

The Prince of Ravens

Book One of the Exile Series

Hal Emerson

Copyright © 2012 Bradley Van Satterwhite
Smashwords Edition

Smashwords Edition, License Notes

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient.

If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to Smashwords.com and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

This book is dedicated to:
The Kings and Queens of Fantasy,
Who trapped me with their magic;
And the Wonderful Satterwhite Parents
Who financed my addiction.

Table of Contents

[Prologue: The Seventh Child](#)

[Chapter One: Nameless](#)

[Chapter Two: Summoned](#)

[Chapter Three: The Girl and the Giant](#)

[Chapter Four: The First Ray of Sunlight](#)

[Chapter Five: The Death Watch](#)

[Chapter Six: Trust](#)

[Chapter Seven: Knowing Death](#)

[Chapter Eight: Banelyn](#)

[Chapter Nine: The Path of Light](#)

[Chapter Ten: Seek and Ye Shall Find](#)

[Chapter Eleven: The Crucible](#)

[Chapter Twelve: Out of Banelyn](#)

[Chapter Thirteen: The Most Loyal Friend](#)

[Chapter Fourteen: What You Use it For](#)

[Chapter Fifteen: Aftermath](#)

[Chapter Sixteen: Choices](#)

[Chapter Seventeen: The Lands of the Kindred](#)

[Chapter Eighteen: Decision](#)

[Chapter Nineteen: The Chosen Path](#)

[Chapter Twenty: The Pass of Cartuom](#)

[Chapter Twenty-One: Aemon's Stand](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Two: The Prince of Oxen](#)

[Chapter Twenty-Three: Aspect of Strength](#)

[Epilogue: Prophecies Fulfilled](#)

[Glossary](#)

[About the Author](#)

Prologue: The Seventh Child

In the fourth month of the one thousand and twentieth year of the reign of the Diamond Empress of Lucien, a son was born.

He was the seventh living son of the Empress – and there was much hope that he would remain so. On the day of his birth, as was customary for children born of the Empress and the Most High, he was examined by a council of twelve clockwork men known as the Visigony. Their purpose was to ascertain the child's future: theirs was the choice whether he would live or die.

Almost seven hundred children of the Empress had passed through their hands, as well as several thousand of those born to the women of the Most High. Defects were not tolerated – if the child had been disproportionate, if he had been sick or weak, if his skin had exhibited the smallest blot or sign of mortality, they would have cast him off the edge of the highest tower, there to meet his death as a disgrace to the Empress and an unfit heir. But he passed their scrutiny, and it was whispered that this child, born as the seven hundredth, was the true seventh child, the one to inherit the Seventh Principality.

The boy was sent to live with the Visigony for seven days, as was customary. He was fed nothing, given nothing to drink, and left to die.

On the first day, he cried – but this was not uncommon. The Visigony reserved judgment.

On the second day, he cried still more, but from time to time was silent. The hunger was beginning to affect him, to sap his strength at the moment of life when he needed it most.

On the third day, he whimpered through the morning hours, begging wordlessly for help and strength from his absent Mother. But he would not find help from Her, the Visigony thought with ruthless, mechanical smiles; that Woman would never help him.

On the fourth day, there was no noise – and the Visigony began to move about the Fortress anxiously as they always did when sensing the nearness of a Death. Those servants who worked in the Fortress spread the word, and soon most of the inhabitants of the capital city of Lucien knew that the child was soon to die – that the seventh heir was yet to appear, that the child was Baseborn after all.

On the fifth day, the child began to whimper once more – and word blazed through the Fortress, this time reaching the Ear of the Empress Herself. But the Visigony was cautious. Some of the Most High had strains of power from early bloodlines that allowed them to last the first five days; indeed, that was the foundation of the Bloodmages. No, the child must survive the full seven days. They waited.

Terrible things began to happen in the capital city. Sandra Putnam woke to find her cat Solem dead as if she'd been gone a week, skin sloughed off her body and maggots bursting from her stomach. Across town Bellamy Jones walked out of his house the morning of the sixth day and felt something crunch under his foot. He looked down to see twelve vultures lying in a perfect circle in the middle of the street, having dropped from the sky in mid-flight, dead. Tim Hightower, a man in perfect health, was found in his bed, eyes wide and staring at nothing, all meaningful signs of life gone from him, left as nothing more than an empty shell. The Visigony saw and recorded these signs, and waited for the next dawn with whatever sense of anticipation their dusty, dry veins were capable of containing.

On the seventh day, the child still lived – and not only did he live, but he had grown, as if he were seventh months old not just seven days. He moved more easily than any child the Visigony had ever examined: his arms and legs were strong, his eyes bright and intelligent. His reactions were perfectly preserved, showing no sign of nerve or brain damage. He made no sound now – but his eyes recognized them, and they, who were once men in an age long gone, felt a supernatural chill run through their dried up hearts as they contemplated this child with their clockwork eyes and were

inexplicably reminded of their own mortality despite the steps they'd taken; the boy was filled with such an abundance of life that they were almost blinded.

The Visigony reported their findings to the Empress as she sat on the Diamond Throne. The boy had passed their test: he had survived the seven days and was therefore a true son if the Empress would have him. So the Empress gathered together her Children, the six sons and daughters among the seven hundred she had born that had proved to be of the Imperial Blood, and so had been allowed to live.

The Children were a spiteful lot, full of all the vices of humanity: they were proud, greedy, lustful, and full of rage, as was their Great Mother the Immortal Empress. Like their Mother, they too were unaffected by the passage of time, and over the years they fought each other for their Mother's approval and love, winning and losing petty battles that destroyed the lives of thousands of citizens of the Empire. Their Mother pitted them one against the other, and they lived like hunted and wounded animals, all the while loving her and hoping for nothing more than the chance to do Her Will.

It was to these *creatures* that the baby was brought.

Rikard, the Prince of Lions and eldest son, tested the boy's courage and with great reluctance found him satisfactory. Geofred, the Prince of Eagles, tested his intuitive sight and mental alacrity, which he found adequate. Symanta, the Prince of Snakes, tested his cunning and perception, which she grudgingly agreed were acceptable. Ramael, the Prince of Oxen, tested his strength and determination and angrily growled his approval. Dysuna, the Prince of Wolves, tested his endurance and loyalty, which she confirmed as meeting their Mother's standard. And finally Tiffenal, the Prince of Foxes, tested his luck and ties to the strings of fate, and sardonically pronounced him fit.

When the boy had passed each of their tests, the Empress herself took him into Her arms. It was Her place to judge the boy's ambition. She laid a

single finger, long and cruel, on the boy's forehead, and reached into his soul for the final test.

He failed.

With a hissing cry, she flung the child from her; the boy began to cry in pain and fear, and the Empress, a hateful expression of disgust and contempt marring the perfect features of her ancient beauty, motioned sharply to the waiting Guardians. The hulking men drew their swords and approached the child, ready to rend him limb from limb and display his body on the palace walls.

But Geofred, the Prince of Eagles, stepped in front of them.

The Empress spit out a single word, her crown burst into dazzling light, and the Prince of Eagles flew across the throne room, straight for one of the Blackstone walls. With a muffled thump, he crashed into the hard stone and fell to the floor. But despite this blow, he came immediately back to his feet, and without hesitation dashed forward, placing himself on his knees in front of his Mother.

The light from Her crown grew even brighter, a light that made the world seem harsh and terrible, but before she could speak another word of power, he began to talk in a voice pitched so only she could hear, gesturing toward his newborn brother, his eyes on his Mother's feet.

Slowly her anger subsided as the Child spoke. A smile crept across her face.

This child had failed the Empress' test, the final test, and by all means should be killed and removed from her sight immediately. And yet ... there was the matter of the Seventh Principality, the one that must be filled in order for the Empress' rule to endure for another thousand years, and for her to ensure the Return. The Chamber of Seers, led by the ancient Prophet, had read the auguries at the beginning of her rule, and though the die had been cast and the sacrifices given almost a millennium ago, the Words still rang clearly in her ears:

There will be a seventh child, a child not worthy of your line - Keep him! Do not cast him out, but around his arms bind your power; raise him as your own until his seventeenth name day, in which year he shall be both key and lock to your ambition. Upon that day, and not till then, take his life: for if he lives, so comes the rise of Light; should he die, so comes the fall of Night. That living Seventh Child shall seek to inherit the Kingdom of the Veil, and should he claim his right, all your strength shall fail. But if, before the year is out, the child is dead beyond a doubt, you shall reign forever on -

For all who might oppose you shall be gone.

The Empress once more took the child in Her arms, watching him carefully. It was not uncommon for prophecies to require sacrifice to be made true. In fact, for such a thing as the Return, a great sacrifice was only to be expected. Was this boy the answer? She tested him again, delving his mind for ambition, testing his fitness for the office of the Seventh Principality. Again, She found him lacking. A smile curved across Her face, etching itself like acid upon a stone sculpture of beauty. None other knew the prophecy, nor the one that followed, but for the Prince of Eagles, who was entrusted with the keeping of all the prophecies that the Chamber of Seers had read. He was bound to silence with ancient vows of power; he would not reveal Her plans. She raised the child above Her head, and held him as he squirmed pathetically in Her firm grip. Her brood watched from under darkened brows - would She cast him down? Or would She raise him up?

That day the word went out across the Empire that in the Fortress of Lucien a son had been born and claimed. The Prince of Ravens, the herald of the end times and keeper of Death, lived and breathed in the dark city of Lucien.

Chapter One: Nameless

The Prince of Ravens stood gazing out of his room's large arched window at the distant horizon when the clock struck the hour and the celebratory bells of his name day rang out once more across the city. It was late morning, only an hour short of midday, and yet the entire city spread out before him was cloaked in shadow. Then again, the city was always cloaked in shadow, for in the sky hung the dark, ever-present, billowing clouds that bore witness to the Empress' power. Today they were shot through with still darker threads that showed they were heavy with rain. Most of the city's people were indoors keeping dry, but the Prince of Ravens had always liked the rain.

A wind sprang up and rushed in through the open doors of the balcony to ruffle the Prince's black hair, blowing it off his forehead, and then decided to play fitfully with a few of the longer strands that fell halfway to his shoulders. His eyes, darker and blacker even than the clouds, stood out in sharp contrast to his pale white skin that had never known anything but the cloaking shadows of the city and the closed interior of the Fortress. His clothing completed the somber appearance: robes dyed midnight black after the color of his office.

The clouds stretched across almost the entire sky - but stopped just short of the horizon, giving a slim, bright, tantalizing view of a world outside Lucien. There, barely visible, was the touch of green that he imagined to be trees, and the bright gleam of sunlight reflected off a blue splash of lake. They were no more than fleeting impressions, flashes of light and swirls color, which somehow made it through the murky darkness of Lucien to the Prince's window. As he'd done countless times before, he tried to estimate the distance: twenty leagues? Thirty? The Prince knew how far a mile was, but had little practical application of judging distances. The Fortress was high enough that the view was largely unimpaired, but still this vision hovered on

the very edge of sight, the very edge of the Empress' immediate influence. It was far, however many miles away it was.

Someday I'll go, the Prince said silently, trying to will the words to be true the way his brother Rikard had instructed him. *Someday I will stand in the light.*

The clouds were constant here - the will of the Empress made it so, and as such there was no circumventing the fact. There had not been a patch of sunlight over the sprawling capital city of Lucien and the surrounding countryside in the Prince's lifetime, nor for many years before that. But he had read of the sun, in books he wasn't supposed to know existed, in the deep bowels of the Fortress. Part of him, the part that needed to see things for himself in order to believe them, felt there couldn't truly be such a thing. A giant ball of fire hanging in the sky? Ridiculous. There might not even be grass or trees or streams, or anything of the sort, no matter what anyone said. All that there was, all that there must be the whole world over, was the bright metal of Clockwork inventions, and the dull gray black of stone towers covered with the murky soup of industrial soot. That was all there was of his world, and all that would ever be.

But the light was there ...

Once he proved himself to Mother, she would let him leave the city. She had promised she would ... and then he would go to see for himself, one way or the other.

The skin on his back and shoulders grew warm and he tensed. An instant later the outer door to his chambers opened and sent a soft breeze through the room, light enough that it did not stir his heavy black robes and should have gone unnoticed. Indeed, it would have if anyone but the Prince of Ravens had been listening. Quiet, stealthy movement, and then the door was shut once more. A sense of something dry and stale that reminded him of rustling scales and cold reptilian eyes bloomed in his mind, born of the new presence permeating the room. Beneath that sense was a boiling, sickly corruption, like the white fluid secreted from a dying plant. The Prince felt his

stomach churn and he fought back the urge to be sick. The feeling passed as it always did, and the Prince took a shallow breath in through his mouth. The interloper moved a step closer, stopped, and stood watching the Prince's back, unmoving.

The Prince knew who it was – he always knew when one of the Children was near. They left a much more profound imprint on the world than the Commons and Baseborn, and with the powers of the Raven Talisman he could sense them immediately when they were near. He decided to let her speak first and so remained stationary, staring out his balcony doors, feigning ignorance of her presence.

“Hello, brother,” said a soft and silky voice behind him.

“Hello, sister,” the Prince said immediately, with a touch of boredom. He heard a rustling as she shifted in surprise, again sending images of dark scales and a sinuous form through his mind. All of his siblings were uneasy about how attuned he was to life – it was the only thing in which they could not best him.

Not that it matters, the Prince thought. As of yesterday he was the lowest of the Children. Still, his siblings hated anything that made him seem somehow better than them in the eyes of their Mother, even if the difference was ultimately unimportant.

“What is it you need?” the Prince asked in a civil monotone.

“Always staring out the window,” Symanta said, ignoring his question. She was sending a message: she would get to the purpose of her visit when it pleased her.

“Always looking ... at what? What do you think you see out there, little brother? The city will never be yours – you are last in line and always will be. So what is it you're looking at?”

The Prince didn't respond immediately. She wouldn't have understood him if he had tried to explain – none of his siblings wished for anything but more power, for a way to control the area covered in darkness. None of them thought of the area outside of Lucien, even though they lived there for the

majority of the year in their respective Principalities. Perhaps they had once – the Prince liked to think that they had, particularly his brother Geofred. He wondered vaguely if someday he too would forget his dreams of the sun.

“Nothing of importance,” the Prince sighed.

“Liessss,” Symanta responded immediately. Without turning, the Prince knew her Talisman markings were glowing a sickly green, standing out along the sides of her long, graceful neck and over the backs of her hands as she sensed the half-truth that the Prince had spoken. His heart beat faster for a handful of seconds before he could calm it and relax his suddenly tense shoulders. He turned to face her.

“I was thinking of the future, Symanta; is that a crime?”

She breathed in sharply through her wide, flat nose and her eyes narrowed dangerously. It was a crime for any to speak the names of the Children, and though such laws did not apply to the Children themselves, such a thing was still discourteous. However, his answer was ambiguous enough to pass the Snake’s test, and though she pierced him with her pale green eyes, studying his face for even the smallest trace of untruth, she found nothing. The Prince’s heart fluttered nervously again, even though he knew his sister’s powers did not extend to mind reading. The mind was impenetrable – not even the Empress could break into a person’s mind unless they allowed it. She could command them, force them to do Her will, but she could never know the inner workings of their thoughts. Many feared she could, even the Most High, but the Children knew otherwise. Not even Rikard, who had been alive for nearly five centuries and possessed the Lion Talisman, had that kind of power.

“No,” his sister said in answer, “it is not a crime to think about the future. But it doesn’t matter, because you’re already in disfavor, brother, so you can think about the future all you want. My bet is that what’s in store for you is nothing like what you can imagine.”

“Mother hasn’t made a judgment yet,” the Prince said.

“Yet Mother is displeased with you.”

“Truly? I hadn’t noticed,” he responded dryly.

“Do not play games with me!” she hissed as her temper, always short, flared up. “What have you done? I demand that you tell me!”

“You can’t demand anything of me,” the Prince said, careful to keep his tone completely even so that she couldn’t read him. “I may be the youngest and least of the Children, but you cannot command me. That is one lesson I know by heart.”

“I am over fifty years your senior,” she responded, which was true though she looked to be no more than twenty years of age, “and you would be wise not to test me, *little brother*.”

“You think in all that time you’d have learned to control your temper,” he responded, taking out his anxiety by goading her. Her cheeks bloomed with pink spots and she seemed ready to spit at him. But instead of lashing out, she smiled, and the Prince felt chills go down his back. Lesser men were known to cry and beg in gibbering madness when something caused Symanta to smile, but he was a Prince, and he would not cringe when his sister threw a tantrum.

“Soon you may very well be taking orders from me.”

The Prince’s skin began to prickle. What was this?

“What do you mean by that?”

“Mother does not take away the names of her Children lightly.”

“Do you have a message from Mother?” the Prince asked quickly, his mouth dry.

“No,” she said, and paused.

“Then what - ?”

“Don’t interrupt me,” she said, sneering. After a long, dramatic pause, she continued. “I’m here to bear you a Summons.”

The Prince’s heart stopped dead for a beat, and when it started again his chest felt as though it were being squeezed by a vice. His palms became slick with sweat and a roaring sounded in his ears. It took all of his will power

to give no visible sign of his distress as Symanta crossed the room with her sinuous, hypnotizing walk, and sat down at the large oak writing desk.

A Summons. The Empress did not Summon Her Children.

“What have you done, little brother?” hissed the Snake. She leered at him, and the Prince’s mind was taken back to the days when he was growing up, before he had received the Talisman, when she had taken out her anger on him. But he shook that off; she could not hurt him anymore, at least not like that.

The irony of the situation was that he truly couldn’t answer her, even if he had wanted to: he had no knowledge of what he’d done. Exactly a week previous, the word had been sent out by Imperial Decree that he had been Unnamed, a disgrace saved only for the lowest of the low. When he had arrived at the Imperial Chambers, overcome with guilt and shame, to ask what he had done to deserve this punishment, he had been turned away. He, one of the Children of the Empress. And now a Summons ... shadows and light, what had he done to deserve this? *What had he done?*

Through his haze of shock, the Prince noticed that Symanta was sitting in the carved wooden chair behind his desk. His room was sparsely furnished, something that set him apart from his siblings, but what he did have was meaningful to him, and something inside his chest grew hot and angry at the thought of Symanta touching any of it.

The Prince moved over to the writing desk, all the while managing to keep his face neutral and expressionless. He could feel his lips trying to twitch in disgust as he looked at her sprawled in his chair, but he wouldn’t let them do so. If he showed her what he was thinking, she would have an edge on him. The Snake Talisman she possessed was based on other’s reactions, and if he gave her nothing more than one twitch of an eyebrow she would be able to read him like a book. It was no mystery why she was the head of the Seekers.

“For you, dear brother,” she said, holding out a parchment scroll. Her hand was covered in green veins, and it looked almost as if it were molting.

The Prince reached out, keeping his face emotionless, and took the scroll. In a flash of movement, the Prince of Snakes lunged toward him.

He knew it was coming, but the action still almost made his stomach empty its contents. The sense of corruption and bile was amplified tenfold as Symanta grabbed his wrist and the green lines on her hand pulsed with a sickly light.

But the Prince's only outward response was to look calmly into his sister's face.

For a moment, the beautiful, seductive mask she often wore had been replaced by a look of gleeful triumph, but just as quickly the look disappeared and was replaced with confusion, and her eyes jerked down to the Prince's hand.

The Talisman of Snakes required one of two things: signs of emotion, or physical contact. A person could stifle their emotions to the point where they wouldn't show, but they could never get rid of them entirely, and so through touch Symanta could sense anything a person might try to hide about their emotional state. The Prince of Ravens didn't know how it worked, and he doubted he ever would, but he knew that if Symanta touched his skin she would know exactly how he was feeling, and he would be in her power.

However, the Prince's wrists and hands were covered in thick riding gloves against the cold of the open balcony doors. For a moment, Symanta stared dumbly at the Prince's hands, and then she let out a snarl and ripped her hand back, leaving the piece of parchment clutched in his fist.

"I apologize," the Prince said with the barest hint of a smile, one that he knew she would catch. "It's a bit chilly in here. I forgot that you don't like wool - so sorry, next time you wish to hold hands as loving siblings I'll be sure to wear the leather ones."

Symanta stood stock still, completely at a loss for words, though quite clearly full of an inexpressible wrath at being outwitted. And then, quite abruptly, she spun on her heel and stalked out of the room, all the time seeming to slither, her body undulating with each step.

The door closed behind her with a sharp snap; the Prince dropped his icy composure and let out a ragged breath as he clutched at the writing desk. His heart was racing as he looked down at the thin cylinder of parchment clutched in his hand. It was sealed with the Imperial emblem of the Diamond Crown over two crossed triliopes. He broke the wax, his hand shaking slightly, and read:

You are Summoned into the presence of the Empress of the Diamond throne, ruler of Lucia, Mother of the Children of the Seven Principalities, Possessor of the Light, the Fearful Shadow, the Grace of Gods and Men, to discuss your Inheritance.

The message was signed by the Hand of the Empress, a short, small, ferrety man who carried out the Empress' commands.

His Inheritance ... but that meant ...

He turned to look out the balcony doors so quickly he cricked his neck. He stumbled forward, breath coming in short, surging pants. The balcony looked out toward the south ... toward the Seventh Principality.

Each of the Children ruled a separate part of the Empire, which as a whole consisted of seven provinces that had once been nothing but uncharted territory inhabited by savages. When the Empress had arrived from across the ocean, she had expanded her territory one province at a time, using fire and the sword. The original inhabitants were quickly dealt with, and those that foolishly chose to fight instead of accepting the Empress as their rightful ruler and the embodiment of the Gods, were killed. For nearly one thousand years the rule of the Empress had brought peace to the provinces, all but the Seventh, which was the final resistant stronghold of those who called themselves the Exiled Kindred.

When the Empress had crossed the sea, she had brought with her seven talismans of power. She had kept them with her always, but the time came when she needed to expand her hold of the Empire. The rebels had infiltrated her government, causing unrest and dissension in the six

provinces under her rule, and each capital city began to suffer riot, famine, and plague, spread by the Exiled Kindred, and she needed help in order to crush them completely.

And so, five hundred years after her rule began, the Empress bore a son, the first Son of the Empress, Prince Rikard, who inherited the most powerful of the Empress' Talismans, making him the Prince of Lions. Wherever he went, he turned people to the cause of the Empire, shining like a bright light in the eyes of the lost, a safe harbor for those who had been unsure which side to choose. He drove the rebels from the Empire, and then took up residence in Tyne, the most prosperous of the Provinces, and was named Lord Commander of the Armies of the Empire.

Each of the Children born thereafter was given one of the Talismans. Many children were born, but only six more, the Prince of Ravens included, were selected as true Children of the Empress, embodying those virtues that she found most important. Each of the Children, at a certain point in their life, was given a task to complete to show their Mother they were ready to rule a part of her land. This task, and the rewards given to them after, was called their Inheritance.

It was well and widely known through prophecy that the Prince of Ravens' Inheritance was to wipe the remainder of the Exiled Kindred from the land of Lucia, and to reclaim the seventh Province, the Province farthest to the south, for the Glory of the Empire.

Was this why Mother had been so harsh? To prepare him to receive his Inheritance? He looked out his window once more.

Perhaps I will see sunlight sooner than I'd hoped.

Chapter Two: Summoned

The Prince dressed hurriedly in the best robes he owned, midnight black like all of his clothing, but with gold scrollwork on the shoulders and arms. He placed on his head the circlet that signified his position as the Prince of Ravens: a small frontless crown made of two curving, golden wings set with veins of onyx and jet. He glanced at himself quickly in a looking glass, grateful that he'd washed and shaved barely an hour earlier, and then left his rooms quickly, his heavy robes swirling about him. Outside his room, his two black-clothed Guardians who watched over him day and night fell seamlessly into step behind him, following him as silently and swiftly as shadows, despite the fact they were both over seven feet tall.

As he moved down the hall, he passed tapestries depicting famous battles and deeds of the Empress and the Children. His body felt oddly light; maybe it was just that he finally had something to do. He had never been very good at waiting around while events unfolded without him. His hand kept reaching down to his left hip to clutch a hilt that wasn't there. The sword he'd been given at the age of ten had rested there until the week before; it had become as much a part of him as an arm or a leg, but that connection had been brutally severed.

Only those with names could carry weapons.

But that would all soon be remedied. He was to receive his Inheritance. Maybe the next time he walked down this corridor it would be past a tapestry of him. The thought made him smile, but in a rueful way that lacked pleasure.

He rounded a corner, and as he did so a young woman moved out of a room in front of him in a swirl of black hair and fine red silks. She turned and gave a small gasp of surprise when she saw him standing right in front of her. The Prince was about to brush past, but stopped when he noticed who it was.

Leah Monsunne was the daughter of one of the Most High – the Monsunne family was on the rise in the politics of the palace, and Leah had been introduced to the Prince not a week before in the hopes that he would take a liking to her and bestow favor. The Prince, highly skeptical when Geofred had first told him this, had found himself quite embarrassingly struck dumb at their first meeting. She was the most beautiful woman he'd ever laid eyes on, with long chestnut hair, a figure that filled out anything she wore, and a soft mouth that was quick to laugh at the dry and sarcastic humor of the Prince that so often turned others away.

“Lady Monsunne,” the Prince said, not having to fake the sudden stirring of happiness he felt at seeing her.

Leah clutched a hand to her chest, eyes wide as though she had seen a ghost. The Prince did his best not to look down at what that hand was clutching.

“Are you well, lady? I didn't mean to frighten you.”

When she didn't respond, he repeated himself more slowly.

“Are you well, lady?”

He reached out a hand, concerned that she looked none too steady.

“My Prince,” she said, dropping a hasty curtsy and lowering her eyes. As a member of the Most High, she was allowed in his presence, but not allowed to look him in the eye unless permitted. He had given her permission.

“My Lady, why won't you look at me?”

His bluntness seemed to put her off even more, as if his acknowledgment of her actions made them shameful. She didn't look up, but instead dropped into another curtsy.

“I'm sorry, my Prince, but I am on the way to an appointment with my father. It is an emergency. May I go?”

“Of – of course,” he responded. It wasn't like him to stammer, and normally he would have wondered over his tripping tongue, but now he could

only watch, feeling rather confused, as the young woman turned and all but ran from him.

He knew she hadn't been telling the truth - he didn't need Symanta's Snake Talisman to tell him that. A sudden foreboding took hold of him as he watched her turn a corner, still at high speed. He began to walk again, slowly at first, but then more quickly until he was nearly running, the Guardians following close behind.

A thought occurred to him: she had been warned to stay away from him. The way she had started at his presence, the combination of fear and surprise on her face, it all said she hadn't expected to see him. Yet, he lived here so she was bound to see him. Someone must have told her he would not be around the Fortress much longer.

He shook his head and dispelled these thoughts; he needed to see Mother. Everything would be made clear once he could speak to Her.

The rest of the journey to the Tower was uneventful, though quite long since his rooms were in the furthest and lowest of the Fortress' spires. He moved as quickly as he dared through the long hallways and corridors, past the grand reception halls on the lower levels and the apartments of the Most High, taking a shortcut through the grand training rooms of the Guardians and Blade Masters with their Clockwork sparring enemies and training equipment, until finally arriving at the enormous doors that led to the Hall of a Thousand Glories where the Empress ruled upon the Diamond Throne. The doors, originally wood but gilded almost beyond recognition, were so huge that it took forty slaves, stationed there day and night, to open them. One of the Most High had once proposed that the doors remain closed except for visits of state, hearings, and proclamations so as to save on slaves. When the Empress disapproved, he had claimed it was in jest, so the Empress had a jester brought from the city to throw him from the Fortress roof. So as to save on slaves.

As the Prince approached the doors, a full fist of Guardians, ten in all, came forward, dressed in blinding white uniforms and full plate armor, great helms tucked under their arms.

“My Prince,” said the captain, carefully looking just below the Prince’s eyes. He was not of the Most High, nor even of the High, but was simply a Guardian and as such existed outside the social order. He would never meet the eyes of one of the Children.

“Open the doors – my Mother has Summoned me.”

“Yes, my Prince,” the captain responded, “she left this for you and commanded you read it before entering.”

He held up a steel plate, engraved with gold scrollwork, which held a roll of parchment that the Prince quickly took. The message was only a single sentence, and a brief one at that:

Await My Presence in the antechamber.

There was no signature, but the message was his Mother’s. No one else would have dreamed of commanding one of the Children.

“Very well,” he said, placing the scroll back on the plate. He turned to the left, where a single well-polished mahogany door was set in the stone wall. His two trailing Guardians, their black armor making them look like shadowy wrights next to the blinding white of the Empress’s personal guard, took up positions to either side of the door as he twisted the crystal knob and entered.

The room was dark, lit with only a pair of oil lamps in wall sconces. They were situated on either side of a long table that ran down the center of the room flanked by a number of intricately carved high-backed wooden chairs. There was no one else in the room, and after the door closed behind him, there was nothing but a heavy silence that covered him like a thick blanket. There should have been someone there - a clockwork servant perhaps, one of Geofred’s many inventions, if not a human one to offer him refreshments while he waited. A simple oversight, no doubt, but one that would not go unpunished if his Mother found out.

The Prince walked slowly down the side of the table, tracing a gloved finger along the polished wood. He felt oddly calm. But then again, the worst part of anything, he'd always found, was the waiting beforehand. Now that events were in motion -

The door at the far end of the anteroom crashed open. Shocked, the Prince's hand fell once more to his hip, reaching for his missing sword. But the hand fell away and the Prince's breathing came easier as he saw that it was only a number of servants, carrying what looked to be a tablecloth. No doubt the fools were simply late - he had left his quarters rather abruptly - he must have beaten the notice of his arrival.

"Where were you?" he asked imperiously, his voice coming out much more harshly than he'd intended. Silence followed his question, and just that quickly he knew something was wrong. One did not ignore the questions of the Children. The servants, human ones the Raven Talisman told him, approached, and as they did the Prince saw that they didn't move with the subdued quality with which all servants were bred. Their movements were too sharp, too quick - and they were coming right toward him.

"You will stop where you are!" he commanded. They didn't listen, but broke into a run down the sides of the table. Surprise set the Prince's nerves on fire and choked him as the men unsheathed long daggers from underneath their dark gray servant's garb.

Automatically, the Prince fell into a defensive stance as the first man came for him, his training taking control of his body. He stepped quickly inside the man's reach, grabbed his wrists, and broke them with two sharp blows. The dagger fell from the man's grip and into the Prince's hand; he spun it around and stabbed the man in the chest, careful to avoid the heart, seeking only to leave the man incapacitated. The servant let out a hiss of surprise and pain and fell back into the man behind him. Two other men rounded the table on the Prince's right, blades flashing in the light. With two quick motions, the Prince disarmed them, and with a third hamstringed them with a sweeping motion of the dagger.

As he spun to face a fourth man, the Prince felt a prick on his neck and a sudden numbing sensation descended along his arm, and then up across his shoulders. He looked up and saw one of the servants on the far side of the table with a *daptsing*, a dart gun that was used exclusively in the lands to the south.

Rebels? In the Fortress? the Prince thought with incredulity as the toxin flowed into his brain and shut down all further thought. Darkness swirled in on him, and the last image he had was of the inside of a sack, sewed to look like a tablecloth.

Chapter Three: The Girl and the Giant

He wasn't sure what happened next. All he could remember were brief flashes of images, scents, and sounds. He'd wake to see glimmers of light, and then blink and find himself in a shadowy world of darkness. Flames from torches once, and then a sickening blow to the head that caused the world to heave and spin. He smelled horse sweat and the stink of unwashed bodies. Felt something on his wrists, keeping his hands from moving. A pounding in his head, a sickly sweet scent in the air and salty, metallic stickiness on his lips.

He opened his eyes and found himself in a strange new world. It was a forest clearing, of that he was sure, though he'd only seen pictures such as this in books and dreams. He was laying on ... grass. He couldn't see the green color of it - *green, yes, grass is green, I've heard so* - because it was dark, but he could feel it, could feel the dirt at its base, could smell it - what a smell! He heard water flowing past him somewhere to his right and saw a deep ravine cut roughly into the ground, at the bottom of which must be flowing water ... a river. He tried to turn his head, to see more of what was around him, more of this impossible world, but a bony hand reached down and forced him to look the other way, not letting him move. Fear seized the Prince, true terror, for perhaps the first time in his life.

The hand was rough, with nails that were filed to look like claws that dug painfully into the side of his head. The other hand reached down and roughly pulled at the front of his robes. There was a prick of something being stuck rudely into his skin, and the Prince let out a gasp of pain as fire flooded his veins. It cleared his mind momentarily, and he looked up.

The clawed hand was gone, and a group of men were moving away, disappearing into the distance on horses. There was one man left, watching the Prince with amusement. The Prince, not knowing what to do, started to crawl toward the man, pulling himself forward with jerky, half-formed

motions. He tried to speak, but a choking, gasping sound was the only thing that managed to escape his throat.

The man laughed. He stood up, came toward the Prince, drew back a heavy booted foot, and smashed it into his chest.

The Prince cried out with pain as his ribs broke. The boot pulled back once more, swung forward, and again the Prince felt red-hot daggers of pain pierce his body, shooting up and down his limbs in time with the poison quickly killing him.

Killing him. The Prince was going to die.

Darkness closed in on him, and the Prince's vision narrowed. The boot swung back once more, the man laughing still. Instinctively, the Prince grabbed the leg as it swung into him, and clung to it.

The Prince wasn't sure how he hung on, but he did. And slowly his shoulders and chest began to itch, as if with a heat rash. The fire searing his veins seemed to pause, questioningly. There was a cry of pain from the man, and the Prince pulled on the leg; the man overbalanced, and fell to the ground. The Prince, with a jerking, unseeing grope, found the man's throat, and began to squeeze. The fire in his limbs began to recede, flowing quickly back to the point where it had entered his body as the breath and life began to drain out of the man beneath him. But the Prince wasn't strong enough, and with a harsh kick that smashed into the Prince's already broken ribs, the man succeeded in dislodging him, and the fire of the poison returned with a vengeance. The man left, fear spurring him onward in a shambling half-run, but before he'd gone more than a dozen paces, he tripped and fell into the partial-hidden ravine. He screamed, but the cry was cut off by a harsh *crack!* and then all was silent. The Prince lay there, gasping for breath, his chest heaving but unable to fill his lungs properly, his shoulders and back burning as he reached desperately through the Raven Talisman in the hopes it would save him. He tried to rise, but the effort sapped any strength he had left and he fell back to the ground, colors swirling senselessly about him before fading to the gray-black shadows of unconsciousness.

* * *

The Prince woke to a dull ache in his head and too bright of a light shining on his closed eyelids. He rolled over to hide his face – and rolled right off the bed onto a rough wooden floor with a painful thump.

His eyes sprang open, and he immediately regretted it. Breath hissed into his lungs, cold and crisp, as a lancing stab of pain shot from his eyes to the back of his head, down the length of his spine and all the way to the soles of his feet, before returning to pound like a mad carpenter on his closed eyelids. The sensation made him shudder and gasp like a drunk doused in a bucket of ice water.

“Good morning!”

The voice that called to him was very deep, and as it entered through his ear it paused to rattle around the inside of his head a bit, before abruptly leaving through his clenched teeth. It was a thoroughly unpleasant sensation.

“I would offer you breakfast,” the voice went on to say, the Prince moaning as the deep rumbling quality of it continued to twist into his skull like a rusty screw, “but dillixi venom does not react well to food. And when I say does not react well, I mean you’d start vomiting all over me and then die. Highly unpleasant for me at least, whatever you may think.”

The Prince finally managed to get his eyes open, and he tried madly to find the source of the voice. For that matter, he also tried to find his own voice, which seemed to have gotten stuck somewhere around his stomach and wouldn’t come out of his mouth no matter how hard he tried to force it.

The first thing he noticed was the floor, because his nose was pressed up against it: it was made of rough-hewn planks of wood, fitted poorly together and warped by the elements into curving, twisted lines. He managed to raise his head slightly, despite a nasty throbbing ache in the back of his neck, and saw that the wall, barely a foot in front of him, was in

the same state; indeed, it was so warped that he could see brief flashes of colors from outside, though his eyes wouldn't focus enough to allow him to discern definite shapes.

"Here," said the voice. An enormous hand descended on the Prince and yanked him into the air. His stomach twisted violently and he was almost sick as the hand deposited him unceremoniously into a rickety wooden chair. The world finally stopped spinning, and the Prince gaped at what he saw in front of him.

The man whose voice he had heard was no man but a giant – that was the only way to describe him. Swallowing noisily, the Prince tilted his head back to look up into the man's face, which was broad and rough with a square, well-kept black beard that was so thick it almost looked like an extension of his chin. The man was so tall that his head nearly scraped the ceiling of the small wooden shack; the Prince was no stranger to giants – he'd been surrounded by Guardians, the elite fighting force of the Empire, since his infancy, all of whom were no less than seven feet tall – but this man would have towered over even them. His clothes were simple, made of brown, gray, and green cotton, though they seemed to fit him oddly, and he looked strangely bulky in places. The long sleeves and pants were worn at the cuffs, and the man's boots – enormous leather affairs that looked as if they could have been made of the entire side of a cow – were old and well broken in.

The Prince, who had never seen such a sight in his life, couldn't make any sense of it, and for a brief moment began to question his sanity. But the strangest thing wasn't finding a towering hulk of a wild man holding him captive in a shack. The strangest thing was that this towering hulk of a wild man who was holding him captive in a shack was bustling around a makeshift kitchen brewing tea.

At that same moment, the Prince also realized that his heavy palace robes had been removed, and he was now dressed in his simple linen under-tunic and a pair of heavy brown pants he'd never seen before.

“Who are you?” the Prince managed to croak out, finally finding his voice. “And where are my clothes?”

The behemoth of a man ignored him, and instead reached over and placed a small tin cup full of some steaming liquid in front of him.

“Drink it,” he growled, his voice deep and implacable as a rushing avalanche. The implication seemed to be that if the Prince did not drink, drinking would be thrust upon him. So, the Prince reached for the cup and downed the liquid contents in a single, long draught, his head still fuzzed and he unable to decide whether this was all a dream. His memories were only splintered impressions of sights and sounds that helped him not at all in deciphering where he was or how he’d come to be there.

As the liquid hit his throat, it suddenly began to burn, causing him to gasp and choke. The feeling of pins and needles being pushed into his skin burst into life at the tips of his fingers and toes before the sharp, stabbing sensation behind his eyes gave one final parting throb and all the pains disappeared together. The man chuckled as the Prince continued to cough and sputter, and he reached over with an arm as thick around as the Prince’s entire torso and thumped him on the back, nearly knocking him off the chair and onto the ground.

“Good, right? Dillixi venom - sorry you had to go through a bout with that nastiness. But hey, you get to drink spirits to clear it out of you. Strange, don’t you think? That a venom can be purged by alcohol mixed with mint and ginger tea ...”

The Prince recoiled, knocking over the chair as he retreated toward the bed where he had awoken.

“How - how *dare* you touch me?” the Prince choked out.

The big man rolled his eyes and turned back to the makeshift stove, where sat roasting what looked like the entire leg of some unfortunate animal. The Prince took the opportunity to look around the shack while the man’s back was turned.

It was small, barely large enough to fit the wooden table, the metal stove, and the large bed. It had only a single door, which was hanging precariously from a single hinge beyond the giant man. The coal and clockwork pieces that would normally power the stove were missing, and it was instead powered by what looked like the most rudimentary of energy sources: a wood fire. There was a large pack in the corner that had a roll of some kind of fabric and two large bulging things that looked to be made of animal skin attached to it.

But what drew the Prince's eye was the enormous sheathed sword propped carelessly against the stove. It was a sword the size of which even a Guardian of the Fortress would have had trouble wielding, the biggest greatsword the Prince had ever seen.

The sight of the blade seemed to flip a switch in the Prince's head, and suddenly his memories caught up with him. In a flash he remembered his kidnapping in the Fortress, and the attempt on his life.

"It was you! You kidnapped me!" he shouted at the giant. His hands balled into fists as he dropped into a defensive stance.

The big man didn't even look up as he responded, but kept right on cooking, turning the leg to brown the other side as he packed away the metal canister he'd used to brew the tea.

"Not originally," he rumbled, vibrating the very walls with his voice, "but yes. Now I have. Because judging by those marks on your and shoulders and back," he motioned without looking to the Talisman markings visible beneath the Prince's loose tunic, "you've been marked as a potential Bloodmage, maybe even begun the training. And yet here you are, far from Lucien. That's of interest to me."

The giant took a poker and broke up the fire before turning to look the Prince in the face - just as the single wooden door was flung open so quickly it almost fell off its single rusted hinge. A shaft of oddly colored light pierced the gloom of the cabin as a young woman rushed in; she had light olive skin

and midnight black hair and wore the same simple browns, greens and grays that the giant wore.

As she entered, her eyes, bright green, flew to the Prince, took in his appearance in one swift glance that missed nothing, and hissed like a cat flung into a tub of water.

The Prince took in her appearance just as quickly, and suddenly all of the pieces fit together. Who else would kidnap one of the Children from the Fortress? Who else would have the audacity to do something of that magnitude in defiance of the Empress, the proper ruler of all of Lucia?

“Exiled Kindred!” hissed the Prince, recoiling. Again, his hand dropped automatically to his side, though his sword was still missing. Shadows and Light curse them all! He needed to find a weapon!

“Bloodmage!” snarled the girl, having caught sight of the black markings under his tunic. In a flash of movement, two remarkably long, curved daggers appeared in her hands, and she launched herself at him.

“Peace!” roared the mountain of a man. He caught the young woman around the waist and threw her back across the room, where she landed with the nimble grace of an acrobat, daggers still held menacingly.

“He is not to be harmed, Eshendai – he is not a danger to us!”

The Prince’s ears perked up at the strange word. The way he’d said it didn’t sound like a name – a title perhaps? He filed it away in his mind to deal with later. His eyes never left the twin daggers, following every small twitch of movement as the Exile girl paced back and forth across the opposite side of the small cabin. The blades themselves were beautifully smithed, over a foot long and three fingers wide. From the way they gleamed in the light and the casual tension with which the girl held them, the Prince had a sneaking suspicion they were well used.

Out of his peripheral vision, he saw a glimmer of light flash through a crack in the wall of the wooden shack and another piece of the puzzle clicked into place as he realized with a shock that the light streaming through the

door couldn't be artificial. The color was off and the angle was all wrong ... it was coming from the sky.

How far away from the Fortress am I?

No matter - he would have time to wonder about his whereabouts after he'd freed himself from the hold of his captors. The girl stood in front of the door - he had to get past her and out. The Prince feinted left, then rolled under the table, as the two Exiles moved to follow him with cries of alarm. As he emerged on the other side, there was a sharp *whisk!* sound, and the Prince dodged just fast enough to feel the air from one of the girl's daggers ruffle his hair. The door was there -

The Prince was pulled straight off his feet into the air and flung back across the room to land on the pile of blankets upon which he'd woken. He spun to his feet once more, only to find the girl's second dagger pressed against his throat. How had she crossed the room so quickly?

"Do it, Exile!" taunted the Prince. "It would be just like you to kill an unarmed man."

Her eyes flashed with rage, haunting green eyes that watched him with hatred and contempt, and he could see her desire to end his life. But the dagger remained completely steady and unwavering, neither cutting into the flesh nor pulling back.

"Remember your oath, Eshendai," the big man said slowly and firmly. He seemed to sense her desire to kill as well. The Prince remained silent, staring at her with arrogant defiance.

"We are not to kill innocents, not to kill victims of the Empire's injustice."

"This is not an innocent!" the girl responded through clenched teeth. "This is one of the Empress' Bloodmages! This is not even a man, it's an animal!"

"He's barely older than you, if at all," the man pointed out calmly, "and it takes years of training to become a Bloodmage. If anything, he is barely a novice. But that's irrelevant; I know that he is not part of the Empire. I found

him unconscious, left to die from his wounds by a group of the Empress' men at the bottom of the mountains. He'd been beaten, severely; several ribs were broken and he had been concussed - "

"You mean you've had him ever since I left?"

The Prince felt a chill go up his back. *What? But that's impossible; his Mother's soldiers would never even dare to -*

The memories of the events since he'd been attacked in the Fortress rolled through his head in a rush that made his ears ring. The soldiers who had left him to die by the stream, they had been dressed in uniforms of the Empire ... no, it was a ruse. They had to be traitors; it was easy enough to change clothing. He felt his anger rise. Did they truly think he'd fall for a trick like that?

"I've seen markings like those before, Tomaz, and he's a Bloodmage, old enough for it or not! And if he'd been beaten like you say, he has healed remarkably well."

The Prince had seen and heard enough. He was the rightful son of the Empress, and these Exiles were nothing. It was time to put an end to this farce.

"I am not a Bloodmage," spat the Prince, silencing the two of them, "I am the Prince of Ravens, Child of the Empress, Seventh Son of the Diamond Throne - and you will release me, now!"

Silence fell. For a moment there was no reaction, the two Exiles staring incredulously at the Prince. And then their eyes grew wide and the temperature in the room seemed to drop several degrees as they saw the truth of the statement in his eyes. The muscles in their bodies became tense and ready, as if he would at any second leap forward, shooting fire from his eyes and cursing them into a thousand pieces. The Prince allowed himself a small smile at the pleasure of knowing the name of one of the Children still struck fear into the hearts of the Empire's enemies.

"Release me," said the Prince, his voice snapping out like a whip.

The girl took an involuntary step back, watching him with superstitious horror and awe. But the big man shook his head like a bear dislodging an annoying fly, and the Prince watched with surprise as he stepped forward, lifted the greatsword from where it had been resting, unsheathed it, and pointed it directly at the Prince's heart.

"Do not lie to us," he said. The Prince looked from the bared sword up into the man's eyes. No, not eyes - dark black chips of stone. Staring into those eyes, the Prince felt a strange sense of uneasiness.

"I am not lying," he said calmly. Slowly, very slowly so as not to frighten the Exile and make him do something stupid, the Prince took a step forward. He held the man's gaze with his eyes as he had seen Symanta do when she was reading someone, watching for the slightest hint of emotion. The man began to relax, and the Prince was certain he had won.

But then the man shook his head once more and actually stepped forward to rest the point of his blade against the Prince's chest.

"Stay where you are," he rumbled.

"We need to leave," the girl said. "We need to leave now!"

"No," the big man said. "No, something is not right here."

"He's a Child of the Empress, Tomaz, shadows and fire, he's the Prince of Ravens! Those markings are the Talisman of Death! If he's here, the Empire is not far behind!"

She moved toward the door, panic and terror clear in both her voice and her manner, but the big man remained still. The Prince locked eyes with him again. There was something strange in the depths of the black chips of stone. This was a hard man, the Prince could tell, hard by nature but hardened by a life of exile, a life lived in the shadows. As he watched, the big man's eyes seemed to light up as he contemplated the Prince, and small bits of fire and life sprang into being where there was nothing but coldness before.

The moment passed, and the big man took a deep, calming breath, then spoke.

“I found him in a clearing at the far end of the mountains. He was lying on the ground with only the barest hint of a pulse - I almost didn't check. That was nearly a week ago, the day after you left.”

The girl stopped in the doorway, then slowly turned back to face the man, and the Prince could tell her mind was suddenly working very quickly. She looked at the Prince - and not just at his face, but at his clothing as well, his chafed wrists, his dirty hair. Her eyes roved over him, from head to toe, and the Prince had the distinct impression the girl was cataloging every detail of his appearance. Her demeanor changed completely. She stopped backing toward the door and instead took a few steps toward the two of them, her fear evaporating like an early morning mist.

“What do you see?” the big man asked her slowly, almost ritualistically.

“His shirt,” she responded immediately. “It's certainly finer linen than most of what even the Most High would wear, but it's torn and dirty. His face is dirty - there's dirt in his hair, too. His wrists look as though they were recently bound together with a rough material. He's favoring his left side, but only slightly, so the ribs you said were broken have healed, implicating accelerated healing time that could come from a number of different blood magics.” She looked over at the big man. “How many times have you seen the Children?”

“More than I'd like to remember,” the man, Tomaz, responded darkly, “and more than once up close in person.”

The Prince's head jerked to him in surprise.

“Have you ever seen this one?”

“No,” said the big man, “but he was born after my time.”

“Have you ever seen one of them looking anything less than immaculate, though?”

The big man shook his head, his bearded face drawn in concentration.

“You said he was left over a week ago? There's been no activity here, not even the hint of a whispered breath. Have you seen anything?”

“No,” the big man said as if that settled matters. A look passed between them.

The Prince looked down and realized they were correct: the clothing he was wearing was ripped and torn where he’d been bound and thrown to the ground. There was also the mud and sweat stains from the journey he could barely remember.

“He was brought here against his will,” she said. She was reexamining him quickly, glancing again at his wrists, his clothing, his bare feet. Her voice was coming quick and breathless now. The Prince had the sudden feeling he was on an examination table. “He was in a struggle – against a group I would guess. He certainly put up a fight – those rips in his elbows are from escaping their grip ... wait a minute, what’s that on his ... ”

She let out a gasp.

“Hold him!”

Immediately the big man sheathed his sword and grabbed the Prince, who, despite his years of physical training, was no match for such overwhelming strength and size. Before he could resist, Tomaz had wrapped a single arm through both of the Prince’s and placed his other hand on the back of the Prince’s head, rendering him completely immobile.

“What are you doing – stop this! I’m the Prince of Ravens! Do you not understand that?!”

The man shifted and the second large hand covered his mouth.

“Quiet for a minute Prince ... ” started the man before tapering off. There was a jerk and the Prince assumed it was Tomaz looking up at the girl.

“I can’t say his name.”

The girl opened her mouth, but only a small noise of surprise escaped.

The Prince felt heat flood his cheeks in embarrassment and shame at being handled in such a way. He stopped struggling and tried to strike up an air of dignified silence, attempting to appear as though he was indifferent to his plight, though as his face was slowly becoming tight and hot from lack of circulation, he was fairly certain it wasn’t working. The girl stepped up to

him, and for the first time he got a good look at her, and was surprised to find she wasn't a girl at all but a young woman, at least his age. Her eyes were boring a hole through a spot on his neck.

When she was barely a step away, she reached up with her dagger and slashed the skin. The Prince drew a sharp breath, but the cut was shallow. She reached out and pulled something from his skin with a sharp tug. The Prince just managed to suppress a groan and even kept his body from tensing, though whatever it was she had removed had hurt like a *kreoling*.

His eyes slowly focused on what the Exile held in her hand. It was a small three-pronged dart, made of steel with blackened tips. The end was rounded and meant to slide beneath the skin on impact. She held it up to her eyes.

"The tips are hollow - and it's barbed."

She looked up and the Prince felt the big man's head shift so they could exchange a glance.

"He showed all the signs of dillixi poisoning," the mountain of a man rumbled, "but there was a puncture wound - "

"I see it," the girl confirmed. "He must have been drugged again after they arrived. The skin here has only partially healed, so the dart must have come first."

"It makes sense he was captured by surprise, and then taken to where I found him. Where was he supposed to be delivered?"

"All of that on top of his name being taken away ..."

"Death Watch," finished the big man. The girl looked at the Prince and considered him for a long time. Fear and curiosity were warring in her eyes ... but slowly the fear died away, and when it was gone completely, her lips began to slowly move into a smirk, her wide, green eyes making her look almost demonic.

"If you were the Prince of Ravens," she said, "then it looks like you aren't anymore."

Chapter Four: The First Ray of Sunlight

The Prince felt chills run up his back. The Death Watch.

Obviously, it was a ploy, a gamble by one of his siblings, either to frame another of the Children or to remove him from the capital for a period of time. But which of his siblings would make such a drastic move? And could they have actually employed the Death Watchmen? It would be a risky move, something that could be traced back to them eventually. The Watchmen cared little about revealing their motives - and they, like all creatures of Bloodmagic, were bound to the Children and the Empress.

But had they truly intended to kill him? No, that couldn't be. Paralyze him - that was all they could have done. To kill one of the Children, that was an impossibility. These Exiles, they were lying to sow seeds of doubt in his mind, of that much he was certain.

Symanta was part of it at the very least, he realized - she had delivered the Summons. Symanta, as Prince of Snakes, would have known instantly if she had been told a lie, even a lie of omission. Whoever had tried - *succeeded*, corrected the Prince - in having him removed from the Fortress at Lucien had gained Symanta's temporary loyalty. It was unlikely she had acted on her own - this plan had too much open audacity for her; she enjoyed pulling strings in the shadows. Rikard perhaps?

But that didn't matter. What mattered was that he needed to return to the Fortress and deal with whichever of his siblings had forged a Summons and had him attacked. Whomever had done this didn't matter yet - what mattered was that he return to confront them. The Children were forbidden from killing one another, and if Mother found out ... She would be very angry. A spasm of fear flashed through the Prince's mind as he thought of what She might do.

"Release me," the Prince commanded the Exiles, "and I will allow you to leave the Empire unmolested."

The word's pained him, but necessity required that he return to the Fortress as soon as possible, and he couldn't do that with two Exiles in tow.

"No," Tomaz responded promptly.

For a moment the Prince was struck dumb by the man's flat-out refusal.

"I am the Prince of Ravens, Exile," he said, gathering his wits. "The entire Empire will be looking for me; they will find me, and you will die slowly and in excruciating pain for holding me. Release me, and I will conveniently forget you. You are lucky I'm even offering this once. I warn you, do not refuse me again."

The Exile girl gave him a strange look, but neither of them spoke.

"What?" he snapped at her.

"You almost made me believe you there," she said. She and Tomaz exchanged a glance and then she shrugged, turned her back on him, and began to tear a blanket into strips with her dagger. Seeing this, the Prince realized that he might not actually be in control of the situation.

"What are you doing?" he asked her, his voice controlled but his mind shaking.

"Binding you," she replied simply.

Partly out of anger and partly out of fear, the Prince lost control of himself.

"ENOUGH!" he roared, his voice cracking out like a whip, using what he'd learned watching his brother Rikard marshal his troops. "You will release me, and you will go! You will be grateful that I am offering you this mercy, and you will forever remember the glory of the Empire on which you have turned your backs!"

The girl had jumped back from the blanket, and stood staring at him with wide eyes. For an instant the Prince thought he had won as she sheathed her dagger; she took a step forward, her eyes locked on his, her mouth slack, and triumph, along with a small measure of relief, surged through him as he saw her submit to his will.

But having focused all of his attention on her, he had completely forgotten about the big man holding him, and the next thing he knew, he was lifted into the air, turned upside down, and dunked headfirst into a barrel of salty brine set next to the table.

The water burned as it rushed up his nose and filled his mouth, the salt choking him. For a brief second he fully believed that the big man meant to drown him, but just as the thought crossed his mind he was hoisted back up into the air, sputtering and coughing.

“He’s just a boy,” the Prince heard the man say through water-clogged ears, “even if he’s a son of the Empress. A boy that needs to be taught some manners.”

Once more he was dunked into the barrel, and once again the salty water burned his eyes, his nose, his throat. He was pulled back out, given time for a single hacking, wheezing breath, one that ripped through his lungs like fire, and then he was again submerged. After the third time he was pulled up and dropped onto the wood floor, his knees and elbows striking the hard, unyielding planks and sending streaks of pain through his arms and legs. As his head cleared and his ears drained, he heard laughter and saw through teary eyes the girl doubled over, arms wrapped around her stomach. His cheeks started to burn and he opened his mouth in fury - but before he could speak, a rough piece of cloth was slipped neatly between his teeth and tied off around the back of his head. He let out a muffled sound of protest, but the big man ignored him and tied his hands together behind his back, using wide strips of fabric from the shredded blanket.

“No use talking if you can’t keep a civil tongue in your head,” the big man said.

The Prince began to shout muffled retorts through the coarse wool cloth, using the worst language he had ever heard from the Commons. However, when he realized how undignified he looked, he stopped and instead sat in sullen - *dignified!* - silence, watching the Exiles murderously.

How dare they?!

As the girl's laughter tapered off, the big man examined him with a critical eye.

"What if we take him with us?" he mused. The girl straightened up and also eyed the Prince, with a bold, frank audacity that was simply infuriating.

"I know what you're thinking, Ashandel," she replied. "The Elders would love a chance to interrogate one of the Children, if that's really who he is. Particularly Elder Ishmael. So would I for that matter. But we've got more than three fourths of the Empire still to cover until we're back to Vale - and how are we going to sneak past Roarke of all places to get there?"

The big man shrugged and smiled. "I just provide the ideas, remember?"

She rolled her eyes.

"You wanted to scout this far into the Empire even though I said it was foolish to come so far twice in one year," the giant rumbled. "I'm enough of a man to know when I've been proven wrong. Foolish or not, your gamble just paid off. I don't think either of us can crack him," they both glanced at the Prince, who was following this conversation quite avidly, "and that means we either let him go or we take him with us."

"Or we kill him," the girl said. The Prince stiffened at the cold calculation that entered her voice as she spoke these words, and from the look on her face he was entirely certain that this was indeed a viable option. The big man frowned, but said nothing. As the Prince watched her thinking the situation over, memories of his brother Geofred, the Prince of Eagles, hatching a plan came to mind: she had the same cold, distant, objective look. He just hoped she wasn't as ruthless.

Abruptly she turned and crossed the room to the corner next to the door, and knelt on the wooden floor. She pried up a loose board, heavily warped by time and weather, from under which she pulled a number of items, chief amongst them a large roll of parchment and two travel-sized paperweights. The Prince watched as she deftly unrolled a large, detailed map across the table. After the second it took to reorient himself (the map

was upside down on his side of the table) he realized it was a map of Lucia. The girl saw him looking, reached over to grab her cloak, and bunched it at the end of the table to block his view. With a mocking smile, she bent over the map, her eyes flying back and forth across the parchment. She then began using a bit of string as a measuring tool, all the while muttering to herself and absentmindedly stroking the side of her face.

“Here ... then here ... and if we skirt around the lake ... ”

She pulled out a bit of charcoal from a pocket hidden in her sleeve, and began to write what the Prince assumed were calculations of distance on the wooden surface of the table. The Prince sat up straighter, but her strategically placed cloak made the motion useless: he still couldn't see a thing. He sat back and watched the girl carefully.

When she was finished, she remained bent over the table, eyes scanning the map and her notes a second time, before finally speaking.

“Two months,” she said, looking back up at Tomaz. “Give or take a week depending on what the patrols look like around Roarke. And that's at top speed - if we want to save the horses, we'll need to factor in another week or two at least.”

“That long?” he asked. She nodded and motioned toward the Prince with her head. “I figure he won't make it easy, and we'll have to take every back trail and shepherders road we know. I wouldn't bother, since even though he's going to fight us along the way, we can get him through the Empire with speed, but there's one variable I can't predict.” She looked directly at the Prince. “Eventually they'll realize they failed, and they'll come after him again. When, or where, or how, I cannot say, nor I think can you. But they will - and when they do, all seven hells will break loose. I don't know why it hasn't happened already; maybe we've just been lucky and they don't know for sure what happened. I doubt that's the case, but whatever is happening, they will be after us, and this will turn into a race to the finish. No doubt his absence has already been noticed in Lucien, and you know how fast rumor travels. The Tyrant and her brood are going to want to end this as

quickly as they can. We're going to have to watch our backs every moment of every day from now until Vale, and we'll have to avoid all main roads and cities. But with luck and planning, we'll slip right past them."

The Prince responded with a low, mocking laugh of real amusement and opened his mouth to try to speak around the gag, but before he could do so Tomaz once more lifted him into the air and thrust him headfirst into the barrel. When he was brought back up, he found himself hanging suspended in the air, dripping foul-smelling water.

"ARGH!" was the only response the Prince could make through his gag, which was now soaked with salt water mingled with sweat and dirt. It was disgusting.

"No no," said the big man, small black eyes twinkling, "my name is 'Tomaz,' not 'Argh.' Please try to get it right next time."

He dropped the Prince to the floor - which, from the height of the big man's arms, was quite a long distance - and turned back to the girl. They resumed their conversation with the air of having just scolded a dog for barking.

"The Council expects us back in a month," he said, "is there any way we could shave some time off of that?"

The girl shrugged, looking at the Prince.

"Using the main roads like we'd planned, a month was reasonable with the horses. But we've got to go more than a thousand miles, hauling a reluctant Prince along the way. We can try, but if we get too close to any of the major cities, he'll make trouble if the rumors don't," she said. The Prince almost grunted his approval of the statement, but received a warning in the form of a raised eyebrow from Tomaz and stopped himself. Once he realized what he'd just done, it only made him angrier, both at himself and the Exile. He was a Prince! He should be defiant to his last breath!

But no ... no, he wasn't his brother Ramael, the Prince of Oxen, to fight something head on and win with brute strength. He would never be able to overpower the big man - particularly not in close quarters like this where he

couldn't maneuver and use his speed. He needed to bide his time. Let them take him where they would - he could wait.

"Tomaz, it may take longer, but think of it. We've got the Prince of Ravens!"

"So you don't want to kill him anymore?" the big man rumbled back dryly.

"I know how you feel about that, Ashandel," she said and the Prince got the feeling she was choosing her words carefully. "But it's my job to think from every angle. It's a viable option."

"He's just a boy," Tomaz reminded her softly. The Prince saw the girl's eyes narrow and her jaw clench in anger, but she let the moment pass. They shared a short, unspoken conversation, and then they turned to look at the Prince of Ravens as if contemplating what lay ahead of them. And then the tableau broke, and the girl turned to roll up the map.

"If you say it's the shortest time, then it's the shortest time," the big man said decisively, in a way that spoke volumes about his utter trust in the girl's planning. "Now," he continued, rubbing his hands together eagerly, "do you wish to tie him up or shall I?"

The girl chuckled. "Go for it."

Barely a few hours later, the Prince had been properly bound and gagged, tied to a horse, and disguised as a member of the Commons - a particularly poor and shabby one, at that. They forced him into a new tunic - no, a *shirt* - that smelled of some kind of animal and bore several stains at which he decided not to look too closely, and maneuvered his feet into a pair of uncomfortable, over-large boots. At this point he had hopes that when they next passed someone, he or she would be alerted to his plight by this strange collection of clothing, not to mention the strips of blanket that now held his hands and feet immobile. But the two Exiles presumably foresaw this eventuality and threw a large dark brown cloak over him before pulling up the hood to obscure his face. He was left with just enough range of motion to turn his head and use his knees to steer the horse beneath him,

but his hands were firmly restrained behind his back, and try as he might, he could think of no way out of the situation.

“Comfortable?” The big man asked cheerfully.

For the Prince, the rest of the day was a series of one humiliating event after another. The two Exiles did not seem at all concerned for his welfare as they traveled through the mountain passes, and with his cloak pulled up over his head in such a way that he couldn't look up far enough to see over his horse at all times, the ride was decidedly uncomfortable. The beast they had given him was none too smart, and the Prince had the sneaking suspicion that since the girl Exile was holding the reins, he was being specifically led over the rockiest part of the terrain.

Yet despite the situation, the indignities he was forced to suffer, the vague threat of death or violence that loomed over him should he try to resist, he could not help but take in, for the first time in his life, the beauty of the landscape through which they traveled.

He was certainly far away from the capital city of Lucien, and the evidence was the large yellow-white ball of fire that hung incredibly in the sky above them. When the Exiles moved him from the inside of the wooden shack - which had turned out to be the ruins of a blacksmith's house, explaining the presence of the barrel of brine and the wood stove - out to where the two horses were tied, he had stopped dead at the sight before him.

The shack stood at the edge of a circle of small wooden buildings, possibly an abandoned town, all located in the center of a small clearing. The clearing was surrounded on all sides by plants as tall as buildings, plants that could only be trees, trees which he'd only seen in memories of other men and never truly considered real. They towered up into the sky, nearly as tall as some of the buildings in Lucien, and they left him dumb and awestruck.

And the sun! It was there, right there above him! It shone through the trees, casting deep green shadows over the clearing and in some places breaking clean through the canopy overhead in straight, spearing shafts of

brilliant white, brighter than anything he'd ever seen. The colors surrounding him on all sides were more vibrant than he ever could have imagined, more moving than he could have guessed from the memories he'd seen or the books he'd read.

"Keep moving, princeling," the Exile girl had said, pushing him forward. He'd stumbled over a floor that was not stone or packed dirt but a mixture of soil and grass and growing things - things of wonder. He'd felt as though he were walking through the incredible landscape of a madman's fantasy.

Once he'd been securely fastened to one of the horses, of which there were only two, leaving the girl to walk, they left the clearing, and the Prince saw that the trees went on as far as he could see in all directions. The sheer size and scope of the area - *the forest*, he thought excitedly - astonished him. It was nearly as big as a city, if not bigger!

The Exiles took him through the trees, and after a brief span of time they moved into a long pass that was entirely formed of rock on both sides. The rock was uncarved but for the work of the elements of rain and wind and the passage of time, and it was beautiful in a stark, harsh way. Loose bits of gravel crunched under the horses' hooves, and the sounds echoed and bounced around the pass as it ascended higher into what the Prince soon came to realize must be a mountain. As they rounded a jut of stone, a gust of wind threw his hood back, and he turned to catch sight of a long stretch of green land laid out below and behind them, covering small hills and stretching an immeasurable distance. The clouds of Lucien weren't even visible; for all the Prince knew, he had somehow been transported to the other side of the world.

But as the day wore on, the novelty died, and the Prince returned to brooding upon his situation. The Exile girl, seeing him look around so avidly, had pulled the hood of his cloak all the way up and tied it more tightly in place, effectively narrowing his world to the horse and the earth passing beneath him. Time continued onward and the saddle began to rub him the wrong way, and he felt blisters start to form on his backside. He had ridden a

horse before, of course, but never for so long. The swaying of the beast soon made his back unbelievably sore, and after a few hours his legs began to pound with a dull, insistent ache.

But even all of this the Prince would have been able to endure, had not insult been added to injury. Sometime past midday the Exile girl led the horse around a rather large boulder stuck squarely in their path, and the horse swerved too quickly; the Prince's momentum kept his body going forward, and with a muffled shout of surprise, he tumbled off the side of the beast as a strap gave out with a loud snap. As if this wasn't enough, he couldn't even fall to the ground with dignity; since he had been bound to the saddle, the saddle went with him, and he ended up riding underneath the horse for at least ten paces, his shouts and cries muffled by the gag, before the girl noticed and burst into raucous laughter. Finally, Tomaz, chuckling, came back and righted him.

They stopped when the sun set, and the Prince was untied from the saddle and deposited under an overhanging outcrop of rock. He threw his head back with a jerk and the hood fell off to reveal that they were at the bottom of a ravine filled with trees and spiny purple-flowered bushes. The big man came over and, after allowing the Prince to relieve himself, tied him to a scraggly tree growing through the cracks in the rocks off to the side with just enough slack to lie down and sit up as he wanted.

The Prince ached as he had never ached before. His head was pounding from lack of food and water, his mouth tasted awful from the still-salty cloth gag, his back was on fire, and his legs felt as though they'd taken on the shape of a saddle and would never return to their previous mold. Nevertheless, he sat up straight and pretended he was unfazed. He knew the Exiles knew he was pretending, but he pretended right back that they didn't. He was a Prince, no matter if he had been tied to a horse all day and led through a forest and helplessly tied to a tree for the night. Yes, he reminded himself forcefully, in spite of all that, he was still a Prince.

Dinner was simple: the Exiles produced bread and cheese from their packs and water from somewhere the Prince couldn't discern, and Tomaz ate the remainder of the huge leg of meat he'd been cooking that morning, breaking open the bone when he'd finished in order to get at the marrow. A small fire was made, carefully sheltered from the biting wind that stung the Prince with cold as it whistled through the ravine. He huddled against his tree - *a tree!* - under the rock outcropping, still trying to be a Prince as best he could.

The two Exiles talked softly to one another, in large part ignoring the Prince but occasionally glancing over to be certain he wasn't making trouble. The Prince repaid them in kind, keeping to himself and his own thoughts. He began to make a list of all he had learned about them, hoping he'd find something of use.

