air, and was finally able to get my bearings. We were heading for the horse line. He confirmed my suspicions, yelling, “I’m going to get you to a horse. Get on it and ride for the main line!”

In that moment, another horn sounded, and he relaxed by half an inch, “Backup from the line?”

“Yes,” he confirmed, “They’re fifteen minutes out at most.”

He cut down another man, and we were close, just a small sprint away. I started to lunge forward to the horse, when he held me back. I looked up at him and he was squinting at the horses in the darkness.

Two men stepped out from between the horses. One was tall and broad and moved like a cat. It was too dark to see much, but his armor and hair were dark, and his skin was moon-white. His eyes were two creepy, dark pools in his light face. A sword, splattered with what must have been blood, was naked in his hand. Another man stood beside him, shorter and thick. He was slow, I could tell by the way he moved. His armor was grey steel, and his skin was light, but not as light as the other man’s. Unlike the rest of us, he wore a helm. Isandro and I hadn’t grabbed ours from the tent, and I wasn’t sure about the ghost-like man that stood in front of us.

The taller man said nothing, but lunged for us. Isandro got in front of me and I heard the metallic clang of their swords meeting. The other man cam for Isandro as well, but I pushed past and brought my sword up.

It was in that moment that I realized how over-confident I’d become. I was training, and although I was good, most of my opponents had been pulling punches. This guy wasn’t and the force of our swords meeting vibrated down the metal and into my hand. It surprised me, but I was actually slightly larger than he was and I held on and adjusted. My training, such as it was, kicked in. Although I lacked the experience, I was skilled, and I’d spent many hours practicing.

We traded blows, and my world narrowed to the sound of our blades meeting. This was different than training - this man would die if he lost, and he wasn’t sparring, he was fighting for his life. I was doing the same, but I simply wasn’t as conditioned and I was obviously tiring faster than he was. I was vaguely aware that Isandro was still fighting next to me, and I knew I only had to hang
on until he finished with that man.

But I was clearly on the defensive. I was dodging more than I was blocking because my arms were
tired and I wanted to conserve my strength. I dropped to the ground and rolled, dodging again, and
stole a glance at Isandro.

Fire flashed against the silver blade in the attacker’s hand as it fell, high, towards Isandro’s head.
He was too slow getting his sword up, and he missed. Horror leached through my body as I
watched the slow fall of the sword in horrible, detail-rendering slow motion to land in the center of
his head. It went right through his skull into his forehead, and he fell, his weight wrenching the
attacker’s blade from his hand.

“Isandro!,” I screamed, surging forward. The jumping towards him saved me from my attackers
next sword swing. The other one turned his gaze towards me and his thin lips formed a wicked
smile. I felt a horrible pain in my skull, and the world went black.
Chapter Summary

Liam, Phalen's cousin, is in exile in the next country over - Llellwyn, with the rest of his family for their own safety. While his politically savvy mother plots and plans, Liam only has his eyes on one thing - Gwyn.

Chapter Notes

Mention of sex, no explicit sex, and no violence.

Also, at the beginning of every Liam chapter, it's best to just facepalm and get it out of the way.

"Have you heard anything about my vile turd of a cousin?,” I asked my mother as she entered the library. She gave me a reproachful look for bad-mouthing my cousin. It wasn’t that she disagreed, it’s that she thought I ought to be more careful.

“He has picked up a new Toy."

“Forgive me, I misspoke, have you heard anything useful about my vile turd of a cousin?,” She met my eyes and something about her body language told me I wouldn’t enjoy what came next.

“From Raedanas. He went to get her himself.”

“Dammit!,” I half-shouted. He’d left Stoneriver and travelled across half the continent and returned and we’d never even known he’d been gone. It was a missed opportunity to take back our rightful place in Stoneriver and place one of his sisters on the throne, where she belonged, “Another opportunity lost! What are we paying the spies for if they are so useless!"

“I begin to wonder that myself,” she ran a hand through her long, grey hair. She wasn’t especially old, but her hair had gone grey early. She sighed, sounding tired. We were all tired, we all wanted to go home.

“He’s not going to leave again, not anytime soon. Not until he kills this one.”

“And they say she’s an elf. She’ll last a long time.”

We waited in silence a few more moments and I asked. “So what now? What did father say?”

“Your father and your uncle agree, there’s nothing we can do but wait for our chance.”

“And find some better spies”

“That, too,” she sighed heavily and changed the topic, “have you met with the seinneadair?”
“I have an appointment this afternoon for the final fitting,” I paused, “You’re sure this is the right action?”

“I am, and so is your father. Your uncle, well, he’ll go along with whatever your father says. These weddings will bind us to the Reilochs and their money. When we ultimately return to our home, their support of us will be lucrative for them.”

“And what of my other cousins? Should we not be trying to wed them?”

“Normally, I’d say yes. I’d never let you marry an outsider, not with you being so close to the throne—”

“I’m sixth in line, that’s not close.”

“Three of the five in front of you are likely damaged and crazy and might be incapable of ruling. The bastard is illegitimate, although it’s likely only a matter of time before he’s legitimized. I’m certain he’s of the same spoiled stock as his father, and no more likely to be a good ruler.”

“So that leaves father.”

“Yes. Your father is Phalen’s rightful heir.”

“Then why have we been trying to put Adélaïde on the throne?”

“Because then we can go home,” she sounded exasperated with my inability to see what she clearly thought was plain. I knew better than to push her when she got like this, she had little patience for my lesser political acumen.

I tried a different tactic, “And the other exiles? The ones in the other cities?”

Our family practiced dyntastic polygamy, which meant there were more of us than could be kept track of. My grandfather had eleven children: my father and my uncle Leo were here with me, Phalen’s father, and the rest that were dead or hiding in different cities. I did not know where, but they’d taken their whole family with them. My uncle Enzo, Phalen’s father, was long dead; but some of the others still lived and had their families with them. I didn’t even know the names of some of my cousins, and had met few of them. We used to all live in Stoneriver, together, but Phalen had murdered some as soon as he’d taken power. The rest of us fled, driven into exile. We’d been lucky to meet the Reilocks. Others had not been so lucky.

She shrugged, “They are not so close to the throne. They’ll follow our lead. They want to return to Ville Flue as badly as we do.”

“It seems you have this all figured out, then.”

“Of course I have, you simply need to do as you’re told, and it will work out. Besides, it isn’t as if Gwyneth is ugly or boring. It could be worse.”

That much was true. While our marriage was arranged, Gwyneth and I had grown close over the years that I’d been living with them, “Unlike Morgan.”

She made a dismissive noise, “There’s virtue in a stupid wife, too, and your cousin will be happy enough to be settled. Morgan is sweet enough, even if not so pretty.”

That much was true, Morgan was sweet. Stupid and ugly, but kind, “Besides, Noel isn’t so pretty himself.”
“It’s unkind to make fun of those less fortunate than yourself, Liam,” her words were undercut by her tone, and the indulgent smile on her face.

We were interrupted by the arrival of the aforementioned Gwyneth, who came sweeping in through the doorway. As usual, her grass-green hair was braided into a crown around her head. Her sapphire-colored gown showed off her shoulders and decolletage, matching well with the brown of her skin and the blue of her eyes. She was striking, and I always liked looking at her. Attraction would not be a problem in our marriage.

“There you are!,” she said, coming over and taking my arm, “I sent one of the servants to find you, but they could not. The seinneadair is here.”

“Then it seems that duty calls. Mother,” I inclined my head to her and left with Gwyn. When we were out of earshot I said, “It she really here, or did you just want to get me alone?”

“Can’t it be both?,” she grinned at me. I stopped us and pulled her to me for a lengthy kiss. She arched against me, pulling me closer, and I pushed us back against the wall. I kissed my way across her jaw to her neck.

“Why are you wearing so damned many skirts?,” I complained.

“It is,” she pushed me away. Not hard, but I stopped kissing her, “Probably for the best if I don’t get disheveled, anyway. At any rate, our first time together should not be in a hallway. We should take our time.”

I groaned in frustration. At first we’d waited because we’d been too young. Then we’d waited because her father dithered about the wedding, threatening to marry her off to one of the other merchant families. Neither of us wanted her virtue to be in doubt. Now we waited for fear that I’d get her with child before we were married, or that her father would change his mind at the last moment. We didn’t love each other, but we’d lusted for each other since we’d come of age.

I waited with her in the hallway for a moment or two, waiting for my body to calm itself. Then we continued on to the room where the seinneadair had set up her things. We parted ways, and I had my final fitting. By the time she finished, the sun was setting. It was almost time for supper, and I headed in that direction. It was a crisp, fresh autumn evening and I’d been standing still for so long that I decided to take the long way around through some of the quieter places of the estate.

Halfway there, I turned a corner and came upon two people. The sight was so strange that it took my mind a moment to make sense of it. My aunt Charlotte sat on a window ledge, skirts around her waist and her bare legs wrapped around a man. Ass bared, he pumped between her thighs, clearly inside her. The trouble was that although I could only see his back, his dark purple hair and tall, strong build told me that it wasn’t my uncle Leo.

Charlotte opened her eyes for a second, and saw me standing there dumbfounded. Her eyes widened in shock and she said, “Brandon! BRANDON!”

He stopped and turned towards me too. I’ve never done up my pants as fast as he did up his, and before I knew it he had his sword drawn and at my throat. I’m am only mediocre with a sword, and even had I been able to get over my shock fast enough I still would be no match for Gwyn’s uncle Brandon. He was, for good reason, charged with the security of this family, and of many others besides. He ran a group of sell-swords who specialized in security and protection.

“What are you doing here, boy?,” he snarled at me.
“W-Walking to d-dinner,” I replied.

“We’re quite a ways from the dining room,” cold steel pressed against my throat. He had the flat side pressed against me for the moment.

“It’s a nice night, I felt like taking the long way,” I hoped he could tell that I was too scared to bother lying to him.

“What should we do with him?,” That was addressed to my aunt.

“We can’t kill him,” she replied, “Not like this anyway. Too many questions.”

The cold, calculating way she said it and her lack of absolute reassurance set my mind tumbling. She was my aunt, but she seemed to be saying she’d kill me in another way if the opportunity presented itself, “Then what? We can’t very well let him go telling people what he saw.”

She evaluated me, her eyes holding a shrewdness I’d never noticed before. There was no love in her gaze, “You won’t tell anyone, will you Liam? You’re going to say nice any quiet.”

“I won’t tell,” yet, anyway. Maybe. I sure as fuck wasn’t going to tell them that though, “I promise. I don’t care who you sleep with, that’s your business.”

“See it remains that way,” Brandon growled, “Or your marriage won’t be a long one.”

He withdrew his sword and I reflexively rubbed my throat where the blade had been. I turned and left, not wanting to stay a second longer and give him time to change his mind. I found a different way to the dining room.

***

Weddings make me nervous. Not just mine, but all of them. Everything is so perfectly planned, and it’s all balancing on a knife’s edge. One little thing goes wrong, and all of that planning and money is wasted. It’s strange, then, that I’m at mine and I’m not at all nervous. Night is almost fallen outside the pavilion, and I can already hear the crackling of the fire outside. By the time it was full dark out, it would be fifteen feet high.

My mother opened the flap of the tent I was waiting in, orange glow lighting her pale skin for a moment. She looked at me and smiled, “I see you’re ready.”

“I am,” I replied.

“Good, then let’s go,” I followed her out, and my father was waiting just outside the tent. In front of me was the cleared space on Ethan Reiloch’s estate. The center contained the huge bonfire, and I could see Gwyneth, Morgan, and Noel approaching from nearby tents. Gwyneth walked with her mother, and Morgan walked with their father. My aunt and uncle accompanied Noel.

We all met in the center, Gwyneth coming to stand beside me and Morgan joining Noel. Gwyn captured all of my attention. Her family were Luminites, and both sisters wore white. It contrasted perfectly with her brown skin, and the tiny crystals that covered the form-fitting gown sparkled in the light of the fire. Her hair, normally braided into a crown, was worn loose and flowing to her hips, crystals dotting the green waves. The fire made the tone of her skin even warmer, her
shoulders and collarbones brushed with orange light. She looked ephemeral and delicate, and her shy smile made me smile back at her.

I reached out and took her hand, and we turned to face the fire, a luminite priestess standing there facing us. Our parents lined up behind us. When we were all in place, the priestess said, in a loud, ringing voice, “Witnesses, enter.”

I wasn’t allowed to look behind us, but I heard them all enter. I didn’t see any of them until they started fanning out in a circle around the fire. All of them were from high-ranking merchant families, and although I didn’t look directly at any of them, from the corner of my eye I could see that they were several ranks deep. All wore white finery, as we did. As was custom at any Luminite wedding.

When they were in place, the priestess began, “We come together in the light, to see the joining of these two couples. The Reilochs of Leochlleyn and the Boudreaus of Charias. Who has named these four souls?”

From behind us, our parents answered in unison, “We have.”

“And what have you named them?”

“Liam Boudreau,” replied my parents.

“Gwyneth Reiloch,” added Gwyn’s mother.

“Noel Boudreau,” said Noel’s parents.

“Morgan Reiloch,” responded Morgan’s father.

“And who now names them?,” the priestess asked.

“We do,” all four of us replied in unison.

“Liam and Morgan, turn to each other, and view each other in the light of God’s eye,” we turned to face each other, both of us smiling at the solemnity of the occasion, “Today you join two great families and two nations which have long been separated. Do you vow to stand beside each other, to support each other and make your way through the world as one soul?”

“We do,” we timed our answers perfectly. That was good luck, a good omen for our union.

“Then Gwyneth Reiloch, what do you name Liam?,” asked the priestess. We’d all agreed to this beforehand. As I was older than Noel, and closer to the throne, we’d follow Chariasian naming traditions. Morgan and Noel would be following Llellwysh ones.

“I name him Liam Boudreau, first in my soul, and the light in my darkness,” I wasn’t as faithful as she was, she was a true believer, but the words still moved me.

“And Liam, what do you name Gwyneth?”

I took a breath and answered, “I give her the gift of my family and name her Gwyneth Boudreau, first in my soul, the light in my darkness.”

The priestess turned to Morgan and repeated the words, then asked the same question. She replied, “I give him the gift of our joined families, and I name him Noel Reidreau, first in my soul, and the light in my darkness.”
She sounded so small and scared, not confident like Gwyn. I felt for her, to marry at seventeen, but Noel was young too and a gentle soul. He would be kind to her, I thought. He answered the question next, “I give her the gift of our joined families, and I name her Morgan Reidreau.”

“Then be joined, married, sealed together on this historic day, in the light of the God’s eye. Turn, and cast your brightness into the world,” all four of us turned to face our family and our guests. I held Gwyn’s hand up in triumph, and a loud cheer erupted from the people. I knew so few of them, and had I been home in Ville Flue, I would have been surrounded by family. The thought tinged the moment with sadness, but the sadness melted into resolve. Somehow, I would remove my cousin from the throne and return home.
Chapter Summary

Time has passed, and Kay's nightmare in Ville Flue continues. When all seems lost, she finds strength and someone she can trust.

Chapter Notes

No sex because TBH I just didn't feel right having pleasure in any of the chapters where Phalen appears. However, there's still the discussion of torture and whatnot, like last time.

Oh, also, without giving away too much: I promise that this isn't tragic lesbians.

“Bring me my Painted Lady!,” I heard Phalen yell through the closed door that stood between me and the throne room. It used to make me panic. Now, it just makes me feel exhausted. I was still sore from the latest tattoo he’d forced on me, and didn’t wish to earn another, but here we were. I pushed through the ornate doors and into the throne room, my personal guard in my wake.

I made eye contact with Phalen first, so he’d know he was first in my mind. I looked like I lit up on seeing his face. I crossed the short distance from the side of the throne room to the foot of the dais. There, I knelt, head bowed deep. My personal guard mimicked the act.

“Rise, my beautiful Toy,” I lifted my head, keeping my eyes on his and my expression beatific. I stood and climbed the steps to stand in front of him, bending low to kiss him in greeting.

“My king,” I murmured against his mouth.

He finished ravaging my mouth and let me go, saying, “Sit, my love. I have a special surprise for you.”

Likely another poor soul that I would have to condemn to death or worse. That’s what I did these days, to earn Phalen’s esteem. It’s what I did to save myself from his wroth and from my own death. He thought he loved me now, that I was pretending to be his equal in sadism. Perhaps I was. These cruel acts I thought up came from my brain, and I couldn’t blame him for the deep well of my own sadistic creativity. It tore at my mind and my soul a little more each day. I’d never be able to forget, either, because he tattooed me with a remembrance every time I inflicted such punishment on someone else. My arms and legs were carpeted, and the court called me the Painted Lady. In my mind I was still Toy. Kay was long gone. I missed her some days, but I’d grown brave without her.

I sat in my throne, next to his. It was new, a recent addition, and made of polished wood instead of the white stone he sat on, “Don’t keep me in suspense, my love.”

My stomach still turned to say these things to him. I did not love him, and he didn’t love me. He
didn’t even know what it is to love. I do, and keeping it to myself is the hardest thing I’ve ever done. I felt her presence, standing with her sisters, to the side of his throne. I didn’t look at her, nor she at me.

He turned to his court and yelled, “Bring them in!”

The main doors open in the back, and the gentry parted for the newcomer, allowing them to walk up the carpet in the center of the room. It was a party of soldiers, let by a man. Their uniforms were strange to me, different than the white of the castle guards. These wore normal steel armor, with the river etched in a band around their chests. They must be real soldiers, part of the army.

The man leading them was tall and lithe, with broad shoulders and a solid build. He had hair the same blonde of Phalen’s, and resembled him as well. He had the same cruel expression, and the same thin mouth. As he got closer, I noticed his eyes. They were purple, and when I saw them, I knew. I knew how Adélaïde had forced Phalen to leave her alone. She’d given him an heir. I forced myself not to look at her for confirmation.

He was dragging behind him a woman. She was tall as a man, and of surpassing beauty. She had long, wavy, blue-black hair, a full mouth, a strong jaw, equine nose, and dark black brows set above eyes the same green as spring pines. She was wearing armor, but even through it I could tell how curvy she was. Despite myself, an ill-advised and untimely attraction brewed between my thighs.

The man came forward and knelt as I had, while saying, “Father, I’ve returned from the Stair Fort. And I come bearing gifts.”

The soldiers knelt too, but the woman refused to. She stood there in her armor, unarmed, and in chains. She was staring at Phalen, eyes boring into him, and ignoring me completely. This was strange, most people tending to be distracted by my nakedness; but she wasn’t. She knew who the threat was. She was defiant and brave and wanted to fight, and I knew that would get her killed. I didn’t want her to be killed. Offhandedly, I wondered what the soldiers had done to her on the way here. She didn’t look too messed up.

“Oh Phalen,” I breathed, “Look at her.”

“Do you like her, love?”

I knew better than to just admit it. He would hurt her worse, just to see my own pain. No, I must frame this differently, “We could have so much fun together breaking her, don’t you think?”

He smirked, turning back to his son, “Rise, Adrien, and tell me about your gift. Tell me what transpired at the stair fort.”

Adrien stood, and his words were at the top of his voice, “We were victorious!”

This must have been what Phalen was planning with his war councils. I didn’t know where the Stair Fort was, or who they’d been attacking, but the news clearly pleased both Phalen and Adrien. Anything that pleased them was likely bad.

He yanked on the lead attached to the woman’s chains, and she stumbled forward, “During the battle I stumbled across the commander, exactly where you said he’d be. He had this bitch with him, so I claimed her for you. None of us touched her, I wanted her to be completely unspoiled for you.”

“And the commander?,” asked Phalen.
“Dead,” Andrien answered. I noticed the flicker of pain across the woman’s handsome features.

“Then we have done it, we are to war!,” shouted Phalen, rising from his throne. War? With whom? The countries of this continent had been fighting since their inception, but border skirmishes weren’t war. He descended to the woman in chains and grabbed her chin, forcing her to look at him, “You hear that, pretty one? Your king will be forced from behind his wall. I will make the hundred year army stir.”

“Go fuck yourself,” she said. Although I’d had a permanent translation charm cast on me long ago, I could tell she was speaking a different language, though I couldn’t tell which one. But the hundred year army, everyone knew them. They were the army that guarded the border of Kelly. Was that who he was fighting? Was he so foolish as to try and provoke Kelly to war?

“Ah, I forget, you can’t understand me. Well, then,” he switched to her language and repeated himself. She spat in his eye. Although I knew she’d earned herself some pain, I couldn’t help but admire her bravery.

I was right about the pain. Phalen backhanded her, hard, sending her to her knees. Phalen bent low, and I knew the flavor of the grin on his face. I don’t know what he was intending though, because it never happened. She pushed up from her kneeling position, slamming her body into his with all her might. He wasn’t wearing any armor, but she was wearing mail and was no small person besides. She barrelled into him, and he went flying, rolling to a stop at the foot of the dais. I felt a surge of hope flicker through my veins, and I tried to ignore it.

Phalen got to his feet, but slowly. I couldn’t see the look on his face, but I could hear the venom in his voice, “Hold her down.”

A moment of panic flickered across her face, and she made to bolt, but Adrien still held her chain, and she stopped at the end of it. The soldiers grabbed her, but it took four of them, one at each of her limbs. They sat on her limbs, holding her to the floor, and still she struggled. It would do her no good, I’d seen this happen before. After all, Phalen didn’t need my help to be cruel. And worse, she would get his blood up, and he’d take his anger out on me later. My heart sank, and I was filled with resentment for the black-haired woman on the floor.

She was wearing pants like a man, not a woman’s skirts, and he yanked them down, pushing her legs far enough apart to get between them. I saw him fumbling with his pants, and I cringed internally, knowing what was coming, trying to keep my face impassive. I might condemn other women to this, but I never enjoyed it.

“No!,” she screamed, “Noooooooo!”

She howled at the top of her lungs, but I knew that would not help her. I watched him use his weight to hold her down, push himself inside her. And then, nothing. I was slammed back against my throne, my ears ringing, the breath pushed out of my lungs. It lasted only seconds, this forced that pushed me into my chair, but it was painful.

When I could breathe again, I opened my eyes and looked around. Everyone who had been standing was knocked down, pushed towards the edges of the room, in a circle around the girl. Phalen was next to her, slowly picking himself up. The guards were down, and her lead wasn’t being held, but she was laying down too. She’d clearly cast a spell, but how? She’d said no words.

“Oh, Adrien, you’ve brought me a most wonderful gift indeed,” the girl was on her knees, pulling her pants up and back into place, but otherwise looking ragged. He recovered faster, and got to his feet, walking to her, and grabbing her chin again, “I know what you are, girl, and I know how to
break you. Guards, see her to her new quarters. Lock her in, and fetch a mage to ward the door. You will feed her through a slot, and no one is to talk to her, especially no men. I have a new Toy.”

A new Toy? I wanted to hope this meant I’d be free, but somehow I knew better by now. I desperately wanted to talk to Adélaïde, but knew I wouldn’t have the chance until tomorrow, at the earliest. He turned back to the dais and climbed the steps, sitting back on the white stone chair. He turned to me and I met his eyes again, managing a smile.

He laid his hand on mine and said, “Don’t worry, Toy, I haven’t forgotten you. You’re still my painted lady.”

“What is she?,” I asked.

“I believe our new friend is a Korianan. Only they could react like that to unwanted advances. Human spell casters need training to cast magic unaided, and my son would not have been able to take one so well trained. So she must be a novice, and the only novices who can cast unaided by words are the Korianan.”

“How...remarkable,” I replied.

“Yes. She shall prove to be great fun for us,” He smiled, and I smiled back. My skin crawled to do it, as only he would think to destroy something so rare. He turned back to the court and raised his voice to be heard, “Step forward, son.”

He’d been one of the first to his feet, so he stepped to the bottom stair and bowed his head, “Father.”

“How shall I reward you for being so successful. How old are you, Adrien?”

“Twenty, father.”

“And for all those years you’ve been my bastard, yes?”

“I have, your grace.”

“From today, and for all time, your name will be Boudreau. Rise, for you are no longer a bastard, but instead my true born son and heir,” Adrien stood, a grin on his face, and deceit in his eyes. His facial expressions were so much like his father’s. The court cheered and clapped for him, and I clapped with them, trying my best to look cheerful. In my mind I could only remember Adélaïde’s words: all her brother’s gifts are poisoned.

“Your gift humbles me, father. I have never been prouder.”

Phalen stood, “Come, let us adjourn to the war room. We must discuss the battle and plan for the next.”

I stood as he exited, smiling broadly, but inside my mind was churning. Was he really provoking Kelly to war? Was he really so foolish? They were content to keep their great army within their own borders, and however much the other countries warred among themselves, the Kellans never got involved. They only allowed a select group to use their port, and they grew rich off the profits of trade with both my people and the dwarves. There were other ways to access Kaydundryl and Dayeerdrlyn, but none as fast or easy as the over sea route that only the Kellans had access to. Did he think he could bring down the Alledran? Personally, I doubted it. Not only that, but I don’t think anyone would profit from the treaty of the bay being broken. The humans may not remember the War of Earth and Sky, but my people had much longer memories. I had my doubts that he’d be any
better of a master of the port than the Kellans, judging by how he closed his own country. No, if he wanted trade then he wouldn’t have isolated Charias. What did he want with Kelly?

I walked away as the girl was being dragged away, not wanting to watch. With Phalen gone to his war council I was free to do as I wished within the strictures he’d given me. I looked over at Adélaïde and she nodded, subtly flashing 5 fingers at me. She’d meet me at my rooms in five minutes. I hurried back to them and entered, my guards taking up their posts outside my room. The guards were a recent addition - once Phalen decided he loved me, he believed that I needed the prestige. The only time I didn’t need them was when I was with Adélaïde. I couldn’t figure out why that was, but I didn’t argue it.

I paced the floor until she arrived, and she was true to her word. Five minutes later she entered, leaving the door open behind her. “Are you ready for your walk?”

I was a pet, and she walked me. Maybe that was why I didn’t have the guards, maybe he felt me the dog and Adélaïde the dog walker, “I am.”

“Then let’s get this over with,” we left together, and took our usual route through the hall of kings. Phalen hadn’t closed the throne room, and so there were fewer people here than usual. My nakedness was a routine sight now, and I’d gotten used to it, as had they. They pretended not to notice us, while studiously eavesdropping. Today we didn’t speak though, and instead made our slow way down the hall.

Once we passed from the hall of kings we picked up our pace and headed for the library. We’d passed many hours here since I’d been given the freedom to roam with her. We entered in a rush, locking the door behind us. I didn’t know which I wanted more, information, or her. She decided that for me, running her hands through her hair in frustration and saying, “I’d hoped he would fail!”

“You knew Adrien was sent to make war against the Kellans?,” I asked.

She swiveled her eyes to the side to look at me, “I knew some of it. I had hoped someone would put a sword through his eye in the process.”

“You wish your own son would die?”

She didn’t argue with me or say I was wrong, “Wouldn’t you, if he was a bastard born of incest and rape? I’ve wished death on him since he came of age. When Phalen started talking about a child, I stopped taking the herbs and let him be conceived. I let him be born because I - rightly - thought I could use him as leverage to stop Phalen’s abuse of me. I let him live because I thought I could mold him to take after me and not his father. You see how well that turned out.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, gently offering sympathy. She must have been carrying this pain for so long. She had no one else but her sisters, and even after all these months in the castle with them I still knew nothing of their nature.

She dropped, exhausted, into a nearby reading chair, “When he started showing signs of following in his footsteps I wanted to kill him. I couldn’t bear the thought that I’d put another of those men into the world. But by then he was too old, and was largely taken from my care. I had few chances to hurt him, and when they came I couldn’t bear to take them. I have hoped for a long while now that someone else would take the duty from me.”

I knelt in front of her, placing myself into her field of vision. I allowed some of myself to come
though, as was habit around her now, “You are not at fault for his sins and more than you are at fault for Phalen’s. It isn’t not strange or wrong for a mother to love her son.”

She smiled weakly at me running a hand gently through my hair and cupping my cheek, “You are too good at knowing what to say to me. How did you know he was mine?”

“The eyes. Well, that and I’d noticed the stripes on your belly when we’re together. The two came together in my mind.”

“I’d been too embarrassed to tell you. Too afraid, I think.”

I nuzzled her hand with my cheek. Sometimes I could not believe that somehow our relationship had been able to bloom in this place of death and blood, “There’s nothing you could tell me that I would not at least try to understand. He makes monsters of all of us.”

She dropped her hand from my cheek and sighed, looking down, “There is more.”

I frowned, “More bad news?”

“That depends on how you look at it. I think the girl is going to provide an opportunity. He seems especially interested in her.”

“He thinks she is Korianan, and for once his logic is sound. I think he’s right.”

“Then I pity her. She’ll never get what she needs from him, because when he has her it won’t be with her consent. She looked the type to die before giving into him.”

“I agree. Her courage is admirable.”

“Her courage is stupid, and it will get her killed. She’ll be too busy being angry to figure him out.”

“I think though that she isn’t our concern.”

“I agree. But she will provide a nice distraction to Phalen’s attentions. I believe he won’t come to your bed tonight, and I think he will spend a long time tomorrow playing with his new Toy.”

I gave a small laugh, “Toy, second of her name.”

Adélaïde smiled and laughed too, “Indeed. He’s never had two at once before, and I fear his attention shifting means he will discard you.”

“Has he given any the same regard as he gives me?,” I stood, not wanting to be kneeling on the hard stone anymore, and sat in the nearest chair. It was next to hers, as we’d dragged them here to read to each other.

“No, he has never proclaimed love before. Never added a second throne, either, not even for us. There used to be a queen’s throne, you know. He destroyed it when he was coronated. It would take an earth mage to bring it back, and most of the mages left court when he took over. Your way of embracing his lust for pain has put you above previous women.”

“Then maybe I will be safe.”

“Is that a risk you wish to take?”

“What choice do I have?”
She was silent for a moment, watching me, “I believe that the distraction provided by the new Toy can keep his attention from you long enough for me to smuggle you out of the city. When he finds you gone he will be angry, but the upcoming war with the Kellans and the arrival of the girl will soothe him well enough, and he likely won’t try to follow you. He may send men, but I can give you a head start.”

“No, Adélaïde, I couldn’t leave you!”

“You would stay here? How much longer will you last, pretending as you are? How long until his actions, the things you’re forced to do, overwhelm you? How long until he goes too far one night and kills you or maims you beyond the healers’ abilities to mend you? It will not be long, I promise you. Not now that she’s here, and I cannot watch him destroy you,” there was pregnant silence between us, “And what if the methods I showed you fail and he gets you with child? No, Kay, I can’t allow you to stay. I have to do this one good thing.”

She choked on her words. I’d never seen her cry, or even come close, not even while speaking of her son. I knew then that I’d let her make me leave, and it made my heart break. I didn’t cry because I, like her, had wasted too many tears on the pain that Phalen caused. Finally, I said, “And what of Bas?”

“You must leave him. Even if he is still alive, and there’s a good chance he’s dead, I have no way of finding him or getting him out of whatever dark place he’s being kept. I can get you, and only you, out.”

“How is it you know of Phalen’s war with the Kellans, but not where Bas is?,” I wasn’t suspicious of her, and there was no accusation in my voice, just sad curiosity. I was making conversation to bide my time until I could come to the smallest peace with what she was asking me to do.

“When I was pregnant with Adrien, Phalen wanted an heir badly enough that he turned his attentions away from me and to my sisters. I tried to draw him back and away from them, but he wouldn’t do it. By the end of my pregnancy he’d lost the taste for me and Sirene was on her way to becoming the woman you see now. She...she was so sweet before, so gentle, and he stole that,” she took a breath, arranging her thoughts, and I was silent while I waited for her to continue. She’d never told me this much about their abuse, although I’d always known it had happened, “Seeing the change in Sirene and Thérèse made me a harder, stronger person, more determined to protect my family. Something about my new-found unflappable nature turned Phalen off, and he left me alone - with one exception. Every time he speaks of our son, it makes me angry, or evokes pain. He can’t resist needling me, so he tells me of the things he has our son do.”

I let a long silence pass between us. I did love her, but did I love her enough to remain in this place? Did I love anyone that much? One thing I’d been as Kay was self-centered. Bas liked to indulge me, so it made a good fit. But now I had enough of my own strength that I didn’t need him to indulge me, and I was self-serving all on my own. I could leave, I could be free and be myself again. I could go home. I realized then that no person was worth staying here for. This place was worse than death, and she was right - if I did not escape, I’d soon be dead.

“I’ll go,” I said into the silence. My only answer from Adélaïde was a soul weary, bone-deep sigh of relief.

The next night was when it happened. It was after dinner, after full dark, and the castle was asleep. Phalen was, as she predicted, with the new girl. I sat on the bed, waiting to fall asleep. Then, I heard voices outside the door, and it opened. Adélaïde entered carrying a pack, and shut the door behind her. A moment later, I heard two crashes outside that sounded distinctly like armored men falling over.
“I drugged them,” she replied in response to my questioning look. She dug in the pack and started handing me items of clothing. Thick woolen socks, a long woolen dress, and a heavy travel cloak. Shoes were last. I looked at them, stunned that she’d managed to fit it all in there, “Hurry, we don’t have all that much time.”

I blinked, snapping out of it, and started pulling the woolen leggings on. It took me only moments to dress, and the fabric felt strange against my skin after having been naked for so long. I felt like I was donning armor, “Good choice on the dress.”

It covered me from neck to floor, and covered my arms completely, hiding all my tattoos, “It is warm, and it will hide you.”

I finished dressing and she looked at me, nodding. Then, a knock sounded at the door. A long knock and two short ones. All of the blood drained from my face and I resisted the impulse to pull the clothes off, lest Phalen see me in them. It was only the logical thought that he wouldn’t knock on my door that saved me from doing that. I took a deep, calming breath, and Adélaïde opened the door, letting the visitor in.

“She is ready,” she said to the man. He had fine brown hair, cut short, and thick brown eyebrows atop deep-set, dark brown eyes. His nose wasn’t especially prominent or small, and his mouth was of an average size. His face was pockmarked with old acne scars, and the only distinct feature he had was a cleft in his chin. He wasn’t very large, only an inch or two taller than me, with no muscles to speak of. He wore the same sort of drab traveling clothing I wore, and a sword hung at his side.

“I am Joshua Pine,” He inclined his head to me.

“He is the only person I trust in this place,” Adélaïde said, “He’ll take you safely outside the city. There is food and water in the pack I brought the clothes in.”

“Adélaïde,” I turned to her, choking on my words. It was time to go. I didn’t know what to say, and I found myself doubting this decision all over again. She wouldn’t let me change my mind, so instead she pulled me to her. Her mouth found mine, and we fell against each other.

We parted and she held me close, our foreheads touching. Tears were coming from my eyes, and I couldn’t remember crying, “Be safe.”

She pulled away completely, and I swallowed a sob. If nothing, I would take this gift she was offering me. I turned to Joshua, “Lead on.”

He left, and I followed, and he took me through a different part of the castle that I’d never been to before. Down and down we went, through catacombs, where the white stone was stained from the waste. I followed him without complaint, even though I was tired and it smelled. I paid attention, too, lest he lose me down here. Everyone has talents, and one of mine is a fine sense of direction. I noted small differences in the stonework, making a map in my head.

We eventually stopped going down, and started moving away, down a long unused sewer tunnel. We turned a wide corner and it sloped downwards. It was cooler here, and I could smell clean water. Here the ceiling was stained with years of dripping water, and I guessed that we were passing under the river. We said little, only whispered directions. He carried a small lamp for us, and it was our only light.

Finally the tunnel sloped up again, and ahead I could hear the rushing of wind. Shortly, we came to a grate that covered the large mouth of the tunnel. Joshua produced a ring that had so many keys...
that it was more key than ring. There must have been more than fifty on the ring, and I wondered at his job. How did Adélaïde know him? I’d have liked to hear that story, if I was ever going to see her again.

He opened the grate, letting me out onto the riverbank. I looked up and saw that we were on the other side of the river, standing on its banks some distance from one of the huge bridges that spanned its width.

I walked forward and stopped, turning back to him, “Thank you, Joshua. Give Adélaïde my love.”

“I’ll tell her,” he replied, and closed the grate. He walked back through the tunnel, his lantern receding. I looked up at the bank of the river. It wasn’t very steep, and I managed to clamber up it without much of a problem. The city was behind me, and the bridges and their guards were just visible to my right. That meant the mountains were in that direction too. I was west of the river, completely in the wrong place to go north into Gregory and home. I could go the long way around, but not until spring. I knew nothing of Mannonesha or Llellwyn so I headed towards Kelly. The city might offer some respite for me, if I could make it.

I rationed my food while I walked, although I wasn’t certain how well I rationed it. I avoided towns and the road, because I had no money, no wish to see guards, and no idea how far tales of the Painted Lady had gone. Some of my actions had been truly grotesque, and I wasn’t equipped to face those consequences yet. I had no weapons aside from a small hunting knife, and I was alone, but I kept walking, sleeping only when I had to. I saw no signs of pursuit, but sometimes I thought I heard the howling of dogs in the distance.

The land of Charias, even in the winter, wasn’t without a certain beauty. The snow hadn’t come yet, but the grass was still bright green. They were famous for that land and the way it nourished their animals. I saw those, too, far-off herds of cattle and goats. The woods were where I most prospered. They reminded me of my home in the Verdryl Valley. I knew how to set snares and catch small game, from my time as a child, and I had a flint and steel. I walked through the welcoming trees and saved my preserved food for times when I had no access to forests. I kept the river and the mountains to my right, and kept walking. I didn’t know how far I had to go until I reached Kelly, but every step towards it was a step away from Phalen.

I kept walking.
Eben - The Stair Fort

Chapter Summary

The king’s fixer picks up Danae’s trail and follows it to where we left her. Following his brother's orders, he tries to divine what happened to her. And, hopefully, prevent all-out war.

Chapter Notes

YAY inside Eben's head!

No warnings or anything. There's no sex, just plot.

I’d spoken to a man in an inn who took my silver and pointed me to the barracks. A soldier there told me that she’d gone with Isandro to the front at the Infinite road. A threatening conversation and a flash of my seal loosened the Andrew Blackfeather’s tongue, and now I rode for the stair fort. My quarry was so close I could taste it, and I’d get off this godforsaken field soon. The Songling is not a pleasant place in the winter, and I’d been freezing my royal nuts off for a week. The only relief was the lack of snow.

I’d say that Danae would pay for dragging me out here like this, but going home to my brother was punishment enough for the poor girl. I think. I never could tell with straight people in general, but them in particular. They fought and made up often. They’d been that way since we were children. I missed her though, my strange adopted little sister, and moreover I missed her effect on my brother. He was easier to deal with when she had him in hand.

The sun was setting behind the mountains when I came upon the camp. It wasn’t like the other camps along the border, it was in considerable disarray. In the distance I could see the stair fort, and between here and there were wisps of a dead fire. I rode into camp from the unguarded side facing the songling, and flagged down the closest passing soldier. Usually, my preference is to go unremarked, but I’d worn my brother’s sigel as the clasp on my cloak so I’d be treated like the emissary that I am.

“You there!,” said, “Take me to the officer’s tent, I need to talk to your commander.”

He almost refused, but then he noticed my sigel and said, “This way, sir.”

Because he was on foot, I hopped down off of my horse to walk beside him, “What has happened here?”

“An attack, sir.”

“Why did we have a camp on Charian land?,” Blackfeather told me she’d come here in Isandro’s company, but I hadn’t been able to shake the reason free from that slimy man’s mouth.
“Was them that attacked, and we had ‘em stuck in the Stair Fort.”

“I see,” I hesitated, “Who is in command now?”

“Same as always, Siren Gregory.”

We arrived at the command tent at the center of the encampment. There was a steward outside, and I handed him the reigns of my horse. I could hear raised voices coming from inside, although I couldn’t make out the words. I nodded to the soldier, “Thanks for the escort.”

A pair of guards flanked the doors. Their black clothes and silver arakhs marked them as Weavers, and I pulled off my glove, showing them the sigel. They nodded and let me inside. I pushed open the flap and let it fall behind me. The noise inside stopped as they turned and stared at me, the confusion plain on their faces. I stepped up to the table they were standing around, “Gentlemen, let me introduce myself. I’m Prince Eben Teyreygon.”

A tall man with rough blonde hair, a heavy brow, a bulbous red nose, overly thick lips, pockmarked skin, and a scowl stood to the left, his thick body covered in furs. Seated directly in front of me was a tall, slender man, with flame red hair and pure white armor. His face was as thin as he was, all sharp angles and thin lips, and carried a scowl. He must be Siren Gregory. Standing to my right, on this side of the table, was a man who had fine features, a slender nose, and fuller lips. He had long lashes like a woman, and perfectly groomed arched brows. His long, braided hair was white and his skin was brown, his body was of an average build. There was something strange about him, he was pretty in the same way my brother and Danae were. Was he like them? A Korianan? He wasn’t wearing heavy furs, only his armor. He could be keeping himself warm with magic.

The blonde man was the first to speak, “The Fixer. We know you. Why are you here?”

I gave him my best courtly smile, “Fixing something. I shall endeavour to be quick, and I’ll let you get back to your argument. I’m looking for a girl. A few inches short of your height,” I indicated the pretty man on my side of the table, “She may be in the company of one of the generals. Night-dark hair, curvy, with a mouth on her.”

The man tried to hide his smile. He knew her, and he answered me, “Danae.”

“What do you know of her?”

The ghost of his smile faded, “Nothing that’ll make you happy.”

The Siren snorted in disgust, “As it happens you’ve blundered into the cause of our argument.”

“Explain, and be succinct.”

It was again the Siren who answered me, “We were attacked, we found the body of the commander who sheltered her--”

“Isandro,” snarled the pretty one, “His name was Isandro Blackstreet.”

“What’s your name?,” I asked him.

“Leigh Cranksbury,” he offered his hand and I took it.

“My name is--,” the Siren began.
“Siren Gregory,” I finished for him. If my knowledge or presumption bothered him, he didn’t show it. In that moment I decided to make it my personal quest to get any reaction out of him. I looked pointedly at the last man.

He answered, but he looked like I was asking him to chew a handful of nails, “Duncan Goodspirit.”

“Oh, I’ve heard of you. You’re the Scarmaker,” I kept my voice neutral. I had my opinions on him, and none were good. He was the kind of cruel that was useless anywhere but in the military. How he’d been chosen for command, I’d never know, “Anyway, continue.”

“We found Commander Blackstreet’s body, but hers wasn’t on the battlefield. We found his near the horse line, so we believe that she was taken by the Chariasian men.”

Taken? I cursed Danae in my mind. Why couldn’t she be more pliant? Quieter and less involved. How she’d convinced Isandro, who I knew to be intelligent and even-handed, to take her with him is information I’d never know. I knew, in my gut, where this was leading. My brother would stop and nothing to retrieve her, even if it meant war. Really, he simply needed an excuse. In pulled up a chair and sat, putting my boots on the edge of the table, “Tell me everything.”

The three of them exchanged a look, and the Siren kept talking, “Several weeks ago, this section of the border was attacked by a small Chariasian force. They managed to kill a few men, but their true accomplishment was my Siren Sisters hostage. We were able to keep them from escaping to Ville Flue, instead trapping them in the Stair Fort. We sent for help to the main encampment, and Commander Blackstreet arrived with the weavers and these men. And, of course, the girl in question. We devised a plan to retrieve my Siren Sisters from the fort. As we were ascending it, we saw the raiding party coming. They attacked the defended sliver camp that was set up at the foot of the stair fort, apart from the main force. It was decimated. We continued and were able to execute our plan well enough, returning the next morning to help with the cleanup. The crux of our argument is over a counter attack. Leigh is, shall we say, more concerned for the well-being of the girl than we are.”

“Why is that, I wonder,” I met his eyes, and saw I was right. He cared for her in some way. Danae, Danae, Danae, what have you been up to?, “Well, he is right to be concerned. The girl has great value to my brother, and he’ll be most...wroth if she were to come to harm. Has he been informed of this? Has Cotton?”