Tomaz. Big, tall, wide, strong. Beard - perhaps good to grab hold of in a fight. The Prince's eyes flicked to the greatsword that was now slung across the man's back. That was the Prince's biggest problem. However, even though the man was uncannily fast and agile for his size, he couldn't be as fast as the Prince, who was naturally lighter and leaner. If it came to a fight, the Prince would need to get in close and then get away quickly. He filed all of this away and moved on to the girl.

No name as of yet. Shorter than Tomaz, but not short. Not tall either. In fact, she was of a height with the Prince, give or take an inch either way. Lithe, spry. Unlike the mountain of a man she sat next to, the Exile girl was slight, lean, and quick. He could tell from the movements she made that she possessed a grace and dexterity that wouldn't have been out of place in the Szobody Dancers of his Mother's court. They'd be evenly matched, though he was certain he would be stronger. He'd need to keep her at a distance if he fought her, and only close when he was sure of a strike.

And then he reached out through his Talisman, and felt their lives.

It was harder to do this with ordinary people. The Children and the Empress left deep impressions on the world around them, and when they

were near it was as easy for the Prince to see and sense the essence of their lives as it was for any man or woman to see and sense the heat and light of a burning flame. But ordinary people were more difficult. The Prince could always sense them, could always feel the lives of people pressing against him everywhere he went, but to truly reach deep and grasp a sense of what their life felt like, that took much more concentration.

He reached out first to Tomaz. The impressions the Prince got were never coherent thoughts, more like jumbled sensory perceptions, so when the Prince delved into Tomaz, flashes of red crossed his vision – *the sound of steel ringing together - determination and a profound, serene patience - a percussive, insistent beat - smells of mint and lavender - the feel of rough leather -*

He moved to the girl – *swirls of green and silver light - the sound of steel cutting silk - the silent second after a symphony ends - the smell of newly trodden dust mixed with fresh honey - old pain - grim laughter - a quiet, secret sense of wonder -*

With a significant effort of will, the Prince pulled back, managing to remain calm and to keep his breathing soft and quiet. There was nothing remarkable about them, and separately they were just two more ordinary people.

Together though, the Prince realized, the Exiles would be next to unbeatable. They complimented each other perfectly – even just looking at them and listening to them talk made that clear. The girl spoke with a fluency and vocabulary that showed she was the planner, the thinker, while the big man spoke with a slow deliberateness that showed he was the pragmatic conservative, the cautious ring of stones that contained and directed her fiery intelligence.

And one fact had become increasingly clear to him during the day's journey – these two ordinary people were very good at remaining unseen. The big man was always ranging behind, covering their tracks, while the girl kept a constant eye out for anything ahead and often picked out winding roads that took them up small creeks, over hard rocks, and around soft

patches of dirt and grass. What was more, the quick skill and efficiency with which they had chosen this place to rest for the night, how the big man noted the opening of the ravine though it was narrow and the sky dark, how the fire was made in such a way that it barely smoked, it all added up to show they were as comfortable and at home in this mountain landscape as the Prince was in the stone halls of his Mother's Fortress.

The chances that he was going to be rescued by an outside presence seemed slimmer by the hour. He tried to think up plans of his own, but each one met with problems, once again because of the way the Exiles fit together: every weakness he observed in one of the two was countered with strength in the other. Tomaz was not overly intelligent, but the girl was. The girl was hot-tempered and the Prince was fairly certain she could be lured into making a false move if he played on her pride, but Tomaz, even when chastising him, seemed to exhibit no predictable spikes of emotion save good-natured humor. No, unless the two were separated, he stood no chance of escape.

So how to separate them?

"Finished with your dinner, princeling?"

With a start the Prince realized the girl had rounded the fire and was standing in the shifting shadows not far off.

"Don't call me that," he said.

Her eyes narrowed.

"Well what should I call you?"

"I have no name," he responded with proud defiance. While at the Empress' court in the Fortress this was a sign of dishonor, here among those who refused to live by Her laws he felt a the glow of pride knowing that he was still loyal to Her word.

"You have no name," the girl repeated, tasting the words. "Well, that's quite interesting and everything, but it's time to sleep."

She pulled the gag out of a pants pocket.

“Do you really insist on gagging me in my sleep?” the Prince asked in exasperation. “What do you think I’m going to do? Sleep shout?”

The girl didn’t listen to him, but grabbed a hank of hair, yanked his head back, and forced the gag into his mouth. But as she turned around, she paused. She turned back.

“I’ll make a deal with you,” she said. Her eyes were glowing strangely and a smile played at the corner of her mouth. “I’ll take the gag off - and keep it off - if you answer one question.”

The Prince tensed. He should have known she was going to try to bribe him. All the same ... what could it hurt? The question might be something of great import to her that gave away little. And what was the worst she could do? She’d just gag him again if he didn’t answer.

“I untie the gag,” she repeated, “and keep it off if you answer just one question.”

The Prince thought it over for another moment, chewing on the salty, dirty, wet piece of cloth, and finally nodded.

The girl walked over and undid the knot.

“What’s your name?”

The Prince, mouth open, ready to speak, closed his jaws with a snap and glared at her.

“Hmm,” she said with a smile. “Told you he wouldn’t make one up, Tomaz - he’s too proud for that. Don’t know why someone would be proud of having their name taken from them, but then again I’m just an Exile. Well, pay up Ashandel.”

The big man grunted and a small coin arched through the air into the girl’s hand. The Prince’s temper got the better of him.

“I have no name,” he said defiantly. “I have no name because the Empress herself, guardian of the Diamond Throne, heir of Theron Isdiel from across the Ocean, chose to take it from me! I am a subject of the Empress, and until the time comes when she chooses to restore my name, I wear my un-identity with pride. I have committed sins against the Empire, and once I

have atoned for them, I will be restored to my rightful place. Glory to the Empress! Glory to the Diamond Throne on which She sits! Glory to the legacy of Her Empire and Her Will!”

He normally wouldn't have added the Three Affirmations; it was an extravagance used mostly by Defenders of the Realm, the most zealous members of the Empire's armed forces, but it felt good to reaffirm his loyalty in the presence of these outlaws.

If he had expected the two Exiles to cower, however, he was gravely disappointed. The air did still, and the joviality of the situation died. But instead of looking chagrined, the girl stood up, walked to him, and slapped him full in the face.

The Prince was stunned. No one outside the Children had ever laid hands on him outside of the Training Grounds in all his seventeen years, and now not only had he been struck, but by an Exile! A *girl* Exile!

“You want to know what the glory of the Empress is?” she snarled at him, her face barely inches from his. “Because I can tell you the glory of your Empress!”

A big hand laid itself on her shoulder, and she was gently pulled back.

“This is neither the time nor the place, Eshendai.”

The girl turned on her heel and stormed off up the ravine and into the tree line, though the Prince silently noted that when she “stormed” she made next to no noise whatsoever.

No wonder we can never catch them, the Prince thought, somewhat absently. His ears were still ringing from the slap - the girl was *strong!*

The big man knelt down in front of him. Instead of putting them at eye level, this only seemed to emphasize the man's size as the Prince still had to tilt his head back a considerable distance to look him in the eye.

I do not feel belittled by this man's presence the Prince reminded himself. *I'm the Prince of Ravens! No man is above me!*

“If I were to give you a piece of advice as a friendly person, then I would suggest keeping that mouth of yours shut,” the big man said, “but

being a supremely stupid prince, you'd probably ignore friendly advice. So, I shall speak in terms that I know a prince will understand."

As he paused, the Prince realized that the big man was idly playing with a thick piece of wood that seemed to have fallen off a nearby tree. The Prince searched his mind ... a branch? Yes, a branch. That is, when Tomaz held it in his huge fist, it looked like a branch. Yet it was as big around as the Prince's arm, and perhaps would have been more properly called a small log.

"Listen carefully. I am committed to bringing you back to my people. For personal reasons having to do with trouble my conscience tends to give me, I wish to do so without harming you. However - "

The big man held the branch up in front of the Prince's eyes.

"That girl that you continue to antagonize is the closest thing to me in this world."

With a muffled crack, the wood snapped right down the middle as he closed his fist. There was a series of dull pops as his knuckles cracked, adding their own support for the statement.

"And I care about her well-being much more than I care about you."

The fist opened and the remnants of the branch fell to the ground. The giant brushed off his hands and leaned in closer, so close the Prince almost gagged on the overwhelmingly masculine musk that rolled off of him in waves.

"You are coming with us. Whether you arrive whole or in pieces is up to you."

The big man shoved the gag into his mouth, tied it off, and rose abruptly.

"Sleep well," he said with his customary cheerful smile, white teeth shining out from his neatly trimmed beard, and walked over to his place by the fire. The Prince, limbs shaking ever so slightly, turned jerkily over and tried to find sleep, though one thought did cross his mind:

So he does get angry.

* * *

The next morning, the Prince was awoken by a kick in the groin.

“AHH!”

“Oh - shadows and fire - ”

A pair of hands quickly covered his mouth to cut off the sounds of pain he was making, audible even through the gag. Spots were dancing in front of his eyes and he felt a sick and queasy feeling start in his toes and rise up through his stomach to his throat.

“Ooof,” he said, his vision doubling and then solidifying once more.

“You know what’s funny,” said the girl, “is that I was aiming for your leg but you rolled over. Wasn’t even my fault.”

He whipped his head around and glared at her, letting out a growl as an added sign of his disapproval. The look slid right off of her and she smiled, a quick sideways quirk of her lips.

“Guess our senses of humor aren’t compatible. Pity.”

She walked around the tree and undid the ropes tying him down. After a quick breakfast, after which he was allowed to relieve himself again, the Prince was tied once more to the saddle of the stupid horse.

This day was even worse. The Prince, who had never before slept outside his private chambers in the Fortress, much less on the stony floor of a ravine in the mountains, could barely summon the energy to stay awake and maintain his precarious perch. Twice more during the course of the morning he fell off the side of the animal because he had fallen asleep and the beast had decided to make a sharp turn or rear up. He thanked the Empress that he had received rudimentary riding lessons for visits of state, or else the day would have been even worse. Still, he was not accustomed to being tied hand and foot, and as the sun rose and heated the day, the restraints dug into his skin at ankles and wrists, chaffing back and forth with the movement of the horse. Eventually it was all he could do to stop from whimpering in pain at every step, but manage it he did: they could tie him

up, they could gag him, they could take him to the farthest ends of the earth, but he wouldn't give them the pleasure of seeing him in pain.

As if in response to this thought the horse turned suddenly and the restraints dug even deeper into his skin as he clung to the saddle. The pain made him breathe in sharply through his nose, and he was only just able to keep a gasp from escaping past the gag.

Please let us stop soon...

But they didn't stop again until night had fallen, by which time the Prince was not only tired and bleeding, but almost blinded with hunger. He'd never gone without a midday meal before, and the evening and morning meals were a far cry from the gourmet feasts to which he was accustomed. When they had chosen a spot for the night and got a fire going, once more well sheltered from even the vague chance of prying eyes, Tomaz moved over to untie him from the horse, but stopped short and let out an exclamation.

"What - he's bleeding!"

The Prince looked at the big man in alarm, and saw that he was actually surprised. To the Prince's utter amazement, concern flashed across his large bearded face and the huge hands quickly untied him, picked him up off the horse, and moved him to the nearby fire. The restraints were removed, and then the gag.

"Give me a waterskin," the big man rumbled, and the girl complied, handing him one of the large bulbous things they carried with their luggage. The girl was watching Tomaz with the same look of surprise that the Prince felt on his own face.

"What are you doing?" the Prince asked suspiciously.

"Cleaning these cuts," Tomaz rumbled, holding the Prince effortlessly in place with one enormous arm while the other poured water from the animal bladder - *that's where they keep the water? What a disgusting practice!* - into a metal container that he then set it over the fire to heat. He unstopped the second waterskin with his teeth and poured a steady stream of liquid

over the Prince's wrists, making them burn with a sharp pain. The Prince stiffened, and breath hissed in past the gag, but otherwise he bore the treatment in silence.

"What are you doing, Tomaz?" the girl asked, confused.

"You bound him too tightly this morning," the big man said. "The bonds cut into his wrists and ankles. If we don't clean them they could become infected."

"So?"

Tomaz shot her an intense look that forced the girl into a shocked silence while he finished cleaning the cuts and then dipped the edge of a piece of cloth into the pot of heating water, lathering his hands with a small cake of what appeared to be herbal soap. Once the water was boiling, he removed the cloth and carefully cleaned the lacerations.

The Prince wasn't sure who was more amazed, the girl or himself. He tried several times to think of something to say, but the situation was so bizarre that he found himself speechless. Was this the same man who had so recently threatened to bring him back to the Exiled Kindred in pieces if he didn't mind his manners? It made absolutely no sense.

After a few minutes, the big man had finished his ministrations and retied the Prince's bonds, which were now wrapped in cloth and done up in intricate knots that wouldn't tighten on their own. The Prince was again tethered to a small tree near the edge of the fire, and given a dinner of dried meat, cheese, and water. Once he had finished, the Prince rolled over and pretended to go to sleep, though in truth he remained awake, trying to figure out why the Exile had shown him such unexpected kindness.

The spot where the Exiles had chosen to make camp that night was in the shelter of a narrow passage through a large stone wall. The tree that the Prince was tied to grew in the shelter of that stone, making it a stunted, withered thing, but still rooted deeply enough to hold him. As he lay there that night feigning sleep, he heard the two Exiles begin to whisper heatedly

to each other, the sound of their conversation amplified and brought to him by the slightly concave wall.

“He’s the Prince of Ravens, Tomaz,” he heard the girl say vehemently; “he doesn’t deserve to be treated well.”

“He’s a boy, Eshendai, nothing more,” the man rumbled back. “And from what I know of the Fortress and his mother, he has seen precious little kindness in his life.”

“And given out far less,” she growled, voice clipped, fiery, and emphatic. “He’s one of the Children!”

“He’s barely old enough to shave every day,” he replied, voice calm, measured and quiet. “He is little more than a boy, and his path has yet to be chosen.”

“He was *born* to his path, Tomaz,” the girl insisted. “He has the evidence of it etched into his skin. He bears the Raven, the Death Talisman. He’s the that’s one supposed to end our people!”

“And yet there he lies,” the big man said, and the Prince could almost feel Tomaz gesture in his direction, “sleeping like a normal human being. There is no monster lying in that alcove, no horrible fangs that sprout from a bloodthirsty mouth. You are blinded by your ideas of him, of what he is supposed to be. Open your eyes and *see*.”

“You are blinded by your compassion, Ashandel,” the girl responded. “You see the boy instead of the monster he’s born to become. The evidence of it isn’t in a grotesque appearance, it’s in his immaculately manicure nails. He is a Child of the Empress, a son of the Tyrant, born into a world of privilege, unable to even comprehend the life of a Baseborn commoner. Even if he were to see the world his Mother has created, I doubt he would ever accept it. The Council will agree with me when we arrive in Vale. They’ll pull what information they can out of him, and then they’ll dispose of him.”

“Ah, Eshendai ... you didn’t used to be so harsh. For one whose own life path changed so abruptly, you are very quick to judge what the future

holds for others. No path is set in stone - I can see something in him. Can't you?"

"Yes, I see many things in him. Pride, arrogance, a hard and fast belief that he is a god among men. Not to mention a threat to my people and my life. A boy whose power literally feeds off the lives of others -"

"- a boy who's been cursed," Tomaz interrupted, "with a terrible burden. Someone in his own family just tried to kill him. He may have convinced himself that it was a plot by others, but you and I both know that the signs point to the Empress."

"So not only do we want him dead, but the Empire does as well."

"Eshendai, stop being stubborn! Use your head. Why would the Empire want him dead? It makes no sense. If he's the seventh son, the one intended to destroy the Kindred, then why would they try to kill him? If I can see that, then surely you can see that. Calm your temper and think."

A long pause fell between them, and the Prince barely dared to breathe lest they realize he was awake and listening.

"You're right," the girl said suddenly. Her voice had changed somehow, and the Prince realized that all the heat had gone out of it, leaving the sound cold and dispassionate. "I'm not angry at you, I'm angry at the fact we don't have all the information we need to understand what's going on here. My every instinct is telling me to kill him now while he sleeps, or else to wait until we get him back to the Council and then arrange his death once they're finished with him. But the Empire wants him dead, whether he will admit it or not ... and you are right, that is something there that should give me pause."

"If the Empire wants him dead," Tomaz said slowly, no doubt watching to make sure his words made sense to the girl, "then shouldn't we want him alive?"

"Yes," the girl responded, deep in musings. "I don't think he can change the way you think he can. But I've never been able to see people the way you do."

“He’s just a boy,” Tomaz rumbled again. “A princeling who would walk right back into the arms of ones who want him dead. We’re the only ones to keep him from it.”

“Well, when you put it like that,” the girl said, the coldness gone from her voice and replaced by wry amusement, “I suppose you have a point.”

“Come, we’ve talked long enough,” Tomaz said. “Dawn will be here soon, but ’till then you should sleep. I will take the watch tonight.”

The Prince heard the sounds of the girl coming back to the fire and lying down, and the big man lumbering off into the woods to make a quick round, before coming back, banking the fire, and settling in.

His heart was beating quickly, but his mind was strangely blank. He wasn’t sure what to think, and he lay there awake for a long time, listening to the girl’s soft breathing and the distant, unfamiliar sounds of the night, trying over and over to remind himself that they were wrong.

Chapter Five: The Death Watch

The next few days passed much the same: the Prince woke, was bound and gagged, tied to the horse, and forced to suffer in silence through a long day of riding. The only change was that he managed to devise a way to tilt his head at just the right angle so as to see out from under the hood. What he saw was a long line of trees and green things, with no end in sight. Try as he might to distinguish one mountain pass from another, he was unable to do so. How the Exiles did it he couldn't understand, and eventually he gave up, head pounding and eyes throbbing due to the awkward angle.

The Exiles spoke only rarely during the day, and never to the Prince. They would talk more openly at night around their campfire, if they made one, but unlike before, they spoke too softly for the Prince to hear. Even Tomaz, whose voice always gave the impression of a crashing wave or a building earthquake, was sufficiently muted to prevent the Prince from eavesdropping. But they never ignored him completely, especially not the girl, who was always watching him whatever he did. The Prince began to realize that whenever he shifted, she shifted as well. Whenever he moved farther away from the fire, she moved closer, using the excuse of stirring the coals or checking a pack, but never returning to her original spot, always keeping an exact distance between them.

"Where are you taking me?" the Prince asked on the third night, breaking into the soft conversation between the two Exiles as they ate their supper. The effect he had hoped for, that of a sudden and forceful interruption, was slightly ruined by the fact he was shivering with cold under his thin clothes and blanket. The knowledge of their earlier conversation was still floating in the back of his mind, making him uneasy, and he felt suddenly uncomfortable when they looked directly at him.

"Where do you think we're taking you?" the girl immediately retorted, her eyes gleaming in the firelight, mocking him.

The Prince almost snapped back, but cooled his temper when Tomaz stretched his fingers and rolled his shoulders. They had camped near a running stream that night, and the Prince was cold enough without receiving another dunking in the name of good manners.

“Never mind,” he said with as much dignity as he could muster, and rolled over to go to sleep. Tomaz chuckled, a deep rolling rumble, and the Prince felt his cheeks burn, but he stayed silent.

This was the most significant interaction they had over the next few days of travel. The Prince, who all his life had been inclined to introversion, had no complaints. The Exile girl, whose name he was never able to catch no matter how hard he listened to the soft night conversations, was just as quiet as he, and often as not it was Tomaz who spoke up first, commenting cheerfully on anything that seemed to pass through his head.

And then, on the seventh day of their journey, as they were crossing the highest part of the mountains, the Prince’s shoulders and chest began to prickle with an unnatural heat.

Immediately the Prince sat up straighter in his saddle. Could it be?

He shot a surreptitious glance at the two Exiles from under his hood as best he could, and saw that they had noticed nothing. As the day progressed, the dark markings on his back and shoulders grew warmer still as the Raven Talisman sensed life, a fourth life, separate from him, Tomaz, and the Exile girl. There was someone behind them, farther back along the path the Exiles were taking, someone coming closer. No ... not just one ... many. Hope sprang into the Prince’s heart again, and his fingers and toes began to tingle. The distant pinprick in the back of his mind grew stronger, and he stiffened, barely willing to believe it could be what he wanted it to be. But the bright point of heat came closer still and then split and multiplied.

A rescue party, it had to be.

The bright glowing points continued to gain on them until they were less than half a mile away, and they didn’t seem to be slowing. Half of them separated from the others and moved farther away to their right, and then

passed beyond the Prince, circling around in front of the three travelers. The Prince again tilted his head the best he could under the hood, trying to get a visual to go with what was happening in his mind's eye, and saw that he and the Exiles were moving through the middle of a wide pass, with high, rocky slopes to either side. Tall trees that provided perfect cover for an ambushing force topped the slopes, and trees grew along the path as well, forcing the Exiles to weave back and forth. The horses' hooves made barely any sound as they walked over a ground of soft dirt covered by a thin layer of what the Prince assumed were fallen leaves, though they looked as skinny and sharp as needles and consummately un-leaf like. The day was cloudy, the sun hidden, and the sky had an iron gray cast that seemed to flatten everything and wash away the color of the world.

This is it, the Prince realized with excitement. They've come to bring me back.

He looked out again from under his hood, and his eyes locked onto the shape of the girl walking in front of him, the grays and greens of her clothing blending her into the forest around her even as she walked, holding the reins of his horse. Beyond her was Tomaz, just visible in the gloom, scouting ahead on his enormous stallion. The Prince allowed himself a small smile; they had no idea they were being surrounded.

The Prince reached out with his mind and felt again the points of light and heat surrounding them, the sparks of men's lives, moving slowly with them as the Exiles walked calmly toward the end of a ravine, which led out into a wide funnel-shaped valley.

And then something else tickled the back of the Prince's mind. He furrowed his brow in concentration, but he couldn't grasp what it was ... something that whined and shimmered in his head, slipping away as soon as he came close to grasping it. First it was on his right side, then his left, then gone, then up ahead, then above him. He focused harder, and despite the cold, a bead of sweat ran from his temple, traced the line of his jaw, and fell onto his shirt. Finally, he located the source of the nebulous something, and

realized the strange feeling was coming from two points of light that felt different from the others. They felt ... wrong. They weren't bright enough somehow ... it was as if they were only half there.

Why is that familiar?

He'd sensed it somewhere before, but where? His head suddenly ached and throbbed, and an image of the Fortress crossed his mind ... but no, no one in the Fortress felt like that. The Children would stand out even more strongly, like beacons, and Guardians were strong, but their abundance of life was directly at odds with this feeling of depletion, this strange sense of hollowness, as if the lights had been shrouded in the cloaking mask of night.

With no warning, a series of things happened in very quick succession.

There was a sharp whistling sound that filled the air from all directions and immediately both of the Exiles converged on the Prince. His horse panicked, and he fell off, once more sliding down the side of the beast. As he fell, his hood was pulled away from his face by two somethings the Prince couldn't see and his heart was suddenly in his throat, choking him with fear. The big man, launching himself from his stallion, grabbed the Prince, and with two quick flashes of silver, a dagger cut the ropes holding him in place. Tomaz pulled him free and dropped him to the ground in a heap as more dark streaks shot past them. Two of them struck the Prince's horse and it shrieked in pain and surprise, the sound deafeningly loud in the Prince's ears.

"Find cover!" the girl yelled. Another dark, blurred shape streaked past the Prince's face, stinging the bridge of his nose, and he recoiled in shock. He crab-walked backwards as fast as he could up the side of the small valley, and ducked behind a large group of bushes, between two tall trees. More black objects shot through the air all around them and he bent to pick one up: it was a small arrow, both head and shaft painted black, with raven's feathers for fletching.

His mind flashed back to the dart the Exile girl had pulled from his neck, the hollow points of the barbed darts. He made the connection, and

felt again the two wavering less-than-human points of light, just before they dimmed even further and then faded completely from his mind.

“Death Watchmen,” the Prince gasped.

It wasn't a rescue party. It was an assassination.

The Prince's daze was interrupted as a man dressed in all black with a drawn short sword burst into view from the foliage on the side of the ravine. The Prince stood and motioned for the man to halt, pulling himself up to his full height and assuming the stance of a Prince.

“Stop!” he commanded. The man ignored him, raised his sword, and slashed at the Prince's head.

“I am the Prince of Ravens - I order you to stop!”

Again, the command did nothing, and the man in black attacked once more. The Prince sidestepped, and the man's own weight sent him sprawling through the bushes behind them. There was the sound of the man hitting something, and then a fading shriek. In alarm, the Prince plunged through the bushes after the man, and immediately pulled up short, only just managing to stop himself before he fell headfirst into a hidden chasm, an ugly five foot gap of black emptiness where the ground and the side of the valley ravine should have met.

More arrows shot past his head, striking the ravine wall. He quickly ducked and moved back toward the valley floor, diving behind a tree just as a black metal arrowhead hissed through where his he had been not a second before. The sound of steel on steel came from in front of him - he rounded the tree to see the giant engaged with a group of men in black further into the funnel-shaped valley, using the limited space to force his attackers to engage him two by two. No doubt the high ravine walls amplified the sound of their weapons, but the battle still looked extremely fearsome to the Prince's eyes.

Tomaz's cloak had been thrown back and the shirt underneath had been ripped and torn by arrows. Through the tears the Prince could see strange glints and flashes of silver - and with a start of surprise he realized

that underneath his shirt the giant wore a concealed layer of armor. A large, hastily donned half helm encompassed his head, protecting the sides and back of his neck as well as the top of his head from the arrows that were still raining down on him. But the arrows were thinning; the Exile girl had scaled the stone walls, how the Prince couldn't begin to fathom, and was dealing swift and silent death to each of the visible archers with her two wickedly curved daggers. Her dark forest clothing blended perfectly with the shadows of the trees, and her long black hair flowed behind her, drinking in the light, wrapping her in a shifting patch of darkness. Besides brief glimpses, the Prince was only able to track her movement by the shocked cries of the men she came upon like a vengeful spirit.

But these were all ordinary men. Highly trained, but ordinary just the same. Where were the two Death Watchmen, the true Death Watchmen?

Before he could focus and search the surrounding area, the bushes rustled on his right and another man burst from concealment. With a short thrust of a black-steel blade, the man attacked the Prince, almost eviscerating him on the spot.

But instinct and training took over, and instead of retreating the Prince stepped smartly inside the range of the sword, rendering the blow useless. He grabbed the man's arm and delivered a lightning fast flurry of blows to the soldier's elbow, shoulder, and knee. There was a series of cracks, and the man let out a gasp of surprise. He tried to swing his sword again, but his arm didn't work properly anymore. The Prince redirected the poorly executed swipe, struck the man's wrist with stiff fingers, and dropped to one knee to catch the sword as it fell from the useless hand. The Prince looked up and saw the man gazing down at him in panic. With only a second's hesitation, the Prince swung the blade upward and ended the man's life.

Instantaneously, the Prince felt that life added unto his own.

The Talisman etched into his chest and shoulders was named for the Raven because it feasted on Death, and when the Prince killed, the Raven fed off the soul of the slain man or woman, augmenting the Prince's life with

theirs. The Prince's physical strength, eyesight, hearing, taste, touch, smell, speed, all were doubled. But, equally doubled, were the Prince's sense of pain, his anger, his hate, and all the most powerful emotions and urges of the man he'd killed. In effect, he became two people in one body.

But worst of all, always worst of all, were the memories.

The details of the soldier's life coursed through his mind as the sensations of a lifetime dug into his skin, both with enough force to send him reeling into insanity. Images of a family flashed across his eyes, and a wife whom he loved very dearly. His dedication to the Empress had led him to volunteer for a mission with the Death Watch. For the glory of the Empress, the glory of the Diamond Throne, the glory of Her Legacy and Her Will.

The sound of footsteps on the hard rock, amplified now in the Prince's ears, penetrated his split mind, and with a huge force of will his true identity surfaced - was it his true identity? What was true in such a world where this thing was possible? - and he blocked out the memories. His eyes opened, catching details too small for normal eyes to see, and focused on the four men rushing toward him. With sudden strength pounding through his limbs, the Prince raised the dead man's sword and danced into the middle of the onrushing group.

He was a whirlwind of steel. In a matter of moments, the four men lay bleeding on the ground, alive, but quite unable to fight. The Prince stood there for a moment, breathing heavily, and tried to control his racing heart and the bloodlust that came from the dead soldier's instincts. He looked up to see Tomaz and the Exile girl, who had now descended to fight beside the giant, under attack from both sides. He moved toward them.

A sound in the bushes to his right - so quiet he would have missed it but for his enhanced hearing. He whipped around to see a skeletal form dressed in black armor bearing cruel, twisted spikes at the shoulders, elbows, and knees, slink from concealment. It wore no helm, and the Prince looked into empty eye sockets, from the depths of which glowed not eyes but a sickly green light. A bare semblance of skin was stretched across the

skull, showing the half-life nature of the creature. It opened its mouth in a smile, and the Prince saw its withered tongue and gum-less teeth. Shivers chased themselves up and down his back as he looked into the face of a nightmare.

“My Prince,” the Death Watchman whispered.

It drew a black onyx sword from a sheath at its hip, a sword that drank in the light around it like a thirsty demon, leaving it cloaked in an ever-shifting halo of shadows.

“You’ve been missed,” it said, and lunged.

The Prince dodged back a step, avoiding the sword. The Watchman lunged again with inhuman speed and strength, the onyx blade whistling and hissing through the air like a thing alive and thirsty for blood.

“Stop!” he cried. “I command you to stop!”

“I don’t take your commands anymore!” the skeletal mouth sneered at him. It let out a maniacal cackle that bounced and reverberated around the walls of the ravine.

A chill went up the Prince’s back that had nothing to do with the fearful nature of the thing before him. Death Watchmen traded their souls to the clockwork Visigony for immortality, but in return they were sworn to obey the commands of the Empress and the Children, even if it meant surrendering the last bare shred of life that kept them in this world. A Watchman couldn’t deny the command of one of the Children. It wasn’t possible.

“You lie!” he screamed in its face, “I’m one of the Children! You owe your allegiance to me!”

The Death Watchman laughed again with terrifying glee and swung the black sword. The Prince retreated quickly, his enhanced strength and speed allowing him to fend off the attacks - for now. But the Watchmen worked in pairs - if the second one came on him unawares, he was doomed. He tried to reach out through his Talisman, searching for the second Watchman, but the black onyx sword flashed toward his throat and broke his concentration.

A flash of curved steel shot past, bare inches away from the Prince's head, and buried itself in the Watchman's left eye socket, eliciting a shocked scream of anger. There was a sizzling sound, and the Prince watched, amazed, as the dagger burned the skin of the Watchman's face. But, undaunted, the Watchman continued forward, swung its sword high overhead, and brought it down on the Prince's blade, shattering it.

"MOVE!" Roared a voice like a lion's roar behind him.

Throwing aside the broken blade, the Prince dove to the side, just in time to see Tomaz and the Exile girl hurtle past him.

The Death Watchman let out a cry, pulled the Exile girl's dagger from his eye as what flesh remaining on its hands sizzled and burned, and tossed it to the side just as the two Exiles attacked. Without wasting a second, the Prince took the opportunity to search for the second Watchman. He turned around in a quick circle, searching through the eyes of the Raven Talisman for the sickly half-dead glow.

But it was nowhere to be found.

That's impossible, the Prince thought in alarm, *I just felt it a moment ago, where is it?*

He strained his mind and his eyes, concentrating harder, searching for that tiny wavering point of life, but just as he felt he was about to reach it, the first Watchman broke through Tomaz and the girl and headed straight for the Prince. Again reacting on instinct, the Prince stepped forward inside the range of the blow intended to cleave him in two. He returned the attack, striking for the bundle of nerves in the Watchman's left side just above the kidney, then kicking out a foot to swipe its legs from under it. But the Watchman moved aside like a snake, dodging both blows, and brought its onyx blade around in a chopping motioning, intending to behead him.

The Exile girl was there waiting, and she dug her second dagger into the base of the thing's neck, sending the blow awry. The Prince noted mentally that she was well informed – the only way to kill a Watchman was to sever the brain from the body.

But her dagger missed the creature's spine, and the Watchman threw her off its back and turned once more to the Prince. It feinted to the left, to the right, and then out of nowhere a heavily booted foot appeared and smashed into the Prince's chest, knocking him on his back and forcing all of the breath out of his body.

The Prince rolled to the side as his vision narrowed; stars winked in front of his eyes as his body cried for air. The Watchman's blade snaked out once more, and with a hair-raising screech dug into the rock not an inch from the Prince's head. The skeletal face of the monster split into a smile of ghastly glee as it raised its sword once more. The Prince had nowhere to run.

A flash of silver-and-blue steel.

The Death Watchman's face turned to confusion as its sword dropped from its hands, and then it crumpled slowly to the ground, where its head rolled loose from its body. A bare second later, both head and body began to decompose, creating a stench that was truly horrific.

Tomaz sheathed his sword, slinging it onto his back. He reached out a huge hand and pulled the Prince to his feet, where he clutched at a rock outcropping on the side of the ravine, still trying to pull air into his lungs.

"That was close," said the girl, who had retrieved her daggers and stood surveying the scene around them. Suddenly she tensed. "Tomaz, I only count twenty-two. One's missing."

As if on cue, a man dressed in black burst from concealment and raced off. Tomaz shot one glance at the girl, who nodded quickly, and he took off after the man.

"Well, looks like that's it."

The Prince shook his head desperately, trying with all his might to force breath back into his lungs. The last blow from the Watchman had taken all the wind out of him, and it was all he could do to force himself to a standing position as black spots floated across his vision. Frantically, his eyes darted over the girl's shoulder, searching the forest, trying to see through

the shadows cast by the trees and the shifting clouds hanging low overhead, turning left, right, looking behind him.

“Did they hit you in the head?” she asked the Prince, obviously questioning his sanity. “We got all of them, you can calm down now.”

“No,” he gasped, unable to say more, his lungs still trying desperately to take in air. Spots of light danced before his eyes, but he blinked them away and tried to breathe deep. He only succeeded in inducing a huge coughing fit, his lungs burning as if he had pulled in a breath of fire instead of air. Desperately, he started trying to mime the message, flailing his arms about.

“You’re fine now, your Majesty,” she said, misinterpreting the message as anger. “Not that I expected thanks.”

He took one last deep pull of air and finally, blessedly, his lungs expanded.

“Two,” he croaked. “There’s always two!”

A soft twang followed by a whistling sound reached his ears, and he dropped to the floor without hesitation. There was a cry, and he looked up to see the arrow had flown past him and impaled the girl in the shoulder. Before he could react, the sound of running feet came from behind him, and he turned to see another Death Watchman, this one much bigger and wielding an enormous black war ax.

“Shadows and light!” cursed the Prince with the little air he’d managed to take in. It was all he could do to dive out of the way of an overhand strike that would have cleaved him in two as the huge creature bull-rushed them. He rose to his feet and backed away quickly, but the Death Watchman followed him without missing a beat. Whoever it had been in life was an enormous hulk of a man already, nearly as large as Tomaz, and the Prince was struck with sudden fear at the thought that this might have been a Guardian.

The Watchman swung into the series of movements that the Prince recognized as the opening of the Gunn Ax Form, and his fears were

confirmed. Frantically, he looked around himself - a weapon, he needed a weapon! Anything to defend himself, even one of the girl's daggers - there!

It was a short sword, clutched in the lifeless hands of one of the human Watchmen, and with lightning speed he grabbed it and fell into the Szobody Sword Form, deflecting the Watchman's swing and retreating quickly. He tried an overhand strike, but it was easily deflected as the Watchman twirled his ax in the form called Spinning the Silk. Despite the speed and strength he'd gained from the dead soldier, the Prince was forced back again by the creature, and as time passed he began to accumulate a series of wounds from the Watchman's enormous weapon that burned as if they'd been salted. His shoulder stung and ached where a cut had sliced deep into the muscle, and blood flowed freely from his side where the ax had scraped across his ribs.

At the last second, the Prince ducked a blow that should have taken his head off, but which instead buried the Watchman's ax in a strange, gnarled tree growing on the side of the ravine. The Prince seized his chance and attacked, striking out with a quick thrust to the Watchman's arm, hoping to incapacitate it. The Watchman moved so quickly the Prince didn't even know what happened, but he was thrown through the air. He landed nearly twenty feet away, dazed, at the foot of a pile of rocks. He tried to come to his feet, looking around desperately for his sword, but he fell back as his head throbbed sickeningly and his legs gave out beneath him.

He looked around, hoping desperately that the girl was nearby and that she might intervene, but she had disappeared. She had cut her losses and abandoned him.

The Watchman ripped its ax from the tree, pulling with it a chunk of wood so large that the tree leaned drunkenly to the side, and then in slow motion teetered and fell to the rock and grass floor with a ground-shaking crash.

The Prince tried again to stand, but this time his leg crumpled beneath him and he let out a cry of pain. He frantically tried again, but his ankle

shook so violently that even with his added strength it wouldn't let him rise. And then the Watchman was there, standing over him. He looked up into the enormous skeletal mask, skin stretched too tightly across a once-human face, glowing green eyes staring from the pitted eye sockets and boring a hole into him with their insistent, fiery gaze.

"The Prince of Ravens," it said in a voice like the crypt. Its vocal cords had long since dried out, and it was in a rasping whisper that it spoke. It stood towering over him, the ax clutched tightly in its right hand, savoring the moment and the Prince's helplessness. The Prince tried to rise once more, but in vain. He began to pull himself up the pile of rocks, dragging his useless foot behind him, before the Watchman reached out, grabbed him, and hoisted him into the air, turning him so that he was face to face with the creature.

"I will be greatly rewarded for bringing back your head to the Empress. She is so concerned about your safety ..."

The Prince's mouth went dry.

"What ... what did you say?"

"Or perhaps another part of your body?"

The Watchman smiled, its rotted lips pulling back to expose dry, gumless teeth held together by sorcery alone, and swished the great ax through the air, razor sharp black blade catching and refracting the sickly burning light of its eyes in twisting, turning patterns.

"My orders were admittedly unspecific ..."

The Prince was frozen in horror. It couldn't be true.

"Who gave you your orders?" he asked, voice coming out in a croak.

The Watchman gave a bone-chilling laugh that rasped and coughed.

"I don't have to answer any of your questions anymore."

The Prince, with a force of will that he would never have thought he possessed, thrust his face forward and let his voice roll out in a crack of sound.

"Tell me!" he roared.

The Watchman stumbled, and dropped the Prince, where he landed painfully on his back, still staring into the fiery green eyes. The ax faltered as if it were suddenly unsure of itself. The Prince fought for control of the creature, trying to force his will on the Watchman. How did Rikard do this so easily? Sweat broke from his forehead. The Watchman shook its head, and the moment passed. A thought seemed to occur to it.

“Do you not know?”

The Prince remained silent. The Watchman laughed, and eyed him like a wolf that had cornered a helpless deer.

“My orders came from your Mother, little Prince.”

The Prince surged to his feet, then stumbled backward as his ankle again collapsed beneath him.

“Don’t lie,” he said, quietly, and then fear and anger took over and he was shouting. “DON’T LIE TO ME!”

The green, demonic eyes flamed brighter and the creature cackled, a sound like a thousand nails scraped across stone. The onyx ax swept upward in an arch, and then plunged toward the Prince’s chest. The Prince lay in shock, unable to defend himself even if he had had the strength of limb to do so.

An enormous swath of rippling steel interposed itself between the Prince and the ax. The gleeful triumph on the Death Watchman’s skeletal face contorted and became a look of fury. It leapt back with a snarl that cut off abruptly as anger turned to shocked disbelief.

“You!”

Tomaz stepped into the Prince’s view. He held his huge greatsword loosely in his right hand, as if it weighed nothing. His clothing was ripped, but his armor and his helm gleamed brightly, shining in a stray patch of sun.

The Prince looked up into the face of the Watchman through a red haze that had settled over his vision. Vaguely, he registered that the Watchman was afraid. If the Prince hadn’t known better, he would have said it was terrified.

What scares one of the Watchmen?

“You’re dead!” it screamed, the ghoulish voice twisting the words into a scream of such ripping, throat tearing fury that no living thing could have uttered it.

“No, Zoroastrian,” the giant replied simply. “Not yet.”

Tomaz flowed forward, steel blade flashing as it hit pockets of sunlight streaming through the clouds above. As big as the Death Watchman was, Tomaz was bigger. He seemed to be everywhere at once, in front, behind, to either side. Scratches began to appear in the Watchman’s black armor as the huge steel blade came closer and closer to sinking into the corrupted flesh; rips and tears formed in the creature’s black clothing, and streaming rivulets of yellow-green ichor began to flow from where the steel blade cut and slashed; the great ax seemed a child’s toy next to the enormous sword that whistled through the air with unholy speed.

With a final overhand strike, the sword cut the haft of the ax cleanly in two, leaving the Watchman with the ax head in one hand and a long piece of useless black wood in the other. The Watchman turned to run, fear, rage, and inhuman strength driving him – too quickly for Tomaz to follow. It reached the treeline, and threw one last look over his shoulder at the Prince, its face a mask of rage.

A slim form stepped out from the shadows of the closest tree, and with a flash of steel, a dagger was driven into the chink in the Watchman’s armor underneath the left shoulder. The dagger, long as it was, pierced the thing’s heart, freezing it in place. Another dagger flashed, digging into the back of its neck, severing the spine, and killing instantly. The Watchman dropped like a marionette with its strings cut, and the Prince felt the small wavering drop of life it had left in it disappear.

The lifeless form of the Watchman slumped to the ground and began to crumble into dust. Within minutes, all that was left was the large black ax and an empty case of armor. The girl stepped into the clearing, eyes scanning the area.

“You were telling the truth,” the Prince said blankly, “they were trying to kill me.”

He fell silent, not knowing what else to say, feeling numb and empty. He should feel something shouldn't he? Out of the corner of his eye he saw the two Exiles exchange a glance. After a moment of tension, the girl knelt and wiped her dagger on a piece of a dead Watch soldier's clothing.

“Come on,” she said, the barest hint of softness creeping into her voice. She roughly cleared her throat.

“They won't be alone - we need to get through the mountains and disappear for a while, see what we can find out about how many people are hunting you. The Death Watch is bound to have left word of its location, and there are always patrols in this area - two, sometimes three, roaming around looking for bandits. We should ... go ...”

She trailed off and pink spots bloomed on her cheeks.

“Come on princeling,” she commanded with the customary steel in her voice, moving off toward the deeper cover of the trees farther down the ravine.

Like an automaton, the Prince rose under the watchful gaze of Tomaz and followed. The girl looked back and saw them following, and addressed herself to Tomaz over the Prince's shoulder.

“Do you want to do a quick scouting run? We want to know if we're in the clear or not. We might not survive another ambush like this one.”

“Wait,” the Prince responded mechanically as Tomaz began to move off, forgetting that the girl hadn't spoken to him. “There are no more living nearby - only us three.”

A brief silence followed this pronouncement.

“What does that mean?” asked the girl, her eyes narrowing dangerously.

“I'm the Prince of Ravens,” he responded numbly, voice still monotone and lifeless, “I can sense life. There are no more living besides the three of us. Not for nearly a mile in any direction.”

The girl's face turned from one of steely calm to one of red-hot hatred and the Prince vaguely registered that this was cause for concern. Yet, he couldn't seem to muster up the energy to do anything about it. Tomaz laid a large hand on the Prince's shoulder and turned him around.

"What are you saying?" he rumbled quietly. Before the Prince could respond, the girl spoke:

"You knew they were here."

It was a simple statement, but it caught the Prince's attention. His hearing, still enhanced from the soldier's death, caught the whisk of metal being drawn from a sheath and he turned back around just in time to see the girl launch herself across the clearing, daggers in hand. With a roar of alarm, Tomaz interposed himself between the two, and just in time. The girl pulled up short, held back by the big man's outstretched and warding hands.

"You were going to offer us up to save your own hide!" she snarled at the Prince, ignoring Tomaz and shouting past him.

"I thought they were here to rescue me!" he shouted back at her, shocked at the state the girl was in.

"NO ONE IS GOING TO RESCUE YOU!" she screamed at him. She turned back to the clearing and gestured in a wide circle, taking in the bodies of the men lying dead on the ground and what remained of the Death Watchmen.

"They were hunting you, oh great Prince of Ravens! I don't know where they got their orders, but do you really think that once it's clear they're dead there won't be more? You were kidnapped in the capital city of the Empire, right under the Empress' nose. You survived, barely clinging to life long enough for Tomaz - an Exile, which I know must gall you to no end! - to save your worthless hide. Now Death Watchmen appear in the middle of the Elmist Mountains to finish the job and KILL YOU, and you're still clinging to the hope that someone is going to come save you! Wake up, princeling!"

And with that, she spun on her heel and made her way back into the trees in the direction of where they had first been ambushed. The Prince stood staring at her, mouth open, as Tomaz slowly lowered his hands and

walked over to him. The big man grabbed the Prince by the arm and pulled the soldier's notched sword out of his grip.

"Come," he rumbled, pulling the Prince, limping on his bad ankle, along with him. Now that the battle was over, the wounds he'd received had begun to sting with a vengeance. When they reached the end of the ravine, they saw that the girl had already finished repacking their bags and was tending to the horse that had been hit by the Watchmen's arrows. After a quick examination, she gave two sharp pulls and the arrows came out. She quickly staunched the bleeding with strips of cloth from the same blanket that had provided the material for the Prince's bonds and gag, and after the shocked, hurt horse had calmed down, it became clear that it had only sustained superficial injuries; the girl reached up her sleeve and brought out a rudimentary set of thread and needle and after the wounds had been stitched and bound, the horse seemed to be fine.

"You do him," she said abruptly, jerking her head at the Prince. Her jaw was clenched in intense anger, and it seemed to be taking all the will power she had not to turn and launch herself at him. "I don't trust myself being around him right now."

Tomaz made no comment, but simply nodded and pulled his own needle and thread from a pouch at his waist, and, after removing the Prince's shirt, began to stitch his wounds. The needle hurt, but the Prince was still in a state of shock and could barely form two coherent words, much less protest the cold metal sewing his skin together.

Once Tomaz was finished, he pulled a few of the strips left from the torn blanket that had made the Prince's gag and attached them to two long, straight pieces of wood, which held the Prince's ankle straight. Then, without any more exchange of words, the big man threw him another spare shirt, fashioned new bonds for his wrists, and tied him to the horse. The girl grabbed the reins, viciously threw the cloak and hood over him, and then the three of them were off once more, almost as if they had never been attacked.

As if they hadn't just been ambushed. As if one of the Death Watchmen hadn't just tried to kill the Prince in the name of his Mother.

It occurred to him that maybe the girl was right.

No! he told himself harshly, *there is another reason. It must all be a misunderstanding, it's impossible that ...*

But it wasn't. Here was the hard proof. Not only had he been kidnapped from the Fortress itself, but the Death Watchman had told him its orders had come from the Empress.

Mother ...

No. It wasn't possible. The Prince shook his head to clear the treasonous thoughts. It had to be one of the other Children. It had to be. But if it was one of his siblings, how had they corrupted the Watchmen? The ordinary soldiers could have been bought or bribed but the actual Watchmen, the Death Watch constructs that formed the center of the group, they cared nothing for money or material gain.

This thought led him back to the ordinary man he had killed, and the memories of the man's life came back to him, jumbled and confused and already fading as time passed. Desperate, the Prince did something he had only done once before, and dredged up the memories from the back of his mind where he had forced them and began to go through them, one by one, looking for any information that could help him.

The process was painful. Not physically so, but mentally, and the Prince tried to make it go as quickly as possible. Memories of a wife flashed through him, and a sudden font of love sprang up and began to flow in his heart - yes, his wife Marya. Memories of making love to her, of their young children and his pride that his son was growing tall and strong. He had to get back to her; she would be waiting for him to return -

No! the Prince said harshly, reasserting control over his mind. He wasn't this man. He was ... he was the Prince of Ravens, even if he had no name. Even if Mother had stripped him of his name ... even if he was being hunted ... no, he was a Prince. He had to be, or else what was he?

Sweat had begun to bead on his forehead with the force of his concentration, and the hood was now uncomfortably stifling, but he couldn't stop. He needed answers. So he waded once more into the mire of memories.

After another few minutes, the Prince finally found what he was looking for: the memory of when the man had received the order to move out from the Fortress ... the orders had come from the true Death Watchmen. The two skeletal creatures had called together a cell of the lesser foot soldiers, and they had set out the next day. There was no memory of a conspiracy, no memory of anything but the man's fear at meeting the two creatures, and of their briefing that they were to hunt down and assassinate a dangerous traitor to the Empress.

Angry and exhausted, the Prince shoved the memories away, and as he did, felt them fade completely from his mind, along with the rest of the soldier's strength. His vision returned to normal, as did his hearing and other senses, and his emotions were once again his own, calm and under his control.

So it was the Death Watchmen themselves who'd received the orders. That meant one of two things: either they had received their orders from the Empress through her Hand, or one of his siblings had managed to corrupt them. If the former, the girl was right and he truly was a marked man. If the latter ... the magnitude of the task amazed him. He didn't even know where one would begin to attempt to corrupt the Watchmen. But then again, his siblings had been alive much longer than he had, and until he received his Inheritance, as was custom, he was only privy to certain information. Rikard alone had been born over half a millennium ago. It was quite possible that they had access to knowledge far beyond the Prince's own meager seventeen years. But even if possible, would one of his siblings truly move so openly against him?

Princes of the Realm had conflicting spheres of power in the land of Lucia. The borders of each of the realms that made up the larger nation ruled

by the Empress were not defined - and specifically kept that way by the Empress in order to sow discord among the Children. Perhaps one of his siblings had found a loophole in the conditioning of the Death Watchmen and exploited it.

But it all came back to the single most important question: who would risk such a move? It was dangerous in the extreme for the Children to act openly against each other. The Prince hadn't been alive long enough to act against or be acted against by one of the others, but he knew the histories. Not fifty years ago, Rikard, Prince of Lions, had moved openly against the third eldest Prince: Dysuna, Prince of Wolves. The Empress herself had seen to Rikard's punishment, and it was rumored She had spared him not at all because he was Her First Son and Commander of the Imperial Armies. The punishment, of which the Prince of Ravens had only heard rumors, and vague ones at that, had been enough to discourage more acts of violence between the Children for fifty years. It was also rumored that the Empress was angrier that Rikard had failed and been found out than that he had committed the act in the first place. And besides, to Rikard fifty years must seem no more than a brief span of time. To Geofred, the second eldest at four and a half centuries, who spent all of his time in the mountain castle of Eyrie pouring over the deepest histories and prophecies of Lucia as was his duty, fifty years would be nothing, and the Prince's own seventeen years no more than a blink.

The Inheritances ... I was Summoned to receive mine on the day I was taken.

It was well known that the Empress, ever suspicious and calculating, tested the loyalty of Her subjects. In fact, the testing was often more intense the more important a person's task was to be, the thought being that if the subject survived the test it would prove and ensure their loyalty, binding them closer to the Diamond Throne. When Symanta had delivered his Summons, his first thought had been that he was to receive his Inheritance. All the signs had pointed to it. Could it be that his Mother had engineered this after all?

Excitement thrilled through the Prince as the pieces lined up and began to form a bigger picture. Could this all be a test? A move to discern the Prince's trustworthiness as a Child of the Empress? Perhaps the Death Watchmen had been sent by his Mother or even one of his siblings on the Empress' orders, to be certain that he was ready. Energy surged to the tips of his fingers - of course! This was the answer - he was being tested, and if he was intelligent enough to escape and return to Lucien to face his Mother, She would then give him his Inheritance to the final city and his mandate to sweep the Exiled from the Empire.

But was he ready for that? He had assumed the Inheritance would come years later, that at most he was going to be told to prepare himself. Could it all be happening this quickly?

He shook his head, dispelling the doubts in the blazing light of the revelation that his Mother had not abandoned him. If the Empress thought him ready, then he was ready. She was all knowing. But then what was to be his next move? He needed information, that much was certain, and he needed the two Exiles to drop their guard so he could get away. But he didn't even know where they were, or where they were headed.

Wait. A thrill shot through him. He did know where they were. The girl had told him, had let it slip while she was berating him.

" ... appear in the middle of the Elmist Mountains ..."

The Elmist Mountains were a far distance south of Lucien, separating Tyne and Lerne from one another to the east and west, and ended in the south just north of the city of Banelyn. Tyne was the seat of his brother Rikard, and the Prince knew immediately that this wasn't where the Exiles were headed, for the citizens who lived there, persuaded by the Lion Talisman, were fanatically loyal to Rikard, and such a place would be suicide for the Exiles. Lerne, the seat of Symanta, was equally treacherous, as it was the home province of the Seekers, who were just as dangerous in their own way as the Death Watchmen, if not more so. No, they must be heading directly south ...

Banelyn.

That was the answer - that was where they were headed, and that was where he would make his escape. The city was large, but not modern enough to be the seat of any of the Children, and in fact was one of the cities that fell in the strange no man's land between Realms of the Empire, with multiple Children often laying claim to it. It was long suspected that the Exiled used hidden way stations there to spy on the movements of troops in the Empire - and that meant that there was bound to be a Seeker there, to spy upon the spies. The Seekers of Light were feared by everyone in the Empire, Commons and High alike; even the Most High were known to speak softly and carefully when in the presence of the elusive Eyes and Ears of the Empress. But the Seekers were sworn to the Children, just as they were sworn to the Empress, so he had nothing to fear. If he could slip away from the two Exiles in the press of such a large city, perhaps even just on the outskirts ... chances were that he would be able to make his way to the Seeker, and once there he'd be safe from the Exiles, able to make his way back to Lucien.

The Prince peered up from under his hood at the backs of the two Exiles, and felt a strange pang deep in his chest. They had saved his life, even if it had been for their own gain in bringing him back to their people. It didn't change anything, not really. But the girl could have run, and instead she'd brought back the giant in order to face the final Death Watchman, to save the Prince at great personal risk to both of them.

But they were Exiles, and a single virtuous act did not cancel out a lifetime of wrongdoing, of that he was certain. However ... he realized that he couldn't turn them in. He owed them a debt now, one he had to repay. In fact, he owed the big man two debts, if, as it looked, he truly had nursed the Prince back to health after he'd been left for dead.

I'll leave them in the mountains outside of Banelyn, the Prince decided. If the maps of Lucia he'd seen in the Fortress Libraries were accurate, the city was nestled at the southern foot of the mountain range. He'd leave them

there, and make his own way into the city. He'd craft some story for the Seeker, how he had slipped away from them days earlier and had no knowledge of where they'd gone. It was the best he could do to repay them.

They're Exiled Kindred - they should be happy I'm willing to do that much.

But still his conscience panged him, something that he tried to smother as a sign of weakness. But nothing he told himself stamped it out completely, and as the day wore on he was lost once more in a mire of confusion.

Chapter Six: Trust

The Prince began to make a plan. He was not naturally gifted at deceptive performance like his brother Tiffenal, who could convince twelve different factions he was doing twelve different things and then end up doing a thirteenth, nor was he well suited to pure imaginative strategy like his brother Geofred, who was infamous for knowing the outcome of everything from a battle to a chess game within the first few seconds of action.

But detail, he was very good at detail. Everything always came down to the details.

The Prince wasn't exactly sure when it had come about, but ever since early childhood he'd had an uncanny ability to memorize, recite, and compile lists. By the age of ten everything from trade ledgers to obscure farming laws were brought to him simply because he could read them over once, understand them, repeat them verbatim, and, most importantly, explain them.

Privately, he had always assumed it was part of the Raven Talisman, or more specifically because of what happened when he took a life. He had been made to kill his first man at the age of five, as all the Children were, and when the man had died, all the memories of his forty-year life had come flooding into the Prince. His mind had been forced to expand in order to encompass all of the memories, all of the sensory details of forty years pressed against his eyes, his ears, his nose, his skin, his tongue.

The details were what made the memories important. It was the moment he'd learned about murder, and starvation, and the life of a thief. It was the moment he'd learned about what men and women did in closed rooms. But it wasn't like he had learned it in a pleasantly illustrated book. No, he had learned it through the smells, the sights, the sounds, the caresses. It was as if he had been there - as if he had lived it. The experience had left him in a semi-coma for the better part of a week, unable to speak, unable to relate to anyone around him, horrified about what life contained.

Geofred liked to joke that he'd grown up that day, the oldest five year old the world had ever seen. The same year he executed a rapist as part of his duties as a Prince, and had been forced to relive the crime through the eyes and skin of the man who'd committed it, all the while feeling like it was he who had done it, he who was.... He shivered violently as the memories came back to him. He'd been sick for weeks afterward, but thank the Empress the memories all faded eventually, even the most brutal ones.

He could still feel bits of the memories of the Death Watch soldier he'd killed floating in the back of his mind, though in truth these were his memories of those memories. Always an hour or so after a kill took place, the memories, the strength and speed, all of the person's life, faded away and went to wherever such things go. What was left was his impression of them, nothing more.

The Prince took a deep breath, the air chill in his lungs even though it was hot and stuffy underneath the hood, and banished the morbid reminiscing. He needed a plan, and to make a plan, he had to get all the details. And to get all the details, he needed to get the shadow-cursed, light-forsaken, damnable hood off of his head. He needed to see, to hear, to smell.

But how would he do that? The Exiles didn't trust him. The girl certainly didn't, not after what had happened with the Death Watch, how he had allowed them to ambush the three of them. Details. That was a detail wasn't it? Yes. She didn't like him, because she felt betrayed by him.

So to make her trust me, I need to prove it. She needs facts, and reasons, and proofs. That's what the girl needs. I need to get her to talk to me.

One down. Prove yourself to the girl, get her talking. Now, Tomaz.

The irony of course is that they can't actually trust me, because I'm only earning their trust to betray them.

For some reason, this thought hurt the Prince. Betrayal was evil, it was wrong and ... but no, this wasn't betrayal. Betrayal would be to turn his back on his Mother, and on the other Children. Family loyalty came first, and

loyalty to the Empire, which was the source of all good in the land of Lucia. Yes. To be loyal to them, this deception was necessary.

Tomaz. The Prince tilted his head again under the hood, but failed to catch a glimpse of the big man. Stifling his exasperation, he dropped his head, and as he did his eyes moved over the two black short swords they had commandeered from two dead Death Watch soldiers. They were tied and lashed down securely to the horse the Prince was riding, and as he looked at them the image of Tomaz's enormous greatsword came to mind; the huge swath of steel cutting through the shadows and flashing in the light as the Exile dueled and overcame the Death Watchman, saving the Prince's life.

He's a protector.

It was all there: the way he looked out for the girl, the way he was concerned with teaching the Prince manners, the way he'd jumped in front of a Death Watchman with no concern for his own safety. He related to people, empathized with them, and wanted them to be better.

He'll need me to seem like I'll be a good person. He wants people to be good.

So the Prince began to make a plan, doing the best he could, knowing that it was rudimentary at best but committed to it, and that night, once dinner had been eaten and he found himself once more bound to a small tree, he spoke to the Exiles.

"I apologize for not telling you the Death Watch was coming," he said. He watched their reactions carefully, recording every tiny detail, no matter how insignificant it seemed.

They both stiffened as he spoke.

"I was," his voice caught in his throat unintentionally, but he pushed on, "wrong."

Tomaz turned slowly to look at the girl, his face giving away nothing but his eyes quite clearly speaking volumes to her alone. She looked back, her face also unreadable, and the Prince felt a flash of annoyance that he

couldn't pick up the slightest hint as to how either of them were feeling. Tomaz looked back at the Prince, waiting for him to continue.

"You were right," he said, choosing his words very carefully. "The Death Watch was sent after me, they kidnapped me, and they followed and ambushed you in order to get to me. I also think ... that it was my Mother who sent them."

He was careful not to lie. He did believe his Mother had sent them, but as a test. He did think that the Death Watch had been sent to ambush them. He continued on, telling them what the second Death Watchman had said to him while the girl had gone to get Tomaz. He watched closely for their reactions, and this time they were more illuminating: the girl's eyes flashed with surprise and then narrowed in suspicion before she smothered the emotions and returned to a blank calmness. Tomaz, who had been squatting on the ground while sharpening his sword, slowly put the stone and the blade away and turned around completely to face him. They were both staring at him with an intensity that was enough to make his stomach do a nervous somersault.

No, you're fine. You've given nothing away. Go on.

"I understand that you want to take me to your people. I ... will be honest with you. You saved me from the Death Watch, and I owe you a debt that makes me uneasy."

That was true enough. More accurately it made him very uneasy, but they should be happy he was going to repay it by letting them go once he'd made it to the Seeker in Banelyn instead of coming back to hunt them down like the outlaws they were.

"And so I want to make a deal with you."

"Excuse me?"

The girl stood up, looking offended, and the Prince was afraid he'd gone too far too fast. But before he could backtrack, Tomaz shifted his weight and held up a hand to stall her. He was eyeing the Prince carefully,

and the Prince knew that the giant's desire to see good in people was preventing him from considering all the possibilities.

"I want to hear what he has to say, Eshendai."

"Ashandel, no, you can't be serious!"

"Humor me, please?"

The Prince watched as the girl's anger winked out and was replaced by the cold, dispassionate mask she wore more and more often around him.

"Fine," she said and turned to the Prince.

The Prince swallowed and cleared his throat, making sure he always knew where her hands were in relation to her sheathed daggers, all too aware now of how lethal she was with them.

"I've ... never been outside of Lucien before."

The girl's eyes widened ever so slightly and then narrowed; her hands balled into fists. What was that? Why did she seem angry at *that*? Shadows and light, even Symanta would have trouble understanding what went on in this girl's head!

"And I want to see the world," he finished lamely. It was true. Of everything he was saying, this was true and always had been. "Until I woke up in that shack ... uh ... wooden cabin, I'd never seen the sun. Never smelled grass or ... never mind. That's not important."

This time it was Tomaz who reacted: the big man stood up and turned away, slowly sheathing his sword and stowing away the whetstone he'd been using to sharpen it. He stood there silently for a moment, then turned back toward the Prince, who felt a moment of panic. What was the big man thinking?

"What's the deal you wish to make?" the girl asked. Her voice sounded harsh and distant, but the Prince was familiar enough with her now to know that she was interested, or else she wouldn't have spoken. It seemed that harsh and distant was just the way she sounded on basic principle.

Details. It was all about the details.

"I ... would ask permission to travel without the hood."

There was a long moment of silence, in which the Prince waited for one of them to speak. He hoped that he had phrased his request correctly. He was not, as a general rule, familiar with how one asks for permission.

“That’s all?”

The Prince looked at the Exile girl.

“Yes,” he said earnestly, quietly.

“How can we trust you?” she replied.

“What do you expect me to do, look my way out of captivity?” the Prince asked, letting some of his annoyance show; the girl was infuriating, there was no need to feign that.

Tomaz chuckled, and the Prince’s heart gave a sick sideways lurch, half out of excitement that his plan was working and he had begun to win over Tomaz, and half out of disgust that he was repaying the big man by betraying him.

They have betrayed all I stand for - all that is good in this world: the Empire, the Princes of the Realm, my Mother. They deserve no special treatment.

The Exile girl continued to watch him, her emerald gaze unyielding.

“You said it was to be a deal. What is your part of the bargain?”

“I promise that as long as I am in your captivity I will not attempt to contact the Empire again. I will warn you should an ambush occur, or if we are about to run into a patrol of soldiers. All of this I swear by my Mother’s name, by the Children, and the Light that they serve.”

They both watched him for a long moment, and then Tomaz looked to the girl, deferring judgment to her. It was a long time before she spoke, and when she finally did it was with the same harsh directness as before.

“This changes nothing,” she said. “You are still our prisoner, you are still a captive of the Exiled Kindred, and you are still coming with us wherever we choose to take you. Should you break your promise, I will end you, Prince of Ravens or not, before you can take your next breath. I want it to be very clear to you that, as you’ve seen, you are extremely valuable to us alive. But should it come down to it, you are much more valuable as a

dead Prince than an escaped one. If there is the slightest chance you are about to become the latter, then I shall make you the former.”

The Prince waited for Tomaz to say something, but the big man did not move, only stood in stoic silence. It was then that the Prince realized that the girl was the true leader of the two; despite being the younger, she was in command, and the big man would advise her only. The final decision, after debate was done, would always be hers.

“I can accept that,” the Prince said, when it became clear she had no intention of continuing. In truth, it was no less than what he had expected, if far less than he had hoped.

“But with one more request.”

She stiffened, and her face grew thunderous, but she remained silent. The Prince quickly continued.

“Every day that I keep this deal, I would ask that I be allowed to earn your trust, or at least as much as I can. You, both of you, saved me from death. Tomaz has, if he speaks true, saved me twice. Should I go back on our deal in any way, then you can hood me, cloak me, and tie me to that thrice-damned horse, if you don’t choose to kill me outright.”

“How will you earn our trust?” Tomaz asked slowly.

“Responsibilities,” he said quickly. “Perhaps something as simple as making the fire. You can supervise me, or you can tie me to a tree with only enough slack to perform the task. But I wish to help you ... and if you give me something to do, you will see that I can be counted on. And then perhaps you might come to view me as -”

“And then as time passes,” the girl broke in, “we come to trust you, the tasks get more complex, until you manage to convince us to let our guard down and you run. You find the Empire, you sell us out to save your own life, and then they kill you and they begin to hunt us in earnest.”

“I just learned that my Mother sent the Death Watch to assassinate me,” the Prince said, very quietly, speaking almost to himself, letting some of his inner turmoil show through. “Why would I run to them? I think it has

been just irrevocably proven to all of us that there is no place for me to run to even should I wish to leave your company. Which, to tell you what I think you may soon guess, I do not want to do, because I know nothing of this world and it appears the two of you know much. You have food and transportation, whereas I have nothing but borrowed clothes a price on my head. Not to mention that should the Death Watchmen come again, as we know they may, I would feel more secure with those daggers and that greatsword nearby. Why would I run, knowing all of this?"

There was a long silence as Tomaz and the girl watched him, the first with interest, the second with something akin to loathing.

"You're lying," the girl said.

"Eshendai," Tomaz said quietly, "I see no harm in this. After all, did not the Empire prove to him in spectacular fashion that he is no longer welcome among them?"

"He's the Prince of Ravens, we can't trust him," she said stubbornly.

"He's a boy," Tomaz rumbled gently, "he's barely older than you were."

She jumped as if burned, and the Prince looked wide-eyed from one to the other. What had just happened? A long time passed before she spoke again, but when she did, it was without breaking eye contact with the big man.

"I understand what you're saying," she said, "but I don't trust him. He's holding something back, I can see it even though I can't explain it."

"The choice is yours," Tomaz reminded her gently. "But you have my counsel."

"Yes, I know."

She turned to the Prince then, and watched him with an intensity that was quite alarming. Her eyes were flecks of emerald stone, and the lines of her face were hard and angular, like the curves and planes of a marble statue. She strode forward, and held out her hand.

"We have a deal."

The Prince shook her hand, which was cool and calloused, no doubt from years of work with her daggers. She dropped his hand quickly, a small grimace crossing her face as if she had just touched something covered in dirt and slime, and then turned away.

“Sleep,” Tomaz said, with a tight smile, “and tomorrow you journey without the hood.”

The Prince nodded, not trusting himself to smile, before he lay down, turned over, and tried to fall asleep. He listened to the sounds of the girl and the giant banking the fire and checking the horses, and then when they had decided the watch, the sounds of Tomaz settling in for sleep and the girl slipping into the surrounding forest.

The plan had worked. They would begin to relax their guard, even though the girl had reservations about doing so. He was a step closer to making his way back to his rightful place beside his Mother.

And yet, peace of mind did not descend on him, and he spent the night, once again, trying and failing to find sleep.

Chapter Seven: Knowing Death

The next few days passed quickly as they traveled on, descending the mountains but still surrounded by dense forest. The journey took a week, and each day, in accordance with their bargain, the Prince was given a new freedom.

The first day, as promised, the Exiles allowed him to go about the journey without the hood of the over-large, stinky brown cloak. They also removed his gag.

“That wasn’t part of the deal,” he protested.

“How else are you going to warn us of impending doom?” the girl said wryly, tone breezy but eyes staring daggers at him.

“Fair point,” he said, and then, taking himself and her completely by surprise, he smiled his biggest, most winning smile, just to make her angry. It worked – and she whirled around, threw his reins to Tomaz, swearing and cursing all “shadow-born Princes,” before disappearing into the trees.

The Prince, half expecting Tomaz to dunk him in whatever body of water happened to be closest at hand, eyed the big man warily, but the giant only shrugged.

“You both take yourselves too seriously,” Tomaz said vaguely, before mounting his stallion and heading in the same direction, the long lead of the Prince’s mount tied to the saddle of his warhorse.

As the Prince had promised, he made no trouble along the way. All he did, and all he wanted to do, in truth, was look at his surroundings as they traveled through the forest at the same steady, mile-eating pace as all the days before.

“There’re so many,” he muttered to himself. He was looking at the trees as they passed through the mountain forest, noticing all of the different types of bark, the short trees, the tall trees, the wide trees, the trees with needle-like leaves. Near midday they stopped momentarily while both Tomaz and the girl were out looking around for whatever it was they used to find

their way, and the Prince was left alone in a small clearing. Alone, but not truly so, for the Prince knew neither Exile was far enough away that he had any chance at attempting escape.

So he sat there on his horse, and reveled in the crisp, clear air, so different from the thick haze of Lucien, and made a vow to himself that once he had received his Inheritance he would make time to come back here of his own volition, just to explore.

“Pine,” rumbled Tomaz.

The Prince jumped, startled because the big man seemed to have simply materialized behind him. He had no idea how the man, mounted on his enormous charger, could move so silently. It was almost like the way Guardians, the personal guards of the Children and the Empress, moved. At the thought of this bearded, rough-and-tumble giant with the uniform and manners of a Guardian, the Prince couldn't help but smile.

Tomaz chuckled and thumped him on the back, thinking they were sharing the same joke, and the Prince would have been knocked off his horse had he not still been tied on. This, of course, only made Tomaz rumble-chuckle harder, sounding for all the world like a swarm of bees, though the Prince's own smile turned to a grimace.

“No need to fear, little princeling, it's only me. Here, look.”

He pointed a hand the size of the Prince's head at one of the trees. It was a tall one, and it had wide-flung branches toward the bottom that got smaller and shorter as they ascended. It was the one with green needle-like leaves, and there were quite a few of them around, particularly lining the dirt path they were currently taking.

“Pine. It's a pine tree. You can tell by the needle leaves and the smell, as well as the seeds they produce. Pinecones.”

Tomaz dismounted to walk aside his horse in a swift, easy motion. He swung his arm to the ground, bending quite dexterously at the waist, and picked up a large brown thing; he straightened, and in the same motion tossed the whatever-it-was to the Prince, who caught it easily despite his

bonds. At first, he was revolted that the man had given him something that had been on the dirt floor of this forest corridor ... and then the revulsion and beginnings of anger evaporated and turned to self-deprecating laughter. The Death Watch had just tried to kill him; he was being held hostage by two of the Exiled Kindred; he was living in a constant state of fatigue and hunger, slept every night on the ground, ate with his hands, and hadn't bathed in over two weeks; but apparently what *really* bothered him was that the big man had tossed him something dirty. If he wasn't careful, by the time he returned to the Fortress he'd be worse than Geofred, who had to have everything cleaned thrice before he'd so much as be in the same room with it.

He examined the cone: it was a good size, perhaps as large as the Prince's fist, though it had looked no bigger than a walnut in the big man's hand. It had some spiny bits that he tried not to handle. He looked back up at Tomaz, eyebrows raised, waiting for the rest of the conversation, the true conversation, to begin, but the big man simply smiled pleasantly at him, waiting for a response. For a long moment, the Prince stared at the big man, and then looked back down at the pinecone blankly. Was the cone a message? He turned it over in his hands. Nothing. No scrap of parchment, no hidden coding or anything of that sort, not that he'd expected the big man to be clever enough to come up with something like that, but then why had he handed him the pinecone under the pretense of ...?

And then, slowly, the realization sank in that the big man was talking about nothing more than pinecones. The Prince had never had any real companions in the Fortress, never had anyone who simply talked to him because they felt like talking to him. The Most High whom he associated with were fed lies and double-talk with their wet-nurses' milk, and nothing they said or did was ever to be taken at face value. Yet here, in the middle of the wilderness, an outlaw was trying to be friendly by teaching him the name of trees. This wasn't a prelude to anything ... they were just talking. About seeds and ... things.

He looked back at the big man, one eyebrow quirked questioningly.

“Pine?” the Prince repeated. As he spoke, he watched Tomaz warily, waiting to be mocked for mispronouncing the word or not knowing it to begin with. Such was the way the other Children had taught him when he’d received his earliest lessons on government, industry, and economics.

“Very good, princeling,” the giant said with a huge smile, for all the world looking like the proud parent of a precocious infant. His large, square white teeth shone from the thicket of his beard as he pointed at another tree, this one taller than all the others.

“Redwood. You can tell by the quality of the bark as well as the height.”

“Tomaz!” the girl called from up ahead. “I need your opinion on something!”

Tomaz reached over and grabbed the reins of the Prince’s horse and tied him to a tree. He then swiftly remounted his charger, the Prince watching stoically, until the big man clapped him on the back.

“Hopefully soon I won’t have to do that,” he rumbled, and gave the Prince another smile, this one small and conspiratorial.

“Right,” the Prince responded, with as much of a smile as he could manage.

The big man rode off in the direction of the girl’s voice, leaving the Prince to stew in his thoughts.

That night, the Prince went to sleep feeling bold, and excited that his vague plan was working. If they let their guard drop a little more, then by the time they reached Banelyn he’d just walk away. He rolled over and closed his eyes.

But as soon as he did, a feeling that squirmed in the pit of his stomach like a pod of eels made him queasy, and he was forced to sit up abruptly. He breathed deeply for a moment, and the feeling passed, leaving a strange hollowness in its wake. He lay back down, but sleep did not come to him, and

he spent another restless night looking at the stars he never would have seen if he hadn't been forced out of Lucien.

As the next few days passed, Tomaz continued to give the Prince impromptu lessons on the various species of flora and fauna they passed throughout the day. After a while, they even began to strike up a strange kind of conversation that involved various barbed comments at one another. The Prince came to realize that this was banter, the kind of friendly conversation that happened between the servants of the Fortress. It was strange to him, but his stiff and awkward attempts seemed enough for Tomaz, and as time passed, the Prince realized that he liked the big man, and that in another life maybe they would have been good companions. But when he thought that, he felt again the queasiness of that first night, and so he shoved these thoughts aside, reminding himself that he was only using this Exile to make his way back to the Empire.

He was glad, however, that he and Tomaz were making progress, because his attempts to make contact with the girl were failing miserably.

His first attempt had been on the third day after the Death Watchman attack, when he noticed the girl trying to lift a log out of the campsite they'd found. Tomaz was out scouting the area, and so she was struggling on her own. The Prince, seeing his opportunity, came forward as far as his bonds would allow.

"Here, let me help, Eshendai," the Prince said, reaching out to grab the other end of the log with his tied hands and using the title that Tomaz used in place of her name.

Her reaction was so sudden and violent that the Prince could never have predicted it. Within the space of a second, he found himself on his back, staring up from the ground into the girl's face, which was contorted into an ugly mask of righteous anger.

"Should you wish to live, you will *never* use that title again," she hissed. She had drawn one of her daggers, and the steel bit ever so slightly into his neck, causing a burning sensation. He felt a drop of blood crawl across his

skin and fall to ground, and suddenly he realized he truly was afraid for his life.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, not trusting himself to speak normally with the gleaming dagger pressed so fiercely against his throat.

“Good,” she hissed. In a flash she had pushed herself off of him and disappeared into the trees. She didn’t return for almost an hour, at which time she pretended the Prince did not exist, only speaking to Tomaz briefly before going to bed.

But he remained determined, and his second chance came soon after.

It was the first night the Prince was allowed to move around the campfire. True, he wasn’t completely unbound: his hands were still tied together, though far enough apart that he could use them, and his feet were tied as well so that he couldn’t do more than execute a sort of shambling half-walk, but it was progress.

As soon as he’d been untied from the horse, he’d set about being “helpful.” He hobbled the horses in a nice patch of grass within sight, as he’d seen the Exiles do each night, began to set a ring of stones for a fire, and then untied their packs from the horse he’d been riding and set them down near the ring of stones.

When the Exiles noticed this, they commented on it to one another when they thought the Prince was out of earshot. He, of course, was very carefully not out of earshot, but he did what he hoped was a decent job of pretending to be so.

“He’s being helpful,” rumbled Tomaz, “it’s ... sure sign ... changing.”

The Prince, even though his back was turned, allowed himself not even the hint of a smile as a thrill of triumph coursed through him. He could risk nothing.

“No,” he heard the girl respond savagely, “he’s ... at worst, conspiring to kill or ... in our sleep. At best ... imitating us ... a trained monkey.”

The Prince almost faltered in the act of retying a saddlebag as anger, white hot and blinding, roared up into his throat at the insult.

Imitating them like a trained monkey, am I? I should strike her down -

No. He calmly tied the bag closed and finished going about the chores that needed doing in order to set up camp for the night, giving no sign that he had overheard a thing. Soon he had everything ready except the fire. He looked around for wood, but there was none, so he was forced to wait for the two Exiles to return. When they did, Tomaz spoke.

"It's been too long since I've had some fresh meat - I'm off to hunt," he rumbled. He reached onto his charger - the horse allowed only him to load or unload anything from its back, and so the Prince had left the big man's gear where it was - and pulled out a sling. Before seeing the big man fight, the Prince would have found the sight of the small sling in the hands of the giant quite amusing. Now, he suspected that a stone from that sling in the hands of that man could kill a full grown ox at a hundred paces.

The girl nodded in response.

"I'll get the firewood - I won't need to go very far, so I can keep an eye on junior here."

A thought occurred to the Prince, a dangerous thought, one he probably should have let go lest he risk everything, but his anger spurred him on.

"I'll go with you," he said to the girl, doing his best yet still failing to make this a request and not a command.

The two Exiles paused, Tomaz in the act of stretching his right arm, the girl about to cross to the Prince and no doubt tie him to a tree so that he wouldn't run away while she was gone.

"No," she said immediately.

"Why not?"

"Because I said so."

"You sound like my Mother."

The comment, completely unplanned on the Prince's part, silenced her. And then, in a rumbling snort like the sound a volcano must make before it

spews forth fire, Tomaz began to laugh so hard he made the forest and mountainside around them ring with sound, bright and clear and rich.

“TOMAZ!” roared the girl. “Shut up! You’ll give away our position!”

“I’m surprised they can’t see your swollen pride from here,” the Prince said. The delivery was awkward and flat, and he was relatively sure the joke made no sense, but it was at least effective enough that the girl turned a bright red and Tomaz doubled over, slapping his knees with mirth.

“Tomaz,” the girl repeated again, growling his name deep in her throat. “I mean it.”

The giant gave a final trumpeting bellow and then was silent as he wiped a tear from his eye, though he still shook with aftershocks of laughter.

“Ah, well,” he said, “sorry about that, Eshendai. But I haven’t had a good laugh in a long time.”

“I don’t care!” she replied harshly. The Prince could tell she was trying to be taken seriously, but the effect was ruined by the beet red color that had spread over her cheeks and down her neck. “We’re trying not to be followed, and we can’t sacrifice that because you feel like having a good laugh!”

Tomaz shrugged and looked at the Prince.

“Is there anyone nearby?”

After a brief instant of confusion, the Prince realized the giant was asking him to check the surrounding area for any signs of life. He paused for only a second, and then realized there was no reason not to. So he reached out through the Talisman, as far as he could, and felt nothing besides the strange static-like background that he was coming to recognize as the muted life of the trees and plants and the simplistic minds of the animals that lived in them. He let the connection slip away, and opened his eyes to find the big man looking at him. It was strange, being in the company of someone who simply took what he could do as a matter of fact, not something to be feared and not something to worship or praise him for.

“No one for at least a mile,” he replied, “and probably not beyond that either.”

“You can’t trust him,” the girl said angrily.

“Yes you can!” the Prince shot back, frustrated. For some reason the fact that she wouldn’t trust him when he was actually telling the truth blew the banked coals of his anger, always burning steadily these days, into a full blaze.

“You’d kill us in our sleep if you could,” the girl said.

Something in the Prince snapped. The way she spoke, it was as if death was nothing to him. As if death itself was ... nothing.

“You have no concept of what you speak,” he hissed at her through teeth clenched in a snarl. His vision had gone red around the edges, and his anxiety, frustration and anger had formed into a hard, twisting fist in his gut. He was inexplicably furious.

“You know nothing of what it is to kill. You perform the act, but it means nothing – to you it is no more than cutting away an unwanted piece of thread. To you it is no more than dispatching nameless faces. If you knew what I know of death, knew what it is like to be inside a person’s mind as they feel the sword cut through skin and bone and feel their life and mind and body go dark, as the spark that anchors you to this world is smothered and you spin endlessly into space, you would never again speak so lightly of taking a life. I have no desire to know you, and so have no desire to kill you. How many of the Death Watchmen did the two of you kill? Not the constructs, but the soldiers. Twenty did you say? Such a brave Exile. I killed one and nearly lost my mind. I did it out of need, out of the base necessity of continuing to live, and even then I knew him, inside and out, as he died; I knew his hopes and dreams and fears, the way he loved his wife, the pride he had in his children – the glowing hope that, even as the steel cut through him, he would live to see them again, to make them proud by serving the Empire! Death is emptiness, death is taking, death is the end! So stop

accusing me of the willingness to do something I understood better at the age of five then you will EVER understand in your ENTIRE LIFE!”

Somehow during the time he was speaking he had taken several steps toward the girl, who stood rooted to the spot, staring at him with wide-eyed wonder. He took another step and was suddenly breathing in her face, midnight black eyes meeting emerald green. Her hands grasped the hilts of her daggers, but he did not care.

“Never speak lightly to me of killing. I am the Lord of Death, for my Mother cursed me as such on the day I was born. I know it as you never shall, and my life is tied to it as you should wish yours will never be.”

He stopped talking, and then took a step back, his anger spent, and suddenly felt awkward and vulnerable, as if he had stripped in front of the Exiles and laid himself bare for all eyes to see.

She stood there looking at him, eyes round and mouth open in a small “o” of surprise and shock. And then the look passed, her eyes narrowed, and it was as if she had made a decision. A minute or more passed that way, the two of them staring at each other, the Prince watching the wheels turn in her head. Abruptly she broke the contact and turned to call back over her shoulder.

“Tomaz, I think that - ”

But the forest behind her was just trees - Tomaz had disappeared. He didn't know when the big man had left, but the Prince was sure somehow that it was after he had finished speaking. There was a long silence then, as they absorbed Tomaz' absence, which made as much, if not more, of a statement as anything he could have spoken aloud. He was forcing the girl to deal with what he had already come to understand about the Prince. Slowly, she turned back to him, and as one, they walked over to the tree closest to the campsite. The Prince waited patiently as the girl tied him to the trunk, then sat down as she left to get firewood. He felt a slight pang of regret that he hadn't remained calm, but was also proud that he had finally said something to which the girl had no response.

Nearly an hour passed, enough time for the sun to set completely, leaving him alone in the dark, before Tomaz returned with an enormous animal slung over his shoulders, the rack of its antlers nearly large enough to hold the Prince's entire body. It had four legs and a heavy, deep chest covered in a thick layer of soft gray-brown fur. If the Prince had to guess, he'd say it was an elk or a deer, though since he had never seen one outside of a book he wouldn't have staked his life on it. One of its eyes was glassy and dead, while the other one was simply missing, a thin trail of blood tracing downward from where it had been. It would appear the Prince had been correct - Tomaz was just as deadly with the sling as he was with his enormous greatsword.

As he came into the clearing, Tomaz paused. He took in the Prince and then the noticeable lack of a fire and the absence of a certain green-eyed girl.

"Where is she?" he asked. His voice was gruff, but not unkind.

"She went to get firewood and never came back," the Prince replied, keeping his answer simple and direct.

The big man grunted and then crossed to the ring of stones that made up the fire pit. With a quick shrug, he lifted the antlered creature off of his shoulders and dropped it to the ground, where it landed with a heavy thud. He then crossed to where he had left his greatsword and unsheathed it. Turning, he approached the Prince.

Shocked, the Prince recoiled from the giant, but he was tethered to the tree and in the end there was nowhere to go. The giant raised the sword and the Prince closed his eyes.

Something tugged at his wrists, and with it came the snick of taunt fibers being cut, and the Prince was no longer tied to the tree. He opened his eyes just in time to see the sword flash twice more, and the Prince, too shocked to move, felt another tugging sensation on both his hands and his feet, and then the fabric parted and slid off, falling to the ground and leaving him free, completely unbound.

The giant turned away and sheathed his sword in a single, fluid motion, as effortlessly as the Prince would do up a button.

“Do you know how to dress an elk?”

Tomaz spoke while rummaging around in his pack, and the Prince wasn't sure exactly what he was asking.

“You mean ... put clothes on it? Why would you want to do that? I was under the impression that you intended to eat it.”

Tomaz snorted and stood up, holding a long, oddly curved knife.

“Here,” he said, and tossed the knife, unsheathed, to the Prince.

Alarmed, the Prince caught the knife by the hilt, almost dropping it in surprise.

“Open the stomach and pull out the insides,” the big man said. “Dig a hole with this,” he tossed the Prince a small wedge-shaped tool, “and throw them in there so we don't get any wolves looking for handouts. Try not to hit any rocks, it's a good spade.”

And with that he turned and left, slinging his sword across his back and moving off in the direction the girl had gone, no doubt following her trail though the Prince could never have said how.

For a long moment the Prince stood there, unfettered, armed, and alone. He turned his head and saw the two horses cropping the scraggly mountain grass not twenty yards away, and realized he could take one and leave. The Exile's packs were there, full of supplies. He could take them and go. No doubt the girl's pack contained the map she'd used, and with that he might be able to chart his own way to Banelyn, and -

He moved off to the side of the small clearing and began to dig a hole, using the metal triangle - the spade - to pull large clumps of dirt out of the ground. As he worked, he told himself again and again that the only reason he was staying was that no matter how fast or stealthily he ran, the Exiles would catch him again before he left the mountains. He was no woodsman, of that there was no doubt, and he would last barely a day, if that, before they caught him and ruined everything.

He needed to wait until Banelyn. So he dug the hole, and when it was deep enough, he turned and did his best to follow Tomaz's instructions, feeling oddly invigorated by the physical activity, even though it made him sweat. But then again, with the way he smelled as it was, and with the multiple layers of grime that covered his Commons clothing, it didn't really matter.

"If only Geofred could see me now," he muttered raggedly, breathing hard as he looked from the hooked knife to the dead animal before him. Or Tiffenal for that matter; the thought of the Fox's perfectly manicured hands holding the metal triangle – *spade, he told you the name so use it* – to dig a hole was certainly an amusing picture.

He bent and stuck the knife into the elk's stomach, doing his best to map out exactly what his plan of attack was here. As he went about opening the animal's belly, he found that he wasn't at all alarmed by the sight of the entrails, nor the smell of the blood or the sounds of the knife. He supposed that after seeing what he'd seen in the lives he'd taken made this seem ... somehow mundane. The creature was already dead – working with a body held no horrors for him now. It was the living he had troubles with.

Sometime later, the Exiles returned, the girl looking around anxiously until she saw him by the elk. Tomaz bore a slightly exasperated look on his face, and was carrying a load of branches and twigs.

The only words that were spoken that night were in reference to the elk and the fire. Tomaz finished the job the Prince had begun, which in large part involved pulling out bits the Prince had missed, and then skinning the creature, before cutting it into large chunks and then strips and hanging it over the fire. Tomaz showed the Prince how to wash his hands with water from the waterskins and a cake of hard soap to remove the blood.

That night they ate what Tomaz didn't decide to smoke and dry – a process the Prince found fascinating. The girl ate only a small amount, while the Prince ate ravenously. He hadn't gone more than a day without meat in his entire life, and the recent diet of cheese, edible plants, and water had left

him sated but never full. Tomaz himself ate nearly half the animal, enormous though it was, and looked as though he stopped himself from eating more.

When they had finished eating, they all pulled out their blankets and found a patch of ground on which to sleep. The Prince and the girl situated themselves on opposite sides of the fire as Tomaz took the first watch.

As the Prince lay beneath his blanket trying to find sleep, he wondered why he didn't feel any sense of triumph. He felt no anger, no remorse, and also no hope. He felt ... blank. Empty. Numb, that was perhaps the best way to put it. The only other time he had described the experience of using the Talisman was to his brother Geofred, so that the reaction could be chronicled. He had felt numb then as well, but mostly because he had recently come out of the coma into which the experience had sent him. Now, the numbness came from ... he didn't know what. Was it because he knew Tomaz's reaction was out of understanding and sympathy? Perhaps because of the way the girl had looked at him, the way her silence showed she too had an idea, however infinitesimal, of what he went through when he used his Mother's gift? He was unbound ... he had played Tomaz into believing in him, and had convinced the girl, however unintentionally, to lower her guard, though he still could not completely say why. He was free to leave when they reached Banelyn, to find the Seeker there and make his way back to his Mother ... his Mother who would never have believed in him the way Tomaz did. The way the girl was beginning to.

She is the Empress, he reminded himself. She knows only right and wrong, as should I. The Talisman is my gift and my burden as one of the Princes of the Realm, and I should wear it with pride. I wear it to serve the Empire and the people who depend upon it. Someday I will be Prince of the Seventh Principality, and I will need to deal with Exiles such as this without pity. They have broken our laws, and turned their backs on civilization. They threaten the lives of the people of Lucien.

The Prince rolled over and stared at the stars. And suddenly it occurred to him that he didn't know what it was the girl and the giant had been Exiled for.

*Reasons do not matter. The Empress Exiled them, and all of their Kindred.
That is enough for me, and always will be.*

But the words sounded hollow, even in his head.

Chapter Eight: Banelyn

The next few days passed with no further incident, for which the Prince was very grateful. He didn't know what had passed between the girl and the giant when they were alone in the woods, but by unspoken consent the Prince was allowed to ride unbound. He expected the girl to demand that now that he could move about freely he and she should take turns riding the horse, but she didn't. Instead, she chose to walk, and more often than not was off in the woods scouting ahead or behind, claiming when the Prince asked that she moved better without a clumsy beast of burden beneath her.

"Ride if you want," she said, "my own legs are good enough for me."

"Very well," the Prince said simply, not understanding but not particularly caring.

"I'll be ranging ahead, Tomaz," she said, ignoring the Prince, which was what she did now as long as he wasn't talking to her. Sometimes even then.

As she left, Tomaz chuckled quietly and pulled his charger back to walk beside the Prince's horse, which shied away from the huge stallion before calming itself.

"What's funny?" the Prince asked, perhaps a touch too eagerly. He had decided to try to keep up the friendly rapport that he had established with Tomaz until they reached Banelyn, though he didn't know exactly how to do so.

"Nothing in particular," Tomaz replied with a friendly smile, "just remembering something she said many years ago."

There was a long pause in which neither of them spoke, and the Prince feared that would be the end of the conversation. For some reason he could not bear silence today, and so he asked the first question that came to mind:

"How long have you known her?" he asked, the words coming out slightly too quickly. Tomaz, however, appeared not to notice and replied in his customary slow rumble.

“Since she became an Exile.”

The Prince, surprised, looked over at the big man, who appeared to be lost in thought.

“How long ago was that?”

The giant looked about to respond, but then caught himself and turned to the Prince with a smile.

“Long enough. It is not my story to tell.”

And with that the conversation ended, and they remained silent for the rest of the day’s journey, even though the Prince tried to come up with something to say multiple times. It was infuriating - he had grown up a natural at court politics, and yet he couldn’t hold a conversation with a simple Baseborn Exile. It was baffling.

The next few days continued much the same, with barely any conversation on any of their parts. Tomaz taught the Prince a few more impromptu names of trees and plants, and though the Prince tried to appear interested, Tomaz soon realized he wasn’t, and so the lessons ended. The girl was gone most of the day, apparently having taken it upon herself to do most of the scouting. She returned only for brief intervals to speak quietly to Tomaz, and then at night when they made camp.

A few times the Prince caught her looking at him across the fire at night. As soon as his eyes met hers, though, she looked away, and either engaged Tomaz in conversation or else made an excuse to walk away from the fire. The looks varied - some were oddly subdued and thoughtful, as if she were waiting for something, while others were angry and uneasy, as if she were impatient for that something to happen. The Prince wasn’t sure what to make of this, but as he remained unbound he told himself it was none of his concern. Neither of them were his concern after they reached Banelyn and he made his way into the city without them.

And finally, that day came.

Close to noon, they emerged from a dense thicket of trees to find themselves on a ridgeline that overlooked a city. It was still miles distant,

and it would take them the rest of the day to arrive there, but the Prince felt anticipation rush through him and suddenly his nerves were on edge.

Even from a distance he could tell that the city must be Banelyn. It was located at the center of an enormous fork made of three well-paved stone roads, each wide enough, it was said, for a dozen carts to travel abreast. One road curved off to the east eventually, once it crossed the river lands, and led to the city of Formaux, the seat of his brother Tiffenal, the Prince of Foxes. The road that led north went to the city of Lerne, nestled in the rolling hills that spread through central Lucia, the seat of his sister Symanta. And finally, and perhaps most importantly, the road that led south eventually ended in Roarke, the seat of Ramael, the Prince of Oxen, and also the end of the Empire.

The city of Banelyn itself could more properly be called a city within a city. Or better yet, a city within a city within a town. The middle city had been built when his Mother, with Rikard and Geofred by Her side as Her right and left Hands, had begun to solidify Her rule of Lucia, and began Her second great conquest of the southern realms. The original wall of Banelyn, known as the Black Wall, had been built to withstand both time and attack, and as such had never fallen to any enemy. From where he sat his horse, the Prince could see the top of it, rising out of the city like an enormous black stone curtain, forming a large parallelogram around Banelyn City, which was a city devoted almost entirely to commerce. It was unparalleled in the rest of the known world, and was the source of various expressions along the lines of: "I bet I couldn't even find it in Banelyn," or "Well, we could always move to Banelyn." Inside this wall was Banelyn City proper, where lived the Elevated, the High Blood, and the Most High Blood, who owned the city and the lands surrounding it. Toward the center of the city proper was another wall, inside which only the Children and the Most High could go. This Inner City was made of towering stone structures that stretched high into the air, spearing the heavens with their spires. Unlike the Black Wall, these buildings had never felt the touch of the Empress, and as such had been worn down

and rebuilt over time. The Prince had heard that they came nowhere close to rivaling the majesty of the Black Wall, but were still tall and powerful, and some, the Cathedral of the Empress among them, breathtaking in their own right.

The Outer City, the city spread out around the walls of what was historically Banelyn City, was actually three very large towns that had sprung up outside the walls. No one was allowed to pass beyond Banelyn's walls who was not a favored merchant, tradesman, or one of the High, and so, over the years, the lower classes who lived outside the walls had built second-hand shops, teetering inns, and rickety wooden houses that had melded into a haphazard city of its own that was like a wooden maze. This Outer City was broken into three large sections, each of which was centered on one of the Black Wall's three Gates: the Lerne Gate, the Formaux Gate, and the Roarke Gate, named after the primary trade objective toward and from which goods flowed. For first and foremost, Banelyn was a trading city, and was important because it was located almost squarely at the center of the Empire, and as such served as the Empire's central trading hub. If Lucien was the head of the Empire, Banelyn could very well be called its heart, and the roads that led from it the arteries that fed the Empire's life blood - trade - to all corners of Lucia.

And somewhere in that mess, thought the Prince, is the Path of Light that will lead me to the Seeker, and then -

But his train of thought was interrupted by Tomaz.

"Shadows and fire, it always takes my breath away to see that sight. It's a beautiful city."

"If by 'beautiful city' you mean a cesspool of corruption, then yes, it is."

The Prince, by now used to the way that the two Exiles came and went with barely a sound, managed not to jump when the girl spoke from right behind him, but only just.

He looked at Tomaz and saw the Exile staring at him, still atop his charger. It took him a split second to realize the giant expected him to be surprised.

“Banelyn,” he said, trying to play it off as though the sight had struck him momentarily dumb. “You ... you’ve brought us to Banelyn.”

“Yes, we did,” said the girl.

“Why?” he asked, keeping his demeanor calm and collected. Inside, however, he was filled with a sudden mix of conflicting emotions.

Banelyn, it’s there, right there! I need to go to it, I need to ...

But he would wait. He had waited this long, he could wait a little longer. He needed to make a clean escape, needed to make sure Tomaz and the girl couldn’t follow him, or at least couldn’t catch up to him until he was safe inside the city, and preferably safe inside the Seeker’s lair. And then, once he was there ... once he was there things would be worked out. They had to be. There was nowhere else for him to go.

“We need supplies,” Tomaz said, dismounting. With a sudden thrill that jolted through his body to the tips of his fingers and toes, the Prince realized this would be his chance. They were making camp here for the day.

“We aren’t going closer?” he asked.

“Why would we?” the girl asked, looking at him suspiciously.

For a moment, the Prince panicked and cursed himself for speaking without thinking, but then his instincts took over and he found he was speaking to cover his tracks before he had even thought it all through.

“I’m not sure ... I suppose I’m just so used to traveling until dusk that stopping to camp at noon is ... alien to me.”

Tomaz grunted in what the Prince felt was agreement, and began to unsaddle his horse. The answer seemed to please the girl, who grimaced and began to unpack the food.

“If there was anywhere else to go, we’d keep going. But any closer and we run the risk of being found by a patrol and any further away we’d be too far to make the journey in half a day.”

“Speaking of which, I could make it there and back by sunset.”

“You?” the girl asked Tomaz. “I thought I was going, I always go.”

“Yes, but I want to make sure you have a path. I have the feeling that by now our friend the Prince is known to be alive and they may also suspect he’s making his way to Banelyn with or without company.”

“That is if the Death Watchmen left record of where they were going to hunt for him. Is that likely?”

“Not at all,” the Prince responded truthfully, trying to keep up the façade of being helpful for just a little longer. All he needed was for the big man to leave him and the girl alone. “Death Watchmen are notorious for following a trail to its end and only reporting once the task is complete.”

“The assassination you mean,” the girl muttered, though there was no heat in it. She seemed preoccupied, and had not the Prince been so lost in his own thoughts he would have found that peculiar. But as it was, he let it go, still trying to will Tomaz to leave.

As if on cue, the big man finished tying off his charger, dumped his bags at the base of a nearby tree - an oak - and pulled the hood of his long gray-and-brown cloak up and over his head, obscuring his face and the hilt of his greatsword.

“I should be back before sunset,” he rumbled, and with that moved off into the shadows and was gone.

The Prince dismounted as if in a dream. Everything felt suddenly too slow, as if it was all happening to someone else or was part of another man’s life that he could only just remember. The Exile girl turned to set her packs by Tomaz’s, and the Prince’s gaze fell on the pair of short swords they had taken from the dead soldiers after the fight with the Death Watchmen. Time passed slowly and yet quickly, and after a few minutes, he knew Tomaz was out of hearing range. The girl still had her back turned, and was riffling through the packs looking for something ... the Prince reached out and grabbed one of the short swords, everything still fuzzy and confused. The

sword had been well oiled by Tomaz, and when the Prince drew the length of black metal from its sheath there was no sound.

The Prince knew from his training that to hesitate once an action was in motion was to fail. As a son of the Empress, as one of the Children, he had been conditioned from a very early age to set aside all feeling and to simply and effectively follow a plan of action. And so, very calmly, without hesitation, he came up behind the girl and raised the sword.

But at the last second she turned, and as her green eyes met his black, he did pause. The sword hung in the air for a second too long, and in that time the shock and surprise that crossed her face disappeared. Coming back to himself, he brought the sword down, but the girl was no longer there.

He spun, striking for her again as she nimbly dodged out of his way to the left, but he sliced through only air. Her hands fell to her hips, and suddenly her daggers were in her hands, and the Prince knew that he needed to end this fight *now*.

Without pausing to consider his actions, he turned and hurled the short sword, end over end, at the girl. Taken completely by surprise, the girl flung her daggers in front of her face and just managed to deflect the sword, which went spinning into the forest; the Prince didn't even spare it a single glance. He ran forward, fainted once, and struck the girl in the gut.

With a *woosh* the breath rushed out of the girl's lungs, and she staggered back a step, staring wide-eyed at the Prince, mouth open in an "o" of disbelief and ... fear.

He felt something lurch in his stomach, but his body moved mechanically, and in quick succession he struck the girl's wrists, kidneys, and the nerve that ran up the side of her neck. She fell to her knees, paralyzed. Her hands fell limply to her sides and the daggers dropped from her twitching fingers as she stared helplessly into the Prince's face.

As he looked at her, his chest began to ache, and once again he faltered.

Don't stop now - you're almost free!

With a clenched fist, he struck the girl on the temple, and she fell to the forest floor, unconscious.

For a long moment he stood over her, looking down at the body. Some time passed, he wasn't sure how much, in which he simply stared at her, unable to look away. Slumped over as she was she looked almost dead.

He came back to himself with a start. He needed to move, and move now, before Tomaz returned. There was no time to reflect or think - he needed to reach the Seeker. Once there, everything would be well. He would contact his Mother and he would return, triumphant, having passed the test and proved himself worthy.

Turning, he made his way to the remaining horse and pulled out the strips of fabric that were left over from his bonds. Wrapping them together, he moved to the girl and tied her hands together behind her back, then latched her feet together in as intricate a knot as he could imagine, and finally tied her to a tree, feeling all the while a kind of vindictive satisfaction in doing to her what she had so often done to him.

He finished as quickly as he could and pulled away. Time was of the essence now. As he turned to go he happened to look down and saw the girl's daggers. He might need a weapon, and these were of much better quality than the short swords the Death Watch soldiers had left behind, not to mention easier to conceal even though they were uncommonly long. He bent and reached for one -

Searing pain raced through his hand, up his arm and into his head as he grasped the hilt. His vision dissolved into swirls of white smoke, and it felt as though a blanket had been pressed against his eyes, ears, mouth and nose, blocking out every sense of the world around him. He felt paralysis creeping into his lungs as he tried to breathe, forcing his hand tighter about the burning hilt. With a supreme effort of will he let out a cry and dropped the dagger.

He staggered back several feet and fell to the ground, watching in alarm as the dagger smoked in the grass where it had fallen. He looked at

his hand and saw that an outline of the hilt had been burned into his skin. As if activated by his sight, the wound began to throb with a sickening intensity.

“Shadows and light!” he cursed. A twig snapped off to his right, and his whole body surged with energy as he whipped around. But there was nothing there, only a small, furry creature; some kind of bushy-tailed rodent that quickly climbed a tree.

In a matter of seconds he had re-saddled the horse. He decided to take nothing with him but a full waterskin. He left both short swords behind - they were too recognizable as the weapons of Death Watchmen - and then mounted the beast. With a quick kick in the ribs, he sent the animal speeding away, leaving the girl and the remnants of their camp behind him without a second glance.

* * *

After the Prince of Raven’s betrayal, the Exile girl named Leah lay at the base of the tree for a long time. She regained consciousness sometime later, and though her first instinct was to sit up straight and look around for the shadow-cursed princeling, she remained still, knowing the wave of nausea that followed head trauma would hit her momentarily.

Just as she had expected, not a second later her stomach suddenly began to do backflips, and her vision swam even though she had yet to open her eyes. For a moment or two she let the feeling wash over her, then she slowly sat up and took a deep breath to still herself. The throbbing in her head continued, but the nausea in her stomach quickly passed.

Slowly she opened her eyelids, and let out a slight moan as the rays of light stabbed into her eye sockets and sent needles down her spine. Her sides ached where the princeling had struck her, but her hands, while still numb, at least seemed to be working properly, likely indicating no serious damage. The image of the Prince’s attack flashed through her mind, and she,

grudgingly, marveled at how well trained he was. He had disposed of her as quickly as she would have a common foot soldier.

She looked around and saw that the packhorse, Trudger, was gone. The packs were where they had left them, though hers had been torn open ... it looked like the only thing missing was the largest of the waterskins. She stood up, only to fall back down halfway through the motion as she realized she was tied to the tree against which she had been propped.

"Lovely," she grumbled. She arched her neck to try to get a look at the knots that bound her, but her head began to pound so terribly that she was forced to close her eyes and lean back lest she retch all over herself.

After the wave of sickness had passed, she opened her eyes again and realized that, even though the light appeared far too bright to her, the sun had begun to sink in the east and dusk was only an hour or two away. Shadows had begun to cloak the area under the trees, all stretching off to the east. She'd been sitting here unconscious for the better part of the day. Tomaz should be back any time now.

As if summoned by her thought, there was the crackle of rustling leaves, and the Ashandel appeared at the campsite. He pulled up short as he took in the scene around him. Shock and dismay crossed his face, and in a swirl of his long cloak, he was off his horse Malial and racing toward her, his greatsword, Malachi, unsheathed in his hand.

He dropped to her side and picked up a dagger, which had been lying on the forest floor beside her - her dagger. Yes, she remembered now, that was where they had fallen. He sheathed Malachi and with three quick movements of the dagger she was free, the bonds cut from her wrists and ankles.

"What happened?" he asked, his voice dangerous, like the anticipatory rumble of an active volcano.

"The princeling made his escape."

Leah was not the kind of person to be vindictive - at least not toward her friends - but she felt a kind of twisted pleasure in saying those words to

Tomaz, who had been so convinced the Child was no more than a misunderstood boy. Her head gave another nasty throb, and she sucked in a hissing breath.

The Ashandel stared at her for a long time, and she knew from experience that he was absorbing what she had said.

“Impossible. Where would he go?”

“Banelyn,” she said immediately, looking him directly in the eye. “I’ve known ever since he gave that speech on death that he would go there. You and I both know that there’s a Hooded One there - and not just any bloody Seeker but a Shadow Lord as well - and he’ll lead us right to them. So when you left, I knew that he would make his move. I had planned to let him “lose” me when he made his escape, but he’s more ruthless than I’d expected and he attacked ... what matters is that we have a way in to Banelyn now, a way to find the Seeker. If we go now we can catch him - Tomaz, after all the time we spent trying to find the way into the Hooded One’s hideout, now the Prince will lead us right to it if we follow him quickly enough. We’ll have the Seeker and the Prince both.”

If Leah had expected praise, she was sorely mistaken. A number of different emotions crossed Tomaz’s face: anger, contempt, pity, until finally settling on fury. Leah felt a sudden twinge of fear and a sense of vertigo - many times had she seen that look on Tomaz’s face, but never once had it been directed at her. For the first time in her life she felt the way countless others must have before their lives had ended under the dazzling steel of the giant’s sword.

“You let him go, knowing that it might lead to his death.”

It was not a question, nor was it a statement. It was an accusation.

“Yes,” Leah said, as calmly as she could in the face of such inexorable fury. Years of working with Tomaz had taught her that while her moral compass sometimes went awry, his did not. He always did what was right, and such fury as creased his features was reserved only for those who had violated his moral code.

“I knew he would never change,” she said, trying to explain herself quickly. She had good reasons, and Tomaz was her closest companion, her best friend - she knew he would understand her reasons and see them as valid if she could only explain them to him.

“When he talked about death the way he did, I could see he would never be free of his Mother’s reign. In his eyes the Tyrant is the only one who can save him from himself. He sees himself as cursed - he is cursed - and his precious God Empress is the only one who can keep him sane. He doesn’t know how to live with himself without Her - the Tyrant is the only one he will ever trust! He’s broken Tomaz, there is no saving him. And this way, he’ll lead us right to the Seeker’s lair. Right to the heart of their organization! He knows we’re outside Banelyn, and that’s the only place left he thinks he can go. When he attacked me, I could see it in his eyes - he didn’t want to hurt me, but he did anyway. He’s a zealot of the worst kind. He knows what he does is wrong, and yet he doesn’t care. He thinks the Empress, the Tyrant of Lucia, is the only solution. There is no saving him!”

She hadn’t realized it, but by the end of her rambling speech she had begun to shout, because Tomaz’s expression of fury had not changed. His eyes, like chips of black ice, stared at her and dug into her conscience, and as she finished she knew what she had done was wrong in his eyes, and that was almost more than she could bear.

“Everyone can be saved,” he rumbled at her, so intensely that she felt the vibration in her bones. “And what you have done is allow an innocent boy to walk into the open arms of his murderers. While you were looking for advantage when he spoke of death, I was looking into a mirror. Well you know my tale, and well should you know that this boy is just like me. Just like you too.”

Leah recoiled as if burned.

“He’s nothing like me!” she hissed. “He’s a spoiled Prince who has lived his entire life in command of the people of Lucia, sitting in luxury born on the backs of slaves!”

“He is a tortured mind who knows more of compassion than any living man I have ever met. If he can be shown a better way - if we can bring him to the Kindred and show him that the Empire does not need to rule supreme - then we can truly begin to change things. And, most importantly, we can change him. I see myself in him, and I see you in him. I see every man, woman, and child who has lived under the Empress and accepted Her rule simply because they have food to eat and know nothing better. He is the key, Eshendai. This boy will change everything. And should that change happen, there will be no need to send him or anyone in as bait for the Hooded Ones.”

Leah stared at Tomaz for a long time, not knowing how to respond. When she did speak, her voice was soft and weak, confused and halting.

“How? I don’t ... I can’t see that far ahead, Tomaz.”

“Neither can I,” he rumbled back, the fury finally gone from him, but the sharp intensity still present, like a bar of heated steel that has cooled and hardened into the form of a sword. “The path will come in time. All I know is that this boy is good. There is a spark in him that has been smothered for years, but it has not gone out. Not yet. He can be redeemed. The way he spoke ... he knows life and the cost of death better than anyone. He knows what it is to feel another person’s pain - something none of his siblings have ever known. Something their Mother was never able to teach them.”

“He’s not different from them, Tomaz, he’s one of the Children all the same.”

“He *is* different, Eshendai,” rumbled the big man, “in all the ways that matter. In all the ways that made them monsters, and left him nothing more than a scared boy, trying to fill a role he never wanted.”

“I know you, Tomaz, and for all your talk of changing the Empire that is not why you are doing this. What is it about him that affects you so?”

There was a long silence.

“A debt I owe to the man who saved my life,” he said finally.

“What debt?” Leah asked, confused. “I know your entire life’s story Tomaz. But I know of no debt that would ask this fierce loyalty from you.”

Tomaz turned to her.

“I will tell you when the time is right. As you said, you know me. And you know I would not keep this from you without good reason.”

Leah was about to protest, but she had seen the look in his eyes before and knew that she would get nothing more out of him.

“Fine. So what do we do now?”

Tomaz held out a hand, which she grasped. He pulled her to her feet and handed over her daggers. As soon as she grasped the hilts, the enchanted Spellblade metal soothed the ache in her head and calmed her stomach.

“We rescue a Prince.”

Chapter Nine: The Path of Light

The sun had just begun to set by the time the Prince made it into the city of Banelyn. His heart was pounding furiously, and sweat had formed on his brow and under his Commons clothing - the entire journey through the mountains down to the city had been nerve-wracking and a few times the Prince thought he might just go mad with paranoia. He had been sure every breaking twig or rustling leaf was Tomaz ambushing him from behind a tree, and every flash of light off a shiny rock the girl's daggers whistling through the air to strike him down.

But finally he had made it. Banelyn.

He kned his horse sharply and was soon galloping down the long dirt path - a hunting trail that he had come upon - that led to the wide paved northern road that ended at the massive Lerne Gate.

As the city came closer and covered the horizon, he became more and more flushed with emotion, feeling certain that he would find answers here to the kidnapping, to the Death Watchmen, to all of it. With each step he felt assured that it had been all a test.

He needed to find the Seeker of Truth. It was a title given to the heads of the Empire-wide information gathering organization that had agents placed in every town, village and city within the borders of the Empire. It was their job to seek out traitorous activity and report it to Symanta, as well as to the Ear of the Empress. But what was more important to the Prince was that they were only allowed to act on direct orders from the Empress, as conveyed through one of the Children, and they did not participate, on pain of death, in any Imperial politics. They were immune to the games of the Children and the Empress gave them relatively free reign. But they were, in all cases, required to answer the Children's questions to the farthest extent of their full and often considerable knowledge. In most cases, Seekers were summoned into the presence of one of the Children, but in certain instances the Children would visit a Seeker if a situation required urgent attention.

The Prince made his way into the town that had sprung up along the road heading to Lerne, quickly losing himself in the crowd. He reined the horse in and jumped off. He crossed to the side of the street and tied the animal to a large stake and left it there, knowing that sooner or later a horse thief would come along and take it. His brother Ramael had always told him there were only two kinds of Commons: arsonists and horse-thieves.

He hurried along the street, almost running, heart pounding in his ears; his skin prickled with every touch of wind, and the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end at the sound of every deep, rumbling noise. He pushed his way through the crowded and narrow streets, between rickety wooden buildings decked out in purples, yellows, greens, and reds all offensively bright, passing merchants still loudly hawking wares and groups of Baseborn speaking loudly. But while the Prince saw all of this, he took no notice - all of his concentration was focused on finding a single golden flower, hung upside down, and tied to seven green shoots of long-blade grass with a black ribbon. The triliope.

The Seekers remained in a position of power partly because they existed in the collective consciousness of the Empire as omniscient phantoms. No one knew what a Seeker looked like, no one knew who could be working for one of the Seekers, no one knew anything at all but that a Seeker may be anyone, anywhere, in any station or level of society, and could, with a single word, take away all that you held dear.

Each of the Children knew the way to find a Seeker, should they need one, and it always began with the triliope, the symbol of the Empire. Peace, the golden flower, prosperity, the seven green blades of grass, contained within the black ribbon, the Empire's borders. It was the first sign on the Path of Light, a path that led devoted followers and those seeking enlightenment to the Seekers. The Prince's brother Tiffenal, Prince of Foxes and Lord of Formaux Province, had created a less glamorous name for the path, detailing a certain orifice into which the Seekers' precious light should be placed. But

the Seekers did their job well, and the Children let them have their little religious games.

Looking for the triliope, the Prince's mind began to work so quickly that the world blurred and spun about him - recording, distilling, discarding information. Each second, the Prince noticed countless thousands of details, the Raven Talisman's powers expanding his mind and allowing him to sense every facet of the life moving around him, every swirling eddy and changing current. Flashes of color, sounds, shifts in the flow of air, jumbled voices, smells of cooking meat, baking bread mixed in with fertilizer and the rank stench of too many unwashed bodies crammed into one place for too long, all passed in and out of the Prince's mind almost instantaneously. Record, distill, discard. None of it was important - only the first marker was. There were seven in all, and had the Prince known where the seventh sign was he would have gone there and relied on his title to gain entrance. Then again on second thought, if the test-conspiracy against him went as deeply as he believed, revealing himself to anyone but the commanding Lord Seeker might be terribly dangerous. In either case, he had to start at the beginning, and he would go step by step to keep his identity concealed as long as possible.

The Prince rounded a corner, still far from the enormous walls that described the borders of the actual city of Banelyn, and found what he was looking for - the triliope. It was hanging outside of an herb shop amid various other dried plants and flowers. He let his connection to the Raven Talisman fade and finally cut off, and the markings on his shoulders and back grew cold once more. He moved toward the triliope, but instead of going into the herbalist's shop, the Prince turned to the building across the street. By this time, the sun had well and truly set, and it appeared that the Commons were going home for the night. In the distance a loud set of bells clanged - a curfew, no doubt.

The building across from the triliope was a three-story affair, made of old wood that was warped and faded almost to a worrying degree. Looking

up, the Prince saw that the building was unadorned but for two windows on the second floor, closed simply but securely with iron bars that shone dully in what light remained from the sun and the coming stars. There was a guard standing next to the door, but the Prince ignored him, and the man, after the first menacing glare, ignored him too. Had the Prince been in his official capacity he would have had the man whipped for looking at him like that ... but now was not the time. Instead, he walked to the door and knocked twice.

After a moment or so, a small wooden peep-hole opened at the Prince's eyelevel, and a voice rang out clearly.

"What do you seek here?"

"I seek the one who seeks the light."

"How do you mean to seek him?"

"By following the path myself."

"How do you hope to see the one who seeks if you do not see the Path?"

"I seek the Path so that my eyes may be opened to the Light."

There was a snap as the hole closed back up, followed by a brief period of silence in which time the Prince was left waiting anxiously out on the street. Before long, there was a series of metal clangs and the clink of chain links being undone. The door swung inward just wide enough for the Prince to enter, and then was quickly shut after him, leaving him in total darkness.

"You seek a path to light?" a soft voice asked him.

"Yes," the Prince replied simply.

"Then you are in luck," replied the voice, dropping the formality.

A flame appeared, followed by the sharp smell of burning sulfur, and the Prince saw a man-shaped figure lighting a small oil lamp across the room at a large desk where there stood a second figure, hands folded inside his robes of plain brown homespun. The man bore a thin golden rope around his neck - a Lesser Seeker. The Prince looked around the room, making note of the bare furnishings, the dark shadowed corners where a person might be concealed.

You're on the Path of Light, the Prince reminded himself, *no need to be uneasy.*

And yet, he was.

"Please, come forward, my son."

The Prince did so, his boots treading on a soft rug - a plain brown color that might be seen in the most humble of houses. Living like the poor was a mark of the lower orders of the Seeker society who sought to understand humility and a way to the Light. But like any order, the higher up one went in the Seeker organization the more lavish the decorations and accolades became. Dysuna had often commented that joining the Seekers was akin to making a long-term investment: be poor today to be rich tomorrow.

"Up that stair is the Path. Go, and do not halt."

Without a word, as per the ritual, the Prince crossed to the simple wooden stair to which the man had motioned, and began to climb. The stairs ascended up and around a corner of the room, and then curved again at what the Prince assumed was the second story, and then again when it came to the third, where he emerged onto a long hallway with but one lit oil lamp in a wall bracket and a wooden door at the far end. He quickly crossed the distance and reached for the doorknob.

A glint of gold caught his eye. He looked down, and bent to pick up the object at his feet: a golden coin, inscribed with an eye on one side and a key on the other. He would need one from each station in order to gain access to the Seeker.

One.

He pushed open the door and found he was at the back of the building on the roof. He strode forward, the dark wall of Banelyn rising in the distance before him.

Another glint of gold caught his eye, and he looked across the street.

Two golden daggers, points down, were hung by large nails on either side of a window in the building in front of him. The building looked as if it

had been built upon and extended for a long while - perhaps a series of smaller homes for the Commons all strung together.

The second sign.

The two buildings were close together - close enough for the Prince to take a running jump and leap from one roof to the other. Once he had crossed the divide, the wind whipping his clothing and stinging his ears, he scaled down the side of the building and swung in through the open window framed by the two daggers, the stone roughly cutting into his hands. He landed in a crouch, and found himself looking at a single golden coin on the floor in front of him. He grabbed it.

Two.

A voice greeted him as soon as the skin of his hand felt the cold imprint of the metal.

“What do you seek here?”

He turned to the right and saw an old woman, older than any he had ever seen in his life, sitting in a large rocking chair. Her eyes gleamed, even in the dark room, with a blazing blue light, and illuminated a face creased and lined with age. There was madness in them, pure and unadulterated. They were the same eyes his sister Dysuna had, and they struck him with fear and misgiving.

Princes do not feel fear. This is the Path, these things are meant to frighten lesser men.

He pushed the emotion away and answered the ritual.

“I seek the one who seeks the light.”

“How do you mean to seek him?”

“By following the path myself.”

“How do you hope to see the one who seeks if you do not see the Path?”

“I seek the Path so that my eyes may be opened to the Light.”

A smile cracked her ancient face, revealing straight, brilliant white teeth attached to stretched, dead gums. The Prince felt his skin begin to

crawl – this was no woman but a half-human construct, a plaything of the Visigony. Seeming to sense his unease, she smiled and very slowly held up a hand, keeping him anchored where he was, forcing him to wait for her directions. She laughed at him, a deep phlegmy chuckle, and finally creaked a gnarled finger straight, pointing to his left. Scowling at her but making no comment, he followed the line to the center of three doors, eager to leave her tainted presence.

He opened the indicated door: on the other side was a long corridor, in which children were playing.

Stunned, he found himself unable to move. Children ... he never seen one of those in person. Certainly not ones this small. There were three of them, two boys and one girl, dressed in simple brown clothing that hung draped over their tiny frames, all only just taller than the Prince's knee, playing with ... a piece of string, nothing more.

The girl tugged the string behind her, twirling in a circle, and the two boys chased it, squealing with laughter. The girl shrieked joyfully and ran down the corridor, blonde hair tied back behind her head in a way that reminded the Prince of a horse's tail, and the similarly towheaded boys chased her, laughing too. They never turned to see him, but raced past, absorbed in their own private world. Two more doors opened and two pairs of Baseborn adults came out, also dressed in the simplest of attire, and took the children, laughing and cooing at them and each other, into their respective doors, and the hall was silent.

For a long time, too long, the Prince stood there, unable to move. Children were not allowed outside of their family's quarters in the Fortress, and were never to be seen, much less seen playing, by anyone outside of their wet nurse or caretaker. The Prince had seen children in the memories of other men, but seeing them in person ...

THIS IS NOT IMPORTANT.

He pushed the thoughts from his mind and walked quickly down the hall, all the while feeling that he was crossing through a land far more alien

than any forested mountain. At the far end of the corridor, perhaps fifty yards away, was another door. He passed through this as well, and found himself on a staircase that went up as well as down. He paused for a moment, but then realized there was a crude painting on the wall in front of him - a painting that contained three golden falcons, ascending into a dark blue sky.

He moved left and took the stairs up. He ascended another four floors before he emerged through a door onto a raised platform on the building's roof, from which a wooden catwalk had been laid that connected it to the next house, and from that house to the house after that - leading him closer to the Black Wall.

The Prince, who had lived his entire life thousands of feet above the ground in the Towers of the Fortress, was nevertheless daunted by the task of walking across a few narrow planks of wood hung nearly seven stories above the ground and anchored to nothing more than a series of wooden buildings that looked as though a strong breeze might push them over.

A strong breeze might even be overkill - a weak one would likely do just as well.

But as he began to think he'd gone the wrong way, another gleam of gold caught his eye and, squinting, he saw a golden falcon affixed to a wall several buildings away from him. Clenching his fear into a hard ball in his stomach, he rushed as quickly as he dared across the wooden planks to the next building, and then, without pausing for thought lest he be unable to continue, across the planks after that, the whole time trying to ignore the way the wood shook and bowed beneath his feet. He came to the final roof and breathed a sigh of relief before rushing forward, feeling the blood high in his cheeks from the exertion and fear, his senses heightened. But when he reached the falcon, there was only one.

Where are the other two?

He looked around wildly, breathing hard, and after a few confused seconds saw another falcon two houses away. He was now in the very shadow of the Black Wall that surrounded Banelyn City proper.

I guess it's a prerequisite for Seekers to be good with heights.

He continued on, making his way across rickety boards and planks, picking his way through various heaps of discarded debris that smelled of rot and age, to the next golden falcon, this one set with a gleaming red ruby where an eye would be. The Prince wondered briefly how it was that this golden statue was still here, attached to the wall of a roof when anyone in this neighborhood of Commons might have found a way to take it down and sell it. Everyone knew the Commons would thief as easily as breathe.

As he reached the falcon, he briefly passed a hand over it, not quite touching it. A tingle started in his chest and worked its way up his shoulders as the Raven Talisman responded to a life force. Stunned, the Prince realized the falcon was a construct just as the old woman had been, and silently thanked the Empress he hadn't touched it. There were Bloodmages in Banelyn as well, and no doubt they had worked traps into the signs on the Path so that they couldn't be moved. Perhaps his brother Tiffenal himself had designed the falcons; it was the type of project that would have interested the cunning Prince of Foxes. In fact, now that he thought of it, this entire Path seemed like the Fox's doing.

He moved past the golden statue, and looked around for the third. He was now only a single house away from the massive black walls of Banelyn, and, high as he was, they still towered above him. As he looked upward, he saw a golden gleam near the top of the wall.

"Impossible," he whispered, stunned.

Unbelieving, he crossed the last teetering house and stepped up to the sheer cliff face of black stone, wind whipping him mercilessly as it flew into the wall from behind him only to be rebuffed by the massive black stone and sent careening backwards. He crossed to the stone and put a hand on it. Not

quite sure what he had expected, he was still relieved to find that the stone was just stone, cool and hard against his skin.

He looked up again and saw the golden gleam and knew, deep in his gut, that it was the third falcon. He walked slowly to his left, hand trailing on the black stone. When he was directly below the falcon, his hand lost contact with the wall.

Confused, he looked down, and with a shock saw that his hand was *inside* the stone. His arm looked as though it simply ended at the wrist, and he realized that the wall here wasn't solid - it was an illusion. A chill went up the Prince's spine. He stretched his arm forward, and it slowly sank into the black stone. His forearm disappeared, then his elbow; and when he was in up to his shoulder, he took a deep breath, and plunged through with his entire body. Passing through the illusion like crashing through the thin membrane of a pool of water, he found himself in a new world - a small alcove made of the same black stone, barley wide enough on either side to fit his slim shoulders, but fairly deep. On the wall of the alcove directly opposite him had been carved a series of wide rectangular holes ... holes that led up to the top of the wall.

Stunned, he looked behind himself and saw nothing but a blank gray space - the back side of the illusion. But there, high up and to the right, was a small Eagle, head pulled back as it screeched defiance into the sky. So it had been his brother Geofred who had made these walls ... or at least this staircase.

He turned and began to ascend, keeping his eyes on the hand-and-footholds in front of him and trying to ignore the knowledge that he was almost a hundred feet in the air. This was made more difficult by the fact that though the wall behind him was nothing but gray haze, the wind only increased in force as he climbed in height. Before long his hands were raw from clutching the harsh stone, and his arms and legs, particularly the ankle that had been twisted in the fight with the Death Watchmen, began to ache and shake with the effort of climbing.

The golden glint he'd seen was indeed the falcon - and it stared balefully at him as he panted and gasped his way up. Soon, he reached the top of the wall, and hauled himself up; rolling over away from the edge he found himself inside an abandoned watchtower. By the light of the moon shining through a large lookout window as it rose over the Elmist Mountains, the Prince could see that the tower had been cordoned off - there was no way into it through the two barred doors on either side, and the only objects of note around the tower's interior were the opening through which he'd come and a black hole in the opposite wall, at the entrance of which lay a single golden coin.

Three.

He crossed and bent to pick it up. He straightened, feeling the cold weight of the golden disk in his hand, and put it in the pocket where he had stored the other two.

"What do you seek?" a voice asked behind him.

The Prince whirled to find a man dressed in the garb of a simple soldier, the black and gold of the Banelyn watch, with a sword of good quality held high in both hands and a stance that suggested he knew how to use it. He had stepped out of a small alcove hidden in the shadows, and the Prince silently cursed himself for not sensing the man.

"I seek the one who seeks the light."

"How do you mean to seek him?"

"By following the path myself."

"How do you hope to see the one who seeks if you do not see the Path?"

"I seek the Path so that my eyes may be opened to the Light."

The man nodded and sheathed his sword. He motioned with his chin toward the opening in the wall and the Prince crossed to it. The hole was large and circular, just slightly shorter than he was and wide enough for him to stretch out an arm to either wall. He entered, and found that inside was a sharp right turn, around which could be seen a long sloping path that led

diagonally down to another sharp turn. Halfway along the path was a torch in a wall bracket, casting an eerie half-light on the black stone so that it was hard to tell where the shadows ended and the floor and walls began.

Seeing no other option, the Prince made his way through. As he turned the second corner, there was a faint crash of metal from above, and he pulled up short.

What was that?

But only silence followed. A minute passed ... then two ... but no further sounds came down the long hallway to him. He shook his head and continued on, doubling his speed. His only concern now was the Seeker. A guard dropping his sword was not his problem.

There were five more turns in all along the steeply sloping passage through the wall, and then the Prince found himself in front of a large wooden door with a simple wrought-iron latch-handle. He pulled the latch and pushed the door, which swung open easily on oiled hinges.

He found himself in a storage barn. Bales of hay lay around him and up in rafters, as well as sacks of what he assumed were oats or some other type of horse-food. Across the small barn was an open door, through which the Prince could see people moving. He quickly crossed the threshold of the door in the wall, which swung closed behind him. He turned to look at it and found that the wooden door was actually part of the back wall of the barn - and even though he knew it was there, he could see no way to open it, and could hardly tell where the door ended and the wall began.

Moving quickly, he left the storage barn and found himself in the middle of a huge stable yard in the shadow of two large, beautifully wrought stone buildings. The men and women moving in the yard - few, and dressed in good quality clothing - must be the night stewards. One of them looked up and saw him, and the Prince's heart jumped into his throat, but the man continued on and didn't seem to find his presence to be anything out of the ordinary.

The Prince looked down at himself, and realized he looked very much like a Common stable boy. His immediate thought was to find a change of clothes, but he reminded himself that as a way to go about unseen, this disguise appeared very effective. He drew the hood of his cloak up over his head and continued on, making his way across the yard, looking as he did at the horses in the stalls around him. He knew precious little about horses - the beasts had never truly interested him - but he knew enough to know that a good number of them had the markings of Tynian stock, thoroughbred chargers that were prized by the Most High. The rest were all the type of horse meant for parades and public showings. The horses of the High Blood, possibly even just the Elevated - the highest class into which a Baseborn could rise. The Prince walked quickly out of the stables past two guards, who stood straight and tall at the entrance and gave him no more than a passing glance. They were there to keep people out, not in.

The Prince passed into the city itself, and noticed first that in direct contrast to the Outer City's maze of dangerously tilted wooden structures, Banelyn City proper was made of long, straight roads lined with beautiful trees and well cared-for shrubs. The buildings were tall and strong, most of them carved with various facades and designs. Some had marble structures outside of them of this or that noble or mythical creature - those of the Seven Principalities were of course forbidden - and others had large family crests above their front doors.

Something struck him as strange, something he couldn't place - and then it hit him that there was no evidence of the Visigony's industry here. No clockwork servants cleaning the streets, no industrial towers slowly burning through the night, no bright electric lights. It was like walking through something he'd seen in a history book in the Tower Libraries.

But still the Prince was on the path - and he needed to find the next sign, the seven-pointed Compass. He walked down the street - eerily deserted - looking everywhere. But everything was marble or stone, and the only gold among these houses was gilding.

He turned a corner and found himself at the back of a sizable crowd. They were in the middle of a large square that included a park and a marble fountain and large, well-groomed trees. The square was big enough to hold what looked like nearly a hundred people, all, by their dress, of the High or Most High Blood. The women were in long, flowing dresses of every cut, color, and size. Some of them were fashionable, while others came close. The men were all in long robes, decorated with the colors of their house or perhaps the colors of the Prince to which they were sworn.

And in the center of the park, next to the marble fountain, a make-shift wooden stage had been erected, on which a slave auction was taking place.

The Prince was surprised, but not shocked. Slaves were a normal occurrence in the Empire. Those who committed grievous crimes or were found guilty of treason were often sold into life-long bondage. As his brother Rikard had explained to him, criminals were turned from a burden to a blessing for society in the slave system of Lucia. They were given moral discipline, taught the Blessings of the Empress, and made into good law-abiding members of society.

So when the teenage girl was brought onto the platform, naked and shivering, the Prince did feel shock.

This is ... a criminal?

The auctioneer called out information about her – height, weight, age – as two men in leather armor strapped the girl’s wrists and ankles into manacles. Once she was strapped in, the two men went to the back of the stage and pulled on a pair of ropes – the chains connected to the girl’s manacles were pulled tighter, and the girl was lifted off the ground and held spread eagle in the air, her naked skin glistening in the light of oil lamps lit around the square.

“A member of the Commons guilty of thievery, Marisa is in need of a strong master to teach her proper conduct,” the auctioneer said.

The Prince, horrified, saw two men of the High Blood at the back of the crowd laugh and mime something crude. The two ladies with them giggled

shrilly, and the auctioneer paused for a moment as the giggles echoed throughout the crowd.

The girl on the platform was silent, but the Prince could see tears streaming from her eyes, and she had slumped as much as possible in her restraints. Every part of her was on display, and the Prince felt as though he were violating her simply by looking at her.

His mind flashed back to the memories of the rapist, and he was suddenly violently sick. He lurched behind one of the buildings and emptied his stomach onto the cobblestone floor of an alleyway, memories still crashing through his head, memories he thought he had buried long ago. The auctioneer spoke again, and this time there was outright laughter, though the Prince couldn't make out what was being said. The bidding began, the auctioneer calling out numbers in a mechanical, clipped voice that ran together.

He forced himself to turn away, and as he looked up, he noticed two things simultaneously. The first was a gleam of gold that winked at him across the street from the alleyway - a golden compass gilded above the door of one of the manor houses. The second was the figure of the Exile girl standing in the shadows of the next building over.

Spikes of terror raced through the Prince's body, and thoughts of the slave auction were obliterated. She couldn't see him. She couldn't - he was so close - he wouldn't be taken back now. He had to get to the Empress - had to get to the Seeker.

He pushed against the side of the alleyway, hiding in the shadows, as the girl, even more stone-faced than normal, crossed the street. She flitted from shadow to shadow, and moved past the door with the compass on her way around the slave auction.

How was she here?

Suddenly he remembered the sound of crashing metal as he'd descended the wall and he knew then that she had followed him and incapacitated the guard. Somehow, she had caught up and followed him. In

desperation, he told himself again that once he reached the Seeker he would be safe. That was one place she would never be able to follow him.

She rounded the far edge of the square, looking in all directions, and as soon as her gaze was turned the other way, he ran for the compass and the door beneath it.

His feet and legs moved jerkily, as if unsure what world they were in and whether or not they could still run. But run they did, and the girl never turned and saw him cross the street. He was at the door. Another golden compass was etched into the doorknob. The Prince reached for it, turned it, pushed the door in, and was through. The whole thing had taken barely seconds, but his heart was pounding as if he'd run a mile, and the image of the girl - both girls - kept flashing through his head.

He was now inside the foyer of a large mansion. Before him were lavish engravings and a painting by the master artist Simaltan himself, dead nearly a century and highly acclaimed. A man in a blue velvet vest and black pants entered the foyer from a room farther in, and saw him standing there. He took in the Prince's clothing, the heavy way in which he was breathing, and then seemed to make a decision.

"What is it you seek?" he asked slowly, obviously thinking that the only reason anyone would be in his house looking like the Prince - dirty, rank from weeks of travel, and with a look of panic in his eyes - was that he was on the Path.

"I seek the one who seeks the Light," the Prince gasped out.

The man's wary look turned to one of relief, and he spoke the rest of ritual with more assurance, pulling his right hands out from behind his back. The Prince was certain the man had been grasping a hidden dagger.

"How do you mean to seek him?"

"By following the Path myself."

"How do you hope to see the one who Seeks if you do not see the Path?"

"I seek the Path so that my eyes may be opened to the Light."

The man nodded and motioned for the Prince to follow. He turned into the main room, and the Prince quickly walked after him. The rest of the house was just as rich as the Prince would have expected from one of the High Blood. There was no one else in sight as they passed through a series of rooms, each more opulent than the last, until they came finally to a grand ballroom that opened onto a garden.

The man motioned to the wide glass doors at the end of the room, and turned away, obviously dismissing him.

The Prince crossed the room, on edge the entire time, waiting to hear the sound of the Exile girl breaking into the mansion to continue her chase. But no such noise came, and he made it across the room and through the large glass doors without incident. On the other side of the doors on a dais in the middle of a wide, sloping yard was a golden coin.

Four.

Beyond the dais the Prince saw another seven-pointed compass, engraved as part of a sundial. This compass had a working arrow on it, one that was currently pointed through a hedge at the end of the garden. The Prince passed quickly through the opening, and then through the wooden door beyond it.