“Cotton has. It’s likely you passed our messenger on your way. For a moment I thought you might have been sent by the king to address this situation,” the Siren answered.

“Well, it’s likely he would have sent me once word reached him.” I knew what my brother’s instruction would be. They’d broken the hundred year peace and attacked us. He’d want to war, and would have no other answer from me. But I thought that I might be able to mitigate the damage, “How many men do you have?”

“A thousand or so, including the weavers and the extra men brought by the late commander Blackstreet,” Answered Siren Gregory. I took my feet off the table and stood to get a better look at the map that was painted on top of it. I surveyed it, looking at the figurines that represented our men, and an idea began to form.

“How many Weavers do you have?”

“Seventy five or so.”

“I’ll take thirty of them with me, and five hundred men.”
“Half the men?,” Duncan burst out, “You’ll leave the border unexposed.”

“No, I will not, because I have other plans. Siren Gregory, were you able to retrieve your sisters?”

“I was, yes.”

“Good. May I borrow one of them?”

“So long as the crown continues to pay for my services, I’ll continue to render them.”

“Just saying yes will suffice, no need to remind me that we pay you. Duncan, you will take the sister, and ten men that Siren Gregory assigns you, and you will take my orders to General Cotton.”

“What orders are those?,” he grumbled.

“It’s time for the men at the Lecheskan border to stop languishing in obscurity. Siren, are either of your Sisters Dove-speakers?”

“One is, but we’re out of doves.”

“Good, send for more doves, she can catch up to us once she has them.”

“And where are we going?,” Leigh asked.

“There,” I pointed down at the map, “To Ville Flue.”

***

To the commander’s credit, it only took him a day to round up the necessary men and supplies while I mapped out our route. Even if we didn’t need to try and move with stealth, it would still take weeks to make it to the Charian capital, and who knew how long the snows would hold off for. While I had no doubt that their king was expecting some kind of retribution, I also knew that we could walk into a trap. Keeping our small force hidden was the best option, and if we were careful we would be able to maintain some element of surprise.

So it was that Leigh took out small scouting parties every morning when the sky was purple to watch for people and for the Charian army. We saw plenty of people, plenty of cows, and more than one unit of soldiers. All of them we managed to avoid by traveling smartly. As we rode I had a good amount of time to consider the city itself. I didn’t know how to take it with only five hundred swords and a few reavers. Surely the Charian army was larger than that, and nestled between two rivers as it was there was no way to lay siege to the town. They could close the gates, close the bridges, and still escape or bring in food. I didn’t have enough men to harass them, and in any event, the river was too wide. Every day the sky got more and more grey, and sometimes I smelled snow on the air. If we could take the city before the snow came, more’s the better. If we couldn’t, we might end up starving outside the gates or going home. My only advantage on that front was Siren Gregory, who’d grown up in the mountains of Gregaran and knew how to handle snow.

At the end of the second week, it was my turn to accompany Leigh on the ranging party, and we
set out at an hour of morning that was truly ungodly. I shivered in my cloak until he cast the charm that would shield us from view. It came with the same spell he used to keep himself warm.

We rode in silence, our eyes scanning the horizon, trotting to cover more distance. After I’d warmed and woken enough to feel up to conversation I said, “Leigh, I’ve been meaning to ask you something.”

“Ok,” he sounded suspicious, and I really couldn’t blame him.

“Why do you seem to care what happens to Danae?”

“We are lovers, and I am her teacher.”

“What do you teach her?”

“Swordplay,” he smirked.

“I would not make that boast to the king. My brother will have your head removed from your shoulders for laying a hand on Danae.”

“The lady in question was more than willing, so he’s welcome to try.”

“You know what my brother is, don’t you? A Korianan?”

He gave me a sideways look and paused for a beat, “As I said, he’s welcome to try.”

“I thought as much. You have that same look to you that he and Danae do. You’re almost too pretty.”

“The prince thinks I’m pretty, now I’m all a-flutter!,” he said, sarcasm lacing his words. It was hard not to laugh.

“Well, I think I’m not your type, and I like my men more corruptible,” I grinned at him, and he laughed.

“Well, if I was into men, you’d be my type, if that makes you feel better.”

“In a strange way, it does. I’d heard Korianan were shallow, and I am vain, so I take my compliments where I can.”

“You’d need a better set of tits on you though.”

I made a face, “I’ve never understood the appeal, although my brother seems to. He’s been fondling Danae’s since they were--,” I didn’t finish my sentence, because we were interrupted by a woman ahead of us, running full-tilt across the field we were riding in. Behind her were men that were clearly soldiers, and they were quickly eating up the lead she had. Leigh and I exchanged a look, and spurred our horses on. We ran past the woman, who couldn’t see us, and came around behind the soldiers. There were six of them, and we started picking them off, one by one. It was easy when they rode in a column and couldn’t see the sword falling.

They were so intent on the woman that they never noticed their fellows falling behind them. Once they were dispatched, Leigh dropped his invisibility spell and we ran after the woman. We caught up to her a few minutes later, cutting her off. I slid down off my horse, and held out my hands to stop her.

Instead of stopping, she collapsed, and I sighed, “We’re going to have to bring her with us.”
“Yes, the more we know about those men the better. They could be part of a larger army. What of the bodies?”

“Leave them. We won’t bring the army this way. We can’t move it until we speak to her,” I picked her up on my arms and handed her to Leigh, who settled her limp body in front of him on the horse. She was so small, she fit easily. She had the strangest hair color. It looked like copper metal beaten into thin strands. Not the copper of natural red hair, but actual copper metal: pinkish brown and shining. When we moved her, her head tilted to the side and I saw the small pointed tip of her ear. An elf, then.

I re-mounted and we went back to camp. When we arrived, we took her to the tent the commanders and I all shared, laying her on my bed. I got a better look at her then. She was rail-thin, and short besides, with a small, delicate nose and the big, cat-like eyes of the elves. Her eyebrows were a delicate arch, and her mouth a small, pink cupid’s bow. She looked so strange to me, human but not. I wondered what an elf was doing out here, so far from their forest.

She woke not long after we brought her to camp, opening those oddly large seafoam green eyes. At first, they widened in terror, and then she caught sight of Siren Gregory and she relaxed slightly. I held out a mug of water to her, and a piece of bread. She had nothing on her, and I can’t imagine someone who was well-fed collapsing after doing something as easy as running. Especially not an elf.

“Here, eat,” I said.

She took the food and water, and after she swallowed a few mouthfuls she said, “You are not Phalen’s guards.”

“Phalen?,” I asked.

“King Phalen,” we all exchanged a look.

“How do you know Gregaran?,” Asked the Siren.

“She’s speaking Kellan,” I said, surprised.

“I have a translation charm,” she replied, “But I actually can speak Gregaran, it is one of my native languages. I am from Lumieare. Which Siren are you?”

“Siren Gregory. What is your name?”

She hesitated, seeming to think about it for far longer than she should for a name, and then she answered, “You may call me Kay.”

Leigh, the gentlest of us, said, “Not to be indelicate, but why were you being chased by those men?”

“Because I am the Painted Lady,” seeing that we were only confused by that statement she sighed and said, “I escaped from Phelan and was stupid enough to wander into a town.”

“You escaped from the king? To be clear, you mean the castle, right?”

“Yes,” she took another swig of water and a few bites of bread. Leigh and I exchanged a look.

“And you escaped undetected?,” I asked.
“Yes,” she replied again, eyes narrowing and suspicion creeping into her voice.

“Could you get back in if you needed to?,” asked Leigh.

She scowled, “Do men only know how to use people? You find a person, half starved and being hunted like an animal, and your first thought is only for how I can help you.”

I frowned, not having the patience for this, “We saved your life, you could offer to help us of your own volition. It could even be thought that you owe us.”

“I do not owe you for exercising basic human decency,” she snapped. Her eyes flicked to the Siren, “How many men do you have here?”

“Five hundred and some Weavers,” Leigh answered.

“Then yes, I will help you, but it comes with a price. He,” she tossed her head in the Siren’s direction, “will use his Galilite to get me back to the Monastery so I can go home.”

“Siren?,” I asked.

“It’s not an unreasonable request. I should be able to see her safely back to the monastery, it doesn’t take long to travel by the Galibal.”

“Then it is settled,” I said, “Tell us what you know.”
Liam, Leochllyn

Chapter Summary

Liam gets some time with his new wife before they get sucked into the scheme of their respective mothers.

Chapter Notes

Nothing really to warn about trigger-wise, but there is erotica here. =D

We were in the hallway, Gwenyth’s body wrapped around mine, skirts around her waist. I slid in and out of her slippery, warm, wetness. As of late, it was my favorite place to be. It seemed all we did was fuck, making up for all of the time we hadn’t been able to, and I had no complaints. We were fairly secluded, but I didn’t care if anyone found us, I only cared for the feeling of her wet, grasping heat around my aching hard cock.

“Harder,” she growled, teeth grazing my ear. I obliged the best I could without falling over the edge. It was hard to have stamina when she felt so good. My hips smacked against her thighs, and the motion rubbed her back roughly against the stone wall. Her nails dug into the skin of my ass where she held onto me and she groaned, “Yes, that’s it. Just like that.”

One thing I’d learned since marrying her was that if she liked what I was doing, I should keep doing exactly that. So I did, trying to ignore the noises she made, or the silk of her cunt, and all the other things that would end me too soon. I kept doing what she’d liked, and soon her body shook with the same spasms that were happening inside her. She tightened around me in rhythmic bursts, and soon I was coming with her. I buried my face in her hair, breathing deep as I emptied myself into her.

We leaned against the wall, both of us breathing hard. Her mouth was near my neck and her voice teasing, “If we keep at it like this, there’s no way you won’t get a son on me soon.”

“I don’t care if it’s a son or a daughter,” either could inherit in Charias, “I only care that we have children.”

“You keep saying that, and I have a hard time believing it,” she squirmed away, and I slipped out of her. She rearranged her clothing, and so did I.

I shrugged, “An heir is an heir.”

“Not to my father,” she said, bitterly. She was the oldest, but her father was likely to leave the bulk of his wealth to her brother, Jaime.

“I can’t believe that anyone would be disappointed in having a grandchild,” I replied.

“But ‘we’re the blood of Muiria’,” she imitated her father’s tone almost perfectly, and I smiled at
her teasing, ‘‘You must produce a male’. I mean really, how does he even know that? Surely the blood must have been corrupted somewhere along the way. You can’t be the first outsider that’s married into our family.”

Her words made logical sense, but her father wouldn’t like hearing them, “I suppose then our children will be Llellwysh, Charian, and Muirian.”

“And many other things besides, I’d wager,” she looked annoyed, “I had lunch with your mother yesterday.”

She did that often, switching gears in her head and saying it aloud. It was sometimes hard to keep up, “How did you enjoy it?”

“It was the usual, I suppose. Now with a good deal more ‘when my son gets a child on you, I’ll be so pleased to finally meet the women of the other merchant families,” really, her talent for mimicry was astounding.

“Would you like me to speak to her about the underhanded comments like that?,” I asked.

“No, no. It’s fine, so long as you don’t grow tired of listening to me complain about it,” I had a feeling that I would, in time, grow tired of it.

She stared off into the distance for a moment, wearing a look that I knew was a mask for her thinking. She blinked and came back to me, “You know, I think my sister is already with child.”

“Why do you think that?”

“She complained to me yesterday that her breasts hurt,” I smirked at her and she took my expression for the dirty joke that it was, “Unless your cousin is worrying at them like a dog, it wouldn’t case the kind of pain she’s having. She’s late with her blood as well. She’s always been somewhat unreliable in that area, but still, I just have a feeling.”

“You sound worried about this.”

“If they have a child first, won’t their child become heir?”

“No. The throne passes to my cousin Adélaïde if Phalen should die. Then to Thérèse, then Sirene, then my father, and then me. All of those people, including myself, three more uncles who aren’t here, Leo, and Noel would all have to die for Noel’s child to inherit.”

“Honestly, your family is a mess. How is that any way to run a country?”

I laughed, tucking a lock of green hair behind her ear. I hoped, if we had children, that they’d inherit her hair. When the light hit it, I could see all of the different shades of green that the individual strands were, that came together to make the bright, leafy green, “I suppose we should just buy each other out till only a few remain and then fight over who gets to make decisions?”

“ Wealth is the only proper way to govern. Buying people off costs fewer lives,” she pointed out.

“And much less backstabbing,” I agreed.

“No, no less backstabbing. More, probably. Just yesterday my father was complaining about how was bought out of three contracts by the Mareschals and another one by the Amberleighs. He detests being third.”
“Your father should have more patience,” I said irritably. Her father was always complaining about the slowness with which we moved to take the throne.

“He’s ambitious. He’d be a far better ruler than the Quinten Mareschal.”

“Be that as it may, things take time. He’ll have his wealth,” A far-off bell sounded, echoing off the walls of the palace, “Midbell. I have to go meet with my mother. Walk me there?”

She took my proffered arm, “Of course. My mother requested to meet with me at midbell too.”

We started walking in the direction of my mother’s rooms, and it wasn’t long before we reached them. The double doors were open, and my mother sat in her favorite chair, her back to the window where the cold winter sunlight streamed in. Across from her, in my usual chair, sat Gwyneth’s mother. She was a queer looking woman, thin as a blade through the body, but soft in the face, as if someone had taken pity on her and rounded her edges to make her slightly more good-looking. She had the same green hair that Gwyn did, but she kept it cut short, and it was shot through with white from age. Her eyes were small, but bright, and the way she was always flicking them about reminded me of a bird. Her movements were small and economical, as if someone had taught her to fight once but she’d long forgotten it. Her cheekbones were high, and always pink, as was the tip of her nose. She had smile lines around her mouth and crinkles at the corners of her eyes, so different from my mother’s smooth skin, although they were close in age. I couldn’t place my finger on it, but being around her always made me feel strange and on edge.

When we entered, both of our mothers stood. I released Gwyn and kissed them both on the cheek in greeting, “Mother, Law-mother.”

“Son,” my mother greeted me, returning my kiss. Branwyn, Gwyneth’s mother, just nodded her greeting.

“Yes,” Branwn said, turning to her daughter, “We were scheduled to meet, weren’t we.”

“You did ask to see me,” I could hear the eye rolling in Gwyn’s voice. She turned to me and gave me a chaste kiss goodbye, “Till later, love.”

“Till later,” I replied, and they left together, closing the doors to my mother’s sitting room behind them.

“I dislike spending time with that woman,” my mother said, dropping back into her chair. I took Branwyn’s vacated seat.

“We must all do as social rules dictate, at times.”

“Speaking of social rules, when am I to have a grandchild?”

I sighed, “I don’t know mother, but it’s not for lack of trying.”

“I hope that girl is fertile. I dislike the thought that we’ve been sold bad goods.”

“Gwyneth is not ‘goods’, and it’s only been two of her cycles besides. And speaking of Gwyneth, you must stop making subtle barbs at her. It upsets her.”

“Good, I hope it does. The girl has yet to be of any use. No children, and she still is keeping me from her social circle.”
“Why do you care so much about that?”

“Contacts bring information and influence. You should pay more attention to these things.”

I ignored her, because the argument was an old one, and changed the subject, “Why was Branwyn here?”

She looked even unhappier than normal at the mention of my mother-by-law, and shifted in her seat, “Well, there’s no easy way to tell you this, so I suppose I might as well just come out with it. We need you and your wife to go to Cairyn.”

I frowned, “I’m sorry, have I done something wrong?”

“No, in fact, I’m sending you because I can only trust you with this. There are rumors that the Kellan army stirs. I need you to go and find out what you can.”

“Why not send me to Sight Town? It’s closer.”

She shook her head, “And too small. None of the merchant families have made their homes there. It’s just lawless rabble. The Déoir family runs Cairyn, and they are allies of your law-father. He will make introductions.”

Not for the first time, I wished my mother wasn’t so ambitious. Right now, I only wanted to stay here with my new wife and enjoy her. My mother acts like my cousin is going to drop dead tomorrow. There would be no arguing though, if she was telling me then she’d already gotten my father to agree and there would be no appealing the decision, “Does Gwyneth know?”

“Branwyn is telling her the same thing I just told you.”

“Then I suppose the only question left is ‘when do we leave?’.”

She smiled at me, “That’s my boy. In a week, give or take some.”

They spoke some more about the details of the arrangement, and he left. There was still hours until supper, and I knew how I wanted to spend them. I went back to the rooms I shared with Gwyneth. She was there, reading a book and waiting for me. She looked up when I walked into the room.”

“We’re to go to Cairyn,” she said.

“Yes, my mother told me,” I sat on the chair next to hers, “What are you reading?”

“Hm? Oh, Intrigues of the Tri-City. It’s a book about Flehtar,” she closed it and laid it on the table, “What are your thoughts on Cairyn?”

“I would rather not be going, but there’s no way of changing my mother’s mind I think,” I shrugged, “As usual I go where she sends me.”

“For once, your mother and I are in agreement. Truthfully, I’ve been wanting to get out from under my father’s roof for some time, and I was friends with one of the Déoir girls as a child. They fostered here for a few years, before you arrived. I don’t think it will be so bad for us.”

I gave her a grin, “I’d rather stay here with you.”

“Come now, this gives us the chance to fuck in new and exciting places.”
I laughed, “How about for the moment we settle for not new or not exciting?”

“Oh, I don’t know.” She got up and walked over to my chair, hiking her skirts up and straddling me. She swiveled her hips, grinding against me, “I don’t think we’ve ever done it in this chair.”

I kissed her, tasting her tongue, wishing it was easier to get her corset and bodice off. I felt my cock rising under the motion of her hips, wanting to be inside her. My kisses moved to her neck and around her jaw, and I smelled the roses of her perfume, “Well who am I to stop you from having new experiences?”

I knew she wasn’t going to be able to reach around all of her clothing, so I worked my hand under the pile of her petticoats and pulled my hard cock out of my pants, pushing them as much out of the way as I could. I held it for her, and when she felt the hot touch of my cock head, she sank down onto me. We both groaned aloud as I filled her and felt her hot, slippery walls fit themselves snug around me.

“Why do we even leave this room?,” she said before bringing our mouths together again. She moved on top of me, and I forgot my words, as I always did when I was inside her. It was sweeter than anything, the wet bliss between her thighs. She rode me, grinding hard against me, my finger flicking the hard little bud near her opening. It took time, but she came, her body shaking, her legs clamping down around my hips, and the muscles inside her squeezing me to a shuddering release as well.

“I want to see you naked,” Even soft as I was post-lovemaking, I still wanted her. I was going to lick and kiss her breasts, taste the sweet cream of her cunt until she screamed my name. She stood, my cock slurping as the motion pulled it out of her. She turned her back to me, showing me her laces.

I took my time with them, careful not to rip them or her dress. Coming moments before gave me a measure of patience. There are many pieces to women’s clothing, and I took all of them off, leaving her naked and beautiful. She pulled the pins out of her hair, shaking it out, letting it down, and I drank in the sight of her. Soft light from the window made her pale peaches and cream complexion seem to glow. It showed off every shade of green in her hair, from her crown to where it brushed her tight little bubble ass. I was always surprised by how small her waist, how flat her stomach. I loved her thin legs, and the cute gap between them, and I especially loved her firm, high breasts and their tight pink nipples.

I picked her up in my arms and carried her, giggling, into the bedroom, where I dropped her onto the bed. She immediately sprang back up onto her knees, grabbing me and kissing me.

“Your turn,” she said, grinning at me. She pulled open the fastening of my doublet and pushed it off of my shoulders. I let it fall to the ground, and my linen shirt followed. She ran her fingers over my chest, and down the muscles of my stomach. I wasn’t built huge like some men were, I was made more for grace and quickness, but I was strong from practicing with a sword, and my body was well defined. Her fingers trailed down me, and pushed down the waist of my pants. I hadn’t bothered to lace them up after the encounter in the sitting room, so I kicked off my boots and pushed off the pants. Now we were both naked, although my body couldn’t respond to her yet.

“Lay down, open your legs for me,” I said, and she smiled and did as I asked, flopping backwards onto the bed. She knew what was coming and eagerly opened her legs for me to settle between. I wasted no time bending to my task, covering her hard clit with my mouth. I could taste the salt of myself in her, but I didn’t care. Her reactions were all I cared for. I didn’t take long for her to start to enjoy it, fingers running through my hair. That led to writhing, and then I slid two fingers into her to compliment my mouth. I found the spot inside her, against the front wall of her, that felt
different. I rubbed it with deep, hard circles as I sucked and licked her clit. I watched her, my eyes
flicking up. Her back was arched and her legs were stiff, thighs pressed against my head. Her hands
clawed my hair, and she was making a high keening noise, rhythmic and uncontrolled. I went faster
with my fingers, my cock finally catching up with my brain and swelling to aching, solid hardness.

She screamed in one long, loud note, her body arching up off the bed. I held on to her, moving
with her as her body spasmed out of her own control. Her cunt clamped down on my fingers and
the salty-sweet liquid poured out of her, dripping all over my chin and down my arm and the curve
of her ass.

Her hands welded my head to her thrashing body, “Don’t...stop...’

I suctioned my mouth to her clit, sucking hard as she’d shown me other times, moving my fingers
as fast as I could inside her, hooked into her especially sensitive part inside her. She had fist-fulls
of the sheets from the bed we’d left unmade. Her wails were one long high pitched moan, but I
didn’t stop. I was rewarded again, and she thrashed and shook, and clenched around my fingers
again, her hot cum flooding my face, her pussy, and the bed.

She dropped down to the bed, pulling herself suddenly away from my mouth, and reached for me,
pulling me up from between her legs, voice urgent, “Fuck me!”

I lunged up and slammed my cock home inside her. She groaned, eyes rolling back into her head. I
growled into her ear, “Is this what you want? To have me deep inside your wet cunt?’

I punctuated my words with hard thrusts, all of them earning a nonsensical moan from her, “Yes!
Faster, please, fast!”

In that moment, begging me and growling with lust, I could deny her nothing. I would do
anything, if it meant seeing that face and hearing her say her words in that voice, feeling her hot
and wet around me. I obeyed her, like I would always obey. I went hard and fast, and she was
reduced to a writhing banshee of a woman, nails digging into my skin as I pounded into her.

I wanted to see her come again, so I flipped her onto her stomach, making sure that my cock hit that
spot inside her. I made sure that my cockhead rasped over it again and again, pushing her ever
closer to coming. When she came again, howling and spasming as before, flooding the bed, I bent
down, growling and biting the meat between her neck and shoulder as I added a few hard, deep
strokes, and spurted my seed into her clenching cunt. I pushed as deep as I could, unable to stop
the movement of my hips as I came, pushing spurt after spurt of milky cum into her. I collapsed on
top of her, refusing to pull out and leave that warm wetness.

We fell asleep like that, unmoving, joined together in wordless pleasure. When we woke, the sun
painting the sky the last orange-red of sunset, we still hadn’t moved. My cock hardened of its own
accord, and I rocked my hips gently, waking her with the small movements inside her. That time,
she rode me instead of the reverse. It was just as good, and we came just as vigorously We had just
enough time to clean ourselves, dress, and go down to dinner.

My mother made a face when she saw us. When we took our seats next to her, she said, “I tried to
take an afternoon nap, but I kept awake by some strange animal out in the yard. It was the
 strangest noise, screeching and moaning.”

I wasn’t as fast on the draw as Gwyn was, “I’m sorry that our attempts at grandchildren for you
woke you, but perhaps if your husband made you scream as mine dies you’d be less bitter about
it.”
My mother was, for once, speechless. Branwyn, close enough to have heard the exchange, was doing a very good job of hiding her laughter. I suspect she’s where my wife gets her biting sense of humor from. When my mother finally found her voice, she said, “What a crass little girl you are.”

But it was too late, and it was obvious Gwyn had gotten the better of the exchange. So she looked at my mother, smiled sweetly and said, “Pass the salt, please, law-mother.”
Danae, Charias

Chapter Summary

Danae finds herself in an unfortunate predicament, and the biology that had previously served her so well becomes a liability. She learns more about Phalen's plans for her. A forgotten piece returns to the board.

Chapter Notes

It's a Phalen chapter, although it's lighter on the torture. It's still a bad place, but it's not as explicit as before. No sex in this one.

My head is throbbing. As I laid on what felt like a soft bed, coming back from unconsciousness, the events of the past few weeks started to filter through. The battle, Isandro, being taken. Weeks of hard riding as a prisoner of some Charian men. I tried to escape half a dozen times on the way here, each time cursing my lack of concentration on my magical studies. Too much time working with the sword left me half a swordsman with no magical abilities.

We’d come here, and we crossed a bridge into a city I could only guess was Ville Flue, and ridden through a town that was so different from what I knew. All of the buildings were various types of stone, and wrought iron everywhere. They swirled in designs that mimicked the rivers they depended on. Here, the Euwain and the Charias river ran fat and slow, impossible to cross without using the bridges or a boat. We’d ridden over one of them, a stone monstrosity that was elaborate carved. The queerest thing about the city was the roofs of the buildings - they were painted bright, cheerful colors, giving the city the appearance of collection of sweets. At the very tip of the V formed by the two rivers sat the shining, white castle, the tallest thing in the city. It’s gold-tipped spires scraped the sky, towers of different heights connected by delicate golden bridges. We rode past the thick white walls, and despite the beauty of the caste, a feeling of sick foreboding settled into my stomach. Even my captors changed their attitude when we strode through the gates.

Then the throne room. I shuddered and pushed it from my mind, while also realizing that casting my first spell - as it were - in that room was what made my head throb. I opened my eyes, and the room didn’t spin. Gently, I sat up and took stock of my situation.

I was in a bedroom, laying on a huge feather bed with thick, heavy blankets. All of the colors were delicate pastels with swirling designs and gold edging, and several large paintings were mounted on the wall. There were huge windows in the outside wall, sunlight peeking around the edges of the thick silk curtains that covered them. The floor and walls were all the same seamless white stone that I’d seen in the rest of the castle. A tray that presumably held food sat on a table across the room.

After the throbbing in my head, the next bodily concern I became aware of was my bladder. Beyond that, hunger. I was wearing my clothes, but someone removed my chain shirt and shoes. I gingerly slipped my legs around and stepped onto the floor, moving slowly as to not aggravate my
head. My feet touched the floor, and it was so cold that I could feel it through my socks.

I looked around, and spotted a few doors. One was clearly the room’s entrance, and I checked the other two. The first was a closet, but the second was the bathroom, and the bathroom had a privy. I settled down gratefully, and alleviated one of my three major bodily concerns. Next was the food, so I hobbled back to the tray I’d seen in the main room. It held fruit and crusty bread, and a plate of butter. Things they could leave for some time without worrying about spoiling or the meal going cold. I ate my fill, and afterwards my headache wasn’t as bad. Moving seemed to help, so I went to the windows and twitched the curtains to the side.

I was several floors up, not in a tower, but in one of the peak-roofed keeps. I squinted, although the sunlight wasn’t very bright. The sky was grey with winter clouds, although it didn’t look dark enough to snow yet. I could see an expanse of gardens and the white walls that surrounded the whole castle. I was just high enough to see a bit of river over the wall, and some homes that were higher than the walls. Freedom was so close, but I knew if I broke the window and ran I’d never be able to get out in the state I was in. It was cold, and I had no shoes, no weapon, no armor, and was weak from lack of partners. That unnerved me - I’d never been this long without a lover since before Caleb. I could feel the weakness in my fingers, a subtle unseen tremor, a lack of exactitude in my motions, and a draining of strength. How long could I go without taking another person to bed? The men on the road had wanted to save me for their lord, and so they hadn’t defiled me, but even if they had it wouldn’t matter. My consent - my pleasure - was required for me to gain any sort of sustenance from it. And because I never used my magic, I had no idea how large my well was. I must at least have some measure of large reserves, because we’d ridden for three weeks and I still had some strength left to me. Still, it would become a problem to be reckoned with sooner or later, and I only knew that I’d let myself starve to death before consenting to the man who tried to rape me.

A noise behind me startled me from my dark thoughts, and I whipped around. The same vile man I’d been thinking of now stood in the room, near the door. I took quick note of the guards outside. Two, that I could see. Armed and armored. Another two followed him in, but I couldn’t help falling into a defensive stance. I would claw his eyes out, rip off his cock and shove it down his throat. I would --

“What do you really think you’re going to do, unarmed and with no armor?,,” his mocking question interrupted my thoughts.

“Come near me and find out,” I growled.

He seemed to remember what happened last time, and didn’t take me up on my offer. My bravado and bluster worked, although who knows if I could manage that bit of magic again, or how much it would cost me to do it. Instead, he sat on a couch, and peered at me. He was trying to look harmless, and it wasn’t working. I could tell that his smile was a brittle veneer over his cruelty. And he wasn’t cruel in the same way that Caleb was. Caleb could be cruel when he needed to be, but he didn’t seem to enjoy it. His cruelty carried with it necessity, and a sort of reluctance. This man, this king, enjoyed being cruel. I could tell, although I didn’t have any reason to think that aside from my own instincts. I imagined breaking every single one of his fingers. I knew, as surely as I knew my own name, that he’d broken people with his barbarism. He’d ruined lives for the fun of it, he was where the black cloud hanging over the shining castle came from. He was the one who closed off Charias. Well, I’d split it open like a great, white egg.

“I’ve been thinking on our predicament,” he said, mildly.

“And what predicament is that?”
"Pretense isn’t necessary with me. I know you are Korianan, and I know you will die in this gilded cage if you don’t meet certain conjugal requirements."

"I am perfectly willing to die rather than consent to fucking you," I spat.

He got up and glided smoothly towards me. It was shameful how graceful he was, "I knew the moment I saw you that you were special. It wasn’t just your beauty, although you are well-made. No, you just have a certain feel to you. Then when you threw us all across the room, well, then I knew I had to have you. I must make you mine."

"I’ve been told that for a human to lie with one of us feels so good for the human that they can become addicted to the sensation."

"You are not dissuading me," he was close to me, and his fingers brushed down my cheek. I shuddered in revulsion and did not bother to hide it.

"Only if we are consenting. Only if we get our pleasure as well. And something tells me, you’ve never pleasured a woman a single time in your wretched life," For a moment, all of the times I’d beaten Petyr unarmed flashed through my head. All of the times I’d won by fighting dirty. My hand snapped out, quick as a snake strike, and I grabbed his shirt front. Heedless of my throbbing head I yanked him to me and smashed my forehead into his face as hard as I could before throwing him down like the piece of garbage that he was. I jumped, following him to the floor, reaching for his throat to wrap my hands around or his eyes to gouge my fingernails into.

But I didn’t have the chance. Two pairs of strong hands yanked me off of him, pulling me back as I struggled, trying to get to him. Dimly, I was aware that they wouldn’t hurt me. He wanted me alive and whole of body, or I was of no use to him.

"I will die before I consent to you!," I screamed, kicking and struggling against the grips of his guards, "You are an abomination!"

He picked himself up, dabbing at his bleeding nose with a finger. Seeing his own blood enraged him and he rushed me where I was held by the guards. His fist grabbed a handful of hair and roughly yanked my head back. His eyes were wild with crazed, uncontrolled anger. He was insane, I saw then. Completely mad, “We’ll see, little bitch, we’ll see who breaks first.”

I kicked out at him, and he dodged. I missed his balls by inches, grazing his thigh, "You’ll never have me."

He dropped my head and made a noise of disgust, turning to the door, “We’ll see. You two can let her go after I’m in the hallway.”

He left, and then the guards threw me onto the bed. The smaller of the two turned and looked at me after his partner left, “This will go easier on you if you give in to him. He has a special talent for breaking people, and he will break you too.”

“Never,” I spat. He shook his head and joined his fellows in the hallway. I was left in the crushing silence of my cage.

When food came, it was hot, and I ate more than I should have. Just because I was resolved to die rather than bed him, did not mean I was hopeless and wished to die. I wouldn’t starve myself into an early grave, and I thought that it made logical sense if I could compensate for some of the energy loss with food. I didn’t know for sure, but I did feel stronger after eating. Some of the tense low-blood-sugar feel went away. So I ate, and slept, and the next morning I woke after the sun was
I didn’t take long - I hadn’t even had my first meal - when there was a knock on the door. Without waiting for an answer, it opened, and I tensed; but when my visitor stepped out I saw that it was a woman. There was something familiar about her, although I couldn’t say what it was.

She was tall, but not large. She had muscle, I could see the definition of it in her bare arms. Her hair was short and dark, but brown and not black like mine. She had lines in her face that seemed to come from the thunderous expression she currently wore. Here eyes were brown too, dark and angry and knowing too much. She wore pants, like me, and like men and not a skirt. I recognized something in her, something hard and unforgiving, and I recognized a kindred. She had intelligence and anger, but she wasn’t my enemy.

“I am Thérèse,” she announced without preamble.

“I am Danae,” she was the first here to have my name, but it seemed impolite not to answer her.

“My brother,” the word stuck in her mouth like glue, contemptuous and poisonous, and I realized in that moment that her anger came from him. He’d hurt her, and the pressure had turned her into something altogether harder than she used to be, “has sent me because he thinks that I am the only one who can come in here unharmed.”

“That might be true. Well, excepting the guards who have swords,” weapons changed things.

“I’ve been told I need to bring you a gift,” the door opened wider, and two guards dragged a man in. He was huge, or he had been. He was tall, and broad, and I could see the suggestion of muscles that were slightly softer after a long time of disuse. He wore only a shirt and pants, and both he and the clothing were unaccountably dirty. His eyes were closed, and they dumped him unceremoniously onto the couch before exiting the room back into the hallway. I had a sinking feeling the purpose of this “gift”.

I turned back to Thérèse, eyes blazing, “You can tell your vile brother that I am not him, and I will not rape another person. I will starve first.”

She eyed me with thoughtful, calm silence. She was evaluating me, weighing me, “Is it true that you gave my brother the broken nose and fat lip he’s been sporting?”

“His nose is broken? See, now, that news is a gift. I should have hit him harder, maybe I could have driven the shards into his brain and killed him and spared us all this trouble.”

“Because of that, I am going to offer you some advice. All of my brothers gifts are poison, without exception.” She turned to leave, and then stopped, looking me in the eyes, “Everyone will tell you to let him do what he wishes, to submit because it’s easier and he always wins in the end. Don’t listen to them. That fire that’s burning in you now, that righteous anger that makes you lash out, hold that close. Nurse it, feed it with the thoughts of all of the things he’s going to do. Maybe we’ll get lucky and your fire will be the one to burn him to death, but take care that it doesn’t burn you down with it.”

That dramatic pronouncement made, she turned, exiting the room and leaving me alone with the dirty, unconscious man. I looked at him, frowning. Who was he? Where had he come from? Why was he so abused? Was he dangerous? Despite his size, he didn’t feel dangerous. That might change when his eyes opened, but I didn’t think the king would send in someone who would abuse me. It went against his purposes for me. I studied the man more intently. He was taller than the couch he was on, his feet hung well over the end, and he was much taller than me. Taller, even,
than Caleb was. He was broad through the shoulders and chest. Just being near him made me feel tiny, and I’m six feet tall. His hair, lanky with grease, was reddish brown, and his skin had the sickly cast of a brown-skinned person who hadn’t seen the sun in far too long. He should be much darker than he currently was. His feet and hands were large, and I guessed that he could almost fit my whole head in his hand.

His eyes were somewhat small, with low, thick brows. His mouth was somewhat thin, too, but the bottom lip was thicker than the top one by a noticeable amount. His nose, chin, and brow weren’t especially prominent, and the overall effect of softening his handsomeness into something that looked somehow kinder. His eyes fluttered open, and they were a bright blue. He blinked me, having a hard time focusing as he came out of his stupor.

He groaned, rubbing his hands over his face, “Soth a sutheos?”

I didn’t know the language he was speaking, and so I replied, “I’m sorry, I don’t understand you.”

His voice was a croak, graveled with disuse, and his Kellan was stunted and heavily accented, “Where am I?”

“Sadly, still in Ville Flue.”

He cursed in the other language, then asked, “Where’s Kay?”

“Kay? I’m sorry, I don’t know her.”

“Who are you?”

I decided to take pity on him and pour him a glass of water from the pitcher that was kept in my room. I handed it to him, and he started drinking it in small sips, “I’m Danae. I’m a prisoner here as, apparently, are you.”

I lilted my voice a little, making the last part a question, and he answered, “I am.”

I waited until he’d drunk more of the water, and regained enough of his composure to sit up, “What is your name?”

“Sebastian - Bas.”
Kay, Charias

Chapter Summary

Kay continued her escape from Phalen's nightmare, but halfway to her destination she unexpectedly runs across prince Eben. He requests her aid with his quest to find Danae, and reveals part of his larger ambitions.

Chapter Notes

No sex, no violence, just plot and character development.

“I change my mind,” I said firmly, crossing my arms. Now that I wasn’t half starving and being chased by the king’s dogs, I had regained a measure of sanity and with it, I realized that I could walk my own ass back to Gregaran and avoid ever setting foot in that horrible place again, “You’ll need to find your own way into the castle.”

“I’m sorry, what?,” I was alone with the prince, as I’d requested. He looked at me with a mild gaze, and I sensed a sort of calculation behind it. He was a strange man, this auburn-haired Kellan prince. I had a hard time figuring him out. Why did he care about Phalen’s newest toy?

“You heard me, my lord. I will not be setting foot in that castle.”

“Why?”

“That’s my affair,” because I would not be trapped by his abuse again. Because Adélaïde risked her life to get me out and I wouldn’t dishonor her sacrifice by going back and placing myself at Phalen’s mercy again.

Something must have shown on my face though, because one corner of his mouth rose in a sarcastic smile, “How do you feel about revenge?”

“I hadn’t considered it,” I blurted out.

“Sit with me, Kay,” he indicated the nearby bed, and I sat, perched on the edge. He sat next to me, and matched my posture, “What do you know of my brother?”

“Nothing aside from the fact that he’s the king of Kelly. You grow rich off the stranglehold you have on the port.”

“Yes, and for my brother, that is enough. My brother is a man of small ambitions. Mercurial and easily distracted by things like this matter with Danae. I am something altogether different,” his manner changed, and some emotion leaked into his eyes, “I am a man of great ambitions, and I am using Danae as an excuse. I think that this affront to Kelly should cost him more than his life.”

“I’m listening.”
"I will take his throne from him, and his country, and I will make it mine."

"You will need more than me for that."

"I have more than you. I have five hundred men, ten Weavers, and a korianan."

I sighed. I just wanted to go home, that is all. And before that, I just wanted to be a pleasure worker. Long ago, I’d just wanted to be anything but an elf from a boring small town stuck in a stifling valley, “I think maybe it is time that I decide to be more.”

“What?”, he asked, not having the benefit of my train of thought. The truth of it was that Phalen had scarred me, and he’d taken from me all I’d ever been before. He’d literally left his mark on me, and I hated him with every fibre of my bring. The truth was that no one should be subject to what Adélaïde, Thérèse, Sirene, and I had gone through. Not anymore. The last truth was that being free of Phalen shouldn’t bear the cost of Adélaïde and Bas. It was wrong to leave them.

I met his eyes, “I will take you there you need to go. We must leave soon, though, the snows are coming. And there is one more catch: there is no way we can take five hundred men. Perhaps ten, but no more. The way in is too close to the bridge to move that many without drawing attention.”

“Ten? How can we take a castle with ten men?”

“Phalen’s court is full of lickspittles and dishonest, cruel people. The honest ones avoid him, and his own family fled years ago. On the other hand, the soldiers are forced to stay.”

“So their sympathies are suspect?”

“I couldn’t say, I don’t know them. But I do know something about the passions of men, and there were a good number of them who took no pleasure in the things Phalen does to his sisters and I, and to any woman who displeases the men of the court. Some wished they were anywhere else when their wives were forced to leave.”

“And so you think some will not mourn him?”

“I know that the only people who will mourn them are the ones who have grown rich by being part of his inner circle. But he has cut off all trade and all contact with the outside world and his people suffer for it. The city is beautiful, but it looked half empty. And I don’t know how many soldiers should garrison a castle, but given the size of this particular castle it seems there should be more.”

“How large is the castle?”

“It’s the largest structure I’ve ever seen. It’s bigger than the monastery in Gregaran and bigger than the university in Raedaan. Adélaïde told me once that it was built to house not only the extensive royal family - apparently they practice polygamy and breed like rats - but also to be of use to the public. There is an entire primary school and university within its walls, and they take up only a small portion of the whole thing.”

“We would never find him in there without your help.”

“That’s true, you wouldn’t. You would get lost in the catacombs beneath and die with no food or water,” the prince made a face of disgust at the mention of the catacombs, “Ten people, my lord, including us. No more. Do you have a map?”

He nodded and rose, walking to a nearby trunk. He pulled a scroll out of it and laid it flat on the table. I joined him, leaning on the other side of the table as we examined it together. He pointed to
a spot on the map that was slight to the southeast of Morelvast, the second largest city in Charias according to the map, “This is where we are, it has taken two weeks or so to ride here.”

“Ride?”

“I took mostly cavalry with me, and gave the infantrymen horses to ride so we wouldn’t be burdened with them. The Weavers come with their own mounts.”

“I’ve seen them. Black as the night sky, with grey eyes, and silver-grey hairs in their manes and tails. We had some of them in Lumieare. I find them unsettling.”

“I think that’s the point. Fast beasts though, much faster than even our most well-bred horses.”

“Watch out my lord, they bite,” I grinned at him. He smiled back, and we turned back to the map. I pointed to the area I thought I’d come out of the storm grate, south of the second bridge on the south side of the city, “This is where we must get to.”

“And what should I do with my five hundred men,” it wasn’t really a questioned aimed at me, but he was staring at the map, “The snow will come any day now, and they’ll die if I leave them behind on this field. He pointed to a town south of the city, near the border of Llellwyn, “Did you stop here during your flight from the city?”

“I stopped in none of the towns or cities, nor in any of the small castles or homes you’ve probably noticed along the way. But I was forced closer than I liked to Farlaine.”

“Did it have walls?”

“It’s a small town, made smaller by the lack of trade over the border. It had no walls, only residents and border guards.”

He tapped it and said, “That will be it, then.”

He stepped out of the tent and was gone for a moment, returning with Siren Gregory. He dragged him over to the map and explained the conversation we’d had, “So you see, I need you to take the men here. You can winter there until the snows break.”

“With the dual advantage of control of a border town,” then he looked at the prince, gaze shrewd, and I thought that there was very little that escaped Siren Gregory’s notice, “Whatever do we need control of a border town for?”

“Whatever I want,” answered Eben, annoyed, “Just do as I say for once. I’m sick to death of arguing with you every step of the way. Winter the men in Farlaine, and we’ll meet up with you in the spring.”

“Siren Gregory,” I interjected, taking perverse pleasure in needling a white priest, “You can always use the Galibal to join up with the prince again, if you so choose.”

He was not fooled by my innocent smile, but whatever he was thinking, he held it to himself, “As my lord commands.”

“It is settled, we break camp at dawn. I trust you won’t be bothered if I take Leigh with me?”

“It will be harder to hide our movements, but we survived easily enough without his talents so I believe we can do it again.”
“Then it is settled, we leave tonight,” Leigh was brought in and appraised of the situation. I liked Leigh, I liked his easy manner and his quick smile. He was kind when he didn’t have to be. Prince Eben thought he was all too quick with a joke, but I didn’t mind. A sense of humor and immaturity were two different things. Best of all, his easy nature made me feel safe and relaxed, something I hadn’t felt in a long time. He eased some of the caution in me, and was always cordial to me, never once making the kind of remarks men like to make about the way I look. I was glad he was coming with us.

All told it was myself, Leigh, Eben, and seven of the Weavers. The other three went south with the men to help them take Farlaine. Their black and silver horses were just as unsettling as I remembered. Although I was not a good rider, I was given a horse as well. She was a strong mare, calm, and a beautiful yellow palomino. I thought again on how strange it was that people could have such a wide variety of hair colors, but horses could not. There were no green or purple horses, nor one that would match my own copper hair. I stroked her neck and whispered to her, something my father taught me. He’d been good with horses, and even though I couldn’t ride one well, they did seem to take a liking to me.