He emerged onto a back alley - the place where the servants of the High would most likely walk during the day. It led both right and left, but the left fork ended abruptly in a large brick wall between two houses further down. The Prince, heart still beating wildly in his chest, turned right and began to run.

He crossed the distance to the end of the alley and shot out onto the street. Or more correctly, the end of a street, for directly in front of him was an enormous gate set into the Inner Walls, beyond which only the Most High could go. Not even the High could enter here without a specific invitation, and the Elevated as well as the Commons were forbidden, on pain of death. The Prince, of course, would have been allowed in as one of the Children. But, remembering his attire, he realized it was remarkable he hadn't been

stopped already by whatever sort of town guard they had in the city proper. Wondering how he was supposed to get over the wall, the Prince didn't notice until a second later all of the eyes staring out of the five main crossbars of the gate.

Five eyes.

The Prince's gaze snapped to the gate, and he realized it was the fifth sign. He hadn't noticed them before, as they were hidden in swirls of mythical action, but five Eyes of the Seeker - gold-rimmed with golden irises - had been strategically placed so that one might find them should he look hard enough.

But this was impossible. Nearly twenty men guarded the gate, all in the black and gold of Banelyn, all with the air of one ready and eager to shoot a trespasser full of arrows without asking questions.

The Raven Talisman grew hot on his back and he spun around.

The Exile girl was there, like a phantom in the night, coming toward him.

Fear and disbelief clashed in the Prince's head, and then his body and instincts took over while his mind reeled; he turned and ran for the gates. Just as he'd predicted, the first three guards who saw him raised crossbows and pointed them at him, calling to their comrades to do the same.

"I SEEK THE ONE WHO SEEKS THE LIGHT!"

The words were out of his mouth and ringing in the cooling night air before he realized he had said them. Several more of the guards shouldered their crossbows and fingered the triggers, and in that second the Prince thought that it all might end, that all that had happened would come down to a dozen crossbow bolts in his chest.

"HOLD!"

The Prince, startled by the word, pulled up short; the guards blinked and faltered. A new guard strode forward, a golden knot of rank on his shoulder that served to fasten a long green cloak, so dark it was almost black, to his shoulders. This captain, or perhaps sergeant, spoke a word to

the guards and surprise crossed their faces, before they turned to stare at the Prince, in his Commons clothing, dirty and travel-stained, with disbelief.

“How do you mean to seek him?” the officer asked, picking up the ritual from where the Prince had started.

One of the guards who flanked the officer shot a sudden look over the Prince’s shoulder as if he’d seen something, and the Prince whirled, expecting to see the Exile girl, or perhaps Tomaz himself wielding his greatsword, eyes burning with hatred and betrayal.

But there was no one, only an empty street filled with dark, twisting shadows.

But couldn’t the girl hide in any of those shadows? the Prince asked himself. *Couldn’t she be there, waiting, perhaps readying a dagger to throw?*

“If you run,” said the voice of the officer behind him, breaking into his thoughts, “or if you do not speak, I will cut you down, Commoner, where you stand. Turn and face me.”

The Prince, jaw clenched and hands balled into fists to stop the sudden terror he’d felt at the girl’s arrival from taking him over completely, turned and saw that the officer had unsheathed a broad sword, while both of the guards flanking him had raised their crossbows again, level with his chest. The guards behind them all had their hands on their weapons as well. Likely, this was the only piece of action they’d seen in a very long while and they were more than eager to use him for target practice.

“By following the path myself,” the Prince said, speaking quickly but doing his best to keep what was left of his composure.

As he said the words, some of the tension left the officer’s shoulders, but this time he didn’t motion for the guards to lower their weapons and he kept his sword unsheathed.

“How do you hope to see the one who seeks if you do not see the Path?”

“I seek the Path so that my eyes may be opened to the Light.”

For a long moment nothing happened, and suddenly the Prince wondered if he had gotten some part of the ritual wrong, but no, it was all right, there was nothing else to say. But maybe this officer had rules never to let a Commoner in, no matter what series of passwords or phrases he knew, maybe -

“Let him through.”

The guards who flanked the officer started in surprise, but obediently lowered their crossbows, while the officer sheathed his own sword and turned to walk to the gatehouse. The Prince could suddenly breathe again, and he quickly walked forward on shaky legs, following the man. As he neared the gatehouse though, the feeling of a presence came to him again, and he once more cast a glance over his shoulder, peering into the dancing darkness and writhing shadows cast by the flickering gas lamps that lit the nighttime streets. But there was nothing, and no one. He turned to follow the officer into the gatehouse, passing the guards, who looked as though, ritual or no ritual, they still wanted to turn him into a human hedgehog. Most of them seemed to radiate pure hatred and disgust, and the Prince couldn't understand why. True he was dressed like a Baseborn, but he was a Prince. Couldn't they see that? Couldn't they see the difference?

He passed into the gatehouse, and saw the officer standing across the room at another wooden door. A huge bar had been placed across it, and as the Prince watched, the officer pulled out a set of keys, and inserted them into the lock, twisting quickly. There was the sound of many metallic, clockwork bolts sliding home, and then the bar simply disappeared into the wall, and the door swung open. As it did, the officer stepped aside, and watched the Prince expectantly. The Prince walked quickly through the open door.

He found himself directly on the other side of the large gate, and then heard a clinking sound as the officer behind him tossed something gold onto the cobblestone ground at his feet. He bent and picked up the golden coin with a single eye in the center.

Five.

The door to the gatehouse closed with a bang, and the Prince pocketed the coin. He turned and looked at the innermost sanctum of Banelyn, where lived the Most High, the ruling class of Lucia.

Palaces rose up around him on every side, grand and decorated with more wealth than the Prince supposed the Commons would ever see. There were sculptures, well-manicured lawns, and beautifully crafted fountains. But what caught the Prince's eye was the Cathedral.

The Cathedral of the Empress was known throughout Lucia, and the Prince had heard stories of its grandeur since the day he was born. But being here, standing in its shadow and seeing it for himself, surpassed all words. The light of the moon and stars was just bright enough to highlight the curving, majestic lines of the stone, the way its towers speared the sky and the central dome seemed to cap the world. It was a visible incarnation of the power of the Empress - for she had built it, if the legends were true, simply by standing at its center and willing it into existence.

The Prince shook himself out of his reverie - the building was grand, but he needed to continue on his path. He needed to find the sixth sign, the -

The six penitents, who knelt on humble knees, staring at him from the face of the Cathedral. Without thinking, the Prince ran toward them - each golden statue in its own alcove, showing proper obedience to the Empress. This was it - he felt his heart begin to soar - the Path led inside the Cathedral. Of course!

He reached the huge wooden doors, still open for late-night worshipers, and passed beneath the penitents. Inside the Cathedral the Prince barely slowed down. He was vaguely conscious of the beauty around him, but all that concerned him was the seventh sign, he needed to find it, he was so close -

A glint of gold to his right, in a large basin of water. He crossed to it - and saw the sixth golden coin, and a mixed wave of relief and anger coursed through him. He reached into the fountain, doing so quickly and as

surreptitiously as possible, as there were members of the Most High nearby in their long, elegant robes, praying to the Empress even at this time of night, and various servants cleaning. He grasped the coin, pulled it out and thrust it into his pocket, silently chiding himself for almost missing it. If he didn't have all seven coins when he came to the Seeker, he would be turned away, and that -

“Who are you, and what are you doing in this Cathedral?”

The voice behind him was deep and threatening, and the Prince spun to face its owner. The man was tall, bald, and very menacing in the long brown robes and golden rope of a Lesser Seeker. The Prince opened his mouth to speak, but before he could, the man's eyes looked behind him and saw the empty basin, then took in the Prince's clothing and his bulging pocket of coins, and spoke first.

“What is it you seek?”

Relief flooded through the Prince's body, and he spoke the rest of the ritual. Once he had finished, the man, suddenly no longer menacing, but instead rather kindly, took him by the arm, and pointed him up the center aisle of the Cathedral. The Prince, not one to linger when shown the way, nodded to the man and nearly ran toward where he had pointed, only stopping himself because he knew to do so would raise an alarm, and possibly keep him from his goal, which was now within reach.

His eyes ran across the front of the Cathedral, looking for the seventh sign, the seven-pointed star, the Star of Light. Panic seized him by the throat - as he neared the large pulpit and the wooden pews on either side of him began to dwindle, he still couldn't see it. It was nowhere - he scanned the area again. Nothing. The ceiling - nothing. The floor - simple marble. Where was the sign?

He turned to his left - and there it was, on a small, unobtrusive wooden door, far to the side of the Cathedral, hidden in the shadows.

Movement at the corner of his eye - he turned to the front of the Cathedral, and there, standing in the shadows just inside the open doors,

was the Exile girl, her green eyes locked on him with ferocious intent, blazing like the gaze of an avenging spirit.

Fear, blind, senseless fear, grabbed the Prince. It was impossible that she could have followed him, but there she was. He turned and ran for the door with the seven-pointed star, hearing shouts behind him as servants and Most High saw him.

He grabbed the metal ring of the door and pulled. The door swung open on oiled hinges; he crossed the threshold, and slammed it shut behind him, locking himself in darkness.

Chapter Ten: Seek and Ye Shall Find

For a long moment, the Prince stood there, wrapped in darkness. He breath echoed heavily in his ears, and he found himself hardly able to think. He half expected the door to open behind him, and for all the attendants and the bald, menacing man to come in and pull him out. Perhaps the Exile girl would find a way in, and slit his throat in the darkness.

But time passed and none of these things happened. More time passed, and his breathing slowed, and he found himself able to think again.

He was through the seventh door. The Seeker was here - the Seeker must be here.

“Hello?”

His voice came back to him in quivering echoes, and he realized he wasn't in a room, but in a long passageway. As his eyes adjusted to the black, he began to realize also that he wasn't in total darkness. He could vaguely make out a light far away, in the distance in front of him. He began to move cautiously toward the light, both hands stretched out before him, inching ahead one step at a time. With each step, the light in the distance grew brighter, and soon he was able to lower his hands. A little farther along he found that he was indeed in a long passageway - a downward sloping half-circle made of cobblestone walls. The floor was nothing but smooth, hard packed dirt, and his simple Commons boots little impression on it.

Down the passage he went, until he could make out the light source close at hand - a guttering, shifting torch held in an iron wall bracket. Beyond it, the passageway curved to the right, and continued down.

The darkness began to close in on him again as he left the torch behind and continued down the hall. This was a message from the Seekers - there was some sort of religious dogma here, he knew, about Seeking the Light of Truth even in the dark when all seems lost. But such contemplations were lost on him: all he was worried about was tripping over actual stumbling blocks, not metaphorical ones.

The passage continued to curve right and downward and he realized he must be directly beneath the Cathedral itself. Another light was visible in the distance. He moved toward it, faster this time, and found a simple wooden door.

A coin lay at his feet, and he bent to pick it up. But before he had touched it, he noticed something odd: there were six small indentations in the floor that looked too perfectly spaced to be there by coincidence. Slowly, the Prince pulled out the six coins weighing down his pocket, and placed them, one by one, in the holes, which, he was unsurprised to find, fit the coins perfectly. As soon as his hand left the metal of the sixth coin, there was a click from above where he had knelt, and he looked up, somehow sure that the sound he'd heard was the door's lock pulling back.

He reached out and pulled the metal latch on the door, which swung out toward him on silent, oiled hinges. Beyond was what looked like a kind of anteroom, where a number of men and women in the pure black cloaks of Searchers, the novice level of the Seekers, were lighting row after row of candles. The room was large, and perfectly circular. The Prince stepped inside, and as he did all of the Searchers stopped what they were doing, and turned to look at him, their faces concealed by the tall hoods of their robes.

For a long time, the Prince just stood there, unsure what would happen next. There were three doors beside the one he'd just come through, each identical, two located at right angles to him, and the third directly across the circle of surrounding candles. It was this door that opened, breaking the silence, and through it came three men, two in silver armor outlined in gold, and a third in robes an unnatural, snowy white, that looked completely out of place in this dark, underground chamber. The two in armor were large and moved with the fluid motions of practiced soldiers, while the third was elderly, with long, flowing hair almost as white as his robes, tied back neatly behind his head. Ornate makeup and tattoos covered his face, bright golden sunbursts, the All Seeing Eye etched in silver upon his forehead, and various seven pointed stars on his neck, cheeks, and the hollow of his throat. Both of

his hands, clasped together in front of him, bore twisting circles of black briars.

“Good evening, my son,” the man in the robes began. “I was informed we had a very promising Child of the Light seeking us along the Path, but I am....”

The man trailed off as the Prince stepped forward, coming into the full light of the candles, breaking the Seeker out of the traditional welcome.

“I am no Child of the Light, Seeker,” the Prince said, lowering the hood of his cloak. “I am a Child of the Empress.”

Immediately, the silence in the room went from contemplative to deadly. The welcoming, fatherly expression on the Seeker’s face curdled, and one of the Searchers was startled so badly that he dropped his metal candle lighter, which crashed to the floor with a hollow, brassy sound, that echoed and rang through the circular room.

“Good ... good evening, my Prince,” the Seeker said. He had regained his composure and spoke with soft assurance, but he was staring at the Prince so intensely a lesser man would have cowered. The Prince knew immediately that this was not a man who was used to being commanded, and certainly not one used to being taken by surprise. He felt himself beginning to form an apology - and then realized he was no longer with the Exiles. He was one of the Children, and was finally being given the respect he deserved. There was no need to apologize or to explain himself here.

A sick feeling kindled in the pit of his stomach, which he dismissed as hunger.

“We need to speak, Seeker,” the Prince said. “And I will need proper clothing. I prefer black robes, as befitting my office.”

The Seeker bowed his head, and the Prince felt a brief flash of amusement as both guards exchanged a shocked glance at such deference.

“Indeed, my Prince - please follow me.”

The Seeker turned, and as he did the Prince noticed his hands make a small motion toward one of the guards. No doubt telling him to fetch the robes.

The guards stepped to either side of the Seeker, and once the old man had passed through the door, they waited for the Prince to enter as well. A voice in the back of the Prince's head told him not to enter ... but he ignored it. Exiles listened to such voices. Princes, as his siblings had often told him, did not.

He found himself in a large, well-lit office. The Seeker moved across the room, and seated himself behind a large desk, and motioned for the Prince to take the seat opposite. The Prince crossed the room, and as he did his eyes fell on a small dagger in a rack on the desk, no doubt used as a letter opener. It was heavily gilded and gem encrusted, but sharp and serviceable.

He sat in the chair to which the Seeker had motioned, and wondered idly why he did not feel relieved. He looked up into the eyes of the Seeker, and told himself he was being foolish. Here he was, in the lair of a Seeker. As a Child of the Empress this was one of the safest places he could find himself - all who lived and worked here were sworn to obey his smallest whim.

"Seeker," the Prince began briskly, "I will need pen and paper immediately. I must send a message to my Mother.

"Indeed, my Prince," the Seeker said, inclining his white head. "I will send for my scribe immediately. But first, wouldn't you like refreshment? You look very worn."

The Seeker motioned to a guard - of which, the Prince realized suddenly, there was now only one. Where had the other gone? Hopefully to fetch him his robes. They would no doubt be Searcher robes, but as long as they were not this Commons filth, they would be serviceable. The remaining guard poured two cups of a blood red wine, and handed them to the Seeker, who then offered one to the Prince. The Prince took it, but did not drink. He didn't have much of a head for wine, and he needed to keep his wits.

“Your scribe is competent, I am sure, but this is a message I must write myself. There has been treason in the Empire, and I must inform both the Empress and you of the events of the past few weeks.”

“Indeed my Prince,” the Seeker repeated, but made no motion to do anything. A long moment passed where the Prince and the Seeker simply looked at each other, and then the Prince’s anger began to rise. What was this?

A door to his left opened, and the second guard entered ... with four others.

“I gave you an order, Seeker,” the Prince said, quietly, calmly.

“Yes, but you see ... another order came this morning, born by the Empress’ Hand.”

The Prince looked up sharply. The Seeker’s eyes seemed to glow red in the reflected light of the candles that lit the room. Something was wrong. Something was very, very wrong.

“What were these orders?” the Prince asked. He moved a hand across the table to grasp his cup, which lay next to the sharp, dagger-like letter opener.

The Seeker smiled sadly.

“Please, my son, do not attempt to make this more difficult than it has to be.”

Two pairs of rough hands seized him by the shoulders, and he immediately grasped the dagger, but a third pair grabbed it and took it from him as easily as if he had been an infant.

“Unhand me!”

He was pulled out of the chair onto his feet, and his hands were tied behind him. A rough cloth was forced between his teeth, and tied around his head.

“Hold him, but do not damage him,” the Seeker said, his brow furrowed in sadness and something akin to disappointment. “He must remain unharmed until one of the Children arrives to claim him.”

The Prince tried to question the Seeker once more, but all that came out was a muffled shout around the choking gag.

“Hush, hush, I will let you know your fate as it is clear now you will be unable to escape. When news reached the Empress that you had survived the Death Watch not once but twice, she sent word to the Seekers that you were to be apprehended and held until one of the Children themselves could come and claim you.”

The Prince felt his knees go weak, and only the men gripping him held him up.

“You seem surprised,” the Seeker said, examining the Prince as if he were nothing more than an interesting specimen of insect that continued to squirm under his gaze. The Prince twisted his head violently, and to his surprise the gag slipped. He spat out the cloth, and pinned the Seeker with his gaze.

“You are sworn to obey me – I am a Child of the Empress! I am the Prince of Ravens, the Lord of the Seventh Principality, and I DEMAND YOUR RESPECT!”

He was vaguely surprised by his own outburst, which had been so violent that his throat felt raw. He didn’t know what was happening - this couldn’t be. Not here. No, this couldn’t happen here, this was a safe place, safe because he was the Prince of Ravens. He was!

“I must send a letter to my Mother, Seeker,” he babbled on, hardly conscious of what he was saying now, slowly losing control of all dignity and pride he had left, his voice turning from command to desperate plea. “I am to receive my Inheritance - there has been a misunderstanding here, one of my brothers or sisters, the other Children, they have misinformed you, they were told to do so by my Mother! You cannot hold me, Seeker - I must be free to claim what is rightfully mine! It is what my Mother expects of me!”

The Seeker watched with an impassive face, and that terrifying look of pity. The Prince, unable to do anything else, found himself wrestling against

the grip of the guards, but their hands were strong, and he was weak from the journey through the mountains.

“Could it be,” the Seeker asked, “that you thought this was all a test?”

The Prince let out a low moan, and then nodded, unable to speak. Yes, yes, a test! That was it - he had figured it out, now they would see, they would understand he was worthy after all, that he was destined to be a true son of the Empress, one that She could be proud of, one that She would love as much as She loved Her other Children.

But the Seeker was shaking his head, and the look of pity was turning to something else ... changing ... into laughter.

“Oh! Oh, hah hah ha ... oh, no I’m sorry I shouldn’t laugh so, but really, Empress forefend, that is quite an interesting deduction to make from two attempted murders ... oh, hah hah, yes. And all this time they’ve been looking for you to the north, thinking you would attempt to seek help from those you knew in Lucien. But no! You came south, in an attempt to find a Seeker ... and in doing so delivered yourself up for slaughter.”

“BE SILENT!”

Rage ignited his blood, and suddenly the strong guards could barely contain him. He’d become an animal in a trap, and in his despair, in his descent into madness, he was granted the strength of desperation.

“You will release me NOW!” he roared, spittle flying from his mouth and his eyes rolling madly in his head.

“Calm him!” the Seeker said, a tinge of fear coloring his voice.

Two more of the guards came forward and grabbed him, and soon the Prince found himself pinned to the floor, unable to move a single limb no matter how hard he tried. He was powerless, and when he realized it, the rage disappeared, and his mind went blank.

He lay there on the floor, and time seemed to slow. No thoughts went through his mind, nothing but vague sensations. Impressions of the room - the high ceiling, held with wooden beams, the smell of incense beneath the

garlic and onions smell of the guards holding him, the color of the Seeker's white robes and the brightness of the swirling religious markings.

"Take him away," the Seeker said. "Hold him, and chain him. Let no one near him bearing any kind of weapon, let no one enter his cell, and feed him only as much as will keep him alive. We must not lose him, and we must not let him use his powers. He, while an Exiled Prince, is still a Prince, and one of the Seven Godheads, until such time as the Empress removes his Blessing. He may appear powerless ... but he is not. Take every precaution, lest ye wish to test the strength of our Empress' blood."

He made a motion over the Prince's shoulder, and a bag was thrust over the Prince's head. Something hard and solid struck him, and he knew no more.

Chapter Eleven: The Crucible

There are moments of exquisite pain in our lives, where time and space swirl into an unknowable nexus of the imagination. Reality ceases to exist and the walls in front and the ground beneath seem to recede and are felt no more. The mind retreats inward, and begins to consume itself in endless, merciless circles of ever deepening despair and desolation. These moments are when the hope that has held us up, has propelled us forward, and given our very lungs the breath we need to survive, withers in our hearts and is blown away before the merciless wind of reality.

The Prince of Ravens, the nameless Prince, the Exiled Prince, the only Prince of the Realm ever cast down in the history of the Empire, woke in such a place, with no identity, no hope, and nothing to hold him together. He had been the Seventh Son of the Empress. Then he had been a kidnapped Prince, a wronged Prince hunted by his traitorous brothers and sisters but still true to his purpose.

Now he was nothing.

He sat silently where he had woken, propped up against a stone wall, not seeing the cell in which he had been caged, not feeling the cold metal cuffs connected to large metal chains that held him by the wrists nor the day-old burn from the Exile girl's dagger that still made the palm of his hand throb. Even the Raven Talisman was silent and cool on his shoulders and back, though there was more than enough life around him to encourage it to awaken.

All that had happened since leaving the Fortress went slowly, repeatedly through his mind. Tomaz, the Exile girl, the Death Watchmen, Banelyn, the Path of Light. Pine trees, hunger, sunlight, darkness. Tomaz, the Exile girl, the Death Watchmen....

The thing that he felt most, as he sat alone in the darkness, was shame. Shame that he had somehow been negligent in his duty as a Prince. Shame that he had disappointed his Mother. Shame that he hadn't seen the

betrayal for what it was. Shame that he had wandered stupidly into the hands of the Seeker. But as hours passed, then days, the shame hardened into anger. What had he done to deserve it all? What had he done to offend the Empress? Nothing. Nothing! He was a model son. True, he was no Rikard. But he was a good Prince. He was a good son. So why? What had he done? WHAT had he DONE?

The Prince shot to his feet and let out a scream of anger mingled with despair that reverberated around the cell, bouncing off the hard wooden door across the room. He knew no one could hear him, and if someone did he was in the bowels of a Seeker's lair, and all here were convinced of his guilt to some crime he hadn't even known he'd committed. But the Prince screamed again, pulling against his chains, his manacles digging into his skin and drawing blood that began to flow down his arms in hot rivulets. He continued to shout, cursing the Seeker, cursing the world, cursing himself for being so stupid as to deliver himself up for slaughter, walking right into the Seeker's trap ... his Mother's trap.

He was never sure how long he raged, alone in his cell, trying to deny what was true, trying to convince himself it was all a dream, but coming back again and again to the hard reality of his imprisonment. Hard reality. He had to be harder to deal with it. That was the answer.

He pushed his emotions into a small ball in his stomach. He wanted to refuse to accept what had happened, but he couldn't. He wanted to lose his mind, but some last shred of himself - whoever he was - kept him clinging to sanity.

In the end, it was the nothingness of sleep that claimed him, the mercy of empty dreams. When he woke, he found himself alone. Sometimes there was food waiting for him, just at the edge of the length of his bonds. Sometimes there were rats that shared the cell with him, and sometimes fleas bit him as he lay on the straw that was his only bit of comfort.

He was alone with his thoughts, which led to his realization of what lay in store for him. He wondered which of the Children had been sent to

retrieve him, and how long it would take them to arrive once the message came. How many days he had left to live, how many days until he reached the Fortress, this time in chains, and was killed. He wondered how he was to be killed. If his Mother would do it, or one of the Children.

He slept again in fits and starts, his mind going in and out of consciousness with no apparent preference. He sat in the same position, slumped against the back wall, unless he was eating or relieving himself, and soon his back grew cramped and hunched. He didn't care though ... things like a straight back didn't matter any more. The minutes ticked slowly by, as the Prince awaited his fate. None of the possibilities were pleasant.

Finally, as he sat in the dark with his black thoughts, the door to his cell creaked open and he knew his time was up.

He stood, his legs weak but still containing enough strength to lift him to his feet. He would face whoever had come to retrieve him with dignity. He had been the Prince of Ravens, and he swore that whoever had come for him would not forget it as they led him to his death

Two Lesser Seekers came in, with brown robes and cloaks and the single gold rope of their office. Their faces were covered with black cloth masks, meant to remind them of their own insignificance, and golden seven-point stars hung around their necks to remind them of the Empress at all times.

The Prince examined them, and found himself amused: one, hunched over with age, was in robes and cloak far too small, and the other, standing as tall and straight as he could, was trying to fill in robes that were far too large.

"Is money scarce?" the Prince taunted them, his voice coming out in a croak past chapped lips and a raw throat. "You know you could always deliver me to Empress yourself. I'm sure there's a bounty to be had."

"Don't tempt me," said the smaller of the two in a female voice. She pushed back the hood of her cloak and removed the black mask. The Prince's mouth dropped open as long black hair fell down to frame the face

of the Exile girl. The bigger of the two stopped hunching over and stood up straight, pulling back his hood and mask to reveal the bearded face of Tomaz.

“What ... what are you doing here?”

“Being stupid,” grumbled the girl, casting a long-suffering look at Tomaz who had turned back to press an ear against the door. She reached into her stolen robes and produced one of her long daggers, moved to the Prince’s right, and began to pry at the locks that chained him to the wall.

“But - but you’re impersonating Seekers! You could be Exiled for that!”

Both of them paused and turned to look at him. The girl went so far as to pull back from the lock far enough to look the Prince straight in the face and cock an eyebrow.

“I mean,” the Prince hurried on, feeling his cheeks grow hot with embarrassment, “why are you risking your lives for me? You shouldn’t be here - you should be halfway back to where it is you were taking me in the first place!”

The girl didn’t respond, but the Prince felt her hesitate for the briefest of seconds before attacking the lock again with renewed vigor. Tomaz turned slightly and responded in a quiet rumble.

“You’re one of us now,” he said simply.

The statement brought everything crashing back down on him that he had forgotten in the shock of seeing the two Exiles enter his cell. But enough of his loyalty to the Empire remained that he felt a surge of anger against the two outlaws. His resentment was still hot, and the rejection too new.

“No,” he said hotly, “no, I will never be one of you.”

He twisted as much as his chains would allow, throwing the girl off of him. In the next second, her dagger was pressed against his throat.

“Try that again princeling,” she snarled.

“Eshendai, now is not the time!” Tomaz said quietly. He turned to the Prince.

“If you come with us, you live,” he said bluntly. “If you stay here, you die.”

The girl and the Prince were almost nose to nose, glaring hatefully at each other. The noise of a far off grate swinging open came from outside the door, and then sounds of feet tramping across a corridor above them.

“I would rather die than become an Exile,” the Prince said finally.

The girl pushed herself off of him and spun, glaring at Tomaz. The big man moved forward so quickly he was a blur until suddenly the enormous bearded face appeared above the Prince.

“Where there is life,” the big man rumbled, “there is hope. Do not turn your back on us, who are trying to save your life, the same way that they have turned their backs on you. There are times when things happen to us. We cannot stop those things. But what makes a man a man, is what he does once that moment has passed. What makes a person who they are, is what they learn.”

“And where will I go now?” hissed the Prince.

“You will go with us.”

“To the land of the Exiled Kindred?” the Prince scoffed. “Where I will be treated as a prisoner of war? Where I will be tortured for information if I don’t give it willingly?”

“I should have known you’d be an idiot like this,” said the girl.

“And what would you do in my place?”

There was a long silence in which the girl just looked at him.

“I would live, just to spite the ones who would have you dead.”

The Prince looked at her for a long moment, and the anger he’d felt, the pain, hardened into something ugly and vindictive, something that he felt ashamed of, but something that gave him fire.

“Fine,” he said. “Unchain me.”

“Fantastic,” the girl said, rolling her eyes. “He better be worth this trouble, Tomaz.”

The sounds outside the cell became louder and it soon became clear that the Seeker's headquarters were in an uproar. An alarm bell began to ring.

"They've discovered our presence," Tomaz said grimly.

"How?" the girl asked, "we stored the Searchers - "

"No doubt my cell is enchanted," the Prince said. "Bloodmages could have placed enchantments around the door and the lock, they - "

"Why didn't you tell us?" the girl hissed.

"I didn't know you were coming!" the Prince retorted venomously.

There was the sound of a key scraping in the lock, and the Prince fell silent. The girl and Tomaz switched places, the girl taking position beside the door in the shadows, and Tomaz approaching the Prince, grabbing the chains that were holding him in place. Clenching them in his enormous fist, Tomaz threw his full weight against the restraints. With a screech like a dying animal, the chains came out of the wall in a shower of powdered stone and mortar.

The door opened and three guards entered with swords already half drawn. Tomaz and the Prince, still in chains but no longer tethered to the wall, kept a safe distance away. The guards saw them and immediately spread out in formation, coming farther into the room. They never even saw the Exile girl.

There was a blurred series of motions, and then all three men lay motionless on the floor, the girl standing calmly over them as she sheathed her daggers.

Shadows and light, she's good.

There was a strange tugging sensation on the Prince's arms, and he turned to see Tomaz pull apart the links of the chains with fingers the size of sausages, once again accompanied by the tortured scream of metal. Not two seconds later, the Prince was left only with the manacles and a bit of chain hanging from each.

"Shadows and light," whispered the Prince, astonished.

“You’re welcome,” Tomaz responded.

“We need to leave very quickly,” said the girl, who was now looking into the corridor. “There are going to be a lot of people here very soon.”

Tomaz grabbed the Prince by the scruff of the neck and pulled him toward the door until the Prince began to walk on his own.

Once in the hallway, a short stone corridor lined with torches in wall brackets, they turned right, the Prince following the lead of the Exiles, as he had no idea where he was. Both Tomaz and the girl had pulled their hoods and masks back on, though the Prince was unsure what help that would be since he, the top security prisoner, was with them.

They rounded a corner and were presented with a set of iron bars spanning from ceiling to floor.

“Shadows and fire, this wasn’t here before,” the girl cursed.

Tomaz motioned the Prince and the girl out of the way, obviously ready to somehow break their way through.

“Wait!” the Prince said. He ran forward and examined the bars.

“We don’t have time to wait, princeling,” the girl said with exasperation.

The Prince ignored her and continued to examine the bars. Near the top of the farthest right bar he saw what he was looking for.

“There,” he said, pointing.

It was a small mark most people would have missed, but one the Prince had been trained to notice on all things. It was a red tear-shaped droplet of blood. The sign of the Bloodmages.

With an awkward, jerky movement, trying to avoid hitting the bars with the manacles still dangling from his wrists, he reached up and touched the symbol with his thumb. The bars shot up into the ceiling, leaving the hallway clear. The Prince motioned for them to follow him through.

“How did you do that?” the girl asked.

“Bloodmages draw their power from all seven Talismans,” the Prince said quickly. “As long as I’m connected to the Raven, nothing they make can

keep me out, even if the entire Empire is hunting after me. That's why my chains were relatively easy to break - they were simple metal. None of their enchantments can hold me. Now, don't we have somewhere to be?"

The girl brushed past him, Tomaz following quickly behind. They rounded another corner as a group of guards came into the corridor twenty yards farther up. Luckily, they hadn't seen the group, or else thought they were all Lesser Seekers, the Prince hiding behind Tomaz's conveniently large bulk. The Prince and the Exiles rounded another corner, and came to a small staircase, leading upwards. Two guards were stationed at the bottom, and they caught sight of the three immediately.

"Stay where you are!" one of them called, but it was too late. The Prince and the girl, side by side, hurtled forward, taking the guards by surprise. Falling back on his training again, the Prince used the same joint locking technique he had on the Death Watch soldier what seemed so long ago now. The man fell in a heap at the Prince's feet, but as he turned away, the man reached up and pulled the Prince's foot out from under him.

He fell flat on his face, slapping his hands against the ground to absorb the shock of the blow. Stars winked at the edges of his vision, but as he looked up he saw dagger sticking out of the Exile girl's boot. He lunged for it, caught the handle, and spun, slicing the guard's bicep, rendering his arm useless. The Prince rolled to his feet, crouching over the guard, staring into the frightened eyes of the man. This was good - now the Prince would be stronger and faster. He raised the dagger high. The Prince's mind flashed back to the Death Watch soldier in the mountains.

With a growl of anger, he flipped the dagger up into air, grabbed it dexterously by the blade guard, and smashed the end of the hilt into the man's temple, knocking him out cold but leaving him alive.

He rose, dagger still in hand, and turned to see the girl and Tomaz staring at him.

"Why didn't you kill him?" the girl asked.

The Prince, nerves considerably on edge after his imprisonment, responded so viciously he was nearly snarling.

“I don’t kill unless I have to, remember? That’s an Exile’s job.”

If he had expected her to look hurt or stung or affected at all, he was sorely disappointed. She simply stood there and examined him, her face cold and dispassionate, but her eyes blazing almost brighter than the torches along the wall.

Tomaz muttered something to her that he couldn’t hear, something that sounded like “worth the trouble,” but that made no sense.

Before he could ask, there was a sound behind him, and they all whirled to face it. A number of men rounded the corner, some dressed in the rough black homespun of the Searchers the Prince had seen upon entering the lair. One pointed and gave a cry.

“Quickly,” Tomaz said, “up the stairs!”

The Prince held out the dagger to the girl, offering it back, but she shook her head.

“Keep it – you’ll need it.”

The three of them made their way up the stone staircase, disappearing around the first curve. They continued to climb for ages, going around and around and always upward.

The Prince, kept in confinement for a week, tied to a wall, and fed little more than starvation rations, felt his strength ebbing away as his feet began to drag like lead weights. The Exiles began to pull ahead of him. Gasping, he hurried to catch up, hearing the alarm bell still ringing in the distance, knowing that this was his only chance to escape.

Through one final door, and he found himself out in chill night air.

He looked around, confused, and realized he was high up one of the towers spaced along the wall of the Inner City. He remembered that he had entered the lair through the Cathedral ... the Seeker’s headquarters must be enormous. It might expand out underneath the entire city of Banelyn, and if this was a way out as well, then who was to say there weren’t multiple

entrances and exits throughout the city? He looked over the wall and found he could see across Banelyn City proper, all the way to the Black Wall. Making his way to the side, he looked down over into the courtyard, and saw guards running back and forth, the entire city of the Most High in an uproar.

“Now what?” he asked.

“Along the wall,” Tomaz said, motioning behind him. The Prince turned.

The tower was connected to the top of the wall by a long battlement running toward the main gate and another door. There were guards stationed every few yards.

“How are we going to do that?” the Prince asked incredulously. Tomaz just smiled at him wickedly. He reached down and picked up a long piece of wood from a large pile the Prince assumed was meant to be the makings of a signal fire. Tomaz motioned to the girl.

“Ready?” he asked her in a quiet rumble.

“Catch me if you can,” she said with a grin, and shot off down the runway.

“What - *what in the name of the Empress is she doing?*”

Tomaz didn't respond, but took off after her. The Prince, not knowing what else to do, ran as fast as he could behind them, the metal chains of his manacles striking his sides. The first guard turned just in time to see the girl make her way past him, and he turned and ran after her, though how he thought he'd catch her wearing full armor the Prince didn't know. The second guard, alerted to the presence of the Exile girl, turned and drew his sword, ready for her to attack, but once more she blew right past him, and he turned to follow as well, not even noticing the hulking shape of Tomaz and the smaller shape of the Prince making their way down the battlements after them.

There were a dozen guards in all, and the girl dodged each of them, as if she were in a foot race that only she knew about. She reached the door, and turned back to look at the guards as they came running after her, and

threw up her hands in surrender. The guards slowed, all standing in a clump near the door.

Tomaz came up behind them, wielding the large wood piece.

Two of the guards went down before they even knew what was happening, the hard wood smashing into the sides of their helmets and knocking them out. The others turned in alarm and drew their swords, only to be attacked by the girl behind them. In a matter of seconds, all twelve were down, unconscious.

The Prince was at a loss for words. It took him a moment to realize that the girl had turned to the door, but couldn't get it open. He stepped forward and shouldered her out of the way, recognizing the Mages Knot, one of the simple puzzle-combination locks popular with the Most High this year.

"A three year old could open this, you know that?" the Prince said to the girl. He twisted the wooden pegs around in the socket so that they formed a triangle, and pushed. The door swung open on well-oiled hinges, showing another spiral stone staircase, this one leading down.

"Well I'm very grateful we have you around to open all the tricky doors," the girl responded, elbowing her way past him. She turned back to him before descending. "I'll just take care of all the guards. And the rescuing. You know," she smiled sweetly at him, "the manly things."

She turned her back on him and disappeared down the stone staircase. Tomaz followed her quickly, chuckling to himself.

"Bloody Exiles," the Prince muttered under his breath.

At the base of the tower they emerged to find themselves in the same gatehouse the Prince had made his way through on the Path of Light. This time it was free of guards, but contained instead two Searchers, and, in a ridiculous coincidence, the Lord Seeker himself.

The two trios stood staring at each other for a long moment, stunned by the others' presence.

"Bar the doors," the Seeker said.

“I think not,” Tomaz responded. He strode forward and grabbed the man, pulling him away from the other two. Time seemed to slow down, and the Prince felt himself swept forward. He didn’t know what he intended to do, but the rage that had festered in him in that dungeon had taken control, and he was simply acting. Leah had moved toward the other two, but he went straight for the Lord Seeker. He drew an arm back, and punched the man full in the face. Tomaz released him in surprise, and the man went reeling backward, nose crushed flat, before he fell to the floor, unconscious.

There was a stunned silence from all parties, even the Exile girl, and then both Searchers simply turned and fled. Both of the Exiles turned to him with wary looks. When he realized what he’d just done, he realized he was flushed and breathing heavy.

“He threw me in a dungeon,” he said by way of explanation.

The girl looked at Tomaz.

“Okay. We can keep him.”

An arrow shot past the Prince’s nose, and he jumped back with a very un-princely yelp. It thudded into the wooden wall behind him, and he felt a small trickle of blood well up on the bridge of his nose. The shot had been terrific - and fired through the open door to their right.

“Time to go,” the girl said. She disappeared through the door on the left, the one that led back into Banelyn City proper, and the Prince followed quickly behind, as Tomaz just managed to duck through the door without scraping the sides.

They ran quickly through the shadows, hearing the sounds of alarm from all around them. Members of the High Blood began emerging from their houses, some with looks of outrage on their faces, others scared and alarmed. The street lamps, which had been dimmed for the night, were suddenly flaring into unnaturally bright light, and the Prince felt a familiar dread creep through him. His hands began to tingle and his stride became slightly erratic.

“Bloodmages are here,” he gasped at the Exiles as they moved through the shadows of a garden. “We need to leave - now. If I stay close, they’ll be able to feel me the way I can feel people, and they’ll follow me like bloodhounds.”

“We came in over the wall, the way I followed you,” the Exile girl said. The Prince suddenly remembered that night, and how scared he had been of this girl, how certain he had been she was coming to kill him or stop him from reaching the Seeker.

“Were you following me to stop me or to see what I did?”

The girl did not respond.

“Now is not the time for questions,” Tomaz said. “We came in over the wall - is that way still safe?”

The Prince quickly nodded.

“No one should know about it but the Seekers - chances are the guards don’t even know there’s anything more than an abandoned guardhouse up there. I would bet that way is much easier to get through than the gates.”

Immediately, both Exiles turned and ran for the stables, trusting him completely, just as if he’d never betrayed them. For a brief instant, he couldn’t catch his breath, but then he was running just as hard as they were.

Chapter Twelve: Out of Banelyn

They made it easily through the stables as no one had thought to guard them, and then quickly through the hidden door (Tomaz simply threw a shoulder into it and it crumpled inward) and up the wall. Coming down the other side was harder - the Prince was so tired, and the places on his wrists where he had fought his bonds and the metal had dug into the skin quickly began to burn and ache. When he was still a good ten yards above the rooftop, his hands gave out, and he fell backwards. Luckily, Tomaz had gone down first - how he had squeezed into the space, the Prince had no idea, but squeeze he had - and the big man caught him before he tumbled to his death over the side of the building.

From there it was easy work. The guards inside the walls had been alerted, but the Outer City was mostly silent. As the Prince had predicted, they'd all been drawn to the main gates, and the Seeker's Path remained open.

They found their way down to the ground level, and as they passed through the city, they picked out a few pairs of clean Commons clothing, drying on tightly stretched bits of thin rope the Exiles called a clothesline. The Prince, very gratefully, shed his filthy clothing, even his undergarments, and changed them all for fresh cotton replicas. To his surprise, he was quite excited to pull on the new Commons pants and shirt. They certainly weren't his Prince robes, but they were comfortable, and provided good mobility, which would help him in this escape.

"Princeling," Tomaz rumbled.

The Prince turned, and saw the big man was holding a hammer he'd found in an equipment rack. The big man motioned for him to approach, and the Prince did. Tomaz held the Prince's hands over a low stone wall, and deftly swung the hammer once, twice, thrice. There was a loud clatter of metal, and then the shackles fell away, and the Prince was free. For a long moment they all stood, frozen, waiting to see if anyone had heard the noise.

But when no alarm was raised, a hand tapped the Prince on the shoulder, and he turned to see the girl holding up the smaller of the waterskins and a tiny cake of Tomaz's soap.

"Wash those cuts."

"No, I'm fine," the Prince responded.

"Do it," the girl insisted.

"We can do it when we're safe away from here," the Prince insisted, feeling she was being completely unreasonable.

"We can do it now," she said, eyeing him dangerously, "when we don't have Imperials right on top of us. I'm not saving you just so you die in a week from infection."

"We'll have time later."

"Just wash the cuts."

"Make me," the Prince retorted.

"Are you seven? Just wash them!"

"No!"

The girl seized the waterskin, but the Prince refused to let go, and the result was they ended up nose-to-nose glaring at each other.

"Save the foreplay for later," rumbled Tomaz, "we're escaping right now."

A beat passed, and then both of them dropped the skin, which the big man caught and tied to his waist. He turned and vaulted himself over the wall that surrounded the garden, a huge moving patch of darkness, with the Prince and the Exile girl close behind, very pointedly not looking at each other.

They made their way through the Outer City, and circled around to the Roarke road, heading south. The haphazard, rundown backstreets of the Outer City turned once more to wide, smooth paving stones, and their pace picked up. Soon they were past the last houses and shops, and crossing the large grassy area that surrounded the city to the south. A wind sprang up behind them and brought sounds of pursuit - but they were far away now,

and the cries were fading as they left the city. The road began to twist and turn, making its way through a series of small hills. They were all panting for breath now, and the Prince felt as though his heart might fail from sheer exhaustion. But somehow he found the energy to carry on, until they'd gotten far enough away and left the road altogether. Tomaz and the Exile girl slowed then, and the Prince followed them as they headed toward a series of larger hills covered in trees - pine trees. The smell of them came to the Prince, and his mind was cast back to the journey they'd made through the Elmist Mountains. That journey had been defined by his need to escape from the same Exiles who were now his one chance of survival. If he had been more rested, he might have appreciated the irony of the situation.

They came to a stop on a grassy hillside at the tree line of a forest from which they could just see Banelyn in the distance. They stood there for a moment, catching their breath, the Prince barely able to stand. Tomaz disappeared off into the forest, and the Prince took one step to follow and then almost fell to the ground. He wished they still had that horse, even if he had to be tied on to it again. As if in answer to his prayers, Tomaz emerged from the wooded glen leading the very same packhorse the Prince had stolen and taken into the city.

"How ... how?" he asked weakly.

"While she was following you, I followed the horse," Tomaz said simply. "He's a good horse. Wouldn't want to lose him."

While she was following him. After a long moment, the Prince turned to the Exile girl, who was staring out at the distant city.

"I don't know your name," he said bluntly, the fact that he was still trying to catch his breath making his voice more curt and formal than he'd intended. "Tell me your name."

The girl turned to him and raised an eyebrow. The Prince looked at her for a long moment, then swallowed, took a deep breath, and spoke again.

"Would you please tell me your name? I would like to know it."

“I’ve heard that question before somewhere,” she said dryly, “though I vaguely remember being the one to ask it.”

The Prince nodded. And then, on sudden impulse, he took a step forward, drawing the dagger she’d lent him. She tensed, but he ignored that. She had every right to be wary of him – for that matter, she had every right to hit him upside the head and leave him unconscious to meet his fate, the way he’d done to her. But he didn’t strike her with the dagger, as she must have feared – instead, he offered it to her.

“I apologize for the way I acted,” he said. Part of him was watching with disbelief at what he was doing, but the larger part of him felt that this was right. She had saved his life, even though he had given her no reason to. There was honor in this, and justice, in a way that was separate from the laws of the Empire. This was something between the two of them. This was a debt he had to repay – and this was the least he could do to fulfill that obligation.

“Thank you for lending this to me,” he said, holding the dagger up in two hands. “And thank you for coming for me of your own free will.”

He turned and nodded his head to Tomaz.

“Both of you, of course.”

Tomaz nodded and smiled. The Prince turned back to the girl, and watched her face, wondering what her reaction would be. For a long moment she stared at the dagger, and then looked up into his face.

“I don’t either,” she said.

The Prince wondered idly if she had been hit in the head and he hadn’t noticed. He would have wondered harder, but his brain was tired of working, and idle was all he had to work with it at the moment.

“Don’t ... what?” he asked, trying to understand.

“Don’t kill people unless I have to,” she said quietly, piercing him with her green eyes. The Prince drew a sharp breath as he remembered her reaction to him when he had said that. He opened his mouth to respond, but

then shut it. He didn't know what to say, and so, as Tomaz had recommended on the day they'd met, he would say nothing at all.

"We need to move," Tomaz rumbled from behind him. The girl broke her gaze away from him and nodded to Tomaz, then turned back to the Prince.

"Keep the dagger," she said, "you might still need it. We aren't out of this yet."

She began to walk away without answering his original question, and the Prince's heart sank. It was understandable though. He was probably the last person she wanted in her debt. And why would she trust him with her name? He had betrayed her, and so had no right to know her. He slid the dagger into the belt of his borrowed clothing and looked out at the city again, trying to hide his disappointment.

"Leah," she said.

He turned back around, and saw that she was still facing away from him, her back tensed in a way that told him the answer had come on its own, slipping unrehearsed through clenched teeth and iron jaw.

"My name is Leah Goldwyn."

The Prince swallowed to work moisture into his throat before responding.

"Thank you, Leah Goldwyn, for saving my life. I am in your debt."

As he fell silent, she made her way to the horse. The Prince turned to Tomaz.

"And thank you also, Tomaz. I am in your debt as well. Thrice over, it would appear."

Tomaz inclined his head solemnly, accepting the Prince's statement. The big man's eyes followed him as he turned once more to look out at the city.

"You were telling the truth," the Prince said blankly. "And this time there can be no doubt. The Seeker told me, before he locked me away. Told me everything about the assassination, about what my...."

He fell silent, the line of thought trailing off, as what he had meant to say hung in the air, whole and complete even though he hadn't finished it: *about what my Mother had commanded*. He felt more than saw the Exiles exchange a glance. After a moment of tension, the Prince heard Leah clear her throat noisily.

"Come on," she said, the barest hint of softness creeping into her voice. She cleared her throat again, roughly this time, as the Prince turned back toward them, his eyes focused on the ground.

"We won't be alone for long," she said. "Word will go out soon and we'll be followed. No doubt they're still investigating the Inner City, assuming we couldn't get past the gates. But eventually they'll realize we escaped, or that Seeker will wake up and put the pieces together. I think we can anticipate scouting parties within the hour, though I don't think they'll range very far from the city initially. We need to get far away from Banelyn, get around the western side of Lake Chartain, and disappear into the wilderness for a while. They never patrol alone - there's always three groups that - "

It was Tomaz who cleared his throat this time, and she broke off, pink spots of emotion appearing on her cheeks. The Prince had the distinct feeling she was eternally grateful when Tomaz looked away. He understood: she was uneasy, and coping for it by talking too much about things that didn't need to be discussed.

"We'll leave once we've caught our breath," the big man said to her. Leah began to move off, but suddenly went down on one knee with a low moan of pain. The Prince moved toward her in alarm, but it was Tomaz who reached her first and calmly picked her up and brought her back into the center of the tangled den of trees with a look of fond concern.

"What happened?" the Prince asked, unable to keep a note of fear from his voice.

"Concerned for me, princeling?"

The Prince, despite the teasing tone of her voice, reached out through the Raven Talisman and felt for her life -

- swirls of green and silver light - the sound of steel cutting silk - the silent second after a symphony ends - the smell of newly trodden dust - old pain - grim laughter, quiet wonder -

He pulled back; she was whole ...wounded she might be, but she was strong and would recover. He looked her over completely, and saw a small patch of blood on her side. The big man saw it at the same time and spoke.

"Ribs?" Tomaz asked her, quietly.

"Surface slice," she said, "just need a stitch or two."

"Then we'll do it now," he said, in a voice that brooked no argument. "We are far enough away to spend the next few hours here. They need to finish searching the city and the surrounding towns before they come for us. And if we're lucky, Trudy will send them north for a time."

"Trudy?" the Prince asked.

"The Seekers aren't the only ones who have contacts throughout the Empire," Tomaz rumbled quietly.

"Fine - but only if the princeling washes those cuts on his wrists. And binds them too - tightly. Check the older wounds too - make sure they're healing."

The Prince nodded, watching her closely. They locked eyes again, and after a moment Leah nodded too. They slowly made their way further into the woods, Tomaz helping Leah when she needed it, and soon came on a woven thicket created out of a large grove of trees and bushes that had grown together, creating a natural, living cave. The three of them managed to prod the horse through the briars, where they found the second horse, Tomaz's charger, already tied to a tree, cropping the grass. Tomaz quickly backtracked to cover up their trail, and then they unrolled some blankets and collapsed on the hard ground. Tomaz went to his pack, moving quickly but with a calm assurance. He threw a second blanket to the Prince as he pulled out a needle and thread and began a small fire to heat water.

"Wash those cuts quickly and then get some sleep," he said. "I will wake you when it is time to move."

Like an automaton, the Prince took the small cake of soap and the waterskin and scrubbed his wrists before wrapping them in strips of cloth. He pulled up his shirt to check the wounds he'd received fighting the Death Watchmen and saw they were healing into fine, puckered lines. He then dropped the soap and skin next to the saddlebags, and curled up in the blanket at the base of a large gnarled oak tree, and fell into a dark, dreamless, sleep.

When he woke again, feeling warm and comfortable, a glowing heat pressing against the side of his body, he wondered distantly where he was. Slowly, very slowly, he opened his eyes.

Above him was a canopy of branches that formed a tight web. He turned his head and saw Tomaz stroking a fire. He tried to rise, but his body decided not to obey him, and he fell back down again.

"Rest while you can, princeling," Tomaz said without looking up. "You've been asleep for barely an hour. We have time yet before we have to move, and we have a long journey ahead of us. Best to rest as much as possible."

"Aren't we being pursued?" the Prince asked, alarmed. "Why did you light a fire? Won't they be able to track us by the smoke?"

Tomaz grinned and shook his head, and then held a finger to his lips. The Prince fell silent and listened ... and heard soft rain falling outside their small living cave. The canopy of trees above them was so tightly woven that none of the water was falling around them.

"Clouds rolled in while you slept, and the wind is blowing more south in our direction. Besides, soon we will be followed in earnest no matter what we do, and there will be no chance for the comfort of a fire. I thought it would be best for us all to have a small one while we still could."

The Prince sat for a moment, wrapped in the blanket, and then with a sudden deliberateness managed to stand. Tomaz looked at him quizzically. Determinedly, the Prince walked forward and sat down at the fire across from the big man. He heard Tomaz sigh.

“So much hardness,” he rumbled sadly, “so much effort to cover up your pain instead of letting it flow as it is meant to.”

“I’m not in pain,” the Prince said firmly. He was proud his voice didn’t shake.

“You are in pain,” Tomaz contradicted with the same indescribable sadness in his voice, “and that makes me frightened for you.”

“You do not need to be frightened for me,” the Prince said, his voice formal and stiff. “But your concern is noted, and I thank you.”

Tomaz stood and rounded the fire. The Prince watched him out of his peripheral vision as he was trained to do. Watch without giving the impression of watching, his sister Dysuna had always told him. The big man stopped next to the Prince, and lowered himself to the ground to sit next to him. The Prince tensed as if expecting a blow, and the move did not go unnoticed.

“Too much hardness can kill you, princeling,” the Exile said.

“Hardness does not kill you,” the Prince responded, reciting by rote what he had been told since birth. “Weakness is death, feeling is death. Life happens to you, and you cannot change what has happened. You harden yourself, and eventually you feel nothing – and then you cannot be challenged. You cannot be defeated. You cannot -”

The Prince’s throat seized up and he broke off.

“You don’t think it is hard to be weak?” Tomaz asked quietly.

The Prince opened his mouth to respond, but shut it again with a snap.

“You do not agree that it is difficult to be weak? It was difficult for me to learn to be weak, that much I can tell you.”

The man was a small mountain. He – weak? The Prince found the idea laughable.

“You are not weak,” the Prince scoffed, “don’t think that I can be caught off guard by simple lies.”

The Prince realized that he was being curt and surly for no reason, that his good humor of barely an hour ago had somehow dried up and disappeared. Why was he acting this way?

“What need do I have to lie to you?” Tomaz asked, quietly, insistently.

“Because you’re an Exile,” the Prince snapped back, rising to his feet. “You’ve rebelled against your true rulers, you’ve sworn to overthrow the very Empire that provides safety and stability to the common man – you’re a criminal! Criminals lie.”

The Prince moved swiftly to the opposite side of the fire, and looked out into the thicket of trees, not wanting to see the Exile.

“A criminal who has saved your life,” Tomaz said.

A chill ran up the Prince’s back. What was he trying to say here? Was he trying to blackmail the Prince? With a surge of adrenaline he spun and looked down at the big man, still seated by the fire, and drew himself up to his full height, expecting Tomaz to be sitting there with a sinister smile, waiting to capitalize on his debt.

But what the Prince saw, a bluff, honest, kind man, deflated his anger and righteousness. Suddenly, his vision went hazy, and he had to look down at the ground.

His siblings would never have come to his rescue even once. Tomaz had saved him three times now, once even nursed him back to health in the middle of the Empire where he was a wanted man.

Help is a sign of weakness, weakness a sign of unworthiness. His Mother would never have come to....

The Prince’s mind blanked out before he could finish the treasonous thought. He began to count the leaves under his feet, and narrowed his hearing in on the cracking and popping sounds of the fire, unable to face his thoughts and so seeking mercy in the simplicity of sensation.

“You are not weak because you needed help. You are not weak because you are grateful,” the insistent rumbling voice said. The Prince

shrugged his shoulders as if he could throw off the voice like it was an irritating fly, nothing more.

“I know I am not weak,” the Prince said.

“You are not listening to me,” the big voice said. “You are not weak because you needed help. You are not weak because you are grateful.”

“You already said that. I know this. I’ve already acknowledged my debt.”

But the Prince couldn’t look Tomaz in the face. He continued to stare at the ground, trying to count leaves, trying to set his mind on autopilot, trying to stop himself from thinking. Thinking and feeling.

“Of course,” Tomaz said. “But you are not weak because you needed help. You are not weak because you are grateful.”

The Prince coughed to clear his throat, and felt an arm wrap around his shoulders.

“There you go,” the big man said, “there you go.”

And then the Prince was crying. Tears ran down his face, and silent sobs wracked his body. His forehead was buried in the big man’s enormous chest and hands bigger than the Prince’s head were patting him gently on the back, ruffling his hair with calm affection.

“I t-ried so hard,” he choked out, the words coming through a throat almost closed up with the emotion he had tried so hard to contain. “I d-did what th-they expected of me, at l-least I t-ried, but t-they st-st-still didn’t w-want me - ”

At this point, he could say no more, and he broke down into sobs that shook his entire body. He clung to Tomaz as he had never been allowed to cling to another human being in his life – as he had never let himself cling to another human being.

“I know,” was all Tomaz said, “I know. I know.”

The Prince didn’t know how long they stood there, at the edge of the fire, but eventually he became aware of the quiet in the air around them, punctured only by the pattering sound of falling rain. Suddenly he felt

suffocated by the big man's nearness and pushed away abruptly, walking around the fire, trying to put something between the two of them. He felt eyes on him and he reluctantly turned again to look at Tomaz.

The big man was looking at him with a strange curiosity, as if something he hadn't anticipated had just taken place, something that had kindled a fire in his small black eyes, and left an earnest look of affection on his face.

"Why don't you take a name?" the big man rumbled.

The Prince immediately felt himself close back up again, tensing, shutting down. He looked away with a sharp twist of his head, and when he looked back Tomaz was now staring into the fire, as if it was only a friendly question. He seemed just as interested in following the shifting, changing flames as he did in the Prince's answer. As the silence lengthened, Tomaz looked back up at the Prince politely. Chips of dark black stone – not eyes. But there was a light in them – a light that was greater than the reflection of the fire.

"I have no name," the Prince said finally. He was surprised to find that the pride was gone from the statement; there was no defiance in it now. He supposed Tomaz would have seen through it in any case.

"You sound sad," the big man replied bluntly.

"I have no name," the Prince repeated wryly. It felt strange to talk about this. Why had he brought the subject up? Was he trying to convince the Prince of something?

"Neither did I," said Tomaz, "when I left the Fortress."

"What?"

Tomaz, still staring calmly into the fire, reached up and slowly undid his cloak, removed his shirt, and then the ties holding his breastplate on. These he gently laid to the side, and then he removed his leather jerkin, and finally a close-fit woven tunic to leave him bare-chested. He rose, his enormous muscles rippling in the firelight, and turned his back on the Prince.

Involuntarily, the Prince recoiled and drew in a sharp breath. Spreading across Tomaz's shoulders and back was an enormous seven-pointed star, tattooed in blue and white ink with sparkling diamond flecks that shimmered and shone in the reflected light of the fire.

It was the sign of a Blade Master, the most elite force of Fortress Guardians. Guardians were never seen outside of the Fortress unless they were in the presence of the Children, and Blade Masters were rarely ever seen outside of the company of the Empress herself unless it was for a mission of utmost importance that could be entrusted to no one else.

"How ... how?" the Prince managed to get out. It was the last thing he had expected: to find the most glorious and feared symbol of the Empire's power here among the trees and wilderness, so far from the Fortress. It left his mind reeling.

"I left the Fortress nearly twenty years ago now, give or take a few," the Exile said. He began to pull his tunic back over his head, calmly and with his customary assurance of movement. The same flowing movement the Prince had seen all of his life among the Guardians of the Fortress. How had he so easily dismissed that before?

"I had been a member of the Guard for five years before I was given a Summons to enter the presence of the Empress herself."

Five years? thought the Prince in amazement. It was unheard of for a Guardian to be summoned that soon. There were precious few who were summoned before they had served ten years, maybe even fifteen.

"When I came into the throne room, my superiors were there, and every Blade Master then living. I was invited forward, told to kneel before the Empress by her Hand, and then she laid a single finger on my forehead."

He seated himself again by the fire, once more fully dressed.

"I was told later that what she did was called delving, that she was examining me for the qualities of a Blade Master. All I remember was her nodding, and then I was given over to the Blade Masters, who took me and tested me themselves. Seven days of testing."

The big man paused and a grimace passed over his face. The Prince couldn't imagine what had been terrible enough of a test to make this man cringe at the memory, but he had heard rumors of the testing and knew that some did not survive it.

"I passed, though I felt at the time I would rather have failed. It would have been less painful. My first assignment came soon after. I was the star pupil of the elder Blade Masters, and they gave the assignment to me so that I could prove myself in the eyes of the Empress."

He paused for a moment, and his face darkened.

"The assignment was an assassination, of a man living in Lucien not too far outside the Fortress."

Assassination? Why would they give that to a Guardian? Assassinations were carried out by the Death Watchmen, and as far as the Prince had known, by them alone.

"As you'd guess, I was surprised, but as I was then I did not question it. If the Empress and my fellow Blade Masters believed the assignment important, then it was important. I was told that it was a matter of security for the Fortress, that this man had uncovered secrets that were dangerous to the Empire, and that the man himself was too dangerous for even the Death Watch to deal with. I did my job too well - I killed the man before he even knew I was there. Perhaps if I had let him speak, I would have realized my error sooner and prevented a tragedy.

"For weeks, something did not sit right with me. I was short tempered, I became angry at the servants, I felt uneasy about my actions. So, using my newly acquired rank as Blade Master, I went and discovered the truth of the man's crime."

Pain and harshness entered his voice.

"It was no crime, not at all. Not to me at least."

He gazed out over the fire into the memory of that day, reliving it there by the fireside. Deep lines of sorrow and regret settled over his face, and the

Prince saw then the Blade Master that Tomaz had been, saw it in his empty stare, and his loss of laughter.

“I had sworn to protect the safety of the Empress, and through her the Empire and the stability of the Diamond Throne. I was perfectly suited to the role of a Guardian. And what was more, unlike many I was convinced of the rightness of the cause. The justice.”

He turned his head to look at the Prince.

“I was wrong. It was not justice that I performed, but injustice. The things I have seen, the things I have had explained to me that the Empress and the Children have done, that the Empire allows to happen ...”

Words seemed to fail him, and the pain turned to anger.

“When I left the Fortress, I was detected and followed. I killed the men following me, and soon I was pursued by those who had once been my sworn brothers. For weeks, I fought my way across the Empire, running and hiding, and fighting when I needed to. In the end, I was found nearly dead by the Exiled Kindred. They took me in, hid me from the Empire. I didn’t join them at first; I was too blinded by my old prejudices. But soon I saw that what the Empire had claimed to be, the Kindred actually were. They kept me safe from the Order, which to this day maintains that I am dead. That I must be, for they failed to find me in the end.

“My name was taken from me during the flight. The Empress renounced me, and it was then that I almost gave up and lost hope. I still cannot remember myself as that person, for, as you know, once a name is taken, no one can remember it much less say it. But in the end, once enough time had passed, I took a new name, one that I chose for myself. I chose a new name, and I chose a new path, not one that I was selected for, but one I selected for myself.”

His gaze turned to the Prince.

“You are freed from the Children and the Empress. It is your choice what to do now. Your choice, and yours alone.”

It was a long time before the Prince spoke.

“You speak as if I am no longer one of the Children.”

“I do,” was the response. Simple as it was, it spoke volumes.

“They are my family,” the Prince whispered.

“Your family,” Tomaz responded, “in name and blood alone. They have severed their ties with you, regardless of your wishes. And now you are free to choose your own life, to choose your own family. To choose who and what you wish to be.”

The Prince remained silent for a long moment, and then seated himself by the fireside next to the unconscious form of Leah. Her words came back to him.

“Not with this curse around my neck,” he said quietly, fingering the black marks over his shoulders through the cotton of his shirt.

“It is only a curse if you believe it to be,” the big man rumbled. He rose to his feet, circled the fire, and draped one of the extra blankets over the Prince’s shoulders. The ex-Blade Master’s rough hands were surprisingly gentle.

“Now sleep,” he said. “We have a long day ahead of us. I will wake you when we need to leave.”

“I thought you said I was free to make my own choices,” the Prince said with a wry smile.

“Only when I say you can,” came the sardonic, rumbling retort.

The Prince sat staring into the fire for a while, his mind turning over the conversation and the Exile’s story, as Tomaz settled himself once more on the other side of the fire.

“Free,” he whispered to himself. His mind returned to his daydreams in the Fortress, where he had imagined what it would be like to go to the places where the sun shone and the wind blew. Where things were green and water flowed in rivers.

“Free,” he said again, tasting the word as he said it, trying to understand how it felt in his mouth, how it felt to say it. The implications ...

The Prince looked over at Tomaz and spoke openly.

“I have no chosen path, no way forward ... it’s terrifying.”

“Freedom always is.”

Chapter Thirteen: The Most Loyal Friend

The next few days found the three companions riding south at a breakneck speed, the Prince on Trudger, the name of the packhorse, and Tomaz and Leah doubled up on the black charger Malial. After they had gone far and long and still seen no sign of pursuit, Tomaz began to circle behind to check their back trail, and it became clear that they were far ahead of any chasing force. When it rained again the day after, hard and long, they were all confident that they were temporarily safe, all the more so because the Prince had reached through the Raven Talisman and confirmed that they were very much alone in the wilderness. They were far from the Roarke Road, and therefore far from any common travelers. After that, they slowed their pace, and the Prince lost track of time.

In space, they were traveling through the heavily forested lands south of Banelyn and west of Formaux, moving farther south toward Lake Chartain, the largest inland body of water in the Empire of Lucia. He knew, vaguely, how long it would take to make that journey via the main roads, but they weren't taking the main roads because those were sure to be patrolled by soldiers of the Empire. So the usual number of weeks was bound to double or even triple, stretching into months. The Prince knew that there were small towns up and down the roads, some large enough to hold as many as twenty or thirty families. Each town this size had a garrison of Defenders, the common foot soldiers of the Empire known throughout Lucia for their zealotry, and it was the responsibility of each garrison to patrol the roads a full day's ride in all directions. And, as both the Exiles and the Prince were aware, there were enough towns between Banelyn and Roarke that this meant, generally speaking, there would be a patrol every few miles, and after their escape from Banelyn they had little doubt that all such garrisons were looking for them.

Ironically, as Leah pointed out to him with a smirk, it was the Prince's fault they couldn't travel the main roads. Two exiles being hunted was not an

uncommon thing, and they were trained in and accustomed to passing unnoticed and had many times before. But the Prince of Ravens was much easier to recognize, even if the specific details of his identity hadn't been relayed, and so they were forced to stay as far from civilization as possible.

"I doubt the Empress would want everyone to know that one of the Children is being hunted," Tomaz had said as they discussed the topic.

"Agreed," Leah said. "I think it's most likely that they are calling him a renegade Bloodmage. It's easy to mistake the marks on his back that way, and no doubt it would be taken very seriously. What do you think?"

After a long span of silence, the Prince, currently walking beside Trudger, looked up over the horse's back and saw the girl looking at him expectantly.

"Oh," he said. "I think they'd see right through that."

He said it so bluntly, that for a moment they both stared at him. And then Tomaz threw his head back and roared with laughter.

"Be quiet!" Leah told him, cheeks burning. "What if someone hears you?"

The big man continued to laugh, but he did quiet down. Well, as much as the huge bear of a man *could* quiet down considering that the sounds he was making still seemed to vibrate the Prince from the crown of his head to the soles of his feet.

"I'm sorry," the Prince said, the words still foreign to him, but persistently giving them a try. "I didn't mean to be so frank - I didn't realize you were speaking to me."

"It's fine," the Exile girl said hotly, "what do you think they'll say?"

The Prince considered for a moment, and as he did, Tomaz's laughter died out and they found themselves once more in the silence of the forest.

"I think they'll keep as much of the truth as possible," he said. "I should think they will describe me as ... an Exile. One who had impersonated a member of the Most High - perhaps even I will be described as a renegade house player who has committed treason. Such things are taken very

seriously - a reward would be attached that would inspire all Most High houses to pursue me arduously in the hopes that I end up being a son of an enemy house that they could..."

The Prince looked back at Leah and Tomaz and saw them both watching him. He cleared his throat and carried on.

"In any case, both of your descriptions will no doubt be circulated, as will mine."

"None of them got a good enough look at us to describe us perfectly," Leah protested, "besides, we were in those Seeker robes...."

She trailed off as she saw the Prince shaking his head.

"We ran into the Lord Seeker," he said. When he saw they didn't understand, he realized that he sometimes gave them too much credit - they seemed to know so much about the inner workings of the Empire that when they didn't know something that seemed like an obvious piece of information, it took him by surprise.

"Full Seekers of Truth are trained to have perfect recall," the Prince explained. "They're trained to remember everything they see and hear, as their job is such that they need to be able to remember every little detail. And the Lord Seeker saw us."