We mounted up, saddle bags full, and took our leave of the camp as the sun was setting. I was wrapped in even heavier clothing now than Adélaïde had given me when I left. Some days I felt like never taking my clothing off ever again. I knew eventually I’d have to bathe, but it was winter, and that day wasn’t going to come soon. My stomach turned at the thought of seeing my own skin and the stories etched on it. My tattoos, long healed now, seemed to itch on my skin. And so, three months after I’d arrived, I was heading back into Phalen’s den a second time. At least I could say I was wiser than the first.

We rode all night, finally stopping as day broke in a thicket of trees. Travelling at night meant that we could use the road. And, being an elf, I could see at night and lead us without using lights. The road meant fast travel and the darkness meant we’d be hidden. My sight meant that I would see others on the road long before they’d see us. This would have been dangerous when I was by myself and on foot, but a horse and I the company of others made it much safer. So we rode through the night and hid ourselves and the horses during the day in the trees. Leigh use his magic to make the fire we started only visible to ourselves, and we were able to cook a meal and warm ourselves. Watch was set, but I was not on it tonight, and I sought my bed, exhausted and saddle sore.

When I woke, snowflakes dusted my cheeks and lashes, and the bright Charasian grass had a small coating of snow. It was still falling, gentle light flakes. Not a real snowstorm, then, a promise of what was coming. I sat up, dusting myself off. Leigh sat by the fire, heating up drinks for us. I sat next to him, gratefully accepting what was offered. There were boiled oats in the pot, flavored with honey and cinnamon. I ate gratefully, thinking about the day ahead of us. Camp broke around me, people packing up their bedrolls and taking from the pot. Leigh, last on watch, was already packed and ready to go.

“How long will it take us to get to the city, do you think?,” I asked him.

“I think you’d be better at answer that than I, I’ve never been there.”

“I left three weeks ago, on foot.”

“And we left the Stair Fort two weeks ago on horses, but moving slowly with the five hundred men and war camp.”

“I don’t know where that is.”
“The Kellan border.”

“So, my walking and you riding makes sense that we met almost halfway between the border and the city. Danae arrived the day before I left.”

“The battle where we lost her was a week and a half before that.”

“The must have ridden hard.”

“Yes, and been only a few men.”

“I saw her in the throne room when she arrived, she only had the king’s son and a few other men as escort.”

“Yes, so a small party moving quickly can make the trip faster than a large one. All told, probably a few days. Certainly less than a week.”

“Good,” I nodded, looking into the dwindling fire. She’d already been there for three weeks. He’d taken two weeks to turn me into Toy, so I knew what he could do to her in the month that would have passed by the time we got there, “Are you close to her?”

“That’s a difficult question to answer. I’d say she and I are friends. I’m her teacher, too, in several areas. Yet, she’s very introspective and private person. She has a world in her head, and I got the sense that although she cared for me there are depths to her that I’d never plumb.”

“You should be prepared,” I turned and looked at him, his light blue eyes met mine. Blue eyes carried a threat for me now, but for some reason I couldn’t see that threat in his, “She will not be herself when we find her. She won’t return to you the person that she left.”

“She is strong, she will be ok.”

I shook my head, “You don’t understand how he is, how he hurts people. She will not be the same.”

I stood and walked to my bed roll, ending the conversation. I packed up and used some snow to clean the dishes I’d used at breakfast, packing them in with the rest of my things. I finished as they were kicking dirt onto the fire. It was nearly full dark, and I started towards the road with the rest of them trailing behind.
In the time I’d been sharing my room with Bas, he’d gotten much better at Kellan. He had a gift for languages, he said, and liked learning them. He’d taught me a few curses in what I’d learned was his native language of Enreadan, but mostly he’d insisted on speaking Kellan to me. He was kind, and funny. For someone so large, he was gentle. ‘Not always gentle, my lady’, he’d told me with a wink when I mentioned it to him.

I hadn’t seen Phalen since Bas was unceremoniously dumped onto my couch, and it made me restless. Thérèse’s words echoed in my head. All my brother’s gifts are poison, she’d said. I didn’t think that it was Bas himself, but there was a trick here, and I could not see it. I grew steadily weaker. I needed to face the facts, I was starving to death. I’d kept the fact from Bas, not wanting to make him feel obligated to help me. We were friends, but could we truly enter into any kind of arrangement with each other in this place? Could he really be counted to express his free will when he knew it was that or death for me? I wouldn’t burden him with it.

This morning I woke, and felt dizzy while walking to the bathroom. I relieved myself and went back to bed, the effort making me collapse back on the bed. I’d been eating regular food, and that helped some. It kept my body relatively healthy, but it was the energy that drove me that was dwindling, and no amount of food would help. I finally couldn’t hide it from Bas any longer, and that was how I found myself laying on my back, looking up into his concerned face.

“I’ll have the guards get a doctor,” he said.

“It won’t help.”

“We must try, you’re clearly sick!”

“I know what’s wrong,” he frowned and crossed his big arms, looking down at me. I sighed and knew I’d have to tell him to get him to leave me alone, “I am starving to death.”

Then followed the predictable confusion, “But you eat every day, I see you do it.”

“I do, but it is not food I need. I am Korianan,” I finally admitted to him.

Understanding flooded his features, “That is an easy thing to fix. I promise, everything is in
I shook my head, “No. I can’t, it’s not fair to you. You cannot participate of your own volition, and I will not pressure someone else into sex.”

As it turned out, Bas was smarter than I’d given him credit for, “Do you only sleep with people who don’t know what you are?”

“No,” I scowled, not seeing where he was going with this, but seeing the trap, “I’ve slept with people who know what I am.”

“And they know that you require sex to survive, correct?”

“Yes.”

“And that without it you’ll die?”

“Yes.”

“But you had sex with them anyway, even though they knew they were giving you sustenance.”

“Yes. Bas, where are you taking this?”

“What does it matter if I am seeing you in the later stages of what is a completely natural process for you? I saw you when your need was less immediate, too, and I still would have offered.”

“But still, we’re here in this place, in this cage. Can we consent to anything?”

“With our jailers? No, but with each other? Yes. So what if Phalen delivered me here to be a food source for you? I don’t care, really,” he took my stubborn silence for the denial that it was, “Lord woman, you would cut off your nose to spite your face, I think. Did I ever tell you what I did before coming here?”

“No, although I cannot imagine why it would matter.”

“I was a sex worker at a pleasure stage in Raedanas.”

“Go on,” I said, suspicion in my voice.

“I’ve been with Korianan women before, and let me tell you something: I would pay you to have the experience again.”

“I doubt I’ll be as good, given that I’m so weak.”

“Hush, you know what I’m speaking of. And beyond that, I’ve seen you looking. When I bathe, when I get ready for bed. We live together, you can’t hide that. Let me help you.”

“Let me think on it.”

“Danae--”

“No, Bas, let me think on your words.”

“Alright, but do me a favor and don’t die of stubbornness,” he left the bed, and I rolled over, staring at a spot on the wall where the sun landed and thinking.
Everything he said made sense, so why was I still hesitating? Why was I still willing to dig my heels in and lose my life? I hated being bothered and not knowing the cause. Bas wasn’t even wrong, I did find him attractive and in a different place and time I’d be more than willing to have a night with him. Just the thought of the hard muscles I knew were under his clothes made me clench inside.

But I couldn’t do it, I couldn’t let go. Why? Where was the sticking point? I thought of Phalen, and it made me angry. The anger was burning in my chest, keeping me wrong. I would not give in to him, would not--

--And there it was. He’d offered Bas, and accepting his offering was giving in to him. Even this small amount, I was giving a tiny bit of ground by accepting his gift. Then the question that followed on its heels, was ‘how much ground am I giving by dying?’ All of it. And to make matters worse, I know it would prove nothing to Phalen. So he was denied something he wanted, so what? There were other women, other Korianan. The only person in this castle who truly cared if I lived or died was me.

And Bas.

And I had my answer. I had to live, I had to put an end to Phalen. Gift or not, I would do this. I turned back over, facing the chair Bas was sitting in.

“You know this is the reason he put you in here? He tossed you in here like meat to a lion, locking you in the cage with me because I’m a predator.”

“There are two things wrong with your analogy. First, meat doesn’t know its own mind, I do, and I don’t care if this was of Phalen’s design. Second, both imply that being with you would be in some way painful or detrimental to me or painful and I think we both know that the opposite is true.”

“And if he kills you for giving in to me?”

“What do you think he will do if you don’t give in to me? My only value to him was as a hostage to keep Kay in line, and that clearly didn’t work.” The bitterness in his tone was clear. We’d discerned over time that she left without a care for his welfare.

“I hadn’t thought of that.”

He got up and joined me on the bed again, “We have every reason to do this, and the only reason you can give to not is ’I don’t want to do what Phalen says’. Well, neither do I, but I don’t see how either of us have much of a choice.”

“You’re right, we don’t have much of a choice, and that is why we can’t consent. Agreement under duress is no agreement at all.”

He made a noise of frustration, “Danae! At this point you are literally saying that death is preferable to sex with me!”

“No! I am saying that death is preferable to raping you!”

“You can’t rape the willing, Danae! I’d want you no matter the circumstances! So, it is terrible here! So, Phalen placed us in each other’s paths and keeps us caged together like animals he wishes to breed! So what! We should take the smallest amount of joy we can find, even if we came upon it in this way.”
“Being with me would bring you joy?”

“Yes. You are beautiful, and funny, and so strong. I’d willingly throw myself on your mercy no matter where we were.”

“Ok,” with agreement fled guilt. I will survive, dammit, no matter the cost. He can take me from the world kicking and screaming and angry.

Bas came to me gently and, while it wasn’t always what I enjoyed, I was too weak for more. I took quiet pleasure in it, and in his body. And when we finished together, the magic flooded into me, filling me. I wasn’t whole yet - we’d need to be together more than once for that, considering how close I’d gotten to death, but I was miles better than I had been. And, as it turned out, bedding a pleasure working definitely had its advantages. He had deft hands and a deft tongue, and when they were finished there was enough of a mess on the bed that they wanted for changing. Afterwards, she lay on the bed with him, red-faced and flushed with magic and pleasure, a sweet ache between her legs. He was better equipped than even Isandro, and when she’d seen it she’d wondered how it would fit.

But it did, and when they were finished I felt better than I’d felt in weeks. Since arriving, really. I felt like I could run laps, like I never needed to sleep again. Indeed, after the sun had set and Bas slept, I sat at the window, staring out. I could see the city from here, the candles flickering in windows, the only brightness of an inky black night. The snows were coming, and the sky had been the color of dirty ice for weeks. But the strange Charian grass stayed an unnatural shade of green. The grey sky made it impossible to see anything but the flickering lights, and I watched as the city went dark. One by one the people went to bed, until there were only a few insomniac souls like myself. It took hours before I tired, but I finally crawled into bed with Bas, curling up next to his absurdly large body.

Because we’d crossed the line, we kept crossing it, seeking solace in each other and passing the time in bed. I was voracious after my fast, and Bas might have even come close to matching my hunger. I knew his body better than I’d known any man’s, and he knew mine. We fell into a deep spiral of passion, using our bodies to keep our minds from succumbing from the endless boredom. I needed more, I needed conflict, and Bas needed a different partner. He had needs I couldn’t satisfy because I refused to be submissive to him. Even with all of that, I treasured him and his company. I lost sight of Thérèse’s warning, because I couldn’t heed it. I would starve or go insane without Bas. The snow started falling, light and gentle at first, but soon it covered all of the green grass and drifts started to pile against the walls.

Phalen and his sister still hid, and I hadn’t seen them since Bas arrived more than a month ago. I could feel his eyes on me. Our meals came and the guards had interrupted us more than once, so he must know I’d broken. I don’t know if he knew how close I’d gotten to death, though, so I don’t think he knew where my limits were. Bas told me all about his home, Raedanas. He told me about the great dirty sprawl of it, the shining, floating city it served, and the immense portal that connected the two. He told me about the savanna around the city, that covered most of Enreadarran. How it was golden in the summer and fall, dry in the winter, and bright green with life during the spring. He told me of the lake and the mountains and the forests, and even of the forest clans that still lived in the woods, clinging to bits of land still left to them by the Enreadarrans. I told him of my homeland, too. Of the tall buildings, and the wall, and the sound of the Songling. Of the castle I’d grown up in, how it was bigger than this one, how it was pulled from the stone of the mountains by my ancestors. Most importantly, I told him of the sea. The colors and the smell, and the huge stone breakwaters, capped by lighthouses, that formed the harbor. He told me of Kay, and I told him of Caleb. Not the part of Caleb that hurt me, but the parts that I loved and missed. His quick humor when his mood was up or when he was drunk, his
lopsided smile, his sense of adventure. I thought I’d like Kay, from what he said. She was quick, and kind. Kinder than I had ever been. I had too many sharp edges, edges I refused to file off. Edges that had driven me to smash my head into Phalen’s.

Somewhere in the back of my mind I knew that this placid existence that I’d grown used to was going to come to an end. So when the door opened one evening, and Thérèse strode in, I wasn’t exactly surprised. I looked at her and knew it was time. Whatever was going to happen between us would happen tonight. I nodded and stood.

Bas looked surprised to see her, and when he didn’t move she turned to him and said, “You, too.”

It occurred to me she was speaking Kellan, as she had before, and I wondered if it meant they knew how good Bas had gotten at it by speaking to me. In the hallway, the guards put shackles on us, and we traveled behind Thérèse at sword point.

They took us to the throne room, where it took four guards to open the heavy wooden doors. The huge room, most of which I hadn’t noticed, was sparsely peopled. It was late, and likely most of the court had gone home to their estates before the snows came or were in bed. Phalen sat on his throne, lounging, his leg thrown over one of the arms. It was a large thing, made of the same sparkling white stone as the castle, and set on a dais a few steps higher than the rest of the room.

To his right stood a tall woman, still shorter than me, but tall for a woman. Her hair was a bright flame red, falling in a long braid that was slung over her shoulder. She twitched her head, and it swung behind her. As we got closer, I could tell that her eyes were a strange shade of purple, the same as the one who had stolen me and stolen Isandro from me. His mother, maybe? I remembered Phalen calling him son. Her face was impassive, and told me nothing. To his left was another woman, pale of hair and skin, with the palest blue eyes I’d ever seen. She wore white, and stood there staring at anything but other people, looking like part of the white castle itself.

When we approached the dais we stopped, a few feet from it. Thérèse left us with our guards and joined the other four, standing above the court and looking down. I wondered how someone like Phalen could be surrounded by women, but it occurred to me that they might all be his sisters. His playthings, if he’d treated them all like he’d treated Thérèse.

Phalen looked down at me, pretending to consider me. He had a dangerous, happy glint in his eye that made all of my hairs stand up, “I’ve decided that I’ve grown bored on waiting for you to make up your mind.”

He spoke in Charian. I was raised with a king, and my king knew the language of his closest allies, and so did I. I responded to him in kind, “It was made up the moment your son killed Isandro.”

“Isandro?”

“My friend. He was a Kellan general, too, so like as not you’ll have war come spring,” I was no fool. I knew how Caleb would take that insult, “You’ve not met my king, but you likely shall.”

“Yes. That was my intention,” the comment confused me, but before I could probe further, he moved on, “Come now, girl. Will you agree to bed me? To love me as I love you?”

Girl? Not Danae? Had Thérèse not told him my name? I thought maybe I had an ally, “It is still no. It will always be no.”

He nodded to the guards, and they swarmed Bas who, sensing the danger even though he couldn’t understand what we were saying, struggled. As big as he was, it was no use. He was not a fighter, was in chains, had no weapons. They held him fast, a sword to his throat. Phalen spoke again,
“And now? If I kill your lover? Kill your friend?”

Here was the poison. Bas, who had saved my life. Who I’d come to be more than fond of, who had been my salvation. I thought of going back to that room alone made me want to run screaming, and the terror in his kind blue eyes made my own burn with tears. Tears because I knew I couldn’t save him. I could lie, yes, but it wouldn’t matter. I couldn’t force my body and mind to love Phalen, I could only pretend at it. He’d know that for a lie the first time I’d submitted to him, and we’d be here all over. I would likely die for it. I still wracked my brain for a way to free Bas. Nothing came to me. This giant of a man, who’d been so essential to me, who’d been a bright spot in an otherwise desolate place, and I knew I had to betray him.

I turned back to Phalen, “I would agree to lie with you,” triumph flooded his face, and I would have sworn I heard a relieved breath from Bas, “But I could not force myself to love you. I could not force myself to enjoy it. This is not consent Phalen, you can’t force people to love you by threatening their friends.”

His face closed down, hardening, and he waved to them. Nonchalantly flicking his fingers. I spun to face Bas, because the least I could do was face my own actions. I don’t know what I’d hoped to find on his face, but a part of my soul was torn off when I saw the look of sad hurt. The next instant, it was over. The guard’s sword stabbed forward, into Bas’s throat. It was worse than watching Isandro die. I had no one else to blame here but myself, and nothing to distract me from the horrible gurgling noise and the blood that was staining the perfect white stone.

The instant the light left his eyes, I snapped. The fire and heat and anger I’d been tending to roared up and consumed me. I flew at Phalen, but his guards were faster, and they lined up in front of him, drawing their swords. I was ready to die then, throw myself on them. The one in the center stiffened, and I looked up at his face. The point of a sword was the center of a red blossom at his throat. There was a noise, and he fell face forward down the steps, rolling, Thérèse standing behind him holding the bloody sword. His sword spun, skittering towards me across the hard floor. I didn’t need to be told twice, I snatched it up.

Chaos erupted after that. There were screams as unarmed courtiers ran for the edges of the room, and the sound of metal on metal. I defended myself, my training returning to me. I wasn’t as good as I’d have liked, but I hadn’t let up on my practicing during my long imprisonment. My forms were as natural to me as breathing, and I was stronger too.

I killed two men before I realized Thérèse and I weren’t fighting alone. Some of the guards fought with us, slaying their fellows. I took cuts, too, being unarmored, but I didn’t feel them until later. At least my head was safe, covered with an ill-fitting helm I’d snatched off of one of the soldiers I’d killed.

We dwindled the number of guards, until there were no more hostile guards left. Only Thérèse and Phalen still fought. I turned to help her, and in that moment her guard slipped. Phalen didn’t miss the opportunity, and I watched with mounting dread as his sword pierced her body. He grinned his vile grin and wrenched the sword upwards. Her guts slopped out onto the ground, and a wave of horror and nausea clenched my stomach in response.

“No!,” the scream came from the other end of the long dais, where the tall sister had been hiding from the fighting. She was frozen, staring at Phalen. In that moment, it was not she that acted, but the small ghost of a sister. The noise that came from her mouth was primal, full of pain and anger and sadness. It was the noise of all the sobs and screams and words she hadn’t said, the noise of an abused woman pushed too far.

She flung herself at Phalen, her weight knocking them backwards. He smacked his head on the
stone floor, and her hands - small and thin, but strong - found his throat. She squeezed, and he tried to struggle.

I wasn’t going to let him. I strode forward and stomped on the arm that held his sword. A swift swing of my own severed his hand from his arm. I saw that the pain registered in his face, but he had no breath with which to scream. The white woman squeezed harder, her tangle of white-blonde hair falling in front of her crazed, weeping eyes.

“No....more....” she seemed to have to force the words out, like she hadn’t spoken in years. Maybe she hadn’t, she’d seemed silent both times I’d seen her, but I hadn’t seen her for very long. I looked impassively down at Phalen, his bulging eyes and red face, and I turned away. His last rattling breaths were passing, and I turned my attention to other things. Leaning down, I picked up his sword, prying his hand off of it. I’d seen it before, in a painting that hung on the wall in my cage. The painting had a label that gave its title; it was called “The making of the Boudreaus”. In it, this very sword was being held aloft by a man, offered in supplication while he kneeled and another man put a crown on his head. It fit well in my hand, the song of its age resonated in me.

There was a resounding boom, a banging on the doors to the throne room, and the guards turned their attention to it. I did not. I saw the tall sister, she was gently pulling the white sister from their brother’s body. No one paid me any mind, and I turned my eyes to a different goal. Time moved slower in that moment for me as I turned and took a few steps towards that big white chair.

Phalen had been right about one thing: that he would break me, but it was not in the way that he assumed. He freed something in me when he killed Bas, and the fire of my anger and hunger still burned bright inside me. And as I sat in that white chair, something changed. Something shifted, and I knew in the depths of my soul that I was meant for more. I wouldn’t be any man’s victim anymore. Only one man was worthy of me, and that was a king. The stone hard and cold beneath me, I knew how I’d earn my reign. Here, in this perfectly white castle, I was made again.

The booming sounded again, and the two sisters were crying on the floor, the nobility cowered, and the guards looked confused. I raised my voice, using the battlefield voice that Isandro had taught me, and commanded, “Open the door.”
This chapter happens concurrently with the previous one, but from Eben's point of view.

There is no sex, but there is some violence.
they never slipped, or fell, or did anything similarly ungraceful. Leigh was a Korianan and the best swordsman I’d ever seen, and he had dexterity to spare. The Weavers, well, they were so light-footed that sometimes I doubted their feet touched the earth.

We started across and, as I predicted, I was the only one who had any trouble with the slippery ground. I had to go slower, choose my footing on the slick, icy bricks more carefully than the others, and I was soon last in the line. I almost fell once or twice, but managed to make it to the next section without breaking an ankle. I hoped we didn’t have to leave this way in a hurry.

The tunnel continued flat for some ways before it started branching. Kay continued, sure as an arrow. I was impressed, given that I knew she’d only been down here once. A few times she stopped, and turned, viewing an intersection from a different angle before choosing her direction.

It took about two hours, but we came to a door, heavy and wooden and set high on the curve of the wall. It wasn’t locked, and we crossed through into the large cavern beyond. It was immense, far too large for our light to penetrate. While the tunnels were clearly newer and man-made, this place had the feel of things that were ancient, and places men weren’t meant to tread. White stone pillars that were at least the width of twenty men standing shoulder-to-shoulder disappeared into the blackness above our heads. I was again the odd person out. Kay didn’t seem perturbed by the place. She was of an old species, a species that had made peace with the earth, and she was welcome in this place. The Weavers were at home in the shadows, although in truth it was always hard to tell how they felt. Most of their faces were obscured, and they didn’t speak. And Leigh, Leigh was Korianan. Legend and historical study agree that his people, when they were many, built the world we live in. They were worshipped as gods, once, before truer gods were found.

I made sure to keep up with Kay, who was sure about her path. If I wandered off, I knew I’d never be found again. I didn’t particularly relish the idea of dying in the womb of the earth. She led us straight and sure across the open space, to the foot of a staircase carved into the white bedrock. Up and up we climbed, until we reached another door and system of tunnels, these ones more like hallways in the rock, with torches flickering at all the intersections. We stopped and Kay motioned me forward.

“Yes?,” I asked.

“This is where we need to start being cautious. There were no guards last time, but clearly someone lit the torches. I’d feel more comfortable leading from between you and Leigh. I looked at Leigh and he nodded, taking the forward position. I stepped behind her. We kept going through the halls until she stopped in front of another door, “Behind here is a series of store rooms that lead to the main cellars in an abandoned area of the castle. I saw no guards last time, but.”

She trailed off and I answered, “I understand. Go ahead.”

Leigh opened the door, checking before stepping through. He looked, and motioned the rest of us forward. We kept on like this, moving through the store rooms and into the cellars. Finally we stepped out into an old, unused kitchen. The hearth was cold, and the cabinets in poor repair. Brik-a-brak covered all of the counters, rusting away. There was a thick coat of dust on everything, and even the footprints in the muck on the ground from when Kay had last passed through. She looked down at them and I saw her shudder.

“Kay, instead of taking us back to where you were kept, could you take us to where there are most likely to be guards?,” I asked.

“To kill them off in isolated groups?” asked Leigh.
“Yes. The odds will be better.”

“What if we were to split and meet where she’s most likely to be.”

“Here,” Kay said, crouching down. She started drawing in the thick coat of dust as she spoke, “The castle is too large for us to cover, but large sections of it are uninhabited. There are also dungeons, although I’ve never seen them. He kept Bas in one, but he keeps his toys in silk-lined boxes, and she’ll be in a room. This is where most of the activity takes place. Here are his rooms, and here is the throne room. Might I suggest we split five and five?”

I looked at the Weavers, the question clear. They nodded their assent, “Yes, that should work.”

“Ok, then I suggest we check these halls, as they are where I was kept and the most often used, and meet in front of the throne room to reassess our situation. If they are found nowhere else, they will be there. Phalen is fond of public shows,” the derision and anger in her voice there was clear, “He has three sisters, and you are not to touch any of them. Sirene is a pale wisp of a girl who doesn’t talk and will remind you of a ghost. Thérèse is the only woman allowed to carry a sword around Phalen, and she looks angry all the time. Adélaïde is the oldest, she wears an impassive expression most of the time, but she is also the only person I saw in the court with natural fire-red hair.”

“Got it, leave the sisters alone,” I answered.

She stood up, “I’ll lead you to the point we need to split up at.”

We resumed our walking formation and pressed on. We’d been walking for around four hours, but having started just after dark we had many hours ahead of us. We reached the crossroads, night-dark but in better repair than the rest of the castle. We nodded to the five Weavers that would make their own party, and headed the opposite direction.

We went around two more hallways before Leigh stopped. I listened in the quiet and heard what he did - the steps of men armed and armored. Chain, by the sound of it. Kay heard it too, and scurried to the back of the line, behind the weavers. We waited as the sound grew closer. Leigh looked at me, counting down from three on his fingers, and then stepping out from behind the wall and swinging his sword.

I followed him out, and the Weavers followed me. It was only two men though, and we dispatched them quickly. A nearby room proved to be an excellent spot to hide the bodies, and we pressed on. We continued through the halls, sneaking our way around, dispatching the soldiers in groups of two, three, and four. It took a long time before we worked our way to the large vestibule in front of the throne room.

Here there was a much larger group of guards. There were four on the doors alone, twenty more posted between here and the doors. We’d checked every room, including one Kay refused to set foot in - her former cage - and found no sign of Danae. With this many guards, she had to be inside that room with Phalen, unless he’d kept her in the dungeons. Either way, killing Phalen served my ambitions too.

“Kay,” I whispered, “Stay behind this wall. If we are unsuccessful, then you run. Run back the way we came and get out.”

“The grate is locked, my lord, I would not make it out. I will free her or I will die,” she had a stubborn set to her face, and I didn’t argue.

“Leigh, are you ready?”
“Yes,” I went to move, but a Weaver touched my sleeve and pointed. Across the way, the other Weavers had arrived, hiding much as we were but on the opposite side of the room. A weaver held up three fingers, then two, then one, then a fist. We came out from behind the wall. Leigh and I screamed as we rushed to battle, and the Weavers’ song started. The spidery hiss of it crept up my spine, but I ignored it as I rushed for the closest man.

Our swords met with a crash, and I heard the battle joined around me. Our swords met again and again, and I managed to find gaps in his plate while dodging him. He was a big man, bigger than me, but he was slower. I wore armor, of course, but he wore a full suit of plate to protect him. Plate doesn’t make a many slow, but it would make him slow er.

He was bleeding from several small cuts, bright red on silver, when I saw my chance. His arm went up and my sword went into the gap by his armpit. He fell, and I moved to the next man. He was smaller, but the process was the same. Dodge and aim for the gaps because, unlike the weavers, I didn’t have a sword that could cut through plate metal. Their magic let them do that, the silver running black during battle, the shadows they cloaked themselves with creeping over the blades. They seemed to shimmer and shutter and vibrate, and were hard to look at for long. Being on the wrong side of a Weaver’s blade during battle is a horrible thing, but I was not on the wrong side and I was grateful for them.

In truth, it didn’t take us as long as it should have to clear the vestibule of guards. They seemed sluggish and ill-trained, and I wondered where the real soldiers were. These couldn’t be the men who guarded the king, could they? We stood in the room, looking at the carnage we’d created. Kay picked her way delicately over the dead men, walking to us.

“Those doors need two men apiece to open them,” she said, motioning with her head towards the great wooden doors in front of us. Leigh and I went to one, and two Weavers to the other. We pulled, but nothing happened. They must be locked from the inside. I looked around the room, and retrieved a war hammer one of the guards had been using.

“Well, I suppose we’d better knock,” I swung back and then forward, landing a few blows on the door. The wood wasn’t even scratched, but it made a great, booming noise. I waited, ready to be attacked. We stood, and nothing happened. Leigh and I exchanged questioning looks, and he shrugged. I tried again, banging on the door.

“There is another entrance if we--,” Kay began, but was cut off by the creaking of the doors. We stepped back as they opened, but I was the first to see the queer scene on the other side of the door.

Nobles scattered at the edges of the room, scared. Guards standing, but not attacking, more dead on the door. Two women on the dais crying over the body of a third - they must be the sisters. Next to them lay the body of a man, a crown askew on his head. And above it all, seated in the throne, a sword across her lap, was Danae.

She smiled when she saw me, and it looked genuine, “Baby brother. It’s good to see you.”

I opened my mouth to reply to her, some stunning display of wit I’m sure, but Kay ran from behind us, almost knocking me over. She bolted for the dais, and no one seemed to stop her.

“Adélaïde!,” she cried. The redhead snapped her head up at the sound of Kay’s voice. Kay reached her before she could stand, flinging herself into the woman’s arms. They clung to each other, hugging, and the rest of us approached the throne. I couldn’t begin to guess what had transpired here, or how she came to be seated on the throne of another country, but I wasn’t going to let confusion stop me.
“Sister,” I greeted her, smiling. I gestured down at the dead king, “I’ve come to rescue you.”

“I’ve learned some things since we last saw each other,” she answered. She was different now, and I looked closer. She had more muscles now, better posture. Her eyes were clear, and the same power that radiated from my brother was seeping from her pores. Even the timbre of her voice was different - more like his, on reflection.

“So you have,” I replied, my voice quiet. I’d come to find my brother’s plaything, but instead I’d found someone who looked altogether too comfortable sitting on a throne, “I believe we need to talk.”

“Yes, we must,” her head turned to one of the guards, “Courtney, you and two more guards stay behind here with us. The rest of you, go back to your rooms and homes. Guards, go with them and see that they return safely. And send for a doctor.”

To my utter shock, people started moving. She had a clear, loud voice that echoed in this room. If I didn’t know better, I’d think that someone taught her to shout on a battlefield, “I’m sorry, we’ve left you a mess outside these doors as well.”

“The dead will keep until morning,” she turned her head and looked at the women, “I assume you are Kay?”

Kay looked up, surprised to hear her name out of a strange woman’s mouth, “Yes.”

Danae looked tired, “We must talk, but you should know, Bas is dead. He lies just over there.”

Kay looked at Adélaïde, and they both stood, hand-in-hand. The other sister stayed on the ground near what must be the body of the third sister. Her belly was split, straight up to the breastbone.

Kay and Adélaïde walked through the bodies until they found the one they were looking for, and a choked sob came from Kay. Adélaïde wrapped an arm around her, and I turned away. This grief was too personal, and I wanted nothing to do with it.

“What now?,” I asked Danae.

“We wait, and we talk,” I was again struck by how sure of herself she was. Where was the girl, the teenager? Where had she gained this maturity? God only knew, “But first I have to know, where is the son, and where is the army?”
Liam, Cairyn, Llellwyn

Chapter Summary

Liam and Gwyn arrive at their destination, arriving just in time to be stuck inside by winter snows.

Chapter Notes

This chapter, and the next several Liam chapters, depict a character with S.A.D. in a time and place when it was neither identified as a mental illness nor was there available treatment. There is no suicide (remember, I warn for character death.), but just in case some find it triggering, there it is. No sex either.

I’d finally torn myself away from my new wife’s naked body and, god, did I regret it. There was something I found insufferably boring about playing politics. My mother enjoyed these games, thrived on them, but I tolerated them for her sake. After all, what amusement is left to her but trivialities like politics? She is only a woman, and warring with words is a woman’s way.

But she was right about one thing: There was a better than even chance that I’d rule my realm one day, and I needed to try to prepare for that. It was true enough that my cousin was likely enough to kill his sisters with his attentions, and likely enough that he’d die early. Father was old, and even if he ruled the rest of his life, I’d still outlive him. So I had to tolerate these intrigues, even if they are below me.

We had come to Cairyn, a week ago, and I was not impressed. It was smaller than Ville Flue, even smaller than Leochlleyn. There were only a few main roads, all of which met in the center of town around the old blackstone crows; a large block of black stone carved to resemble a murder of crows. It was old, much older than the town, and no one remembered who built it. I found that my skin crawled whenever I was forced to go near it, so I avoided it.

Each of the streets housed a different thing, food markets on one, goods on another, and so on. Steel working had its own street, due to the closeness of the Kellan army. They traded together, both sides pretending they weren’t technically at war. An entire slice of the wheel was dedicated to hospitality, with inns and brothels crowding every inch. It was a patchwork of buildings, all crammed together, rich and poor. The streets that ran warren through the buildings were all made of dirt - iced hard now, and slick. The only exception were the streets in the hotelier district - those were made of smooth stone cobbles, some a normal grey, and some the black of the crows in the center of town. The only luxury they enjoyed was their plumbing. Their streets were wet, not slopped with filth, and all of the toilets ran to huge underground cisterns that were cleaned by mages with a special sort of magic.

We stayed in one of the rich residential districts in the city, in the house of the Déoir family. Their house was smaller than Gwyneth’s, but so was their town. There were more of them, at a surety, and since the snows had come and largely trapped us indoors, I was climbing the walls with
impatience. The parents had spawned seven healthy whelps, all of whom were younger than I was. Lyriell, the oldest and the only one whose name I could be bothered to remember, was the friend Gwyneth had spoken of. She’d been happy enough to see her, and I was pleased that Gwyneth had a friend so she would not miss her family so much. They spent a lot of time together, giggling and talking as girls do.

My separation from Gwyn’s naked body was a forced one - with the coming of the snows, she was often sick. She slept a lot, and seemed to get weaker and paler as the winter pressed on. She missed the sun, she said, and as happy as I made her, the lack of warmth stole something from her. I tried to spend time with her, but she seemed less herself, and it was harder to carry on a conversation with her. If I thought on it, I’d seen this happen to her more than once as we’d grown up. When the snows came, and the sun hid behind a thick blanket of clouds, she grew sick.

I sat in the study, on a window seat, reading a book of humorous poems and watching the tiny, wet snowflakes fall outside. Something to do to pass the time. I heard footsteps on the wooden floor, and looked up. Lyriell was crossing the room towards me.

“Hello,” she said. She had a light, feminine, sing-song voice, “May I join you?”

I moved my feet to make room for her on the other end of the window seat, and she settled there, perched on the edge, and leaned back against the wall. She was a slender, large-breasted girl, made more so by the stays she wore. They were there, plain for me to see, outside her clothes. She followed the custom all of the women in Cairyn did by making her stays from fine fabrics and wearing them on the outside of her dress. I hadn’t yet grown used to all of the women wandering around with their undergarments on the outside.

“Have you been to see Gwyn?,” I asked. I did my best to maintain contact with her eyes. I noticed they were a strange color, a deep amber, the color of whiskey. A shock of lavender hair fell artfully across part of her face, but the rest of her curls were held back by a pearl and silver net over her scalp so that they tumbled down her back. She’d never cut them, Gwyn had told me, not since she was a toddler. She was a pale girl, paler even than Gwyn. The greyish-white light was soft and complimentary on the soft skin of her face, shoulders, and collarbones. Her face was like the rest of her, delicate, with pale eyebrows, barely visible lashes, a small nose, and a small pink rosebud of a mouth.

“Yes. She worries me. She’s so sad,” she let a thoughtful moment pass, “I remember this from when she was a child, too. Something about the winter steals her happiness.”

“It seems to,” I studied her face, relaxed and watching the snowflakes fall, “Does it make you sad, too?”

She smiled a little, and her eyes flicked to mine for a moment, and then back to the window, “No. I like the winter. In the summer I wilt and the sun burns my skin, and I’m too shy to wear the summer dresses, so I sweat. In winter, there’s no sun to burn my eyes, and everything is quiet.”

“I wish Gwyn could find some happiness like that.”

“It is more just peace.”

“Really?,” I joked, “In this house full of people? Even without us, you live with eight other people.”

“We all have our own rooms, and the young ones stay in the nursery. Mother spends more time with father because he can’t travel,” She blushed, “Most of us were born in the summer.”
“That is a lot of celebrations in a row.”

“It’s a good few months.”

“So, why did you come see me?”

“Why not? Gwyn is sleeping again, the children are playing or sleeping and their caretaker doesn’t need my help, and my parents are off somewhere in the city enjoying each others’ company. You are here, of an age, and you are my friend’s husband. We should know each other better; especially with you being mysterious Charian royalty.”

I finally closed the book and set it aside, “Alright, what would you like to know?”

“Let’s play a game,” she said, standing. I stood too, and we walked to the small game table in the corner, “It’s very dark in this corner. Would you mind terribly moving this table closer to the window? It is a shade heavy to move on my own.”

“Of course,” I replied, picking up the table. It didn’t seem so heavy, but it made me feel nice to help her. She went to a wall cabinet and pulled it open, selecting one of the games, and I moved two chairs over to the table. She pulled it out the familiar board for the game of Marches.

“I assume you know how to play?,” she asked, setting up the pieces.

“Of course,” I replied.

“For every piece I lose, I’ll answer a question, and when you lose, you’ll answer a question.”

“That sounds fair,” I watched her finish setting up the pieces, noticing how thin and feminine her fingers were. She’d painted her nails with a soft, girlish pink color that went well with her skin. We began the game, and she earned the first piece.

“Is it true that you are here, in Llellwyn, because your uncle is king, and he is mad?”

“You don’t want to start with something easier, like my favorite color?”

“I’m sorry,” she smiled gently, “What is your favorite color?”

“Pink. The color of a woman’s...blush. And, yes, my uncle is king and he’s quite mad. He killed some of my relatives and exiled the rest of us,” I earned the next piece, “I heard that you have an older brother living in the city somewhere, is that true.”

“I thought we were to keep to easy questions?”

“I was joking.”

“Yes, I do. Half-brother, really. He’s not my mother’s son, but he and I are fairly close. He has the cutest baby.”

I earned another piece, “Who is his mother?”

“I woman named Esther. Having Josh almost killed her and she couldn’t have more kids, so my father divorced her. I’ve never met her, but I heard she lives in a cottage somewhere out in The Barren.”

“Well, he seems to have made up for lost time,” she laughed, a light, girlish sound. I lost a piece to her.
“What languages do you speak?”

“Well, obviously Charian and Llellwysh. A smattering of Kellan, and a few words of Cherry-speak.”

“That’s a weird one.”

“When I was a kid I had a phase where I thought their weird grammar was cool. And they have some truly inventive curses,” I lost another piece to her. I needed to catch up.

“Favorite legend?”

“Oh, that’s a weird one. No one has sung legends for me since I was a kid,” I thought about it some, “The story of the Kitts, probably.”

“I don’t know that one.”

“The Kitt family is one of the twelve major noble families. The founder of my dynasty was a man named Arno Boudreau. He beat the Morel family in the war of the two rivers, and founded Ville Flue. That’s what the war was over, you know, the spit of land that it’s on now. Anyway, he had four children: Daniel, Arnella, Xavier, and Sosanna. We call them the Fortune Four, because they took over after Arno died, early in his reign. They were all very close, and they ruled together acting as one monarch. Really, it was them that built our city, and that’s why both men and women can inherit, you know?”

“We have no king, so all of this sounds alien to me.”

“Yes, your famous meritocracy,” there was skepticism in my voice.

“Why do you sound as if you don’t believe in it?”

“Because you’re born to wealth, and that’s not merit.”

She was quiet for a moment and then said, “I’m sorry, I interrupted your story. Please continue.”

“Oh, um, ok. Well, one of the Fortune Four, Daniel, falls in love with a commoner. This is while his father is still alive, and he marries her. Our families have strict laws about marrying outside of nobility, and Arno even more so. A member of the royal house can’t marry outside of the nobility, and my family likes to marry cousins on top of that.”

“You’re not married to another noble.”

“Well, no, but she’s the daughter of one of the great merchant Barons, so the difference is semantic.”

“What does semantic mean?”

“It means that they are the same thing called by different words. You call them Merchant families, we call them noble families. It’s all the same, born into the ruling class.”

“I didn’t realize this story contained so many reference to modern politics,” the corners of her pretty pink mouth turned up in a smile that softened her words.

I laughed, “Ok, it doesn’t. So Daniel marries this girl from the Kitt family and his father threatens to disown him, but the Fortune Four never broke. They stood up to their father and said that either Daniel stayed or they all left. He wasn’t about to lose all of his heirs, but he couldn’t have his
grandchildren be base born, so he ennobled the entire Kitt family.”

“Why do you like that story?”

“I like that the Fortune Four stood together, as one, strong. And I like that true love prevailed. The love of the siblings and the love of Daniel and his bride made the family stronger, instead of tearing it apart.”

“A sweet thought. There is a romantic hiding inside the soldier’s body, I see.”

“It is kind of you to say so, my lady.”

“I’m not a lady. You should just call me Lyriell.”

“As you say,” I inclined my head to her, “It’s your turn, Lyriell.”

“So it is,” she replied. She smiled again, she had such an easy smile, and made her move.
Eamonn, Keehlayhan

Chapter Summary

We go back to Keehlayhan and check in with the resident schemer, and see what the king is up to. The aftermath of the incident in Charias is partially addressed.

Chapter Notes

No sex, no violence. There is a gross description of a dead body tho.

“What do you mean, ‘Charias has attacked’?,” Shouted Caleb. I’d come to give him the message, taken directly from the hand of the castle’s dove-speaker. The poor little thing had barely survived its flight, it was a summer bird, and not one of the ones bred bigger with warmer feathers. If the other dove-speaker had not thought to cast the warming spell on it, the message never would have come.

“That is what the message says. There is more, your grace, from your lord brother himself,” we stood alone in the vast throne room, save the guards. The rest of the council wasn’t here. I hadn’t sent word to them of this meeting.

Caleb took a breath, apparently trying to calm himself, “Yes, yes. What other bad news has he sent?”

“It seems he went north with a party of five hundred troops. They successfully took Farlaine and are wintering there. Furthermore, he found the girl and,” Eamonn tried to keep the grin off his face, and drew himself up tall, “They have delivered your vengeance to King Phalen, and now control Stoneriver. They must needs remain there for the time being due to the snow, and the political matters.”

Winter had arrived, and the snows were finally thick on the ground. The Ice Wardens took their small boats out in the morning, taking their axes and poles to the ice in the harbor, clearing a path for ships from the south. Keehlayhan was too large a city to be much stymied by the winter. The roads were cleared, the snow dumped into the seaward side of the huge jetties that made the harbor safe, or piled high against the wall. It mattered not where it went, so long as it got out of the way. Kellans disliked having their city slowed for even a short time. Trade might have slowed, but plenty of merchandise and supplies came through. Dwarves weren’t bothered by snow, and Dehta’s port was busy as ever. They say the weather in Unterlund never changed, and goods came from them as well. And the damned Luminites used their cursed Galibal to help distribute the supplies.

As if his thoughts summoned them, Emri entered the throne room. As he got closer, I could see his fist was around a piece of paper. He bowed quickly and said, “Your majesty, I’ve received word from the Great Mother. She says that she has received requests from your brother via one of her Sirens to use the Galibal to funnel supplies into Llellwyn.”
“Yes, your majesty,” I interjected, “That was the next part of the message. Your brother wishes to provision Charias.”

“All of it?,” the king’s arms were crossed, muscles twitching. There was a scowl on his face, but that was nothing new. He was always scowling, although he did seem to be scowling slightly less now.

“The major towns, at least. And the city. It seems that king Phalen was a most lax ruler, and all of the years of isolation have left them rather bereft,” there was more to it, I know. Eben was planning something, he was not this altruistic. There was a purpose to this largesse.

“We can’t afford that.”

“We can, sire. The harbor masters send much on to Jayreely from the south because we have no need of it. In fact, some of the captains tell the dock masters that the food rots and they don’t wish to bring it that far north, so they go home. We could make more off the taxes from letting them dock and sell than we would lose by sending it to Charias.”

“Fine then, let Eben have his food. Emri, you will make sure it gets where it needs to go. How many Luminites in the city?”

“A hundred and three, majesty.”

“Take half of them to use for this. The rest should stay with the people.”

“As you will,” he bowed.

“Good,” the rest of the council walked in. Thomas came first, wearing long, black winter robes. He was even more skin-and-bones, dark smudges under his eyes. His hair had long ago gone white with age, and his face was a mass of wrinkles, but his appointment as First Justice was for life and so he stayed. Anjelo was next, wearing his thick shoes. Even with them he was still the shortest and slightest man I’d ever met. He had long, purple hair that was stick-straight, and braided tight. He was a strange little man, and he always looked like he was laughing at his own private joke. Rubbing his hands in glee over whatever coin he’d managed to collect was more likely, because he never made jokes. Cesare came last, waddling in behind the rest. His great bulk was wrapped in heavy red velvet, sleeves trimmed with fur. He was bald, and it made his head look like a glopping pile of bread dough. I was coming to learn thought that the secretary of relations had a keen mind for strategy. Out of all of them, I spent the most time with him, and he seemed to have the most useful information. Abim-fa Cal was nowhere to be seen.

The greeted the king, and Cesare spoke first, “Majesty, I received word from General Cotton that the troops guarding the border Lecheskan border have been moved to the Charian border, by your brother’s command.”

“My brother, again,” the king’s leg bounced, a habit he seemed to engage in to stave off agitation.

“He’s done it to prepare a response to Charian aggression,” as I blurted it, I realized my blunder and the king’s eyes narrowed in suspicion.

“Were you planning to tell me about it? You are my brother’s representative, are you not? Here to be my Fixer while he is retrieving the girl for me?”

“I was interrupted earlier by Emri’s arrival. The Lecheskan border is only made of impassable mountains, so he judged it worth the risk to double the size of the army along the Charian border. He also wanted the leadership from the Lecheskan branch to fill the void in command left by the
death of Commander Blackstreet and the taking of the Siren to Farlaine.”

My explanation seemed to soothe him, and his foot stopped bouncing. He turned his gaze to someone else, “Anjelo, my brother has promised large stores of grain to the Charian people that he has recently liberated from their king. I have agreed, and it will be your responsibility to see to the taxes and ships.”

“It will not be a problem,” there was definitely greed in his smile. I couldn’t fault him his ambition, and there was much profit to be made from tragedy, “The proceeds from the winter carnival alone would be enough to cover the extra expense.”

“I’d forgotten about that. My least favorite time of the year. Two weeks away is two weeks too close. Thomas, have you anything to add?”

“I--,” he was cut off by the door opening, and a young page running in. The boy, a small, skinny thing with gray eyes and skin the dark color of the Carpithians, came running in. He knelt when he reached the dais. I frowned at the interruption, but the boy wore the king’s personal livery. They were only sent into this room with urgent news.

“Majesty, I was sent to find First Justice Thomas. Abim-fa Cal has been found dead in his room,” Dead? I had not thought - no, he couldn’t be dead now.

“It seems I must go with the boy.”

“Take two soldiers with you,” the king gestured to two of the men standing along the walls.

“I would like to go too,” I said, “He was of my order.”

There was hesitation by the king, and a suspicious look, “Yes, I suppose you would be interested. You may go.”

I bowed and left with the rest of the group, trailing a few steps behind them as we made our way to Abim-fa Cal’s rooms. When we got there, the maid that had found him was standing outside, looking pale. She refused to go in, too upset to give voice to her reasoning.

We all entered, and immediately saw him. He lay on his couch, dressed in his night clothes, covered to the chest in a blanket. Yet even with the blanket, it was obvious what killed him. His skin was pale and white, veins standing out unnaturally dark bluish-black against his skin. His blood would not pool in his body, it would stay in his veins, thickened to the point of solidity. On seeing it, none of us would get closer, and one of the guards made a sign to ward off evil. We all knew the signs.

Winter Plague had come to the walled city of Keehlayhan.
“How is Sirene?,” I asked Adélaïde as I heard her enter the study we were using as a meeting place. I looked out at the snow while I waited for her answer. The throne sat empty, although the bodies were long since removed and sent down the river. People avoided the throne room.

“The same as always. She’ll drink and eat, but she refuses to change out of the clothing, refuses to wash his blood off her hands. She just stares at it all day and all night. She’s gotten it all over her bed linens,” I turn towards her in time to see her close her eyes, and I see the pain flicker across her face. I understand her pain as best an outsider can, but I can’t help it. I can do nothing for Sirene.

“You may have to have the doctor sedate her. She’ll get sick otherwise,” we’ve had the same conversation every day now for weeks. I watch the snow drifts get ever higher, and plan for spring. I get up and join her at the table that she is sitting at, looking at her. I study her face, her unique purple eyes and flame-red hair. The Luminites would say she was a scion of God’s light face, and good to her core. I thought she was just tired, and the lines around her eyes betrayed her stress, “We are procrastinating.”

“Because we’re trapped here with each other for another month,” a twist at the corner of her mouth.

“If you don’t treat with me, you know what will happen come spring when the armies can move again. You and I, we can avert that. We can continue to deliver food to your people so they’ll live through the winter, we can make arrangement for the free use of Keehlayhan’s port, the free immigration between us. Help rebuilding,” I paused, “Help finding your son.”

“And all you ask is our freedom.”

“We don’t even ask that, we ask that you join your strength - such as it is, such as we both know it will be again in the future - to ours. One nation, one king.”

“You want me to give up the legacy of my family for one bad leader and one bad winter,” her eyes went to their family sword, the blade that now hung from my waist. I hadn’t relinquished my prize, and I wasn’t planning on doing it any time soon.
“I don’t. Keep your titles, save king and queen. Be princes and princesses of the realm. We’ll make you a royal marriage, we’ll make your children part of the line of succession,” I’d thought long and hard about this. I’d make Charias a Kellan province by force or diplomacy, but I’d prefer to do it by diplomacy.

Her eyes narrowed. She was interested, but skeptical, “How?”

“Marry prince Eben. He is second in line for the throne.”

She snorted with derision, “And as gay as I am.”

“Yes, so he’s unlikely to care about your relationship with the elf. You practice polygamy besides, so you can take as many spouses as you’d like. He wouldn’t be the first sword-swaller to father an heir,” I watched her as she thought it over.

“I can’t marry the elf, she isn’t nobility.”

“Eben is.”

“He’ll agree? The king will agree?”

“He’ll agree to all I ask him to if he gets to return to his brother with me, and an expanded kingdom besides,” I leaned forward, “You can govern how you wish, aside from rules we will both negotiate that will apply to the kingdom as a whole. You’ll be in the line of succession to a larger, joined nation. You won’t be foreign anymore, and so you won’t need to pay the same port tax, only the taxes that all Kellans pay. We’ll take the troops from your borders.”

“And do what with them?”

“State secret,” I grinned at her, “But some of that will no doubt involve protecting you from your son and, presumably, the troops he’s hiding. There is only benefit in this for you.”

“And the implied threat. You’d starve my people if I refuse. What will you do to the ones here, too,” Along with some of the food, the Siren had used the Galibal to bring us some of the troops wintering in Farlain. The castle was ours, and by extension the starving city. The military had decamped at some point while I’d been held in the room with Bas, and the guards were few.

“I won’t allow the troops to kill starving common folk. But, as much as I enjoy your company Adélaïde, I will kill you and as many of the exiles as I can find, and your bastard son. I will have Charias either way, but this way is sweeter for both of us.”

“I would be seen as a terrible ruler.”

“You wouldn’t have to be. Your brother’s attentioned have aged you, surely, but you have plenty of time to reign and to really govern.”

“It will be an unpopular choice.”

“After feeding them all winter, the commons will look favorably on us.”

“The exiles will never agree.”

“They don’t need to, they’re not here. And, Adélaïde, there is more, but I will not discuss it with you while this rift still stands. Join me. You have much to gain by it. And, I promise you, I will treat you more kindly than my king will.”
“What kind of man is Eben?,” she asked, quietly. In any other woman, I might take the question for girlish fancy, but for her...she did not want another nightmare.

“He isn’t your brother. He isn’t Caleb, for that matter. He’s ambitious and smart, and willing to make hard decisions. He was raised in the Kellan court as I was and is no stranger to intrigue. He solves problems for the king, and sometimes that involves cruelty and manipulation. There are those who live in fear of his name, of his calling card, but he is not himself cruel. He is never wantonly abuses people. He’s not even unpleasant to spend time with,” I smiled and shrugged, “He likes raspberry cakes and swimming.”

She gave a small laugh, “We do have a fantastic pool.”

“A match made in the heavens.”

“Will he get in the way of my rule?”

“What do you mean?”

“I have ambitions too, although maybe not so far-reaching as his and yours. I’d like to bring my family back. Reopen the school, bring people back here. This place has been full of cruelty and ghosts for so long. I can’t have a king - a prince - who won’t allow me to rule my home.”

“I will talk to him, but I don’t think his interests lie in the day-to-day governing of Charias. I can see no reason for him to try to bar you from exercising real power. There will be a marriage contract, and the details of his power can be enumerated there. Eben appreciates intelligence more than almost any other quality, and you have that in spades. Even if you won’t be a love match, you could still make a good pair.”

“You are not entirely wrong,” she said, begrudgingly, “And what of you?”

“What of me?”

“There’s something in you Danae. I know you’re not going to go back to Keehlayhan until you’re good and ready. For that matter, neither will Eben - marriage or no.”

“Well, I’m taking the sword as a gesture of goodwill. The royal family can make an heirloom of it after I’m done using it.”

“For what, I wonder, will you use it?”

“For the thing swords are used for,” I answered, and then switched the subject, “Show me this school. I have an idea.”

We rose, and walked out the door. I followed her down hallways, into portions of the building where it grew colder and no people could be seen. We were heading towards the center of the castle, the tallest tower. It seemed odd to me that they wouldn’t use the largest one. The ringing of my heels on white stone followed the swishing of her yellow skirts.

Finally, we reached a huge arched opening, and I frowned. There were hinges in the frame, ripped and blackened, “Why is there no door?”

“My brother stole it, putting it in the throne room. When he was young, we had two earth-shapers. They refitted the doorway. He left this open.”

I followed her into the great, round tower. It was so large across that several modest sized homes
could have fit, lined end-to-end. The floor was carved with an intricate mandela, and gold was poured into the delicate grooves. There are arched doorways around the edges of the floor and across from me is a white, sweeping staircase. Although there is no fire coming from the wall sconces that grace the walls, flat snow-colored sunlight pours through a stained glass ceiling five floors above me. The light glints off gold-clad railings that swirl around the edges of each balcony, but beyond the center the floors are shrouded in murky shadows.

“That ceiling seems too low. Five stories isn’t that tall, and I seem to remember the center tower being much taller?”

“It is, it’s a false ceiling. It’s enchanted to allow the light through. See there, where the top staircase goes through it? The classrooms and offices for the teachers go all the way to the top.”

“So it does. What kind of repair are the classrooms in?”

“The rooms themselves are not damaged, but the contents of them aren’t in serviceable condition. The most intact place is the library. We have several, but it is the largest. It’s three floors of the tower, above the ceiling.”

“So much knowledge,” I murmured.

“All going to waste.”

“When was the school closed?”

“As soon as my father died and my brother took his place. He didn’t want the citizens seeing what he was doing.”

“And the commons weren’t happy with that, I take it?”

“It is what started the crash of the economy. The teachers were paid by the crown, and all of the people who serviced it went with it. Hundreds had to scramble to create new education institutions.”

“How well did that go?”

“Not well.”

“How would the country feel about the school opening again?”

“I imagine they’d be happy,” there was suspicion in her voice.

“Happy enough that they would welcome the joining of our nations?”

She was silent for a long time, thinking it over. On some level, she must know that between the food and the school, we were buying her country from her. And if she sold it, she’d be taking on no small amount of risk. The nobility wouldn’t like it, but access to the port would go a long way towards calming them. The commons would be happy to eat. Her family would be a concern, but we weren’t taking rulership of the place from them. And the threat was there, under it all. She would give Charias to me, I could feel it. She just needed to lay her ego aside.

“Yes,” she said finally, “Tell Eben I will marry him. Our countries will be one.”
“No, absolutely not!,” I said, raising my voice. Danae stood in front of me, arms crossed and a dangerously stubborn look on her face.

“You will! You will marry her, and you will get children on her, and neither she nor I cares whether you need to bring a man into the bedroom to do it. You will give her an heir, and you will do it soon!”

“I will not! I don’t like women in that way and you can’t force me to mate with one!”

“You are a prince, Eben! You are heir to Keehlayhan! How did you think this would end up? How? Did you think you’d be unmarried forever?,” I stared at her in sullen silence. She was, of course, right. I was just loathe to admit it, “You could do worse. She prefers women, so she will only lay with you enough to get an heir or two. She will never care if you love her, because she also loves others. She will never care if you bed men, because she won’t be giving up the elf.”

“And how do her people feel about that?”

“They are polygamists, they don’t care. They care more about the fact that you’re Kellan than they do about what you do with your cock.”

“And how are we to convince them to accept us?”

A smile spread across her face. She’d been a girl when I last saw her, but the woman she was turning into was too dangerous by half. I’d seen her training with Leigh since the day we arrived, and she was starting to occasionally land shots on him. On Leigh. I couldn’t even do that, “I have a plan.”

“Oh, God,” I dropped heavily into a nearby chair, “Sit. Talk. Tell me the plan.”

She sat, and told me her thoughts. She told me of the school and continuing to bring food to the people of Charias. Of marrying in winter, and all the rest. She was right, of course, and her goals lined up with my own. She pointed out that my brother would be happy to give us the resources we needed if I told him why it was needed. I would need to talk to Siren Gregory about returning to the castle to speak to Caleb. She convinced me, although given her reasoning she didn’t have to argue terribly hard.
“There’s still going to be work on the nobility. They’ll see that you’re just buying the country at the point of a sword,” I said, after.

“That sounds like something you’d do,” she smirked at me, and I had to admit that she was right. There weren’t limits to how far I’d go to protect my brother and the throne, “I have a plan for that, too.”

“What plan is that?”

Her look was bland and guarded, more serious now, “The wives.”

“I don’t understand.”

“That’s ok,” she stood abruptly, and walked towards the door, obviously ending the conversation, “We’ll talk more later, I have things I need to do.”

I nodded and she left. I chewed my lip and absently drummed my fingers, thinking. I realized that person I really needed to talk to was Adélaïde, so I left to go find her. It took some asking around, but I found her walking along the gallery of an inner courtyard. She was dressed warmly, looking out at the bright white snow. I approached, carefully making noise so that I didn’t startle her. She turned and looked at me, inclining her head. Her strange purple eyes surprised me, as they always did. She was such a strangely colored woman.

“I suppose we should talk,” she began, when I came within a few feet of her. Her voice had the same tone to it as my brother’s did. The calm expectation of obedience that came from ruling.

“It seemed advisable to me.”

“I assume you’re here because your sister has spoken to you?”

“She’s not my sister, you know. We’re not related by blood, just raised together.”

“Well, I’d hoped she wasn’t willfully engaging in a brazenly open incestuous relationship with your brother,” a small hint of a smile. It was the first joke I’d heard her make.

“I’m not sure relationship is the right word there but, no, there’s no incest,” I stared at her, fixing the purple gaze with mine so that she knew the meaning of my next words, “We don’t hold with that kind of behavior.”

“Neither do I,” her voice had cooled considerably, and she hadn’t received the message I’d intended. I was letting my court-honed instincts for obfuscation kick in when I should speak plainly with her.

“My lady, if you’ll allow me to be blunt, what I meant was that your brother was a horrific monster and I promise that submitting to me will not result in more of the same.”

She gave me a small nod and returned to looking at the snow. This was more what I was expecting from her, cool thoughtfulness, “I have been too long the victim. It is time I find own my path.”

“Does that path include joining our countries?”

“I think it does. I have goals, and I cannot achieve them without help. My brother strangled my people too severely for too long. Maybe it was meant to be, anyway. There are stories, you know.”
“I don’t. I’ve never really been all that big on history.”

“Ah, well, then there is something you can learn from me.”

“I sense there might be much I can learn from you. What stories?”

“Kelly, Charias, Llellwyn, and Lecheska. They were all one once, or so some historians think.”

“Why do they think that?”

“The green rock.”

“Green rock?”

“Yes. You’ve heard of the crows of Cairyn?”

“Yes”

“That green rock was found in other places, but a quarry has never been found. It’s older than any scholars can date. Some say it comes from the Unterlund.”

“We trade with them. Mostly with the twin cities, but they’ve never brought any green stones with them. Only food when it grows too cold for farming.”

“Sineztn and Rwecktn?”

“Yes. And Artain. One time I even saw a ship flying the colors of D’sallez. I didn’t even know what flag it was until I asked the harbormaster.”

“Kelly has a large appetite. Ours is larger still. It is opportunity for all, but how to make the nobility see that?”

“Danae says she has an idea.”

“Oh?”

“She said something about the wives?”

Another pause from Adélaïde, and then a nod, “Yes. That may well work. Eben, Danae has told you where my true preferences lie, I assume?”

That was an abrupt subject change, but I followed her line of thinking, “She has. She’s told me of you and Kay.”

“I meant to thank you for that.”

“For what?”

“For bringing her safely here. I sent her away for her own protection. We may have saved ourselves from my brother, but you brought her back to me. For that, I think I can give you a chance. But I’ll do my duty when it comes to an heir, and nothing more.”

“I like men,” I blurted, “Danae shouted me down and convinced me I had to make this match, but I am not attracted to women.”

“What a pair we make,” a rueful grin graced her mouth.
“I think we can be friends though. I know very little of the details of your ordeal, but you got Kay out at great personal expense. You are protective of Sirene, and that doesn’t seem like new behavior. I didn’t know Thérèse, but I think you would be practical where she was concerned too.”

“No one could help Thérèse. She was too angry, and he’d turned her into that long ago. But she saved us, and I can’t find it in me to hate her for her sacrifice. She was miserable. We all were.”

“And you survived, with the most intact. Friends, Adélaïde. People have made more with less.”

“They have. It’s not in my nature to trust men anymore, but I think I can at least give you the chance to earn my respect. The rest may come in time.”

“Agree,” I held out my hand to her, and she took it, clasping my wrist. We shook, and released each other. Friends, indeed.
I looked up at the chandelier in the ceiling, squinting. The small flames in their glass globes were a blurry flicker. I blinked, clearing the tears from my eyes. It was smoky in the room, the consequence of the incense that burned with the candles. Around me glasses and silverware clinked, and voices combined into a low hum of noise. It was warm in the room, and I’d eaten and drunk some wine.

“I think they’ve disappeared for good,” a rough voice rose above the others, focusing my thoughts. It belonged to the Kellan general, Bartholomew Cotton. He was short and broad, although it was impossible to tell whether it was muscle or fat. He had the tan of all the Kellans who lived on the Songling, and his face had age written in lines on it. Although his face was clean shaven, his hair was a wild nest the color of carrots. Bits were going to grey, I noticed. He was here with two of his people, Lieutenant Blackfeather and another man who was a recent appointment; a young man named Bryan Anderson. I hadn’t met him before tonight, but his blonde hair and purple eyes put me in mind of someone whom I couldn’t remember. It was on the edge of my mind, but the more I tried to remember, the harder it seemed to catch hold of it.

“How do you know? If they’re all gone, I mean,” Marcus asked.

“I’ve read their scrolls.”

“Oh, that’s most interesting,” added Lyriell, her quiet, gentle voice such a contrast to her father’s, “I have a great love of the Carpithian scrolls myself. My favorite is the prophecy of the mists.
What’s yours?"

“Well, they’re all quite good. I could never decide a favorite,” he replied, some of his bluster fading.

“Maybe something from the Blood Cycle for you? They certainly fought some spectacular battles. I could see their wisdom being relied on by an able commander such as you.”

“Yes, the Blood Cycle is certainly among the ones I’ve read more than once. What good is the Prophecy of Mists? All prophecy is folly.”

“All save Carpithian prophecy,” Bryan’s voice was also quiet, but it wasn’t the gentle touch of Lyriell’s. His was a dangerous quiet, the quiet of control, of a blade in the darkness, “They are well known for their accuracy. That is why the scrolls exist to begin with.”

“Just so,” agreed Lyriell, “The fire and the thunder, they came. The children ran before them, and disappeared. Gone they were, gone like mist--”

“-- only to burn in the desert like steel, grains upon grains, to pour from the womb and march with the black star, to flow like hot glass,” Bryan completed the line.

“See? Dead. Burned like steel,” Bartholomew said. I thought to myself that steel doesn’t burn, it melts and is worked and comes out stronger with less impurities. I kept my thoughts to myself though, because I’d never read any Carpithian writing.

“Some scholars think that the phrase ‘pour from the womb’ is restorative, a rebirth,” Bryan added.

“And some other scholars think it’s more imagery showing their demise, sand filling barren wombs,” Lyriell countered.

“Do you agree?,” asked Bryan.

She gave him a sweet smile, “No, I think they are alive. They will come back. Although it is not them I fear, but their desert. After all, I am so very pale and the sun is very hot.”

“I don’t think you’re in any danger of burning in the desert,” her mother interjected, dryly, “And you’ll have to forgive my daughter, my lords, she often reads things that aren’t best suited for women.”

“Oh, I don’t know. Uneducated women make poor companions. There’s no harm in reading stories, I think,” replied Bryan. His eyes lingered on Lyriell, and I saw her blush. The entire exchange made my head hurt, and I drank more wine.

“It is a pity your lovely wife couldn’t join us,” Bartholomew said, addressing me.

“She sends her pardons,” I assured him, “She gets sick in the winter.”

“The Winter Plague?!” Blackfeather exclaimed, fear climbing into his eyes. It was the first real emotion he’d displayed all night, and near on the most he’d said.

“No, nothing so terrible. The cold and snow makes her tired and delicate. She’ll come around when the sun returns in spring.”

“Our Gwyneth is a flower. Her hair is even summer green,” Lyriell said, affection lacing her tone.
The conversation continued after that, following a different path. My mind strayed to Gwyn, upstairs in her bed. We hadn’t made love since coming here, even though I thought a baby would make her happier. May times I’d considered sending for her mother, but I didn’t much like Branwyn, and Gwyn would have to learn to function without her besides. I kept these thoughts to myself, and listened to the conversation flow around me while I sipped my wine. I tried to study the participants, as mother had taught me, but the wine made it hard to concentrate on anything but the way that Lyriell’s corseted breasts jiggled like pudding when she moved her arms. I crossed my legs and shifted in my chair to hide my body’s response. It had been too long and I was tiring of my own hand. Straight to bed for me then, after this dinner was over.

As it turned out, my alone time was not to be. After dinner, Marcus insisted that the men join him in his study for a drink and some Llellwys golden smoke. So I soon found myself sitting in a comfortable chair in front of a fire, a glass of Charian Amber in one hand, and an unlit roll of golden smoke leaves in the other. The weight of the warm room and the alcohol pulled me towards the murky edges of sleep, so I kept shifting to keep myself awake.

“What news from the front?,” Marcus asked, after we were alone and sufficiently plied with alcohol.

“It’s winter,” replied Cotton, “Nothing moves in winter.”

“I don’t invite you to these dinners simply so you can eat my food and oogle my daughter. Don’t be coy.”

“The Lecheskan front is bare, the soldiers moved to Charias. King Caleb sits in his throne room with his royal ass-kissers while his brother moves on Charias,” I looked around at the other men. Bryan was wearing a thoughtful frown, and Blackfeather stood off the side, appearing nonchalant and uninterested. But I’d heard my country’s name, and I was interested.

“Moves on Charias?,” I asked.

“There are rumors that the prince has taken part of my army and moved to attack the Charian king. Some reports say the whole Lecheskan front was taken, leaving most of the Charian border unprotected, but it’s hard to say. I doubt that a third of my army is sitting useless in Charias, but if they took dove speakers with them, they send no messages. I have to rely on gossip and messages passed through the lines so many times that they can’t be trusted, because the camp is too dense for a rider to make it through. None will risk the open Songling in the winter.”

“The same goes for Charias itself. No one is willing to brave the open fields to the southwest, and Faith Road doesn’t cross close enough to any of the relevant towns for rumors to make it. Whatever will happen will have to wait until spring,” Bryan added.

“Something must have happened to the prince and the men who left with him before the snows came,” Marcus insisted, “They must have responded to the attack at the Stair Fort.”

“I’m sure something did happen,” Bartholomew agreed, “But I’ve got no bloody idea what that might be.”

“What of the border? I know the road is clear, it’s always kept clear for the supplies to come through. Why is my city crawling with more refugees than normal? Are you not letting them in?,” Marcus asked.
“We let some in, but most we turn away. Sight Town is probably as full as you are. There have been more lately.”

“I’ve noticed that too. I heard rumors of some blighted crops during the last harvest in Mannonesha, especially to the north.”

“But Mannonesha is huge,” I said, confused, “Why would they come here and not to Doranten or Flehtar if they needed work?”

“Keehlayhan’s port draws more. They have access to the warmer climes in the south. The road is clearer too, and the even though Enreadarran is warm too, Kellans are friendlier than the Enreadarrans. I had a dove from a friend of mine in the city there, and he said that the roads aren’t safe. His people stick to the cities. Koranten and Refuge grow aggressive,” Marcus explained.

“Mages,” Bartholomew rolled his eyes and took a swig of liquor, “They should just eliminate the Reliquas. Useless savages.”

“They’ve tried, but they’re too deeply rooted in their forests. They’re like the Detónese in that way.”

“How would you know, no one ever sees the Detónese,” I joked.

“Exactly,” Marcus said.

“Your turn, Marcus,” Bryan said.

“Similar story. Too much snow, none can move.”

“Now, now innkeeper, I know you know more than that.”

“The snows keep the Lecheskans from coming down the Ghostwalk Road. If they see any, it’s the Mannoneshans, and the relations between those two peoples are no more congenial than they’ve been for thousands of years.”

“The Lecheskans have always been prickly. Always going on about their pride and honor,” grumbled Bartholomew.

Marcus ignored him and continued, “Something is stirring in Mannonesha, I can feel it. Too many of them are coming here, pale-faced and starving.”

“It’s winter,” I said, doubtfully.

“It’s Mannonesha, and they’ve got two things: farmland, and people. They don’t starve.”

“And what of the Gregarans?,” asked Bryan.

“What of them?,” Marcus replied, “They stay in their mountains, doling out arrogance and wisdom. Same as always. The Gregory family hasn’t made a political move in centuries, they’re not likely to start now.”

“I’d be more worried about the red bitches,” Bartholomew said, leaning back in his chair and taking another swig of liquor. I wondered how drunk he was, but my own glass was empty and I wasn’t one to judge, “They make my skin crawl.”

“It’s because you’re one evil bastard,” Marcas said, grinning, “You and your little eyes-and-ears.”
I’d forgotten about Blackfeather. He was still there, quietly sitting near the door. His glass was untouched. He looked at Marcus and one corner of his mouth tilted up, “I’m sure I don’t know what you mean.”

“Uh-huh.”

“I have one piece to add, since you’ve been so generous to us. Don’t discount the Gregories. They sent people to the king’s court, a young, hungry man named Eamonn. Not there a month or two before he wormed his way in with the Prince. He’s been the Fixer in place of the brother. Or so I have heard,” his knowing smile was an oil slick on top of his words.

I frowned, “What difference does that make? There is always an Abimite on the king’s council, is there not?”

“Of course, but Eamonn’s predecessor seemed to come down with the Winter Plague and yet no one else seems to have caught it. A Gregaran learns to avoid the sickness from birth. A funny coincidence, that,” I understood what he was insinuating, but how could someone be murdered with the Winter Plague? It made no sense. Blackfeather must simply be wrong. Still, Abimites were known for their ambition. It was but one way they worshipped the dark side of God’s face.

Ugh, politics.

I suddenly felt the blinding urge to be anywhere but in this room with these schemers. What did it matter what the rest of the countries did? I’d learned nothing about what was going on with the other merchant barons while exiled here.

“My lords,” I said, standing, “You’ll have to excuse me. I drank too much wine at dinner, and I’m going to find my bed.”

“Well, I know better than to stand between a young man and a warm bed,” Marcus said, “Goodnight.”

I made my goodbyes and exited. I headed for the ground floor toilet and made my water before going upstairs. The lamps were turned off up there, the only light was murky moonlight shining fitfully through the clouds and into the odd window. After some time, my eyes adjusted, but as I turned a corner I bumped into someone.

“Ow!,” squeaked a feminine voice. The collision off-balanced her, and I impulsively grabbed her to keep her from falling. It was Lyriell, wandering the halls in a soft satin dressing gown.

“I’m sorry,” I said, my hands still resting lightly on her arms, “I didn’t see you without the lamps on.”

“It’s ok,” she looked up at me, the moonlight turning her amber eyes dark and smokey, her body still and thrumming with energy. She didn’t pull away from me, and the moment of silent eye contact, my hand on her arm, stretched in the shadowed hallway. She was close, so close, and I felt the heat of her through the thin, silky cloth of her gown. She rocked towards me, and I made a poor decision.

I leaned forward and kissed her. It was small and gentle, but she didn’t pull away, she leaned into me, tilting her head up. I pulled her against me, my hands tangling in her soft curls. Her body, her heavy, soft breasts, pressed against me, melding itself to me. I used my height to walk her backwards and pin her against the wall as we kissed, her tongue playing with mine, darting out of her pink rosebud mouth. She tasted sweet, like she’d been drinking juice or eating candy. The feel
of her made me achingly hard, even with the wine I’d had. Her hands were twisted in my hair, holding her mouth to mine.

And then it was over, as quickly as it started.

“I’m sorry,” she muttered as she pulled away, ducking out from under my arm and continuing down the hall. I was left standing there with a rock-hard cock and an embarrassed flush. I turned and trudged down the hall to my room, where my cold bed waited, the memory of Lyriell’s warm body seared onto mine.
Raendra, Detón

Chapter Summary

Here we introduce a new point of view, in a different part of the country. Raendra shows the others how they deal with thieves. The tale grows some, and I get to introduce one of my favorite countries - Detón.

Chapter Notes

No torture, an a short sex scene. There is character death, but it's a few red shirts.

It's kinda long because I didn't want to stop writing about Raendra and company.

The forest stretched around me, dark and shadowed. It was not silent, and in the distance I heard the creak and pop of trees bearing the weight of too much snow. Occasional the snap of a twig or the rustle of leaves as an animal made its way through the forest. Cold fogged my breath as I stood still beneath the sheltering branches. Watching, bow and arrow held loosely, pointed at the ground. I couldn’t see my companions, but I knew they were there.

A warm furry body nudged my side, and I automatically put a hand down, sinking it into Syeska’s soft fur. She quieted down again. Fur from the edges of my warm leather vest ticked my nose, but I didn’t rub at it. We looked forward, watching the scene in front of us.

Six men sat on logs around a fire, talking and eating. I couldn’t understand them - they were speaking Mannoneshan - but they looked calm. Their body language was relaxed and unguarded as they gnawed on the meat they’d hunted. Detónese meat, and Detónese logs stolen from Detónese land. My blood boiled just looking at them sitting there, unguarded, like they owned the land that they squatted on.

I signaled to my companions by making a series of small noises that sounded like noises of the forest. If the men heard them, they made no indication of it. I listened for the return noises and then, when I heard it, I acted.

I raised my bow, aimed, and fired. The arrow took the first one through the skull, punching through the back of it and out through his eye in the front. The others shouted and jumped back, reaching for swords.

My people melted out of the forest. Four of us, and Syeska. I moved forward firing again. He moved, and the arrow took him in the shoulder instead of the head. Body shots, then. I liked another one up, hitting his chest this time, moving forward while my companions moved in. Two more were taken down by the long, thin silver swords of Ander and Zyro, and another went down under the weight of Syeska’s body. He never stood a chance against the dire wolf, and her jaws closed around his throat with an audible crunch. We closed in around the last one, weapons aimed.
“Do you speak Detónese?,” I asked him. If he did, we’d question him. Sometimes we let them go, to tell the stories of how fiercely we fought, but here the bodies would be story enough. Get off our land they said, stop stealing our forest was the message. We always had small raiding parties from Mannonesha who sought the riches of our woods. Sometimes, if they were ill or obviously starving, we’d take them in and care for them during the winter. That is not what these men were. They were thieves, and we’d seen them more and more often.

Mannonesha was only flat, open land. Good for growing food and not much else. The land did not provide unless they forced it to. Here, it was different. Things grew and beasts roamed and the land provided. We lived here, avoiding other men, but the Mannoneshans thought that because we let them through the Suntree Road unmolested and did not build walls on our borders that we didn’t care about the sanctity of our land. They were easily the largest of all the human countries, and still they stole from us. They’re greedy, and grasping, and stupid.

The man I’d spoken to looked confused and didn’t answer, so I nodded at Ander, and he cut the man’s head cleanly off. I whistled, and Syeska loped over, muzzle dripping blood. The others wiped their weapons down before sheathing them.

“This is the third one this week,” Zyro commented.

“More than other years,” Ander agreed.

“And none have been sick or starving,” Nyene added, “What do you want us to do with the bodies?”

“Leave them for the beasts. I want their fellows to find them. Nyene and Zyro, gather up their provisions. We will take them back with us. Ander, with me,” I strapped my bow onto my back and grabbed my arrows, yanking them out of the bodies. The tips of the ones that hit flesh were retrievable, but the one in the man’s skull was lost.

He walked with my as we found the trail the men followed to come this far into the forest, and followed it, our leather boots silent on the damp leaves that covered it. I looked down, frowning, “This path is well-trodden. They’ve been back and forth to the clearing more than once.”

“But no trees were cut from the clearing,” Ander said, and I could hear the frown in his voice. He disliked being asked to patrol the border, he disliked killing the Mannoneshans without giving them a chance to defend themselves.

“We’ll see,” we kept walking through the forest, and soon heard the sound of rushing water in the distance. Following it, we saw that the crude path ran beside a decently sized stream, “How close are we to the Sapling?”

“Close enough for this to be a tributary,” Ander was better at finding his way around than I was. Sometimes it seemed there wasn’t an inch of the woods that he didn’t know. We kept following the trail, and it wasn’t long before we heard the distinctive sound of a water wheel, and floating logs gently bouncing against each other on the water. We rounded a corner, and found the source.

A hundred or so yards from where we stood was a small building with a waterwheel. Stolen logs were floating nearby, attached to a dock, ready for shipping downstream. A warm orange light came from the windows of the structure, and smoke curled from the chimney. We stepped off the path, and the two of us crept towards the place, Syeska padding along silently next to us. When we got closer, I motioned for both Syeska and Ander to stay off in the woods, and I crept forward. The trees had been cleared here, and there was more light. My people were well adapted to the low light of the forest, and I could see as if it was day.
I snuck up to the building, right under one of the windows. I turned and slowly peeked over the edge. Inside I saw two more men, eating as the others had been. They were speaking in low voices, but I heard the Mannoneshan. They were thieves too. Stolen wood in the river, a dock built of stolen wood, and a house built of our trees. I made my way back.

“Two. Eating, as the others had been. Both Mannoneshan,” I reported, “We should draw them out. You have some Mannoneshan, right?”

“Some,” he agreed.

“Yell for help. They’ll hear you and come running.”

“This is a stupid plan. They’ll hear my accent.”

“Well, then you had best be very urgent. Urgency will override logic.”

“Fine,” he stood, and cupped his hands around his mouth and yelled, “Isayla! Shem, Isayla!”

“Syeska, speak,” I thought the sound of a dire wolf’s bark would add realism to Ander’s calls for help. I knocked an arrow and aimed it about head height, and in a few seconds I was rewarded. The first man burst out from the door. I let him pass, and instead waited for the second.

“Shem, tsalem?,” yelled the man.

“Speak,” I whispered to Syeska. She barked. Ander screamed. The man ran towards our noise, and the second came out. I tracked him and let loose my arrow. It slammed into his chest, and he dropped to the snowy ground.

The remaining man realized our ruse as soon as he saw the light glint off of Ander’s sword. Like the other men, he was crudely armed and was no challenge. More food for the beasts. That finished, we turned and followed the path back to the clearing where Zyro and Nyene waited for us. All was packed and ready.

“We found two more,” I told them, “Dead, now. Let’s go home.”

We all took a pack of provisions, and we followed Ander back into the forest. We walked easily enough behind him. Although it was late winter and the snows were thick, the trees grew so tall and thick that little enough of it made it to the ground. Rain dripped, but snow did not.

“I can hear you thinking,” Ander said. I looked up, and although I could not see the worry in his deep brown eyes, I knew it was there.

“So many Mannonehsans. Why are they coming to our lands?”

“They always want what we have. So it has been since the time of the faceless ones.”

I rolled my eyes, “The faceless ones were not real.”

“You’re wrong. The faceless ones were no men, and every men.”

“I know the stories as well as you. They made war on the Korianan, they died, they owned all of the land. The Korianan are almost all gone, and the ones that are left never speak of the faceless ones.”

“I bet they are on the wall.”
“How do you make a carving of something that has no face?”

“You carve the body, leave the face blank.”

“Next thing you’ll be telling me to wish on a unicorn. Ander, we have more important things to worry about than children’s stories. We will eventually have to deal more forcefully with the Mannoneshan aggressors.”

“Death is not forceful enough?”

“We are reacting. We are defending. We should be taking an offensive position. If they never set foot on our land, they can’t cut down our trees. What if they find our homes? We must take the fight to their lands.”

Even I recognized where we were, and I followed him onto the stone steps that led through the forest into our village. We passed the ancient mossy boulders that marked the border, and into the ground below our homes. I looked up, seeing some lights were still showing in windows.

My attention was diverted by a young girl, running across the ground. She, like many of my people, had hair that was green and skin as brown as bark, and she was small. Our gods made us in the image of our land, and made us small and nimble so we could move among the branches. Her name was Myra, and she looked upset.

“Raendra! Come quickly!,” she called. I turned to Ander.

“Go home, I’ll see what she wants. I’ll see you there soon,” he nodded and took my pack. He touched his forehead to mine, and started towards our home. Syeska trailed after, looking for her warm bed too. I felt bereft without my wolf. I turned to Myra, “What is it?”

“The other party is back. Your father asks for you, They didn’t fare as well as you did.”

She frowned, turning towards where she knew her father would be, “Thank you for waiting for us Myra. You should find your bed, cousin. It grows late.”

We made our homes in the strong middle branches of the largest trees in the forest. They’ve been growing for centuries, their trunks so large that you’d need half the people in town to make a circle around one. My father says that the oldest ones in Starsight, the capitol, are thousands of years old and big enough that twenty men riding abreast on horses could ride through just the arched some had through the trunks. We had nothing that old here, and they were deeper in the forest than we were, but our oldest trees were still large.

Our homes are built by coaxing the small branches into shapes that we find useful and pleasing and letting them grow that way. Sometimes, when speed is necessary, young houses will be made by building them from planks in the branches and then over time changing the planks for the living tree. And, when a tree died, we cut the upper portion and left the huge trunk behind, building inside of it. This was the case with the market; it was built inside the remnant of the largest tree to have grown in this part of the woods. It’s my favorite place to go, especially in the summer when the merchants stop here between Starsight and Arestisia. We are not so far from the merchant’s path, one of the few roadways through the forest that can accommodate the wagons. This is what makes us so vulnerable to the invasions of the Mannoneshans.

So I find the nearest elevator and wrap my hands around the knots in the long rope, putting my foot on the little platform at the bottom. Then I yank on a second, smaller rope, and it releases the weight attached to the other end of the rope, and I rise at the same speed that the weight falls.
When I hear the distant thud of rock on dirt, I step off onto the platform on top. I crank the weight back up and secure the release rope for the next person to use. There are also handholds and footholds in the trees, and in some places stairs, but the elevators are the fastest way up.

From here I cross several vine-and-plank foot bridges. They sway with my weight, and are high above the ground, but I’ve been doing this since I was a child and I am sure-footed. I pass several homes before I found the larger one that houses my father. He is Daneshu, and I am the leader’s daughter. This is the home I grew up in, but it belongs to the people and not to us. They graciously allow us to live there, so long as our rule is just and good. I can see light seeping through the windows, and I push aside the thick hide covering the door, stepping inside.

“Father,” I say, seeing him sitting near the fire. He is old, older than most parents of other people my age, as he fathered my late in life. His hair is the color of age, the lightest green there is. It looks white most of the time, except when he walks under a shaft of sunlight. Lines run deep on his face, and the veins show on his hands, making his skin look even more like the bark of the trees. They are strongest around his eyes, save for the one in the center of his forehead that comes from what I call his “worry face”. My father is wise, but he has given up too much to the caution of the elderly. My mother is gone, back to the earth, and her life tree grows strong in the grove of ghosts. Someday, when all of the trees in the ghost grove are large and strong, they will house our people as these do. He will join her soon and it will be my responsibility to care for our people.

“Raendra,” he says, giving me a sad smile. He stands and kisses my cheek. I return the gesture of affection.

“Myra sent me, she said it was urgent.”

“Yes. Come with me,” I follow him into one of the other rooms, ones that are used for guests. We pass through the hide, and I can smell the iron in the air. A fire burns hot in the hearth, and one of our healers sits near the foot of the bed, considering its occupant. She looks at us as we enter, nodding a greeting. I look at the face of the man laying there, and the skin is all too pale. I don’t need to see the wound to know he’ll soon return to the earth and join the others in the ghost grove.

“Ishan?,” I ask, thinking that I recognize the man on the bed.

“Yes, and two more besides,” my father replies.

“Who?”

“Faenan and Kaz.”

I closed my eyes in sadness, letting the pain wash through me, and then opened them again, “I am sad to hear it.”

“Three of our best, and good people besides.”

“Have the other two parties returned yet?”

“Yes. A few injuries, no deaths. Sylan is finally back as well.”

My head snapped up at the mention of my wolf-brother. He was not truly my brother but, like me, had the gift of the wolf bond. His real brother must be back too, then, although he was not a wolf-brother, but a crow-brother. They didn’t travel together, but always came and went at the same time. So it was with twins.

“Then we should hear what he has to say,” I didn’t want to see him, but there was nothing for it.
“Come. Now that you’ve seen Ishan, let us leave him to his rest,” we stepped back out and into the main living area of the home. We sat in front of the fire, my father on a chair of branches, and me on a nest of furs on the floor, “He has requested full council.”

“For once, I agree with him.”

“I suspect that his news will not be good.”

“How could it? My group alone has cleared out three nests this week. The bests are eating well this winter.”

“Be sure not to take too much pleasure in killing men,” he said, sharply.

“They are not men, they are thieves, and Mannoneshans besides.”

“They are men to their own families, and the winter brings out the worst in people.”

“They haven’t been starving. These are not winter refugees. As I’ve said before, these people have no women or children,” Mannoneshan women were treated as children and couldn’t fight or hunt, “This group tonight was no different. Just men come to steal from us.”

“It still does not mean that they are doing this at the instruction of their lords.”

“How not? They’ve never come this far before. They would not dare if they didn’t have the strength of their lords behind them”

His mouth was set in a stubborn line, brows pressed together, “We will see tomorrow what Sylan says.”

“Yes, we will,” I rose, knowing nothing would be accomplished tonight, and wanting to sleep, “Tomorrow, then.”

“Goodnight, little leaf,” he smiled at me, and I hugged him.

“Don’t stay up too late, you know it makes you grouchy,” I said softly before leaving.

I made my way across the bridges. My home was much further from my father’s than the elevator I’d ridden up, and so the walk was long. About halfway there, I turned a corner and, distracted by thoughts of the conversation with my father, ran directly into someone else.