The Prince had to give the Exiles some credit - as they absorbed this piece of information they remained admirably stoic. Anyone else who had just heard that one of the leaders of the most feared organization in the entire Empire would know them on sight as rebel outlaws would probably have reacted in a different way. The Prince assumed screaming and cowering in fear would be the most common, though begging and pleading things such as "say it isn't so!" were no doubt close behind.

The Exiles, however, just seemed annoyed.

"So he knows exactly what we look like - and you think he's - what - made sketches and sent them to the garrisons of Defenders?"

"Yes, actually," the Prince said.

"Oh. Well. Okay."

“Though I think the most important part is that there will no doubt be a bounty attached to our heads,” he continued, watching them carefully for their reactions. “I agree with Tomaz in that the specific details of my identity will be kept a secret, but I think that it will be alluded to heavily that I’m an Exile spy, a treasonous member of the High Blood who passed along important information. That will certainly get the Defenders riled up. As for the bounties, I assume mine will be significant, because, as the Seeker mentioned, I’m now wanted alive. For you two, the price will be high as well no doubt, but likely they are only seeking you to find me.”

“Unless that Seeker can connect us with our former lives,” Tomaz mused idly. “I suppose the price would be higher then.”

The Prince was astounded - the big man hadn’t spoken with any bit of fear at all. Only a thoughtful kind of speculation.

“Yes,” the Prince said, unsure what else to say.

“Shadows and fire,” Leah cursed suddenly, and the Prince looked at her, somehow feeling more comfortable that she at least was showing fear about this whole situation.

“That means we probably won’t be able to get any supplies, will we?”

The Prince found himself utterly flabbergasted. She was worried about supplies?

“We’ll have to go the long way around too,” Tomaz said, looking terribly glum. “Swamps ... gaaah I hate swamps. Pesky little bugs all over the place ... fuegh ... ”

“Don’t you two understand?”

Both Exiles looked at him in surprise. The Prince cleared his throat and looked down, trying to contain a further outburst.

“I apologize,” the word caught in his throat again, but he persevered, “but don’t you understand that this is one of the deadliest men in the entire Empire? That now he has a personal vendetta against the two of you? He will no doubt have sketches made and circulated, not just to garrisons along the Roarke Road, but to other Seeker cells throughout the Empire. Bounty

hunters and even common Defenders will have your images branded into their minds by the amount of money that is being offered for the three of us taken together. There will be no place for you to go to ground. No matter where you go, no matter what town, what city, you will be recognized, and likely killed in your sleep! This is not a matter to be taken lightly!”

Tomaz and Leah exchanged a look, as if asking “do you want to take this, or shall I?” The Prince felt his ire rise - here he was, trying to be helpful and concerned for their well-being, and all they did was treat him like a child who was scared of the bogeyman!

But before he could speak and vent his spleen at them, Tomaz held up a hand and the Prince held his tongue.

“Before you start having a fit, let me explain. Twenty years ago, I was a member of the Guardians. A Blade Master.”

Leah looked at him, alarmed, but he forestalled her.

“No no, it’s okay, I told him when we were camped outside Banelyn.”

She relaxed about half an inch, still watching the Prince and Tomaz intensely, but Tomaz paid it no mind and continued speaking.

“I’m nearly eight feet tall,” he said with bluff candor. “I think in these boots I might actually be that and a little more. In any case, I’m not easy to miss. There have been pictures of me in every town, village, city, and hamlet, for nearly two decades. Hell, there’s even a legend about me up in the Port of Valour. It’s a good one too. Someday we’ll have to go, just so you can hear it from one of the fisherfolk yourself.”

He was grinning from ear to ear, but then he looked at Leah, who was very seriously frowning back at him, and he gruffly cleared his throat and rumbled on.

“The point is all of the Exiled Kindred who serve as Rogues or Rangers have bounties on their heads and sketches made of them to be put on garrison walls. This may be Leah’s first, but I doubt it. She made a bit of a name for herself up north when we were in Tyne last year.”

He smiled wickedly at her, and for some reason she blushed furiously.

“What do you mean?” the Prince asked curiously.

“Well, it involved a very fashionable dress and two or three young men
_”

“Well, that’s enough talk,” the girl said, “let’s get moving.”

And with that, she jumped up on the stallion’s back and spurred Malial on ahead, and, though he seemed rather annoyed to have anyone but Tomaz giving him orders, the warhorse obliged and she was soon lost in the trees.

The next few weeks passed just like that. They would talk from time to time, about this or that, and the Exiles continued to dismiss the Prince’s fears as irrelevant, and as time passed and they saw not a single soul, the Prince fell silent and let it rest.

During the journey he began to learn small details about them, things that prior to captivity he never would have cared about. Such as that Tomaz liked lavender. They had passed a clump of it on the journey, and the big man had let out such a bellow that both Leah and the Prince had turned around and unsheathed their daggers, ready for battle, when they saw the big man jump off Malial and lumber over to the purple blooms. Leah had found this hilarious, and actually began to roll about on the ground with laughter. The Prince began to chuckle as well ... and then he was laughing full out with her, and so was Tomaz, who had taken some of the plant and stuck it behind his ears, holding double handfuls to his nose and inhaling deeply.

It felt good to travel with the two Exiles, the Prince had to admit to himself. True, the fare was nothing grand, mostly what Leah and Tomaz caught and harvested along the way to supplement the supply of cheese and herbs they’d restocked in Banelyn, but there was a strange, peaceful quality to the woods that caught the Prince by surprise. It was a kind of isolation, a serenity that he had never before encountered. The summer was fading slowly into autumn, and as it did the mornings got chiller and fog would roll in at night to cover even the tallest of the tall trees - redwoods, like Tomaz

had shown him in the Elmist Mountains - leaving them wrapped in a cocoon of silence.

The cold was too much for the Prince the first few days, as they built no fire so as to risk not even the slightest chance of pursuit, and even with the extra blanket he could only curl into a ball and shiver through the night. But after they were sure they'd lost any pursuit, they'd begun to make small fires, and the nights had been easier to bear. Additionally, the first deer Tomaz had seen was quickly brought down, gutted, skinned, and over a few days transformed by a mysterious process the Prince could neither explain nor fully comprehend: the hide was stretched, scraped, painted with some foul smelling stew made of various rendered animal parts, and left to dry attached to the back of Malial's saddle, extending out past his rump like a strange sail. When it was done, Tomaz presented it to the Prince, and told him it was a coat, if he could make it into one.

"I did the prep work, since I enjoy doing it," the big man rumbled, "but the sewing is up to you. You can make it long, you can make it short, full sleeve, no sleeve, whatever you'd like. I've got a couple more scraps of hide in one of the packs if you need anything, and of course I have plenty of thread. So figure it out and make yourself a coat."

"I'm looking forward to seeing how this turns out," Leah said, and they both turned to see her bringing in wood for that night's fire, a smirk on her face.

"Don't listen to her," Tomaz said to him a quiet, conspiratorial whisper, "she's just worried your first coat will be better than hers was."

The Prince had spent the entire rest of the night trying to figure out how he felt about this interaction, and the unexpected gift of a deer hide. For the next few days he simply kept the hide as it was, wrapping it around him as he walked or rode Trudger like a robe or a cape. But soon he started having ideas about what he could make with it ... how he could add a hood to make a new cloak, or cut a pattern to make a shirt ... and he almost broke down.

He didn't know why exactly. All he knew was that something about the hide had solidified for him the realization that his life had been changed forever. Here he was, traveling through a forest with two outlaws, a hunted man, unshaven, unwashed, smelling like some dead animal, unable to return to his family, completely lost to everything and anything that had ever held meaning for him. He had no goal, no destination, he was simply moving to move, traveling with Tomaz and Leah because they were the two who had rescued him, and yes they were fine, but they weren't anyone important, they weren't people who could fix the situation he was in, they were just two people, two EXILES, how had he ever gotten himself into this situation, what was it that he had done - done - he needed to figure out what he had done and return to his Mother, the EMPRESS, the ruler of Lucia. He needed to return to her good favor; she was Life and Light and Salvation to all who believed in her and if only he could find a way to show her he was sorry, show her that he was still worthy; he needed to be penitent, needed to humble himself, accept his faults and go back, and if he died, if she needed him dead, then that was what was needed, because the good of the Empire was what concerned her, and if the Empire was better off with him dead, better off with someone more worthy wearing the Raven Talisman about their shoulders, better off without him - WITHOUT HIM! - then fine, he'd give up - give up and let it all end that way so he could just -

SLAP!

The Prince's head rang like a bell, and stars exploded across his vision as Leah struck him clean across the face.

"Stop it," she said, as calmly as if saying good morning.

Red, the deep, nauseating color of blood, clouded the Prince's vision, and he felt rage rise up in him. It was one thing to strike him in combat, but to strike him in such a way, unprovoked - that he would not let go.

He launched himself at the girl, bearing her to the ground with him. He thought he saw a brief look of surprise cross her face, but then he didn't

care, because he was pummeling every inch of her that he could reach, with fists, knees, anything at all.

An enormous hand grabbed him by the scruff of the neck and pulled him backward, up into the air.

“That’s enough of that, I think.”

The Prince, surprised to suddenly find himself dangling several feet off the ground, shot a murderous glare at Tomaz, and then refocused on Leah, lying on the ground with a trickle of blood coming from her lower lip.

“You slapped me! Shadows and light, I was just going along and then she slapped me, Tomaz! By the Empress, what do you want from me? She hit me! I may not be a Prince anymore, but I bloody well deserve the right to hit someone back when they hit me first!”

Tomaz looked at Leah, who was slowly getting up. The Prince saw, to mingled feelings of relief and anger, that she wasn’t much hurt. He’d been so blindingly angry that all he’d really done was knock her to the ground and give her a good amount of bruises. She winced once, and the Prince saw her grab her side, and he felt a moment of triumph. Good! That’s what she deserved!

“What did you do that for, Eshendai?” The big man sounded more resigned and exasperated than curious, but he waited for the girl to respond.

“He was going to a dark place,” the girl said. “Had to snap him out of it.”

“What is that supposed to mean?” the Prince retorted. “I can think whatever the bloody burning shadow-cursed hells I want!”

“A noble thought, Eshendai,” Tomaz said wryly, “but did you really have to slap him? You never take the subtle approach to anything, do you?”

“I remember you helping me in a very similar way once, Tomaz,” Leah said to the big man. “He was closing off.”

Tomaz eyed the Prince, still held by the scruff of his neck in the air, and then slowly lowered him so his feet were touching the ground again.

“Once I let you go, you will let her be. She struck you, you struck her back. You’re even. If you attempt to hurt her anymore, then I can and will tie you back to the horse. In case the two of you don’t remember,” he shot a look at Leah as well, “we’re being hunted by nearly everyone in the thrice-damned Empire. Likely they’ve recruited even their grandmothers to keep a lookout and cane us should we pass by. So let’s try and be good boys and girls who don’t fight too much between ourselves, yes?”

The Prince scowled at the big man, but when Tomaz raised an eyebrow, giving his no-nonsense expression, the Prince swallowed his anger and nodded.

Tomaz let go of him, and the Prince took a deep breath before turning to face the girl.

“Why did you strike me?”

“Because you were starting to think about going back,” she said, watching him closely, her look daring him to contradict her. “You were thinking that maybe if you just went back, and even if you let them punish you and kill you, at least you’d be going back and doing the right thing, the thing that was best for everyone, the thing that was best for the Empire. That maybe it would even be easier, because at least then you wouldn’t be hunted. Right?”

The Prince felt chills go up and down his back, and also the heat of embarrassment and shame, knowing that she had guessed his thoughts.

“How did you know?” he asked, his voice coming out a little mumbled and sullen.

“Because I went through the same thing,” she said. Her eyes clouded over for a moment, and then cleared again. “And the only thing that ever brought me out of it was when Tomaz cuffed me upside the head for almost getting him killed.”

“You hit her?” the Prince asked, a little unbelieving.

“Hit might not be the right word,” Leah said dryly. “As I remember it, he clocked me so hard I flew ten feet through the air and hit a tree.”

A rumble-chuckle came from the big man, who clearly remembered the incident. Leah took a step forward, and pointed a finger dagger-like at the Prince's chest.

"Use your anger. Cling to it. Let all of the other emotions get burned up in it. It is the most loyal friend you will ever have. It will *always* take your side, and it will never leave you helpless. Hold it close. Don't let it go. When you feel shame or guilt, or anything at all, burn it in anger. Focus in on a single point, and feed the emotions, one by one, into the flame, until your mind is clear, and you can think again."

"Anger is not useful," the Prince protested. "Anger clouds your mind."

"So does shame, and guilt, and self-pity," she said, taking another step forward, only an arms distance away now, speaking slowly and emphatically. "So use your anger to conquer those, and once you do, then you can worry about conquering the anger."

The Prince was silent. He didn't know how he felt about this ... didn't know if he believed such a thing could really help. The silence stretched, and finally the girl looked him up and down, seemed to decide that that was the best she could do, and walked away. The three of them began to move again, all of them on foot to save the horses' strength for when it was needed. The girl pulled farther ahead, taking point, and the Prince found himself walking beside Tomaz, each of them leading one of the horses.

For a long time, they were both silent, and then the Prince spoke:

"What did you do, Tomaz? After you made it to the Kindred and you knew that, for a time at least, you were safe."

"I drank. Heavily."

The Prince looked at the big man in surprise. That was quite possibly the last thing he would have expected from the man he had come to know. Tomaz saw him looking and nodded.

"Morning, noon and night, the Kindred knew where to find me. I made a makeshift lean-to out in the woods and spent my days drunk as a daisy."

“No matter how many times you say it, that still doesn’t make sense,” Leah called lightly from up ahead. The big man and the slight girl exchanged smiles as she looked over her shoulder. Tomaz shook his head and chuckled wearily.

“It wasn’t until General Goldwyn found me and told me the same thing I told Leah, the same thing she just told you, that I was able to find myself again. You can only blame yourself for so much, only take so much on your shoulders, before you start taking on the problems of the whole world. General Goldwyn and I didn’t agree at first.”

Here Tomaz paused briefly and smiled to himself in a decidedly dark and unpleasant fashion.

“I remember quite distinctly trying to club him to death for telling me what to do with my life. But he stuck with it, and took time each day to come to me and speak with me. Me, nothing more than an ex-Guardian. An Exile. It didn’t occur to me until later that anyone is only ever an Exile by their own choice. The title is just something given to you, a name that you learn to let go of.”

The Prince didn’t know how he felt about this, and his face must have shown his thoughts, for Tomaz held up his hands in mock defense.

“Don’t worry, I’m not trying to turn you,” the big man rumbled, smiling. “You asked what helped me get through it, and I’m simply telling you.”

The Prince nodded, but said nothing.

They lapsed into silence for the next few days, barely speaking more than a word to each other, each lost in their own thoughts. Every morning when the Prince woke up he reached through the Talisman and felt the surrounding forest for signs of pursuit, but no matter how far he reached, he felt nothing but the muted background of forest life.

One day when he opened his eyes and let go of the Talisman, he found the girl watching him. For a moment she just looked at him, and then she spoke:

“Anyone following us?”

The Prince hesitated before responding, trying to see if she was going to mock him, or in some way degrade him for using the Talisman. But she looked simply curious.

“No,” he responded. “There hasn’t been anyone since we left Banelyn.”

“I’m not surprised,” she responded casually. “This is the kind of area only very dedicated hunters or foresters come to. We’re lucky, in spring and early summer this forest is downright homey. But during winter and autumn, it’s miserable. Either covered entirely in snow, or else pouring buckets and buckets of rain down on your head. We caught it right on the cusp, and if we’re lucky we’ll be around Lake Chartain before the rains really get here.”

The Prince slowly realized that she was trying to have a genuine conversation with him, and was so taken aback that he spoke hastily. He had heard of such things: talking about the weather was a way the Commons apparently passed time.

“Oh - you - yeah. Yeah, the weather is good. I hope it holds.”

A brief smile crossed her face, and he felt his cheeks burn. But she made no comment, only continued the conversation.

“Indeed. By the time we get to Lake Chartain we should run into a few more people. That area is more accessible, and there’re a few dirt roads that lead up to the Lake itself. I know that there are a few of the more adventurous High Blood who live around the lake, up in the mountains, for hunting. We’ll have to keep a look out for them. Though, chances are we’ll have to go around the east side of the Lake, since there’ll be no one there. Maybe a hermit or two, but no one else is crazy enough to live in that miserable stretch of bogs and swamps.”

The Prince, realizing that this might be the longest non-threatening exchange of words he’d ever had with her, was listening with rapt attention and outright fascination. And then something occurred to him - how was it that her teeth were so white? And her hair always looked combed and, if not washed, at least taken care of.

“How do you do that?” he asked suddenly. She looked up at him in confusion, and he quickly explained himself.

“Your teeth - and your hair. They look good. How do you keep them clean?”

She smiled at him; it was the first real smile he'd seen from her, and he was dazzled. He wasn't sure how he felt about that. And he wasn't sure how he felt about how often lately he seemed to be unsure of his feelings.

“Here,” she said, and reached into her pack, “take this.”

She tossed a few things in his direction, and he snagged them from the air in surprise. There were two whittled things - one that had many teeth and one that had a flat bit at the end. The other items she tossed him included a small pouch, half full of some sort of liquid, and a bag with some sort of white powder in it.

“You're lucky I have extras. The one with the teeth is a comb - you know what a comb is, yes?”

The Prince nodded at her as if such a thing was obvious, but for the life of him he couldn't remember how the groomers in the Fortress had styled his hair. He'd never had to pay much attention to it. He supposed he'd try to go off on his own at some point and figure it out, or perhaps catch her using it and learn by imitation.

“The flat piece is a brush. You squeeze some of the cream from the pouch onto it, shake out some of the powder - it's called baking soda, and it'll feel strange at first, but soon you'll get used to it - and scrape your teeth with the wood piece. There's a small combed bit at the other end you can use to get in between the gums. Careful not to go too hard though, or you might start bleeding and then I'll have to hold you down while Tomaz sews you back together, and really the whole thing will be no fun for anyone.”

She paused and smiled at him again.

“Just 'cause your chest is black from that Talisman, doesn't mean your teeth need to be after all.”

“Right,” the Prince. “At least I can do something about my teeth, though. The Talisman ... it’s right that it’s black. There’s nothing good about it ... no light can come from such a thing. This is a curse, that’s all,” he said, fingering the deeply etched lines on his upper chest. They had never felt more like bonds than they did now - holding him to a life he no longer wanted and making him a target for the entire Empire.

“Nothing is inherently cursed, princeling,” Leah said. The Prince was struck again by how strangely talkative she was, and realized that she had seemed generally happier as time went by, as if this solitude suited her, and the more time she spent traveling through the forest the more energy she absorbed from the silence.

“This is,” he replied, trying to smile but failing halfway through.

“Then choose to do something about it,” the girl said, slightly exasperated, but still trying to be reasonable. She looked out into the forest, picking her words carefully as she continued. “Look, I don’t understand how the Talisman works, I don’t understand what it feels like to use it. But if you’re convinced there is no good that it can be put to, then stop using it. Just remember this, it’s something my father always told me when he was teaching me how to fight: a sword isn’t bad because it’s pointy, and a shield isn’t good because it’s blunt. Both can be used for offense, and both can be used for defense. What matters is always, always the person who wields it. You were born into this, I know, and you’ve been made a weapon of the Empire, one that they’ve decided is no longer of any use to them, so now you are your own weapon. You have a choice now. You have power, you have a sword so to speak, a sword unlike anyone else has. What matters is what you use it for.”

She turned to look at him, and the Prince found himself drawn into her green eyes. Green like the sun through the forest canopy.

“What matters is who you are,” she said.

The Prince, thinking this over and trying to find a flaw in her logic, trying to see how she was deceiving him like the Children and the Empress

always said the Exiled did, didn't respond, and that was the last they spoke for the rest of the day. But as he went to sleep that night, wrapped in his deerskin, warm and well fed on the meat and roots the Exiles had gathered, next to a cunningly built fire that was both strong and somehow nearly smokeless, the Prince could only admit that what she said made sense.

And as he admitted this to himself, he felt guilt and shame begin to boil up to the surface of his mind. If any of the other Children could see him now, here, taking the charity of the Exiled and agreeing with them ... this was a slippery slope. Soon he would be planning the destruction of the lives of everyone in the Empire. He'd be trying to wreak havoc on the lives of the Commons, who were only protected by the grace of the Empress.

And then something else occurred to him, what the girl and Tomaz had said about anger being his best, most loyal friend. And on a whim he reached out to his anger, and found it waiting, like a well-trained dog, and suddenly his head filled with all the terrible things that had been done to him, all of the injuries he'd suffered, both before and after his kidnapping, at the hands of his brothers and sisters ... and his Mother.

He was angry, and in his anger the guilt and shame of not doing what they wanted or thought was right burned up and disappeared. And he found that he was tired, and what he wanted to do was to go to sleep. And so, peacefully, he did.

And the next day, when he woke, he did not reach out through the Talisman to feel the forest around him. He made a silent promise to himself that he would not use the Raven again, though a part of him, a very small part in the back of his mind, told him that Leah had spoken sense about this as well. But for now, in his anger, he decided to forego using it altogether.

Soon, as the days passed, it was as though a shadow that had lain on his heart ever since he could remember had been lifted, and he was just a young man, traveling through the forest with his two companions. He began to speak more freely with the two Exiles, sharing memories with them. At first, he was reluctant, because he thought they might ask for important

information about the Empire, that they might be doing this all along so that they could get information out of him. And in the end, he knew they did want that. He knew that they would take any information he would give them, and store it in the back of their minds. And he knew too that if he finished the journey with them, that he would find their leaders, and would be made to talk.

But for now, here in this seemingly endless forest, he let those thoughts and worries go, and found he truly did enjoy the company of these two Exiles ... these two people. His brightening mood, coupled with Leah's newfound smiles, made for an infectious aura of laughter. Leah continued to needle him, teasing him about this or that, but for the first time he realized that she did it in good fun, and after a while he was able to score a point or two back against her, to uproarious applause by the always-ready-for-a-good-time Tomaz.

On one of these days, when they stopped in the early afternoon while the sun still shown through the trees above and the sounds of birds calling to each other filled the glades with music, the Prince pulled out his deerskin. He'd thought long and hard about it for a few days, and in the end he decided to make something simple.

He stretched the hide out, smelling the deep, leathery scent that reminded him intensely of Tomaz, and drew his dagger. First, he cut an oblong hole in the center. He pulled out Tomaz's needle and thread, and was about to sew the cut out piece to the top of the hole in order to make a hood, when the big man came over and stopped him. He looked at what the Prince was doing, nodded once, and said, "do it this way."

He demonstrated what he thought the Prince should do, first making a few stitches along the inside of the cut-out flap, and then using extra pieces of the deerskin to make the whole thing more flexible. Finally, the Prince got the idea, took the needle and thread, and sewed himself a hood.

He picked up the garment, shook it out, and threw it over his head. It fell down, long in both the front and back, almost to his knees, and about

halfway down his ribs on either side. The hood he'd attached was easy to pull up or down, and, most importantly, the thing was warm and wouldn't fall off. It was simple, and inglorious, and the Prince loved it.

"A drape-over?"

He turned and saw Leah watching him. The Prince felt Tomaz's hand encompass his shoulder.

"Certainly is," said the big man.

The girl eyed it critically, and then nodded. The Prince felt a soaring feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Looks good actually. I think the proportions would have been wrong for anything else anyway. How does it feel?"

"Warm," the Prince responded simply. Tomaz chuckled.

"Well, that's the most important thing," he said, and then turned away to start prepping a fire and pull out strips of smoked venison.

Their journey continued, and as it did there were a few nights when, restless, the Prince and Tomaz would spar. The first night, Tomaz had thought he was joking.

"Princeling, I'm sorry but I could break you in two just by looking at you."

"Then prove it," the Prince said, adding a biting, taunting twist to the words that he had learned from Leah. She laughed as he said it.

"Fair enough," the ex-Blade Master said as he rose to his feet. "But no blades. We can use staves if you want to find some likely looking logs, or practice swords if you can find some good branches."

So, after some searching, they found both. And, as predicted, the Prince was soundly beaten at both competitions.

"Again!" he said, after being knocked down by the big man's staff. He could already feel bruises forming on his arms and legs where the wood had struck him, but he was ready for more. It felt good to be active. The cuts on his wrist, and the wounds he'd received from the Death Watchmen, had all healed well, and he felt whole. He had been too long away from the practice

yard, anyway - he knew that he was in desperate need of a tune up. And so, obligingly, the big man readied himself once more. Most every night found them at it again, and though the Prince struck the big man a number of times, he never landed a serious blow with either staff or sword. Tomaz, though big as a small hill, was faster than the Prince had predicted, and never tired. It seemed as though he could move forever. He reminded the Prince vaguely of a combination of his brother Ramael and his sister Dysuna. Ramael, the Prince of Oxen, had a similar build and, bearing the Ox Talisman, could perform feats of strength that would awe the Common man, while his sister Dysuna, the Prince of Wolves, never rode a horse because she could run the length of the Empire without stopping for food or rest.

Leah, however, refused to spar.

"Why not?" the Prince said, still trying to figure out the ins and outs of taunting. "Are you poultry?"

"Chicken," she corrected him, "am I chicken."

"Yeah," he said, "well are you?"

"Sure, princeling," she said, too sweetly. "You tell yourself whatever you need to so that you can fall asleep with your manhood intact."

And throughout it all, their march south through the Empire, the Prince held onto his anger, and slowly, as the girl had predicted, it began to eat away and dissolve the other thoughts he held, the other things he was keeping inside himself. And as time continued to pass, hope grew in him that he might be able to escape his captivity and free himself from the Empire entirely. They made camp a day outside Lake Chartain that night, and he fell asleep completely at peace for the first time that he could remember in far too long.

When he woke, it was to find a Defender of the Realm holding a sword to his throat, silhouetted against the rising sun.

Chapter Fourteen: What You Use It For

He yelled in surprise before he could stop himself, but the cry was cut off short as the sword pressed deeper into the skin of his neck.

“None of that now, little Exile,” the Defender breathed into his face, smelling of garlic and rancid meat, a combination so disgusting that the Prince almost emptied his stomach right then and there, sword or no sword. But he swallowed and was able to steal a glance to his right and left, trying to see where Tomaz and Leah were.

It was just past dawn, the shadows of the forest still long and cool about them. The campsite was just as they had left it, fire banked and food stashed close by. All three bedrolls were present, but where were the Exiles?

“Don’t worry, your friend is here too.”

The Defender grabbed a hank of his hair and, careful to keep the sword close as a warning to the Prince against doing anything foolish, pulled him upright. The Prince looked frantically around the campfire; he saw Tomaz, and as his gaze fell on the giant, the Prince felt his heart lurch and momentarily stop dead in his chest.

The big man was sitting calmly on the ground, though he was neither tied nor bound and no sword or dagger was being held threateningly to his throat. Instead, a man dressed all in black, with a head shaved bald and arcane symbols tattooed into his skin, stood over him, holding a blood red crystal into which Tomaz was staring helplessly.

A Soul Catcher. A Bloodmage.

“NO!” the Prince roared, heedless of the blade at his throat, caring only for the safety of Tomaz. The Bloodmage threw up a hand, and immediately three Defenders were on him, all equally unwashed and dressed in the notorious Brown and Red, with insignias of the triliope on their chests.

“how ... how?” He asked no one in particular.

“Came on you in the night, we did,” said one of the Defenders, apparently in answer to his question. “Samson there, our Bloodmage, he

sensed you a ways off and said we'd wait for dawn, and then he'd come and hypnotize the guard and we'd have the other two of you no problem. Happened just like he said."

"Quiet," said a deep voice, and the Prince knew it was the Bloodmage speaking, for the voice had the raspy quality all of those cursed fellowship carried.

"Sorry, Samson," the Defender said with true deference and contrition.

The Prince was thinking hard and fast, trying to find a way out of this situation. Where was Leah?

"Is the girl secured?" the Bloodmage asked, mirroring the Prince's own thoughts.

"Yes, sir," the Defender holding the sword to the Prince's throat responded. "We tied her up and sent her back to Formaux. Captain Toraine is seeing to it himself."

The Prince felt confusion and panic fighting inside him - why had they taken Leah? Had the orders changed about him? Was he to be killed here, by the Bloodmage, and his soul harvested to feed the mage's power? But no, that made no sense, if they wanted to kill him, why would they take Leah?

And then it came together, the pieces falling into place with almost audible clicks - they didn't know who he was. They had no idea who they were holding.

His brain went into overdrive, and took in every detail of the appearance of the men around him. All had several weeks' worth of beard growth on their cheeks, and all smelled so foul that it was clear that they hadn't had time to wash in an equally long period of time. The Bloodmage, from what the Prince could see, looked gaunt, so much so that he looked like a man starving to death - which most likely meant he had gone some time, perhaps several weeks, without sustenance. The Defenders all had several caked layers of mud and grime on their boots, and also halfway up their thighs. All also had large, angry looking boils on their necks and cheeks - bug bites.

They've been in the swamps east of Lake Chartain, the Prince realized in a rush of understanding. They've been looking for Exiles, like Tomaz and Leah, who use that way to get around the usual patrols.

Tomaz gave a small groan, and the Prince came back to the present, and realized desperately that he needed to do something - anything - to break that trance. If he didn't, soon the big man would be beyond saving. But what could he do? He couldn't move - the Defender with the sword was staring very intently at his neck to discourage any such thoughts. Leah wasn't anywhere around -

As this thought crossed his mind, he heard, almost at the edge of hearing, the sharp whistling sound that signaled one of her daggers flying through the air.

The Defenders heard it as well, and they all turned to look into the forest behind them, wondering what the sound could be, and as they did, the long, wicked length of steel flew through the clearing and pierced the Bloodmage in the back, where his heart would be. The black robed man gave a small cry, and then fell to the ground.

For a long moment, no one moved, not the Defenders, not the Prince, not Tomaz as he came out of his trance. All of them simply sat and stared, uncomprehending, at the fallen figure of Samson the Bloodmage.

And then all seven hells broke lose.

The Prince threw himself backward, away from the sword at his neck, as the Defender holding it drew back the deadly metal and sliced it clean through where his head had been not seconds before. The Prince hit the ground and struck out with both hands and both feet, whipping around in a circular motion. He was rewarded when he connected with two pairs of ankles, depositing two men onto the ground. The remaining men, three all told still standing, drew their swords and made to run the Prince through.

An enormous figure came up behind them, casting a shadow over them as it blocked out the rising sun, and they turned to see a thoroughly enraged giant towering above them.

Seizing his chance, the Prince reached under his drape-over and pulled out the dagger Leah had given him. In three quick motions he flipped himself over, and then slammed the dagger's hilt once, twice, into the temples of the men he'd knocked to the ground. Three muffled cries followed by three heavy thumps signaled that Tomaz had done the same to the other Defenders, leaving them helpless on the ground.

The Prince quickly crossed to the Bloodmage, who lay still on the ground unconscious, but, as the Prince knew, not yet dead. He kicked the mage over and reached down to grab the blood red crystal that had been used to hypnotize Tomaz, breaking the leather cord that held it strung around the man's neck. He threw it on a flat rock nearby and scabbled around quickly for another. His hand closed over one and he pulled, prying it from the earth, as the Bloodmage began to stir. He raised the second rock high in the air, and brought it crashing down on the Soul Catcher. As rock met crystal, there was a terrifying moment where it felt as though the rock would be repulsed and the crystal would remain whole, but then came the sound of breaking glass, a sharp shattering as if a piece of reality had been fractured, and the crystal broke. The Bloodmage screamed, so loud that the Prince flinched away and his ears began to ring. The black robed figure rose up, like a corpse marionette on tangled strings, twitched in the direction of the Prince as if to exact revenge, and then fell to the floor and moved no more.

The Prince whirled around, and saw that Tomaz had thrown all of the Defenders into a line against two adjacent oak trunks, and was binding them with lengths of their own clothing.

"How did they find us?" Tomaz asked the Prince over his shoulder.
"What happened?"

"They were scouting the swamps for Exiles - their clothes, their hair, they're filthy, and see those bug bites? From what that one said, they were returning to the roads when the Bloodmage sensed us, and they set an ambush as we slept."

“Why didn’t you sense them?” the big man asked, looking at the Prince with an intensity that unnerved him.

“I ... I haven’t been using the Talisman,” the Prince said, and felt guilty and ashamed. If only he had listened to the girl, he could have prevented this, but he’d let his pride and his anger blind him.

“How did they take me? The Bloodmage?”

“Yes,” the Prince said, “he hypnotized you.”

“How did you break the trance?”

“I didn’t, Leah did.”

“What? Where is she?”

“I don’t know. They said they were taking her north to Formaux, but she must have escaped and come back –”

“Is that her dagger?”

“Yes, it’s how she broke the trance, she threw it and it struck the Bloodmage.”

Tomaz was suddenly in the Prince’s face.

“From where? Did you see her throw it?”

“No – no it just came flying in from the forest, but she can’t be that far, I mean it’s impossible to throw a dagger –”

“She’s a Spellblade, princeling,” Tomaz hissed at him, low enough that the Defenders couldn’t hear them. His anger and fear were unnerving. “She can throw a dagger from wherever she wants and make it go wherever she wants. She could be miles away! She threw the dagger hoping the Bloodmage would be where he still was when she last saw him, and she got lucky. But she only would have thrown it as a last resort – only would have thrown it if there was no way she could use it to help her own situation and come back to help us.”

And as Tomaz said this, the Prince looked into the big man’s face, and saw that Leah was lost to them.

“No,” he said to Tomaz. “No, you’re wrong. She can’t be that far.”

“Far enough that you’ll never catch her!”

Both the Prince and Tomaz whipped around and saw the Defender who had held the sword to the Prince's neck, blood dripping from his temple down his face and making him look like some grisly reanimated battlefield corpse, smiling at them with a hatred that was unmatched by anything the Prince had ever seen.

"Explain yourself," Tomaz said, stepping up and towering over the man.

"She is being taken to Formaux on the fastest horses money can buy, with a squad of two dozen fully armed Defenders of the Realm. They left almost an hour ago - you've been in your trance all that time, and this scrawny little runt didn't even wake up!"

"LIAR!" the Prince roared in his face, but the man only smiled manically back.

"I only speak the truth," the man said, grinning his bloody grin. "It cuts so much deeper than lies."

The Prince turned around and started to pace, needing to do something.

"We have to go after her," he said to Tomaz.

"How?!" the Defender shouted at him, enjoying every moment of their fear. "We slaughtered your horses! Hah hah! You have no way to catch them. You truly should have been more careful in setting up your campfire ... we could see it through the trees a mile away. Didn't even need the Bloodmage to point us in the right direction at that point."

"I told her!" the Prince said, suddenly angry at the Exiles, trying to make it their fault for some reason he didn't understand. "I told you both, we needed to be more careful!"

"Too late for that now," Tomaz growled at him, anger and pain in his eyes, and the Prince realized, with despair, that the big man had a point. It didn't matter now who was wrong and who was right - what mattered was that Leah was gone, and they had no way to get her back. She'd been taken.

If he had continued to use the Talisman, like she'd suggested, to feel around them for signs of life and pursuit ...

"They will reach Formaux before you can come within a hundred miles of them!" the Defender yelled, breaking into the Prince's thoughts. "And once she is there, she is out of your reach, and we will have a bargaining chip against the Exiled Kindred that they dare not ignore!"

"What is she to you? Why didn't you take me instead?" the Prince screamed, grabbing the man by the throat, his fingers digging into the skin as fear coursed through his body, standing every hair on edge.

"The daughter of General Goldwyn, the leader of the Armies of the Exiled Kindred themselves?" the Defender managed to get out past the Prince's hand. "And not only that but part of a Rogue pair and likely a Spellblade as well? Are you blind? She is worth ten of you - you who are a simple Exile!"

The Prince shot a quick look to Tomaz to see if any of this was registering with him. The look of horror on the big man's face was all the confirmation the Prince needed.

"How do you know all that?" the Exile asked, pushing the Prince out of the way, grabbing the man and lifting him clear off the ground into the air as far as the ties would let him go. The Prince had never seen Tomaz lose his temper, even when he was fighting for his life he seemed cold and calculated. But there was a panic beneath his anger now, and his massive shoulders were quivering with useless energy. He was on the verge of losing control.

The man tried to sputter out a response, but the look on Tomaz's face had finally gotten through to him, and it was clear his mind was now buried in fear.

"We've all been in the wars," one of the other Defenders said with the same eerie, maniacal light in his eyes. The fire of a zealot. "And we know all of your secrets, Exile!"

The way the man spat the word at Tomaz struck a chord in the big man, and he dropped the first Defender, drew his sword, and moved to the second. He stood there for a long moment, sword raised, before letting out a bellow of frustration; he turned away and threw Malachi end over end into a nearby tree, where it sunk up to the hilt and caused the tree to sway dangerously under the force of the blow.

“Tomaz,” the Prince said quickly. There had to be a way to stop this, to prevent her from reaching Formaux. If she did ... his mind helplessly began imagining what kind of treatment Leah would undergo if she made it into the hands of his brother Tiffenal, and the thought of seeing her at the mercy of the Prince of Foxes was enough to set his heart racing. “Tomaz, your people will come for her, won’t they? Isn’t there some way to get her back?”

“NO!” roared the big man. He strode forward, pulled his sword from the tree trunk with wrenching, bone-breaking power, and swung it around in an enormous arc where it sunk into the side of a tall redwood and stuck fast, quivering. Tomaz fell to his knees and his hands covered his face.

“Once she is in one of the capital cities she is disavowed,” the big man said, his voice heavy with despair. “She will not be rescued. She will be mourned as if she were dead already, though she may cling to life for years to come.”

The Prince stood stock-still, unable to wrap his mind around what the man was saying. The girl had always seemed so ... invincible. She was untouchable, no matter what danger had been thrown at her. Following him, undetected through Banelyn ... dispatching the soldiers in the Elmist Mountains ... even the Death Watch itself hadn’t slowed her down.

And she had rescued him, from the bowels of a Seeker’s lair. She had rescued him. He, who wouldn’t have lifted a finger to save her.

Now you are your own weapon. You have a choice now.

He spun to face the Defenders. Five of them, all told. Five of them.

What matters is what you use it for.

The leader's face split into a grin as he watched Tomaz kneeling on the ground.

"Yes - the Empire cannot be defied! Make your peace with whatever god you pray to, Exiled scum, there is nothing you can do to get her back."

"Nothing he can do," the Prince said softly. "But something I can do."

The Defender shifted his gaze to the Prince, and his smile faltered and turned into a look of uncertainty. The Prince reached beneath his hide drape-over, feeling the cold wire hilt of the girl's dagger.

"What can you do?" the man asked, eyeing the Prince warily.

"I can kill you. Because what you don't know is that you're right, she is worth ten of me. But she's also certainly worth five of you."

Fear crossed the man's face as the Prince drew Leah's dagger and slammed it into his chest, piercing the Defender's heart.

Immediately, the man's life was added to the Prince, and he staggered back under the weight of memories, even as he forced them to the far corner of his mind along with the bloodlust that came from the man's zealotry. His limbs flooded with strength and the world leapt forward as his eyesight increased; scents filled his nose and sounds of wildlife and birds in the trees suddenly seemed far too loud and close.

The Prince turned to the other four, and in four quick motions, these men fell limply to the ground, all with helpless expressions of fear and awe, as if seeing an avenging angel come to reap their souls.

The Prince's heart was beating so quickly he felt it might come right out of his chest. He had never absorbed so many lives before at a single time, and his mind was reeling under the memories crowding into his own, of home towns, of childhood sweethearts, of murders and beatings they had committed in the name of the Empress - and it was these he focused on, used to fuel his anger, and his need to save the girl who had saved him.

He felt as though he could jump to the top of any of the tall trees surrounding him; he could see the veins of each individual leaf, hear insects buzzing and birds calling each other what seemed like miles away. His blood

was on fire with the power, the strength, and the pure life flooding through him.

“What - what are you doing?” Tomaz asked in a shocked voice from behind him.

“Bringing her back,” the Prince said.

He grabbed two swords from the dead Defenders, one a long hand-and-a-half sword, the other a short stabbing sword. They felt no heavier than feathers though both, he could see by the intricacies of the metal, were made from good Tynian steel. Reaching out with his mind, he quested for the life of the distant Defenders and the Exile girl.

His mind, powered by the deaths, shot outward, farther than he'd ever gone before. A woodsman several miles to the east - two women moving to the south - several small bands of what must have been families to the west - and there, several miles to the north, a band of soldiers and the Exile girl - *flashes of green and silver, the sound of steel cutting silk* - glowing in his mind's eye, and then gone, too far away.

He set off at a run, his feet digging deep trenches in the soft ground as he shot through the glen with inhuman speed. Trees flashed by him to either side at an astounding rate. Each of his strides covered nearly ten feet, his bounds leaving long gouges in the earth.

He didn't know how long he ran for, following the life energy of the fleeing Defenders, but as he ran the sun moved overhead, and he felt more than saw the forest take note of his passing. He was a phantom - a blurring wraith, made of six men but controlled by the anger of one. He ran faster and harder and longer than he had ever done before, dodging fallen trees, running up the side of hills, leaping streams, all with barely any effort, all the while focused on that distant speck of life in front of him, that single beating heart that belonged to a girl with green eyes and raven hair.

And finally, as his strength began to flag, and his speed began to ebb away, his nose caught the scent of horses and the sweat of men in rusty

armor. He pushed himself even harder, passing through the forest so quickly he left whirlwinds of leaves swirling behind him.

Without warning the forest ended, and he was running across a brief grassy plain that stretched to the horizon and then ended in another line of trees.

There they were, silhouetted against the horizon line, the squad of Defenders - and there was Leah, bound and gagged, struggling and bucking wildly against her restraints. The Prince could hear her muffled curses. One of the Defenders turned to her, and with a slashing motion carelessly backhanded her across the face, mailed fist hitting her so hard that she was almost sent flying off the horse, held on only by the ropes binding her to the saddle. The Prince snarled deep in his chest, and the bloodlust of the Defenders he had killed rose up in him like a tide, and he knew there was no going back.

When he was twenty paces away, he pulled back his right arm, and hurled the hand and a half sword straight toward the white-plumed helmet of the captain as if it were a javelin. The power of the throw sent the sword right through the man's head, sliding neatly into the helmet up to the hilt, as if it were a hot knife sinking into butter.

The Prince felt his flagging strength and speed surge back as the man's life was added on to his own. Memories flashed before his eyes, but he blocked them all out except for one: which men were where in the squad. The Prince shot toward the left hand column, which contained all four under-captains.

The entire group was in disarray, horses rearing in shock as their riders turned every which way to look for who or what had thrown the sword that killed their captain. Leah, eyes wide and staring in shock as the captain fell off his horse right in front of her, was in the right hand column.

A few men spotted the Prince and notched arrows to bows, letting out cries of alarm, but they weren't fast enough. He watched calmly, his mind moving at extraordinary speeds, as the arrows left the bows, and he moved

causally aside. The first passed him with barely an inch to spare, harmlessly nicking the drape-over as it billowed out behind him. Three more arrows shot past him as he closed the distance. The Prince shrugged out of the drape-over, letting it fall to the ground.

And then he was among them, hacking, slashing, cutting with the short sword, twisting past their blades with the speed of a demon; he leapt from the ground onto the back of a horse, slit a Defender's throat, pushed off the creature's back, flipped high in the air and landed astride the horse of the second under-captain. He pulled Leah's dagger from his belt, severed the man's spine, and then rolled to the ground and moved on.

Soon the sword and dagger were coated in scarlet blood, and with each kill he grew faster and stronger. He was invincible, a whirlwind of pure death, a tool of absolute and complete annihilation.

And then it was over. The horses cantered off out of sight, leaving the Prince alone with twenty-three dead Defenders lying on the ground. Leah had somehow managed to free herself of her bonds during the fight; she had rolled to the edge of the battlefield, and now stood staring open-mouthed at the sight before her.

The Prince was kneeling amid the bleeding corpses. His eyes were closed, and his entire body was shaking, each and every muscle jumping, bunching, contracting, releasing only to tense again. His breath was coming in short, harsh gasps, rasping and tearing his throat, the smallest particles of dust in the air choking him, the scent of blood and death overpowering all thought. He was on fire – life filled him so fully that he felt he must explode, that he must die at the very moment when he was filled with so much life that he felt like a beacon, shining across the world for anyone who cared to see.

The memories of all twenty-eight men he had killed that day pounded inside his skull, overwhelming his mind, coursing through him as real as if he had lived them. Images of childhood, the scents of fresh baked bread and a father's hug, hopes and dreams achieved and unfulfilled alike. Families, lack

of families, lovers, friends, enemies, their first kills, their first beatings, their passion, their hatred, their painful loyalty to the Empress. Their fears, worst of all, always worst of all, buried so deep and left so long uncomforted that they were raw and bloody, brought out like a swarm of mutilated, deformed monsters from a dark cave, ready to devour him whole.

“Stop,” the Prince whispered aloud, “please stop! I don’t want it – I don’t want to care about you! I don’t want to know any of you – leave me alone! LEAVE ME ALONE!”

His hands clutched his head convulsively. He wasn’t aware that he had spoken aloud, wasn’t even sure who he was anymore. He was the Defender Billzby who had joined up in Lerne – no! – he was Livanom who had joined outside – stop! – Jimayl who had three children and a fourth on the way – STOP IT!

He had no name to cling to, no identity. The Empress had taken it from him. He felt himself dying, felt himself being submerged under all of the memories, all of the people who he had killed –

Slender hands grasped his head, holding him as silent tears ran down his face. He was clutched against a lithe frame that smelled of the strong lavender soap a giant named Tomaz made, raven black hair falling into his face, cool and feathery.

“Breathe,” a voice said to him, a scared voice but one with a steely insistence in it. “Breathe. I’m here, princeling, I’m here. Be here with me, stay here with me. Just breathe.”

He did breathe then – a long shuttering breath that burned his nostrils and lungs but helped to clear his mind. His own memories began to come back to him as the girl’s insistent voice calmed his racing heart, her hands clutching him to her chest, holding him tightly. He took another breath, and the memories retreated further. Another breath and his mind went completely blank, leaving him in silence.

“You’ll be okay,” Leah said to him, “I’ll take care of you.”

And the rest was darkness.

Chapter Fifteen: Aftermath

The Prince woke to sunshine, warm and buttery like freshly churned cream, playing across his face. His body was swaying slightly, which he felt a little strange about. He was relatively sure that one didn't sway when one was lying down, but then again he supposed one could never be entirely sure. He chuckled to himself, smiling. He sounded like Geofred. Who was that again? Who was ... oh well there it was, of course, Geofred was his pet eagle.

Pet eagle?

The Prince twitched slightly as he heard a voice talking to him in the back of his head. He told it to leave him alone; he could have a pet eagle if he wanted to. But the voice just laughed.

Wake up, you.

His eyes opened and reality resolved into being around him once more. A face was peering down at him, black hair with green eyes. A few freckles across the nose. A strong mouth, curved in a stifled grin.

"Leah," the Prince said. He sat up and realized he was in a litter slung between two horses, Leah walking behind and looking at him over the edge of the wooden frame. Tomaz was leading the horses down a narrow but surprisingly well laid woodland trail. A third horse was tied behind the litter and was loaded down with most of the packs and supplies.

"Thanks for joining us," Leah said with a smile.

"And I sincerely hope you don't think your brother Geofred is an actual eagle," rumbled Tomaz from up ahead.

The Prince rubbed his head, which was still feeling a little fuzzy.

"I said that aloud?" he asked sheepishly.

"You're a pretty big sleep-talker, princeling," Leah said, ruffling his hair and giving his head a playful push.

"We certainly learned a bit more about your feelings for a young lady by the name of ... Monsunne was it Eshendai?"

Leah let out a laugh like the peal of a bell, bright and golden like the day. The Prince felt his cheeks burn and he lay back down on the litter.

"I'm going back to bed," he said, mortified.

"I think not!" roared Tomaz, "I want to know more about this Lady's heaving bosom!"

"I did not say that!" the Prince protested, sitting bolt upright and pointing at Tomaz with a severely outstretched finger. The big man just smiled and shrugged. The Prince caught Leah stifling a laugh out of the corner of his eye.

"Don't encourage him," the Prince said. He looked around and realized he had no idea where they were and said as much.

"A few days past Lake Chartain," responded Tomaz.

"*Past* Lake Chartain?"

"Indeed," Tomaz rumbled. "We've hauled your skinny butt nearly a hundred miles. But it's fine, we know Princes need their beauty sleep."

"And what," the Prince paused and cleared his throat before continuing. "Happened after ... after ..."

He broke off and left the sentence unfinished.

"You mean after you saved this girl's thankless hide?" Tomaz asked bluntly. Leah stooped, picked up a heavy chunk of stone and threw it at him. It glanced harmlessly off his massive shoulder.

"Just say that again, Ashandel," she taunted, "I can take you."

Tomaz pretended to cower in fear. Leah laughed.

"Why are you in such a good mood?" the Prince asked, bewildered.

"What do you mean why are we in a good mood?" the girl asked. "You might defy death and certain torture everyday back in the great big capital city of Lucien, but I think being spared that is cause for celebration."

"But - aren't we still being followed?" he asked.

"Not so far as we know," Tomaz said. "We did some serious scouting, and found that those Defenders were the only ones who knew where we

were, and you," the big man looked back over his shoulder at the Prince, "you certainly dealt with them."

"Yes," the Prince said, his mood darkening as vague shapes and images came back to him, his own memories of the memories that he had absorbed from the men he had killed. Suddenly he felt immensely tired and ravenously hungry and said as much. Leah seemed to have anticipated this – she passed him a small hunk of bread and cheese and a waterskin. Without even thanking her, he tore into the food, and drank heavily from the skin. He wondered how long it had been since he had eaten, and how many days he had lain unconscious after ... after he'd killed the Defenders.

Suddenly the food turned to ash in his mouth, and his appetite left him. He saw Tomaz and Leah exchange a significant glance.

"You never told us the exact details of what you could do," Tomaz said. "Would have been nice to know. Come in handy in a fight."

"Yes ... well, that's why I don't kill unless I have to," the Prince said quietly. Both of the Exiles were looking at him intently now, and reluctantly, feeling every word pulled from him like a splinter from under his fingernails, he continued on.

"The Raven Talisman, it connects me to the life of everything around me. But human life – human life is somehow more than everything else. Brighter, more intense. When a person dies, well, when I kill someone, their life ... I absorb their life. Geofred always said he was more inclined to think it was their soul, since I don't just absorb their physical qualities, but also what makes them *them*. Memories, fears, anger, happiness. One time I even absorbed a rash. Damned inconvenient."

He was studying the grassy ground of the forest to his right, not wanting to look at the two Exiles. For some reason he couldn't put his finger on, he felt ashamed talking about this with them. As if he was talking about something dark and unclean, something that would never enter polite conversation.

"And after a certain time," Leah said gently, "the memories fade?"

“Yes,” the Prince said slowly, not knowing why he continued to speak, but feeling compelled to do so. “Impressions of them remain, though. Memories of those memories. The first time it was bad ... the first state execution I was required to take part in ... the man had ... taken a woman by force.”

The Prince felt more than saw the girl tense, and he couldn't bring himself to look up at Tomaz, to see how the big man was reacting.

“I relived every action for an hour. I lived in his skin ... I was too young to know anything about right or wrong really, but I knew what was happening was monstrous, and still I couldn't let it go. I still remember the hour it took for the memory to fade ... the experience was ... unpleasant.”

The Prince almost said more, but then simply closed his mouth and let it pass. He couldn't continue. They had stopped moving, sometime along the way, the Prince couldn't remember when, and for a long moment the three of them stood there, the Prince looking intently at the hunting trail beneath his litter, and the two Exiles looking intently at him.

Tomaz was the first to move. He crossed the distance to the Prince and placed two enormous hands on his shoulders, nearly engulfing his head.

“I had no idea,” he said simply. “For what it counts, to survive that as the man you are, you're stronger than I will ever be.”

As the big man said this, the Prince felt the corner of his eyes prickle, and a lump formed in his throat. He sat there for a moment, holding himself in check. And then he looked up, cleared his throat gruffly and nodded to Tomaz. The big man, his stony black eyes watching him closely, nodded as well, and dropped his hands.

“There's a stream this way - I'll fill up the waterskins. We'll camp here for the night unless anyone has any objections.”

“All right,” the Prince said quickly, anxious to change the subject. He slid off of the litter, and let out a small groan as a hundred aches and pains suddenly came crashing down on him.

“Oh shadows and light, that hurts.”

“Are you all right?” Leah asked, looking concerned.

The Prince straightened up, his back letting out several loud cracks, and stretched. He took a deep breath, and in spite of all that had happened in the last few weeks, he realized he actually did feel rather good.

“Yes,” he said, surprise coloring his voice. “Yes, I think I do feel all right.”

“In that case, help with the food,” she said, motioning to the packs on the horse. She was untying the strings holding the litter to the other horses.

“How did we get back to Tomaz?” the Prince asked, opening a pack at random and looking into it, searching for the food.

“Other pack,” Leah said, “and you and I got back to Tomaz on these horses. Both Trudger and Malial were put down by the Defenders ... Tomaz was pretty torn up about losing Malial, they’ve been together for years now. But, in the end there were plenty of good Tibour stock running around after you fainted, so I picked three and rode them back.”

“Fainted?” the Prince asked, pulling open the other pack.

“Yes. Fainted.”

“I didn’t faint.”

Leah paused and looked at him with an amused expression over the backs of the horses.

“Oh you didn’t?”

“No,” the Prince said, deadpan, “I fell unconscious due to the strain of saving you. See, it sounds more manly that way. Much more like something a Prince would do.”

Leah rolled her eyes and the Prince smiled.

“You fainted, princeling.”

“Fine – but I still rescued you. That was pretty manly right?”

She laughed and shook her head. She undid the final strap holding the litter in place and it fell to the ground in a clatter of wood.

“Whatever you say, sleeping beauty – you’ve been riding in this for almost a week now, sleeping like a little baby. Besides the occasional muttering about Lady Monsunne of course.”

She smirked at him and bent to pull the wood they had used as a frame out from the tangle of blankets.

“You know what’s funny?” the Prince asked.

“I never should have said that to you, you use that expression too much now.”

“Yeah it’s kind of funny isn’t it?”

The girl sighed, but let it go. The Prince managed to locate the last of the dried venison and also found three large rolls of bread and a wheel of cheese. They must have been scavenged off the Defenders.

“All right,” she said, “what’s funny?”

The Prince was sure she was hiding a smile and so he continued on boldly.

“Her name was Leah too. But you two couldn’t be more different.”

The girl froze, and then slowly turned to him, her face blank.

“What do you mean by that?” she asked.

“Well,” the Prince continued on, “she was one of the daughters of the Most High so she was trained in all of the courtly manners of Lucien. I don’t think she’d ever seen a dagger in her entire life much less held one. And she was always wearing the most fashionable dress of the season. I don’t think I could see you in a dress – and certainly not the ones she wore. I don’t know how she got into those things; someone must have had to pour her into them. But you, I mean you’re much more – ”

He cut off as he caught a glimpse of her face, which looked as though she was ready to torture a small woodland creature.

“Are – are you all right?” the Prince asked, taking a step back.

“Fine,” she said stonily, “I’ll leave you alone so you can get back to reminiscing about your Lady Monsunne and the dresses she needed to be poured into.”

And with that, she turned on her heel and stalked off across the clearing, brushing past Tomaz who had just returned from the stream. He looked from the girl back to the Prince, and shook his head.

“You couldn’t keep a memory of how to talk to a woman?” he rumbled.

The Prince had no response to this, and so he refrained from speaking and simply helped Tomaz with the fire, still trying to find where he had gone wrong. He’d only been trying to compliment the girl. Why had she taken offense?

Leah came back sometime later, her arms full of rather large white mushrooms.

“Surprise!” she called to them, and the Prince was glad to see that whatever anger she had been holding against him had passed. “I found these down by the stream. We can cook them tonight and store them to eat as we travel.”

“Mmm,” Tomaz said, licking his lips, “Daishains. My favorite!”

They made and ate dinner quickly that night, talking happily amongst themselves. Afterward, the Prince and Tomaz sparred as Leah watched on. When they were done, the Prince was covered in sweat, and was sore beyond belief. A sudden idea occurred to him.

“Wait,” he said to the other two, “did you say there was a stream nearby?” Tomaz nodded.

“I think I’d like to go,” the Prince said. “It’s been a long time since ... well, I would like to clean myself ... that is to say, I -”

“Yeah yeah, you wish to *bathe*, we understand,” Leah said. “It’s that way - though why you want to go when it’s getting so cold is beyond me.”

“I like it cold,” the Prince said, and then excused himself, gathering up the grooming materials Leah had loaned him and making his way through the trees in the direction the girl had pointed.

She’d been right - the water was close to freezing. But as the Prince stripped off and ran it over his bruised and battered body, he felt that the cold was worth the cleansing. He hadn’t had the opportunity to thoroughly

wash himself since he'd left the Fortress - he, who had taken sometimes two baths a day. He chuckled, scraping himself with Leah's comb and some of Tomaz's soap, thinking about what he would have said then if he could see himself now.

Once he'd finished, he made his way back to the fire, wrapped in every piece of clothing he owned to protect against the cold. As he approached the camp, he heard the Exiles conversing softly. His comb slipped from his hand, and he pulled up short and bent down to pick it up. As he did, he overheard Tomaz speaking.

"... and then through the Pass and onto Vale."

The Prince froze in surprise. They must be consulting the girl's map - something they never did when he was nearby. He straightened up, comb in hand, and watched them through the trees.

The girl and the big man exchanged glances and then both broke into smiles.

"Home," Leah said.

"Home," the big man agreed. They held the gaze for a long moment, sharing a joy and elation that made the Prince giddy just watching it. He began to come forward, but stopped as Leah spoke again.

"What about the Prince?" she asked.

Tomaz, who had begun to busy himself with his bedroll, turned slowly back around to look at her.

"What about him?" was the soft rumbling reply. The girl stood up, rolling up the map and tucking it under her arm.

"He's a product of the Empire," she said. She was facing away from the Prince and he couldn't see her face, but her voice sounded resigned and ... sad.

"He's a product of a society whose teachings are that rebellion is the worst sin anyone can commit. You saw the power he has - how can we take him to Vale? How can we take him to our home, now that we know what he

is capable of, and knowing that he has been taught since infancy to hate us and everything we stand for?"

Tomaz studied her face for a long moment.

"He's changed," he said finally. "You can see it in his eyes. He sees us as his family now, not as members of the Exiled Kindred."

"I know that, Tomaz," she said quietly, and the Prince could hear, to his surprise, true affection in her voice. "But how will he see the rest of us?"

"We shouldn't be having this conversation, Eshendai, you and I both know that he has changed. He saved your life, and from what you described, doing so almost cost him his. He has great power, but he sees it as a curse, and if nothing else that gives me hope."

"Hope for what, Tomaz? Hope that he won't butcher us all when we sleep when he has a fond daydream about home? What if we take him to Vale and we find out that we were wrong about him?"

"Enough," Tomaz said. The Prince was surprised to hear disgust in his voice as he confronted the girl.

"You were chosen Eshendai to teach me, and I was chosen Ashandel to teach you. This is something you have never understood, that people change. The Kindred took me in, one of the elite members of the Society of Guardians, and I have become as loyal and proud a citizen of Vale as any man or woman that was born there. I remember them also taking in a scared young girl who didn't know where to turn when she -"

"Stop," she said harshly. "I know. But he is the Prince of Ravens, Tomaz. The Empress isn't some distant master or religious icon to him. She is his Mother. And if you want to talk about who knows how difficult it is to abandon one's family, then I think we can agree that I know more than you."

"We owe him a chance," Tomaz said emphatically. "If nothing else, we *owe him the chance.*"

The girl paused. Finally, she looked down and nodded.

"All right. All right, we'll take him to Vale," she said. "But ... if it were up to me alone he'd come as our prisoner or not at all. He's the Prince of

Ravens, and nothing will change that, no matter how many times we save him or he saves us. We're the exception to his rule that all Exiles are bad. He just happened to find two good ones, that's all he thinks. You can see it in his eyes - that's the change you're talking about. But if you, speaking to me as Ashandel, tell me that this is something I need to accept, then I will heed your word."

Tomaz looked at her for a long time, and what the Prince saw in the big man's face broke his heart: doubt. The giant didn't speak, but instead turned away from the girl, and they both began to get ready for bed.

For a long time, the Prince stood in the shadows, not knowing what to think. He remembered the looks of happiness they had exchanged, the happiness of going home that he had wanted to share with them. But now he realized how foolish that desire had been. They wouldn't want him to share in it - the Exiled Kindred would treat him just as Leah did, with suspicion and fear. And if he couldn't go with them and he couldn't go back, then ... where would he go? He turned around and walked away from the clearing once more, out of earshot of the two Exiles.

It was a strange thing, not having a home. He had been cast out of the place he had grown up in, cast out of the very society he'd been born into and existed in all of his life. And now ... he was going to join a band of rebels.

Was he? When had he made that decision?

He was an outcast, it was true. But he wasn't an Exile. He wasn't, and just as Leah had said, some last shred of pride in the Empire clung to him and made him reject those that had rejected it. True, there was injustice; there were things to be improved. But that was the responsibility of the Princes of the Realm, endowed with the power of the Talismans in order to make a difference for good in the Empire of Lucia. It was his responsibility, and he couldn't run from that.

After all of this ... the girl was right. How had she known?

The Prince couldn't turn his back on his duty. He knew it, now more than ever. He was not, nor could he ever be, anything less than the Prince of

Ravens, and it was his duty to remain with the Empire, even when it had turned its back on him. True, things were bad, he knew that now. But not so bad that the Empire was beyond redemption. If he was certain of anything, he was certain that if the situation were presented to the Empress herself, perhaps to the right members of the Most High, then things would improve. That was the way the Empire worked.

Wasn't it?

He shook his head, dislodging the thought. Open rebellion was not the answer. The Prince turned and looked back through the trees toward where the two Exiles were, reminiscing about their home. A home that had betrayed the Empire. They were traitors, and they were criminals.

But these two are good people, a voice said in the back of his mind. Good people who care about you, who have saved your life. People you cared about enough to use the Talisman to help them, to keep them from your own brother's men and the justice of the Empire.

"Shadows and light," the Prince muttered under his breath. "They're Exiles. They're committed to overthrowing the Empire - even the good that the Empire has in it."

He stood there for a long time, as night truly fell, the twilight fading to complete black. Eventually, he made his way back to the fire. When he came into the clearing he saw that Leah was curled up in a ball under a blanket by the fire, one hand on a dagger, ready for a fight even in sleep. Tomaz looked up from where he sat.

"I was about to come looking for you, princeling," the big man rumbled with a smile that made the Prince's stomach clench. The Prince forced his mouth into a grimace that he hoped passed for a smile and made an excuse about wanting a walk to stretch his cramped legs. He picked up the spare blanket and curled up under it in the crook of a nearby tree. As he did so, he saw that it had been purposely cleared of rocks and roots by a deft hand. He looked up and saw Tomaz wink at him.

"We know you like to sleep under trees. It was her idea."

He motioned his head toward the sleeping girl.

“Thanks,” the Prince said, “but I’m not very tired at the moment. I can take the first watch if you’d like. After all, I have slept quite a lot recently. I’ll wake you when the fire dies down.”

Tomaz’s eyes widened in surprise, but he smiled appreciatively.

“Sounds good to me,” he said, and pulled his own blanket over himself and lay back, his head pillowed on his crossed arms.

The Prince sat staring into the fire for a long time, wondering what he was going to do when morning came.

Chapter Sixteen: Choices

The next morning dawned with the Prince still holding watch, his mind whirling with thoughts. He hadn't been able to sleep, and in any case, he felt he owed a full night's rest to Tomaz and Leah for carrying him while he'd been unconscious.

Leah was the first to stir, waking up with a luxurious stretch like a cat. She opened her eyes and rolled over, taking in the banked fire and the sleeping form of Tomaz, then the Prince.

"Have you been on watch all night?" she asked, sleep coloring her voice. The Prince couldn't help but smile at the unfeigned surprise in her tone.

"Yes," he said simply. "It looked like you needed your rest. And I've been sleeping for a while, after all."

"I suppose I did," she said. Then in one fluid motion she rose to her feet, the blanket dropping off her, and she moved over to wake Tomaz. The Prince in the meantime went to the saddlebags and pulled out more cheese and bread for breakfast. He was pleased that his hands weren't shaking.

They ate their meal in silence, the two Exiles enjoying the food and the brisk morning air.

"What's our plan for moving on from here?" the Prince asked, bracing himself.

"We're going to make for the Pass of Roarke," Tomaz said, in a sleepy rumble. "There's a few passes through the mountains that we can use to cross - they're usually patrolled by rotating squads of men from Roarke, but if we're quick we'll be able to make it across the border before they even know we're there. Then we head to Vale -"

"No," the Prince said.

Leah and Tomaz stopped eating. The Prince looked up at them.

"What do you mean no?" Leah asked, eyes flashing.

“I mean you were right, Leah, I’m not one of you,” he said quietly. “I can’t let my personal injustices at the hands of the Empire make me believe rebellion is the right course of action. So I won’t be going with you through the Pass. I won’t be going to Vale.”

They sat staring at him with incredulity. He rushed on.

“The Empire is good,” he said emphatically. “It’s good for the people who live under its rule, it’s good for the development of the land, it’s good for the majority. And while you have saved me on multiple occasions, I will never rebel against the lawful rule of the Diamond Throne. I – I am ... grateful,” the word caught in his throat, but he forced it out, “and you have given me much to think about, but my place is in the Empire. I am a Prince of the Realm as long as I bear the Raven Talisman, and I cannot turn my back on my responsibility.”

A long silence followed this pronouncement. The girl stood up, staring at him, and the Prince knew that she felt vindicated. Here he was making all of the arguments she had made last night.

“And what about the slave auction you saw in Banelyn?”

The Prince flinched back, as if she’d physically hit him. The memory came back to him, unbidden, and he was once more nauseated.

“Yes, I know you saw it, I know you were there,” the girl continued. “You’ve seen the kind of men the Empire employs, scum like the Defenders, you saw that they were going to take me to Formaux and would have held me and tortured me until I was dead, simply because it would hurt my father. You’ve seen now what your Empire does to people!”

“Yes!” the Prince snapped back, “and that is why I am needed here! I can’t just run away from all of that, I can’t just give up and leave the Empire to run off and become a rebel. Do you know how many of the Most High ever leave Lucien to see the Empire? How many ever leave their own Province to visit a neighboring one if they do not need to? If I can make them see the world they’ve unknowingly created, then I can make the Empire better, I can make it –”

“And when you return and they kill you, what then? What’s your grand plan to deal with that?”

“What does it matter to you, I thought it was too risky to bring me back to your precious Vale anyway?!”

The shout came out of him before he could stop it, and Leah took a step back in shock at the hurt and reproach she heard in his voice. The Prince took a deep breath. This arguing was getting him nowhere.

“In any case, you’ve gotten your wish. I’m not going with you.”

“Your intentions are good, princeling,” Tomaz rumbled, a look of near-panic on his face, as if things were quickly getting very far out of hand. “But you had never left the capital city yourself until a very short while ago. You do not know how this world works. As soon as your name was taken from you, you were made into an outcast, and even if you wish to return to change things for the better, there are men and armies after you as we speak. You’ve killed Defenders. You’ve destroyed Death Watchmen. The life of a Bloodmage is on your hands. You’ve defied your Mother’s orders to return to the capital, ignored the commands of a Seeker, and saved the lives of two Exiled Kindred.”

The Prince shook his head. This was wrong, it was all wrong.

“But I can’t just run away, Tomaz! I can’t turn my back on my people, on the Empire, I can’t –”

“It has turned its back on you, princeling.”

“I won’t run away!”

“You’ll just go back and get yourself killed,” Leah muttered. “I should have known. Stupid men, why couldn’t we have kidnapped one of his sisters?”

“You wouldn’t want to meet my sisters,” the Prince retorted, shaking his head ruefully at the thought of Leah and Symanta in the same room.

“They can’t be worse than you!”

“Enough, both of you,” Tomaz said. A silence fell, as both Leah and the Prince turned away from each other and pretended to be very interested in examining the trees surrounding the clearing.

“If you wish to go, then we cannot keep you.”

The Prince looked quickly at the big man. Tomaz was quite clearly disappointed by this turn of events, but was just as clearly resigned to it. There was a deep sadness in his eyes, and the Prince quickly looked away, feeling as though he were betraying the man in some way.

“Yes we can keep him! We did it once, we can do it again!” Leah cried.

“No we cannot, Eshendai,” Tomaz said, turning to the girl, “we are being pursued by the Empire in force now. Things were different when we had a reasonable chance of passing through the Empire by stealth – but how can we tie up the Prince of Ravens and take him not only through the Pass of Roarke, but past the personal seat of the Prince of Oxen, who will have gotten the message days if not weeks ago that his brother is heading straight toward him? It’s common sense, and if you used your head you’d know it better than I do. Calm yourself and consider the situation.”

For a long moment it looked as though Leah would just ignore Tomaz. But as the Prince watched, the anger seemed to drain out of her, and her face grew calm and still. Her hands continued to clench and unclench by her sides, but eventually those too relaxed, and the Prince breathed easier.

“You’re right,” she said finally. “The benefits we could receive from his information do not outweigh the dangers of us not returning. The Elders need our report. We can’t take the risk of being caught by a border patrol.”

She turned to the Prince.

“We can’t let you go now,” she said, and he tensed, dropping immediately into a defensive stance, “but once we reach the road again near Roarke, we can part there.”

“How long?” the Prince asked.

“A few days at most,” she responded automatically, her eyes now focused past him as if seeing something in her memory. “It is far enough

from Roarke you won't be detected by the Prince of Oxen's forces, and it is close enough to the Pass that we can continue on without any added inconvenience."

She caught his gaze.

"And then you can go get yourself killed in whatever way you want," she said, the anger coming back to the surface. She turned away, and began to pack her belongings. The Prince looked over at Tomaz, but the big man had turned away as well and begun making his way to the river once more to fill the waterskins one last time before they left.

The three of them climbed onto their horses in silence soon after, the sun rising in the sky to their left, and set off toward Roarke.

The next few days passed in almost total silence. The Prince did not feel much like talking, so he kept silent unless a question was asked of him, and that was seldom enough as it appeared Leah and Tomaz were just as reluctant to speak as was he. However, it soon became apparent that they still weren't being followed, which surprised all three of them and made them wary. The Prince made a habit of reaching through the Talisman every night and every morning, searching for any sign of people following him, but time and again he found only the three of them in the middle of the giant forested mountain range.

The mountains began to become more noticeable as well, the ground dipping less and less often back toward sea level and instead continuing to climb. The Prince knew from lessons in geography that the Roarke mountain range was easily twice the size of the Elmists, and that passage straight over the top of them was next to impossible. He wondered how the Exiles were going to get around the Pass of Roarke.

None of my business now, he reminded himself firmly.

One night as they began to make camp while the sun was still in the sky, the Prince broached a subject that had been on his mind. Leah had disappeared into the trees, muttering something to Tomaz but not even acknowledging the Prince's presence.

“Do you really think we’re being followed?” the Prince asked Tomaz.

The big man looked up from starting a fire and raised an eyebrow at him. The Prince quickly continued.

“It’s not that I doubt your word,” the Prince said, “it’s just that it seems like we’re the only ones for miles. As a matter of fact, we are, I can tell you that much for certain. I haven’t even caught the slightest hint of the odd hunter or shepherd for days now.”

Tomaz looked at him thoughtfully for a moment, before letting out a long sigh and speaking.

“I’ve been wondering that as well, truth be told. It’s something of a curiosity that we haven’t caught a hint of trouble sooner. I can only assume that they’re unsure exactly where we are.”

“We’re almost a week past Lake Chartain,” the Prince insisted, “and we haven’t caught any sign of anyone. Maybe we got away clean this time. It’s possible don’t you –”

The Prince cut off mid-sentence. Something, as if summoned by their conversation, was coming. He turned quickly, looking through the trees out over the side of the mountain. There appeared to be nothing there, only landscape folding out underneath them. But the Prince was certain there was something. Why was he so sure there was something?

“Don’t I – ?”

“Quiet,” the Prince said. He squinted his eyes as the wind picked up, blowing in his face. He reached out with his senses, using the Raven Talisman. He became more aware of the abundance of life around him, the mountain forest full of bright points of light – but they all bore the same hazy, undefined quality. No people, nothing nearby but animals. Further away perhaps?

The Prince closed his eyes and knelt down to focus. He sent his mind out, questing in every direction, ranging over the forested mountains, down to the bottom of the valley. Nothing. It appeared that they were alone.

Wait – there!

It was so far away that the Prince knew he shouldn't be able to sense it: a bright point of life, coming toward them. But it wasn't a single point ... it seemed to move and pulsate just beyond his vision, expanding and contracting strangely as if moving in disparate parts. And then he understood.

"They've found our trail," the Prince said, standing quickly. "And there're following with an army. That must be why we haven't seen or heard them in so long, they've been gathering force. They probably found the Defenders, and knew they were on the right trail. My guess is they've got the entire countryside covered. They're still a few miles away ... I can barely feel them ... but they're coming quickly."

"Are you certain?" Tomaz asked.

The Prince nodded. Tomaz didn't hesitate.

"Find Leah," was all he said before turning and rushing back to the campsite.

Immediately, the Prince set off around the side of the mountain in the direction the Rogue girl had been headed. The Prince closed his eyes and the Talisman picked her up, pointing the Prince toward a river that came down from the mountaintop. He burst through the trees, already launching into an explanation of what was happening.

And there was Leah standing at the edge of the river as it poured down the hillside in a gently sloping stream, all of her clothes piled carelessly on a rock behind her.

The Prince stood breathless, his mind suddenly blank.

Her midnight black hair fell halfway down her back, shining and clinging to her light olive skin in a shimmering wave, glints of deep blue highlighted by the rays of the sun. Her skin glistened with water droplets from the stream, as she stood, back straight, arms spread wide to either side, drinking in the sun, the mountainside, and the miles of landscape spread out in front of her. A wind whipped through the trees, racing across the clearing as if to embrace her, and she breathed it in as if it were a spring

of youth and grace, making her shine with an inner light, her eyes closed, mouth open and jaw slack in surrender. Her skin dimpled in the cold, but she didn't cover herself. She stood in the rushing brook as much a part of the world as the wind, the stream, and the earth itself.

Without warning, she whipped around and locked eyes with him. The Prince didn't remember having walked forward, but he now stood on the bank of the stream. He wasn't sure what he expected to happen, perhaps for her to yell at him to turn around, or for her to run for her clothes, even attack him for invading her privacy, but she did none of these things. She just continued to stare at him. She shifted slightly, and as the sun hit her from another angle the Prince's breath caught in his throat.

Scars crisscrossed her body, some red, thick and ugly, others barely a razor's width and white, nearly invisible. Some were scars from battle, but many of them were long whip scars, their latticed crossings along her arms and shoulders standing out as if branded into the skin.

She'd been beaten. Horribly.

Horror and revulsion seized the Prince – not at her disfigurement, but at the person who had done such a thing; his stomach knotted up, and anger rose in his throat, choking him. Each of the scars seemed to be a slap to the face, a kick in the gut. A thin, nearly invisible, scar ran vertically down her chest and seemed to stand out most of all as she pierced him with her green eyes, eyes that dared him to look away, dared him to defy the evidence of the Empire's cruelty.

Slowly she took a step forward, the muscles in her legs bunching and stretching with a steely, coiled, grace. Her hands slowly lifted to each side and she inclined her head.

"Your Mother's legacy, my Prince," she said, bowing to him, voice emotionless but gaze so intense it felt like a hand had begun to squeeze his heart and lungs, leaving him panting and unable to speak.

"Be glad you can choose to ignore it. Some of us were never given the chance."

The sound of her voice broke through his clouded mind, and he dropped his gaze to the ground, looking anywhere but at her.

“Tomaz,” he stopped, his voice coming out in a croak. He swallowed and started again, still not looking at her. “We’re breaking camp – they’ve found our trail, we’re leaving, Tomaz sent me to find you. I’ll see you back – back there.”

He turned and ran, not even waiting to see if she would follow him. When he had reached Tomaz, he was out of breath, but the ex-Blade Maser didn’t seem to notice.

“Where’s Leah?” he asked.

“Coming,” the Prince managed to respond.

“Good,” the big man said, finishing the packing.

Leah burst into the clearing not a minute later, once more clothed, and without hesitation jumped onto her horse.

“This way,” she called out as she spurred the mount through the trees.

As they rode, the Prince could feel the men behind them hot on their trail. That was a surprise – they must all be on horse as well, and though the Prince, Leah, and Tomaz all had mounts that were well rested, the Defenders, despite their boasts, certainly hadn’t been picky when purchasing the animals. None of them were built for speed.

They rode around the lip of the mountain before dipping down into a small valley that split into two paths at the far end. When they reached the fork, the Prince realized the path to the right led downward, and in the distance he could see that the mountains gave way to a large thoroughfare with a steady amount of traffic on it. The road to Roarke.

“That’s the way back to the main road,” Tomaz said, breathing heavily, pointing the way the Prince was looking. “This is where we part ways. Hopefully they will split their force and we will both have an easier time of avoiding them.”

The Prince looked at the trail leading down the mountain, and turned his horse to go. But he paused. He had to know. He turned back and looked at Leah.

“How did you get those scars?” he asked.

Her eyes widened slightly, in surprise or anger the Prince couldn't tell. She shifted her hands on the reins. Tomaz's eyes narrowed on the Prince.

“What do you know about scars, boy?”

“It's fine, Tomaz,” she said, looking back over her shoulder. The Prince didn't need to follow her gaze to know that the army was closer; he could feel them growing nearer every second.

“I lived in the city of Tyne until I was eleven years old,” she finally said, turning back to him, voice coming out hurried but quite clear. “The Empress came to visit. I put on my best dress and went out with my family to watch. When she passed where we were, we were expected to bow. No one had bothered to tell me. So, I was left standing, smiling up at this beautiful figure on a beautiful white horse. She was beauty incarnate and I was so happy to be standing there, able to see her finally. Then, not even knowing what I had done wrong, guards seized me. I was taken out of the crowd, brought to the center of town, and whipped with a lash by the Prince of Lions himself. My family took me home and whipped me as well, all the while telling me what a terrible girl I was, and at the same time that I should be grateful. Apparently it was an honor to be beaten by one of the Children, an honor to be recognized by the Empress even if it was for punishment. I came within an inch of death for bringing shame on my family. My father ... he spat on me as he left the room, leaving me hanging from the chains where slaves were whipped for disobedience. He was a member of the Most High, those virtuous men and women you hope to convert. My mother made no comment. She didn't need to - I could see what she thought of me, clear as day, written across her face. When I recovered, I ran away.”

Her eyes were blazing with emerald fire as she dared him to say anything.

“You can go back to your precious Empire,” she spat. “But I know what they’ll do to you. I know what they did to an innocent child who wanted to believe in glory and hope and ideals. Go. But when they kill you, when you watch them slice you open with no remorse in their eyes, then you’ll understand. Then you’ll understand that the world is made of people like us, who see evil and fight it, and people like you, who see evil and excuse it.”

She wheeled her horse around, and launched herself up the mountain side. After a brief second, Tomaz followed, spurring his own mount even harder to catch up.

The Prince watched them until they disappeared into the mountain forest, numb, empty, feeling the need to go, to escape the pursuing men, but knowing, deep down in his heart, that once he did his path was set. Part of him had known, all along, that what Leah had just told him was true. He would die. There was no hope for him.

And still, knowing this, he slowly turned his horse to begin the path down the mountain. The horse began to trot, and the path fell away, and suddenly, not knowing why, maybe just wanting one last glimpse of the two Exiles, his companions - his friends? - he thrust his mind through the Raven Talisman and sent his consciousness up to them, following them along the road that led higher up into the mountains. He found them, and watched them go in his mind’s eye, feeling their life dwindle as they rode further and further away. They were almost gone. Gone forever.

Sudden as a flash of lightning, he felt another life spring into being in the direction they had gone. He jerked back, shocked. There had been nothing, and now there was a growing life energy focused in a single point at the top of the mountain along the left hand fork. At first the Prince thought he was seeing things, but the life continued to grow - to grow? How was that possible?

Understanding hit him, cold and dead, numbing him with terror and fear for the Exiles. Only one thing could leave that kind of signature.

The Prince looked down the right hand fork, down toward the distant road. The path duty would lead him to. He looked back up the way he had come, back toward the left hand fork where Tomaz and Leah had gone, and still he could sense it, that life growing, morphing, building. It was huge ... elemental.

In panic, he looked behind him and felt the enormous multitude of men combing through the forest, making sure he wouldn't slip through their net this time. There were thousands of them, and they were moving very quickly. He wouldn't have time to come back this way if he didn't take the trail down the mountain now.

"Shadows and light!" he growled to himself.

But what does it matter? he thought. *They're only Exiles. They chose this life*

-

Anger rose up in him like a bolt of lightning, and cleared his mind, consumed his well thought out arguments and plans, and in that instant he knew where he belonged.

He kicked his boots into the sides of his horse and was rocketed up the mountainside. He could feel the energy of the new life still growing and he knew it wasn't over yet. Thunder sounded in the sky above him and he looked up to see black clouds forming over the top of the mountain. Too fast - he wouldn't reach them in time!

He urged all of the speed he could out of his mount, climbing higher and higher, leaving the road to Roarke far behind him, racing against the building clouds. If it started to rain, then he'd know the process was complete and the monster would become corporeal.

Trees flew past him as he tracked both the life energy of the Exiles and kept a check on the life of the creature. The trail was leading him well up into the mountains, high enough that the wind whipping past him cut straight through his layers of clothing. His horse was frothing at the mouth, but the Prince continued to push it mercilessly.

Faster! he urged it. The Exiles were close, but he didn't know if he'd reach them in time. He looked up and saw the clouds converging on a spot not too far ahead of them. His horse came to a small clearing in the midst of a grove of trees, and there they were, moving at a steady trot twenty yards in front of him.

"STOP!"

The two Exiles turned in their saddles to look back, barely slowing as they did so, but then reining in their horses as they saw him. Tomaz dismounted and moved forward, roaring to the Prince over the rising wind.

"WHAT IN THE NAME OF THE TYRANT'S SAGGY LEFT -?"

"THERE'S A DAEMON RIGHT IN FRONT OF YOU!" he yelled back.

They both stared at him blankly, obviously not hearing him, keeping a tight rein on their horses as they tried to keep them calm against the force of the rising wind.

"A WHAT?" Tomaz shouted back.

"A DAEMON!" the Prince roared. "AN ELEMENTAL! WE NEED TO LEAVE - NOW!"

"WE'RE NOT LEAVING!" Leah shouted back, clearly having heard almost nothing he'd said. "RUN BEFORE YOU CAN'T!"

"NO, LEAH, STOP!"

Lightning and thunder broke through the clouds and momentarily blinded the Prince and left his ears ringing. Rain began to fall, and the Prince looked up at the sky, terror seizing him. He didn't know how they were going to get out of this one.

The clouds began to circle in on each other, and lightning and thunder rocked the world once more. The black clouds parted, and an enormous shape plummeted toward them.

The Storm Daemon crashed into the ground in front of them, lightning shooting across the ground in sheets. The Prince dove behind a tree and the raw energy shot past him, leaving his muscles limp and jerky. He forced

himself back up, looking around frantically for Leah and Tomaz – hoping they had found cover across the clearing.

The Prince turned and looked at the creature before him.

It was nearly twenty feet tall, made of a blinding white substance that the Prince knew to be the essence of the storm itself. It wore a white helm shaped like a crown, made of razor sharp shards of ice and flickering pulses of lightning, around a skeletal head, out of which glared eyes that were pockets of ice. It was clothed in blue and white armor and a cloak that flowed like storm clouds, gray and misty. Hands like claws, each of the fingers as long as the Prince's arm, held a staff as long as it was tall, one side a pointed, wicked looking saber blade, the other end a cruel spear point. The entire length crackled with raw lightning.

The Daemon drew a deep breath and the air in the clearing rushed toward it, a mighty wind that tore at the Prince's clothes and pulled him toward the monster.

The Prince knew of no way to defeat a Daemon that did not involve killing the Bloodmages who had created it, and as distance mattered little when there was a full circle of twelve summoning a Daemon, the Bloodmages could be halfway to the castle of Roarke. All that they could do now was run.

The Prince saw the two Exiles looking out from behind a tree not too far from him. Hoping against hope the Daemon wouldn't notice him, he took off running as fast as he could in their direction. There was a roar of surprise as the Daemon caught the motion. The Prince dove behind the tree hiding Tomaz and Leah just as the creature brandished its staff, shooting a crackling bolt of lightning through the spot the Prince had just been. The Prince ran headlong into Tomaz's chest and stumbled back. Big arms shot out and steadied him.

"We need to run! Now!" he roared over the rushing wind. Lightning and thunder crackled again, and the top of the tree was severed from the trunk and came crashing down nearly on top of them.

“We need Valerium!” Leah called. She was peering around the edge of the tree as if examining how to fight off the monster. The Prince grabbed her by the cloak and pulled her back, turning her around to shout in her face.

“What in the Empress’ name is Valerium?!” he cried.

The answer was lost as the rest of the tree was uprooted when the Storm Daemon attacked again. The Prince was suddenly airborne, thrown across the clearing. He landed with a crash on a tree root that dug into his back and tore his breath away. He choked and tried to push himself to his feet, but the Daemon was there, hurricane winds twisting around its head, as a clawed, blue and gray foot shot out and pinned him to the ground. The Prince let out a cry of pain and struggled vainly to free himself, the heat already seeping from his blood as the cold bit deeply into his body. He looked up into the icy, enchanted eyes of the Elemental, and knew there was nothing he could do to save himself.

The Daemon raised its staff, lightning crackling along its length, and brought it down. The Prince closed his eyes and waited for the end.

But it didn’t come – instead, there was a piercing cry of pain from above him, like that of lightning ripping open the fabric of the sky, and the Prince opened his eyes. The Daemon reared back and turned, a dazzling white dagger sticking out of its neck, just below the edge of its crown shaped helm.

A figure burst from concealment, a sword like a white flame held in one hand.

The Daemon charged the figure, roaring in rage and pain. That alone was enough to stun the Prince – he had never seen a Daemon in pain before. The figure dodged and the sword lanced out, to the Prince’s continued amazement, in the complicated sword form of Wolf on the Mountain, flawlessly allowing the figure to dodge the Daemon while slicing through the blue-white armor coating it.

Another flash of white caught the Prince’s eye, and he looked over and saw a second figure, nearly as large as Tomaz, wielding an enormous ax

made of the same white metal. The figure reared its arms back, and then hurled the ax through the air; it swung through a large arc, and lopped one of the Daemon's arms clean off. A terrible scream rent the air, a howling and tearing that resounded with the raw power of thunder and the piercing shriek of wind. The Daemon swung its staff, lightning branching from the saber's blade, through the air - but the figure had dodged back, and it rolled to the side just as a flash of energy shot over its head, ripping into a pine tree and shattering it into a thousand flying bits of kindling.

The smaller figure took a running leap, and threw the white sword through the air. It flew completely straight, as if a force was pushing it directly through the intervening space toward its target. With a scraping, ear-splitting crack, it plunged into the creature's neck, just below the crown-shaped helm. As it sunk in, the white metal seemed to pulse, and the Daemon appeared to swell. And then, with a final heaving cry, the elemental monster exploded into a thousand shards of ice that went flying in as many directions. The Prince, Leah, and Tomaz threw themselves to the ground in a heap, hands covering their heads. Lightning flashed and thunder roared; the Prince felt a searing force and an accompanying percussive boom rock through his body and explode in his ears -

And then it all stopped, and everything was deadly quiet. The Prince lifted the edge of his drape-over, which had blown up over his head, and looked to where the Daemon had been. But where the creature had stood was now just a blasted heath, and in the sky the scattered clouds of a dying storm.

The Prince felt his head lift, almost involuntarily, as if drawn by a living lodestone, his eyes flying across the ground, trying to locate the two figures that had saved them - the two figures that had killed that which should have been immortal.

There!

The Prince was on his feet, stumbling across the clearing before he knew what he was doing. As he stumbled over the uneven ground he saw

that the two figures had also thrown themselves to the earth, and were only just slowly picking themselves up.

“Davydd!”

The Prince gaped in surprise as Leah shot across the clearing toward the smaller of the two figures, laughing in a way he had never seen. The Prince shook his head, trying to force his eyes to focus, and when he looked up again the smaller figure had resolved into a tall, lean young man, returning a gleaming white sword to a sheath slung across his back, and the long white dagger to a loop at his belt.

“Leah!” he laughed out in response, wrapping her up in a tight embrace.

“Lorna,” rumbled Tomaz.

The Prince looked at him and then toward the bigger figure to whom he was nodding, and noticed it was a woman. She had short-cropped light hair cut as if a bowl had been placed over her head and all of the hair sticking from it had been sheared off. She walked forward with a lumbering gait that reminded the Prince of the bears sometimes brought to the Fortress for court entertainment.

“I’ve always told you that you should carry Valerium with you,” the young man said to Leah with a roguish smile.

“Good against Elementals,” Leah responded, smile turning into a frown, “but terrible against everything else.”

“Now that, is a complete and utter fallacy that I will not accept, particularly coming from my sister.”

“Sister?” the Prince asked incredulously.

Both of them turned to look at him, and with a shock the Prince realized they were almost identical. With one simple, very noticeable difference: the boy had shining, scarlet pupils.

“What’s this? You don’t usually pick up strays,” the young man said, looking the Prince up and down and smiling as if at a private joke. The red

eyes seemed to mock him, and the Prince couldn't help but think of the red crystal Bloodmages carried with them to perform their magic.

Now that the Prince had a good look at him, he was surprised he hadn't pegged him for Leah's brother immediately. He had the same lithe frame as Leah, with the core of steely cat-like grace that made her movements seem like she was dancing. He had the same shade of black hair, though he wore his short and in an unkempt, windswept tousel. And the eyes - both red and green had a piercing quality that showed a clear and masterful intelligence. What was different was their carriage; where Leah held herself with a tension and rigidity that seemed to exude strength, the young man held himself with a slouching ease that radiated command and charisma. They seemed like two sides of the same coin.

"He's a friend," Tomaz said from behind them. They all turned to look at the big man as he approached, followed by the young man's companion and leading five horses, two of which were shiny, light gray, and quite obviously meant for speed and endurance.

"Well, a friend," the young man acknowledged. "Where do you come from and what could you have possibly done to earn my sister's company? She would rather travel with a talking parrot than another person."

He smiled mockingly at Leah.

But Leah was ignoring him and staring directly at the Prince, who felt his throat go dry. A few awkward seconds passed, wherein the Prince just managed to prevent himself from swallowing nervously. What was she going to say?

"He's Tomaz's project," she said finally, "he fell in with us when we were passing through the Elmist Mountains. He's a runaway from a family of the Most High. Something, I think you will find as intriguing as I did. His name is ... Raven."

"Raven," Davydd said, tasting the word as he said it. "Very well."

The Prince held Leah's gaze and tried to convey his gratitude without words, but whether she understood or not he couldn't tell.

“Mmm,” the young man said, looking back and forth between them. He stepped forward abruptly with a smile that seemed to mock both the Prince and himself, and offered his hand.

“Davydd Goldwyn,” he said.

Slowly, the Prince reached out and grasped the hand, noticing that it was slim but nonetheless covered in calluses that belied constant work with a sword. He reached out briefly through the Raven Talisman, but felt nothing special about this Exile. How had he managed to destroy a Daemon?

“Raven,” the Prince said, taking Leah’s lead.

“And this is Lorna,” he said, dropping the Prince’s hand and motioning to the woman who had come up with Tomaz. She had retrieved the large battle ax from where it had been flung after the Daemon had exploded, and wore it slung on her back just like Davydd wore his sword. He was shocked to find that she stood just a head shorter than Tomaz. She grunted and nodded to the Prince before turning to Davydd and speaking in a husky voice.

“Eshendai – there is a force coming on us very quickly. It looks to be several thousand strong, all cavalry with mounted archers.”

“How do you know that? They must be a mile away still,” the Prince blurted out, reaching out and sensing the army still far away but certainly gaining.

“Ignore him,” Leah said with a long-suffering look, “he thinks he’s a tracker but he has no idea what he’s doing.”

The Prince felt his ears burn as they all turned away from him and looked at Davydd and Leah. He understood that she was covering for him, but he still didn’t like it.

“Is there a cache of supplies nearby we could go to?” Leah asked Davydd.

“No,” he responded, “and you’re not going to get much farther on those horses so the normal route is out.”

For a moment the two of them stood silently thinking, and then Davydd clicked his tongue and made for his mount.

“The bridge.”

Leah’s eyes widened.

“It’s finished already?”

“Indeed,” Davydd said with another rakish smile. “We were part of the first scouting party sent across. We were trying to navigate a path through this area – it’s ringed with Bloodmage traps like that Storm Walker.”

“I should have rechecked the area before running through,” Leah said angrily, “I led us right into it. I was so focused on ... nevermind.”

The Prince’s eyes flicked in her direction and saw small spots of color light on her cheeks, but the young man didn’t seem to notice.

“No worries, sister mine,” Davydd said. “We’ll lead them up to the higher pass, cross the bridge, and cut the restraints. We should have enough time to get there and they won’t be able to follow us. We’ll have to repair it eventually, but since winter will be on us soon and the pass will be closed for months, we can deal with that later.”

“The Elders will take us to task for ruining what was just built,” said the large woman. Her mouth didn’t move much when she spoke – in fact it barely opened, making her words sound like a kind of soft, bass growl.

“You’re right, but there’s not help for it,” Leah said simply. She looked at Tomaz, who nodded his assent, and they all mounted, the Prince remaining silent, seeing no way forward but to go with the group for now – he had to stay out of reach of that army.

They made their way out of the clearing, and continued the upward trek, passing the midway point on the mountain and beginning to make their way past patches of snow. The Prince pulled his drape-over closer about him and settled the hood upon his head. It helped a little, but he was still shivering. They continued in this way for the better part of the afternoon, keeping up a quick trot along a narrow hunting trail, working their way through territory treacherous enough that the army coming up behind them would no doubt be forced to slow to a crawl to maneuver their larger numbers.

At one point they passed along a ridge that afforded them a view of a castle and city far down at the entrance to a large pass through the mountain range. The castle of Roarke.

The Prince reached out and felt the life of his brother Ramael even from the large distance. The Ox Talisman endowed his brother with enhanced physical strength and power, and he was positioned here in the southern most Province because of that fact. He was not the general that Rikard was, but he was the most unforgiving and brutal of all the Children. His physical strength was matched only by his force of will - and he had never been defeated on the battlefield in an open fight. The Exiled only managed to keep him on this side of the Pass because he could not bring his full force to bear on them; they were able to hide by stringing his force along with ambushes and false trails that led nowhere.

Suddenly the Prince realized the significance of what was about to happen. He was about to pass into the lands of the Exiled Kindred, a place where none of his siblings and none of the subjects of the Empire had been for nearly half a millennia.

"Why did you come back?" Leah asked.

The Prince looked up from examining the castle in the pass and into the frowning face of the girl. He realized he had fallen behind the group of Exiles and she had fallen back as well to talk to him.

"You needed help," he said quietly. "You didn't know the Daemon was coming. I thought I could warn you in time, and we could get away before...."

He trailed off and shrugged.

"Guess that didn't work out particularly well," she said.

They exchanged a glance and he laughed ruefully. "I suppose not."

Together they rode along for a stretch of time, not saying anything. Finally, the Prince had to break the silence.

"And also," he said, "I couldn't ignore what I'd seen."

He felt his cheeks turning red and kept his eyes firmly facing ahead. He felt her do so as well, and when she spoke it was with a pausing awkwardness that was very unlike her.

“You could have. Ignored it, I mean. None of your brothers and sisters would have even given it a second glance. And none of them would have listened to what I said ... for which, I apologize. It was said in anger.”

“I ... there is no need for apologies. And I know that none of the other Children would have come to help you,” he responded, “but the more time I spend away from them the more I realize I’m not very much like them after all.”

They rode in silence again for a good amount of time, following Davydd, Tomaz, and Lorna at a quick trot. As they rounded a boulder completely covered in snow and ice, she spoke again, her voice misting in the air.

“I know you didn’t want to come with us,” she said, her voice taking on a steely quality as if expecting a fight. “But it doesn’t look like you have much of a choice. And I should tell you that once you’ve gone over the pass, you won’t be able to come back.”

The Prince looked up sharply.

“What?”

He pulled hard on his reins and the horse came to an abrupt stop amidst a small cloud of dislodged snow and earth. Leah pulled up as well. The others heard the noise and turned.

“We don’t allow people to leave our lands. Once someone has crossed through the Pass or over the mountains with us, they have to remain in Vale until the Elders agree they are ready to leave.”

“And how long would that take?”

“It’s not a matter of time,” she said, “it’s a matter of trust.”

He looked at her for a long moment, and then to Tomaz waiting further up the trail. He reached back with his mind and felt the army of the Empire still following behind them. The choice appeared very simple on its face: go

forward with the Exiles, or die with the army. He nodded and set his horse in motion once more, the shivers running through him only partially due to the cold. He'd made his choice back at the crossroads - he'd thrown his lot in with the Exiles. His mind tried to whirl into action but he shut it down. This was his only way forward - there would be time for thought and reflection later.

They came to the bridge not too long afterwards. It was a simple thing, made of wood and rope that was coated in tar and resin to provide a steady footing for horses. They all blindfolded their animals in preparation to make their way across.

The Prince felt his heart beating faster in his chest as they crossed the bridge. It was barely fifty feet long, and it was sturdy enough that the Prince felt no worry of falling even though they were suspended better than a thousand feet in the air, and below them yawned a black, shadowed abyss. What had his heart knocking against his ribs was the realization of what he was doing.

Once they were on the other side, Tomaz and Lorna destroyed the wooden restraints that held the bridge in place, and then began to saw through the ropes that held it up. After a quarter of an hour, with the sharp sound of snapping fibers, the rope unwound and split, and the bridge fell into the chasm, crashing and resounding off the steep stone walls. The Prince winced with each sound, unable to control his frayed nerves. The four Exiles all breathed a noticeable sigh of relief, but the Prince did not.

He followed them as they made their way through the mountain passes on the other side of the chasm, and soon they began to make their way back downward, this time on the other side of the mountain range. For the first time in history of the Empire, a Prince of the Realm had peacefully crossed into the Seventh Principality.

Chapter Seventeen: The Lands of the Kindred

As they rode, the Prince began remembering what the Imperial scholars had told him about the Kindred, and also what he had been able to glean from forbidden texts in the secret Fortress Library that held accounts of the generals who had attempted to invade the Kindred's sanctuary. What it came down to in the end was that while the Empire had far superior numbers, strategists, and all the resources of war, they could not bring these things to bear on the Kindred. The Pass of Roarke forced the Empire to invade through a single fixed point. A number of times, an ocean attack had been tried, but the shores that bordered the nation south of the mountains were a series of treacherous cliffs and murderous tides, impossible for a large force to navigate. But even given these obstacles, the Empire should have conquered long ago. It was, in the end, the ingenuity of the Kindred themselves that had fended off the Empire for nearly one thousand years.

Any invading army that managed to pass beyond Roarke, through the mountains, and into the land of the Kindred, found itself wandering aimlessly through lands that turned from desert to forest overnight. Rivers would erupt from bare rock, cutting an army in two. Days and nights were not fixed - darkness would fall sometimes barely hours after the sun rose, and sometimes day would continue on for an entire week. The only man who had been able to successfully invade the Kindred lands was the Prince of Oxen, and only because he had pushed his army with no concern for his men's wellbeing. Twice he had invaded with a force numbering in the hundreds of thousands and tracked down the Exiles, but twice he had been repulsed, his army too worn down by attrition to win the day.

The Prince had never heard more than wild speculation as to how the Kindred were able to manipulate the land. Some said it was an ancient magic that had existed before the Empress had come from across the sea; others said that one of the servants who had come with Her had betrayed Her and taken Her secrets to the farthest part of the Empire. Still others, the most

zealous of Her followers, insisted that it was the Empress' will to allow the Exiled Kindred to remain, and that She would, on the day of Her Reckoning, lead an army into the heart of the lands and wipe them from the face of the earth, turning illusion into reality.

Once they had descended from the mountains, the Prince was informed by the Exiles that the city of Vale, nexus of the Exiled Kindred's power, and final stronghold against the ever-looming shadow of the Empress on her Diamond Throne, was located barely more than a full day of travel from the Pass of Roarke. The Prince reined in his horse abruptly and the others all stopped to look at him.

"What?" he asked in shock. "That's impossible!"

The red-eyed Eshendai laughed; the sound rang out with a rich baritone quality that, again, seemed to mock the Prince.

"I thought you said he was one of the Most High?" the young man said to Leah. "I thought he'd be more intelligent."

The Prince's blood boiled and he had to fight to keep his hand from reaching for the dagger at his belt. Tomaz seemed to have read the Prince's mind and hastily broke in with a deep rumble.

"The magic of the Council of Elders makes it so that anyone without an Anchor is unable to see through the protections we have in place. It's the greatest of our defenses against the Empire."

Davydd, still chuckling, rode on ahead with Lorna, and the Prince sullenly followed, Leah and Tomaz hanging back with him.

"What's an Anchor?" the Prince asked.

"It's a kind of totem, unique to each person who carries it," Tomaz responded. He gave the Prince a brief look of interest mingled with excited anticipation.

"I wonder what will happen to you without one?"

"Wait - why can't you give me one?"

"What part of 'unique to each person who carries it' didn't you understand, princeling?"

The Prince looked over at Leah. She had cocked an eyebrow at him.
“Even if we somehow had a spare Anchor it wouldn’t work for you.”

“Why not?”

“An Anchor is only given to those who have sworn loyalty to the Council of Elders above the Empire, for the preservation of the nation of Aemon.”

“What is Aemon?”

“Aemon was the first Exiled Kindred,” Tomaz responded. “He founded the Kindred with the help of the land’s original inhabitants.”

“The savages?” the Prince asked skeptically.

Leah and Tomaz exchanged a glance.

“Keep that opinion to yourself,” the big man rumbled. “Most of the Kindred are not Exiles from the Empire like we are. We joined them, yes, but they have been here for longer than living memory – before the Empress came. The people who live in Vale are their descendants, mixed with those like us who they took in.”

“The Exiled Servant,” the Prince said slowly.

“What?’ Leah asked sharply.

“A story,” the Prince explained, “I was told when I was growing up. A servant who came over with my ... with the Empress when she crossed the sea. He stole one of her greatest secrets and fled, taking refuge in the mountains. He was never found.”

“Aemon,” Tomaz said, nodding. “That man was Aemon.”

The Prince looked up, and suddenly they were now in the middle of the strangest forest he’d ever seen.

“Argh!”

He turned around and looked behind them. There was foliage as far as the eye could see, large trees he had no name for dripping long ropes of what he assumed must be vines. A bird the size of an eagle flew over his head with a bill made of the colors of the rainbow. There was no sign of the

mountains they had just crossed over, and heat lay heavy on him like a wet blanket.

“How - how are we in forest?” he asked, fighting to keep his voice calm.

“A forest?” Tomaz asked excitedly.

“Yes, a forest!”

“We’re not in a forest, princeling,” Leah said. “We’re walking through a field.”

As soon as she said the word ‘field,’ the world gave an odd sideways lurch as if someone had pulled a tablecloth out from under a set table, leaving everything where it was but revealing what was underneath. The Prince saw a field of wheat flowing around them, felt a cool breeze on his cheeks, saw that the sun was dipping down toward the horizon before him - and then the world lurched back, and it was a forest again. There was no breeze, the sun was only just rising in the east, and everything was back to normal.

“So - so this is the defense you were talking about?”

His voice came out somewhat choked.

“Yes,” she responded with a grin, “and it looks like it’s working.”

“So - you don’t see that rather large ... cat? Over there?” the Prince asked, motioning off to their right.

“Nope. And neither do you.”

“No, I see it, it’s standing right there. It’s huge!”

“Your mind isn’t Anchored,” Leah said. “You see whatever your mind cobbles together from past experiences, things you’ve read. But it’s all illusion. Not reality.”

“Whatever I imagine seeing?” the Prince asked confused. Leah nodded.

“The genius of the defense is that it doesn’t change your mind at all,” she said, “it simply makes the world look like a blank canvas. Your brain fills it in however it sees fit. Your default image must be of a forest, or, from your

description, a jungle even. Strange – I would have thought you'd be walking through the corridors of the Fortress or the streets of Lucien."

As soon as she mentioned the Fortress the world gave another lurch, this time so violent that the Prince felt his stomach protest and bile rise in his throat. He was in a long stone corridor, tapestries on either side of him depicting famous battles, a small alcove to his right holding a gaudy golden chalice –

The forest - jungle? - returned, and the Prince abruptly leaned over the side of his horse, feeling he was about to retch.

"Whoa there," Tomaz said, reaching over and holding onto the neck of the Prince's shirt, "what did you see that time?"

"Fortress," he managed to get out, breathing heavily, his stomach settling back down as the cold air calmed his nerves.

"Interesting," Leah said, "is it because I mentioned the Fort – ?"

"Don't say it!" the Prince snapped. The world did a half-lurch, but the Prince was able to squint his eyes and keep himself in the forest.

"Ugh – how long is it going to take to get to Vale?" the Prince asked, doing his best to keep his mind blank.

"We'll have to camp for the night, and then we'll get there early morning tomorrow," Leah said.

"Shadows and light," he cursed. They lapsed into silence and the Prince noticed that the forest had begun to shift unsteadily at the edges of his vision. A twist in the contours of the land reminded him vaguely of a stream he'd seen in the Elmist Mountains.

"Keep talking," he pleaded as a stream suddenly sprung into being running alongside them.

"About what?" Tomaz asked.

"Anchors," the Prince said at random. "How are they unique?"

"It's the nature of Valerium," Tomaz responded.

"You mentioned that before – what is Valerium?"

"It's a type of metal," Tomaz began. He was cut off abruptly by Leah.

"It's a type of *metalworking*," she corrected.

"Well, why don't you tell the man about it?" Tomaz responded with a grin, motioning her to continue. She smiled apologetically but kept talking.

"A type of metalworking that takes iron ore and combines it with pure Valerium ore - only found in the mines east of the city of Vale - at extraordinary temperatures. When the alloy cools, what's left behind is then reheated and oxidized - the same way that steel is made - and the result is a pure white metal that is denser than steel and can be honed to a razor's edge. It's powerful - a weapon made of Valerium is as much better than the best Tynian steel as steel is over the copper or bronze weapons people used at the beginning of Cumrunian Era, which was nearly three millennia before -"

"No history lessons please," the Prince said through a tightly clenched jaw. "Why don't you use it then?"

"It's deadly against any kind of magic and stands up well against other weapons. But it's extremely difficult to wield, owing to the fact it's heavier than steel and that if it's struck just right, the blade shatters."

"What?" the Prince asked, confused. "I thought you said it was denser than steel?"

"It is," Leah's brow furrowed as she continued, trying to remember, "but something about the way the blades are forged makes it brittle when struck at the right angle. That's why all Valerium blades are curved and single sided. It actually makes better axes than swords - you saw Lorna's? Good - but daggers made from it are terrible. The smaller the metal, the weaker the alloy, for a reason no one has been able to explain. Daggers made from it are good for throwing, not much else. They're just too heavy. And the swords made from it have never felt right to me. So, I stick with steel. I've never had problems."

The Prince nodded. He had been trained in single-edged swords and found them easier to wield than their double-edged brothers, but if you could handle daggers like the girl could, why bother with anything else?

“So Anchors are made of Valerium. How do you make it unique to a person?” he asked. The conversation was helping him keep his mind off the shifting landscape, which was a blessing. It had settled for the moment into a scene from the Elmist Mountains, and he wanted to keep it that way as long as possible.

“When the metal is forged, the first person to touch a drop of their blood to the Anchor becomes linked to it.”

The Prince looked up sharply and the world spun round him. He closed his eyes for a second before speaking to let the vertigo pass.

“Blood magic?” he asked.

“Not the way you think of it,” Tomaz rumbled.

“Bloodmages are a corruption of the art the Council has perfected.” Leah said hotly. “Their magic involves blood of others, sacrifices, even sometimes – ”

“I know,” the Prince said, and then lowered his voice so only they could hear him. “Prince of Ravens, remember?”

“Oh. Right. I suppose you would know more about it than I do.”

“I’ve seen it,” he said darkly. To his surprise the world remained stable even though he was thinking of a distinct place in his memory. There was a brief silence as both Tomaz and Leah seemed to contemplate what it was he was talking about, but neither of them questioned him about it.

“How’re the illusions?” the girl asked.

“Good, as long as I don’t focus on them.”

“Well, hold on a bit longer,” Tomaz said. “The enchantments only exist around the borders with the Empire. A few hours into tomorrow and you’ll be fine.”

“Tomorrow?” the Prince asked weakly.

“You’re lucky,” Leah said. “The enchantments used to cover the whole land south of the mountains, days in every direction.”

“What changed?”

“No one knows,” Tomaz rumbled. “But the world’s moved on, and some things start to fail.”

“What happens when it fails completely? What do you do?”

“Hopefully we have a long time until that happens,” the big man said. “But when it does ... I pray that we’re strong enough to face the Empire on our own.”

They lapsed into silence, and the Prince closed his eyes. It was easier that way, and with his horse obediently following the rest of the group, he was able to remain close.

That night they camped in the middle of a lake. Or at least that’s what it looked like to the Prince. A lake complete with waves rolling beneath and around his feet, and fish that stared up at him in alarm as he sat on the glassy blue-green surface.

When Tomaz asked what he was seeing now - the big man seemed to have a sick fascination with the illusions - the Prince said as much, and Leah’s brother Davydd began to make jokes at the Prince’s expense, until Leah told him to stop because the Prince was looking decidedly green in the face. Which, of course, only encouraged another round of jokes from the red-eyed young man about seasickness. The Prince was distinctly starting to dislike the man, no matter whose brother he was.

In the end, even when Davydd had stopped mocking him, the Prince found he couldn’t choke down any food at all, and so he simply curled up in his bedroll and blanket - thankfully, both of these were solid objects that did not shift - and closed his eyes and did his best to will himself to sleep.

But in the middle of the night he woke and opened his eyes to find himself back in the Seeker’s lair, with the Seeker himself standing at a nearby table, unrolling a long collection of metal implements in a leather sheaf. Each was longer and sharper than the last, and the Prince knew, beyond a doubt, that he would be tortured to death for what he’d done. As this thought solidified in his head, the Seeker pulled out a long, wicked, three-tined instrument, crossed to the Prince, and bent to begin his work.

In a matter of seconds, he'd woken the rest of the group with his screams. It wasn't until Leah and Tomaz came, inexplicably walking through the walls of his prison and shouting at him to close his eyes, that he was even able to grasp what was truly happening. Tomaz grabbed him by the shoulders and was able to convince him to stop screaming, but it was Leah who managed to bring him out of the vision altogether by unexpectedly taking his hand and holding it tight, giving it a quick, almost apologetic squeeze - and then slapping him so soundly that his ears rang and his brain did a somersault.

The shock blanked out his mind, and suddenly the world resolved into a long, rolling grass plain, with the moon high above them, and wind flicking back the girl's hair.

"What ... how did you do that?" he asked her.

"Well, you cock your arm back like this - "

"No no! Please, no need to demonstrate."

"Good," she said with a sly smile. The wind gusted again and blew her hair back, and his mind seized this thought and started working again - and just that quickly, the plain had disappeared, replaced by a mountainside, a river, and Leah without her clothes.

He recoiled in surprise, thinking she'd be angry, but she just stood there. Which, of course made sense, because only he could see the illusion. Except, this time it was real also. He suddenly felt extremely guilty about what was happening, and he quickly looked away.

"Is everything all right?" Leah asked cautiously, taking a step forward.

"Yes!" he exclaimed, his voice several octaves too high. She reached out toward him, and he jumped back as if she was wielding a smoking cattle brand instead of offering a friendly shoulder pat. Keeping his eyes firmly on the ground, he turned, went back to his bedroll, and covered himself with the blankets.

"Thank you, but I'm fine now. Time for bed. Good night."

For a long moment there was just silence, and the sound of wind blowing across the plain/mountainside. And then Davydd spoke:

“You brought us a halfwit. Yay.”

“Just go back to sleep, idiot brother,” Leah said.

The Prince managed, after a time, to sleep as well, and this time he slept until morning, when he was awoken by a huge hand on his shoulder and another covering his eyes.

“AH!”

“HEY!” roared a voice like a crashing waterfall as the Prince jumped up and moved to attack the source of the hand, “don’t panic, it’s just me. It’s Tomaz. Don’t look around yet, just remember where you are and what’s going to happen when you open your eyes.”

The Prince realized what a fool he’d just made of himself, but then decided that, with his nerves as frayed as they were, he was lucky he hadn’t done something truly stupid. He took a deep breath and nodded beneath the hand, steeling himself.

“Right. Thank you, Tomaz.”

He opened his eyes, and found himself in a world covered in a thick white blanket. He must have gasped, or made some sign, because Tomaz tensed, and asked him a question, but the words didn’t register as more than sound.

“Snow,” he whispered.

And so it was, piled high all around them. He had seen it before, particularly in the streets of Lucien when winter came, but the snow there was fast to melt, and often gray or black with the soot in the sky or the grime on the streets. Here he found himself in the middle of a picture that he had seen when he was barely old enough to walk, a picture of perfect, new fallen snow. Everything was covered in the soft, white blanket, making the world look fresh, and clean, and beautiful.

“What are you seeing?” asked a voice. He looked up into the eyes of Tomaz, those chips of black ice that glowed with kindly fire, and he shook his head.

“Snow, I think. But like I’ve only ever seen in a picture. And parts of it I don’t think I’ve ever seen. Then again, with all the ...”

Suddenly the Prince was conscious of Davydd standing nearby, and he changed the end of his sentence.

“...stories people have told me, maybe what I’m seeing is some kind of amalgamation of images.”

Tomaz nodded after a brief hesitation, understanding.

“Stories?” Davydd asked. “That’s not how it’s supposed to work. Only things you’ve seen can be shown to you - only memories.”

“He’s got an overactive imagination, brother,” said Leah, coming up on the Prince’s other side. “And he certainly does hound people for stories. And tells them to you too, whether you want to hear it or not. We couldn’t get him to shut up on the way here - have you heard this one, have you heard that one.”

“He doesn’t seem too talkative now,” Davydd said. “He can’t have forgotten them all. But then again, stories are as easy to forget as identities.”

And then the young man’s red eyes fixed on the Prince’s black ones. The Raven Talisman grew hot, and somehow the Prince knew, though how he could not say, that Davydd was playing them all for fools.

He knew *exactly* who “Raven” was.

The Prince’s hand twitched instinctively, about to move under his drape-over to grasp the hilt of his dagger, but stopped. The red eyes were watching him closely - and watching him with unmistakable intelligence. How much did he know? How much did he guess?

And would he tell the Elders in Vale and have him taken by force?

Leah and Tomaz were both making up more excuses, but the Prince knew it was useless. Somehow something he had done had revealed his true

identity, or maybe Davydd had simply heard rumors of the Prince of Ravens moving south and put the pieces together. He was one of the Exiles who operated in the Empire after all; who knew what sources of information he had access to?

But Davydd didn't speak. He simply nodded, and gave the impression that he believed what Leah and Tomaz were telling him, all the while watching the Prince, holding him with his fiery red gaze.

"Well," Tomaz rumbled, "let's get going. Shouldn't keep the Elders waiting, now should we?"

"Certainly not!" Davydd said, breaking eye contact and resuming his foolish ne're-do-well older brother character. The Prince was amazed at how easy the transition was, and how oblivious the others were to it. "Though I'll bet five golden stags none of them but Crane remembers you even left."

Tomaz and Leah laughed, though it was somewhat forced, and they all went about packing up their temporary camp. As they did, Davydd went over and spoke in a low voice to Lorna. She made no sign that anything he said had any import, and the Prince found himself wondering if the young man was keeping this a secret from her as well.

But why? No Exiled in their right mind would let the Prince of Ravens into the lands of the Kindred.

He means to turn me in. That's what he must intend to do.

But what could the Prince do? He couldn't go back, not now. Assuming he found his way through the illusions - a huge assumption, but for argument's sake say he could - the bridge they'd come over was out. His only other option was equally impassible: even if he could make it through any Exiled patrols between here and the Pass of Roarke, upon arrival he would have to contend with his brother Ramael, and that was not a confrontation he felt confident he would survive.

No, he realized as he mounted his horse and followed along behind the Exiles, the landscape flickering but he too lost in his thoughts to notice, there

was nothing he could do but go to Vale and hope the Exiles all held their tongues.

Another thought came to him, one that whispered sweetly and deadly in the deepest corners of his mind: Davydd wouldn't need to hold his tongue if the Prince silenced it for him. It was what Geofred would do. What any of the Children would do.

No, the Prince thought harshly, I do not kill unless I have to.

And as he sat his horse and did his best to ignore the changing world around him, he also did his best to turn a deaf ear to the voice that repeated, over and over, a single line full of haunting possibility:

So what if you have to?

But slowly, as they walked along, all of them in the early morning silence that comes from hastily banished sleep, he felt a sense of resignation settle on him, and he knew he would never be able to do it. He wasn't his brothers or sisters. He'd never be able to strike down Davydd in cold blood. He couldn't say why ... in fact, he didn't know. Even a week earlier he might have, knowing that his safety depended on it. But suddenly, that didn't seem to matter anymore. Nothing, really, seemed to matter to him much anymore. And with that thought, his mind fell silent.

They reached Vale some three or four hours later. The Prince knew that they were close because suddenly the world - which was currently a long corridor from the Fortress, the corridor that led to his Mother's audience chambers - morphed slowly into a forest that didn't shift or change. A forest full of tall trees that had ... golden and red leaves?

"How are the leaves this color?" the Prince asked Tomaz, almost breathless. The sight was ... oddly beautiful.

"You can see them?" The big man asked, immediately interested.

"Yes ... I think the illusions have stopped. Everything seems steady."

"What's over there?" Tomaz asked, flinging a hand out toward what appeared to be a shrubbery of some kind. The Prince said as much, and was rewarded by a huge laugh and a cry of praise.

“By all the gods,” Davydd said, sticking a finger in his ear as he looked back at Tomaz, “no wonder your throat is so thick. You’ve managed to stuff a full grown bull down there.”

“What is it?” Leah asked, arriving from a short scouting trip up ahead in a flurry of leaves.

“He can see again,” Tomaz said, with the too-solemn air of a parent announcing that his son, blind from birth, had been granted the gift of sight.

Davydd sniggered and Lorna cracked a smile as well. The Prince was glad to see the woman, who hadn’t spoken a single word to him since their initial meeting, at least had a sense of humor.

“Yes, thank you,” the Prince said, “but the leaves - how are they gold and orange and red? I thought all leaves were green?”

“Not as green as you,” Davydd said, and spurred his horse forward with a wicked smile. “I’m going home - catch up when you can!”

Immediately, Lorna followed him on her identical, if larger, gray horse, and Leah and Tomaz motioned to the Prince as they too took off with cries of excitement.

The Prince, somewhat irked that his question had been disregarded, nevertheless heeled his horse in the ribs and shot after them. He lay low over the horse’s flowing mane, the long brown hair streaming back in the wind of their passing, leaves stirring around them, and a clean, crisp smell in the air that made the Prince feel awake and alert.

He caught up to the others easily enough - the forest road wasn’t made for speed, and as he wound around trees and rocks, heading upward at a quickly increasing incline, he was soon riding only slightly behind Tomaz and Leah, with Davydd and Lorna a few yards ahead of them.

The incline took them farther and farther upward, until they burst out of the treeline, quite suddenly and dramatically, and found themselves looking out over a valley several miles long and wide.

A valley filled to the brim with a sprawling, white-stone city.

“Welcome to Vale,” Davydd said.

Row after row of tall buildings made of white stone spread out before them, those in the middle taller and grander. Trees rose up in-between the houses, something the Prince had never stopped to contemplate as a possibility until Banelyn, and there were no barriers to separate the buildings one from another. No cordoned off sections where lived the Rogues, or the Elders, no plot of land for the Commons to sleep on should they find no housing for the night.

“Where do your Elders live? I see no area walled off for their use.”

“They live wherever they want,” Leah said, watching him with interest, her green eyes big and intent.

Slowly, what she was saying, and the meaning of it, sank into the Prince’s mind, and he didn’t know what to say. He simply stared out over the city, watching the people go from building to building, all walking down the same streets, all breathing the same air. How did they know who they were? How did they know what their place was in society?

“Well,” Davydd said loudly, interrupting the Prince’s thoughts. “Lorna and I are going to report to Captain Autmaran. He’s expecting us. Stay out of trouble while we’re gone.”

And with that, he kicked his horse into a gallop and rode down the side of the hill into the valley, and was soon lost in the wide boulevards.

“So what’s the plan?” Tomaz asked, turning to Leah.

She looked at him, quirking an eyebrow, and then turned back to contemplate the Prince, eyeing him critically.

“Well, I need to report to Eshendai Jensen. He needs to know we’ve returned, and I don’t doubt he’ll have a thing or two to say to me about being so late behind schedule. Why don’t you and ... Raven ... spend the night in your cabin, Tomaz? After I report to Jensen, I’ll need to make an appearance with the General.”

“Very good,” Tomaz said. “That way you can tell Jensen we have sensitive information that needs to be heard by the Elders immediately. Likely they’ll see us within the next few days.”

“I think so too,” the girl said, “and then we can give them our report in person.”

“And what about me?” the Prince said.

After he spoke, both Tomaz and Leah took a deep breath and wouldn't look at him. He felt his heart sink.

“Am I prisoner of war?” he asked, quietly, slowly. “Will your report tell of me as Raven, the runaway child of the Most High, a friend and possible ally, or as the Prince of Ravens, a treasure trove of knowledge should you manage to pull it out of me?”

For a long time, Leah looked blankly at the ground, and the Prince realized that, just as he had been struggling with the realization that she, while an Exile, could be a good person, she was going through a similar battle, trying to reconcile him as the person who had saved her life with him as the Prince that she hated for oppressing her people.

“I see no reason to make the final choice today,” Tomaz rumbled softly, looking now at Leah with tender fatherly regard. “Go home. Sleep on it - I think that's what we all could use. And tomorrow, the three of us together,” he looked here at the Prince, including him, “will decide the best way to move forward. The Council will not see us for a few days at least, no matter how urgent we tell them our message is.”

For a long time, Leah remained silent, and then, slowly, she nodded. Tomaz looked at the Prince, and he nodded as well. Like it or not, he couldn't force the issue.

“We'll meet tomorrow at midday,” Leah said abruptly, “at the Bricks.”

This apparently meant something to Tomaz, because he nodded, and then, without another word, Leah was off, riding down the hill in the same direction Davydd had gone.

“Well then,” Tomaz said cheerily, his tone completely at odds with everything the Prince was feeling at that moment. “Follow me!”

He urged his horse into a slow walk, and the Prince followed suit, moving down the hill at a slight angle to the city. The Prince, lost in his

thoughts, didn't notice that they took a trail that branched off the main road, until he looked up and realized the city was now hidden by a screen of tall pine trees, which, the Prince thought harshly, knew what they were doing and had kept their green needles instead of changing them for red and gold.

"It's a bit small, and it'll be snug with two of us in there," Tomaz said. "But I think it'll be all right."

They continued down the road, made of hard packed dirt, a decent ways. They came to an opening in the trees, and the Prince saw a wooden cabin with a tall stone chimney off to their left in the shade of a large tree with white bark and fading red leaves. A path, which looked as though it were accustomed to being well cared for but was currently in disrepair due to its owner's absence, led from the dirt road up to the front door, and also around to the back.

The cabin itself was actually rather large - but then again, so was Tomaz, so no doubt to him it was simply adequate. They dismounted, tied off their horses to a hitching post, and approached the door, the giant sweeping fallen branches and leaves off the path with his huge boots as they went. When they reached the front door - a huge slab of wood over twelve feet tall - the big man pulled out a dull silver key from a breast pocket inside his leather jerkin, inserted it into the dirty silver door handle, and pressed down on the latch. The door swung open easily, though the hinges squeaked, another sign Tomaz had been absent for several months.

The Prince's first thought upon entering was that he had somehow shrunk. Everything was Tomaz-sized, and as such it made him feel like he'd returned to childhood and had just entered an adult house for the first time. The cabin was made of three rooms - the first was the main room, which contained a large couch, an equally oversized rocking chair, two rugs made of some kind of furry - *hairy?* - animal hide, and several hunting implements that hung about the walls. Visible off to the left was a corner room taken up almost completely by an enormous bed and an equally gigantic carved wooden dresser, on top of which was a water basin, a mirror, and various

shaving implements. Off to the right was a small door - this one only some ten feet tall - that led to a kitchen full of bright, polished silver pans and dark black pots. Even the cooking utensils were too big for him.

“Well, this is it,” the big man said, and the Prince turned and realized Tomaz was actually nervous to see what the Prince thought of the whole thing.

“Like I said,” he continued, “we might be a little squeezed, since it’s just the three rooms, but I’ve only ever had myself living here, so - ”

“It’s perfect, Tomaz,” the Prince broke in. And truly it was, all else aside. It was no luxury apartment in the Fortress of Lucien, but it was ... a home. It had a lived-in feel to it that almost evoked memories of homesickness in the Prince, and carried with it the smell and sense of a hard-won, well-lived life. The Prince smiled, feeling true affection for the big man, and Tomaz, after taking a minute to confirm this wasn’t sarcasm, positively beamed back at him through his beard.

“Well,” Tomaz said gruffly, swinging his arms back and forth unnecessarily, “let’s get the bags unpacked, eh?”

And with that he nodded once, swung his arms to and fro one more time, and then turned and went back to the horses, moving with a jerkiness that was half pride and half self-consciousness. The Prince stifled a smile, and followed the Ashandel out to the horses.

Once they had unpacked, the Prince helping Tomaz since he really didn’t have anything of his own that he wasn’t wearing, it was well past midday and they were both ravenous. Tomaz took the Prince out back and set him to chopping wood, even though there was a large pile already stowed against the back wall of the cabin.

“That’s for winter,” Tomaz rumbled when the Prince mentioned it. He’d taken the time to trim his beard properly, instead of the hasty shavings he’d done when on the road, and now he truly did look like a giant warrior-woodsman from some half-remembered legend. His long black hair, which the Prince noticed for the first time was graying ever so slightly at the

temples, had also been combed and pulled back, though it was so thick and wild that “combed” was a relative term.

“Never touch the stockpile unless you have to,” Tomaz said. “Always chop fresh wood when you can still get it. Now get me some good-sized logs so we can start a fire and get a stew going. I’m going to see what kind of meat I can find us.”

And with that he set off into the woods, a longbow that was nearly eight feet long over his shoulder.

The Prince’s stomach rumbled, so deep it was as if it was trying to imitate Tomaz’s voice, and he set to work with the simple axe. It was easier than it looked – as long as he put the wood pieces on the stump the right way, he was strong enough to split it in half with a well-aimed blow. Before long he’d worked up a sweat, and Tomaz was coming back through the trees with a trio of rabbits and three or four birds the Prince couldn’t identify.

“That’ll do nicely,” the big man said. “Take some kindling and a big stack of wood and set it up in the fireplace like I showed you. I’ll handle the rest.”

The Prince did as told, all the while grateful to have something to do to keep his mind off the situation at hand. His thoughts kept trying to stray to Davydd and Leah, imagining what they might be telling members of the Kindred about him as he sat here in the woods and helped cook dinner. But as soon as he was in front of the fireplace, trying to remember exactly how to make a fire, these thoughts went away and he found temporary peace.

In no time at all it seemed, though by the setting sun it was several hours later, Tomaz had cleaned the rabbits, chopped and sliced a number of roots and herbs the Prince couldn’t begin to know the names of it, and slid it all into a black pot that could have been used by the Prince as a slightly undersized bathtub. The Prince, who had finally managed to construct the fire and get it lit, sat down on the large, well-stuffed couch, and found himself idle for the first time since arriving.

Immediately, like the air bubbles rising to the surface of the stew, his thoughts of Davydd and Leah and the Council of Elders returned, floating to the top of his mind and releasing little bursts of fear and panic that he knew would build into something dangerous if he didn't head them off.

"You said once that Leah is a Spellblade," the Prince said, picking a topic at random. Tomaz was bustling around the kitchen, putting things away, and also keeping an eye on the stew. "What does that mean?"

"Ah, well ... some of it is secret. A ritual is involved that I don't fully understand as I've never been a part of it - but the effect is that a man or woman, one that has decided to give their life to the cause of the Kindred, is bound to a weapon. It is traditional for Eshendai to do this - though it isn't necessary. I never liked the idea - what happens if my sword breaks? Or it's stolen? No, I've seen too much battle and used too many weapons to pick one. But Leah - and her brother Davydd with that sword of his - both became Spellblades."

"But what does that mean exactly? Why would they bond themselves to a metal?"

"Well," Tomaz said clearing his throat, "it gives you certain advantages. The metal lends you strength, for one - it's harder to wound a Spellblade, and they heal faster. At least, when they're in contact with their weapons that is. And they can command their weapons to a certain extent - like you've seen Leah do. She can't make it dance or anything, but she can make it do things that no normal dagger would be able to do. Fly farther, hit a target more accurately, return to her if it's close by. Oh, and if anyone she doesn't approve of tries to pick it up, it gives a nasty burn."

The Prince instinctively closed his hand into a fist - the hand that had been burned by the girl's dagger when he'd escaped to Banelyn. The burn had healed well, and there was hardly any mark left behind ... but the memory was still clear and strong.

“Usually they’re Eshendai, like I said, and usually they’re Rogues, not Rangers. Rangers tend to, like me, like to use the weapon that suits the situation if they can. Though we all have our favorites of course.”

The big man turned and smiled at the Prince.

“What’s the difference between a Ranger pair and a Rogue pair?” the Prince asked Tomaz, hoping more conversation would drown his thoughts, or else re-submerge them. The big man didn’t even turn from stirring the pot, simply spoke in his rumbling mountain-slide voice, knowing it would carry in the cabin no matter how softly he spoke.

“Rangers, like Davydd and Lorna, are sent out to patrol certain areas, scout out and relay troop movements, sometimes set ambushes or raid along the border if the Empire is mobilizing, as the Prince of Oxen does every few months. Rogues on the other hand, that’s Leah and me, work much more subtly. Where Rangers actively fight the Empire, Rogues do so passively. Indirectly is the better word. We gather information, on members of the High Blood, the Most High, and the Children themselves. We are saboteurs as well, if the need arises.”

“Saboteurs?” The Prince asked, interested in spite of himself.

“Yes. Most of it goes unnoticed. Little things, such as delaying this or that project, or convincing certain members of the Empire not to look too closely into the affairs of the Kindred.”

“Convincing?”

Tomaz looked over his shoulder and smiled wickedly.

“Euphemisms are sometimes the best way to describe things.”

“Right.”

They lapsed into silence again, Tomaz stirring the stew and the Prince sitting on the couch, staring into the fire. He really did feel like a child; his feet dangled a good six inches off the floor, even when he was slouching, and the high back went up over his head. As the silence lengthened, the Prince once more felt tension creeping into his shoulders and chest. His

hands started to ball up into fists, and he had to make the conscious effort to make them lay flat on his lap.

“So you and Leah are Rogues. Have you been a part of one of these?”

“Sabotage missions? I’ve been part of a few. It’s useful to have a big man on your side to deal with ... crowd control.”

He winked at the Prince as he used this euphemism, and the Prince smiled, knowing Tomaz thought himself exceedingly clever for coming up with it.

“You said most of the sabotage goes unnoticed, but what about the things that do go noticed?”

“Ah, yes. You’ll most likely have heard of some things, though they were no doubt concealed in propaganda. Your brother Geofred is quite the master of turning disaster into opportunity.”

The Prince felt a swell of anger at this, but it quickly faded. First, because Tomaz was right. One of Geofred’s main responsibilities - and indeed talents - was keeping the citizens of the Empire informed of what events transpired throughout Lucia. And second, because he realized he didn’t truly care what anyone thought of the Children, or what they said of them. In the Empire it was death to voice a negative thought about one of the Children in public. But here, in the woods, with just a stew and a giant for company, such things seemed remarkably unimportant.

“All right, so try me. What have you done?”

“Personally, I’m responsible for the ongoing problems in expanding the granaries in Tyne.”

“What?” the Prince asked, shocked. Tomaz nodded, still watching the stew.

“Of course, it’s passed off as the Exiled Kindred burning crops and killing farmers, and I know that’s the story you’ve been brought up with. But for the past ten years I’ve done something very simple that’s suspended the granary construction, and I haven’t killed a single farmer in order to do it.”

“What?” The Prince asked, warily. He was unsure if he wanted to know.

“I break the dams. Easy enough. Bloodless - unless a guard tries to gut me, like what happened a few years back. I nearly didn’t make it out; some hotshot captain had set an ambush. Too bad he wasn’t expecting an ex-Blade Master. In any case, break two or three dams and the crops below them fail, flooded with water or else parched. It’s a common enough thing to happen by accident. We just make sure to target the ones that Rikard is planning to use for one of his special projects.”

The Prince, who had known for years that a certain number of dams broke every year in the Tynian Fields that produced wheat and other grains for the rest of the Empire, was shocked. The official story had always been that the dams were poorly constructed, or else they were torn down by the Empire in order to make way for better ones.

“That’s incredible. But ... how could you do that? The grain shortages that were caused in some years ... you’re responsible for that.”

Tomaz was shaking his head.

“There are no grain shortages,” he rumbled. “In Tyne there are nearly ten acres of silos full of grain stored every year by the merchants and farmers for sale and distribution across the Empire. The extra grain, the grain we won’t allow them to grow, is the grain needed to feed an increased military under the command of Rikard.”

“But there’s been no military increase in nearly half a century,” the Prince protested. “Not since Rikard attacked - ”

“You’re sadly misinformed, princeling,” the big man rumbled. “Rikard builds his military every year, in secret. I doubt the other Children know, but I’m certain the Empress does. And the dams I break are the ones that control the water to the grain he’s trying to grow in secret to feed those armies.”

“But that grain goes to common citizens.”

“No,” Tomaz said, somewhat forcefully. “That grain goes to feeding the soldiers that oppress common citizens and try every year to invade this land.”

The Prince let it drop, but the subject still felt unresolved. How could the man be sure? How could he know he wasn't hurting innocents?

"That's quiet an undertaking," the Prince said, not knowing what else to say.

"Indeed. Do you remember the Haven Dam that broke up in Tyne, the one that was being built for twenty something years?"

"No!" the Prince said, astounded. How had they managed to do that? The whole dam had collapsed the day before its completion, which was intended to be a day of celebration.

"Yeah, that wasn't us. Just bad luck. But I had you going, didn't I?"

The giant turned around and winked, and the Prince shook his head. Tomaz frowned slightly.

"Is something wrong, princeling?"

"No," the Prince said, though there certainly was. "No, don't worry, it's nothing."

The Prince had somehow managed to forget that this man was an Exile. He'd been going along, treating Tomaz as if he were nothing more than a hunted fugitive, living with other fugitives, trying to escape from a place where they were no longer wanted.

It wasn't that simple, though. This man wasn't just a passive victim, he was an active outlaw. He had just admitted to high treason and sabotage, and beyond that it wasn't some isolated event, it wasn't something he'd done to free or protect himself from harm, it was something he'd done as an attack on the Empire. And what was more, he wasn't the only one. There must be many Rogue pairs, though how many the Prince couldn't say. How many other things had the Kindred done to the Empire?