“Oh! I’m sorry,” I muttered, jarred from my thoughts. I looked up, and directly into the spring green eyes of Sylan. He wore the same expression now that he had when he’d left: a smug smile and arrogant knowing in the eyes. His dark green hair was tied back in its customary ponytail, but I remembered the cool slip of it between my fingers.

“Raendra. Coming from your father’s?”

“Yes,” no point in lying, why else would I be wandering the bridges this late at night?, “He told me you were back.”

“So it seems,” My eyes flicked down, and I saw his wolf sitting calmly beside him. The great black beast’s name was Tebron, and it was the father of the only pups Syeska had ever whelped. They’d long since been given to other wolf-brothers and wolf-sisters though. My eyes moved back up to Sylan’s, “I’d not thought to see you until tomorrow.”

“Well. uncommon gifts occur,” I gave him half a smile. I am not a person given to easy humor, but
I’ve always taken great pleasure in needling his arrogance.

“Yes they do,” he said, voice dropping low. I felt the muscles between my legs spasm. His voice had always had that effect on me.

“Well, have a good night,” I moved to go past him, towards my house.

“Wait,” he said, taking my hand as I passed. The familiar feel of it made my chest tighten, and I didn’t have the willpower in that moment to take it away. My body, at least, missed him, “Come to my home tonight.”

I took a deep, steadying breath, pulling in a lungful of cool air. I let the smell of snow and sap and fresh growth wash through me, “I can’t. I am wedded to Ander. You know that.”

“What does that matter? You are Daneshu-ka,” The heir. Able to take what I will. There was no reason I couldn’t have them both, but I wasn’t ready to forgive Sylan.

“Last I remember, your inability to remember what that really means was why I am going to my home with him tonight, and not our home,” I slipped my hand out of his, “it’s good to see that you returned safely. Goodnight Sylan.”

I turned and walked away, leaving him there on the platform. After a few more minutes I was home. Syeska was fed, sleeping in front of the warm coals of the banked fire. There was little light in the room, but it was enough for me to undress with. I tossed my quiver next to the door and looked towards the bed. Ander lay there, asleep, the blankets around his waist. Light from the window turned his skin silver, accentuating the peaks and valleys of his body.

While I undressed, the thoughts crowded my head. The attacks, the dead warriors, Sylan. Especially Sylan, with his smoky voice and familiar body. I worked the ties of my vest apart, and shucked it off, dropping it into our clothes trunk. My warm wool shirt and linen undershirt followed, then my leather boots and my woolen pants and underthings. Then I did what I always did when I had too much on my mind - I sought release.

I crawled under the blanket and furs with Ander, cuddling close, and pressing my naked body to his. I brushed my fingers across his hips and lower stomach, close to where his manhood lay, but not touching it until he woke up. I nuzzled his cheek until he stirred, his sleepy brown eyes finding mine and seeing the lust in them. He took my hand and pushed it lower, and I wrapped it around him.

I kissed him as I stroked him to readiness. My brain kept flashing to Sylan’s mouth, Sylan’s hands, and Sylan’s thick, hard cock. It didn’t take long for Ander to stiffen under my touch, and I climbed on top of him, straddling him, and groaning as I slid him deep inside me. He didn’t fill me the same way Sylan did, but he curved, and as I leaned back and ground my hips against him, he hit the perfect spot inside me. I rocked my hips faster and faster, letting the feel of him inside me chase the thoughts from my head, until my world was just the feel of him inside me and the sounds he was making. I looked down at him, watching his pleasure through slitted eyes. He moved with me, making the strokes harder and deeper.

He pushed deep inside me, and I tumbled my head back, letting the feel of our bodies do all the thinking for me. I came then, squeezing hard around him, high pitched noises coming from me mouth. He followed me over the edge, arching and pushing hard and pulsing inside me. I flopped forward onto him and he held me close until I slipped off him and curled up under the blankets.

He fell back to sleep quickly, but I wasn’t satisfied. My cunt still burned with need and I slid my
band between my legs. This time, I couldn’t chase the thoughts away. I let them fill my mind. Sylan’s tongue and sucking mouth, his dark green head between my legs. His adept fingers pulling pleasure from my body and noises from my mouth. Sylan inside me, so thick and hard that he filled me almost to the point of pain. How he took me that last time, rough and quick, wringing my pleasure from me, and how his seed dripped from me and made my thighs sticky. I put my own arm into my mouth to muffle my cries as I came again. Why did he ever come back? It was hard enough on us all when he left. My fantasies left an empty ache in my chest, the pain of things that couldn’t be and the guilt of wanting.

The next morning I woke with the sun, aching and tired from the late night the night before. Ander knew better than to make conversation, and left me alone to dress. He cooked breakfast, and I gratefully took it, feeling all the more guilty for my thoughts the night before. I shouldn’t feel guilty, I hadn’t actually done anything, but I wanted to and it made me feel ungrateful and duplicitous.

“You should know,” I said when I was finally dressed and halfway through eating, “Sylan is back.”

His movement stilled for a moment, and then resumed, “You spoke to him?”

“For a few moments. He made it plain that I could change my mind,” I rolled my eyes.

He leaned back in his chair and crossed his arms, giving me a look that meant he knew I was equivocating, “All of it, now.”

“I missed him, Ander. I didn’t think I missed him, but then he was there, and I missed him.”

“Has he changed his mind?”

“Not as far as I know. We only exchanged a few sentences. He invited me back to his home and I...I wanted to go. I think there is a part of me that still wants us to be a circle.”

“Well,” he said carefully, “That is your prerogative, and I knew being with you did not mean owning you. But I am not sure I am comfortable with it being him.”

“I know. He hurt us both last time, not just me.”

“I might be willing to forgive him, if he apologized.”

“So would I, and that is what scares me,” I cleared my throat and popped the last piece of egg in my mouth, “Come on, let’s get to the hall.”

We cleared the table and left, Syeska at my side. I wiggled my fingers into the thick grey-and-white fur at the ruff of her neck as we walked. She easily kept up with us as we walked across the bridges. As a puppy she’d been nervous the first time she crossed one, but after that she’d been fearless. She grew more sure-footed as she aged, and now crossed the bridges as easily as we did.

The meeting would be held in the hall, the largest building we had, and on the ground inside one of the dead trees. So we took the nearest set of steps down, and made our way across the cleared forest floor do the ancient hollowed-out tree. The chamber inside was so large that loud voices echoed in the space, and it had a viewing gallery carved out atop a large center space that was the same circular shape as the tree. We were last, the others already seated around the large semi-circular table that was carved out of the tree itself when it was hollowed out. It was polished smooth and slick with wax and thousands of years of hands. The building itself was vast, with a vaulted ceiling made of criss-crossed vines. During the summer, they let in green light and some
bits of sun. Now the light was murky and there were wil-o-wisp lights on all of the walls. They lit the place as if it were in direct sunlight, making the light wood of the walls and the gallery above us look inviting. The floor was wood too, polished smooth by countless feet, and the place smelled of sap and wood.

He sat at the apex of the arc, and I took my seat to his left. Ander stood behind me to my left. We were married, but he also was my sworn sword and co-captain of the ranging groups. On my father’s right hand was his first councillor, Loghain. Next to him sat Andlyn, who served as trade master. The others at the table were Grace, Eynlain, Harwain, and Talia. They were the secretary, master-at-arms, farseer, and First Healer respectively. Behind them, as behind me, stood their seconds. Myra stood in the background to act as our page, but the gallery was empty. This wasn’t a trial, and so we didn’t need witnesses.

“Go ahead Myra,” my father said after I sat, “Bring him in.”

She said nothing, but left the room. A moment later she entered, Sylan behind her. My stomach flipped on seeing him, but I ignored it. Her father spoke first, “Sylan wolf-brother. It is good to see you have returned safely. Although, we’d not expected to see you at all.”

No one looked at me, but they all knew the reason he was not expected to return here. Sylan had the good sense not to look at me, and replied, “I had not expected to return, but my news is too dire to not share in person. I returned so quickly that my brother didn’t have time to join me. Wise councillors, the Mannoneshan incursion is not accidental. The border towns house soldiers. Before winter, their numbers were swelling. The snows have stopped them, but the snows will be gone soon and they will move again.”

“Are you saying they’re planning coordinated attack on our sovereignty?,” Eynlain asked.

“It looks like they are planning something that requires soldiers. I’ve heard of the camps being found and cleared by the rangings, so I can’t see why the soldiers would be for anything other than a planned incursion.”

“Have you informed anyone other than us?,” father asked.

“No, I will send a crow to my brother and he will go to Starsight to tell them of what’s coming.”

“They’ll never get as far as Starsight,” Grace said confidently.

“Because we will be expected to stop them,” Talia replied, bitterness in her voice. She was a healer, and so disliked violence.

“And the other border towns,” Grace reminded her.

“Still, we are the largest. Only Starsight is larger,” Eynlain reminded them.

“Harwain, have you seen anything like this?,” Father asked.

“No,” he replied, “But then, I have not been looking beyond our borders. I will in tonight’s seeing, but for all his faults Sylan is an excellent Wanderer.”

I saw the Sylan’s cheek twitch. Harwain’s backhanded compliment had not landed well. Talia commented next, “Has anyone attempted to talk to the Mannoneshans? See what they want?”

“They want our land, as they always have,” Eynlain grumbled. He had no patience for peace. In this instance, I agreed with him.
I took control of the conversation, “It is time to call the clans and show the Mannoneshan thieves that we will not let them have our lands. We’ve lived in these forests for thousands of years. No plains-walker can be allowed to come and steal them from us. I will take the clans, and lead them across the open land and make war on the Mannoneshans. I will not let them take our homes!”

“And when they gather their armies? Mannonesha is the largest nation of all the eight lands,” my father didn’t sound angry, just tired. I think a part of him knew the inevitability of the conflict.

“And not so populated,” I replied.

“You don’t know how populated they are,” he shot back.

“Harwain can gauge their forces for us.”

“It would be madness to meet them on an open field. They have horses, and we don’t,” Eynlain said, and it sounded more speculative, an invitation for a strategic discussion.

“We will not meet them in the open field, because you are right, that would be madness. Call the clans, father, and we will keep these men from our land.”

“We vote. Should I call the southern and eastern clans to make war on Mannonesha?,” he said. Myra ran up with a small device. You stuck your hand inside and pressed the right button, or the left one. Left for yes, right for no. No one could see how you voted. She came to us, one by one, and we all stuck out hands in. When she’d gone around the circle, she read the numbers.

“Four yes, and four no,” her high, clear voice declared. That meant my father would make the decision.

“The choice falls to me,” he stood, as he always did when deciding votes, “I don’t wish to make war on the Mannoneshans, and yet...I fear that they will bring war to us. There stands the possibility that waiting and inaction will give them time to amass, and lead to our ruin. So I cannot ignore their actions. I call the southern clans to join together, and as leader of the rangelings, and my heir, I give the responsibility of leadership to my daughter, Raendra.”
This time, it was not me that sat the white throne when we called the nobility to us. Instead, it was Adélaïde. I sat the smaller one, the one that was created for Kay months ago. We were alone at the front of the room, with a sea of noble faces in front of us, though between us and them stood a row of guards. Guards were all around the edges of the room. Leigh was behind me and to my right while Eben was behind and to Adélaïde’s left. We’d managed to round up most of the nobles who were residing at court or living in the city. Some few I recognized from the night we’d killed Phalen. Sirene was notably absent. We’d gotten her cleaned, but she didn’t seem to want to leave her rooms. Adélaïde wasn’t willing to force anything on her now that Phalen was gone. Kay was absent as well, because we didn’t think the people would appreciate the presence of Phalen’s Painted Lady.

“Lords, ladies,” Adélaïde began, “I know you’ve long been waiting to hear the fate of the realm. As the law dictates, I now take the throne in my brother’s place. I’ll begin by righting some of his wrongs,” the crowd stirred, and a low murmur went through it. Some of these men had prospered under Phalen, “The following lords should step forth: Silas Young, Matthias Waterman, Francis Rolareux, Cloud Kitt, and Michael Farlain.”

They did, stepping into the wide open space between the guards and the crowd. All of them were in their middle or older years, and clearly dripping wealth. They disgusted me. Their people starved, and they wore silk and gold. I knew their crimes, and it disgusted me further. Adélaïde’s face was impassive as she watched them line up in front of her. They had smug looks on their face, as if they were about to be rewarded.

“My lords, you are hereby charged by the crown with the crimes of spousal rape, abuse, assault-by-proxy for submitting your wives to Phalen’s justice for petty crimes. Those of you whose wives died during their punishment, you are also charged with murder,” she had to raise her voice halfway through her pronouncement as louder whispers and voices came from the crowd. I watched them carefully though, and the women were largely quiet. I saw surprise, or impossible to read expressions, “Guards, arrest them and take them to the dungeons to await trial.

“You put a foreigner on Toy’s throne and give her your lord brother’s sword and presume to charge us?,” one of them shouted.

She surged to her feet, anger flashing in her eyes, “And YOU, Lord Farlain, submitted your wife to Phalen’s attentions for the petty crime of speaking to the boy who delivered your wheat. I saw
what happened to her when the other wives left. I was forced to witness her punishment. I saw her body ripped and shredded from the inside out by and for the entertainment of this court so don’t speak to me of justice! You are lucky you get a trial at all!,” she sat down again, stubborn set to her face, “Remove this filth from my sight,” after waiting a moment for the lords to be lead out she continued, “The rest of you were not the worst offenders, but I saw you. I saw it all and I know you for what you are. I know which of you participated, I know which of you enjoyed it and which of you were almost as tortured as the women my brother made you hurt. We need to heal, and that cannot happen while the canker festers in our court. It is time to find justice. It is time for the husbands to leave.”

There was a surprised muttering, but after seeing their fellows led away to almost certain death, the remaining men started shuffling towards the exit. I wondered how badly beaten down they all must be for this to be going so smoothly. In my court, they would not go quietly.

After they left, Adélaïde had the soldiers move to the side so she could get a clearer view of the women she spoke to, “Charias has long been a place of equality and prosperity. In the space of twenty-one years my brother took our prosperity and left us barren. We are half as many as we were when he took the throne, and we would have lost more this winter if not for the help of the Kellan king and his lady, Danae.”

I squirmed at being called his lady, as it wasn’t strictly true, but I nodded my head and smiled at them, and then she continued, “I long to return us to the time before he closed our borders and elevated the worst among us. Pursuant to that desire, I am offering a dissolution of marriage without consequence for anyone who wants one. I know many of you were forced into your marriage and many of you have been treated poorly. You need not discuss it here in view of all, but I will be hearing petitions and allowing single meetings with any who want them.”

The women looked at each other. I spotted bruises on more than one of them. Finally, one of the younger ones spoke up, “And what of our children? Or the dowry our families paid?”

“Well, your children will still be treated as legitimate heirs of their father’s houses. Or their mothers, if she is the last of her name and they choose to do so. The money will be repaid by the houses you were sold to. You are not slaves, and I will not have this in my court. If you are in such danger that you cannot see me alone, or cannot risk your husband knowing what is going on, tomorrow bring your children to court and wear a purple ribbon in your hair. I will have the guards take your husband into custody while you remove you things from his house. Any who need housing will have it here at the palace. It is time to bring life to these halls again. It is time we regain the identity we lost when my brother was crowned.”

“Is it really over?,” one of them wondered aloud.

“None of you will be shared ever again. No one will.”

“May I...may I leave my husband right now?,” one woman asked. There were a few noises of assent.

“Yes. If you wish to stay here, you may. But as of this moment, chattel marriages are over and we are returning to the time when the consent of both parties is required, as it was under my father, and had been before him.”

“The men will not be happy,” another, one of the older women, observed.

“Men who abuse those who can’t defend themselves are cowards,” I said, “I don’t fear them.”
“You are not Charian,“ She replied.”

“I’m not, that’s true. Kellan women are still subject to chattel marriage in the noble families, and we cannot inherit the throne either. I admire your country for that. Despite the power they wield in my own country, I still don’t fear cowards.”

“Why are you wearing the Boudreau sword?,” another voice from the crowd asked.

“Because I earned it. I took it from the coward who wielded it. It is a battle prize, and,” I stood and took it from its sheath. It rang out through the room, the light glinting off the steel, “I am going to use it on cowards the world over.”

I shoved it back in the sheath with a clack, and sat back down. Adélaïde took the floor again, nodding to two women that stood along the edge of the room. They stepped forward. They were Luminite priestesses, a Guardian and a Solan. Their red hair matched Adélaïde’s, and stood out starkly against the white of their robes and the white of the room, “If you would like to be separated from your husbands, please join Kara and Renee. They will take you to safety.”

A few women separated themselves from the pack. One of them, a short, plump woman with chestnut brown hair and lively green eyes, curtseyed and said, “Majesty?”

“Yes?”

“What of our children?”

“How many of you have children?,” three of them raised their hands, including the woman who asked the question, and Adélaïde gestured to the men that stood along the walls, “Justin, Aaron, Luke, and Eric. Please go with the women. They will tell you where they live, and you will go to their homes and retrieve their children, along with any other people who have been abused by the master of the house.”

“Even men?,” asked one of the guards. He was wearing the same white enameled steel that the rest of the guards wore, the river and sunburst bright on his chest, but I could see a peculiar scar on his cheek.

She sighed heavily, and once again I saw the cloak of sadness settle over her, “My brother’s court housed all manner of sins, Luke. Yes, even men, but place them in a different part of the castle when you return separate from the women. I’ll have stewards waiting for you to assist you.”

I spoke up, “And take one of my Shadows with you. As an extra precaution. Eamara, actually. She is especially canny with telling truth from lies.”

He gave a quick bow, and the entire group left through the door normally reserved for use by the royal family. I knew that there were stewards and more priestesses waiting on the other side, courtesy of the Siren and his Galilite. Eventually some Abimates would need to be brought in as well, but there was no expedient way to do that with the snows.

Adélaïde raised her voice and said, “Bring the husbands in.”

The massive back doors opened, and annoyed husbands swarmed in like angry hornets. They sought out their wives, and we both carefully watched the reactions of both parties. Some men didn’t look angry, they looked worried or sad or relieved. Most bore a positive or neutral expression, but too many were angry. Tense lines around their mouths, scowls, or a too-possessive hand around their partner’s arm. Problems abound, because they were not about to think any more kindly of her. Once they were all in, the doors of the hive shut with a soft boom.
“My lords whose wives are not present should not worry themselves about it. Your ladies are attending to a task I have assigned them. Now that we are gathered together again, I have several more pieces of business that must be attended to. The first, you will all once again be subject to the crown’s taxes. My brother near beggared the realm, and I will not have it happen again. The outlying towns and families will all be subject to the same laws that govern Ville Flue. All nobility and all citizens that fall under the rule of the crown will be taxed,” there was muttering, a low buzzing, in the room, but nothing that could not be spoken over. Again, some reactions were calm – they knew their exemption from taxes could not last forever – and some were angry. She continued, “The second piece of business that I wish to present before the realm deals with the foreigners. My brother’s willful mishandling of the realm and royal family has left me with no choice but to make an advantageous match and marry.”

More buzzing from the crowd, louder this time. She waited for the noise to die down, “I have chosen to wed crown prince Eben Teyreygon, brother to king Caleb Teyreygon, ruler of the nation of Kelly, who stands here beside me. We will wed our families, and our nations, forming a more powerful union than any we have had before.”

The outbreak of noise was furious, and made me glad that we’d disarmed them before this gathering. There was shouting, and I picked out words here and there. Notably, one close to me said ‘exiles’. I knew who they were, and if I knew which noble had suggested it, I would have had them jailed. I looked at Adélaïde, and she nodded. I touched Leigh’s wrist, and heard him mutter something under his breath. This was planned, a quick spell to help her control the court.

“SILENCE!,” she yelled, her enhanced voice cutting through the noise and echoing around the chamber, “I cannot address your concerns if you cannot hear me speak,” the noise subsided and she spoke again at her normal volume, “We will not be losing any of our traditions, or our ability to govern ourselves, and we will be gaining access to Keehlayhan’s port - without the customary foreign tax. You merchant lords will grow rich trading with the elves, dwarves, and people of the Unterlund. If you think I have made the wrong decision, then you are free to address it to me in open court as a petition, as always has been the case. But if you think to accuse me, I pray you remember the role you played in arriving to this point. You who sat by and did nothing or became rich by licking my brother’s boots. You had avenues, legal avenues, open to you to have your voice heard in the governance of this realm and you did nothing but allow him to have his pleasures. Think long and hard on this before you question my actions.”

She stood, and I stood with her. These are all the words she would be sparing for her nobility tonight. The big doors opened once again, and she held out her arm. Eben took it, as we’d agreed, and they turned towards the same entrance that the women had left through. Leigh and I came behind. Behind us, guards.

There were guards waiting in the hall as well, some of mone and five of my Weavers. I turned to the person I knew to be their captain, a woman called Wrath. She was a muscular woman, a few inches shorter than me. She wore the shadow-wrought clothing and silver weapons they all did, and kept her curled brown hair cut short against the dark brown of her skin. She was Carpithian, but I didn’t know if it was by descent or if she hailed from Flehtar. They never shared that sort of information.

“Two of you are to attend her at all times, as well as Eben. If you need more Weavers, more can be provided.”

“I’d like you involved in the selection of normal guards, as well,” Adélaïde added, “including among the Charian guards. If we are going to be one nation, let it start here.”
“As you wish,” replied Wrath. Her voice, like the voice of all the Weavers, had a strange quality to it that I found uncomfortable to hear. An echo, almost. Sometimes it was the echo of a person in the same room, and sometimes it sounded like the echo of someone far away, “Mercy, Faith.”

They all had names like that. Words, not names. Some called them the Nameless because of it. She gestured to Eben, and two of the weavers, men standing near me, nodded, and stepped nearer to him.

“Adélaïde,” said Eben, “the time has come for me to be taken back to Keehlayhan for a short time to inform my brother of the match and make other arrangements for the wedding. I fear he won’t be satisfied with missives and doves for much longer.”

She nodded, and gave him a friendly smile. They’d been trying to get to know each other, and when I was around them they seemed to have developed a genuine liking for each other, “Be careful. I’ll see you soon.”

“Of course,” he returned her smile, and left down the hallway, towards his room, his two Shadows and three guards trailing behind him. We were left in the hall with three of the weavers, and a few more soldiers.

“Best send one to watch over Kay,” I said, catching a stray thought, “Until we know more about how the nobles will react to her. Her presence is, to say the least, complicated.”

“Agreed,” Adélaïde said. Wrath nodded at another of her people, a small woman this time, and she turned and ran down the hallway. Adélaïde turned to Wrath and asked, “What are your names?”

“I am Wrath. This is Justice. We will be your shadows. You will not always see us, but we will always be there.”

“Right,” Adélaïde’s voice sounded strange, like she was holding something back. I had to agree that Wrath’s statement sounded vaguely ominous and a little creepy. In my head, I was making sarcastic remarks about cheesy, vaguely threatening statements, but the time for jokes was past. There was only work, now, “Well, thank you. Danae?”

I nodded, and we started walking, “It went as well as you could have expected.”

“Yes, agreed. I knew they’d be discontent, but seeing it was different,” she sighed and shook her head, clearing her thoughts, “They will see, after the situation starts to right itself.”

“I believe so as well. Eben tells me that wedding plans are continuing apace, so that is well, and that cleanup of the school is beginning.”

“Yes, all of that is true. Seeing it take place eases some of my worry, I admit.”

“Have you thought more on the question of the exiles?”

“Yes, but the hallway is not the place for the discussion. I’ve not made a decision at any rate.”

I nodded, “How many divorces do you expect?”

“A few. There will be some who were too afraid to show themselves in court. Some will simply divorce their husbands and be done with it. Things will get easier after the trials of those we took tonight. The fortunes of the guilty will go far towards helping to rebuild our coffers.”

“What of their wives?,” we arrived at her study, and entered, the guards and one of the shadows
remaining outside. Wrath came in with us, taking a position by the door.

“They’ll receive enough of the money to live and provide for their children, placed in a trust with the crown. Then we’ll be able to hire some of the staff back and better feed the new mouths were taking in,” she sat down heavily in the chair behind the desk and I took the one across from her, “It never ends.”

“I suspect it will become easier once your recovery has come further. And if there are any among the exiles you trust to help you, that will ease your burden as well.”

“I don’t know that I trust him, but I must at least invite my uncle Raphael back. Until Eben and I produce an heir, he is my heir. Given Sirene’s state, she could never inherit.”

“I’d been wondering about that. The line of succession, I mean. Securing that will go far towards calming the nobility. Especially those who are, no doubt, beginning to plot your downfall as we speak.”

“We will need to make more marriages, you know. Between Kellan families and our own. For this arrangement to work, we need to integrate more. It cannot rest entirely on my marriage to Eben. If it turns out I am too old to bear more children, it’s all for naught.”

“Speaking of children,” I said gently.

“I know what must be done,” she replied, sounding tired, “He was born of incest and bad seed, and is a threat to my seat besides.”

“I don’t mean to repeat myself. It is a problem best remedied sooner rather than later.”

“Yes, well, we must find him first,” she then abruptly changed the subject, “I received word of my cousins today, you know.”

“Which ones?”

“The two sons of Raphael and Leo, my father’s brothers. Both of them - Liam and Noel - have wed daughters of a Merchant Baron of Leochlyn named Reiloch.”

“They married a pair of Llellwysh girls?,” I asked, frowning. There was something about it that felt off to me. I didn’t know what, but it made my instincts rise. Those children would inherit Charias and parts of Llellwyn if Adélaïde and Eben couldn’t have children. It might put our own alliance at risk.

“Yes. It’s a strange move, to be sure. It removes them from the line of succession.”

“How so?”

“The royal family must marry nobility. Preferably a cousin, but if none is available then a marriage to one of the other twelve families is arranged. If Eben wasn’t a prince, I would have had to refuse you on this piece of legality alone.”

I frowned more, “Be careful Adélaïde. Something about this feels off. Why would they purposely remove themselves from the line of succession?”

“Perhaps they thought they’d never inherit and wished their children to continue their line? They haven’t had access to the exiles in other countries, nor any of the twelve families.”
“I will have to think on it,” I have my head a shake to clear it, and looked up, “What’s next?”
Chapter Summary

Liam makes some interesting life choices, and some help arrives for Gwyn.

Chapter Notes

There is *absolutely* sex in this chapter. Three separate scenes (because I love writing these scenes for Lyriell. Her sexual orientation is a fun one to play with. I'm not saying what it is quiet yet tho.). No violence, and some discussion of Gwyn's S.A.D.

There was the sound of children yelling and little, stomping feet in the hall. Gwyn groaned and turned away from the door, pulling a pillow over her head. I got up and yanked open the door, and Sasha stopped in her tracks. Her older sister, Lyndria, bowled right into her.

“Lyn, Sasha,” I said. Sasha, the younger of the two, was the spitting image of her father. She had curling blue hair that came to her shoulders, and the same liquid brown eyes as Lyriell. She was six, and built like a small tank. Behind her, clinging to her shoulders, was her sister Lyn. Lyn was eight, and a skinny slip of a girl who also had their father’s blue hair, but in her face she took after their mother and Lyriell. I’d noticed that she was a quiet girl, so it was likely most of the shrieking was done by Sasha, “Lady Gwyn is trying to rest. Is there possibly a different hallway you could run around in?”

Sasha scowled, “Lady Gwyn is always trying to rest. She’s been resting since you got here.”

“She’s sick,” Lyn said in a tone that implied that Sasha was an idiot for not knowing that.

“Nuh-uh, mommy says that she’s just sad and that she should do her duty,” the prim tone she used to imitate her mother almost made me snort with laughter, even if her words annoyed me.

“That’s a lie!,” Lyn countered hotly, “Amanda told me she was homesick!”

“Amanda is a big dummy!,” Amanda was their eleven year old sister.

“She is not! You take that back!,” Lyn fired back, her voice ratcheting up in volume.

“She is too! She’s stupid and she smells funny!”

“You smell funny!”

“No, YOU smell stupid!”

Their rapidly escalating voices were not what I wanted, “GIRLS.”

“She started it!,” Sasha said, crossing her arms, and a dangerous look on her small face.
"Honestly, I don’t care. I don’t even care if you fight. I don’t care if you run, or play, or do whatever you’re going to do. Just do it somewhere else," Now I was annoyed, and I turned to go back in the room. I caught sight of Gwyn though, laying with her back to me, and got a burst of musty, acrid sickroom smell. It was the smell of unwashed body and chamber pot, and as it invaded my nose I realized I couldn’t stay there a second longer. So I turned the other direction and stepped out of the room, shutting the door firmly behind me, “Somewhere else, got it?”

“Yes, sir,” they said in unison, and ran off down the hall. I started the other direction. My feet took me, as they often did, towards the library. I hoped to find Lyriell there, but I knew she wouldn’t be there. She’d been avoiding me since we kissed the other night. She was good at maintaining our previous easy conversation when we were around other people, but as soon as our meals ended, she made a point of disappearing.

I tried to stop thinking about her. The kiss the other night cast a new filter on old memories, and the feel of her body against mine made me hoard thoughts of her. I was bored and caged and my wife hadn’t touched me since we arrived. She barely spoke to me. I spent hours with her, reading to her while she stared out a window, or sitting with her while she slept. I couldn’t take another moment of her bored indifference. Luckily, her mother would be arriving soon. We’d sent for her, and although travel was difficult, it wasn’t impossible on the main roads. Llellwyn was the land of a thousand inns, and they’d have plenty of places to stay between here and Leochllyn. They’d be safe until they arrived. I wasn’t any especial fan of Branwyn, but I was at the end of caring with Gwyneth. She would barely speak to me.

And Lyriell was in the castle, wandering around with her sea of hair, her full breasts, and her amber eyes. Every time I thought about her for longer than a few minutes, I got achingly hard. I’d spent a lot of time with my own right handle, lately.

When I arrived at the library, Lyriell’s sister Jessica was laying on the couch with a book. She was a young woman, near flowering I thought, with dark purple hair and dark brown eyes. She was unusual looking, because her dark hair and eyes were set in skin that was the same pale milk of Lyriell’s. They had the same nose - all the girls did - but she was the only one who also shared Lyriell’s small, pink mouth.

“Sorry to disturb,” I muttered in apology and left. She seemed a nice enough girl, but I had no desire to be around a teenager. There were too many people in this house.

That frustrating though made me remember that it hadn’t snowed for a few days, and they’d had enough time to clear the snow from most of the roads. I decided to brave the cold, and retrieved my fur-lined winter cloak, along with my heavier boots and gloves. I was already wearing a warm shirt and pants, and so once I’d put on the other things, I headed out the front door.

I started walking down the long, muddy drive that led to the street. The lawn of their home rolled away from me, a blanket of snow. Some was disturbed where the kids had played in it, but it was mostly smooth and white. There was no breeze and, although the sky was still hidden behind clouds, the day was brighter than it had been a week before. We were still some ways from real spring, but this was the kind of winter weather that could be dealt with, rather than the snows that clogged everything up.

I left the driveway for the path through the woods that led to the pedestrian gate rather than the large main one. The path was cleaner, shaded by trees as it was, and covered in fine gravel. Soon, I heard footsteps, although I couldn’t tell who they belonged to until I rounded the bend in the path. Lyriell was coming towards me, only a few feet ahead, and completely alone. She was garbed in all white. A white dress, a white corset with some gold embroidery, and a long white cloak. The
only splash of color was the fur the cloak was trimmed with - it was a deep, rich red. It looked like blood splashed across the winter landscape. I wondered why she was wearing all white, and then I remembered that it was the Luminite sabbath day. She probably took advantage of the break in the snow to worship. I tended to avoid the religion altogether, but if forced to pick I was more of an Abimite. I like their flexibility of character.

“Good morning, Lyriell,” I said when she was close enough to hear me without raising my voice. This close I realised that her cheeks were pink from the cold, and I wondered how I hadn’t noticed before how prettily she blushed.

“Good morning, Liam,” she answered, making no indication that she’d stop.

“Lyriell, wait, please, just a few minutes. Just...look, I’m sorry. I regret spoiling our friendship. I miss our conversations.”

She stopped walking and then turned, a heavy sigh leaving her, “Then you regret kissing me?”

“I regret the pain it caused, but a kiss like that isn’t something I can bring myself to regret,” her breathing was slow and even, and I watched the thoughts chase themselves around her head.

“I think of it too often for us to go back to how we were before.”

“I think of it often, too.”

“You would do it again if I let you.”

“I would,” I agreed, “And more.”

“But you are married.”

“I am Charian royalty, and we never keep to one partner. Most of us even take more than one wife.”

“And yet, I don’t think marriage is what you are promising me.”

“No.”

“I am only a distraction from your wife’s illness,” she said, her tone deceptively neutral. I couldn’t tell at all what she was thinking.

“That might be true, but I enjoy your company nonetheless. My thoughts didn’t stray towards anything but friendship until that moment in the hallway.”

She took a step closer, and I didn’t move. She was so close that the fog of our breath mingled in the empty air, “And your thoughts now?”

“My thoughts aren’t appropriate for a friend.”

“Do you think them often?,” she laid her hands on my chest, and the nearness of her made my blood run to my cock. An image of her lips around it as she knelt before me flashed through my mind.

“More often than you know.”

“And what do you do while you are thinking them?,” she looked up at me through lowered lashes. They were long and fluttering, and the same light purple as her hair. It was one of the many things
that made her look the perfect winter princess.

I put my hands on her waist and pulled her snug against me, dipping my head down to nuzzle the side of her neck. She tilted her head to the side, her hood falling back. I lowered my voice as I answered, “I get hard. So hard it hurts, and I get no relief until I stroke myself to completion. Do you think of me?”

She shuddered in my arms, and her hands dropped from my chest to around my waist, letting me pull her even closer, “Yes.”

“And do you get slick and wet? Do you slide your fingers deep inside yourself, or rub the sweet, hard little nub in your folds while you think of me?”

She groaned, just a little release of air from her throat, “Yes.”

“And if I could touch you there now, right in this moment, how would I find you?”

“Slippery, and warm, and wanting, my lord,” she said, quiet but steady. She wasn’t shy, “And how would I find you, if I could touch you?”

“Ah, but you can, if you like,” I enveloped her in the broad circle of my cloak, wrapping us together in it. I felt her hand wiggling between us, and then her fingers brush against me on the outside of my woolen breeches. My cock jumped as I felt her rub her palm along my length.

“Wanting, indeed. I’m afraid my hands are too cold to touch your skin,” somehow, she managed to convey both regret and a teasing humor in her tone.

“You can leave them where they are, and warm them while I kiss you,” I didn’t wait for a reply. I caught her mouth with mine, and as before, her kiss was needy. She pulled me in deep, sucking cold air through our noises. Her delicate tongue, slipped into my mouth, playing with me, while her hand on my cock kept moving. I loved her mouth, the feel of it against mine, the way she used it. Playful, nipping kisses one moment, and deep ones the next. I felt fidgeting between us, and then her hand was inside my breeches, wrapped around me. Her skin was so soft, such a contrast to mine, and a little cool. She took me in her fist, and needed no instruction on how to handle me.

I groaned against her mouth, the noise lost to her. I wanted to touch her, to taste her, but she was covered in heavy clothing and I couldn’t reach her. My hips moved of their own accord, thrusting into her tight fist.

“I want to be inside you,” I said, nipping at her lips between words. Her mouth moved to my ear, licking and sucking the lobe. Her breath was hot and her voice quiet and sexy.

“I’m so wet my thighs are slick. Tonight. After the house is quiet and asleep, come to my room. The door will be unlocked,” she took her hand out of my pants, not bothering to close them. Cool air rushed between us as she stepped away, but it did nothing to quench what I was feeling. I pulled her back to me for a parting kiss.

Then she pulled away with a smile, and continued up the path. I did my pants up, but it did nothing to help the cockstand. I paced back and forth on this part of the path, hoping it would go away, but the heat of her lingered and so did the aching between my legs. I paced for a good ten minutes, but all I got was chafed.

“Fuck it,” I muttered. I stepped off the path and stood with my back to it. This part of the path was well-hidden. I opened my pants again, and yanked off a mitten. I shoved my hand down my pants, wrapping it around my shaft. My hand moved with jerky movements, applying pressure and
friction where I loved it best. I groaned low in my throat, picturing Lyriell. Her mouth around my cock. Those perfect breasts, the biggest I’d ever seen. I couldn’t wait to touch them, to lick them and suck her nipples. I thought about watching them move and bounce when I sank myself deep inside her dripping wet cunt.

“So tight,” I grumbled to myself, my arm and hand moving furiously, “Oh, shit!”

My balls contracted and the waves of pleasure shot through me, cum splattering on the leaves below me and the tree I was leaning against. I squeezed my cock as my hips jerked, wringing the last of the unsatisfying orgasm from myself. At least now I could wander around town without the risk of being inappropriate. I closed my pants and took off down the path towards town. The walk would help me pass the time and give me something to think about aside from the wet warmth that was waiting in Lyriell’s bed.

Even with the walk, the day passed at a glacial pace. I didn’t see her again until dinner, and she wasn’t wearing the white dress anymore. Through the meal, I did my best to not watch her every move, but I was still hard as a rock under the table. Luckily I’d thought to change into a longer shirt, and no one noticed.

After dinner, the children were sent to bed, and the adults subjected to interminable amounts of conversation. Just as I was beginning to dear that they’d never go to bed, I saw Lyriell yawn. She excused herself, and her parents followed. I didn’t. Even without the promise of Lyriell, I’d taken to staying up late and avoiding my wife’s bed. I’d learned the rhythm of the house, and when I knew all was settled I made my way to my own room. I stripped off my heavier doublet and boots, keeping my pants, shirt, and socks. I found a pair of slippers, and padded out of the room. Gwyn never stirred, but I noticed she’d eaten her dinner and took heart from that.

I padded quietly down the dark halls until I reached her door. I twisted the handle and pushed in. It opened soundlessly, and I slipped inside. It was dim, the light all coming from the fireplace that was on one wall. It made the space comfortably warm. She stood on the left side of the room, between the bed and a set of chairs by the window, wearing the same robe from the night in the hallway. She looked up when I entered, smiling at me as I closed and locked the door behind me.

She closed the room to me, sliding her arms around my waist, tilting her head up. I answered her, dipping down to kiss her. Her hands quickly found their way under my shirt, pushing it up and over my head. I let it drop to the ground, and she undid my pants. The dropped too, and I kicked them off, using my toes to peel my socks off. I was already rock hard, and freed from my pants, my cock bobbed with my movements.

She wrapped her hand around me and broke free from my mouth. Turning she tugged gently on me and she walked towards the chairs, leading me by her hand around me. She indicated the chair, “Sit, please.”

“Yes ma’am,” I grinned at her and sat.

“Hm, what to do now that I have you all to myself.” I didn’t reply, just watched her watching me. She stood between my legs and took my hand, placing it on her the soft globe of her ass. She undid the sash of her robe and it fell open, hanging loosely from her shoulders. I could see the space between her breasts, her flat stomach, and the purple curls of hair at the V where her legs met.

I let her control things for now. I wanted to see where she was going with this. She took my hand and guided it up her body to her breast, where I eagerly cupped and kneaded it, “I see you looking at them all the time. I kept imagining what it would be like to have you touch them and taste them.”
“Do you like having them played with?,” she nodded, her cascade of soft curls shimmying around her body. I took my other hand and reached up, sliding her robe off her, leaving her perfect pale skin bare for me. I drank in the sight of her slim body, the swell of the breasts cupped in my hand. She leaned forward, pressing them towards my face, and I used my hand to bring one of her small pink nipples to my mouth. I sucked her breast into my mouth and flicked my tongue across the nipple until it hardened, and used my hand to produce the same effect on the other one. I loved how soft they were, how firm and heavy on my face and in my hands.

“Yes,” she moaned, long and low. I freed one nipple from my mouth with a pop, and rubbed my face across her to the other, taking it into my mouth and giving it the same treatment. Her hand covered mine, clutching me where I had her nipple under my moving fingers, “Harder.”

One of her hands tangled in my hair, pressing my face to the soft, forgiving flesh. I sucked harder and she groaned, her legs shaking as she held herself up. I grazed the hard pebble with my teeth, and one of her legs buckled for a second. When she said harder, she meant harder. I pinched the other one, rolling it between my fingers.

“I could come from this,” she whispered.

I let go of her nipple, “Do you want to?”

“Yes,” I put my mouth back to work, watching her reactions. I let me teeth graze her again, and then bit down gently, “Oh, god!”

Her eyes we closed, and she was leaning forward, her hands holding her up on my shoulders. The more I played with her, the more she shook, and her nails dug into my shoulders. She made encouraging noises until, finally, she cried out, hips thrashing in the empty air.

I let go, and she turned in my arms, pressing her back to my front, rubbing herself against me like a cat. My cock fell between the two halves of her ass, and she rocked her hips, sliding it against me. I cupped her breasts while she moved, nuzzling her neck. I nipped and kissed the skin there, licking and kissing it.

“What next?,” I asked.

“Mmmm...a little fun. Hold your cock up for me,” she pulled away, and I did as she said. She bent over, and I ran my free hand over the curve of her backside, petting it. She moved back until the tip of me was touching the slickness between her legs. She rubbed herself around my head, smearing me with her dripping wetness, but not taking me into her.

“How does that look?,” she asked.

“Fucking amazing.” I replied, watching my cockhead slide around her juicy cunt, the teasing warmth burning against my skin.

“What does it make you think?,” she swirled her hips, drawing a groan from me.

“It makes me want to be buried inside your hot cunt. It makes me want to fuck you until You say my name, and come on me.”

“What about just the tip?,” she moved her hips so only the barest tip, only half the head, slid into her.

“Oh, fuck, I just felt the muscles inside you clench.”
“That’s you.”

“Oh gods, baby.”

“What about just a little more?,” she moved back just a little bit, almost to the rim of my cockhead.

“Fuck, I want to split you open. I want to fuck you and watch your tits bounce.”

“Mmm, you want more of my wet pussy?”

“Yes, oh, fuck, yes,” she pushed back and my whole cockhead was inside her. She stood, holding me perfectly still, and leaned back against my chest so her head was on my shoulder and her back was arched.

“Even just that little bit feels so good. Stretching my little pussy,” she dropped a little more, “I bet you can make me come again. Do you wanna make me come?”

I grabbed both her breasts, rock-hard nipples in my palms. I rubbed circles over them until she moaned, and slipped a little more, “Please baby, let me fill that tight little cunt.”

“Just a little bit more,” she whispered, pushing down. She hadn’t taken me even a third of the way yet, she was moving so slowly, and I was dying.

“Please let me deeper, please let me make you come.”

She swirled her hips, moving me inside her, but not taking me any deeper. She was going to kill me, I was sure of it. The sound of her wetness slurped and squished in the room, “Fuck, you feel so good. Even this little bit feels so good.”

I could feel her wetness dribbling down my cock, and she pushed down a little more. I moaned into her shoulder and squeezed her breasts, “I love how you’re using us.”

“Beg me again. Beg to feel my pussy on your whole cock,”

“Please, baby. Please let me deep inside you. I can tell how wet you are. How bad you want to feel me as far inside as you can get me. I know you want to come and come and come while I fuck you, while I bury myself inside you...over...and over...and over. Please let me make you come.”

She moaned again and bore down, sheathing me fully inside her, gripping me in the tight heat of her. She was so wet, so unbelievably dripping and juicy. A wave of need washed over me, and I let go of her breasts, grabbing her shoulders with one arm and her hips with the other. I stood, holding her to me, and walked her to the bed while she giggled at being picked up like that. I put her on it, her face in the mattress, never sliding out of her.

“Yes!,” she cried out, the blanket muffling the sound. I held her hips, and slid out of her, dragging my cock across her g-spot, before plunging back in. I made sure my cock rasped against that spot inside her. I wanted to feel her clenching around me when she came. We’d skipped much of the foreplay, going straight to this, and we were two people made of need and instinct. I plunged in and out of her, my body smacking against hers, while she held onto fistfuls of blankets, and her her face to the bed to muffle her cries of pleasure. I tried not to think about the way she felt around me, or the visual of all that hair tumbled across the bed. I just held onto her hips and didn’t stop.

“Oh fuck,” she moaned, “Oh fuck, oh fuck! Don’t stop, Oh fuck, I’m coming!”
True to her word, several seconds later I felt her clench around me hard. She pushed up with her legs, pushing me deep, twisting under me. She came with her whole body, shivering and shaking, and - best of all - hot spurts of liquid spurted out of her, drenching me and her. She groaned in nonsensical pleasure, unable to stop moving while she came, rubbing herself against the bed.

I didn’t give her time to rest though. I pulled out, and flipped her. Grabbing her hips, I pulled them up and stood, so her upper half was on the bed, and her back was arched to meet her lower half. I cradled her hips, in my arms and grinned down at her, “how was that?”

“More. Oh, god, your cock is so good!,” I slid back into her. This time I wanted to watch her come, wanted to watch her tits bounce and swing while I fucked her. Using my arms as a sling for her hips, it was easy to get momentum going. Our bodies slammed together hard, slapping together, little droplets of her wetness spraying onto both of us. I looked down at her, watching my cock slide in and out of her wetness, watching her breasts bounce, even though she was clutching her own nipples. She let go of one to stick her arm in her mouth, and I heard the muffled sound of her loud moans.

I went as fast and hard as I could, and she made encouraging sounds, trying to keep her voice down. The house was asleep, but if she was loud enough, she’d wake them. My own grunts and moans joined hers. She just felt so damned good the way my cock was so snug inside her, and the way she was so wet. I loved seeing a woman this turned on.

“Ooooohhh, oh, shit, oh shit. Fuck, I’m going to come again. Don’t you dare fucking stop,” I pressed her harder, going deeper, Hands clamped over her mouth to muffle the scream, she came on my cock again. Cum spurted out of her, arcing, splashing onto my chest. I fucked her while she gushed all over me, dripping, and squeezing my cock. I didn’t stop while she twitched and flailed.

My orgasm took me by surprised. I might have tried to pull out if I wasn’t so far gone on the feel of her around me, or if I’d had more warning. My balls tightened, and I groaned, pushing into her hard. I came so hard, cock spasming and splashing spurt after spurt of cum into her. I felt it ooze out of her on my deep, hard strokes, and I kept going until I felt wrung dry. I dropped her onto the bed, collapsing on my back next to her, cock twitching and shining with her wetness.

“Good god,” I moaned.

“Mmm,” she said in response. We laid there, coming down from our mutual highs. She rolled over, grinning at me, whiskey eyes gleaming in the firelight, “So...how long until round two?”

I grinned back, “Get that tight little ass over her.”

I crept into my room and next to Gwyneth shortly before sunrise. She never even stirred. I wished she would. I wished she would grumble at me, angrily demand to know where I was. I missed my wife, I missed the time when she cared for me. But she was buried and I had no idea how to reach her.

I was up a few hours later, squinting and unhappy. I stumbled down to breakfast, an Lyriell was there. She was put together, covered from neck to wrists as usual, corset tightly laced, and every hair in place. Looking for all the world like I hadn’t fucked her within an inch of her life the night before. I tried to avoid looking at her longer than was required.

I was shoveling a forkful of eggs in my mouth when I heard a familiar voice from the hallway. Footsteps, and then Branwyn swept into the room. She had on a green wool travelling dress, although she’d left her cloak with the steward who answered the door. Her green hair was startling to me, because it made me realize how much Gwyneth’s had faded and gotten rough and uncared
for. Her brown eyes sought me out, and the green of her dress made me noticed a ring of green in
the center of them.

She took in the room with a glance, her predatory gaze settling on me. It was true she still
reminded me of a bird, but it was a bird of prey, “Liam, I believe we have things to discuss.”

She turned and left the room, knowing I’d get up and follow. I swallowed my eggs and jumped up
from the table, following her to the hall, “How was your ride, law-mother?”

“I’m not here for small talk, take me to an empty parlor.”

“This way.” I led her to Marcus’s study. He was currently eating breakfast, so I knew it would be
empty. We walked in, and I shut the door behind us.

“How bad is it?”

“It’s the worst I’ve ever seen her. The only thing that can be said for it is that she eats and goes to
the privy. She lies in bed all day, barely speaks, sleeps most of the time. I’ve barely touched her
since we arrived. She’s so thin and,” my words caught in my throat, “I’m worried.”

“I bet you are,” she said pointedly, “So worried that you strayed already. How long have you been
bedding the one with the purple hair?”

I was stunned into telling the truth, “One night.”

She sighed, “I suppose it was to be expected from a Charian. I told Gwyn you would never stay
true to her, but she would hear nothing of it.”

“Please don’t tell her.”

“As if I would do the hard work for you. No, that is your responsibility. Are you intending to take
a second wife?”

“No. She is a pleasant distraction. A friend.”

“That is something I suppose. I would see that she stays that way. Now, take me to my daughter,”
I led her out of the study and upstairs to our room. I watched her as we entered the room, and she
wrinkled her nose, frowning at the sick room smell and thick heat of it. Some of the color left her
face when she spotted Gwyn on the bed, “You were right to call me.”

“Mama?,” came Gwyn’s voice from the bed. It was so thin and brittle from disuse that I almost
didn’t recognize it.

“Gwynnibird,” her mother answered, voice soft. She crossed to the bad, sitting on it. Gwyneth
rolled onto her back, and Branwyn took her hand.

“Why are you here?”

“Your husband,” she nodded at me, “sent for me. He told me how sick you are.”

She looked at me, making eye contact for the first time in weeks. Her eyes were fevered and
bright. I swallowed hard, trying to push down my fear and hurt at the idea that she might die. She
looked so weak, “Am I?”

“You are, baby, you are. Don’t worry now, mama’s here. Liam, have them bring in a small bed
for me so I can sleep near her.”
“You won’t be sleeping in your room?”

“No, I hadn’t planned on it.”

“Then I believe I’ll sleep in your bed, to give you and Gwyn some privacy,” there was no way I was sharing a bedroom with my law-mother. She nodded absently at me, “Anything else you need?”

“Some fresh fruits or vegetables if they have them. Really, any fresh food. Nothing dried.”

“I’ll take care of it,” I went and found the steward and asked him about the bed. He agreed to have a trundle brought up. I went to the kitchens next, and had the food sent up. Luckily they’d gotten some from the market today. The lack of snow for the past few days let some of the goods flow through again.

After that, I had no reason to go back to my room. I could hear the childish noises ramping up throughout the house, and decided that my swirling emotions dictated a walk outside. Some of the pathways around the house were clear now. I put on my cloak and boots and went outside.

It was sunny outside, really sunny, for the first time since before the snows. It made the air marginally warmer, although I could still see my breath fog and none of the snow was melting. I looked out at the yard, squinting in the bright sunshine. Several pathways spiraled off from the house, and I’d never walked any of them. What’s more, most of the property, save the small copse of woods near the front that hid the entrance from view, was just grass and dead gardens. The only thing remotely interesting was an old, run-down shed in the distance. I shrugged to myself, and headed down the path.

When I got to the thing, I could see its age even more. The boards were grey and the bottoms rotting, tiles missing from the terra-cotta colored roof. It had two big wooden doors, and one was open just a sliver. With nothing more entertaining to do, I slipped in through the opening.

Inside it was just a barn. There was a loft, and tools to my right, with empty horse stalls. The Déoirs didn’t keep horses in the winter, they sent them to be housed in warmer places that were better equipped. To the left were stacks of hay and wooden crates. Wind whistled through the rotting boards, shafts of light showing dancing dust motes. All told, it was boring and ordinary. I turned to leave.

“Liam,” I heard the rustle of clothing. I knew that voice. I turned around and saw Lyriell, standing there in all her polished perfection. She’d added a cloak for warmth, but she was wearing the same dress as this morning. It was different than her normal fair - it lacked the heavy hoop skirts and layers of petticoats. This one was flatter, showing off her figure better. She still had on her ever-present corset, though, and I couldn’t ignore the swell of her breasts. Not anymore, not after I’d been so close. She still looked every inch a winter princess.

“Lyriell,” I smiled to see her, taking a few steps towards her, “What are you doing outside in a barn?”

“I come here when I need to be alone. My parents never think to come here, and the children are all afraid of it. The wind howls when it comes through the boards, you see? And it scares them away.”

“What made you seek solitude today?”

“Gwyneth’s mother. The way she looked at me,” she shuddered, “It is dangerous to continue our
liaison with her around. She’ll find out.”

I shrugged, “She already knows.”

“What?,” she exclaimed.

“She knew the second she saw us. I grew up with the woman. As much as I dislike her, and as much as I dislike admitting it, she knows me well. She knows how I am.”

“Will she tell Gwyn?”

“No, she told me as much. She thinks it is my responsibility. She isn’t wrong, what I do with my marriage is my business,” I dismissed the subject with a wave of my hand.

“I suppose...,” she sounded doubtful, so I switched the subject.

“How is it,” I put my hands on her tiny little waist and pulled her flush against me. Her breath sucked in and her hands went to my chest. There was no mistaking the lust that flickered through her lowered eyes, “That you can walk around looking so perfectly put together when I know for a fact that, until, five hours ago or so, I was fucking you senseless?”

“A woman’s beauty is her armor,” she replied.

“And are you expecting battle every day?”

“I am just well-prepared,” I took her mouth then, covering her perfect pink lips with my own. She replied in kind, swaying against me. Even through our winter clothes, I could feel her soft and willing against me. I stiffened, and my pants felt uncomfortable and restrictive.

“I’ve brought a sword,” I joked, voice low against her mouth, between kisses.

“Then I am conveniently well armored,” her kisses were hungry little nips, pink lips touching mine.

“To battle, then,” I kissed her once more, and then pulled away, spinning her around and pushing her against the nearest crate. It came up to her waist, and I bent her over it. I grabbed her skirts - there were only two, an underskirt and the heavy woolen one she wore for warmth - and pulled them up. I pushed them up around her waist. She wore no underwear, her perfect, tight pink pussy bare for me.

I held her skirts up with one hand and worked my cock free of my pants with the other. I leaned forward and ground my cockhead into her. She was slippery and wet already, and I couldn’t resist the opportunity to tease her a little. I rubbed myself over the hard little nub of her clit, teasing her opening.

“You’re so wet. What were you thinking that made you so wet?,” I bent over her, growling in her ear.

“I was thinking about last night. Thinking about how you felt buried deep inside me,” I ran the whole length of myself over her clit, and she shuddered under me. She was so sensitive to my touch, her cunt always eager and ready.

“Is that what you want?,” I pushed the fat head of my cock into her opening, “To feel me stretching that tight little hole?”
“Yes! Gods, yes! I can’t stop thinking about it!”

“What do you say?”

“Please!,” her desperation drew out the word into a long whine, “Please fuck me! Please, use me!”, I slammed myself home into her with a groan, her hips rising to meet mine. She was shorter than me, so she had to go on tiptoe to raise her hips enough to meet me. The image of her bent over the crate, straining and taut, made another surge of blood go to my cock, and it twitched inside her. I dragged it out of her slowly, and then slammed myself home again. The motion earned me a groan, and cute little ‘oh!’ of surprise.

I ran my hands over her ass and felt the gooseflesh there, so I let some of her skirts fall to cover her legs and keep her warmer. I held up just enough of them that they wouldn’t get in my way. With my other hand I reached under her and grabbed one of her breasts. It wasn’t the same over her clothes, but I love the feel of them anyway. I slowly pulled my cock out again, and pushed it back in. I didn’t know how long we had, but I know that I wouldn’t last long buried in the sucking warmth of her.

“Faster! Please, more!,” she begged. I obliged her, picking up the pace of my strokes. Over and over the sloppy, warm tightness of her cunt drew me in and enveloped me. Our flesh smacked together, and she was smothering her moans in her arm. I wished for all the world that I could hear those noises at full volume. She was so vocal, and I loved it. I loved the way her body met mine, how her legs shook holding her hips as close to mine as possible.

She might be a diversion from Gwyn, but I couldn’t ever imagine wanting to give up access to her. She felt so good around me. The allure of the juxtaposition of her daytime innocent femininity with her dirty mind, dirty mouth, and sweet body was not one I was capable of resisting. Good gods, the woman begged me to use her, to take her how I wanted. She was completely unashamed of her own pleasure, and her sensitivity to touch made sure that she came every time.

“Oh god, you’re so fucking big,” she moaned, nails digging into the wood of the crate. I didn’t think I was any more well endowed than other men, but she was a small woman with a small, tight pussy. Regardless, it made something deep and masculine in me roar with pride when she said it. I growled and fucked her harder, “Yes! Oh, god, yes, fuck! Fuck, don’t stop!”

“That’s it baby, come on my cock. I want to feel all that cum dripping all over me,” I hoped she came soon, because I was too turned on to last much longer. I groaned and dropped my head to her shoulder as my hips worked as fast as I could go.

Then, I felt her cunt squeezing, clamping down on me, felt the hot liquid gush out of her trembling body, heard the muffled cries from her mouth. I sped up, flesh smacking flesh, plunging in and out of her while she gripped me tight. I pushed myself deep as I followed her over the edge, filling her. I collapsed on her. I stayed there until I felt her shivering. I realized that covered in wetness and exposed probably wasn’t doing her any favors, so I muttered and apology and pulled out of her, letting her skirts drop back down. She stood and turned, leaning against the same crates I’d just fucked her against. She watched as I straightened myself the best I could. I’d have to hide under my cloak when I went back inside because my pants were completely covered in what had come out of her.

I looked up and saw her grinning while she watched me, “Oops.”

I laughed, “I’ll have you know it’s a war wound. I earned that mess.”
She shook her head in amusement, “Tonight then?”

“Yes. Come to my room though.”

“With your wife and law-mother?”

“Oh, uh, no. I’m staying in the room they were going to put her in. The one in the east wing.”

“Oh. That one’s small.”

“And far away from your parents and my wife,” I walked over to her and pulled her body tight against mine, leaning down and kissing her. I couldn’t resist her mouth, “All those cute little noises you make. I’d love to hear them without you having to bite a pillow or your arm.”

“I see. Well, I’ll make you work for them,” she nipped my bottom lip, sucking it into her mouth. I groaned and welded my mouth to hers. I cursed my body’s inability to keep up with my mind, “Mmmm, be careful, or I’m going to make you stick around.”

“What a threat,” I teased.

She pulled away, and I felt the cold air rush in. Maybe she was right, the barn wasn’t the best place for a lengthy winter liaison. Then, I was struck with an idea, “You know, I think I’m going to go check out the Golden Lantern. I hear their rooms are worth the trip to Cairyn alone.”

“Oh. Well, there is a lovely book shop I like to visit that is close to there. I am feeling the sudden need for a few new books.”

“Isn’t that a strange coincidence?”

“Isn’t it just,” a smile played at the corner of her lips. I leaned forward and gave her a light kiss.

“I’ll see you when you go book shopping,” I turned to leave, slipping out of the barn. Branwyn be damned, I wasn’t giving this up.
Eamonn, Keehaylan

Chapter Summary

Eamonn further burrows himself into court politics by dealing with the plague, and bringing Caleb a suggestion for taking ownership the situation in Charias. Because while Eben and Danae have been attributing their own ideas to the king in an effort to get him to acquiesce and support them, Caleb himself has ruffled feathers over things being done in his name.

Chapter Notes

No sex, no violence. There is an implied BDSM relationship, and a description of medical grossness with the plague and whatnot.

Also I get to introduce one of my favorite side characters - The Kraken.

I say at my desk, the bridge of my nose pinched between two fingers in an attempt to stave off the oncoming headache. Yet another Abimite stood in my office in the chapel, telling me some wild story about Winter Plague. This one involved selling me a remedy. Me, a Gregaran. As if I hadn’t been avoiding Winter Plague since I was a child.

No one else had died from it since Abim-fa Cal, but the rumors swirled. Cooped up during the snows, people had nothing to do but speculate. The Ice Wardens kept the streets passable and the harbor passable, but they also spread gossip like old fishermen. They were lucky there hadn’t been a riot. Only the lack of further deaths prevented them from full-scale panic. That lack of further death could be laid directly at my feet and my preventative measures.

“--And you just roll it, like this, see? And you stick it up your--,” this was where I tuned back into the words pouring out of the man’s mouth.

I cut him off, “Yes, yes, I’m sure it’s suitably miraculous. I am Gregaran, I have no need of your chicanery.”

I waved him off, and he gathered up his materials, a scowl painting his face the whole time. When he was gone Marcus santered in and dropped himself into the chair across the desk from me, dropping his booted feet on the corner of the desk and leaning back, “Morning, brother.”

“Oh good, you’ve climbed out of a whore’s bed long enough to come visit me,” I gave an exhausted sigh.

“Don’t be like that now, you know you’d be lonely without me.”

“I suppose you’re right. Sorry, I’m just tired from the plague thing,” I waved a hand. It was almost more trouble than it was worth, “And now that he’s gone, I’ve taken over his spot.”
“Am I right in thinking he was the only one that died?”

“Yes”

“Curious, that,” for all my brother’s roguish ways, he was surprisingly observant.

“Yes, curious. Have you come to me for a reason?”

“Of course, my churlish sibling. I’ve heard some rumors. I heard that the king’s mistress and his brother bought Charias for some winter wheat and a marriage.”

“Oh god’s balls,” I cursed, “How do whores know about affairs of state?”

“You’d be surprised at when whores know. Is it true?”

“Well, the details are a little lacking, but it’s true. Eben is to wed their queen, and the king is going to the wedding to sign the treaties. Kelly has grown a little, although the price included equal access to the port.”

“No foreign port taxes?,” The steep taxes on merchants from other countries was part of what kept large amounts of foreigners out of Kelly. That, and the enormous army at the border.

“Interesting. Might I make a suggestion?”

“You’ll do it anyway, so go ahead.”

“Make friends with the dockmasters. They’re about to become a good deal richer. The tax collectors too.”

“I think everyone is about to become a good deal richer, especially the Charians. The woman that rules them now, her brother was the one behind Charian aggression, and the one who kept them so isolated. Trade will be good for them.”

“Yes. There are a lot of people in the Unterlund.”

“Don’t forget the elves and dwarves,” it was not a comment that required a response, and he changed the topic, “There is something else.”

“Ah, the real reason you came to see me.”

“The Kraken sent me to deliver the message that she needs to see you,” I frowned. I’d been sure to introduce myself to her, but I’d only seen her a couple of times since then. Mostly to keep my contact with her, “A soon as you can, it’s urgent.”

“Well, let’s go now,” I said, rising from my desk, “Anything to get away from these idiots selling me lard as a cure for the Winter Plague. Evening is falling, and I know where she’ll be.”

“Excellent,” he took his feet off my desk and stood. I retrieved my warm furs and cloak from my room, and we left the castle. I led us through a passage I’d found that allowed us to circumvent the front gate. It was locked, but Eben’s keys opened it, and I locked it behind us after we went through. Hoods pulled up against the cold, we made our way to the docks area.

The waterfront was easily the busiest area of the city, and even in winter I could see great ships anchored. The harbor wasn’t a natural one, it was created by two enormous, solid jettys that were built to be hundreds of feet long. The ocean thrashed on the other side of them, and on stormy days the spray from waves could be seen coming over them. On the end of them perched two statues, a
man and a woman, taller than the tallest building in the city. They were so large that they made
the mountains look like stepping stones, and moss and other green things covered their surface.
They looked to be stepping towards the ocean, arms outstretched, lanterns hanging from their arms.
They’d guarded the harbor for as long as the harbor had existed, and they were called the
Breakwater Lights.

The docks themselves ran the whole of the beach between the mountains, with none waterfront left
for sand. A long road, called Fisher’s Strip, ran from one end to the other. The western, water-
adjacent side had only the docks. The eastern city side of the road contained a rabble of inns,
taverns, shops, and other assorted sundry. During the day it was alive with the shouts of merchants
and people working. Seafood was sold from brimming cars, and on the northern end of Fisher’s
Strip a colorful bazaar dominated the eastern side of the road. At the other end was a part of the
city called Sweetwater. The name was a misnomer, because it was the poorest, dirtiest part of the
city. That six block radius was a pile of hovels just waiting to be burned down.

Now, because of the hour, the fishmongers were gone and the ships were quiet, their ropes
creaking as they rocked gently in the calm waters of the harbor. The cold, salt air crawled up my
nose and made me cough. It wasn’t precisely unpleasant, but I disliked the outdoors in general and
so couldn’t appreciate the smell of the ocean. In the summer, there was mist and fog, but in winter
there was just cold wind.

We walked towards Sweetwater; the tavern that the Kraken tended to spend time in was located
towards that end of the strip. She’d be there, eating dinner and taking petitions. The dockmaster
might be the crown’s representative on the docks, but it was The Kraken who really ran it - and
large other parts of the city besides. Arms in many areas, it was said that there was very little that
passed through the city unnoticed by her. Keeping a good relationship with her meant that I had
information that the others didn’t have.

We found the tavern in question, a place called Squiddy’s Tits, and pushed inside. The scent of
unwashed bodies, alcohol, and tobacco washed over me. It was warm and smokey, and although it
was clearly well-kept. A fire crackled in a huge stone hearth, the light reflecting off the well-
varnished wood floors. The wooden tables were packed with people, and in the far corner, The
Kraken held court.

She was a short, compact, muscular woman of no particular beauty; with hair and eyes the blue of
the summer sea, and nut-brown skin. She wore a long, black coat over black leather pants, black
boots, and a black linen shirt. A red scarf was wrapped loosely around her neck, and she had black-
sheathed sword hanging from one of several leather belts. She sat in a large chair next to the fire, a
small, slim young woman wrapped around her like a vine and a small, slim young man kneeling on
a cushion next to her chair. He was clad only in a loincloth, and wore an expensive looking silver
collar around his neck. He looked peaceful and serene, a slight smile on his face. Behind her stood
two enormous guards, swords at their waists and scowls on their face. Their shaved heads and long,
oiled goatees, similar size and manner of dressing made them look almost like twins. The left one
had a long scar running from the crown of his head, down his forehead, over his eye, and through
his cheek to disappear into his facial hair. It lent him a rather fearsome look that I, in some ways,
found to be extremely attractive. I eyed him up and down, wondering if he went in for men. With
Eben gone and soon to marry, I needed to find someone else to warm my bed.

This woman might be named The Kraken, but she never set foot on a boat that wasn’t moored.
Her name was for other reasons. When they walked in she saw them, a small smile playing around
the edges of her face. She raised her voice and yelled, “Oye! Priest! Over here!”

As if I couldn’t see her. As if I was a dog to be called. I scowled, but Marcus waved back and
nodded to her. He forged ahead, and I followed in his wake. She didn’t stir from her comfortable seat when we stood front of her. Every time I saw her, her treatment of me rankled my pride, but I tamped it down because she was competent.

“Kraken,” I said, nodding to her.

“How’s your night going, priest?,” she asked, a lazy smirk on her face.

“Cold.”

“Marcus, why is your brother always so miserable?”

“Born that way. He came out of the womb with that face on,” Marcus replied with a laugh. I scowled deeper, not liking it that they were laughing at my expense. So what if I am of a serious bent?

“Does he need a woman? I can get him a woman.”

“He wouldn’t know what to do with one, I’m afraid.”

“Oh, so he likes the lads. Well, if it would cure that sour face I’d lend you my sweet Allred,” she said, petting the man kneeling next to her. My eyes inadvertently flicked up to her scarred bodyguard, “Oh, you like them bigger, I see. Dustin doesn’t really like men, I’m afraid. Women neither.”

“Alls the more pity,” I grumbled. I wanted this part of the conversation over, but pushing her would do no good.

“Well, I’m sure I’ll be able to find a friend for you.”

“That’s gracious, but, no thank you,” I tried not to let her get a rise out of me. This would only go longer if she did.

“I fear our priest doesn’t like being teased. Ah well, better get to the point of this evening sooner rather than later. Up you go,” she patted the bottom of the girl, and she uncurled herself from around her mistress and rose, “Take care of your brother, my love. I’ll be back soon. Dustin, since the priest finds you so pleasing to look at, you will come with us.”

She turned and strode towards the door, and the bodyguard muscled his way between her and us as we followed her back out into the cold night air. A wind had come up off the bay now, cutting through my clothing. I pulled my cloak tighter, wishing I knew some warming spells. She took a torch from a take-one-leave-one bucket near the door and Dustin lit it with a flint and tinder. We turned and headed towards Sweetwater. Anything that happened in Sweetwater was bad, and my feelings concerning tonight’s activities were not improving.

“Jesting aside, Eamonn, I’m not pleased to have to bring you out tonight.”

“That matches my feelings on being brought out tonight. I didn’t think you’d summon me personally without a good reason.”

“Although I long for more of our thrilling chats, you are correct. I thought it best to show you rather than tell you. One of my people in Sweetwater came to me today to share what they’d found, and so I’m sharing in turn.”

“I’m not going to like this at all, am I.”
“It happened in Sweetwater so, no, it’s unlikely you’ll like it.”

We kept walking, hurrying and eager to be away from the cold of the waterfront, and into the buildings so they could shelter us from the winds. She found the street she wanted, and turned down it. Ugly, ramshackle buildings rose around the thin cobbled street, leaning against each other or forward over the road. I felt claustrophobic, and a smell of dirt clung to the place. The only thing that could be said for the place was that it was free of the human waste that plagued poor parts of my own city in Gregaran. Keehlayhan’s sewers and drains were a modern marvel, and quite possibly my favorite part of the city.

We walked for another few minutes, turning down a few more streets, before she stopped in front of one of the homes. It was a tiny thing. A hovel, really, its front door blackened by grime, with one tiny, dirty window in the wall. The Kraken handed her torch off to Marcus, and took a set of keys from her pouch. She went right to the one she needed without fidgeting at all, and unlocked the door. Opening it, she stepped aside.

“It’s best if you and Marcus go in.”

Marcus raised his eyebrow and said, “If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were about to have us assassinated.”

“But you do know better,” her expression was friendly, but her tone was flat. Regardless, I knew why she wished to stay out here, as I recognized the smell seeping into the air from behind the door.

“Let’s go, Marcus.” I said, pushing the door open the rest of the way, stepping through the doorway. He followed me in, raising the torch as much as he could with the low ceilings inside.

Inside there was a blackened wooden floor, with some of the boards rotting. Along the back wall was a fireplace, small and only meant for cooking. A few dishes were on a shelf above a small, flat space for preparing the food. A ratty, aged set of drawers stood on the wall to the left. To the left was a bed, large for one person but small for two, and that was where the horror lay. A family of three lay there, locked in each other’s arms. And, as I thought I might, I saw the same dark purple veins lacing their skin. They died of winter plague. By my guess from the smell and the flies, about a day ago. This was the smell of bowels letting go mingled with the unique scent of winter plague, not the smell of rot. The plague itself smelled like food that was allowed to rot, and then frozen. Ice and snow gone off somehow, as if water could go bad.

Anger bubbled inside me, and I angrily left the home, not touching anything. Once outside, I rounded on the small woman. She took not a single step back, looking unconcerned, “I thought you said this wouldn’t happen.”

“I did,” she replied, “But disease is unpredictable, and so it has.”

“Do you have a few people, strong and discreet, that you can trust to handle this mess?”

“Yes.”

“Good. They’ll need to cover themselves completely in oilcloth from the neck down. A shirt, pants, boots, and gloves. Then atop that they’ll need a robe and hood made from cloth that has been covered thoroughly with wheatwax. They’ll need to completely wrap the bodies, sheets, and mattress in the same, and then burn everything. Then they’ll throw their clothing in the flames too, removing the gloves last. You pull them from the bottom, turning the glove inside out as you go as to not touch your bare skin to the outside. There needs be a bucket of hot water and soap nearby for
them to wash their hands in afterwards. Then they’ll dress in a disposable robe and taken somewhere they can have a hot bath - as hot as they can stand it - and the most through wash they can imagine. With soap, Kraken, not oils or water. Good, hard soap. They themselves will throw the robes in their hearth fire, allowing no one else to touch them. During the process they must not touch their faces, especially their eyes and mouth. Choose responsible people, people who won’t cut corners.”

She looked skeptical, “That seems like overkill to me.”

I made a noise of frustration, and Marcus stepped in, “It’s not. This is how we handled the dead of the winter plague in Gregaran, and we’ve not had a breakout in centuries, only isolated deaths.”

“Thank you.”

“Allright. Come back to the inn with me and make a record of that. If it is so serious, I don’t want to get it wrong, and I have already forgotten half of what you said. Dustin, lock the door again.”

We trooped back to the inn, where I recorded the steps, and it was nearly the middle of the night when we returned through the same gate we’d left. I spent the next three nights tossing and turning until I received a message from the Kraken that the matter had been handled exactly to my specifications. I slept a little better, but not as well as I would until spring and the disease slept. All the while I walked on eggshells, wondering if I’d made a mistake.

A week after the incident with the plague, and no new victims, the thread of terror in my gut started to relax, just a little. It had stopped snowing, which meant that spring was imminent. In a few weeks, it would be warmer, and the snows would start to melt. I knew from experience that new cases at this time of the year were rare, but I still worried. I couldn’t help but worry, paranoia was in my nature.

It was about this time that I was summoned to the king’s chambers. I quickly made my way there, and was led into his private meeting room. He sat alone, seated behind a desk that looked very much like the one that I was borrowing in his brother’s rooms. His presence crowded the smaller space, and I couldn’t decide if I enjoyed it or was too intimidated to be comfortable. The light in here was a little different, sun streaming through the windows, and it brought out the bluish undertones of his black hair. His dark blue eyes were serious, and he was obviously deep in thought. He was no less the king, but there was something about being out of the throne room that softened his beauty and made it less painfully perfect. It blurred the harsh edges.

He looked up me, over steepled fingers, and gestured for me to sit. I sat, and waited for him to speak. It took him some time, as if he were still contemplating whether or not he should speak at all, but eventually the words came, “I would like your advice. You are in constant contact with my brother, are you not?”

“I am,” I replied.

“And he is still advocating marriage to the Charian queen?”

“He is, as soon as the snows melt and travel can resume.”

“Hm. Do you believe that my leaving Keehayhan to attend the wedding is a good idea, rather than forcing the two of them to come here?”

I contemplated my answer for some time, deciding what the truth was, and whether or not I should give that truth to the king. “It is not the safest option, your grace, but I think it is...the most
politically expedient one.”

“Is it now?”

“You are joining two nations. That will take a large amount of glue.”

“And has my generosity over the winter not been enough?,” he sounded annoyed, and I was reminded that I needed to treat lightly.

“If you were to feed the Kellan people for one winter and then leave them on their own, would they not eventually revolt? The Charian people need to know you, they need to see you,” I hesitated for a moment and an idea came to me, “You should go on progress.”

He frowned, “What?”

“It’s an old tradition, from before the continent sundered itself into smaller kingdoms. When we were almost all one nation. The rulers would leave Kelly and ride around the continent, delivering gifts and money to the citizens. Their face was on the money, you see, so all knew who the king was - as we still do here. They used the trip to cement their hold on the land and remind the people who their leader was. It was a show of strength and unity.”

“An old tradition from the last time we were united,” he was contemplative now, rubbing his fingers over the stubble on his face, “How does it work?”

“You bring your personal guards, but also a large honor guard. We can take this from the force that we will have to pass through anyway to reach Ville Flue. You give gifts to the people and let them see you. If you and your brother do your jobs equally as well, you can claim the love of the people and he can claim the court.”

I could see the idea taking root in his head as he turned it over. A slight nod of his head, “Arrange a meeting with Anjelo and Cesare. Tell them of my wish to solidify our union with Charias by going on progress. Make sure that they know you are working under my direct authority.”

I bowed, “As you will, your grace. Is there anything else you require of me?”

He was quiet for so long that I thought he’d forgotten my question. I was about to ask again when he cleared his throat and said, “I think the time has come for me to be somewhat more committed to religious practice. As I am an Abimite, I’ve decided that you should deliver holy services to me.”

There was only one response to that, “I am deeply honored, your grace.”

“Good. We’ll start this week,” I bowed again and he flicked his fingers in dismissal. I was now personal clergy to the king, and about to execute orders on his behalf, with power over some of my fellow councillors. Not bad for a few months work.
Raendra, Mannonesha

Chapter Summary

Raendra takes her people and starts to deal with the Mannoneshan threat to their land, while dealing with a vexing personal issue.

Chapter Notes

No sex, but there is violence. Some red shirts die - your basic battle stuff.

I laid still on the ridge on my stomach, Syeska to my right and Ander to my left. Next to Syeska lay Sylan and Tebron. Behind the five of us, out of view, crouched the fifty people of my rangeling party. I put out the call, and the other four border towns had answered. All sent their rangelings, and I had with me ten from the other towns, and ten of my own Rangelings. The rest lay in wait a day’s walk from here, closer to the safety of the forest.

In front of us, at the bottom of the slope, was the closest of Mannonesha’s raiding towns. There was a large hall in the middle, stables, and a cluster of homes and other buildings, all ringed about with a high wall of thick tree trunks. There were four guard towers behind the ringed wall, one to each cardinal direction. Smoke came from the chimneys, and I could see people moving around the town. Alisande

“So this is what they’ve done with the trees they stole,” I muttered while I watched. A large bird flew over the town, swooping and looking for prey.

“A hawksibling?,” Asked Ander, gesturing at the bird.

“Hawksister. From Ravensdale,” I replied. The bird swooped over the buildings a few more times and then started to fly in our direction. We all slid down the back side of the ridge, towards the bird’s partner.

The bird flew over the ridge and landed on the fur-clad shoulder of its sister, brown-and-white plumage fluttering as she settled into place. The woman pulled a sparrow out of her game bag and handed it to the bird. The woman, named Alisande, saw me coming down the ridge and nodded.

When I was close enough to speak, she said, “It is as you expected. I saw only soldiers. Men and women both, and weapons in an armory. Many horses. I don’t know anything about horse flesh, but they looked strong.”

“No children about?”

“No, none. Some unarmed women, but they were all clinging to the men.”

“Whores then. We will spare them, and anyone else who is not a fighter.”

“Bah, they’re all Mannoneshan scum,” sneered one of the nearby soldiers. He wasn’t not one of
mine. Mine knew better than to speak out of turn.

“They are innocents,” I said, my voice a blade’s edge in the cold. The warning was there, “We do not kill innocents.”

“No,” agreed Alisande, “We don’t. But what will we do with them?”

“That depends entirely on their actions. Some will die regardless, because they will pick up arms to defend themselves. We will discuss it again after the battle.”

“Until nightfall, then,” Sylan said.

“Until nightfall,” I agreed. The group dispersed into clutches to wait for nightfall, and I started to walk around camp, circling with Syeska at my side. Sylan and Tebron followed us.

“Thank you for letting me come,” he said.

“We both know I couldn’t have stopped you.”

“You could have placed me in another group, far out of your sight.”

“I think you know why I didn’t.”

“I really don’t,” I watched Syeska and Tebron jog ahead of us, playing. My traitorous bitch had been sleeping curled near Tebron every change she got. She didn’t have the same worries I did.

“I won’t have you dying in the cold, alone and out of my sight.”

“So you do care,” there was a sort of lightness in his tone, a joke but not.

“You want to do this now? Right before a fight?”

“We have hours to kill and no one is close enough to hear. We’re discussing battle plans for all they know.”

He wasn’t wrong, and we’d have to have the conversation eventually, “You know the issue was never whether or not I care. I care, Ander cares. We still love you, but it isn’t about love or caring.”

“If you still love me, then it is just about time.”

“It is about trust,” I emphasized the word, “It is about hurt.”

He stopped walking, and so did I, and a gentle touch of his hand on my arm and I turned to face him, “I’m sorry. I love you both, and I was weak. I won’t be again.”

“There’s nothing you can do or say that can heal the wound.”

“I know better than to try. That, my love, is why it is about time. I am not leaving, and I will spend the rest of my time here making up for it, even if you only forgive me on my deathbed.”

I cracked half a smile, “Still so dramatic.”

“Well, someone around here should have a flare for the dramatic.”

“Ander picked up some of your theatrics,” there was a part of me that saw his smile, and heard his
voice, and knew that it felt like balm for my soul. He went to hug me, and I shied away, shaking my head, “Not...not yet, Sylan, just...not yet.”

“Not yet isn’t the same as never, and so I’ll take it. I was serious, though. I came to regret leaving, and I don’t intend to do it again.”

I nodded in acknowledgement, and switched the subject, “Tell me your thoughts on the town.”

We talked and came up with a strategy, and after that it was just waiting. It took a few hours of shivering in the cold - fires would give us away - but night fell. There was a moon, but it hid behind the clouds, offering only a feeble glow. Our people had long ago adapted to the low light of the forest, and we could see well enough. But the lack of light and our head-to-toe white would make us blend into the snow, invisible to the people in the town. We waited until the lights in the windows of the houses went out, and behind its cloud cover the moon was high in the sky.

We crept over the ridge, staying low to the ground so we didn’t outline ourselves against the sky. We crept as close as we dared, and I whistled to our four best archers, and the moved forward into position. It took them a good fifteen minutes, but Alisande told me when they were in place. I nodded to her, and her hawk screeched.

I could only see the archer nearest me on the western side of the town, but I knew the other four would act in concert. The archer on my side loosed the nocked arrow, and seconds later the man in the tower slumped over. We all hurried forward silent in the snow. The walls were just trees, and we lived in trees. They presented no challenge to us, and by the time we reached the walls the archers had already taken the place of the guards in the towers. A few ropes later we were up and over the walls. I came over near the gate, and we opened it enough to let the wolves in, and closed it behind them, barring it again. We didn’t want it to be easy for anyone to escape.

All of my people knew the plan, we’d gone over it repeatedly while waiting. Half the group followed Ander, Sylan, and I through the south side of the town. The other half followed Alisande through the north side. We crept down the rows of houses, breaking off into pairs, with the exception of Ander, Sylan, and I. We all followed the same procedure: look into the window, then enter.

I lowered my hood, now that we weren’t backed by the snow, the white made us stand out. I stood with my back against the wall, and tilted my head around the edge of the window until I could see in. It was even murkier inside than it was outside, but I could make out the vague shapes of a table and counter, the banked coals of the fireplace, and the lump of a person in a bed. I nodded to the other two, and Ander pushed the door open. It wasn’t locked, there was just a simple wooden latch.

Sylan and I slipped into the house. We were quieter, and Ander was more observant. He stayed near the door to watch. Our dire wolves, too large to fit into the house with us, waited with Ander.

Inside, it was much as I’d seen from outside. There was a sword leaning against the wall that I hadn’t seen, and I could see more detail now that I was inside, but that was the end of the differences. A man slept in the bed. I didn’t look at him much, because his appearance didn’t matter. He was a Mannoneshan thief who came to our lands to attack us, and we would put an end to that.

I took my knife from its sheath on my belt, the thin, sharp blade caught the light from outside. The man laid on his side, and that made things all the easier for me. I brought the knife down at his temple, and he was dead without knowing he’d been attacked. I wiped my knife off and slipped it back into the sheath. We left the house.
“I have a feeling,” Ander whispered when we re-joined him outside.

“Go on,” Sylas said. We trusted Ander’s intuition. It had saved us on many an occasion. Sometimes he just knew what to do.

“We need to go to the armory. This is going too well.”

“Ok,” I replied. We moved back to the group behind us and told them where we were going, and then snuck off to the middle of town.

Most of the buildings in the town were homes. The blacksmith, the stables, and the large center building were the only functional buildings. Of those three, the blacksmith was most likely to house the armory. We headed that direction, Ander naturally falling into place between the protection offered by our wolves. Old habits were already re-forming, and in being honest with myself, I felt more comfortable with both of them at my side than I had the whole time Sylan had been gone. I missed this.

The blacksmith had the forge outside, under a protective overhang. There was a building attached, clearly for storage. That was where we went. All around us we heard the quiet noises of doors opening and closing, soft footsteps, and weapons being unsheathed and resheathed. Men were dying in the spaces between those quiet noises.

We went to the door, and Sylan stuck out his hand to open it. Before he could, Arlan stopped him with a touch on his arm and a shake of his head. No sooner had he done that than a scream, high and shrill, came from a house near us. It was long and loud, and then a breath, and then again. One more time, and it ended abruptly. It was too late though, the damage was done. Seconds later, men stumbled out of homes, some wearing chain shirts, but none carrying weapons. They came our direction, and all three of us drew our swords. Of the three of us, Sylan was the best with a sword, and I was the best with a bow and arrow, but none of us were inept.

One man came from the house with a lantern in hand and the rest went to him. He led the way to our location. His light splashed on us, and he wheeled back in surprise. Our swords fell, and though it was ten on three, they were unarmed and we had dire wolves. It was no battle, but if we hadn’t followed Ander’s intuition, they would have been able to arm themselves.

In the end, we were left with a few whores. There were no children in the town and no wives. We had horses and weapons, and all of the materials they’d taken from us. Alisande met us in the center of the town, near the large central building. The women were shivering, kneeling in the snow.

“Who took them without giving them their warm clothes?,” I asked of the gathered crowds. No one answered, “Let them dress. They are not our prisoners, we have no quarrel with them. Let them take what horses and food they want. We won’t keep the things of the Mannoneshans as spoils.”

Alisande watched me, her hawk agitated on her shoulder, although both she and the hawk relaxed marginally when I told them to let the women go.

“This was butchery,” she remarked, voice tinged with discomfort and sadness.

“This was assassination. We will not take their things, we will take back what is ours and punish those responsible. No more, and no less.”

“But to kill them while they slept, unarmed? There is no honor in it.”
“You Starshanes have strange notions of honor. There was no honor in theft, either, nor in coming to our land. Do you think they didn’t take a Detónese woman while they took our forest? I promise, they did. We will do this again, to another town full of soldiers and thieves. If you cannot stomach it, then you should go.”

In the end, they all stayed. The whores took horses and food and clothing. We took all of the Mannoneshan things and piled them outside the walls. We lined the bodies up in neat rows, on their backs, arms crossed. The rest, we put to the torch. Dead trees this far from home were no use to us. They’d been floated down the river and moved by wagon train to get here, and we had no way to bring them back. So we burned it, all of it, and put the town behind us.
Ellian, Mannonesha

Chapter Summary

Here I introduce Ellian, the POV on the Mannoneshan side of the conflict. More insight into why they're doing what they're doing, and show the difficult position Ellian is in with his father - the king of Mannonesha.

Chapter Notes

No sex and no violence. There is a character nickname in here I don't like: Bloodcrow. It's because it's too close to Bloodraven, and they aren't even thematically related or anything I think it was just stuck in my head while I was writing, but I can't think of anything else. :/

“Three forts!,” screamed my father from his throne at the front of the great hall, his expression twisted with rage and malice, “Three! Demolished by those savages!”

“I say we invade in earnest!,” Lord Lawrence shouted. I internally rolled my eyes. That man was a sycophant, although I was never sure why since it was his sister that my father made my mother. Technically, that made him my uncle, but we’d never been very familial, “Give the bitch what she deserves!”

A chorus of agreement ran through the gathered lords. They were bloodthirsty and greedy, the lot of them. Those that weren’t never attended these meetings. Lord Kerran added, “We need to strike before she can do any more damage to our forces.”

“She’ll never be able to meet us an on open field. They don’t ride, so they can’t stand against our cavalry,” continued Lord Joshua, called Bloodcrow by his men for the way he preyed after blood was drawn by other, braver men. He also was tall and thin and dressed in black, but had bright red hair.

“What say you, Ellian? You’re being awful quiet given your place as leader of our armies,” that was the bane of my days, old, fat Lord Cooper. His soft, quiet voice cut through the din and drew my father’s intentions. I shifted in my chair, sitting straighter.

“I warned you this would happen,” I replied, shrugging, “You had me send those men and build those towns--”

“--FORTS,” my father corrected me.