And how many of them, really, had the same good intentions as Tomaz?

All of this passed through his mind in the few seconds it took Tomaz to turn back around, and as the big man went back to stirring the stew, a light went on in the back of the Prince's head, and the Talisman around his neck

seared red hot, and then went cold. Immediately, the Prince turned his head to the left, and knew he was looking north, toward Roarke.

Because the glow he felt was the distant glow of the Prince of Oxen, at the head of an army. Marching right toward him.

Chapter Eighteen: Decision

As this realization sank in, the Prince slowly turned back around and stared blankly at the fire before him. His brother was coming. Somehow, the Prince knew, his brother was coming straight for him and would not be stopped. He opened his mouth to say something to Tomaz, to warn him, to have them raise an alarm and ready a defense ... but no words came out. And after a moment or two of him sitting there, jaw hanging loose, he closed his mouth again, and remained silent.

He went through the rest of that night in a strange kind of twilight, not giving any particular thought to what he was doing, or where he was going. He remembered vaguely Tomaz telling him more about Rangers, who scouted the mountain border and made their way up and down the Empire lending help to anyone who found themselves on the wrong side of the law, offering them a new life in the free land of the Kindred.

Through it all he nodded, he smiled, and kept silent.

Soon after the stew was finished, they both turned in to sleep. Tomaz went to his corner room and the enormous bed contained therein, while the Prince made do with the couch, and the large animal-skin blankets there.

He did not sleep that night. He didn't even doze. He lay there, feeling the glow of life, twenty, thirty times what a single man should give off, coming from his brother, far off but drawing closer, even in the night. And as the light grew, so did his anger and his resentment.

Anger at who? He wasn't sure. The boiling, sickly feeling that had formed in the pit of his stomach like a seed slowly sprouting was directionless. His resentment though, was reserved for the Kindred. Why should he warn them? He held no loyalty to them. They had successfully defended themselves from over a thousand years of attacks, safe here behind their enchantments. If they were so great, then let them defend themselves.

And truly, he knew that Davydd would give him up. He knew that Leah and Tomaz, no matter their choice now, would give him up in the end. He was too valuable to let go - the Kindred needed the information he had about the Fortress, they needed what he knew in order to continue and possibly turn the tide of their ongoing war. And they would get it, no matter the cost. He knew they would ... people who would risk the starvation of common citizens in order to prevent the growth of an army would care little about his single, unimportant life. And so he felt no guilt about letting them face this threat alone.

As for his brother, let him come. If he tried to take the Prince back to Lucia, back to the capital city and to his Mother, then maybe he would go. Having delivered her the Seventh Principality by infiltrating it as no other member of the Empire had been able to do since the beginning of the war ... perhaps that would earn him his freedom and his life. That was certainly something she couldn't ignore.

But he didn't want that either, he realized. Not truly. It would be, perhaps, the easiest option. He could solidify it by seeking out the Elders and killing them. It would take very little effort, considering he had the Raven Talisman to help him. As Leah said, now that he was here, now that he knew where to go, he could destroy everything. And if he did, he had no doubt that he would be welcomed back into the arms of the Empress, the brave, conquering Prince of Ravens. Whatever crime he had committed would be washed away by such a deed. Such a deed that had not, in a thousand years, been achieved by a single man, woman, or Child.

As the night wore on, his mind continued down this path. And what he saw there was red and bloody.

Dawn came on the heel of these thoughts, and he realized he had come to no conclusion. He didn't know to where or what he was attached, or to who he owed his loyalty. If he owed loyalty to anyone. Tomaz and Leah had needed a night to think over what they'd felt about whether or not to

force him before the Council of Elders and reveal himself. Even they put their cause above him.

He felt alone, so glaringly obviously alone, even as he knew the fate of two nations hung upon what he did in the next few hours. But his anger and his resentment had begun to deepen into hatred; hatred of what or who he could not say, perhaps of the world, hatred *at* the world for making him choose, for constantly demanding that he choose what he wanted and who he wanted to be, right here, right now. And that hatred fed his anger, and his anger turned around and fed the hatred, until in the end he was lost in spirals of hopeless, unending pain.

Let it happen, he thought savagely. I have no duty to anyone anymore. There is no one here I care about, no one in the world who truly cares about me. I am the Prince of Ravens. I feed off death. Let death come, even if it comes for me.

So when Tomaz awoke and set the leftover stew over the fire, he asked if the big man would like to spar.

“Certainly,” Tomaz said, looking surprised but also excited. “I didn’t know you liked to get beaten so often. Would wound my pride if it happened to me.”

The Prince smiled at the big man’s joke, feeling a true touch of affection for him. It would be good to spar with Tomaz one last time. So, after breakfast, Tomaz led him down the mountainside, and into the city of Vale itself.

The city, as the Prince had seen when they’d entered the valley the day before, was a huge, sprawling thing, and as he walked through it, the chimneys of the bakeries slowly taking their first smoky breaths and the shop windows rubbing sleep from their eyes and opening themselves to customers, he knew that if there was a good place to spend his last day, it was here.

Children ran in the streets, herded along by various haggard-looking mothers, and the Prince wondered vaguely where they were going. It was a surprise to him, as it had been in Banelyn, that they were allowed out of the

houses, and allowed to be seen before they'd reached puberty, but this was Vale and the Kindred were certainly strange people. And the Prince was numb to surprise now - he was just existing. He would make no choices, he would feel nothing. Let the choice come to him this time; let the world decide without him.

The sparring arena was on the east side of the city, and as they made their way down the broad main street that cut through the center of it all, they passed large buildings that slowly grew in size until they resembled the houses of the Most High, though here they were simply out in the open for anyone to see and approach. The largest of them, at the end of a long artificial pond, was made of white marble painted with green and gold columns and sculptures of what must have been important Kindred. The large domed roof had a single spear-like flagpole at its top, though no flag was raised there today.

When they finally reached the sparring arena, the Prince saw that it was located amid a huge barracks and training ground. The arena itself was a large stone building, capped by a dome that was painted with various murals of Kindred fighters. One of them was a huge bull of a man that looked vaguely like his brother Ramael, but with pure white hair. The Prince of Ravens reached out again and felt the still-growing point of light in the back of his head. It was growing larger, still approaching, and the Prince knew that somehow the Prince of Oxen had found a way around the enchantments that had held him at bay for so long. He wondered idly how, but then let the thought go. It didn't matter ... let the Kindred sense him. He would take no sides, and see what happened.

They entered the arena and found that it was separated into five large sections, one main, central area, which was a platform with raised stone seats immediately surrounding it, and four smaller areas situated outside that perimeter.

"Practice arenas," Tomaz said, nodding to the four smaller areas. "Each is for a different art. Back corner is archery, back left is axes,

hammers, and larger weapons, the one on our right is the unarmed ring, and the one on our left is the sword and dagger arena.”

“Sword and dagger?” the Prince suggested.

“Wouldn’t have it any other way,” the big man said with a grin.

Together they moved forward, and as they did the Prince felt an icy chill settle inside him, and felt his mind clear of all thoughts. He felt oddly at peace.

Tomaz pulled out his greatsword, which he’d brought, slung across his back, from the cabin, and then selected and attached a thick leather edge-guard that would prevent the blade from slicing. Even guarded though, the weapon was still a formidable thing, and the Prince realized this would be a much better example of actual combat between the two of them.

The Prince approached the rack of spare practice swords on the side of the sparring platform and looked through them. He’d always fought best with a single-sided long blade, but most of these looked like the typical double-edged broadsword. There were one or two falchions, a handful of long hand-and-a-half swords, a slew of thin rapiers, a row of daggers of all shapes and sizes, and at the end ...

The Prince reached out and grasped the copper-wired hilt of a long, slightly curved, single-sided sword made of creamy white metal. It was thinner than a broadsword, and slightly longer. The blade was oddly bright, almost shining as it took in the smallest hint of light, amplified it, and threw it back. From different angles it looked alternately like a creamy, ceramic antique, and a razor-sharp surgical implement. It was an elegant weapon, that much was certain, and it carried with it a haughty, proud air, as if the sword itself knew its value, knew its deadly power.

“Valerium?” the Prince asked, turning to Tomaz. He held the sword out for the big man to see, and as he did he felt the extra weight that Leah had spoken of – the sword was a good few pounds heavier than a typical broadsword.

“I thought this was rather valuable?”

Tomaz was looking at the sword curiously too.

“It is. The store of Valerium metal is well guarded, but then again, if you’re going to use one in real life, then you need to use one in practice, so there’s always one or two floating around. Most of the time it’s only for Ranger or Rogue training, but it looks like they found a spare since I’ve been gone. If it’s here, you might as well use it. I’ve never much liked it - the weight feels wrong to me. I’m like the girl - steel’s always been good enough for me, and I suspect it always will be.”

The Prince peered closely and saw the blade was sharp - not a practice sword at all. He pointed this out to Tomaz and said as much, and the big man just smiled.

“You can’t dull Valerium once it’s been sharpened, at least not down to the point where it’s safe to hit someone with it in the sparring ring. It’ll get less sharp, but it will never be dull. No matter how much you use it, it will always be sharp. Maybe not always sharp enough to kill, but certainly sharp enough to leave a nasty cut. Just throw an edge guard on it and let’s get going.”

“Will it work?” the Prince asked dubiously, eyeing the razor sharp edge and remembering what Leah had told him about the metal.

“The guard’s lined with a thin bit of metal,” Tomaz said, tossing him one made for single-edged swords. “It’s light enough so you don’t truly feel it, and it’s good to train with a bit of extra weight anyway. The leather’s just on the outside, so when I smack you upside the head you get a bit of cushioning from the blow.”

Tomaz grinned evilly, and settled himself into a ready stance. The Prince slid the guard onto the blade, and hefted the sword in one hand.

Strange, now that he was in a ready stance it didn’t feel all that heavy. Heavier than a normal sword perhaps, but in the Prince’s opinion most swords were too light anyway.

A few people who had also come to the arena first thing in the morning were gathering around the slightly raised platform, some of them squatting down to watch while they waited their turn.

The Prince settled into the opening stance of Tiger Stalks the Deer, the sword held loosely by his side, his right leg forward, but his weight back on his left. Tomaz, seeing this, shifted to Bear Defends the Hill, and began to circle off to the right. The Prince felt a momentary glow of satisfaction knowing that they were both using Imperial sword forms: if one had to fight, it might as well be in a civilized manner.

The Prince began to move as well, circling away from the big man, trying to keep an even distance between them. His mind, unlike in the past when they sparred in the woods, was blank and controlled. There was no anger, no emotion at all. He was simply reacting.

Tomaz changed directions and rushed forward, sword swinging in from the side in the brutal form only known as The Reaping. The Prince saw it, and instead of countering, took a single step back, felt the blade pass in front of his chest, and then spun around and moved past Tomaz.

The big man turned before the Prince could get in a hit, and the greatsword swung once more, upward from the floor, and the Prince, unable to dodge, brought down the Valerium sword, and met the blade, parried it, and spun away again.

The white metal sword felt good in his hands.

The big man turned, but before he could approach, the Prince closed the distance and sliced for Tomaz's right shoulder. The greatsword parried it easily, but the Prince used the energy from the deflected hit to strike for Tomaz's left side, then his head, and then his legs.

The white metal sword felt *very* good.

Tomaz counterattacked, bull-rushing the Prince and using his size to push him off balance. The Prince dashed away, using his greater agility to avoid the giant sword as it hissed through the air behind him.

He fainted left, then dodged right and came at Tomaz again.

Surprise crossed the big man's face - he was used to the Prince keeping his distance. But the surprise was gone in an instant, and Tomaz adjusted to this new tactic, using smaller, defter movements to counter the Prince so that the smaller man couldn't close distance and get inside the big man's swing.

Clawing Eagle met Rushing River, and the Prince's sword glanced off the greatsword yet again, forcing him back. Tomaz followed quickly, sweat glistening on his face, and the Prince quickly began to parry, only able to turn aside the greatsword's weight, not stop it outright.

But the denser white metal, curved as it was, was a blade made for the dexterous fighter: graceful enough to maneuver well, yet heavy enough to defend against a larger opponent. And as time wore on, it became slowly but shockingly clear that the Prince was holding his own against the giant, strength met with finesse.

The fight continued, and soon they were both absolutely drenched in sweat. Neither made a mistake, neither gave ground without turning around and taking it back. But then Tomaz slipped, just a fraction, as he came forward for another rush, and the Prince was on him in an instant.

For a moment, Tomaz continued to parry him, turning aside the Valerium blade easily, and the Prince knew a lesser man would have been overcome much more quickly, and that if he made a mistake as well, the fight would continue and the advantage would be lost.

But he didn't make a mistake - his hands firmly gripping the wire hilt of his sword, he began making cuts and slashes that were slightly too fast for Tomaz to parry, and the Prince continued to press him, not allowing him a single instant to recover.

Finally, the Valerium blade slipped under the greatsword's guard, and struck the big man in the thigh. Tomaz grunted, but continued to strike back, to parry, to fight. The Prince pressed back just as hard, and then felt his body start to fail. He was exhausted, and the big man, with his enormous strength, could keep going for hours. He needed to end this fight *now*.

So he took a gamble, and used the sword form aptly named Slicing Hands, and locked his sword with Tomaz's. For an instant, Tomaz looked confused, and then he understood. But it was too late - the Prince let go of his sword, and used both hands to strike Tomaz's wrists.

The strike numbed the giant's hands, and his sword clattered to the ground. The Prince, hands also numb - the giant's bones felt harder than rocks - dodged as the big man swung his arms around to grab him. The Prince reached down and grasped his sword, just before Tomaz managed to wrap a hand around his own, and with a final flourish, the Prince struck the pressure points in Tomaz's forearm, shoulder, and bicep with the flat of the blade. The enormous greatsword fell once more from a hand now devoid of feeling, and the leather guard of the Prince's white metal sword came to rest against the big man's throat. For a moment the two of them remained stationary, and then the Prince lowered his sword.

Applause came from the area surrounding the practice arena and the Prince turned to see that a crowd had gathered to watch, many of them wearing green-and-gold or green-and-silver uniforms. The Prince assumed these were the colors of the Vale infantry.

"Well done," Tomaz said, respect coloring his voice. "That is the first time I've been disarmed since I completed the Training."

In spite of his wishes, the Prince felt a surge of pride at the praise.

"Must be getting old," he said to the big man with a reluctant smile. Tomaz let out a loud roar of a laugh and picked up his greatsword.

"Again?" the Prince asked.

"How about a real fight?"

The Prince turned to see Leah standing just outside of the practice ring, fingering the hilt of one of her long daggers.

"Aren't you supposed to be at home?" the Prince asked.

"Aren't you not supposed to care?" she retorted, coming forward into the ring. Tomaz took a step back, a smile on his face.

"I don't care," the Prince said sullenly, "I was just commenting."

“You tend to do that a lot lately,” she continued. She was idly paring her nails with one of her daggers.

“You never let me spar with you before,” he said, “why the change of heart?”

“I think you might finally be good enough for me,” she said nonchalantly.

“I don’t want to hurt you,” he said. He turned and began to walk away, when a snort as loud as an avalanche issued from Tomaz. The Prince turned and saw the big man openly smirking at him.

“How’s the arm?” the Prince said angrily, “you have any feeling back yet?”

“What’s the matter princeling?” Leah asked. “Scared of a girl?”

“Girl? I don’t see any girls here, just you.”

The Prince had turned around, and though he didn’t remember raising the sword, he was holding it in both hands in front of him. He watched as her eyes flashed away from her nails and looked up at him in mild surprise.

“Interesting. Little princeling’s angry.”

The crowd that had begun to dissipate was gathering once more around the arena.

“Say that again,” the Prince said.

She drew both of her daggers, which gleamed cruelly in the bright light of the training arena skylight.

“Make me,” she responded. She slipped two small guards onto her blades.

“I hoped you would say that,” he said. “Call it Tomaz.”

“Go!” Tomaz rumbled immediately.

The Prince launched himself across the floor, sword flashing. She met him halfway, and in a slightly muffled ring of metal, daggers met sword.

They separated and circled each other, both of them moving to their right. The Prince no longer felt the icy coldness he’d felt with Tomaz. This girl

always seemed able to provoke him, no matter what he did. Well this would shut her up, once and for all.

He rushed forward, sword flashing from side to side, the weight of the Valerium perfect for his fighting style. The girl dodged away, daggers flashing, constantly moving, catching the light like birds flitting through a ray of sun.

He spun to follow her, and this time managed to force her into a corner, forcing her to engage him. He swung for her head, a brutal blow that would have decapitated her in actual battle, but she ducked just enough that the sword sailed over her head, stepped forward, and thrust her daggers at his stomach and chest.

Using his momentum he twisted away, and the daggers passed within inches of his chest.

The crowd that had gathered to watch gave out a yell, half full of cheers half of disappointed groans, but the Prince quickly tuned them out. He retreated back across the arena and studied the girl, who was now holding both daggers down by her sides. She was too fast for him - he wouldn't be able to beat her the way he'd beaten Tomaz. She was quicker and more agile. What she lacked was his reach and the weight of his blade.

He shifted his weight and moved into the Warrior sword style, sword held high, directly over his head, and stepped into the center of the practice arena, and watched her circle him.

She feinted left, then charged him, but before she could close the distance, he brought the sword down with sickening speed, and she only barely dodged to the side. But then she was there, in his face, and all thought of tactics disappeared as he simply strove to meet her twin daggers with his sword.

He didn't know how long they fought, for it seemed to be something suspended in time. Their bodies spun and their weapons clashed, striking out again and again, neither able to land a blow. They were both panting now,

gasping heavily, but still moving, unable to stop, caught up in the deadly dance, pushing each other and being pushed in return.

And then out of the corner of the Prince's eye he saw Lorna and Davydd come up next to Tomaz, and a thought passed through his head.

It hit him like a lightning bolt, and suddenly everything was clear to him. He knew what the Prince of Oxen was doing, and he knew how he was getting so close to Vale. In his shock, he fumbled a simple parry and found Leah, breathing in gasping pants, with her dagger at his throat, her face an inch away from his.

There was a loud burst of sound, as the large crowd of gathered soldiers cheered Leah's win. A number of Rogue and Ranger pairs swarmed the arena. One stopped to grasp the Prince's hand; something was said to the Prince, but he didn't hear it. He was looking from Davydd to Lorna to Tomaz to Leah, back again to Davydd.

A tracking spell. It was a Bloodmage trick, weaved into the making of Daemons. It was rare because it was only activated upon the Daemon's destruction ... and it required the sacrificial death of a Bloodmage to create the bond. But Bloodmages who had been moving through the mountain ranges of Roarke must have known that there was a way for Exiles to destroy Daemons ... and if the Prince knew his brother Ramael, he didn't doubt that the Prince of Oxen had forced a Bloodmage to submit to the torturous sacrifice on the off chance the Daemon would be fought and destroyed. If the group that the spell latched on to remained in close proximity, then the spell would allow the Bloodmages to track them from one edge of the world to the other ... or through centuries-old enchantments, leading an invading army and a Prince of the Realm straight toward the city of Vale.

At that instant the crowd parted and there was Leah, beaming at the praise from those around her. She lifted her head and her eyes met his, and the Prince realized again just how stunning she was when she smiled. It was as if the hard stony exterior she so often assumed was pulled away, leaving behind just a girl. A girl asking him to smile back at her.

A rebel! the voice shouted in the back of his skull.

And the Prince of Oxen was coming to kill them all. To kill her.

At this thought a crack appeared in the hard, bitter hate that had formed in him the night before. The crack spread, splintering and spiraling outward, and when it reached the edges of his mind it shattered, leaving him alone. Just that easily, the icy stillness that had given him clarity and helped him harden his heart, melted, and ran, and blood began to pump through his veins, and his breath came faster.

He spun on his heel and began moving through the crowd that was still cheering Leah's victory. A victory that would be short lived indeed if his brother arrived with no warning. He would come in here and she would be smiling no more, she would only be -

A rebel!

He neared the edge of the large domed building, turned a corner and sank to the ground, finding himself alone in the stone-lined hallway. His brother was coming; he could feel the energy from the Ox Talisman shining like a bright white beacon in his mind. This was his chance at redemption if he wanted it. He could claim credit for the tracking spell, claim he knew that it was in place, that he did nothing, and in doing so helped his brother to overthrow the Exiled Kindred, to reclaim the final piece of the Empire.

But what if that isn't good enough?

"It will be!" he hissed out loud. The spitting, hateful noise echoed up and down the corridor. He clutched his head in his hands.

Aren't you a rebel too? asked a traitorous voice.

Nearly two decades of training under the hands of the Empress, the Children, and the Imperial Scholars crashed down on him, blanking out his mind and trying to wipe such a terrible thought out as if it were an ink blot spreading quickly over a clean white piece of parchment. But he couldn't do it this time, his mind kept working.

He was sitting in the very heart of the enemy's capital city, welcomed as a friend, welcomed by a people who should have hated him, and had every reason to kill him on sight if they knew him for who he was.

His brother was approaching, coming closer with every minute – every breath the Prince of Ravens took was a breath wasted if he wished to warn the Kindred. But if he remained silent, if he allowed his brother to attack the Exiled Kindred, it would be the end. There would be no more Kindred, there would be no more resistance. The Empire's power would be complete. The Prince of Oxen was not the leader that Rikard Prince of Lions was, but this job required no finesse. He was a club, and the city of Vale little more than an overripe fruit. He was ruthless, heartless, concerned only with physical power – conquering, destruction, annihilation of the Empire's enemies. If the Prince of Oxen found this place, marched on it with his army, he would crush them all. This valley, while well hidden, was not defensible against the likes of him.

And if I help him, the Prince thought, I'll be allowed to come home. They'll HAVE to take me back then. If I open the gates to let the army in, or sabotage the defense with false information or ... or take out the Council of Elders.

Chills ran down his back at this final thought. Yes. He'd entertained the thought wildly last night, but suddenly the reality of it crashed in on him, and he knew he truly could do it. Strike off the head of the snake, and that would be it. The Prince of Oxen would arrive to find no resistance, and the Prince of Ravens would be hailed as the greatest servant of the Empress the Empire had ever seen. He'd be known as the one who made the attack possible, who infiltrated what could not be infiltrated – he would be given power over all of his siblings.

But could he betray the Kin? Did they deserve it?

Of course they do! he roared at himself, *they're lawfully opposing the rule of the Empress; they deserve whatever fate is in store for them.*

The assassination attempt on his seventeenth name day flickered across his vision. His mind's eye flashed back to the slave markets in

Banelyn, saw again the torture devices used to extract information in the dungeon of the Seeker that Tomaz and Leah had rescued him from.

And the scars crisscrossing the body of Leah Goldwyn, Daughter of the Kindred, Spellblade, Eshendai, traitor, rebel, criminal, outlaw, wanted for conspiracy to overthrow the Empire, the crime for which was death, death so gruesome that -

No! a tiny voice sobbed, forcing the litany to stop. His face remained stoically calm, a trick he had learned years ago from the constant scrutiny of Symanta, of the Seekers, his Mother. Emotions were weakness. But try as he might, a single tear traced a line from the corner of his eye, down his cheek, and along the line of his jaw. Slowly, it fell, and by the time it had reached the ground, the Prince was on his feet and moving. Now was no time for emotions. Now was the time for action.

He had made up his mind, once and for all.

A quick surge of energy and he was moving down the corridor, purpose lending the strength and speed of determination to his movements. As he made his way back toward the arena, his mind was working ceaselessly, counting cracks in the wall, noticing tiny defects, anything to keep from thinking too deeply about what he was about to do.

He rounded the corner and saw the crowd gathered around Leah had mostly died down, though there were some who were asking her questions about her technique. Davydd and Lorna had disappeared. Good - they would only get in the way.

The Prince began to move toward Leah but stopped, catching sight of a looming figure off to the side, sitting in the shadows honing an enormous great sword with an equally large whetstone. The Prince changed course and made for Tomaz.

"Well, princeling," the big man said to him, "what did you think of ...?"

The mountainous man trailed off into silence as he met the Prince's gaze. Surprise and wariness combined with the barest hint of fear crossed the large bearded face.

“Where are the Elders meeting?” the Prince asked without preamble. Tomaz’s eyebrows rose.

“Why would you need to know that?”

“There’s no time to explain, Tomaz,” the Prince said, stepping forward and pitching his voice low so that people couldn’t overhear them.

“You need to trust me.”

The Prince was surprised at how controlled and emotionless his voice came out, considering the turmoil going on inside him. He would deal with his feelings later – right now he needed to get to the Elders before anyone else did.

“Council cannot be interrupted,” Tomaz rumbled slowly, confusion drawing his eyebrows down and close together as he looked at the Prince as if seeing another person. The Prince allowed a small hint of the inner turmoil to show through.

“I don’t have time for that, Tomaz – I need to see them now!”

A few of the other Kindred turned to look at the two of them, wondering what was happening. Leah excused herself and began to approach.

“Why?” Tomaz asked.

“Tomaz,” he said, “you need to trust me.”

For the longest moment, the Prince waited for the ex-Blade Master to respond. The big man was quite clearly thrown off balance. Trust and loyalty warred with a sudden suspicion, and the Prince could see that he needed one more nudge. Banking on the big man’s over-reliance on loyalty to make the decision for him, the Prince played his final card.

“You once told me I didn’t have to be one of the Children if I didn’t want to,” the Prince said. “Do you still believe that?”

Tomaz’s expression froze, and his eyes stared holes in the Prince.

“Take me to them, Tomaz. They need to see me – now.”

The two of them stared at each other, locked in tableau for a long moment. And then the big man nodded, stood, and moved quickly off toward

the arena door, the Prince following close behind him. As he passed the rack of practice swords he pulled out the Valerium sword's sheath, quickly slid the blade inside, and tied it to his belt.

"Tomaz? Raven?" they heard Leah ask in confusion.

The two of them, Tomaz in front, burst out of the double doors onto the brightly lit street, sun shining down in cracks through the tall trees that grew on either side of the long, broad boulevard.

"Follow," was all Tomaz said. The Prince complied.

They took off down the main street through the center of the sprawling valley city. Tomaz was moving so quickly, his large strides nearly three of the Prince's, that the Prince was hard-pressed to keep up without running. They passed between various men, women, and children, who all gave them a brief, curious glance and then continued walking when they recognized Tomaz. Their expressions clearly showed what they were thinking: he was an Ashandel - that kind was always moving somewhere quickly.

They approached the large building the Prince had seen when they had first come through the town, made of white marble painted with green and gold columns and beautiful sculptures of heroic men and women. The large domed roof with a single spear-like flagpole reared across the sky. Tomaz turned toward it, and the Prince followed him quickly, passing large, cultivated trees, and a small fountain made of a man spouting water from an upward reaching hand.

Quickly, they made their way past the silver-and-green liveried guards at the doors, who stepped aside with a nod to Tomaz, though they eyed both his greatsword and the sword sheathed by the Prince's side with suspicion. Inside were three huge staircases, two going up and branching off to the right and left, and one equally grand but descending straight down through the floor into the living rock of the valley. It was down this third flight of stairs that they made their way, moving past various groups of men and women who looked to be going about rather important, official business.

The stairway curved twice, all the while descending, going so far down that the Prince soon realized they were quite possibly farther underground than most buildings were above. Finally, they came to a long hallway, at the end of which could be seen a large door carved with majestic beasts and meditating men and women. There was a green-and-gold embroidered black carpet running the length of the hall, and burning torches had been lit and placed in brackets on the walls every few yards; at the end of the corridor stood eight Kindred in formal uniforms of green-and-gold over tight fitting black cloth that covered their arms, legs, and neck: four had the insignia of a white sword sewn into their high collar and four the insignia of a white dagger.

“Brothers and sisters,” Tomaz called out as they neared, “stand down!”

The eight guards, what the Prince suddenly realized were four Rogue or perhaps Ranger pairs, spread across the corridor and seemed not at all inclined to do as Tomaz suggested.

“Who comes to the Council?” a wiry man with a shock of white hair asked. He had stepped forward and unsheathed a pair of remarkably thin swords, which nonetheless had razor sharp edges that gleamed dangerously in the light from the burning torches. There was a dagger on his high collar ... what did that mean?

“One who brings urgent news, Eshendai,” Tomaz said, stopping with the Prince a few yards away. The Prince shifted closer to the big man’s left side and put a hand behind his back, under his shirt, resting it on the hilt of his hidden dagger; his other hand kept a firm grip on the Valerium sword, sheathed by his side.

There was a sudden noise from outside the room in the antechamber back where the staircase ended; it was the sound of steel on steel. Immediately, two of the pairs loped past Tomaz, drawing their various weapons and heading for the door. Tomaz and the Prince exchanged a glance. The Prince nodded toward the door back to the staircase, his

message clear - draw them off. Tomaz stared at him in shock, truly realizing for the first time that the Prince didn't mean to gain admission, but instead to force it. The Prince watched as disapproval and confusion warred with trust. And then the giant gave the barest hint of a nod.

"You two - with me," he said, motioning to the third pair. He turned and ran for the door, not waiting to hear their response. For a moment they stared stupidly at each other, and then rushed off down the corridor. Once they reached the door, they ran through and it closed with a resounding *boom!* behind them.

As soon as the door closed, the Prince was in motion, dashing forward as the dagger came out from beneath his shirt, blade flashing in the torchlight. The Eshendai fell first, not even knowing what had hit him. The Ashandel spun around, only to see the dagger fly through the air and strike him squarely between the eyes. The sword fell from his fingers and hit the ground with a clatter, followed closely by the loud thump of his body.

The Prince retrieved the dagger and replaced it, instead unsheathing the Valerium sword. It felt suddenly heavier than it had in the arena, and the Prince knew it had nothing to do with the actual weight.

He spun toward the door. There were two keyholes and no visible door handle. One keyhole was made of gold, the other of silver, both large but simple in design. A glimmer of light caught the Prince's eye and he turned to see a large golden key hanging around the neck of the Eshendai, having come out of the man's tunic when he fell. The Prince ripped it off and then quickly found the matching key on the body of the Ashandel. He rammed the keys into their holes and turned them simultaneously, arms stretched wide to either side.

The wide double doors cracked open, producing a rush of air that sputtered the torches in the hallway behind him. He pushed, and they opened inward on oiled hinges.

On the other side of the door was a large circular room made from the living rock of a subterranean cave, high-roofed as well as wide. An enormous

round table of polished oak was set in the center, around which sat twelve men and women, each equidistant from the next, with a single empty chair to the side. All of them turned to look at who had disturbed their conclave, as the doors crashed closed behind the Prince.

He stepped forward, the Valerium blade hanging heavily from his clenched fist.

Chapter Nineteen: The Chosen Path

There was a series of scraping, banging noises as eleven chairs were pushed roughly back from the large round table by eleven elderly men and women. The Prince noticed they each wore an ornamental dagger on a chain around their necks, but none reached for it.

“How dare you enter this sanctuary?!” a voice roared to the Prince’s left. A man rushed toward him, wearing green and black armor with gold chasing. The Prince caught a glimpse of a portly face and a mustache before he swung the Valerium sword, catching the man on the temple with the flat of the heavy blade and knocking him unconscious.

The silence after the man fell to the floor was deafening. The Prince moved forward swiftly, kicking the man’s curved dagger away with his boot as he passed it. It clattered across the rough, natural stone floor of the council chamber, where the only noise now was heavy breathing. The Prince rounded the table, eyes locked on a single Elder who sat at the far side of the table, in a chair larger than the others.

This old man was the only one who had remained sitting, and the Prince saw that there was no fear in the man’s eyes, even though he sat unarmed in the face of an assassin.

As the Prince passed each Elder, he noticed that their faces showed anger, defiance, and above all pride. There was no fear, no resignation. A few of them had even moved in front of their chairs and assumed a defensive stance as if ready to fight him even without weapons, though none of them looked to be younger than sixty at best.

But the Prince didn’t stop to engage any of them. He simply walked past them, all the while approaching the Elder at the far end of the table. As it became clear what his intention was, the Elders shifted and a few of them moved to block his way.

“You shall not approach Elder Crane,” one of them said, the only one who had drawn his dagger. The man was taller than the Prince, back straight

even in age, and had dark blue eyes that commanded his obedience. The Prince raised his sword to dispatch the man, but before he could move, a voice spoke behind him.

“Please, Warryn,” Elder Crane said. “Let him come.” The others looked back in surprise, but the Prince simply continued moving, passing between them until he stood in front of the dignified leader.

When he was no more than five feet away, the Prince, gripping the sword with both hands, dexterously twisted his wrists and whipped the sword up into the air over his head. He fell to one knee in front of the seated man, and drove the blade down into the ground in front of him; the Valerium metal cut through the stone with a shower of sparks, leaving the blade half buried in the ground.

“I have no time to ask for absolution, nor do I much care if you would grant it. You are in my mind rebels, criminals, and outlaws, but to you I am something much worse.”

The Prince was speaking quickly, his words coming out clipped but quite clear. He had very little time left.

“I am not a runaway from the families of the Most High who has come to you with information, as has been reported. I am the Prince of Ravens, Seventh Son of the Empress of the Diamond Throne of Lucia, heir to the lands of the Exiled Kindred should I recapture them for the glory of the Empress and the Empire of Ages.”

He rose and pulled off his shirt, exposing the black markings of the Talisman. Dead silence rang through the hall. He took a deep breath and forced himself to continue, staying calm and remaining cogent of his actions.

“I renounce that claim. I renounce my claim to the Diamond Throne; I renounce my claim to the Seventh Principality; and I renounce my claim to citizenship in the Empire of Ages, ruled by the Empress, known as the nation of Lucia.”

If the silence had been great before, now it was profound. Each face bore the same look of shock – every face but the face of the head Elder, this

Elder Crane, who was studying the Prince intently. The man's eyes, such a light blue that they were almost white, were looking at him in a strange way – as if seeing something familiar, and yet unexpected.

The Prince reached down and pulled the Valerium sword from the ground. It slid out as easily as it had gone in, the metal so sharp that not even stone could bind it. The Prince held it horizontally across his open palms, and knelt.

“My brother, the Prince of Oxen is no more than a half day's march from this very spot. The Talisman that my Mother bestowed on me allows me to sense his arrival, and it is my belief that he has in place a tracking spell that is leading him straight toward us and through your land's defenses. I and four others killed a Daemon in the Roarke Mountains not three days ago, and have remained in close proximity ever since. If a tracking spell is in place, Ramael would be able to track us even through your enchantments. He will find this place, and he will attack. If you evacuate this valley and fall back to a more secure position, you have a chance to fend him off, but from what I have seen of this city, should you stay here you will be slaughtered, every last man, woman and child. He is ruthless and will stop at nothing until the will of the Empress is fulfilled and each of you lies dead. If you run, and run fast, then you have a chance.

“As a token of my honesty, I pledge myself and whatever aid I can give to the Exiled Kindred until the Prince of Oxen and his invading army have been repulsed.”

He fell silent, and waited for the Elder's response.

Before it came, the double doors swung inward, and men and women in heavy armor accompanied by Rogue and Ranger pairs in gleaming silver, gold and green flooded through the doors, looking around them. A single Spellblade spotted the Prince, and before anyone could react, a dagger was flying across the intervening space, faster and straighter than an arrow.

“STOP!”

The powerful voice reverberated around the room, and the Prince was left staring at a dagger that hung quivering in midair, point forward, not a hair's width away from his right eye.

Slowly, Elder Crane rose to his feet. Silence filled the room as everyone present took in the sight of the old man and the young Prince. Crane reached up and grabbed the hilt of the dagger. The Prince waited, sweat beading on his face and in the small of his back. Would they believe him?

He pulled the dagger away.

"How much time do we have?" the Elder asked quietly. The Prince just barely stopped himself from letting out a gasp of relief.

"Two hours at most before his scouts arrive, and the main army can't be more than two or three hours behind that," the Prince said, his voice carrying clearly through the room.

For a long moment the Elder stood staring at him as if he were trying to memorize the Prince's face. What was the old man thinking? The blue eyes set in the lined face seemed to be weighing and measuring his entire life. The Prince was reminded forcefully of his Mother, and though he told himself that this man, this traitor, could never rival the Empress, he knew, somewhere deep inside himself, that a confrontation between the Elder and the Empress would be akin to a war between gods. There was power in this man, far beyond what the Prince had expected.

Finally, the old man broke the gaze and the Prince let out a ragged breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

There was another commotion at the door, and the Prince looked up to see Tomaz and Leah, bound and gagged, brought into the room. Leah was kicking and fighting with all her might, and while Tomaz did not struggle, no one seemed to want to lay a hand on him.

"What is this?" Crane asked.

"These two ambushed the guards and allowed that man to penetrate the chamber," a man, who wore a cape and looked like a Captain of the Guard, said reluctantly. "The Eshendai caused a disturbance that drew off

the guards at the door, while the Ashandel led them to her and allowed them to be ambushed. In the confusion, this man broke through.”

“Ah I see,” Elder Crane responded. “In that case release them.”

There was a shocked moment of silence and then the gags and bonds were cut and the two Rogues freed. They seemed as shocked as everyone else.

“I have just been informed,” said Elder Crane, “that the Prince of Oxen is advancing on the valley with an army, killing our scouts and leaving us blind to his advance. We have reason to believe he has penetrated our defenses without the use of an Anchor and will not be stopped short of a counter-attack or well-prepared defense. His scouts will be arriving in two hours and his main force not long afterward. We will evacuate this valley and fall back to Aemon’s Stand – generals go with Elder Warryn – Elders Lymaugh and Stanton, organize the evacuation. The rest of you – spread the word that the emergency teams should run to ground and organize distribution of supplies. Families flee south – all able-bodied men and women willing to fight are to be given weapons. We will all meet again at the Stand.”

Crane nodded to show he had finished, and turned to the Prince again. Pandemonium broke out in the next instant as if it had been held in like steam under a tightly secured lid now removed. The Prince was almost overwhelmed by the sounds of shouting and riotous activity. The Elders remained the most calm, giving orders and generally composing the soldiers, Rangers, and Rogues in the room with tasks, however menial, to do that which would speed the evacuation. The Prince remembered something his brother Rikard had said: *true leaders know that action is the surest way to turn fear into courage. Give them something to do, give them purpose, and they are yours to command.*

The Prince looked up at Elder Crane, who was looking down at him. The man gave the impression of something solid, an eye in the storm forming around him, a deeply rooted boulder amid a rushing stream.

“Rise,” he said to the Prince.

The Prince quickly stood, sword still held unsheathed in his bare hands. He was very careful not to touch the edge – he felt certain the sharpness of the blade would cut him at the slightest touch.

“Eshendai Goldwyn and Ashandel Banier, come!”

Leah and Tomaz quickly made their way forward. Elder Crane focused on the Prince.

“I accept your loyalty, and I also understand you gave it to me only until this crisis has passed. After this coming battle is over, we will talk more, you and me, about your future. But for now, I would request that you sheath that sword and put your shirt on.”

The Prince did so quickly as the other two came within earshot.

“I have a task for the three of you – this evacuation must be covered. You three, Eshendai Davydd Goldwyn, and Ashandel Lorna Lamas, will help Captain Autmaran lead a group of Scouts and Rogues on an ambush mission. Here” – he motioned to a point on the table, which the Prince now saw was carved to resemble an enormous map – “is where that ambush is to be set. The five of you will draw the larger force there, and dispatch the Bloodmages who are tracking you. This should leave them in confusion and force them to slow their advance, buying us time to regroup at the Stand.”

He turned to Leah and Tomaz.

“You are to serve under the tactical command of Captain Autmaran, who will lead the ambush. Eshendai Goldwyn – your brother and Ashandel Lamas will be with you, and this young man here is to be used at your discretion, as you know more of his capabilities than I. Tell the captain to take five hundred Pairs and a thousand Scouts, and use the passes through the mountains and backwoods once the ambush is complete. You and the captain along with whomever he chooses as Eshendai and Ashandel lieutenants are to report to me personally at the Stand. Go.”

With that, he turned and began to examine the map carved into the tabletop, hands folded calmly behind his back, but his shoulders holding a

tension that belied a mind thinking very quickly. The three of them left the Elder, running for the door.

“I need you to get to Davydd and Lorna, princeling,” Leah said as they rushed past Elders conversing with a squad of hastily summoned officers.

“Me?” the Prince asked in surprise. She nodded and continued quickly.

“Tomaz – I need you to find the supplies and horses for those who don’t have them. I also need the soldiers under the direct command of the captain, Tomaz take care of gathering them as well. Davydd and Lorna will have twenty or so pairs of Rogues under them on reserve here in the city, princeling, tell them to get them ready to leave within the hour. I’m going for Captain Autmaran. We are all to meet at the northwestern entrance to the valley; from there we’ll head back toward the mountains and the ambush point Elder Crane set for us. It should draw them away from the Stand.”

“What in the name of shadows and light is the Stand?” the Prince asked as they bounded up the final flight of stairs.

“Aemon’s Stand,” Tomaz rumbled. “It’s where he defeated the Empress one thousand years ago.”

The Prince stopped dead in his tracks.

“What?!”

“No time for that!” shouted Leah over her shoulder. “You can ask questions later! Get to the barracks and find Davydd and Lorna!”

The two Rogues made for the door and immediately split, going in different directions without hesitation. The Prince recovered quickly, dashed out of the door, and ran back for the barracks as fast as his legs would take him.

Defeated the Empress? Impossible!

He had no time to think about that now. In a matter of minutes, he burst through the entrance to the barracks, seized a random soldier, and asked for the way to the Ranger quarters. The man pointed up a staircase, and the Prince was off at once. He arrived on a small landing, accosted another man, who pointed him toward Davydd’s quarters, and then soon

after found himself pounding like a madman on what he hoped was the right door.

“Davydd!” he roared, trying to be heard over the din of rushing soldiers around him. “Davydd it’s Raven! Let me in!”

The door opened and Davydd came out, fully dressed in his Eshendai uniform over a breastplate, leather jerkin, and bracers all tied in place. A small gold knot of rank on the upper right side of his chest shone brightly in the light of the hall. His Valerium sword hung slung across his back, and his red eyes burned like fiery coals.

“What?” he snapped. He pushed past the Prince across the hall and opened another door - revealing Lorna. The Prince followed, and saw that the Ashandel was finishing tying her own armor in place, dyed a dark green color and much more extensive, crafted to take heavy beatings. The great white ax lay close at hand.

“Do you know what’s going on?” Lorna asked Davydd, ignoring the Prince.

“We’re evacuating, and it looks like the Prince of Oxen is on his way.”

The Prince was amazed to see that the Eshendai not only seemed unafraid of the prospect of fighting the Prince of Oxen, but even appeared excited by the idea.

“What do you want?” the big woman asked the Prince.

“I’m here with a message from Leah, via the Elder - Elder Crane.”

Both of them stopped doing up Lorna’s armor and stared at him.

“Well tell us!” the young man snapped, as if the Prince was intentionally stalling.

“We’re setting up an ambush to draw off the main force,” the Prince said hurriedly. “Leah says she needs you and the twenty Rogue pairs under you to meet her at the north-west entrance to the valley within the next hour. The rest of the Kindred are evacuating to the - the Stand.”

“The Stand?” Davydd asked in surprise. He and Lorna exchanged a significant look. The red-eyed young man turned back to the Prince. “Tell Leah we’ll be there.”

The Prince turned and left the room, not quite sure what to do next. There was a sound behind him and he turned to see Davydd looking out of the room at him. The young man approached, red eyes searing the air between them.

“Do they know who you are?” he asked.

The Prince swallowed, and a hundred different responses crossed his mind, from bare-faced denial to polite confusion. But in the end, he knew the time for pretense was long past, and so he answered in earnest.

“Yes. I’ve renounced my claim to throne and sworn myself to the Elders - to Crane - until the Prince of Oxen has been repulsed. I knew they wouldn’t believe me otherwise.”

“You did what?” Davydd asked, surprise widening those terrible glowing eyes.

“Now isn’t the time!” the Prince said, suddenly angry. “Do you want my help or not? No, I don’t care - I’m not doing this for you. I’m doing this for -”

He broke off, and shook his head. Davydd stepped forward, and the Prince looked up. The red-eyed young man spoke quickly.

“Fine, your reasons are your own. But my sister trusts you, and that’s enough for now. If you’re coming with us, go to the armory. Find any spare bits of armor you can. And try not to poke anyone with the sharp point of that sword, yeah?”

The Prince nodded and turned to go.

“Idiot!”

The Prince turned back.

“That way,” Davydd said, motioning the opposite direction before pulling back into Lorna’s room and shutting the door.

The Prince made his way quickly down to the armory, watching the sun in the sky through each window he happened to pass by, trying to mark out how much time he had. The Prince of Oxen was closer, that was certain. But the Kindred were moving quickly, and there was a chance they would be clear of Vale before the army arrived.

When he made it to the armory, the Prince found it was a free-for-all. Armorers and blacksmiths were pounding madly at metal, forges blazing as they did last minute repairs as soldiers of every rank and file waited anxiously.

“Spare armor over here!” a voice was bellowing. The Prince followed it into a corner, where a large-bellied blacksmith in a grimy apron with soot-stained hands and face was handing out pieces of armor to various soldiers.

“What do you need?” he asked the Prince breathlessly.

“Whatever you have,” the Prince responded quickly. He was looking at the pile around the large man and saw that there was very little left.

“What do you already have?”

“Nothing!”

“You have no armor?” the man asked incredulously.

“No! But I’m here on Elder Crane’s orders, so I need something now!”

The man paused for a moment, and then turned and pulled out a sack from behind a counter.

“Here - take these.”

The Prince was loaded down with a leather jerkin, metal bracers and greaves, a helm that would come down to cover the back of his neck as well as the bridge of his nose, and what looked like a discarded general’s breastplate with attached cape. All of it was black.

“Black?” The Prince asked.

“An officer commissioned it and then changed his mind so I never finished gilding it. Just be thankful I had it lying around!” the man bellowed angrily before turning to the next soldier in line.

The Prince did his best to pull all of the pieces on while running toward the north-western entrance to the valley, all the while trying to gauge how much time had passed, and how far away still the Prince of Oxen was.

The entire city was moving, like some enormous anthill disturbed by a child's insistent prodding. Men and women were making hasty goodbyes, most of the children wore expressions of fear and more than one was crying in the middle of the street as its parents packed wagons, carts, and anything that moved with their various possessions. Soldiers in green and silver were moving everywhere, organizing the evacuation, helping with broken carts. Carpenters were making last minute repairs to wagon tongues, and oxen and horses were shying fearfully due to the heightened emotional state.

By the time the Prince made it to the valley entrance, he saw that a large part of the ambush force had already been assembled. Two-thirds of those gathered were men and women with bows strapped to their backs and short swords sheathed at their waists. They were all clad in thick leather armor, with thin, rectangular pieces of metal sewn on to offer protection against light weaponry. The other third were Rogues and Rangers, dressed in black-and-green uniforms with swords and daggers sewn into their high collars. Some had silver chasing on their armor, while others had gold, and the quality varied from person to person, from one slight woman who wore no armor at all, to a large, dark-skinned man who was clad in a full suit. The Prince located Leah and quickly made his way toward her. As he came closer, he saw that she was talking quite animatedly with a man mounted on a white horse.

"Just in time!" Leah cried, noticing him. She was dressed in the same armor as Davydd, though her chasing was silver, and she had no greaves or bracers. She too had a golden knot of rank on her chest.

"Who's this? You're a captain?" asked a the man on the horse. He was dark-skinned, with a helm like the one the Prince wore and a similar breastplate and cape, but gilded in red.

“No,” the Prince explained quickly, “this was the only armor they had. I’m with her.” He pointed to Leah. The man took this in stride and nodded.

“Right, the fifth one in the tracking spell. You two stay with the other three.”

He motioned to Tomaz, Davydd, and Lorna in one of the groups on their right-hand side. The Prince and Leah made their way over - Tomaz was holding the reins of the horses they’d taken from the Defenders so long ago.

“Going to a funeral, princeling?” Tomaz asked, noticing the Prince’s black armor.

“I certainly hope not!” the Prince cried back, mounting in a single bounding leap onto his horse, surprised to find how easy it was to move in the armor.

“Let’s go!” cried the voice of the man with the red cape.

Immediately, all fifteen hundred Rogues, Rangers, and Scouts spun their horses and began to move through the gate, following the lead of captain red-cape and a pair of Rogues that flanked him. The five of them found themselves positioned toward the back of the force.

“Here we go,” the Prince said.

“Scared princeling?” Leah asked.

“Oh, I think he’s properly terrified,” Davydd called over the thunder of their horses’ hooves. The Prince saw again the manic glint in the young man’s eye, a look of demented excitement.

“You’re insane, you know that?” the Prince called back. To his surprise, Lorna grunted in agreement with him.

“We’re about to go ambush the Prince of Oxen,” said Tomaz, “who knows exactly where we are and will be. We have a bare fraction of his force. We have had no preparation, no time to properly outfit ourselves, and we’re racing blindly. At this point, I think we’re all insane.”

“Damn right,” said Davydd, with a huge grin.

Chapter Twenty: The Pass of Cartuom

The first part of the ruse worked – as night fell, it became clear that the Prince of Oxen had veered from his original course and was moving after the small decoy.

“It looks like you were right,” Captain Autmaran said, who turned out to be the man in the red cape, when he checked in with the Prince the hour of sunset. “That tracking spell is leading him right to you.”

“A good plan so far,” Tomaz rumbled in agreement. The Captain spurred his horse forward once more to join the leading Ashandel and Eshendai at the head of the column.

“Oh, a great plan,” the Prince responded with quiet sarcasm, “let’s just stay together and lure the Prince of Oxen, only the most ruthless, terrifying, and unmerciful of my brothers and sisters straight toward us. Great plan. *Superb.*”

There was a slight movement from ahead of him, and even though he couldn’t see more than her silhouette in the falling darkness, the Prince was quite certain Leah had just rolled her eyes at him.

“How far until the ambush site?” asked Lorna.

“A few more miles,” Leah and Davydd responded together.

“So soon?” Lorna and Tomaz responded.

“Yes,” said Davydd and Leah.

“Good,” said Lorna and Tomaz.

“Stop that,” said the Prince.

“What?” asked all four together.

The Prince threw his hands up in the air in exasperation, his nerves making him easily perturbed. After a few moments of silence, he asked the question that had been burning in his mind since Vale.

“What exactly is Aemon’s Stand?”

The four exchanged glances and the Prince saw Leah’s shoulders tighten.

“I’m on your side now, remember?” the Prince said. “It might help me to know the big secret, since we’re supposed to meet there anyway if we survive this stupid, *stupid* ambush plan.”

The plan, which had seemed good in concept when Elder Crane sent them off in the capital room of Vale, now seemed terribly foolhardy. With only some fifteen hundred troops, they planned to divert and hold off the Prince of Oxen? He had told them all how foolish such a thought was, but none of them had believed him.

“Stop saying the plan is stupid,” Leah said, calmly composed. “The plan will work, all we are supposed to do is buy the others time, and we’ve already bought them at least a few more hours by leading the army away from Vale. If we’re lucky, the ambush will force the Prince of Oxen to slow down and it will take him days to track us to the Stand, and by then we’ll have gathered –”

“Ramael won’t be slowed by an *ambush!*” exclaimed the Prince with a healthy note of disdain in his voice. All of them looked at him, surprised by the outburst.

“Ramael is the Prince of Oxen! He doesn’t care about the lives of his men, he doesn’t care about morale, he doesn’t *care!* He’s a man completely concerned with domination, control, and single-minded annihilation. You need to understand this! No matter how effective this ambush is, it will stall him only as long as it takes him to force his army back into motion. He will not slow down. He will not pause. By now he’s past the illusions, so he can use his scouts to track us. We can buy the main army a day at most, unless we try to lead him back toward the mountains, and even in that case he is smart enough to figure out we’re only a decoy force. He’ll turn around and burn the countryside until you march out to face him. He’s past the Pass, he’s past the enchantments, he knows he’s in the right place, and with a huge army! From what it feels like, he must have at least a hundred thousand, if not more, following him – that’s the entire army of Roarke. You need to be ready for that!”

A brief silence followed this outburst.

“Well, that brightened up my day,” Tomaz rumbled.

“This plan is still out best chance,” Leah insisted. “And the Stand has never been conquered.”

“So it’s a fortress?” the Prince asked.

“Yes,” Davydd said at the same time Leah said “no.”

“It’s a fortress built around a city that contains all of the history of the Kindred,” Lorna said in compromise.

“History of the Kindred?”

“All of the original accounts of the Founders,” Tomaz said, “including Aemon himself. It has documents dating back to the early years of our nation, when we fought against the Empire in earnest. It has information about the first Spellblades and about the time when the enchantments were placed around the nation to make it impregnable to outsiders.”

“And the time when the Empress herself led an army to the Stand and was defeated,” Leah said. The others nodded in seeming reverence.

“You said that before,” the Prince broke in, “what do you mean? I have never heard of the Empress leading any attack, and certainly never of her being defeated.”

“It was the greatest battle the Kindred have ever seen,” said Tomaz. “It was decades after Aemon had fled from the Empire and come here to establish a new nation, not one that imitated the old ways of the land across the sea. The Empress came, leading an army. The sky was blackened by her very presence, just like the sky is around Lucien today. But the Kindred stood strong in the newly raised castle, and around Aemon the newly crowned Prince of the Veil.”

A shock went through the Prince.

“Prince of the Veil?” he asked, forcing his voice to come out even.

“Yes,” Leah said, “when a crisis occurs, the Council of Elders are called to elect a single Prince of the Veil that will remain in power until the crisis is over. Aemon was the first.”

The Prince felt like he'd just been hit with a mace upside the head. It couldn't be. The Prince of the Veil? But that was ...

"The Empress attacked," Davydd picked up, eyes gleaming even in the gathering dark, "and broke through the defenses of the castle. But Aemon, carrying the first Valerium sword, met the Tyrant in open battle, and drove her from the field. Her forces were crushed - well, they fell back, but I like the way 'crushed' sounds - and as she turned to tuck tail and run, she lifted a hand to the black clouds in the sky above her, cried out a single word, and a bolt of lightning sliced through the sky and pierced straight through Aemon's heart. Shadow-cursed, cowardly bitch."

"In their outrage," Tomaz said, gently overriding Davydd's somewhat overly enthused retelling, "the Kindred followed the Empress' army for days, pushing them back to the Pass of Roarke, but eventually they could pursue them no more and they were forced to set guards at the Pass and wait in defense. Aemon was buried where he had been struck down, and a temple was raised over him. His sword, fallen from his hand, could not be touched. Those who tried were hurtled backward by an unseen force. But the castle had stood, and so had the Kindred. It was renamed Aemon's Stand."

Silence fell over them as Tomaz finished the story and the Prince was swept up in his own musings as to what this meant about the history of the Empire. Could there be other histories that had been tampered with? Prophecies even? The Prince of the Veil ...

Not too much later they reached the ambush sight, just as the sun had well and truly set, leaving them in a brief twilight. A mist had descended along with the darkness, covering everything with a fine layer of dew and drastically reducing visibility. When they saw the ambush sight, it seemed to leap out at them from the fog bank.

It was a mountain, almost sheer, with a single path leading up to the top that twisted to the right, and then twisted back to the left in a broad but precipitous swath before reaching the top. The side facing them had been

completely cleared of trees, and it was relatively easy to see to the top, upon which was located what looked like a castle.

“Reinforcements?” the Prince asked in shock. The castle had torchlight situated on the battlements and looked to be heavily manned.

“It’s an illusion,” Davydd drawled at him. “Meant to make little princelings like you wet themselves at the idea of a fully armed castle on top of an impregnable hill.”

“Long ago deserted,” Leah explained, “which makes it perfect for us. From this side it looks almost new, but the rest of it is a ruin and has been for some time. But the Army of Roarke will think that it’s an actual castle and have to bring most of their force to bear before attacking, which gives us the perfect opportunity to hit them hard and fast in the night when they make camp.”

“It’s not going to be that simple,” the Prince tried to explain, but he was cut off.

“The same strategy has worked many times before,” Davydd said.

“I don’t doubt it, which is why Ramael will probably come up with something - ”

“The Prince of Oxen isn’t the smartest sheep in the pen,” Lorna said.

“Yes,” the Prince responded testily, “but I know him, and I don’t think he’ll fall for it!”

He said this louder than he had intended, and a few soldiers riding nearby looked at him askance. The Prince cleared his throat and continued, cheeks a little hot.

“What I’m saying is he will know we’re at the top because of the tracking spell, and anyone with half of the military training I have would know this is the perfect spot for an ambush. Ramael isn’t known for his intelligence, but he is one of the Children. He’s had over a hundred years of battlefield experience, with all the resources of the Guardians and their vast knowledge of war.”

Davydd rolled his eyes as if to say, “what would you know?” and rode on ahead of them. Lorna followed.

“It’s a good plan, princeling,” Tomaz rumbled as quietly as was possible for him. “Even a Blade Master would be cautious here. You know the Training as well as I do: you bring the full force to bear before advancing on a possibly fortified position, and you never do it at night. And with a force this large, ambush is highly unlikely. They will be caught unawares.”

The Prince’s gut told him it wouldn’t be that simple, but he had to admit it seemed like a good plan. Simple, and it played on the enemy’s strategy, which was a safe bet considering the standardization of the Empire’s forces. He put his doubts aside for the time being.

After a few muted orders from Captain Autmaran, passed along down the column of riders, the force of Kindred arranged themselves along the mountain pass, in positions in the trees. The Prince was amazed at how well and quickly they managed it; one minute they were there, the next the narrow path seemed to be nothing more than a forested ravine.

And just in time, the Prince thought to himself. The Prince of Oxen and his army were no more than a mile away, and already he could feel the earth rumbling underfoot.

“I suppose I don’t need to ask how close he is,” Leah said breathlessly to the Prince as they made their trek up the road to the castle situated on the hill; a grunt of amusement from her other side told him that Tomaz agreed.

The illusion was certainly a good one: even when they were no more than fifty feet away from the castle’s large exterior wall, the Prince thought it looked real. True, fallen into disrepair, but certainly whole. But once the five of them crossed under the wall’s large gate the Prince could clearly see what the Exile girl had been talking about: this wall, the one that faced the road and the sheer mountainside, was the only one standing. The other walls and, indeed, most of the interior structure of the castle, was scattered and strewn

about the ground, looking like so many children's building blocks toppled and thrown about in a tantrum.

The wall had a second, smaller gate that was hidden from view. The five of them made their way in that direction, Davydd telling them Autmaran had asked them to take position on the outer side of the wall so they could have a view of the battle below them and be in position for a counter-offensive should the need arise to cover a retreat. They crossed through the door single file, having dismounted and tied their horses in the Kindred's makeshift stable inside the decrepit castle's walls. Soon were all located at the top of the hill, looking over the lip of a crumbling wall at the horizon, which was now almost fully cloaked in shadow. The clouds were out and the moon was completely concealed. The Kindred soldiers had all been told to extinguish their torches once they were in place, and now the only light was just visible coming through the hills, snaking toward them.

The Prince felt shivers go up his back.

"I don't like knowing I'm a sitting target," he growled to Leah, trying to mask his anxiety with anger.

"Like it or not, we're the bait, princeling," she snapped back, obviously trying the same tactic. "We're still their only lead in uncharted territory, and if we don't stay up here then they'll know, or at least suspect, the castle is just an illusion."

"I don't know what you two are complaining about," Davydd the red-eyed Eshendai broke in, "any day I have an excuse to kill Imperials is a good day to me."

"Each and every one of those men have lives," the Prince started hotly, the memories of the men he'd killed floating up in the back of his mind as they always seemed to do before he was about to commit violence.

"Be quiet," said the authoritative voice of Captain Autmaran before the Prince could continue.

The captain, who had appeared behind them in a swirl of a red cloak that blended in surprisingly well with the dark shadows of the night, knelt next to them, looking out over the ambush set before them.

“Yes, sir,” all of the Exiles responded. The Prince rolled his eyes. Now they respected authority.

“He should stop for the night when he sees the pass is guarded,” the captain said, looking at the Prince. “Don’t worry. I have fought against the Ox Lord in various skirmishes – he is predictable. He will stop for the night.”

The Captain rose to his feet, his bald head shining even in the darkness.

“I will bet you the Diamond Throne I know him better than you do,” the Prince muttered under his breath. To his surprise Davydd let out an appreciative chuckle.

The Prince wasn’t sure how long they waited in the deepening black of night, the ground shaking underneath them as the enormous host advanced. He wasn’t sure about the others, but to him it felt like lifetimes. Barely able to keep still, his heart pumping more pure, unadulterated emotions into his blood with every second, common sense screaming at him like an animal sensing a predator – *run! Run now!* – it was all he could do to keep still and silent. A cold sweat had broken out on his forehead, and his tunic and undershirt were suddenly stifflingly hot under his leather jerkin and breastplate.

“Breathe, princeling,” said Leah’s voice from next to him. He could barely make her out in the pitch-blackness of the night.

“We should be running,” he told her in a harsh whisper through clenched teeth. “This is not a good idea!”

“Look, they come,” said Lorna softly, voice like the quiet murmur of far-off thunder.

They all shifted and peeked their heads the barest fraction over the barrier, just enough to see the advancing force. It was true – the first column of men, the light infantry clad in the white-and-red of Roarke, had rounded

the corner. A number of scout cavalry had accompanied them, and pulled up short when the light from their torches caught a glimpse of the mountains around them rising up through a gathering nighttime fog. A man with a long red plume in his helmet motioned to one of the mounted scouts, scribbled a message, and sent the man running back through the pass. They continued to march, but the pace slowed as they waited for orders.

“We are committed,” rumbled Tomaz. “There is no other course of action.”

“We can still run,” the Prince reminded them.

“In times like this, there’s only one thing you need to remember,” said the voice of Davydd. His red eyes seemed to gather the light from the torches down below, turning him into a devilish creature of the night. “A brave man is no more courageous than a normal man.”

“He is simply brave five minutes longer,” Leah finished. Her green eyes had the same gleam as Davydd’s, making them shine in the night with anticipation and excitement, hot and demonic.

“You’re all insane,” the Prince said. “Have I made that abundantly clear?”

Leah smiled at him.

“They’re resting for the night,” Tomaz broke in. They all looked over the wall at the men, who were indeed stopping. The mounted messenger had returned, and the red-plumed captain was holding a scroll and motioning for a full-company halt. There was a ripple in the crowd and more riders came forward.

“The Bloodmages,” Lorna said suddenly.

They all lifted their heads the slightest bit more, craning their necks just far enough that they could make out in the distant torch light four men in hooded black cloaks so voluminous that they covered the entire body of the rider and a large portion of the horse as well. One of them was talking to the captain and motioning to the top of the hill, while the others were staring blankly forward – straight toward where the five of them sat in hiding. The

Prince knew they were too far away to be seen and too well covered, but he shivered nonetheless, feeling as though a long icy finger had just been run down his spine. The five of them ducked back down behind the wall.

“Are you certain you’re the Prince of Ravens?” Davydd whispered, half exasperated, half mocking. “You’re acting like the Prince of Mice.”

“Not my fault,” the Prince said, shifting from foot to foot, his hands wringing each other over and over again. He had a slight headache and he felt as though he had drunk too much *soufa*. “The power of the Bloodmages is connected to the Talismans. When there is a group of them gathered together, particularly when they’re using an enchantment like this light-forsaken tracking spell, the Children get this way unless Mother is near. She dampens the effect somehow. But the central part of the Bloodmage’s power is based off, in essence, the Raven Talisman. That’s why we have the same black marks. The process to make the Bloodmages ... it’s messy, and the Raven Talisman picks up on the aftermath; it’s like putting a lodestone next to a compass.”

The Exiles exchanged glances, but even Davydd remained silent. Perhaps they weren’t too keen to go into exactly how the Prince was connected to the Bloodmages.

“What is he saying?” Leah wondered in a curious voice.

“What?” the Prince asked.

“Look,” she said, motioning with her head. She had peeked back over the wall. Slowly, they all did the same.

It appeared that the captain of the infantry column was arguing with the messenger and the Bloodmage. He kept making references to the mountain and then to the ground, and the Prince got the distinct impression he was saying he didn’t want to ascend the mountain in the dark and foggy night, but wanted to camp.

The messenger, who the Prince suddenly noticed had a tunic embroidered with the sign of the Ox, was motioning vehemently toward the

mountain pass. He was joined by the Bloodmage. The message was clear: they were to keep going, not to make camp.

“Oh, shadows and light,” the Prince said.

The captain, face red and set with anger, motioned to his lieutenant, and the column began to move forward again.

“I hate to sound smug, but I told you this was a bad idea!”

The Prince moved back far enough from the wall that he could stand without chance of being seen.

“No!” hissed Leah, “we’re not supposed to move yet – that’s not the plan!”

“Plan’s changed!” the Prince snapped back. He turned to Davydd and Lorna, speaking quickly. “The Bloodmage only wants to come now because he knows we’re all up here, together, and he has an exact lock on us. We need to spread out – the tracking spell grows weaker the farther we are from each other. You and Lorna move down the south side – Leah, Tomaz and I are going to go to the north. It will at least slow them down, and give us some time to get out of here without losing any men. Once we’re far enough apart, the spell will be more confusing than helpful – they’ll know we’re here but have no idea where.”

“I don’t take orders from you,” Davydd snarled viciously.

“But you do take orders from me,” said a voice. It was Captain Autmaran, having materialized out of the darkness behind them with the commanding Eshendai and Ashandel, a pair of silver-haired women who looked like twins, and apparently having overheard the Prince’s plan.

“Do as he says. The only thing different is that once you’re on the other side and they’re confused, I’ll give the order to attack.”

The Prince looked up sharply. He opened his mouth to object, but the captain held up a hand and continued to talk as the Ashandel standing at his shoulder gave the Prince a look that very clearly warned against interrupting.

“The ambush was meant to buy time. The main force is counting on us, even if it’s only for a few more hours – and if the army gains this ground we

lose all advantage. The ambush needs to happen now; if the first column is here, it means the rest of the army has entered the ravine and is coming – if we stop and confuse them now, they may turn and go back around entirely. That’s an extra day at least, maybe two, for our forces to get to the Stand. Wait for the bowmen to fire three volleys, and then charge with the other Rogues and Rangers. All the Scout infantry will cover you with bow and arrow. I’d offer to send them in too, but we’d only get in your way. Pass the word. Go!”

Davydd’s demeanor didn’t change, but the barest note of deference crept into his voice as he responded with a curt “sir,” and spun away to the south. The captain turned to make his way back to his post, and Leah grabbed the Prince by the arm and pulled him along after her.

They made their way around the side of the wall, careful to keep their heads down and out of sight, and soon found themselves in the thickening forest, Leah in front with the Prince and Tomaz spread out to either side. Leah and Tomaz stopped briefly at each nearly invisible Kindred force as they went, relaying the Captain’s orders. The Prince was once again amazed – they were hiding behind the smallest of rocks, in the barest hint of a fold in the ground, behind saplings the size of a child. They were halfway down the slope, approaching the army, when they passed a place where a gap in the trees gave them a view of the path below, and as the Prince caught sight of the Bloodmages, he saw them suddenly falter, as if they had been hit over the head and their vision had doubled.

“This is it!” the Prince whispered. Leah and Tomaz ran down to join him as they dashed the last few yards to just within the tree line that kept them concealed. They were now no farther than twenty yards from the troops marching by below them. The first column was nearly halfway past them, headed up the road to the ruined castle, arranged in siege formation.

“Where do we go when we’re done?” the Prince whispered suddenly. He was shaking almost uncontrollably now, the Bloodmages’ presence making it very hard to stand still, he had so much extra energy.

“There’s other passes through the mountain,” Leah breathed back to him almost inaudibly, “they won’t be able to follow us.”

“Won’t they just go over the mountain?”

“They’ll try,” Tomaz whispered, sounding for all the world like an enormous bumblebee as he did his best to remain quiet, “but Captain Autmaran will think of something.”

“But what -?”

Leah’s hand was suddenly over his mouth, and he looked at her in surprise. She motioned to the column, and the Prince saw that the Bloodmages were speaking frantically to the captain, almost in an air of panic.