“Forts, then, anyway. I warned you that if we went onto their land and started cutting down their forests that they would retaliate. You all said those would be acceptable losses. To build anyway.”

“Then you are saying we should do nothing?,” Cooper countered.
“I am saying, this is what ‘acceptable losses’ looks like. They will burn more of these outlying towns, it is clear from their handling of the bodies and their sparing of the non-military people that this is an eye for an eye. They don’t even keep the horses or our weapons, they loot nothing. We still have the larger settlements that are further from the border because they’ve been distracted with the smaller forts. Either the men in the outlying ones will figure out how to deal with them, or they will not.”

“Why let them burn our forts when we could easily defeat them in open combat?,” the Bloodcrow had a sneer on his face. He led his own men, even if he himself was required to bend to my leadership.

“Because they will never engage us in open combat. They aren’t stupid, they will never take to the field. They know what happens to them against cavalry, and they know equally as well that we can’t take the horses into their forests. Even if we could, they’d still have the advantage as horses cannot climb trees. My lords, this is not new information! This has been the situation for thousands of years! This is how they’ve held their lands for so long and why we’ve never been successful in taking them!,” I was frustrated with them, because I’d explained all of this before they engaged in fruitless attempts at invading Detón, “Why are we wasting time to the north when we could much more easily take Charias or Llellwyn? They will meet us on an open field.”

“I considered it,” my father admitted, seemingly more calm. One never knew with him, “But the time is past for taking Charias. Their king is dead, and his sister sits the throne.”

“That sounds like more of an opportunity, not less,” Lawrence said. His dark eyes were hungry and eager.

“It would be,” father replied, “if not for the fact that she is to marry the Kellan prince. The hundred year army stirs. Their border with Leecheska has been emptied. After the snow melts the king will go east for the wedding.”

I hated it when he did this. We were supposed to be informed in the same way, so that we could back each other in these councils, but he liked to insert these surprises when we were in public. I ignored the satisfied look on Cooper’s face and inserted myself, “Even better. If we were to take Llellwyn then we could continue into Charias and catch the king on his trip north. That’s three countries at once. If we join with Enreadarran, then we will be even stronger.”

“And you think we have the strength for that?,” asked Bloodcrow. He wasn’t sneering, so I treated his question seriously.

“Our combined forces can take Llellwyn, certainly. Adding the Llellwysh forces to our own? We might be a match for them.”

“For the hundred year army?,” Lawrence looked skeptical.

I thought on it for a moment, “And what of the Charian army? What of Phalen’s bastard?”

“I’ve heard some rumors,” Bloodcrow said. I raised an eyebrow at him in an expression that clearly meant he should share, “I’ve heard that the bastard, at least, is in the Kellan army.”

I frowned, “That makes no sense.”

“Agreed,” he replied. I filed that information away for later. I liked to let things process in the back of my mind sometimes. Twist the puzzle pieces until they make sense.

“I wonder how that Charian nobility feels about being annexed by Kelly,” Kerran mused.
“Likely about as good as we would,” Lord Lawrence rolled his eyes, as if the question was nonsensical. I thought it wasn’t.

“The Charians have been starving under Phalen. Some might see it as an opportunity. They were given free access to Kelly’s port, and that means money. Their people were fed, or so my spies tell me,” my father said.

“So they may not all be willing to join the bastard. His father hurt many of their families. Kelly could mean stability,” I added, “They won’t be as quick to war, but Kelly might be. A jump to warfare might drive a wedge between them. If we can find the Charian army we may be able to get them on our side.”

“Assuming they’re still with the bastard,” Bloodcrow said.

“Assuming,” I agreed.

“Fine. Send an emissary to Enreadarran, but in the meantime you’ll do what I told you concerning Detón. Move to someplace less populated and cut trees from there, if you have to. I’m tired of sharing a border with them, I’ll have their land.”

I repressed a noise of frustration, “As you say. If you’ll excuse me, I have preparations to make.”

“Yes, yes,” he grumbled, “Be gone.”

I pushed back my chair and got to my feet. The grumbling and griping started up again behind me. A bunch of old men with delusions of grandeur. We were never going to take Detón, and even if we did it’s unlikely we could keep it without razing the place. And if we did that, what was the point? The land was useless without its vast forest. And, besides, I wasn’t exactly ready and willing to participate in the genocide of the Detónese.

My father was, though, that crazy old bastard. He’d burn it to the ground, them with it, and call it winning. For now, I had to hope that he’d get distracted with Llellwyn and Charias and I could throw minimal resources at Detón and hope he forgot it. For now, though, I had to talk to the Ambassador from Enreadarran. He could go home without waiting for the snows to thaw, and bring troops here the same way. With any luck he’d bring some of his war-wizards. What were they called again? Silvers, I thought. Although I didn’t think that was the real name for them.

I strode down the hallways of our great keep into my offices, where my page was waiting for me. Or rather, dozing while he waited for me. I couldn’t blame him, I remember how tired I always was at sixteen. I looked at him and said, “Daniel!”

He jumped, green eyes opening. I’d always found the shade of his eyes to be disconcerting. They were bright, light green and his skin was on the darker side of brown, as was his hair, so they stood out like two lanterns in his face. He was a nice enough kid though, and a decent page. He rubbed his eyes and smiled a lopsided grin, “Sorry, sir.”

“It’s alright. I wish I could do the same.”

“How was the meeting?”

I shrugged, “More of the same. My father shouting, his lords shouting, et cetera.”

“Sounds thrilling”

“Sometimes. Anyway, I need you to go to Rayeen and have her meet me in the war room at her
earliest convenience.”

“It’s evening, sir. She’ll likely be at evening meal.”

“I don’t think so, but if she is, tell her I’ll be having supper sent up. Then go to the kitchens and have them send supper for the both of us to the war room.”

“Anything else?”

“No...wait, yes, have Janice sent as well. Tell him to eat first. Then you may eat and be free for the day.”

“Yes, sir. See you tomorrow.”

I nodded at him, and he left. I collected a few things, and made my way through the keep to the war room. I knew I’d be faster than both Rayeen and Janice, even having taken the time to collect the paper and pens and other assorted things I thought I’d need. When I pushed open the heavy wooden door to the war room, I saw I was right, and it sat empty.

I dumped my things on a table nearest the door and looked around, sighing. I spent a great deal of time in here, and the place was like a second home. The gallery around the edges contained tables and bookshelves, and a door to the room where we kept records of all of our communications. Attached on the other side was the dove-speaker’s quarters, although he never came in here. Lanterns, now lit, adorned each of the columns that ran along the gallery on the outer edges of the room, casting the whole large space in a warm, orange glow. The high ceiling of the center area was enchanted to show the sky outside, and now it showed twilight, a few stars twinkling. The floor had a mosaic tile map of the entire continent, from the very bottom of the Unterlund to the very top of the elven lands. It was ill-proportioned though, showing the human kingdoms in the center as larger than they were. It was at least a thousand years old, but as things had changed over time the map had magically arranged itself to reflect these things. Mannonesha wasn’t a land steeped in magic, but long ago the war room had been a gift from the lords of Enreadarran to my family. A symbol of a pact that kept the mages fed ever since. They were our staunchest allies.

Our only allies, if I was being honest with myself. None of the countries got along well with many others, as shown by the Kellans’ army. It had been growing in place for over a hundred years, and no one but the Kellans knew exactly how large it was. They were professional, too, every soldier the equivalent of one of our knights. There were no drafted farmers and recalcitrant lords for them. I stood by the map, facing the door, considering it.

The door opened to admit Rayeen, and I couldn’t help but smile at the sight of her. She was tall and fit and dark, the descendent of a Carpathian, and every inch of her showed it. Although she was a skilled mage, she carried herself like a noble warrior. Her dark brown hair was styled into hundreds of long, thin dreadlocks, and tonight they were pulled up and held back by a tiara of delicate silver swirls. She was incapable of leaving her rooms dressed simply, and tonight was no exception. She was always a feast for the eyes, and tonight she wore a long gown of shimmering red that slithered and flowed as she walked. It was covered with complicated silver embroidery, and she wore decorative pauldrons made of silver feathers and silver threads. A red silk velvet cloak covered her shoulders and made a train behind her. She was even made up; I could see the ruby-red of her lips and the shine of gold on her high apple cheekbones in the flickering torchlight.

“Strange place for a tryst,” she observed, walking towards me and looking around with a hint of a smile at the corner of her full mouth. She moved like she was floating rather than walking, and half the time it made me think that she cast a spell on herself just to be so graceful. It wasn’t true though, she just moved like that.
“God, you are beautiful tonight.”

“Now, now,” she teased. “What did I tell you about calling me God?”

“My apologies. God dess, you are beautiful tonight,” I smiled at her teasing, and when she reached me she pulled my mouth down to hers for a kiss. My arms tightened around her as I pulled her against me. As always, the feel of her against me was right, and good, as if that was where she belonged. We were only lovers now, but I would wed her when the time was right. I am a bastard, I don’t have to marry nobility. Even if I did, I would abandon any claim for her.

I knew that Janice was coming, and that she wouldn’t let me escalate things beyond a kiss besides, and so I drew away from her and let her go, squeezing her hand gently. Then she said, “So we are not here for a tryst?”

“Sadly, no, although I wouldn’t be disagreeable to one later. Janice is on his way, and I need your advice.”

“Sometimes I feel the two of us spend more time ruling your father’s kingdom than he does,” she observed.

“I think that’s probably true,” the door opened again to admit my squire, Janice. He was a large young man, broad through the shoulder and waist. He was built like a barrel, with large hands and feet, light skin, and a mop of unruly brown hair. He looked like he ought to be an ox, but he wasn’t. He was surprisingly quick of body and wits, and had a good head for strategy. It had been his idea to build a second set of towns, further away, to minimize the losses and keep the Detónese distracted with the smaller forts.

“Hey boss,” he said after closing the door and walking over, “Ma’am.”

“Hello Janice,” Rayeen said, nodding in greeting.

“Hey, Jan,” I said, “Alright, since you’re both here. Tonight during the council, my father decided that he wants to use Llellwyn as a way to take Charias and Kelly.”

“What of the Kellan army?,” Rayeen said, frowning. I went to the boxes of figurines that were kept, and came back with a few.

“They’ve moved here-,” I placed a large figure at the Llellwysh border, “-and here,” I placed another at the Charian border, “The king of Charias is dead, and his sister has taken the throne. She’s to wed the prince of Kelly, joining their nations into one.”

“I wonder what they will call it,” Rayeen mused.

“I hadn’t thought to ask. The king’s bastard hasn’t died, but he has disappeared. Bloodcrow said he heard the man was hiding in the Kellan army.”

“And the rest of the Charian army?,” she asked.

“We don’t know,” I watched her as she walked around the map, considering. The heels I knew she was wearing clicked against the tile surface as she considered the problem.

“And the Llellwysh army?”

I shrugged, “I don’t know that the merchant barons have a standing army, as disorganized as they are.”
"The Kellan army finally stirs and two of their border countries combine and you think they aren’t arming themselves?,” she gave me a shrewd look.

“She’s right, boss. They’ll have an army and we need more information if we’re going to go there,” Jan agreed.

“Yes,” I said, “My father’s plan is this. To take Llellwyn and add their strength to ours, and intercept the Kellan king en route to the wedding where he’s likely to have a smaller, escort sized host. That can give us both Charias and Kelly in one go.”

“And he thinks that the forces of Mannonesha and Llellwyn are enough to counter the hundred year army?,” Jan looked skeptical.

“He things that the Enreadarran ambassador,” I gave Rayeen a pointed look, “could be convinced to advise her country to join us. The wizards would go a long way towards bringing us victory.”

“Our war wizards aren’t so many in number,” she replied. It wasn’t a no, and she was still considering the board.

“I think the plan is mostly use them for transport. The element of surprise can gain us much.”

“The Llellwysh and the Kellans keep a close eye on each other. As soon as you start invading Llellwyn the Kellans will know about it. You’ll never maintain the element of surprise all the way into Charian.”

“Could the Silvers just drop us on top of the Kellans while they’re en route?”

“We could, but it would be a bad idea. Portals make you vulnerable because they can only be so large. Fighting any battle on a snowy field is folly for all involved. So we’re most effective when you can choose your battleground. We can transport people in and melt all of the snow on the battleground. That, of course, gives away your position.”

“No, but what about literally on top of?,” Jan interrupted.

“What?,” I asked.

“Drop a couple mages right on top of the king. Or open a portal under him? Precision. All of the army won’t matter if we get only him.”

I thought about it, but found the flaw immediately, “That’s like catching a tiger by the tail. If we take him, we either kill him and his brother becomes king, or we keep him, and...what? Ask them to surrender very nicely? The second we let him go, they’ll turn on us, and we can’t keep him forever. We can’t just go to Keehlayhan and rule, we’d be murdered in a day, and as long as they have the army they’ll never submit to our rule. We have to take care of it, because it is the key to their power.”

“I’m still concerned about the bastard,” Rayeen said, gazing contemplatively at the map, “Something is going on there, but I can’t see what. We need to wait and see what he does. The Charian army is too big of a wild card to not know where it is before we choose to attack Kelly, no matter how large our forces are. We need time.”

I retrieved more carved figures, putting the ones representing our military by the border with Llellwyn, some representing the wizards, and all the rest as we knew it, “Father wants to attack the king on his way to the wedding. I propose we attack on the way from the wedding. It gives us time to take Llellwyn while they’re distracted, we’ll see how large a force escorts him, to get spies
into more of the camps - my spies, not my father’s - and time to put ourselves in place.”

“Yes,” Jan nodded, “That makes sense.”

“The only problem,” I said, turning to them, “Is that he wants to continue to fruitlessly harass Detón. It’s a waste of men.”

“I think you’ve got to keep doing it, or at least the pretense,” Jan said.

“I agree,” said Rayeen.

“So many wasted lives, theirs and ours,” I said, the bitterness clear in my tone.

“You sound also recalcitrant for someone who is trying to be a conqueror,” she observed.

“It’s different with Detón. We’ve been fighting them for thousands of years. We know each other. And I know, were I to meet them in open combat, it wouldn’t be a fair fight. Llellwyn, Charias, and Kelly are different,” I waved my hand dismissively at the map, “They have horses and fight like we do. It’s more…”

“Honorable?,” she supplied.

“Yes.”

“There’s little that’s honorable about being a conqueror, love. So you should either commit, or take me up on my offer,” she gave me a pointed look. May times she’d offered to take me back to Raedaan with her and be married. Many times I’d said no, that I wouldn’t run from my father and abandon my little brother to our mad father. I didn’t trust him. This is the only reason we aren’t wed yet.

“Let’s start at the beginning with all of this. Can you speak to the deans?,” my way of bypassing the question again.

“And parliament and the headmaster, yes. But not tonight, I think.”

“No,” I agreed, “Not tonight.”

Jan broke his silence, after staring at the map for a long time, “What do we know about the other Kellan leadership?”

“Not enough,” I replied.

“Can we get some Whisperlings in place there?”

The king’s specialized spies. They were not my favorite people, or my favorite tool, but they were useful, “I suppose that would be a good idea. You know we could move on Carim, just to see what happens. We could take it, I think. It’s not even walled.”

“No,” said Jan, “We don’t have enough information, and victory relies on the element of surprise.”

“I agree with Jan,” Rayeen said, “We don’t know enough.”

Jan was too conservative for my tests, usually, too cautious; but Rayeen fell between my overzealous boldness and his reservedness. If she agreed, then I’d fall in line, “The Whisperlings it is, then.”
The door opened and a servant brought in a few trays of food for us, and it made me realize my stomach was rumbling. We abandoned the map and ate, shoving food in our mouths. The door opened again as I was finishing, and a short man with blonde hair came through. He was wearing my father’s livery.

“Is it bedtime, then, George?,” I asked him.

“It is, he asks for you,” he replied.

“Tell him I’ll be along shortly,” the page nodded and left, and I wiped my mouth with a napkin. I stood, bending to kiss Rayeen, “Your rooms when I’m done?”

She nodded, “Yes. I’ll be waiting.”

“Good. Night, Jan,” I said, nodding my head to him.

“Night,” his mouth was still full of food, and the attention he paid me was perfunctory. I left the room, and went out into the larger portion of the rambling castle. When I’d been young, I thought it was difficult to find my way around it because it was so large. As I grew, I learned my way around, and recognized that there was a certain symmetry to it. The large hall I’d been in earlier with my father was at the center of the structure, and used for everything from feasts to royal audiences. It was the oldest part of the keep, the rectangle meeting hall first built of wood. Only the giant timbers that held up the roof remained, the rest long since rebuilt in stone. It was surrounded by and outdoor path and a gallery. The long portion of the rectangle had the kitchens in the back of the house with the servant’s quarters, and the areas for entertaining guests towards the front. Longer wings came off of the short sides of the main hall, one for living quarters and the other for useful spaces like the map room and the library. The facade was mostly functional, but the roof was peaked and there were turrets at junctures and corners, all with wrought iron decorations atop them. The whole thing was six stories tall, except the center hall, which was in the vicinity of two and a half.

I left the wing, walked through the gallery without entering the hall in the center, and entered the residential wing through a set of ornate double doors. The family had one floor to ourselves, and this was where I headed now. I found the rooms easily enough, as the path across the stone floors was familiar enough to me. Two guards stood at the doors, but they let me in without acknowledging me. One inside, I walked through the two outer rooms and another set of guards, and into the bedroom.

“Elli!,” came the excited voice of my half brother, Grayson. His whole name was Greyson Alice Silan Reinhart the third, but I just called him Gray. I was a bastard, and so he was the trueborn son of our father, heir to our throne, and only eight years old. He was a kind child, if a little small, and much smarter than our father. Smarter than me, or anyone I knew. His mother was gone now, taken when he was five by the Winter Bleed. Ever since then, he had trouble sleeping unless I put him to bed. He was the entire reason I stayed in my father’s home and didn’t leave to Enreadarran with Rayeera.

“Evening, my lord Gray,” he small nose wrinkled in distaste. He made everyone in the world use his title, but for some reason disliked it when I did, “Already in bed, I see.”

“Quila made me before she’d send for you.”

“As she does most nights,” I pointed out. I climbed into the huge bed, sitting next to him on top of the thick blankets, “What are you in the mood for tonight?”
“A story,” he said, leaning back on his pillows and getting comfortable.

“How about The First King?,” Gray grinned up at me; it was the boy’s favorite story.

“Yes, please,” Everytime he was kind to me, it warmed my heart. He was so much different than our father, and it gave me hope.

“A long time ago, before there were countries, and so long ago that it’s nearly been forgotten, there was a great war. One side had technology, and they wanted to conquer all peoples, and subjugate them. The other had magic, and they--”

“The korianan!,” he interrupted, smiling. He badly wanted to be one of them, so their stories were his favorite stories.

“Yes, the korianan. They looked out and saw what the nameless ones were doing, and went to war to defend us all. The War of the Ancients is what we call it, although its true name is lost to us.

They warred for ten years, until famine gripped the land and the people dying from hunger and sickness was greater than the people dying from war. Even here, where the species of men were born, things would not grow. Out of this time, in the middle of our country, rose the hero of the Rhine. He was a riverman, and this was the name of the river when he lived. He was strong and kind and fought like a demon. But worked the river, too, and knew his land. When not fighting, he tilled the fields with all the rest, and was well-loved, and his neighbors used to say, ‘you are the heart of the Rhine itself’.

When he was a young man, the War of the Ancients finally reached his town. Three times the nameless ones attacked, and three times they were repelled. Then they came the fourth time, with better weapons and more soldiers. They would stamp out this little troublemaker, teach him and his people a lesson. But he would have none of it, and his people rallied behind him and fought.

Even so, the Nameless Ones were too strong and too clever, and the tide of battle turned. Then, just as it appeared all was lost--”

“Korianan!,” he yelled, grinning.

“Indeed,” I smiled down at him, “Their spellcasters came, and their warriors came, descending on the Nameless Ones, all muttering and whispering in their language. They bolstered the humans with spells, holding off the Nameless Ones while they healed the humans, and they pressed the battle forward. Their combined strength beat the Nameless Ones, saving the town.

The Heart of the Rhine showed himself to be a useful asset in battle because he was so brave and smart, and after the battle they asked him to join them to lead the human armies. He refused to leave his town unprotected, and so the korianan left a number of healers and others of their people in his town to look after those that lived there. Located as it was in the center of the continent, it soon became a valuable crossroads for human and korianan alike. And the Heart of the Rhine fought alongside the korianan until, in the middle of his life, they enacted the spell that banished themselves and the Nameless Ones.”

“If they banished themselves, why are there some now?”
“No one knows. They were gone for many years, for so long that we forgot they existed, until the magical children started being born again and the lumietra came soon after and explained what they were.”

“How did she know?,” his nose wrinkled in distasted again, and I tried hard not to laugh at the expression. He was still young enough that he thought all girls were distasteful. Of course, he also could have picked up that habit from our father. I would have to pay more careful attention.

“I don’t know. The lumietras keep their own council.”

“When I’m king I’m going to summon her to court and make her tell me.”

I made a chiding noise, “No one makes the lumietra do anything she doesn’t wish to do. And besides, she’s not been seen for some time. The last died, oh, near on nineteen or twenty years ago. This generation’s seems to be rather quiet. Well, we haven’t heard from the anilumietra either, so that’s a blessing to be sure.”

“How did they die?”

“The last ones?”

“Yes.”

“I was almost your age when it happened, and I remember father didn’t much care either way. But he redoubled his efforts at children all the same.”

“Yes but how did she die?”

I shrugged, climbing out of his bed, “No one really knows. She could have died twenty years ago or ten, either way, they both went about it quietly. I expect that they, as most lumietras and anilumietras, killed each other.”

I watched him thinking about it, and as I was about to excuse myself, he asked me something he’d never asked me before, “Elli, who was your mother?”

I shifted uncomfortably, “Lord Lawrence’s sister. She was queen before your mother.”

He frowned, not understanding, “She was queen? Then why are you a bastard?”

“It’s complicated,” I replied, hedging.

“But I’m smart!”

I sighed, “So you are, and old enough to know these things. My mother and our father were married by an Abimite priest. When my mother died, your mother wouldn’t marry my father unless her child would be heir. She was a devout Luminite besides, and she had my parents’ marriage annulled. In the eyes of the law I’m a bastard.”

I didn’t mention to him that at the time his mother’s family, the Kerrans - who were rich and powerful in their own right, and had the support of several of the Stonelords - had been just this side of open revolt due to my father’s mishandling of certain affairs in which they were involved. I didn’t add that setting me aside and inserting their own heir as crown prince was the only thing that held the nation together. I didn’t add that if anything ever happened to him, the country would descend into civil war.
“Do you want to be a prince?”

“No, not very much.”

“Why not?,” he sounded shocked, as if he couldn’t imagine anyone not wanting to be a little prince. I’d loved it at his age, too.

“I prefer the job I have, and it means I can choose my own wife, too,” and I prefer avoiding civil war.

“Ooohhh,” he pretended to understand the way of adult relationships, “Well, Ray is pretty.”

“Rayeera. You know she doesn’t like having her named shortened.”

His smile was wide and silly, “Well, I’m crown prince, I can call people what I wish!”

“You can,” I agreed, “But it doesn’t mean they’ll like you for it. Now, I have to go meet the lady in question, and you’ve had more than enough stories for one night.”

“Aw,” he complained as he always did, but I’d kept my end of the bargain and so he kept his, snuggling under his blankets. I blew out the lamps on his bedside tables, leaving only the small wizard light that served as a nightlight, “‘Night Elli.”

“Night, Gray,” I left, closing the door softly behind me.
Danae, Charias

Chapter Summary

Caleb advances on Ville Flue, and Danae awaits his arrival with equal parts trepidation and excitement. Time has dulled her anger over what he did during their first night together, and years together makes it easy to try to forgive. Charias continues to recover from the “leadership” of Phalen.

Chapter Notes

Explicit sex in this one - Danae/Leigh. Also a fight, but it's just sparring and no one dies.

Eben told me they’d left as soon as the snow started melting. They took casters with them to melt the snow, much earlier than anyone expected. His brother had progressed fast, stopping at any towns they came across, but not for long. So it happened that a large part of the Kellan army in sight of the city. I stood at the top of one of the towers, alone, staring out at the oncoming behemoth. I could see the banners from, though just the colors, not any of the arms they contained. I knew them all, though. I’d had the same education as Caleb.

Caleb. He was in that group, and I was nervous. Would he try to make me come back with him? Would he be angry? Did I want to see him? Eben said he’d be tearing the kingdom apart looking for me. He knew I was here; Eben would be foolish not to tell him, but he didn’t know much beyond that. What he’d said and tried to do to me before I left was unacceptable, and yet...and yet, I’d loved him since we were children. I’d missed him since I’d left. He was part of me, and I didn’t know if I was capable of refusing him if he wanted me. I should, everything in me said I should, but I doubted my own abilities.

Frustration drove me from the high observation tower and down the long way through the castle to the yard. There, I found Leigh in the same place he always was doing the same thing he always did: training new guards to replace those killed during the battle for The Sentinel. They’d had a surprising amount of volunteers, even from the noble houses.

I walked up to him, observing the men in the yard. Most were young, but after weeks of being fed on a regular schedule they all were looking much more robust than the first class of recruits we’d gotten in the beginning. Right now, they were in pairs, hacking at each other with training swords while Leigh looked on. And, Leigh, I hadn’t even considered it. Caleb was possessive, and would not allow for another man to bed me if he could stop it. But Leigh and I had been sustaining each other since we’d met and I’d lost Isandro. The usual pang of sadness drifted through my heart when I thought of him. I shook my head to banish my thoughts of Caleb and Isandro.

“How are they doing?,” I asked him.

“Well enough - JARED, keep your shield up!,” the man in question scowled, lifted his shield, just in time to ward off a blow from his sparring partner. The swords kept clanging, and I let the sound
of it soothe me.

“I was up in the tower.”

“The crow’s nest?,” he asked, using the castle slang for the tallest spire.

“Yes. I can see them on the horizon. They’ll be here soon. What’s that one’s name?,” I gestured at a slim man with brown hair and freckles.

“Andrew.”

“ANDREW!,” I bellowed at him, “Watch your feet!”

A ghost of a smile crossed Leigh’s face. The young man looked at him questioningly, and he nodded. Our training sessions had become something of an amusement for the increasingly large number of people who lived in the castle, but these recruits were new and it had been some time since we’d trained in the day. He was teaching me darkened swordplay of a different type than he normally did. These people didn’t know me.

“And you’ve come seeking some comfort?,” He frowned and walked to another man, this one near an age with Leigh, “Frances, you’re still not holding your sword right. How many times do I have to show you?”

“How is it wrong now?,” Frances complained, exasperated.

“Like this,” I replied, correcting him. Again, he looked to Leigh for confirmation. Leigh rolled his eyes and nodded. We wandered away again, “And, yes, but I was hoping for some practice.”

“And here I thought you might be hungry.”

“I will be if you practice with me,” I pointed out, “And, in truth, it would be our last time for awhile.”

“Oh?”

“I’m not sure how Caleb will react to seeing me with someone else, and I’d like for his visit to go smoothly.”

“Uh-huh,” he said, noncommittally. Of all the people I knew, he was the one I was most honest to. Eben, too, but less due to the kind of trust I had with Leigh and more due to our long history, “Good Gods, Sean, that form was terrible!”

“That’s it!,” yelled the man in question, a tall, broad youth with dark brown hair and light skin. He threw his sword down, “We’ve been at this for hours. I’m tired. If you think we’re so bad then YOU do it!”

“It’s called muscle memory, you egotistical whelp,” I replied, cutting Leigh off, “You practice until you do it without thinking so that you will not have to think in battle.”

“What do you know, you’re just a woman?,” the way he said it was so casual that I knew he didn’t mean it as an offense, just a statement of fact in his world. This was part of the damage Phalen had done, and it had to be fixed.

“Leigh, I find myself in need of a workout.”

“What a coincidence, my class find themselves in need of a demonstration. Cease!,” he shouted,
and the sound of practice halted, “My top student has come to see how we are doing, and I think it will be beneficial to you all to see a demonstration.”

The men formed a ring around the edge of the practice yard. It was still cold, and the area had long been cleared of snow, so the dirt was hard packed. There were racks of blunted weapons of varying kinds along the walls. Leigh had started drilling me and teaching me other kinds of weapons, but I still felt more comfortable with the sword. I learned it faster and was best at it. After months of practicing for hours every day and Leigh’s tutelage, I’d gained some skill. I still couldn’t best him, but once or twice I’d fought him to a draw.

We’d switched to live steal some time ago, after Leigh felt confident I could at least keep him from accidentally maiming me, but with that switch had come the addition of armor, so I said, “Blunted, I think? My steel is in my rooms.”

I’d taken to leaving the sword on a locked chest, in my locked room, and when I wore steel, I wore a basic castle-forged sword. I didn’t like rubbing Charian noses in their defeat. He nodded at me, and we both selected a weapon.

We didn’t spend much time sizing each other up. We sparred every day, and by now we usually launched straight into the fight. So it was today, where I launched myself at him, sword out. It was for show, of course, because he easily saw it coming and blocked me.

Our swords clanged as we went back and forth across the space. Most of the time I was defending, but a few times I pressed an offence. I reverted to few of the tricks I’d used with other soldiers to win; Leigh made it clear in earlier lessons that any trick I could pull he could pull better, and if I didn’t like a dose of my own medicine, I’d better stick to actual swordplay. Under his tutelage I’d not only become more skilled, I’d gotten faster.

But in front of the students, I couldn’t help myself. I was concentrating on my fight, but I could hear their gasps in the background. So when I next had the chance, I dropped to the ground, and slid between his legs. I popped up behind him and shoved him forward. He tripped and fell and went sprawling. Normally I would have followed him down, turning it into a wrestling match, but there were people around. The class laughed. Some loudly, and some remembering that he was their instructor.

And, as it turned out, I wouldn’t have had the chance. He rolled over and flipped himself back onto his. Feet. Rolling his shoulders and swirling his sword, he advanced, and I saw the first flicker of real anger in his eyes. He hated when I did this, but I didn’t care, I loved making him angry. It turned me on to push his buttons.

“Something wrong?,” I asked, brow cocked and my head tilted, pretending I didn’t know exactly what was wrong.

“Not at all,” his tone was flat. He charged me, and I got my sword up, but he didn’t swing his. He barreled into me, smashing me backwards into a rack of weapons behind us. I groaned, falling, and the weapons clattered down around me. He stood over me. His sword came down and mine came up, and they met. We pushed against each other, my sword holding his off through only the strength of my arm. Normally this would be a reset, were we working with live steel. If one of us slipped, my head would be gone. But it wasn’t live, it was blunted. I’d get a bruise. I still didn’t want to lose, but I knew I wasn’t strong enough to hold this for long.

Then I realized that my left hand had landed on a short sword. I grabbed it and brought it up, smacking the flat of the blade against the side of his head. Not hard enough to hurt him, just hard enough to ring his bell a little and get him to lose focus.
It worked and I rolled away, jumping to my feet. I kept the other sword in hand, watching him and giving the two swords experimental swings. It felt right to have one in each hand. He’d been trying to teach me to use a shield and I hated it. It was heavy and ugly and I felt like I couldn’t move while I was holding it. This was better.

He came at me again and I blocked with one sword and swung with the other, and it made my blows come faster than his. It forced him to be faster, and he rose to the challenge. I realized that he hadn’t precisely been holding back, so much as treating me appropriately for my skill level. He was faster now, sword flashing in the sun.

“Yes!,” I cried, and he grinned at me. We loved this. We both loved this. It was fun, it was freedom and movement. It felt good and natural. It was beautiful.

And soon, it ended, with my swords crossed at his neck. I’d finally beaten him. I dropped my blades and bowed, the class clapping. I saw some money exchange hands. I tossed the swords onto the pile made when he’d thrown me into the rack as he said, “Dismissed.”

The students put their things away and trickled out to attend to their other responsibilities. I knew the look I’d see I Leigh’s face when I turned to him, so I said, “Your rooms or mine?”

“Mine are closer,” it was always like this after we fought, and the better I did, the more we wanted each other. So we left, finding out way to his room. We spilled into it, laughing, and he slammed the door shut, pushing me against it, and kissing me hard, “Turn around, get your pants down.”

“No...no,” I put an inch of space between us, “If Caleb makes this our last time, I don’t want you to do it quickly against the door. Take your clothes off. It’s early yet, we can take some time.”

He paused and nodded, “Ok. But, for the record, I hope it’s not the last time.”

“Me either,” It took some time, more for him than for me since he was wearing plated leather and more layers that I was, but we stripped down to nothing, “Turn around.”

He did, not really asking why. I pulled the tie off of the braid he wore his long, white hair in, and gently started pulling the strands out. One place where Leigh excelled at was care. He might beat me up on the yard, but when we were alone, he bathed with me and rubbed the knots out of my muscles, and put salve on my cuts. He told me it was partially to help me relax so we could practice magic, which we sometimes did, but he also enjoyed it. Some of his caring had rubbed off on me.

So I gently undid his braid, and grabbed his hairbrush from the bureau. I gestured to a footstool, and he sat. I brushed all of that silken white hair until it ran, shimmering, through my fingers. It wasn’t the flat white of the old or the cornsilk of people who tried to dye it white, it was a shimmering, robust white that was blue around the edges. I loved his hair, and loved the feel of it against my skin, when it fell in curtains around us while he was on top of me. I ran my fingers through it, scratching in circles against his skull, and he groaned. He’d done this to me before, and I understood the pleasure he was feeling.

He grabbed my wrist, not hard, just enough that I knew he was done and ready to move on. He stood up, only a few inches taller than me, and I watched the muscles of his arms and chest bunch and release as he moved. He kissed me again, and turned us, walking me backwards towards the bed while we kissed. I plunked down onto the bed and put the brush on the nightstand, then looked up at him. I grinned at him, taking his cock in my hand, and running my lips over the head, letting my tongue flick out.
“Ah, woman!,” he grinned back. I let his cock rest on my lips, running my hands between his thighs, teasing him. He held me by the back of my head with one hand, and with the other he held himself, and pressed his head against my mouth, trying to force my lips apart. I made him work for it a little, but I opened my mouth and let him push his head past my lips and in. His hand behind my head didn’t let me move back. He didn’t always want his cock sucked, but clearly today he was into it.

I used one of my hands to move up and down with my mouth, making him nice and slick before I let his cock push down my throat. His hand held me, lips pressed to his body, not letting me back off. I couldn’t breath, but the control he was exerting turned me on. The pressure let up, and I pulled back to breath, before the combined pressure of his hand and my own action forced him down my throat again. Two more times and my eyes were streaming, spit covering my chin. After the third, I gave him the double tap on his thigh that was my signal. He let me go, and my breath exploded out with a gasp.

“Fuck!,” I groaned, flopping back on the bed and moving back until I was all the way on it. I wiped my mouth on my arm; I hated the feeling of fluids drying on my face. He crawled up the length of my body, hair trailing on my skin and making me shiver.

He stopped at my breasts, bending down and putting his mouth on my nipple, sucking and swirling with his tongue until it ached and then doing the same to the other one. Then, he knelt, moving up my body until his hardness laid in the smooth valley between them. I cupped them myself, surrounding him with the soft flesh, and he groaned aloud, head dropping back. His cock was still wet from my mouth and throat, and he slid easily in the deep cleft made by them. I was rather neutral on this activity, but the visual and feeling turned him on like few other things.

“So beautiful,” he mumbled while he watched himself slide against my skin, the tip of him touching the space between my collarbones. Keeping his hips where they were, he bent backward some, and I felt his fingers slip into the damp slit between my legs. He used to be surprised at my wetness, but not anymore. Now it passed unremarked, save for a flash of hunger in his eyes. His fingers circled my clit, and I raised my hips in a silent plea for more. He only grinned at me and said, “Greedy.”

What could I reply to that? I was, we were both well aware of it. One finger, and then another, slid inside me. I groaned and my body clenched around them. My skin had grown too sticky as the fluid dried, so I let go of my breasts, but he stayed kneeling on my chest, his fingers plunging in and out of me. Faster and faster he went, and my eyes closed, my head tilting back. I wanted to come, just a few more seconds and I’d be there and--

He abruptly took his fingers out, “Bastard! Asshole!”

He smirked at me and licked my juices off his fingers, “You know it’ll be better when you finally come.”

I did know. It didn’t mean I liked the process of getting there. I tried to slow my breathing, willing the throbbing between my legs to stop. I wondered how many more times I’d have to engage in that particular torture. When it was clear I wasn’t close anymore, his fingers went back to my clit and our eyes locked while he rubbed me in firm circles, just the way he knew I liked it. My hips rocked against his fingers until I was close again and he took them away. I cursed at him again.

“You know how to make me stop,” he chomped. He was right, I did, but some part of me liked this.

I took a deep breath and calmed myself down. It was harder this time. He climbed off me and
pushed my legs apart kneeling between them. I groaned in mingled dread and excitement. His
tongue, warm, accompanied by his cool breath, parted my folds. He teased my clit, making light
circles around it before truly turning to his task. I never really paid much attention to what he did, I
just knew that he was keenly aware of my reactions and changed accordingly. His attentiveness
was what made it so good, and when my hips started to rock against his face, he held on.

Again, he stopped. Again I cursed. I was so turned on that I felt like I’d come at the slightest
provocation. He didn’t give me time to cool down again, but instead sat up and slid himself deep
inside me. A few hard strokes later, I was coming. He didn’t stop his rhythm, and didn’t give me
time to rest. Be bent forward, and we kissed, my hands twining in his hair while his hips pumped
between my legs. He broke our kiss, our eyes open, foreheads touching, while he fucked me so
hard that my whole body shook with the force of it. I could hear how wet I was in the movements
of our bodies. I was fairly certain the bed was rocking, too.

“Yesyesyesfuckmefuckme!,” I wailed, coming again while his cock surged inside me. My pussy
clenched down hard on him. Gods, he was so deep. I knew he could go deeper, and I wanted to see
if I could fit all of him. We’d managed once or twice when I was really turned on, so I begged,
“Deeper. Please, give me more, Leigh!”

He slowed down so as to not accidentally go too far, and started pushing himself in further, “Tell
me when to stop, ok?”

“Yes. More,” he pushed, my cunt swallowing another inch of him. I could feel it, but it didn’t
hurt. He kept pushing and I closed my eyes and tilted my head back, enjoying the sensation of
being fuller. Then, he stopped, “You’re good, keep going.”

“That’s, uh, it...that’s all of it,” I opened my eyes and looked down, seeing his body flush with
mine, I groaned and grabbed him down to me, kissing him hard. He pulled out and slid in again,
all the way, waiting for a signal from me that he should stop. It felt so good, I wasn’t going to be
giving that signal any time soon, “Fuck, it feels so good to be all the way inside you. It’s so hot.”

I didn’t reply, but I swirled my hips, feeling him move so far inside me. He got the idea, and
started moving again, deeper, longer strokes until I came for him again. Then I rolled onto my
stomach, and he entered me from behind, pushing deep each time. His strokes were so hard, and I
felt each one of them deep inside me. I was shaking with the need for release, until he found his,
tumbling over the edge, and taking me with him. My whole body moved and squirmed with the
force of coming, drenching us both, as he buried himself inside me and filled me. The magic
surged through us, filling our wells, stretching and twisting with its bright fingers.

After we finished, neither of us wanted to leave this space. Soon, though, soon we would have to.
Caleb and his retainers would arrive soon, and I had to be in the throne room when he did. I sat up
with a reluctant sigh and dressed. He sat on the edge of the bed, watching me.

“Do you want me to come with you?”

I shook my head, “It’s a bad idea to put you in front of Caleb. He’ll know there’s someone else,
obviously, or I would be dead. He won’t appreciate having that someone else paraded in front of
him.”

“It sounds controlling.”

“He’s king. He’s controlling by nature. And, unlucky for me, in some areas I like a little control,”
He gave me a half-hearted grin.
“You never speak well of him, you know.”

“Don’t I?”

“No. So you can see why I wonder that you’re contemplating putting yourself back in his path.”

“He is,” I took a moment to think about it, “Complicated. In truth, he appeals to the worst in me, but I like that about him. It makes me feel free, like the badness has a home and maybe I’m not so terrible after all. He is a part of me, and the way he makes me feel when I’m with him is...addictive. We fight and experience highs and lows rather than the steady course I’ve known with you. And yet, there’s something that feels right about the up and down. Something that feels...real.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I know, and that’s ok. You don’t have to,” I have him a small smile so he knew I wasn’t angry. I walked over and gave him a quick kiss, “I’m sure I’ll see you later. We good to keep up with the other parts of my training?”

He groaned and rubbed a hand over his face, “Ugh, you beat me.”

“I did, and I intend to keep practicing with two swords. Something about it felt more natural.”

“See you later then.”

I nodded and left.
Chapter Summary

Eben and Adélaïde prepare for Caleb's state visit, and their wedding. We get some insight into the complex relationships forming between Kay, Eben, and Adélaïde. The issue of heirs is further addressed. Caleb arrives in Charias.

Chapter Notes

No sex, no violence. Nothing really to watch out for.

“Again!,” said Adélaïde, the frustration clear in her voice as she paced back and forth. The Kellan king was almost here, and she was being rougher with Eben than she normally was. They were trying - and succeeding - to cultivate a friendship, or at least a working relationship; but his brother’s impending arrival was making her beyond nervous.

“The twelve noble families are,” he tossed a little ball in the air, catching it as he spoke. His feet were up on the table and he was leaning back in the chair. I was used to this, his casual pretended indifference, “Waterman, Earhart, Pommé, Rolareux, Bridgart, Kitt, Trevalle, Bellarté, Mirhommé, Stone, and Farlain. The royal family, the Boudreaus, makes a nice, round thirteen.”

“Good,” she stopped pacing and looked at him, her expression slightly more relaxed, “And their heads?”

“Noah Waterman, Adrian Earhart, Georgette Pommé, Sasha Rolareux, Victor Bridgart, Imri Kitt, Seline Trevalle, Melese Bellarté, Jacques Mirhommé, William Stone, and Casser Farlain. Adélaïde,” he stood and gently laid his hands on her crossed arms, “I have been at court my entire life and have had little else to do but study - and mingle with - Charian noble houses for months. I will be fine, and so will you.”

I watched the tension drain and felt a stab of ugly jealousy. I could love her and comfort her, but in this part of her life I was not her equal. I couldn’t reassure her about matters of state the way he could. Although sometimes I did find myself wishing both of them weren’t so resolutely gay. It would be nice to form a stable threesome with them. As much as I loved Adélaïde, I missed the feel of men.

“Eben,” I said, “Don’t forget the thing.”

“What thing?,” Adélaïde asked.

“Ah, yes. I’ve been thinking, and I ran this idea by Kay to see if it was, ah, appropriate. Let’s sit,” the two of them joined me at the table I sat at, “You, Kay, and I are...well, I suppose were a really screwed up sort of family. This is a discussion we need to have together. I know this isn’t the best moment for this discussion, but with my brother here it’s likely the last one we’ll have.”
“I’m a queen, my life is full of fitting things where they can go.”

“Right, so, I’ve been thinking. I have no desire to revisit the things your brother inflicted on you, and I can’t help but think that being with a man will be...traumatizing for you,” his tone was gentle, but she grabbed my hand and held it, as she always did when the subject of their wedding night came up, “and I have no desire to do that. I’m not attracted to women besides, but we must have children. Agreed?”

She nodded, “You...are right. Being with a man will be traumatizing for me. Although I do wish to have more children, so I was planning on just gritting my teeth and holding onto Kay.”

He laughed, “Ah, to feel so wanted. No, I believe that is a poor solution. Instead, I offer you a solution born of different means. I know a woman, a doctor, who specializes in the maintenance of families. She helps women have babies, prevent babies, all of that. And she has come up with a new technique that she believes can impregnate you without sex.”

Adélaïde looked confused, “How?”

Eben shrugged one shoulder, “I don’t know the particulars. But she comes highly recommended.”

She frowned, “By whom?”

“My love,” I said, gently, “We are not the only nobility to be living with an arranged marriage to someone who is not ideal.”

Comprehension dawned, “Of course. I hadn’t, well, obviously they must be.”

“I spoke to some of the other men,” I didn’t manage to hide my snicker and he rolled his eyes. He and I got on well, and if there was one thing I’d learned about him it was that the only difference between he and I is that I was paid for passing my body around and he was not, “and they have used her services before. They usually don’t know much about the details, only that she is discrete and their wives have had no reason to complain. You don’t have to commit to her tonight, but may I at least bring her to you for an interview?”

I could see the pros and cons crossing Adélaïde’s face and she asked me, “What do you think?”

“I’ve been thinking about it since he discussed it with me and I agree. It seems like it will be far less traumatic for you than the traditional way of getting with child. I am, of course, biased. I was not overly fond of sharing you,” I gave her a smile, “Any more than need be, of course.”

In truth, it had been difficult for me to come to terms with her marriage to Eben. I’m not royal, and would always have had the luxury of marriage for love. I easily shared Bas because we were friends and lovers, but not in love. I had rarely been in love, and I found that it made me jealous. The only thing that made the situation tolerable was Eben’s personality. His caring and easy humor made him fun to be around, and he had a deep sense of justice, and empathy when he chose to exercise it. When it came to Adélaïde and myself, so far he’d always chosen to exercise it. That they were open with me and included me in all that they could, and so I could see that their relationship was business with a slowly budding friendship, a sort of trust based in necessity, made it even easier to let go of my jealousy. In the beginning, though, I’d spent a fair amount of time being angry or wishing that I could be more like the korianan with their attitudes towards multiple partners. They didn’t seem to experience jealousy the way that the rest of us did.

She nodded, “Ok. If you are both in agreement, then bring her to me on our wedding night I will speak to her. And, for the record, I do not appreciate the two of you managing me by colluding
behind my back.”

“I am to blame for that,” Eben said, having the grace to look embarrassed, “I didn’t know if it was an appropriate subject for me to brooch with you, and I didn’t want to damage our growing relationship by bringing up the subject of your brother and children.”

“I understand. But still, in the future, it is better to simply come to me. I am stronger than I seem.”

“Then you’d be made of steel or stone, because you seem pretty strong to me.”

“You’ve no idea,” I said, not unkindly. It was a statement of fact, not an assault on his character.

At that moment, the door opened and Danae entered. Her long black hair was pulled back into a tight braid, shining in the sunlight from the windows. She was wearing her martial clothing - gabeson, chain shirt, and a black, silver-edged tabard that bore no crest atop black doeskin breeches, silver cuisses that covered only her thighs, and heavy black leather boots that came to her knees. From her belt hung the Boudreau sword and sheath that she’d claimed the night Phalen died. She still refused to give it up, and it remained a point of contention between Danae and almost every member of the Charian nobility - including Adélaïde; albeit not one that Adélaïde had been willing to dissolve the alliance over. It was a matter of pride, and it was the symbolism of it that bothered her. And so Danae and Adélaïde remained respectfully polite towards one another and no more. Although in truth it was a little hard to tell if that was the sword, or Danae’s behavior towards everyone.

She looked more harried than usual at the moment, so what came out of her mouth next wasn’t entirely a surprise. She addressed Eben, “He’s here.”

A look passed between them, a form of communication born of having grown up together, that I didn’t understand. Adélaïde was the one who answered, standing and squaring her shoulders, “Then I suppose we should go meet him.”

We’d already discussed the procedure. Eben and Danae would join us on the dais, where I would be to act as translator. It likely wouldn’t be necessary, Eben and Danae spoke excellent Charian, and claimed that Phalen did too. All three of them spoke Kellan, Charian, Llellwysh, and Lecheskan. Eben even spoke a smattering of some Unterlund languages, Dwarvish, and Elvish from his time spent on the Charian docks. The latter had gotten better during his time here, as I’d been teaching him Elvish over the winter. He seemed to have a gift for acquiring language. But, all of that was beside the point, because Adélaïde wanted me there. Leigh, as the ranking member of the Kellan military, would escort the king in.

We left the room in silence, but Adélaïde held my hand the whole way as we trailed behind Eben and Danae, and a set of the black-garbed guards that she calls Weavers trailed behind us. They both looked lost in their own complicated thoughts about the king of Kelly. We reached the door to the small antechamber attached to the throne room, and they exchange another look. I repress a shudder; this is the room I would wait in while Phalen held court, naked and hoping not to hear the word Toy. I squeeze Adélaïde’s hand and she squeezed back and then we let go.

There are some more of the Weavers waiting at the double doors to the throne room alongside the normal guards. We re-arrange ourselves. Adélaïde and Eben in front, Danae and myself behind. Adélaïde nods and the guards open the doors, and the first set of Weavers enter. We follow behind, and the second set comes behind us. The doors close, and the wall looks smooth from the throne room side. We enter onto the raised platform that contains two thrones. The room is already filled with the nobility, guards all around the walls and stationed at every pillar between the dais and the doors at the other end of the hall. The sun streams through the windows, lighting the place
Adélaïde and Eben take their places on their thrones: She, the larger and he, the smaller. Danae stands at the Prince’s right hand, on the right side of the dais - left for the audience. I stand on Adélaïde’s left. The four weavers stand at the foot of the steps up the dais. Sirene isn’t here. Adélaïde doesn’t make her come to the throne room, and she never enters on her own. She hasn’t been seen by outsiders since the night Phalen died, but she is doing better than she was. She eats, and allows herself to be dressed, and no longer screams in fits.

“Let them in,” Adélaïde’s voice echos out over the room. The silence is thick and heavy and complete, and the opening of the door is a like a knife into it.

At first I can’t see them through the sunshine in the outer hall, but then they enter. Leigh comes first, as planned, to present the king. Behind him is the man himself, although I can’t see him very well yet. I can only tell that he’s tall and raven-haired. I hear Danae swallow. Boots clomp, muted by the bright red carpet that covers the stone in a long river from the ornate double doors to the throne itself. There are twenty men behind the king, soldiers in dark green Kellan plate armor, arranged in neat rows of four.

They stopped when they came within five feet of the Weavers, and Leigh stepped to the side, saying, “Your majesty, allow me to present his grace, Caleb Teyregon, king of the Kellans, lord of Kelly, and protector of the great Erestian Sea.”

I stepped forward, curtsying and saying, “Your grace, may I present her majesty, Queen Adélaïde Boudreau, descendant of the Fortune Four, and protector of river and stone. I am Kay, and I offer services of translation if your grace requires it.”

“Thank you, I do not,” he said in perfect Charian. His voice slid across my skin like silk, and I looked at him. He was tall and fit, broad through the shoulders, and trim in the waist. He wore a white linen shirt under a long purple and gold brocade coat that fit him perfectly, with black breeches and black boots. He had skin a shade or two darker than Danae’s and the same raven-black hair, worn in loose waves that brushed his collar. He resembled Eben, but only to a point. They had the same deep-set eyes, and the same nose, but Eben was thinner through the face and mouth than his brother. But the king was obviously older than his brother, thicker, somehow more lush than Eben, and more charismatic. His presence filled the room, pressing against the edges, demanding attention. His walk was a swagger, his movements broad, and he had that strange otherworldly beauty that some korianan had. For that is what he was - a Korianan like Danae. They were both random born to human parent, and so his brother was human. They both, to my eyes, were something other. Too beautiful to be human. So was Leigh, but he’d never mentioned it and so neither had I. I didn’t know if humans could see the difference, but I wasn’t human, and I saw them clearly as other.

He was striking and I was drawn to him. I noticed that he wasn’t looking at his brother, though, and I followed his gaze to Danae. If there is one skill I’ve acquired as a whore, it is a keen reading of people. There was desire in her face, naked and conflicted. Her eyes shone and her breathing changed, and her eyes burned into his. She licked her lips, and broke the gaze. I turned back to him, and he’d turned his attention to his brother.

“I have been told,” the king said, “That my brother wishes to marry. Let it be known that I have granted my permission for him to marry your beautiful queen. I have given gifts of food and help to the people of Charias, and on my progress here I have come to know them and they know me. I wish nothing more than to have our nations joined as one, and be proud to call your people my own.”
Adélaïde stood, “We have gladly accepted your gifts, and your consent to our wedding. Come, great king, let us become family.”

The shadows parted, and the king climbed the steps amid clapping from the assembled nobility. Oh, there were sharp looks to be sure. The trials hadn’t been held yet for the prisoners taken during the transition of power to Adélaïde, and some still protested the loss of sovereignty. But with no other way to pass the long winter months locked in the castle, he’d been busy, and he’d turned many in his favor. There were twice as many who were happy at the pair, eager to start trade via the port, and personally invested in their match being a successful one.

We left through the same door we’d entered. The king had arrived in Charias.
Danae, Charias

Chapter Summary

Dining together, the two royal families begin the delicate process of integration, and Danae finally has to face Caleb.

Chapter Notes

There is explicit sex in this one, towards the end of the chapter. Some themes of D/s and possession.

We sat around a small table, candle light making dancing shadows on the wall. The remains of the last course sat on the table, the servants outside waiting for our command before clearing away the empty plates. It was warm in the small formal dining room of Adélaïde’s rooms, and we’d had enough wine that the conversation flowed easily. The chairs were comfortable, and I leaned back in mine, sipping the sweet summer wine from my crystal wine glass.

“-- and then,” Eben said, recounting a story from our childhood, “the three of us had to hide in the garbage pile until the cook stopped looking for us. It was near dark before we managed to get away, and she looked at us askance until we were teenagers!”

Even Adélaïde laughed, “And what of the cat?”

“Swear I still see the damned thing roaming the castle sometimes,” Caleb replied, grinning.

“My mother was so angry with us!,” I added, smiling at the memory of her.

“She made us bathe in with the rough lye soap instead of the kind we normally used, just to teach us a lesson. I still remember the look on her face when she smelled us,” He imitated my mother’s stern disapproval, and even I laughed at it.

“And YOU got off easy,” I said, “Once you were gone I had to listen to her muttering about it for hours. ‘Playing the garbage, Danae, really. What were you thinking? That is no place for a proper young lady and to think you dragged the princes into your bad behavior! I have half a mind to stripe your behind!’”

The boys roared at my imitation and Caleb said, “Your impression of her is spot-on, really. That is exactly how she sounded.”

“Sounded?,” asked Adélaïde, “Is she no longer with us?”

I shook my head and took a sip of wine, “She passed away of sickness a few years later. I was, what? 14? That would have made Eben 15 and Caleb 17. Their mother died when they were 1 and 3 respectively, and their father hired my mother right after I was born to look after them.”

“That sounds about right,” Caleb agreed, “We all miss your mother.”
“We do,” agreed Eben, raising his wine glass. We all repeated the gesture and drank, “And what of your family, Adélaïde?”

“Well,” she said, putting her glass on the table and leaning back in her chair, “As children, my siblings and I were close. Phalen was the eldest. Then I was born, then Thérèse, and Sirene. Our mother died of childbed fever after Sirene’s birth. When Phalen was 18 our father died under, well, suspicious circumstances. Phalen started acting out when he was around 14 or so, but my sisters and I stayed close.”

“Speaking of family, there was something strange in your title that raised my curiosity. The portion that says ‘descendant of the Fortune Four’. What does that mean?,” asked Caleb.

“As I’m certain you already know, my family is one of the most ancient of all human families. Before the Banishing of the Korianan, the founder of our line of rulers was a man named Arno Boudreau. He fought a war against another family named the Morels - whom we only know of due to their intermarriage into my family following the war. They fought over the spit of land Ville Flue now sits on, and we won. Arno had four children: Daniel, Arnella, Xavier, and Sosanna. We call them the Fortune Four because they were the real founders of the city and ruled collectively - including the sisters. One of their children was queen, and a powerful earth magus, and she is responsible for the raising of this castle. So we draw our legitimacy as rulers through their line.”

“The Banishing was over a hundred thousand years ago,” I said, “How do you know so much about them? How have their names not been lost or turned to myth?”

“Because of this castle. It took over a thousand people to raise it, and a thousand of them were korianan during the height of their power. Enchantment is sunk into the bones of the place, and one of the enchantments are the statues and paintings that you’ll notice everywhere. We have the faces and names of every Boudreau ruler since Stoneriver was pulled from the bones of the earth.”

“How has the river not changed course?,” Eben asked.

“Upstream and downstream it has, but the sections occupied by the city have been lined in stone to prevent the rivers from changing course, and to protect the city from being undercut by the flow of the rivers.”

“The ingenuity of it is remarkable,” Caleb added, “But how have you avoided the problem of an unfruitful marriage? Surely there have been rulers incapable of having children.”

“There have,” she agreed, “We practice polygamy to ensure sufficient heirs.”

“Not polyandry?,” I smirked.

“A woman can only bear so many children, no matter how many times she marries,” she shrugged, “But it’s not unheard of in the case of the man possibly being the cause of infertility.”

“And there have been no dynastic struggles? No questions of legitimacy? No bastardy? No power struggles?,” Caleb asked in disbelief.

“Of course there has, but the winner’s name has always been Boudreau.”

“Well, now it will be Teyregon,” he replied.

“No, brother,” Eben said, “We discussed it, and I have decided to adopt Adélaïde’s name. Partially to quell the doubts of the nobility, and partially because as it turns out, the name is key to the castle’s magic itself, and without the connection to the castle there is no legitimacy of their heir.”
“The castle must accept the ruler,” Adélaïde explained, “The enchantments simply won’t work if the heir is illegitimate or from another family. Without the enchantments’ acceptance, it’s impossible to rule. For example, there were doors in the place that simply wouldn’t open for me before I was crowned. They only opened for Phalen.”

“Is the magic tied to the name, the blood, or the position of ruler? Is there something to say that the control won’t pass to me after you are married and the treaties signed to make me high king?,” Caleb frowned.

Adélaïde and Eben exchanged a look, and Eben spoke, “We aren’t sure, but felt it best not to risk losing control of the castle during such a delicate change in leadership.”

Caleb leaned back, mollified, “I suppose I can see the sense in that.”

“So brother,” Eben said, changing the subject, “How has live been in the city since I left? Everything running smoothly, I hope?”

I knew that look of mischief on Eben’s face well, and I groaned internally. What had he done? Caleb answered the question, “I don’t see why you needed to foist another of your lovers on me as an advisor.”

“Because I love torturing you. Has he not been doing his job properly?”

“He has,” Caleb admitted grudgingly, “Almost as well as you before him.”

“Ha! I knew I’d chosen well! He’ll make an apt replacement for me.”

“Great, that’s just what we needed, another fixer,” I grumbled.

“Fixer?,” Adélaïde asked.

“I fill a certain niche on my brother’s council,” Eben explained, “I solve problems that need solving. It’s a very flexible role that these two started referring to as a Fixer.”

“It’s an accurate name,” I pointed out.

“Eamonn is capable, even if a little too ambitious for my taste. That he was my lover for a time was only a point of a amusement for me. A gift, from me to you, brother,” Eben grinned.

“He prevented an outbreak of the Winter Plague,” Caleb said.

“He did?,” Eben sounded surprised.

“The Abimite priest on my council was found dead of it. Caleb took his place and prevented the spread.”

I gave a snorted laugh, “You are saying you had one case of the Winter Plague, and it affected his main competition and no one else? That was not a normal case of Winter Plague.”

Caleb frowned, “Are you saying that you think Eamonn assassinated the man using a disease? That’s ridiculous.”


There were a few beats of quiet before Eben added, “He’s not just Gregaran, he’s a born and bred Gregaran. If anyone could use the winter plague to selectively kill, it would be a Gregaran.”
“Bah,” Caleb said, waving away the possibility, “No one is that reckless.”

I disagreed, but I kept the thought to myself. I didn’t wish to start a fight with Caleb here, especially not over something I cared so little about. Whatever was going on back at court in the city was none of my affair, no more than it had been while I’d been living there. We sipped our wine in silence, the conversation having died down and all of us having our own thoughts.

“Well, I believe I am ready for bed,” Caleb said, rising, “Thank you for a lovely meal, Adélaïde.”

“You’re welcome. Should I summon someone to take you to your rooms, or do you remember the way.”

“No need. I don’t remember the way, but I’m sure Danae can show me, can’t you?,” my head snapped up at the mention of my name and I swallowed. I shouldn’t want to be alone with him, but I did. Oh, I very much did. My attraction to him burned as hot as it ever had, and the closeness of his person still consumed my awareness as it always had. My traitorous body clenched at the thought of having him inside me again, while my brain invented new ways of forgiving him for past wrongs so I could indulge my physical longings. I knew what was coming, and I’d known since he entered the throne room and only had eyes for me.

“I can,” I agreed, sealing my fate. In any event, there was no polite way for me to turn him down. I ignored Eben’s knowing look.

“Excellent,” I stood and said my goodbyes, following him out into the hall. Just my luck. His rooms were nowhere near the queen’s, and the castle was a sprawling warren. We had a lengthy walk ahead of us, “So I have finally found you.”

“You have,” I admitted, “Although I didn’t really think you were looking.”

“I was, that is why I sent Eben out. And I find you in a very strange place, indeed. Standing on a dais with a foreign queen, next to my brother, wearing mail and a sword. Of all the things,” he chuckled and shook his head, “And, of course, not dead.”

“No, not dead,” I agreed, concentrating on walking and not on the heat of his closeness in the hallway or the warm, spiced smell of him.

“Oh come now, give me more than that!”

My eyes flicked sideways to him, “Are you really curious or looking to start a fight?”

“It’s never me that starts our fights.”

I snorted, “Of course not, you’re the picture of innocence.”

It was his turn for a sarcastic laugh, “Obviously. No, tell me, how did you come to be here?”

“After you left me,” I couldn’t keep the anger out of my voice, and he interrupted me.

“I’m sorry for that. I came to regret that action. I didn’t think it would make you leave.”

“And what DID you think?!”

He shrugged, “That you would find another to fulfil your need, and come home.”

“But why did you leave? And why did you say those things to me”
“I...don’t know,” he sounded defeated, “I went to that room truly excited. We’d been waiting so long to be together. Then we were, and nothing changed. The earth didn’t move, I didn’t feel different. I was disappointed in the act, and not in the quality of it, but because nothing inside me changed the way I expected. I took that out on you, and I shouldn’t have. Sometimes I say things and I don’t know why. I’m sorry.”

This was something I knew to be true, he did say things sometimes and do things that seemed out of his control. Sometimes, afterwards, he’d look so vulnerable, so hurt and confused, that it made me feel the need to protect and comfort him, “I can forgive you, I think.”

“Thank you. So, continue the story?”

“Ah, right, well, I went to Isandro--”

“The man I dice with?”

“Diced, he was killed in the attack on the fort. But, yes. I went to Isandro and he took me into his service and trained me in swordplay, and...other things,” I looked at him again, seeing his reaction. His face was neutral. I knew he must be feeling jealousy, but I would be dead if I hadn’t taken a partner, “He fed my Fire, too. Made me part of almost all his military matters, and took me to the stair fort. I was taken during the battle by Phalen’s bastard son, and so I ended up here. I’ve remained here since, until Eben came.”

I wasn’t ready to give him more detail than that, “You said Isandro died during the battle at the fort. Who has been keeping you alive since then?”

“I’m not telling you that, because I’d like that person to remain with their head on their shoulders, thank you very much,” I smiled at him to soften the statement, “And, as it turns out, I have a talent for the sword.”

“Of course you do,” he laughed, “Why am I not surprised? I am trying to picture you living at the front. To think, I sent people everywhere searching for you, and you were so close. Only Eben found any trace of you,”

“The particularly funny part in that is that I wasn’t making great pains to cover my tracks. I simply thought you didn’t care that I’d gone.”

“I cared. I cared very much,” Our eyes met, and it was like when he’d seen me in the throne room. There was something deep in them, “Eben says I’ve been...difficult since you left. And I admit, I feel calmer now that I am beside you again. You gentle me.”

I laughed and swayed, nudging him playfully with my elbow, “Only you would be gentled by a loud, mean, sword-wielding adrenaline junkie who makes terrible decisions.”

“Oh, you’re not as bad as all that. Besides, beauty hides all manner of sins,” he grinned so I’d know he was joking. We reached the door to his rooms, where we stood away from the guards, “Do you want to join me inside for an evening drink?”

I bit my lip, deciding, “I think we both know what you’re asking, and what happens if I go in there with you.”

“Would that be so bad?”

“I’m not sure.”
“Let me help you decide,” he put his arm around my waist, slowly drawing me closer, giving me time to push him away. I didn’t, and I didn’t stop him from lowering his mouth to mine, and I didn’t stop him from kissing me to breathlessness. I leaned into it, my hand sliding up his neck and into his hair, holding his face to mine. His hand cupped my behind through the dress I’d worn to dinner. My mouth opened against his, our tongues dancing and sliding against each other. Good gods, I’d missed the taste of him. In me he opened a deep well of desire, made me into a thing of want, banished all logic thought from my mind. And he made me wet, wetter than I was with any of the others. I remembered how our bodies fit, how good he felt inside me, and I groaned against his mouth.

“Inside,” I said, making my choice. He took my hand and we went into his rooms, shutting the door behind us. We undressed and kissed our way through his meeting room and into the bedroom, leaving a trail of clothing behind us. His naked skin was hot against mine, his arms a hard cage around my body, his thickness trapped against my body. I spoke between our rabid, sucking kisses, “Let me-I want-to feel--your cock-in my mouth.”

I felt his groan rumble through his chest, and I fell to my knees in front of him. With one hand I held his cock in place, resting it on my lips while I looked up at him. I gripped his ass with the other, holding his hips still. Holding his eyes with mine, I opened my mouth and wrapped my lips around his cock, licking it and letting it disappear an inch at a time. I swallowed around him, working him down my throat, and holding my lips to his body for a moment before sliding back to breath. I used my hand to help me so that I could look up at him without hurting myself. I sucked his cockhead, using my hands to twist from my mouth to the base, and then dipped my head further down the length of him. I sucked on the outstroke every time, using my hands and mouth, setting a rhythm. I felt his hands in my hair and I watched him, his body swaying, watching what I did to him. God, he looked even better than I remembered. I savored every groan and moan as gifts I’d earned with the skill of my mouth and hands.

“Danae, oh fuck, Danae,” he groaned, “Wait...stop, I’ll come if you don’t stop.”

I had plans of feeling him inside me, so I stopped, kneeling, letting his cock rest on my lips again, grinning up at him, “Are you sure?”

He smirked back at me, “As much as I’d like to see your tits splattered with my cum, it’ll have to be another time. I have plans for your pussy tonight.”

“Oh? And what plans are those?,” I gave his cockhead another quick, teasing suck.

“You’ll see,” he backed away from my teasing, dropping backwards onto the bed, sitting there, cock wet and twitching. I stood and crossed to him, straddling him, using my hips to rub my dripping pussy along the length of him.

“How long until you’ve back far enough away from the edge that I can have you inside me?”

“A little longer,” he kissed me, wrapping his arms around me. He laid back, taking me with him. Both of his hands grabbed handfuls of my ass, groaning against my mouth, “Fuck, you’re so hot Danae. Bring that pussy up here to my mouth, I want to taste it.”

I did as he asked, and he held my hips in place while I straddled his head. I crouched low, moaning and closing my eyes as I felt the first long lick of the flat of his tongue against me. His tongue made long, luxurious strokes against my clit until he drew a moan from me. When my hips tried to rock to get more sensation, I felt the point of his tongue against the hard bud between my legs, flicking and circling until he found the rhythm that made me moan the loudest. I was close, so close, and he opened his mouth, making a seal around me, sucking on my clit while he flicked it
with his tongue. My hands were buried in his hair, and they tightened to fists as I came, tilting my head back and crying out. He held me fast, wringing the last drops of my orgasm from me until I was too sensitive and I forcibly pulled myself away by rolling off of him and flopping onto my back on the bed.

“Fuck,” I groaned, with feeling. He rolled over so he was on top of me, between my spread legs. I felt him rubbing against my clit for a moment, and then he was pushing inside me in one fast, hard thrust. My pussy stretched around the thickness of him and I cried out as his body seared mine open.

“Mmm,” he nuzzled my ear, nibbling it, fully sheathed deep inside me. He was so much thicker than Leigh, at least as thick as Isandro had been. I loved the mingled pain and pleasure of it, “Still throbbing from my tongue.”

I turned my head and kissed him hard, grabbing his ass with both hands and digging my nails in, trying to pull him deeper. Fuck, he felt good. He let go of my mouth to kiss a trail down my neck, sucking. Every pull made me pussy throb around him, “Oh gods, you’re so big. I’d forgotten how big you are.”

He laughed against the skin of my neck and lifted his head, looking me in the eyes. He pulled out of me slowly and I whimpered, “You like it big like that?”

“Yes,” I whimpered.

“Most men aren’t thick like I am, are they,” I shook my head, biting my lip, wanting him to plunge back into me. He watched me, knowing the effect he was having on me.

“Please,” I begged.

“Please what?,” he pushed a little more of himself back into me.

“Please fuck me!”

“You can do better, Danae.”

“Ooohhh,” I moaned, “Please give me all that thick cock! I need it inside me! Please make me come with it!”

He pushed back inside me and I groaned in relief. He set a rhythm and before long I was squirming under him, meeting his thrusts with my hips. I could feel my wetness on my thighs, hear the noises it made as he slid in and out of me.

“Faster, harder!,” I pleaded. He pushed himself up on his arms and looked down at me.

“Yeah? You like it hard now?”

“Mhm,” I responded. He upped his pace, cock squishing inside me.

“Like that?”

“More,” He shifted his position so that he was kneeling, legs spread so he was low, looking down at me and holding my thighs for better leverage. After he re-positioned my thighs were closer together, “Oh, fuck, you feel even thicker!”

He didn’t reply, but he did set a rhythm. All of the muscles he had from training with his sword
master served us both well, and he fucked me hard. His cock rubbed mercilessly against the sensitive spot inside, and our bodies smacked together. His cock became a thick blur of movement inside me, and I came, wailing as the fluid gushed out of me.

“That’s it Danae, that’s it baby girl, come for me. Oh, yes, come all over my cock,” he hadn’t stopped moving and he fucked my throbbing pussy into another spurting, gushing orgasm while I screamed.

He dropped forward, using a long, slow strokes that made my whole body shudder, “Keep screaming like that and you’ll wake the castle.”

“Don’t care,” I replied.

“Roll over so I can make you come from behind,” he pulled out of me with a slurping, sucking sound and I rolled over, making myself comfortable, and opening my legs for him. I pushed my ass up, and felt him slide in deep. I shuddered as his cock slide over my g-spot, making a humming noise in my throat. His legs straddled mine and he leaned forward, holding himself up with his arms and pushing deep. His hips moved, and his speed upped in tempo. He thrust hard inside me, so hard that the springy-ness of the mattress under us pushed me back up against his cock.

“Yesyesyesyes,” I groaned. In that moment, my world was only his cock, his hips, his body. He leaned forward, the heavy weight of him pressing into me, and the more extreme angle making him rub even harder against the front wall of my pussy. He cupped my chin in his hand, lifting my head a little. His breath was hot against ear.

“Whose pussy am I fucking?”

“Yours!”

“That’s right, this is my pussy. Is my pussy going to come for me? Are you going to squirt all over me again?”

“Yes!,” My voice was strained, and I was close, “Yes, yes, yes!”

“That’s it, let that pussy come for me, baby,” I wailed again as I let go, come flowing. And this time, he must have come with me, because I felt the flood of magic surge through me. I realized then that I felt him twitching and his cock jumping inside me. When he was finished, he rolled off me flopping on his back spread-eagle. I rolled over, my head laying on his bicep, “Fuck, Danae.”

He ran a hand down his face and through his hair. I nodded, “Yeah. Damn. Just, uh...give me a minute to come down and I’ll head back to my rooms.”

“Absolutely not. I’m not done after one time, and I intend to have you in the morning too.”

“Oh, well, in that case,” I turned and wiggled closer to him. We fell asleep before he rebounded, but, as promised, he had me again in the morning. It was good, but I couldn’t help wondering...why the change of heart?
Raendra, Mannonesha

Chapter Summary

Buoyed by early success, Raendra pressed forward. But has her quest for vengeance led her to press too far? Can she make a dent in the vastness of Mannonesha? Or will she lose all she's gained so far...

Chapter Notes

No sex, but definitely violence. Not the torture-y kind, the fighting kind.

This is the last completed chapter to this book. It's not finished, I still work on it, but it'll be a little while before the next update.

Night lay as a dark blanket, the fingers of it threading through the small woods that we waited in. To my right was Sylan, and to my left was Ander. The wolves stood nearby. The rest of the unit was deeper in the trees. Another town, the fourth, lay in front of us in an open field. There was nothing for miles, just a few stands of trees and the small bit of woodland we waited in. Farmland had been marked off in neat squares bordered by stone fences. In places the fences look to be taken apart, stones missing.

This town was larger than the others, with more towers, and was ringed by torches. It lit up the night, a blazing sign, and the snow was melted in a circle around the wall. There were two men in each tower and a rotation of doubled mounted guards that patrolled in a circle around the high palisade walls. The walls weren’t a problem for us, nor was the size of the town. A second unit had joined my original one, and I had around ninety people with me. The problem was the horses, the torches, and the tower men. The copse of trees was just out of range of our longbows.

“I saw no farmers,” Alisande said quietly, standing behind me, “I didn’t even see any whores. Only men and horses.”

“Maybe we’ve made them too afraid,” so far we’d cleared three towns, and put them to the torch, “No women will come this far from them, and the farmers flee.”

“There’s no honor in scaring farmers and whores,” Ander said.

“No, there is not,” I agreed. Our vendetta was not against the common people of Mannonesha who had committed no sin aside from living on the wrong side of a border, “We cannot fight the men on horses on open ground.”

“We can’t fight them in close quarters either,” Sylas added.

“This feels off,” Ander said, “I think they knew we were coming.”

“Their extra protection means we have scared them,” Alisande said thoughtfully.
“Good,” I replied.

“No, love,” Sylas’s tone was gentle, “We may have to pass this one by.”

The thought made me angry. I could not - would not - let this incursion into our sovereignty go. They were dirty, feckless thieves, and I would make them regret their actions.

At the same time, charging them or attempting stealth was suicide. How to get them out of their fortification? I stared at the town, working the pieces of the puzzle together. I watched them walk their routes, I watched them change their guard. The hours passed, and the others slept. Syeska and Tebron went to hunt. Eventually even Sylas and Ander left me alone. The cold seeped in, making me stiff. I did not shiver, though, I just stared at the fort, thinking of how to get in.

Finally, shortly before dawn, Sylas and Ander came to me together. Sylas went first, “We should walk. You’ve been standing there a long time.”

Ander handed me a cup of steaming tea. I took it gratefully, wrapping my cold hands around it. The warmth radiated through my gloves. I took a sip, letting it warm me, “Let’s walk then.”

They led me from my place, deeper into this small forest. I was struck with sudden homesickness for the tall trees of home, and their sheltering branches. I missed my father, too, and my little house in the treetops.

When we were away from the others Ander said, “We think this town should be skipped.”

“We think that this should be over, that we should go home,” Sylan added.

“Why?,” I asked, “Are they not still thieves? Will they not still come and steal from us? Are they not still sheltering under the fruit of our land?”

“They are,” Ander said, his voice calm and sweet, “You aren’t wrong to be angry, but--”

“--A few dead trees aren’t worth the cost in lives it will be to take that place, if we can do it at all. Maybe if we had more people, or allies with horses, or even a good supply of starburst arrows,” Sylas cut in, “But we don’t. We have a hundred good people against a fortified place with more soldiers. We are not meant for this kind of battle.”

I was silent, their words filtering through my mind, and Ander took up the thread, “They clearly knew we were coming. Word of your deeds is spreading.”

“Good! Let them cower.”

“No, not ‘good’. We rely on stealth, and we cannot have it if they know we are coming.”

“If we show them mercy, they will come again,” I was angry, but their words appealed to my homesickness. That made me angrier, because it made me feel weak. I longed for home and they were giving me an easy way out, “We must slay them!”

“Love, I’m not saying never--,” Sylas began.

“Stop calling me that,” I spat, “You only do it when you’re trying to gentle me, and it’s patronizing.”

There was a flicker of hurt on his face, but he covered it and continued, “Raendra, we can come back with the things we need to successfully complete this but the bare fact of it is if you take us in
there most of us won’t survive. How does the death of your units, possibly even that of yourself or your husband, help anything at all?’

“This is sense, Rae, not weakness,” Ander added.

“Damn you for knowing me too well,” I scowled, “Is this only your idea? Something you cooked up between the two of you out of fear for my person?”

“No,” Sylas said, his voice flat, “this is what the other siblings say, and this is what the people say as well. They will follow, because they are bound to, but they don’t believe we can win.”

If all of the people with me were having second thoughts, or doubting what we were doing, it was at least worth considering their words, “Alright, I’ll consider it. Set the watch, cover the signs of our presence, and move the camp into the branches. I will give you an answer at sundown.”

I didn’t wait for them to answer, I turned and walked back to our camp. I passed Alisande on the way, and stopped to give her the same instruction, but she interrupted me, “There you are! There’s been a hawk.”

Worry lanced through me, “From whom?”

“One of the hawk-brothers in the units to the northwest. They took two forts the same way we took three, but encountered a trap on the third. They lost most of their unit, and the fort still stands. He is heading this way with the survivors.”

“That makes nine border forts that we know of,” I said. The four we encountered, the three included in the message, and two more we’d heard about from the hawk-sister with the units to the southeast. The loss of so many people from the other unit gave me pause, Ander and Sylas’s words playing in my mind, “I’m going to move the camp into the trees and remove all marks of our passing. Set a double watch. We will leave at sundown, so send the hawk back with a message to retreat back to Avenree. Same for the other units in the southeast. We need to rethink our approach.”

I saw a certain amount of tension leave her face. My men weren’t wrong, others were hesitant about attacking the fort. She nodded, “Right away.”

“I’ve been awake all night, I’ll be sleeping, but make sure they know to wake me at even a hint of trouble,” she nodded in acknowledgement and I walked away, back closer to our main camp. When I arrived, dawn was coming and we’d never stayed in one place through the day, so they were packing their things. Most were awake, and they all looked up when I walked into their midst. Most were leaning against trees, or sitting on fallen logs while they ate dried meat. I stood in the center of them and said, “Rangelings, attention! We will be leaving tonight at sundown, back to Avenree. Remove all traces of fire and cover your tracks, retreat up into the branchest of the trees. Stay hidden, keep your weapons ready. Sylas, Alisande, and Ander will be assigning extra watches to ensure our safety during the day. We leave under cover of darkness.”

There was some murmuring and nodding in acknowledgment. Then, they set to work doing as I’d instructed. I climbed the nearest sturdy-looking tree, found a stout branch, and slept. As I drifted off, I felt Syeska nearby again. I yawned and looked down, squinting. She lay curled below the tree, drifting off as well. Content in her safety, I fell asleep, drifting off among the pines.

It was the smell that woke me before anything else. At first, I thought it a cookfire and, on waking just enough to remember where I was, felt a momentary burst of anger at the person willing to risk fire.
Then I heard Syeska barking, and shouting drifted into my sleep-fuzzed brain. I felt her urgency, and sat up, awake. I looked around, frowning, trying to figure out what was going on. Puffs of smoke swirled on the breeze, tiny, dancing ribbons that meant something was wrong.

I climbed down from the tree, dropping soundlessly onto the forest floor. I turned towards the edge of the woods, where I knew the watch would be. Syeska padded along beside me as I jogged towards the thinner trees. Smoke came thicker here, and dread coiled in my stomach, tense and hungry for adrenaline.

I didn’t make it far before I found flame. I knew, with a certainty, that the path of the watchers would be on the other side, but fire was jumping from tree to tree, the pine-needle-covered ground blazing. I was not going to make it out that way, but I needed to know if anyone was nearby.

I pulled out the small flue that we used for communication in the forest, and played the series of notes that signaled to another rangeling. It sounded like bird song to hide the source, but was loud enough to be heard in the forest. I listened, hoping to hear something from one of my people.

It took a few tries, but I heard the answering call. We whistled back and forth until I found him, coughing from smoke, singed clothes, but otherwise unharmed.

“Captain,” he said, the relief palpable. This was one of my rangelings, from Avenree.

“D’yesh, good to see you unharmed. Where is your watch partner?”

“I sent her ahead, back to camp. I don’t know where the other pair is, but when the fires started, I whistled and got no answer.”

The fire crackled nearer, and I motioned for him to follow me, walking deeper into the woods, “Did you see how it started?”

“No, but I find it suspicious that the other party didn’t answer. Our paths were supposed to cross soon, and they should have been close enough to hear me. I waited as long as I could, but I had to leave.”

I nodded, “Let’s gather the others.”

We walked as slowly as we dared, whistling the call tune. We got answers, especially around the camp, and people gathered. I split them into groups of four, and had them make their to the other side of the forest. I told them to stay hidden, up in the branches if they must, for as long as they could, and gave instructions to go back to Avenree if we were separated.

I picked a few groups to help me search, two in the branches, and two on the ground with me. After that, we ran for the safety of the other side of the forest. The fort was on the south side, so we started north. This was the way we’d entered in order to avoid detection, and I felt it would be the easiest way to avoid getting lost.

We were about halfway there when Ander came through the trees with nine other rangelings. Almost all were accounted for, now, and I felt a rush of relief on seeing his face. Alisande and Sylas were still missing though.

“There is fire to the west,” Ander told me after we got everyone moving again. Whistles could be heard all around us, the other rangelings doing as they were taught to do. I felt gratitude for the discipline that all of their respective commanders had instilled in them.

“And to the east,” came a voice from above me. I looked up and Sylas was in the branches,
jumping from tree to tree. Tebron melted out of the forest to walk beside us as Sylas came down, “We are being herded.”

“I feared as much,” I replied, “Have you seen Alisande?”

“No, but she was on watch,” Sylas answered.

“I did not see her either,” Ander added.

“I encountered D’yesh when I went to go look for the watch. He said he’d been due to cross paths with the other set of watchers and wasn’t able to find them,” I shook my head, “We will find nothing good on the other side of this.”

“Agreed,” Sylas looked grim. We kept walking. The wind was low today, and the ground damp from the snows that had fallen and been trampled, or melted. The fire was slow, and we outpaced it. When I saw the forest thinning, I whistled the signal that meant ‘take to the trees’ and then ‘hold’. I watched the others climb up, doing as they’d been trained to do since they were young.

“With me,” I said to Sylas and Ander, although it was redundant. They would not leave my side. We crept to the edge of the forest, keeping low and flitting from tree to tree until we could see the open land beyond.

It was, as we expected, not good. Two lines of men, about two hundred or so, were waiting for us to leave the woods. The front line was mounted on horses, wearing chainmail covered in tabards, and the back line was dressed the same but unmounted. The tabards were red, the color of the Reinharts. These weren’t intrepid settlers, these were men of the army under the command of the king of Mannonesha.

The horses snorted and pawed the ground, bored, their breath fogging in the cold. I wished we could draw them into the woods, but it would not happen. They were burning and the men had only to wait us out. The only advantages we had were surprise and discipline.

“They’re in bow range,” I whispered to Sylas, who was closer to me. Ander was in the trees above us.

“And I don’t see any of their own. They only have swords.”

“I have an idea. Come on, let’s get back to the others,” I have a low whistle to Ander, using my mouth instead of my flute, and we turned back into the forest. I could smell the fire and the burning of the trees, but the smoke was still distant and I could see no flames, nor a glow. We had some time.

When we reached the spot we’d left the men, all three of us retreated into the trees. Using the flute, I called one of my rangelings. She was younger, and exceptionally quick in the treetops. I explained my plan, and told her to relay the message to the others. Off she sprinted, and I listened for their whistled acknowledgment.

Once I had it, I whistled the advance. We jumped from branch to branch. Even though this wasn’t our own woods, we’d been doing this our entire lives. The trees were old and close enough together that there were plenty of branches in reach, and when we couldn’t reach, we had ropes and claws to help us. Throwing them onto other branches and swinging from tree to tree was as second nature to us as breathing.

When we reached the edge, I signaled a halt. The sound was heard by the men, I was sure of it, but none of them seemed to notice it for the sound that it was. Below us, I saw small animals starting
to break free of the woods and scamper into the snow of the field. It had been warmer these past few weeks, and it wasn’t nearly as deep as it had been when we’d started this venture. They had no trouble with it, despite being small. I saw one man nudge another and point to them, smiling.

I gave the whistle to draw, and picked up my own bow, pulling an arrow out of my quiver. Then, the signal for nock. I settled the arrow in place, pulling back. Beside me, Ander and Sylas did the same. Like the others, I’d drawn the thin-tipped arrows we used for combat, leaving the triangular hunting arrows in my quiver. The men were about fifty yards away; no problem for the longbows we used. I exhaled, aiming, and gave the signal to loose the arrows.

I fired, aiming for the person who looked to be the commander. I was easily the best shot in Avenree’s rangelings, and likely among the best in the whole of the rangelings. I hit what I aimed for, and the arrow took him in the chest. Arrows came flying out beside mine. Some missed, embedding themselves deep into the ground, but others hit their targets. Men fell from horses, and some of the men in the back row screamed and fell. We sent a second round of arrows in, and that was as far as we got before the scrambling men got their shields up.

Luckily, a good many of the men on horseback had fallen, and some of their horses. I didn’t have all hundred rangelings, some had been lost, but I had most and near on a hundred rangelings were capable of a lot of damage. The smell of blood made them nervous, and riderless horses ran free, creating confusion. I gave the next symbol, and all of us dropped down out of the trees. Bow in hand, we ran from the forest, screaming.

We broke around the confused lines, splitting into two flanks. I’d had them concentrate the arrow fire on the ends of the lines, and the men here had fallen in greater numbers. With no commander, they were confused, and we used that confusion against them. We shot them as we ran past, but did not give battle unless necessary. Our goal was to gain our freedom, not to kill them.

It still was necessary to fight. Syeska saved me from the first man, jumping him and tearing his throat out. The second, I took out with an arrow from ten yards away. I wasn’t capable of missing at that distance. In my heart, I said every prayer I knew for the safety of the rangelings. We weren’t that far from the border, and the sky told me it was in the afternoon. If we could make it to dark, we’d make it home.

I shot two of the remaining horses - we’d taken quite a few of them out, which was good. We were at least the equals of these people on the ground, it was calvary that we couldn’t compete with. As sad as I was to kill the animals, I cared more for the safety of myself and my people than I did for the horses. Another man came at me, and I shot him. I was running low on arrows, and I thought others probably were too. It was hard to run, the snow made the ground slippery with ice and mud, but we ran anyway.

The thundering of hooves behind me made me turn, and I cursed and ducked. The sword missed me, whistling through the air just past my head. I ran a few steps and let me feet slide, body bending backwards as I ducked under the horse and popped up on the other side. He had his shield on this side, but he couldn’t get it up fast or high enough and my arrow took him through his eye.

I looked around to see where we were. He had been close, and so arrived quickly, but the rest of the line was bearing down on us and it became clear to me that we couldn’t outrun them. I’d never before this moment wished I could ride a horse. If I could, we could jump on the back of one and get out of here. Well, I suppose, no time like the present to try and learn. I grabbed, the bridle of the animal in front of me and said, “Ander, Sylan, take their beasts. We’ll never outrun horses.”

“I can ride a horse,” Sylan said.
“You only mention this now?,” the irritation was clear in my voice.

“It only became important now,“ I made a noise of irritation. He loosed and arrow and I saw it take a nearby rider in the chest. He grabbed that horse and swung up onto its back. I imitated the motion with the horse I was holding. I whistled a signal to the other rangelings that they should look, and see me and do as I do. I whistled a retreat, too, as a reminder that they should run and now give battle. Run towards home. Imitating Sylan’s motions with the reigns of his horse, I followed him. I just hoped the others would follow.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!