“They know it’s an ambush,” she breathed.

At that instant, the column slowed the barest fraction, waiting for the captain’s orders to be relayed, and a shrill whistle sounded out from high up the mountain.

The next second, the Prince thought wildly that the whistle had been taken up by the Kindred hiding the mountains, but then arrows began to sprout in the chinks of the infantrymen’s armor before him, and he knew the attack had begun. Men fell to the ground dead, others cried out as they were wounded, and the Prince realized he was about to join open battle against the Empire.

“One,” Leah whispered.

There was a moment of shock, as the Imperial soldiers absorbed the fact that they were under attack, and then they bolted in every direction looking for cover, chased by a second racing wind of arrows that did deadly damage, each and every one seeming to count for ten in the dark night, the fear of the men feeding on itself and giving way to panic.

“Two.”

The infantry in this column were light, but their shields were still metal-reinforced wood and well made. Some of them had the presence of mind to kneel and place those shields over their heads, but a large majority of the

men had forgotten and were now rushing toward the surrounding woods, looking for cover, and falling in droves. The first line of these men was barely ten feet downhill from where the Prince, Leah, and Tomaz stood, when the final volley ripped into them.

“Three!”

The Prince, fire pumping through his brain and turning his vision red, shot out of the trees flanked by Leah and Tomaz, the valley suddenly full of shouts and cries that had an entirely different timbre from the screams of pain and panic resounding from the Imperial army below.

The Prince just had time to shoot one look behind him and see the entire forest burst open to reveal the Kindred, dressed in green, gold and silver, and then he was in the middle of the fray, hacking and slashing with his heavy Valerium sword.

One man ran toward him, trying to run past the Prince into the relative safety of the woods as arrows continued to fall with brutal accuracy from the higher slopes of the mountains. The Prince’s sword lanced out and hamstringed the man, tripping him and two others who had tried to follow. A Kindred soldier came up behind the Prince and finished the job; the Prince moved on, and caught a shadow moving toward him with lightning speed out of the corner of his eye. He threw himself to the ground, and was just in time to avoid being decapitated by Tomaz’s greatsword, which had swung wildly backwards after cutting down two men.

The light infantryman in front of the Prince, seeing Tomaz, seemed to forget that he had a sword of his own; he turned and ran, but the Prince caught him and cut him down. That life was added to the Prince’s, and he quickly forced the memories to the back of his mind, using the strength and speed to dodge another sword thrust at him from his left.

Time seemed to blur together as the world became a simple fight to stay alive. The Prince was able to avoid killing any more men, the general panic of the Imperials keeping most of them from being too much of a threat. His Valerium sword cut indiscriminately through armor and flesh, and it was

an easy thing for the Prince to use his training to locate tendons and muscles that, once severed, left the soldiers incapacitated, but very much alive. At one point the Imperials seemed to rally, but then arrows flashed out of the night again and cut down the men holding the torches, plunging the world into darkness and the Imperials back into a blind panic.

Leah was fighting next to him, and even in the midst of the bloodshed she was breathtaking. The Prince had known she was good, and if he hadn't then the sparring match back in Vale had proved it, but this was different. She had a deadly, graceful beauty to her that was chilling to watch. The sparse torchlight seemed to gather in her green eyes and her body flowed from one move to the next so seamlessly it seemed she was dancing. Her lithe body twisted and turned with a dexterity and finesse that made even the most skilled swordsman look like a hapless lumberjack.

Tomaz fought next to her, and if Leah was the embodiment of grace and finesse, he was power and brute force. There was not a single man who could stand in front of Tomaz and not quake at the sight – arrows bounced off of his heavy armor, swords were swept aside like tree branches by his gauntleted fists, and men fell beneath the enormous sword Malachi as if they were nothing more than stalks of wheat at harvest. At one point, caught up in the fight as he was, the giant threw back his head and bellowed out a wordless challenge to all who could hear him. It gave the Kindred heart and their blows rained down on an Imperial army suddenly terrified out of their minds.

“Fall back!” cried the voice of Captain Autmaran, “fall back!”

The cry was taken up and horns sounded. The Exiled Kindred began to disengage and retreat, leaving hundreds of the enemy dead behind littering the ground and hundreds more fleeing back up the ravine. In the confusion, the Prince was jostled around and forced to kill two more or else be killed himself. His body, weary and exhausted, was suddenly strong once more, allowing him to race ahead of the soldiers and catch up with Leah and Tomaz. A cry came from the Imperial force, as the men realized what was

happening and regained enough presence of mind to give chase, but arrows from the waiting Kindred soldiers stationed high on the mountainside brought them down in droves with terrible accuracy, forcing them to take cover.

“Let’s go!” roared Tomaz ahead of the Prince, Imperial arrows and broken blades sticking out from his armor in so many places he looked like a monstrous porcupine. Leah almost shot past him as well, but the Prince reached out and grabbed the Exile girl’s arm. The other Rogues and Rangers continued on without a backward glance, covered by volley after volley of deadly rain from Captain Autmaran’s Scouts.

“The tracking spell is still in place!” the Prince roared in her ear. He saw her eyes light up with understanding: if they retreated now they’d be followed straight to the Stand.

“How do you break the spell?” she asked.

“Normally,” the Prince began, “you’d need to use a –”

She drew her daggers.

“I can work with that!” he said.

They turned and ran back down the hill, the Prince unsheathing the Valerium sword once more, the strength of the three soldiers making it light enough even for his exhausted limbs to wield with dexterity. They passed fleeing Kindred soldiers, who all looked at them as if they were insane, but they didn’t notice; they were searching with all of their might for the blood-drop insignia of the Bloodmages.

“There!” the Prince gasped, pointing off to their right. It was a single banner, not very large, but located on the fringe of one of the groups still in disarray. They doubled their speed, dodging through a thickening crowd of soldiers, mostly Kin fighting to extricate themselves from the fray and retreat to the escape passes in the heights of the mountains. They were the only ones running toward the enemy troops.

“We’re going to die!” the Prince said.

“No we aren’t!” Leah roared back over her shoulder.

Three men seemed to spring up from the ground directly in front of them. Before Leah and the Prince could even react, arrows flashed out of the mountains, and all three crumpled in heaps – leaving the path to the Bloodmages completely open.

They crossed the final twenty yards, and were suddenly in the midst of three men in hooded black robes, all of who were completely surprised to see two Exiles running at them, weapons drawn. One of them wore a Soul Catcher that was shining with a bright, gold-and-blue light, very different from the usual blood-red.

The essence of lightning! He was in control of the Daemon!

“That one!” the Prince shouted, pointing.

They both shot toward the Bloodmage in the center, but the hooded men had recovered quickly, and they all drew long, straight daggers, tips blackened with poison, chanting words under their breath that cracked and hissed.

The Prince was confronted on the left, but his enhanced strength and the Valerium sword made quick work of the dagger, and the hand holding it as well. With a cry of pain, the man fell to his knees, blood blossoming on his robes. The Prince turned to the Bloodmage with the blue Soul Catcher. Leah had been engaged off to the right by the third Bloodmage and two other Imperial soldiers who had come to his aid. The Prince saw her throw one of her daggers; it impaled itself in the first soldier, flew back into her hand – and then the Prince lost sight of her as he engaged the head Bloodmage.

The hooded man attacked, feinting to the left and then stabbing at the Prince’s right. It was child’s play: the Prince, with the speed of three men, dodged the blow, wrapped an arm around the man’s elbows, and with a snap broke them both.

There was a wordless shriek of pain from within the hood, and the Prince knew that the Bloodmage’s mouth was pulled back in a snarling rictus of agony. The Valerium sword flashed up, and slashed the Soul Catcher

cleanly in two, breaking the spell, and destroying the force that bound the mage to life.

The air around them seemed to compress, and then it exploded outward with the sound of thunder. Lightning shot up into the sky, throwing the Prince backwards into a tree, forcing the breath out of his lungs. The Bloodmage let out a shriek of disbelief and despair, and then fell to the ground, dead.

A shape shot past the Prince's blurred vision, pulling him along with it as it hurled up the mountain as fast as it could.

"Time to go, time to go, time to go!"

Breath still not flowing into his lungs quite properly, the Prince just managed to keep up with the girl as he shot a glance over his shoulder. What he saw made him lose any last hint of inhibition and run like a madman.

The second rank of the army had rounded the corner of the ravine, and had been alerted to the presence of the Prince and Leah by the destruction of the Bloodmage's medallion. It consisted of five columns of archers, and what looked like nearly a thousand bows were trained on the Prince and Leah as they ran up the mountainside.

The Prince looked up and saw the Kindred firing arrow after arrow from the ledge above them, but it was nowhere near enough.

A loud command and a sharp *twang!* came from behind them, followed by the sound of a thousand pointed needles of death whistling through the air, and then the arrows were falling among them as they ran, slashing through their cloaks, thudding into trees, ravaging bushes.

"RUN!" a voice roared at them. It was Tomaz, standing at the opening to the lowest of the escape passes through the mountain. He was barely fifty yards away, but that distance seemed as far as the bottom of the ocean.

Not knowing where they found the speed, Leah and the Prince shot for the pass, arrows still falling around them as the men reloaded, falling around them like a deadly rain ... and then they were through.

They collapsed against the side of the rock wall just long enough for Tomaz to bodily hoist them both in his arms and begin to run, sprinting as fast as he could.

“NOW!” he roared in a voice so loud it left the Prince’s ears ringing.

Boulders crashed down from the sky above them, and the Prince thought for a brief moment that the world was ending. But the rocks landed behind them, and the rumbling soon stopped as the big man slowed and set them down on a small patch of dirt.

“What was that?” the Prince asked, lifting his head.

To his amazement, the pass they had just escaped through was now completely blocked by the remnants of a landslide. He raised his eyes and saw that two groups of Kindred soldiers had scaled the rock walls, waited until the big man had brought them safely through the pass, and then brought a mountain of rubble down to seal it behind them.

There was a loud series of echoing crashes off to their right, followed by a final booming roar, loud enough to sound like thunder, which rippled through the very earth beneath their feet.

“What - what was that?” the Prince gasped. It was very difficult to breath; he must be more winded then he’d first thought.

“The other passes,” Leah managed to say, “they’re all being blocked.”

“And if I’m not mistaken,” Tomaz added, “that last one was the castle itself.”

There were whoops and cheers from the Kindred soldiers standing on the mountainside, and they looked up and saw them motioning down over the sheer cliff side to the army trapped in the ravine below.

“They’re retreating! They’re turning back! Hah-hah!”

Leah and Tomaz let out responding whoops of joy.

“Well done, Ashandel,” Leah said as she was pulled to her feet.

“Are you well?” He asked, looking her over with a critical eye.

“Yes, amazingly,” she responded.

“Good – because now I’m going to kill you for being a stupid, foolhardy slip of a girl!” he growled ominously. She just beamed back at him. Slowly the grimace on the big face slid off and he let out a resigned sigh.

“You are far too much like your brother.”

She laughed, and then turned to the Prince and smiled tauntingly.

“What, princeling, are you going to sit there resting all day? A little exercise too much for you?”

He tried to respond, but all that came out was a choking gasp that surprised him as much as it did her. Together, they both looked down and saw a thick wooden shaft sticking out of the left side of his torso, under the armpit. He coughed and felt something salty and metallic in his mouth; he spat it out and realized, dumbfounded, that it was blood. The last thing he saw was Leah’s look of horror, as the world caved in around him and swirled into blackness.

Chapter Twenty-One: Aemon's Stand

The Prince of Ravens was standing in a large field, and on his right was Tomaz. On his left was his brother Ramael, the Prince of Oxen.

Tomaz held his huge greatsword, Malachi, an enormous ribbon of steel that seemed to undulate in the shifting light as he moved it back and forth between his hands. Ramael, the Prince of Oxen, held his customary weapons: Two huge battles axes, double-bladed, and made of the finest Tynian steel, the wood dyed black and the metal dyed red, making it seem as if they had blood on them even when they were clean.

For a long moment, they remained frozen in an awesome tableau, standing proudly on either side of the Prince of Ravens, but then a breeze stirred the grass of the field, and the Prince knew what was going to happen. He jumped up and yelled for them to stop, but he couldn't make any sound. His mouth was gagged.

They both leapt toward each other, coming right toward the Prince as if he wasn't even there. They clashed, and then fell apart. They stood for a moment, towering over the Prince, and then Tomaz fell in a heap. The Prince of Oxen hefted his axes, and looked down at the Prince. He smiled a blood-curdling smile.

"Not even he is strong enough to defeat me," he said in a voice deep as the ocean that rattled the Prince's bones and squeezed his heart like a vice. "I'm coming for you."

The double-bladed axes swung down.

With a heaving gasp, the Prince sat upright, his head pounding as the dark shadows of unconsciousness splintered to reveal reality behind them.

He was in a large, dark room lying on the ground in what looked to be a makeshift infirmary bed of some kind, amidst a large number of other people who were all wearing bandages covered with blood and dirt.

"What ...?"

He cut off as what felt like a hot poker stabbed through his side. With a groan of pain he fell back on the makeshift bed of blankets and rags. He brought his hand away from his side, expecting blood from the wound he remembered taking in the ambush, but it came away clean. With a sort of frantic energy, he pulled up the tattered remnants of his tunic, hastily cut open in order to allow someone to examine the wound, and found bandages wrapped around his chest. He breathed a large sigh of relief that sent a small jolt of pain through his body but did no more than that.

“So you’re awake!”

The Prince looked up at the source of the stern voice and found an older woman with so draconian an air about her that he immediately felt he had done something wrong and needed to apologize for it.

“Yes ...?” he responded cautiously.

“You should be dead,” she said curtly.

The Prince wasn’t quite sure how to respond to this remark.

“I’m ... sorry?”

She rolled her eyes and walked toward him. Before he could react, she grabbed his head, thrust it under her arm, and held him in place while she checked his bandages. He was so startled by this treatment that he didn’t even think that he might try to stop her until she had already released him, and then she was forcing a white porcelain mug of hot liquid to his lips.

“Drink,” she commanded. He coughed and spluttered at first, but the woman’s hands were insistent and dexterously managed to spill most of the cup’s contents into his mouth. It tasted strongly of peppermint, with a disgusting, bitter aftertaste. She pulled away to let him breath.

“You’re healing well, but you need another day of rest before you can even think about going back to fight.”

“Fight?” he asked, coughing and gasping. He seemed to remember the ambush being a success. Surely they weren’t needed to fight until they made it back to the Stand, which was days away.

“Yes,” she said, now eyeing his head critically as if she might have missed something. “You can’t go back to join the defense for another day.”

“We don’t have another day,” broke in a young man, dressed in the same plain light brown wool the woman was. He bent to an unconscious man lying next to the Prince and began to unwrap a bandage from around his eyes.

“Don’t speak like that,” the woman responded sharply, her tone brooking no argument. The young man’s demeanor changed to one of deference.

“Yes, Elder,” the man responded.

“The walls will hold,” she continued, her voice loud enough to be heard throughout the room, “they always have.”

The Prince noticed other wounded men lying around the room, and watched several of them nodded at this reassurance, but the general feeling seemed to be in grave disagreement with the hopeful pronouncement. Suddenly, a loud, muffled rumble shook the floor.

“What was that?” the Prince asked. It repeated, and then again, in a slow mournful rhythm. He knew that beat, but didn’t want to.

“Where am I?” he asked the woman quickly.

“Lie back down, and finish drinking,” she commanded imperiously. The Prince caught a glimpse of a rough wooden door opening onto what appeared to be a dark balcony over to his left. He ignored the woman and pushed himself to his feet.

Immediately, fire rushed up and down his side, sending shockwaves down his arm and leg before spiking throughout his whole body. But the pain died away in the next second, fading to a harsh but manageable ache, and he stumbled forward.

“No!” the woman said, and placed a hand on him. He grabbed the arm and twisted it, sending the old woman to the floor with a shocked cry of surprise. Pushing his way through the crowd of injured Kindred, he forced his

body to carry him out onto a rooftop balcony that gave him a full-circle view of his surroundings.

What he saw took his breath away. Rain lashed his face from an overcast sky, the night lit only by torches and watch fires from below. Laid out before him was a city-fortress, seemingly carved from the living mountain on which it had been built, with natural gray granite walls laced with veins of black onyx and green serpentine. Three tiers had been hewn out of the rock, broad enough to contain layers of houses and huge guard towers, each sporting its own protective gate and wall. The three tiers seemed to spiral up one into the other, moving with the contours of the landscape. The keep itself, the castle within the fortress, rested squarely on top of the mountain, a large spire rising from its center and defiantly spearing the sky.

There were three walls ringing the city: one around the keep, one halfway down the mountainside, and one of awesome size and proportion that circled the roots of the mountain. This bottom wall had a double gate facing a single road that appeared to be the only way in or out of the city. The Prince was on the third tier, and from his vantage point he could see to the left a broad river that butted against the mountain itself; having worn away the rock over years of violent elemental struggle, the river had created a sheer drop-off that, the Prince was willing to bet, was impossible to scale. To his right, bordering the fortress' outermost wall and circling around out of view, was a cliff face so steeply inclined that no advancing army would have been able to bring any siege equipment to bare, making it unassailable. The only approach to the fortress city was directly ahead - and that was where the Prince of Oxen's army had gathered.

The first wall, the one that surrounded the first tier that was even with ground level, was enormous, and its double set of gates was being assaulted by an army so vast that it had cloaked the ground outside the city for miles.

The pounding booms he had heard were the sounds of a massive ram, being applied to the outer gates by five enormous forms, each at least

fifteen feet in height, covered in rocks and moss that had melded together to form a massive body with arms and legs made of entire living tree trunks. Fiery arrows rained down from the walls, burning oil and pitch were thrown from the houses above the gates, and as the five forms approached once more, one of them caught fire and a ragged cheer could be heard from the mob of soldiers manning the walls, but the Prince knew it was no good.

Earth Daemons could not be defeated so easily.

The form on fire reared back and opened a craggy mouth, filled with gnashing peg-like teeth of rock and bone, and roared, a sound only echoed by the final crashing boom that signified the gate's demise: it crumpled inward and was left in a twisted heap of wood and metal. The five Daemons pulled back, and the Imperial army began to flood through the now-open gateway.

Arrows from guard towers and the walls shot into the invading army by the thousand, but they had little to no effect, even though the Prince knew the accuracy of the Kindred and knew those arrows were finding their mark.

The army burst through the wall in the gleaming white-and-red armor of Roarke like a bloody wave. The Kindred soldiers, formed up before the wall in the green-silver-and-gold, met them head on, and held them. Arrows began to rain down on the inside of the wall as well, the men and women on the walls firing at the attacking army's back as it passed beneath them. The Prince was shocked to realize that the Imperial army was being held at a stand-still, forced to bring only a small number of their force to bear because of the bottleneck of the gate, allowing the Kindred the advantage of numbers.

But then the Daemons arrived, with spiked morning stars swinging viciously back and forth in their hands, each the length of two men. Black-hooded figures rode on their shoulders – the Bloodmages who had conjured them and were controlling their movements. They came charging through their own men, flinging figures aside and trampling them as if they weren't even there, and then they hit the Kindred and the slaughter began.

Men and women were thrown into the air, and all of the Kindred who attacked the monsters were trampled or found their weapons unable to pierce the rock skin of the Daemons. It was over in a manner of minutes, the Kindred fleeing before the onslaught of the five massive forms. Arrows continued to rain down, but now it was cover fire as men and women fled the outer walls and ran across bridgeways specifically crafted to allow them to reach the second wall without touching the ground. One of the Bloodmages saw this, and his Earth Daemon plunged its hands into the cobblestone street and pulled. An enormous slab of earth came free, was reared over the Daemon's head, and hurled at one of these bridges, connecting and breaking it cleanly in two.

The Prince watched in horror as the Imperial army took the first tier of the city.

The Kindred soldiers retreated to the second level, passing through the gate as quickly as possible. Those who were too far away or who refused to retreat were given up for dead as the gates closed. The stone bridgeways connecting the walls were cut off as soon as the Kindred passed, portcullises with giant metal spikes rolled into place to prevent the Empire's soldiers from following.

The second gate held, largely due to the presence of mounted ballistae that were heavy enough to give the Bloodmages and their Daemons pause, and scores of dead-eye archers manning the guard towers that struck down any wayward Imperial soldier brave enough to come close. The Prince saw the Imperial army falter, and then tactically retreat in order to regroup. A brief, harsh cheer went up from the Kindred soldiers manning the second tier gate and walls, and the Prince allowed himself to take a long, slow, calming breath. They had been repulsed – the Kindred had bought time at least.

An iron fist grabbed the Prince's shoulder and spun him around.

"Get back inside *now*," said the woman, her tone brooking no argument. The Prince shot one more glance out over the edge of the balcony and confirmed that the two armies were backing down for the moment. The

Imperial army was bringing the rest of its force to bear, while the Kindred were repositioning their forces along the walls. The Prince turned, tearing his eyes off the sight of the burning buildings of the lowest tier of the city, and came back inside the temporary infirmary.

“This is Aemon’s Stand isn’t it?” the Prince asked.

The woman eyed him in the same draconian manner as before, not deigning to respond. She pointed to the place in the corner of the room where he had woken. The Prince moved to the bed of rags, his wound sending little shocks of pain down his side every time his left foot hit the ground.

“How did I get here?” he asked.

“Quiet,” the woman snapped. She placed a hand on his forehead. While the rest of her was covered with dirt and sweat, her hands were perfectly clean and cool to the touch.

“Arms up as high as they go.”

The Prince did as he was told, and raised his arms over his head. His side gave a small twinge of pain, but that was all. The woman shook her head as she began to undo the white cloth tied tight around his torso. He winced as the pressure came off and the wound was exposed to the air.

“You should be dead,” the woman repeated.

“So I’ve been told,” the Prince responded testily. The woman grunted and thrust a cup of something into his face.

“Drink.”

He drank. This too tasted strongly of mint.

“What was that?”

“No questions!” she snapped. She applied some sort of foul-smelling poultice to his wound, which stung and burned. He gritted his teeth together, taking it on faith that this woman wasn’t trying to kill him even though it felt that way. Once she was finished, she re-wrapped the bandage.

“You’ve been out for three days,” the woman said to him, still giving the impression that it was entirely his fault that he had taken so long to recover. “You came in with Captain Autmaran’s unit.”

“Where are Leah and Tomaz?” he asked. She eyed him for a second, and the Prince thought she would refuse to answer again.

“Black-haired girl and great big hulk of a man?” she grunted.

“Yes,” he said, sitting forward, “where are they?”

“They were the ones who carried you here,” she said. “They come to check on you every few hours, but now that the siege has begun in earnest, I don’t think – stop right there!”

The Prince had risen from his corner and begun to move toward the door on the far side of the room. He paused, unconsciously responding to her tone that seemed to expect his obedience. It was as if his brother Rikard, Prince of Lions, was talking to him; but she was not his brother, and her powers were no more than a normal woman’s. He shook himself and moved on, through the door. On the other side there was a staircase, which he descended.

The young man who was helping the older woman was in the room at the bottom of the stairs, and he moved between the Prince and the door.

“Good,” the Prince said, “this saves me the trouble of calling for you. Retrieve my armor – it’s black officer’s issue – and find me a new tunic if you have one.”

The Prince turned to a pot of cold stew and realized he was ravenously hungry. He grabbed a hunk of bread, tore it in half, and began to spoon the stew out of the pot and into his mouth at a quick pace. He caught sight of the young man moving off to find his armor. The Prince smiled grimly; it was something he’d observed Tiffenal do many a time to the other Children: act as though you deserve obedience, and people will unconsciously give it to you.

“And where do you think you are going?”

The Prince heard the woman descending the staircase, but ignored her. He needed to eat quickly and couldn't spare any time for talk - he didn't have much time before they renewed their attack, and he knew he could help in the defense if only he were able to find Leah and Tomaz.

"Do not ignore me you young fool, I'm warning you!"

The Prince rolled his eyes, stuffing the last of the bread and stew into his mouth and washing it down with a long draught of water from a clay pitcher next to the pot, before turning to face her as the young man returned with his sword and armor.

"I don't have time for you," the Prince said abruptly. The woman's entire demeanor was starting to infuriate him, as if she expected his obedience. As he thought this, he realized the irony and laughed to himself. He motioned for the armor, and the man helped him into it as quickly as he could. The woman just stared at him, mouth open and working like a fish that had just realized it was no longer in water. She recovered quickly, though.

"If you leave now that wound will reopen," she said, her voice telling him that she hoped it would.

"Thank you for taking care of me," the Prince concluded as soon as the armor was in place, and then he dashed out of the doorway into the waiting night, his side giving a nasty twinge as if sparked by the woman's parting comment.

The street was a mess of people running here and there, belongings scattered across the broad boulevard that ran around the mountain up to the keep. Men and women were hauling children after them, doing their best to keep their families together, yelling and screaming to each other over a general cacophonous din that pounded in the Prince's ears. Soldiers in the silver-and-green were doing their best to keep the crowd of people moving, some of them with carts and carriages that told the Prince they were from Vale and the surrounding countryside seeking refuge, and others just as clearly from the Stand carrying their belongings on their own backs.

“Make your way to the keep! There is room for everyone there! Please, hurry but do not panic!”

The Prince heard the bullish voice over the din of the crowd, and turned to see a captain with a green cape and green-marked armor directing the Kindred up the mountain. He quickly made his way over.

“Captain!”

The man turned and looked him over once, noticed the black armor and cape, and his eyes widened, in surprise or anger the Prince couldn't tell, for both emotions seemed plausible on the squashed face of the man. But then suddenly the captain snapped a salute, fist to his chest.

“What can I do for you, major?”

Major? The Prince thought. *That's an interesting development.*

“Where are the Rogues being deployed?” the Prince said, seeing no reason to correct the man's innocent mistake.

“Sir?”

The man obviously thought this a strange question for a major to be asking a captain. His brows pulled together in suspicion.

“I've been wounded, captain,” the Prince said, “and that's no concern of yours. Now tell me where the Rogues have been deployed.”

The man tensed, the Prince's manner apparently enough to convince him of his own inferiority in this situation.

“Down at the second gate, sir, they're going to be used as shock troops.”

“Against the Daemons?” the Prince asked in surprise.

“Yes, sir,” the man said with a quick nod.

“As you were,” the Prince responded with a quick salute, turning before the captain had time to answer.

“Who the hell was that?” the Prince heard a second man ask the captain.

“I have no bloody idea,” was the bewildered response.

The Prince moved off quickly before they could ask him to identify himself. His mind was racing, and he was doing his best to walk normally even though the healing wound in his side was making it hard to take full strides.

Rogues and Rangers fighting against the Daemons? The Prince supposed there was a chance, particularly if any of them had Valerium weapons like Davydd and Lorna. But five Earth Daemons at once? The Prince shook his head. No, they'd never be able to get close enough without one of the other Daemons smashing them to pulp. The Rogues were good, but what they were fighting against were supernatural beings, the power of the earth itself given form and malicious intent.

But what else could they do?

The Prince heard a familiar voice and stopped, looking down a back alleyway between two large houses. It was Davydd, and he was talking to a gathered group of Rangers and Rogues. The Prince approached quickly.

"How long do we have?" a man with a mane of white hair asked, blood on his face and an eye-patch covering his right eye. He had the black-and-silver armor of a Rogue and the dagger insignia of an Eshendai.

"Not long enough," a tall woman, a gold-and-black Ranger, responded grimly. "We can't take another attack like that."

"It's those shadow-cursed Daemons!" Davydd retorted in anger. "Nothing even slows them down. Nothing!"

"We need to kill the Bloodmages riding them," the white-haired man said.

"They won't die," said a woman with a bow slung across her back. "We've pin cushioned them and still they ride those beasts."

"You could try drowning them," the Prince said.

Davydd and the rest of the group turned as the Prince came out of the alleyway.

"Look whose joined the fight," Davydd said, eyeing the Prince in his armor.

“Who’s this?” the eye-patch man asked.

“A captain major?”

“No, it’s borrowed armor,” Davydd said.

“Drown them?” prompted Lorna, who was leaning against a building, hidden in a patch of shadows.

“Yes,” the Prince said, stepping forward into the circle so they all could hear him. “They’re Earth Daemons, summoned with the essence of earth, which is primarily rock. You need to counter that essence.”

“Wouldn’t air be the counter of earth?” the white-haired man asked.

“Yes,” the Prince said quickly, “but if you drop them off the cliff south of us they’ll get carried away by the current. The drop will take away their connection to the earth and weaken them, and then the water will carry them away. If you’re lucky, it might even break them up. Worst case scenario is that they get washed down river and have to make their way back – but they’re slow. They’ll be out of the fight for a couple hours.”

The Rogues and Rangers glanced at Davydd, who looked to be doing some very fast thinking.

“You’re sure of this?”

The Prince nodded.

“I must be shadow-blinded insane to take advice from the Prince of Ravens,” he muttered so that only the Prince could hear before turning back to the group.

“Do it,” he said shortly. “We don’t have much time until they assault the walls – be ready to draw them off. Pass the word – all Spellblades, particularly Rangers, are to draw the Daemons to the edge of the cliff. Rogues will be used as a harrying force to drive them. Those with Valerium weapons take point. Have five teams ready, one for each of them, ready to push them over the edge.”

“With what?”

“The longest spears you can find,” Davydd answered. “Break off the metal tips and use them to push them over. Are these things easy to unbalance?”

This last question was addressed to the Prince.

“No,” the Prince responded, “but if they’re up high enough, close to that cliff, it will be easier. In any case, aim for the chest to get leverage. It’s your best shot – you’ll at least be able to slow them down.”

“Right, all of you pass the word to the others.”

They began to move off, but the Prince stopped Davydd.

“The Bloodmages,” he said quickly, “the ones riding the Daemons. You need to take them off the Daemons to kill them – they’re connected to the essence of the earth that helped make the creatures. Arrows will never penetrate their skin now, but knock them off the Daemons, and they’re just ordinary men again. The Daemons will run amok with no one controlling them, but they won’t be much use in any tactical planning after that. To knock them off and kill them, break or somehow take the medallions they have slung around their necks – it’s the source of their power, and it will be what’s connecting them to the Daemons.”

Davydd watched him for a long moment, and the Prince knew he was being reevaluated. Finally, the red-eyed young man nodded and turned to go, then stopped and turned back.

“Leah and Tomaz are at the second gate, go join them if you can.” he turned and moved off at as near a dead sprint as he could through the buildings.

The Prince retraced his steps and made his way back onto the boulevard. Two turns later, he was facing an enormous gate connected to a high wall branching off to either side of him, following the natural curves of the mountain with tall guard towers every fifty yards or so. Kindred archers in dark greens and browns covered every spare inch of the wall, raining arrows down on anything that moved in the lower levels of the city. Similarly dressed light infantry men stood with them, some with small but colorful

stripes on their breastplates to mark them out as officers in different regiments, ready to repel an attack should it come at them from over the wall. The Prince searched frantically around for Leah and Tomaz, and finally saw an enormous back over to his right pounding on something with a large hammer.

“Tomaz!”

The hammer paused and the big shape turned. The Prince ran for him, and as he came closer, he saw that the big man was working at a makeshift forge. Leah was nowhere in sight.

“I thought you were wounded!” Tomaz rumbled, the lines of exhaustion on his face breaking into his customary smile.

“Just a scratch,” the Prince responded, smiling as well. But then the moment passed and they remembered that they were in the middle of a siege that could begin again at any moment.

“Are the blacksmiths too busy?” the Prince asked, motioning to the armor.

“Yes,” the big man responded with a sigh as a shadow of fatigue passed over his face. “Most of the smithies are on the higher levels, thank the Light, but there is much more dire need of new arrowheads, swords, anything of the like. Some men aren’t even armed. And since I did my share of blacksmithing before I joined the Rogues, I take care of my own armor when I’m on duty.”

“Some men aren’t even armed?” the Prince asked. Tomaz nodded darkly.

“There were spies within the Kindred,” he responded, “a clan of Seekers.”

“No!” the Prince said, feeling his stomach drop out from under him with no warning. An entire clan of Seekers could do incalculable damage. “What about the Anchors?”

“The three we’ve caught had them,” Tomaz said. “And we haven’t caught them all. From the interrogations, we know that there was a group of

thirty hidden in Vale, and another group of fifteen here. We stumbled on one man setting Black Powder to the granaries. He won't talk names, but we were able to find out the numbers. We were too late to stop the seven others from destroying the main armory; a full third of our force was half equipped when they began the siege. We caught two of the seven, which means five are still running around creating trouble. We've doubled the guard on the food and armor, but who knows what else they could get up to."

The Prince didn't know what to say. How had a clan of Seekers infiltrated the Kindred and he hadn't known? It must be a covert operation by his sister Symanta - she was the only one who had constant contact with the Seekers. The Prince wondered if the Empress even knew about this.

"Where's Leah?" the Prince asked.

"I sent her to eat," Tomaz answered.

"Sent?"

"Yes, that fool of a girl hasn't eaten in nearly two days, and she still insisted she didn't need to. It's the Spellblade in her - the strength she gets from the bonding makes her think she's indestructible."

"When do you think they'll attack again?" the Prince asked.

"I don't know," Tomaz said quietly, his tone solemn. "Soon, though. They know we're beaten, but not broken. They'll make sure the first tier of the Stand is clear and then they'll assault the gate. I'd say at an outside guess we have a little under an hour until they can bring the ram to bear, and then we'll begin again. You know your brother: once the scent of blood is in his nose, he won't stop while there is anyone left standing."

"No. No he won't," the Prince said to himself.

"Would you mind giving me a hand with this?" Tomaz asked the Prince, breaking him out of his reverie. He was pointing to the large breastplate he was holding. The Prince nodded.

"What do you need?"

Tomaz asked him to hold it steady so he could beat it out with his hammer and then to heat it over the banked coals of his makeshift fire. The

job was imperfect, but the metal slowly bent back into a semblance of the shape it was supposed to have. The Prince, glad of the mind-numbing repetition of the job, relaxed into the rhythm, and for the next hour or so they mended most of Tomaz's armor, which had taken a heavy beating in the first attack.

All around them men were employed in various tasks of war: re-fletching arrows, sharpening swords, beating out dents in helms and breastplates like Tomaz. Not a single one was sitting idly by, and the Prince felt a strange stirring of pride, knowing that the people with which he had thrown in his lot would not back down even in the face of an overwhelming force.

And then the ground began to shake beneath their feet.

Immediately, Tomaz stood and thrust his armor into a waiting barrel of water. With a hiss and a huge gout of steam, the heated metal began to cool. While it did, the big man quickly smothered the fire, making sure all of the coals were gone. As soon as the breastplate was cool enough to touch, the Prince helped Tomaz into it, and was just doing up the last strap when Leah appeared.

"Leah!"

She turned and searched the street suddenly crowded with soldiers, all bristling with spears and swords, gleaming in their silver armor. All of the faces the Prince could see bore a steely reserve and a fierce light of defiance.

"Leah!" the Prince called again.

She found him finally and began to force her way through the crowd toward them. Out of the corner of his eye, the Prince saw Davydd and Lorna arrive with a large group of Rangers, all of who were holding very long spears with sawed-off ends. They also bore looks of grim determination, as though they were ready to march off to the ends of the earth if need be.

"Why are you here?" Leah asked bluntly when she reached the Prince.

"What?" he asked.

“You’re wounded,” she said, “you need to be in the infirmary!”

“Would you be?” the Prince responded angrily. “I can fight. And you need everyone you can get.”

“You’re still wounded?” Tomaz asked, his eyes narrowing.

“No,” the Prince insisted, “I’m fine.”

As if on cue, a sharp, piercing barb dug into his ribs and he gasped in pain as red spots danced across his vision. He shook his head and rounded on Leah, who had jabbed him with her finger.

“Do that again,” the Prince growled.

“That’s enough,” Tomaz rumbled. “This is neither the time nor place for you to act like spoiled children.”

The gravity of the situation fell on them once more, and the Prince felt his anger at the girl disappear. The shaking under their feet was growing more pronounced, and the Prince knew that his brother was somewhere on the other side of the gate. For what seemed like an eternity, they waited there, watching the barred wooden doors under the gate through which the enemy would attempt to come.

BOOM!

All of the soldiers recoiled at the noise.

BOOM!

The Prince felt as though something invisible had been placed over his ears, silencing all sound. The pounding of the ram was so loud that the silence that followed was almost unbearable.

BOOM!

Cracks splintered through the wood of the gate. The sound of arrows being shot from the force manning the wall continued, but it slowed the ram not at all.

BOOM!

The cracks widened, and the doors bowed inward under the weight of the enormous ram in the hands of the Daemons.

“YEAAAAAHHHH!!!”

The Prince started so violently at the noise, coming from directly behind him, that he jumped nearly a foot in the air. It was Tomaz, roaring in his huge voice, shouting his defiance.

“Yeah!”

“For the Kindred!”

“For Aemon!”

“AEMON!”

Cries sounded from throats on all sides of the Prince, and he found to his surprise that he was screaming with them, wordlessly shouting against his brother, against this force that had come to kill him as assuredly as it had come to kill the Kindred around him. He roared so loudly it felt his throat would split.

And then with a final crash, the doors crumpled inward and two Daemons with Bloodmages riding on their shoulders forced their way through, giant maces swinging and flattening anything and everyone in their path.

Before the Prince could even react, there was a flash of movement and the Rangers, led by Davydd, his red eyes glowing with a murderous light, stood in a clearing in the center of the large courtyard. The giant poles, held by the Ashandel, lanced out with amazing accuracy and battered the Daemons from all sides, keeping them far enough away to keep them from attacking. The Eshendai began swooping in so quickly that the slow moving Daemons couldn't react in time, cutting at the straps holding the Bloodmages in place and trying to haul them off their enormous mounts. Arrows rained down on the Bloodmages and their Daemons from the walls above, but as the Prince had warned, they did little damage.

And slowly, step by labored step, the Daemons were advancing, moving out of the way of the gate, where the Prince could see the swarming red-and-white horde of soldiers waiting to attack.

Without warning, Tomaz turned to the Prince and thrust his enormous greatsword into his hands.

“Hold this,” was all he said, and then he was darting straight toward the Daemons, Leah right behind him.

The Prince had no time to respond, but watched in complete shock as Tomaz ran at the closest Daemon, and rolled forward inside its reach as it swung its mace. Leah had drawn her two daggers, and with a slicing overhand motion, she brought both hands over her head, hurling the daggers straight at the Bloodmages.

Out of instinct, the Bloodmages pulled back, and the Daemons pulled with them, leaning dangerously backwards. And then, inexplicably, one of them rose up off the ground. The Prince couldn't believe his eyes – Tomaz had managed to situate himself directly under the Daemon, and was lifting it into the air.

“LEAH!” The Prince yelled as loudly as he could, pushing his way toward the girl but succeeding in barely moving half a foot in the dense crowd of waiting Kindred soldiers. Leah, daggers flying back toward her as she pulled them in with her mind, turned.

“YOU CAN KILL THE BLOODMAGE NOW!” he roared, pointing.

Without a second's hesitation, she turned and the daggers flew like steel arrows at the Bloodmage whose Daemon Tomaz had lifted. One pierced its neck, and the other shattered the medallion hanging around his chest.

An enormous explosion rocked the crowd as condensed rock and wood flew in every direction. The Prince was pushed back so violently he fell to the ground, along with half of the Kindred soldiers surrounding him. A large boulder, smoking as if it had been blown there by Black Powder, landed not four feet in front of him, crushing an unfortunate Kindred soldier. The Prince frantically pulled himself back to his feet, and saw that the blast had been so powerful that the second Daemon had been lifted off of its feet and thrown through a building off to the left. There was nothing left of the first Daemon but debris. The Rogues were the first to rise, and they converged on the fallen Daemon's Bloodmage, pulling it off of the Daemon. The Daemon rolled away, crushing Kindred beneath its enormous rocky bulk, and the last image

the Prince saw was of Davydd pulling his Valerium sword from the Bloodmage, the shining medallion hanging from his clenched fist, and running off after the monstrous form with a squadron of Rogues close behind.

As the dust from the Daemon settled to the ground, Tomaz was revealed standing with half of his armor hanging off of him in twisted scraps, panting heavily, numerous cuts covering his body from where sharp bits of rock had cut the skin. A brief moment passed as both armies seemed to catch their breath and absorb what had just happened, and then the Prince realized that the way was now clear for the rest of the army to make their way through the gate.

“TOMAZ!” he called.

The Prince drew back his arms, took a step forward, and with a great heaving convulsion threw the huge sword with a two-handed swing through the air. It arched end over end, and was caught by the waiting hands of the Ashandel. Tomaz spun and crouched low, just as the first line of Imperial soldiers flooded through the torn remnants of the gate. He lifted his sword and brought it down in a ferocious swing that cleaved the first three men clean in two.

There was a loud thundering roar and two more Daemons pushed through the gate with another flood of Imperial soldiers directly behind them. The Kindred rushed forward as well, cries of defiance ringing from every throat, and the battle began in earnest.

Time moved in jerky, half-seen flashes; the Prince found himself at the front of the Kindred attack, once more fighting beside Leah and Tomaz, his Valerium sword swinging like a white flame through everything that stood in his path. The sword swung and hung frozen in air, and then came down and struck with blinding speed. The sword swung again and took a second man, and time sped up as these lives were added to the Prince and his movements became easier, the Valerium sword suddenly no heavier than a child's practice blade; time slowed again as he ducked beneath Tomaz's

back, his eyes catching sight of another Imperial soldier; with a snarl of anger on his face, the Prince brought his sword up with all his strength and unseamed the man from navel to chin.

But despite their best efforts, the Kindred were pushed backward inch by inch. The next two Daemons, swinging their maces back and forth and wiping out broad swaths of Kindred soldiers, were an unstoppable force. Soon the Prince found himself backed into a side road off of the main courtyard in front of the gate, still fighting alongside Leah and Tomaz, but unable to advance as the Kindred were forced farther and farther backwards by the deadly spiked metal club of an advancing Daemon. Tomaz tried once more to roll forward and get under the Daemon, but was nearly scalped as the Bloodmage riding the monster anticipated the move and commanded the Daemon to bring the butt of the mace down in a quick slicing motion. The Prince did his best to make his way past the thing's guard and cut it with his Valerium blade, but as soon as he got near enough to do damage, the Imperial soldiers drove him back. Soon they were completely off of the main road, and the superiorly trained and armed Imperial army was engaging with the main body of Kindred as the second Daemon forced more of the splintered force off in the other direction.

"Shadows and fire - what do we do now?!" Leah cried in frustration.

"I don't know!" the Prince called back, cutting down a man who had forced his way forward, but leaving him alive.

As if in response, there was a resounding crash, and the wall of a nearby house exploded outward. The Prince jumped and rolled away, springing back to his feet and turning to confront this new threat. His eyes rose and fear took hold of his heart as he beheld the final Earth Daemon, the dark figure of a Bloodmage on its back, with the shining medallion hanging around its neck - it must have made its way through the mangled gate while they had been busy dealing with the other two. The Daemon took a step forward into the light of a nearby torch and the Prince froze. The red-and-white soldiers charged forward, headed by the first Daemon and Bloodmage

who could smell victory, and the Kindred around the Prince all settled into defensive stances, faces grim but still set with determination. The Prince, however, remained motionless, hand holding the Valerium sword forgotten by his side. He had just realized something that should have been impossible: it wasn't a Bloodmage riding the Daemon.

It was Davydd Goldwyn.

The mace descended, and veered at the last second. The Kindred watched in shock and amazement as it struck the first Daemon full in the face, and knocked it completely off of its feet and onto its back. Immediately, Davydd's Daemon stepped forward and brought its mace down on the Bloodmage, killing him and causing a second explosion of rock and flying splinters that carved a broad swath out of the Imperial soldiers, who had no idea what had hit them. The Daemon's arm rose again, and the Prince and the Kindred charged forward, joining in the battle. The Imperial soldiers stood strong for about half a second, and then Davydd's Daemon leaned forward, opened its rock-and-moss covered mouth and let out a bellow loud enough to shake the walls of the houses around them. It swung its mace one more time, and then the Imperial soldiers turned and ran for their lives back up the boulevard.

As they gave chase, making their way back to the wall, the Prince ran up to Davydd.

"How ... how?!"

"Does it look like I know?!" the red-eyed man roared back with a roguish smile that showed quite clearly he was having the time of his life. "I just point and hope it goes that way!"

Doing exactly that, the Eshendai pointed toward the crowd of Imperial soldiers surrounding the other Daemon and the monster charged. As it lumbered away, the Prince noticed the medallion of the dead Bloodmage swinging around Davydd's neck.

The Prince let out a fierce shout that was taken up by the Kindred around him, and they ran after the red-eyed Ranger.

With two Daemons down and a third converted to their cause and engaging the fourth, the Kindred were able to engage the Imperial army directly; and it soon became clear that while the Imperials were better armed, better organized, and all around the more efficient soldiers, it was the Kindred who were unstoppable. Arrows were being continuously fired into the group, finding weak points in the red-and-white armor, and forced as they were to concentrate their attack through the bottleneck of the gate, the Army of Roarke was unable to bring their superior numbers to bear.

Davydd's Daemon, backed now by innumerable Rogues and Spellblades, felled the final Daemon, and threw it bodily over the wall. A cheer went up from the Kindred, and their attack redoubled, the Imperial army forced all the way back through the gates.

"Drive them from the city!" Davydd roared, and he disappeared under the gate on the shoulders of the massive beast of rock and wood, and the Kindred followed, attacking the fleeing Imperial army. The Prince, swept up in the moment, followed them through the gate on the heels of Davydd's Daemon.

And then the presence of his brother burst into his head like a minor sun.

"No!" he cried, but no one heard him. A dark figure, nearly as big as Tomaz, stood before the Kindred, flanked by the fifth Earth Daemon and a squadron of men dressed not in white-and-red but in dark black-and-red that seemed to make them a moving part of the night.

Davydd pointed his Daemon toward the figure and charged.

With a painful roar of agony, the Daemon fell back, an enormous ax blade buried in its side. And then the Daemon, with Davydd still on top, rose into the air, and was thrown not over the wall, but *through* it, bringing down a wide stretch of stone that included what had once been the gatehouse, as well as part of a guard tower, as the Daemon broke up and exploded.

From where the Prince stood, he could see Davydd, lying on the ground unmoving as rubble fell around him.

Kindred bowmen fell amidst dislodged stones, and the Kindred soldiers were forced to duck down and find cover wherever they could. The Prince, having stopped in his tracks when he'd recognized his brother's presence, was on the inside of what had been the gate, and watched with horror as the Imperial army forced the Kindred back up the mountain.

And then, miraculously, the army halted. The Kindred force stopped as well and turned to see what was happening. There was a long drawn out moment of silence, as in the middle of the battle both armies simply stared at each. And then, with a deliberate slowness, the dark figure disengaged from the larger force and strode forward.

The Prince pushed his way to Leah and Tomaz.

"You need to run," he said gasped, "you need to run now and evacuate as much of the city as you can."

"What are you talking about?" Leah hissed back at him.

"I can distract him and buy you time, but you need to go - now!"

There was a heavy crunching sound, and the dark figure came out of the shadows and into the torchlight. He was a giant. Dressed in black and blood red armor from head to toe, he stood eight feet tall and carried two enormous double-bladed battleaxes, one in each hand; the blades alone were easily as large as the Prince's entire torso. He wore a helm from which grew bone-white horns, curving down and framing a metal visor, which was shaped to resemble an enraged bull. Though he stood at half the height of the Earth Daemon behind him, there was a weight to him that made him seem somehow larger, as if he were more physically present than any other being could possibly be, even beings made from the very essence of the earth. As he walked, it was easy to note that his every movement was sharp and precise; he moved with a deadly power that screamed danger.

As he approached the waiting Kindred, his gaze fell on the Prince, and his step slowed. He held up a mailed fist and the Imperial army behind him halted.

With two quick motions, Ramael the Ox Lord, Fifth Child of the Empress, Prince of the Realm and Defender of the Imperial Borders, sheathed his battleaxes and removed his helm.

“Hello, little brother,” he said.

Chapter Twenty-Two: The Prince of Oxen

There was something eerily beautiful about all of the Children, a physical trait that seemed to come directly from the Empress herself. It was an ethereal quality that marked them out as different and, as the Children were instructed, special. But none of them exemplified this trait like Ramael. The moment he removed his helm, the dark night seemed to shine with reflected glory; the Prince saw Leah's knees go slightly weak before she caught herself, and a number of the Kindred, including Tomaz, took an involuntary step forward as if to bow in deference.

His face was framed with golden waves of hair that shone like the sun even in the night with an insistent and hypnotizing luminescence. Perfectly sized almond eyes the blue-grey color of ice framed a sharp nose that led to sculpted brows and high, sharp cheekbones, giving him such an air of masculinity that no other man in the world could ever be considered more than a boy. He was the perfect physical being, made so by over one hundred and forty years wearing the Ox Talisman. He was stronger and faster than any living man, and had been so upon reaching adulthood.

But beneath it all, the Prince of Ravens could sense blood and hate, as he always had. The Prince of Oxen's life was an inferno of burning metal, and around his life the Prince could sense a murderous heat, like coals set to the leaves of a dry forest.

The Prince of Ravens stepped forward, knowing how small and insignificant he looked in front of his brother, the same way he'd always looked.

"Ramael," he said quietly.

"I'm amazed to find you here," the Prince of Oxen said, smiling to reveal a row of perfect white teeth that he had never needed to scrub clean. Even his voice was beautiful: a deep vibrating bass that penetrated pleasurably to the core of your body, making women sigh and men pledge everlasting fealty. "But then again, I'm not."

“Go away, Ramael,” the Prince said, his voice low but strong. A few of the Kindred shifted behind him, as if this contradiction had helped them break free of the Ox Lord’s spell. “Or else fight us like a man.”

There was a growl of anger as the face turned ugly, the lips pulling back from the teeth in an animalistic snarl as the gray-blue eyes grew even colder.

“Oh ... I’m sorry,” the Prince said loudly, his own lips lifting, but in contempt. “I forgot – you don’t like people challenging you.”

“Mother isn’t here to save you from me now,” Ramael said, the anger cooling quickly everywhere but in his eyes. “I would watch what you say. No Geofred here to convince me it’s better not to teach you a lesson.”

“Watch what I say?” the Prince asked wryly. “Does that mean you’ll leave if I ask nicely?”

The Prince of Oxen chuckled darkly. The Prince of Ravens felt his teeth clench automatically, but he took a deep breath and another step forward.

“Ramael,” he said, “you don’t have to do this.”

He motioned to the Exiled Kindred soldiers behind him.

“These are good people,” he said, forsaking his pride and speaking from his heart. “They have law and order in their cities, they raise their children well, and they would be good citizens of the Empire, if only Mother would allow them back.”

There was another stir behind the Prince, this one rebellious; he knew that many of the Kindred, Leah and Tomaz included, would never go back to the Empire, no matter what the Empress offered. But he rushed on heedlessly – he knew that if the Prince of Oxen attacked, they would stand little to no chance of surviving.

“Please brother, they have things they can teach even us! They can add to the Empire’s greatness, they can come back, they are good people! They would be good citizens. If you and I both go to Mother and tell Her that – ”

“Mother didn’t even allow you to keep your name,” the Prince of Oxen said slowly, enjoying every word. “Why do you think She would allow you in Her presence?”

The Prince fell silent, and in spite of his resolve he felt his breath catch in his chest. He took another deep breath, but Ramael cut him off by raising his helm to his head.

Fear spiked through the Prince’s body and he took another step forward. A number of Kindred drew in sharp breaths: he was within the reach of his brother’s axes if the Ox Lord chose to swing them.

“Please, brother,” the Prince said to Ramael. “Please believe me!”

Ramael stared at the Prince for a long moment, face stony and blank, and then slowly his upper lip pulled up in disgust.

“I would say it shames me to see one of the Children who would beg,” he said quietly. “But then again, you aren’t one of us. You’re a dog, who ran instead of facing his fate. You are a *mistake*. The first that Mother has made, perhaps, but one she is striving to correct. And I am here to take back what has always belonged to the Empire. Like a good son. A true Child.”

At that moment a number of things happened simultaneously: Ramael pulled his helm back onto his head and unlimbered his axes; a shout rang out from behind the Prince and an enormous form pushed him out of the way; arrows released from taut bowstrings on both sides; and the Earth Daemon charged forward, lifting a heavy, spiked, iron club.

The Prince, knocked to the ground, looked up – and to his horror saw Tomaz, armor in tatters, greatsword in hand, engage Ramael.

Any other vision was obscured by a haze of arrows so thick that the Prince was forced to press his head to the ground and pray he wouldn’t be hit. When he looked up again, it was to see the tree trunk foot of the Daemon descending toward his head. He rolled out of the way just in time and made it back to his feet. The Daemon caught sight of him and swung the club, and it took all of the Prince’s speed to dodge out of the way – a dodge that forced him away from Ramael and Tomaz. He ran back, but the Daemon

stayed on him, swinging the mace and killing two Kindred soldiers who got in the way.

And then Leah was there, springing past the Prince and straight at the Daemon, her daggers drawn. She landed on the Daemon's arm and it tried to shake her loose, but with an amazing display of acrobatic dexterity she not only clung on, but was able to climb up the arm and onto its back - directly behind the Bloodmage controlling it.

"No!" the Prince yelled at her, but it was too late; the dagger swung down toward the Bloodmage's neck.

There was a flash of green light, and Leah was sent flying into a crowd of Kindred soldiers who were moving to engage the Imperial force; the Bloodmage, still anchored to the earth, the source of its strength through the Daemon it rode, could not be touched.

Except with ...

The Prince's hand flew to his sword, and he drew it in a single flourishing move that caused it to bite deeply into the Earth Daemon's tree trunk leg.

There was a howl of pain that made the very ground under the Prince's feet shake; the creature tried to stamp on the Prince with its other foot, but with the speed of numerous men joined to his own, the Prince simply moved to the side and struck again with the Valerium blade, the white metal cutting through the magic flesh.

There was another scream of pain, and the creature brought down its iron mace with such strength that it left a crater in the ground.

Just at that moment the Rangers appeared, now led by Lorna, and engaged the Daemon with their long spears, prodding the creature and unbalancing it enough that it turned its attention to them, leaving the Prince alone.

He turned, searching frantically through the crowd for Tomaz and Ramael.

Everything was chaos, the Kindred and Imperial armies both fighting with a vehemence that showed no mercy. But in the center of it all, standing head and shoulders above every other man and woman there, were two giants.

Tomaz and Ramael were fighting so ferociously that even in the heat of the battle between Exiles and Imperials, a circle had opened up around them that no one dared to enter. Tomaz's great sword and Ramael's double-bladed axes were both flying so quickly and with such deadly power that sparks flew each time the blades hit as metal screeched against metal. The two were perfectly matched for battle, neither appearing able to gain any ground on the other. The Prince of Oxen's face was set in a snarling rictus of fury, and Tomaz's in a grimace somewhere between anger and pride.

Fear seized the Prince's heart.

He began to push and kick and fight his way through the crowd, getting nearer and nearer to the two circling fighters. Out of the corner of his eye he saw the form of Leah doing the same.

The Prince of Oxen began to win. It was slight at first, seemingly just a minor setback on Tomaz's part. But then it became more distinct: the Prince of Oxen began to move faster, faster than should have been possible, and the expression on his face turned to one of amusement as Tomaz tried to counter attacks that seemed to come from every direction at once. Ramael's blows, which had been earth-shakingly powerful to begin with, now took on a power that was simply inhuman, and Tomaz's arms began to shake just trying to fend them off. The axes forced Tomaz back step by step - and then the Ashandel slipped on the slick footing of the blood-soaked stones.

The axes descended, and just as in the Prince's dream, Tomaz crumpled and fell.

"NO!"

Leah ran at the Prince of Oxen, but three other Eshendai grabbed her and pulled her back, just as the Earth Daemon swung its enormous mace and smashed a hole in the ground where she had been standing.

The Prince fell to his knees, his whole body suddenly numb. The Prince of Oxen let out a bellow of triumph and then turned and began to make his way up the boulevard, cutting down anyone and anything that stood in his path. With a cry of anguish, the Prince crawled the final few feet to where the big man lay.

The Prince knelt next to Tomaz. The big man's breathing was labored, but he was attempting to speak. He motioned the Prince closer, and so the Prince leaned in.

"Kill me," Tomaz whispered in the Prince's ear.

The Prince recoiled in shock, but what little strength remained in the great hulking body was enough to easily hold the Prince's arm and keep him close.

"I'm dying," the big man whispered. He broke off as he coughed and blood came onto his lips.

"You can recover," the Prince said, "you know that you can recover!"

"I don't want to recover in a world where there are no Kindred," Tomaz responded with a simple, earnest pride that made the Prince's heart ache in his chest.

"Look ... look at that man!" Tomaz said weakly, his normal rumbling voice reduced to a bare mewling whimper.

The Prince looked, and saw the Prince of Oxen sauntering down the broad avenue, killing all who dared to cross his path with an indolent arrogance that made the Prince's mouth curl in disgust.

"You can stop him," Tomaz said, tears coming to his eyes with the effort of speaking. "*You* can stop him!"

With a grunt of effort, the big man forced the Valerium sword, discarded and lying on the ground, back into the Prince's hands, placing the point above his heart.

"Do it!" the big man said harshly. The Prince pulled the sword up and over his head.

No! the Prince yelled at himself. *Another way - there has to be another way! How can I ... how can I ... FIND ANOTHER WAY!*

The sword plunged down, and the Prince felt Tomaz die.

Strength flooded his limbs, strength and power like the Prince had never felt before. Tomaz by himself seemed to be as strong as ten men. His heart began to beat so quickly that he felt certain it could be seen through his chest. The wounds he had sustained in the prolonged battle ceased to exist; the healing hole in the side of his chest from the arrow felt no more serious than a fleabite. Where seconds ago he had felt too weak to stand, he now felt as though he would never need to rest again.

The memories came as well, but the Prince pushed them to the back of his mind, all of the memories except for the Blade Master training and his own rage at Tomaz's death. He would need that now.

"RAMAEL!"

The Prince of Oxen stopped and turned slowly to see the Prince of Ravens, unsheathed Valerium sword in hand, standing over the now lifeless form of Tomaz. Ramael began to slowly walk back, ignoring the chaos surrounding him. Two men crossed his path, but black and red axes flashed and they were no more.

The Prince's hand was clutching the hilt of his sword in a cramped fist, his entire body throbbing with energy and life. The task of killing Ramael was impossible, but he had to try. For Tomaz, the only true friend he had ever had, he would *die* trying.

Ramael stopped.

"You called?"

"There's something we need to talk about," the Prince growled. The Prince of Oxen chuckled, and raised his two double-bladed axes.

"Whatever could that be, little one?"

With a snarl of rage, the Prince of Ravens charged. His enhanced speed and strength carried him across the intervening distance in the blink

of an eye, and the Prince of Oxen barely had time to bring his axe up to deflect the Valerium sword.

They exchanged a series of blows, the Prince moving through the Blade Master forms so quickly he barely had time to think. His sword was a white blur in his hands. But, unfortunately, so were his brother's battleaxes. Every thrust was parried, every riposte turned aside. The Prince felt sweat break out all over his body, but his speed never flagged.

Something flashed past his cheek and he was forced to disengage. Another arrow shot toward him, and he had just enough time to dodge to the side before it struck him through the throat. Out of the corner of his eye he saw his brother swing one of the axes, and with a desperate leap the Prince jumped to safety through an open doorway, just as more arrows hit the ground where he had been standing.

I need to get him away from the battle!

That much was clear: the Prince had no chance of defeating his brother when he couldn't give his full attention to the task. He took a deep breath, and shot off across the road, directly at the Imperial archers that had been firing at him. In three quick motions he cut them down, but he saw that more soldiers were making their way toward the two Princes.

"Why, little brother," Ramael said, "have you been killing? I seem to remember how pathetically *against* that you were."

The Prince turned back toward his brother and walked up to him with an arrogant swagger.

"Why do you mention it, *brother*?" he said. "Are you afraid of what I can do?"

Anger at the thought crossed Ramael's face, and with no warning the Prince of Oxen brought the axes crashing down. The Prince dodged, having to use all of his speed to do so.

"What was that Ramael?" he taunted. "I almost had time to take a nap during that swing!"

The first axe swiped through the air so quickly it was no more than a blur of motion that the Prince just managed to avoid.

“That’s all you can do, big brother? Now I remember why I never looked up to you!”

Ramael let out a snarl of rage, swinging the second axe – another miss.

“You miserable Nameless wretch! I could tear you to pieces with one hand!”

“Do you really think you could manage to lay even a single *finger* on me?”

Ramael lunged for the Prince, but he was gone and racing up the street – away from the battle. He looked over his shoulder and saw that Ramael was following him.

Right. Now he’s chasing you. Great plan!

The Prince took a running leap, pushed off a wall with his enhanced strength, and landed like a cat on the roof of a house. There was a rumbling, and the Prince looked down to see his brother pulling himself up the side of the house, tearing chunks of brick and mortar out of the wall with his gauntleted hands, trying to follow. The Prince took off running on the top of the buildings, jumping from roof to roof, as fast as his feet could carry him.

There was a heavy crash behind him, and the Prince shot a look over his shoulder. His brother had made it to the rooftop and was still following him, leaving deep gouges in the thickest wood and stone buildings with his enormous weight, but gaining with each of his immense strides.

“Is that all you can do?” the Prince called back, doubling his speed, leaping almost ten feet with every step. The only answer he received was a roar of rage. Ramael picked up his pace as well, and soon he was right on top of the Prince.

“Where do you think you’re going?!”

A battleaxe swung down and tore into a section of rooftop where the Prince had been not a second before. The second axe swung and actually

brushed the Prince's head, shaving off a chunk of his hair and missing his scalp by the barest fraction of an inch.

Good question - where are you going?!

The Prince rolled under his brother's feet and dove into an open doorway that led him down a staircase to the main level of the house. With a crash of smashed plaster and powdered stone, Ramael tore through the opening and followed.

Where do I take him, where do I take him, where do I...?

The Prince made it out onto the main level of the street, looked left and then right, and saw off in the distance a large building that looked like a temple, up on the third tier of the city, completely away from the battle, in an open area where he could face his brother alone. He took off running with all of Tomaz's strength - *oh shadows and light, Tomaz!* - fueling his legs, and just in time, as the next instant his brother crashed down behind him with a bellow of rage.

"STOP RUNNING!"

That was all the encouragement he needed to run faster. He lowered his head and focused with all of his might on getting to the temple off in the distance.

Why am I going to a temple? I should be running away!

"SHUT UP!" he yelled at himself. He spun around a corner, going so fast that he actually overshot and ended up running along a wall for a few paces before he was pulled back down to earth. He shot a look over his shoulder and saw that his brother, going just as quickly as the Prince, couldn't help but smash into the wall, and was forced to extricate himself before he could continue the pursuit. It cost him barely a second, but it was enough that it gave the Prince an idea.

The Prince kept running along the street, and his brother came up behind him alarmingly fast; the Prince swerved around a corner, and when his brother followed, he crashed into the opposite wall again. The Prince of Ravens shot around another hairpin turn, but this time his brother checked

his speed just in time to keep his distance. The gap was closing between them.

The Prince looked up and saw his destination, behind the large gate of the third tier, which was still open in the event the Kindred needed to retreat once more. The Prince of Ravens flew through the open gate, and veered immediately to his left, where rose before him a wall of the large temple, directly ahead at the end of the street. He ran toward it with all of his might, casting frightened looks over his shoulder at Ramael.

Ramael, sensing the fear, let out a snarl and began to gain once more on the Prince. The wall was coming closer ... closer ... there!

At the last moment, the Prince turned and ducked away.

With a resounding crash, the Prince of Oxen shot past him and straight through the side of the building. As the dust settled, the Prince of Ravens followed him, sword drawn and ready to fight.

They were in a dark rectangular enclosure with unlit torches lining the walls. Numerous pillars went from floor to ceiling, and in the middle of room was a large marble tomb.

All right, now I'm here, what do I do?

He looked left and right, but his brother was nowhere to be found. How did someone run through a wall and then have the clarity of mind to hide?

His nose wrinkled, and his now inhuman sensory input brought him the smell of blood and sweat and oiled metal from over his shoulder; immediately, the Prince ducked, and once again felt the heavy wind of a battleaxe pass over his head, inches from scalping him. He rolled behind a pillar, got to his feet, and ran for the other side of the Temple.

With a resounding boom and crash amplified by the large empty space of the Temple, the Prince of Oxen swung his axes and destroyed the pillar in a display of strength that shook the Prince of Ravens to his core. As the dust settled, the Prince of Oxen stepped into view, swinging his axes easily by his sides, a horrible grin on his face.

How do I defeat that? the Prince thought with despair.

The building around them seemed to shake for a minute, and then settled. The Prince of Ravens felt his breath catch in his chest, and realized he'd just found the answer.

Ok - I'll take it.

Taking a deep breath and praying this would work, he ran for a second pillar. Immediately, his brother followed him, and as soon as the Prince was behind the pillar Ramael tore it down with a savage blow that struck sparks as the metal of his blades tore through the heavy stone, ripping it down. As the dust settled, Ramael looked around and ... saw nothing.

The Prince had taken the opportunity of his brother's momentary blindness and the enormous crash of the crumbling pillar to run to the other side of the Temple and throw himself behind another pillar to hide.

"Brother, brother, brother," Ramael said, amusement coloring his voice. "Are you hiding now? Tsk tsk tsk ... no wonder Mother is so disappointed in you ..."

The Prince's breath caught in his chest.

"Did you know that there was a bet between the Children over which one of us would be the one to bring you home and kill you? Though I suppose credit should be given where credit is due ... Mother was the one who offered the prize for your head ..."

There was another huge crash and the sound of screeching metal as Ramael tore down another pillar, thinking the Prince was hiding behind it. The roof above them shook ominously, and a patch of stone fell and crashed to the floor. The Prince tensed, but the dusted settled and the building remained standing. The Ox Lord continued to talk.

"My bet was on Geofred, to be frank ... he seemed to think it would take cunning to find you, but then again you always were predictable. Perhaps I should have realized you were with these scum. At first I thought you were being clever, luring me to their base, trying to buy back your place in the Children with the end of the Exiles ... who knows, it might have worked. But when the Bloodmages told me you and the others they were

tracking had moved, I knew you had gone over ... I knew that you had been corrupted away from your duty and your blood. Scum ... rebels ... the worst dregs of humanity ...”

“They’re better than you will ever be!”

The words were out of the Prince’s mouth before he could stop them. He snapped his mouth closed and held very still. Ramael began to slowly make his way over to the side of the temple that the Prince was hiding on, heading about ten yards too far to the left.

“Hah! You actually believe you’re doing the right thing! Think again little one, you’ve betrayed your family! You’ve betrayed your Mother!”

“She betrayed *me!*” the Prince roared back, coming out from behind the pillar before he could stop himself, rage boiling so hot inside him that he couldn’t see straight. “You all did! You tried to have me killed! I did nothing to you, and you took away my name, you made me an Exile, and then you tell me *I’m* the traitor?!”

The Prince of Ravens charged, and there was a flurry of blows exchanged that threw sparks into the dark temple. The Prince of Oxen made another swing with his axe, but the Prince ducked and it instead hit another pillar that also came crashing down.

“Too slow!” the Prince of Ravens taunted. His rage was so intense it was bordering on madness.

The Prince of Oxen reversed the swing and almost took the Prince’s head off; he had to scramble back ungracefully to once more avoid decapitation, and as the Prince rolled back to his feet he heard his brother laughing.

The Prince of Ravens realized with a spike of fear that he was being toyed with.

“What,” the Prince of Oxen said, “this is all about Mother taking away your name? Oh, poor little boy ... would you like a new one? I’m sure I could think of something.”

“I HAVE NO NAME! AND YOU HAVE NO RIGHT TO GIVE ME ONE!”

He launched himself forward once more, sword light as a feather in his hands, and pushed his brother back across the room. A sharp swing from one of the axes brushed across the Prince's ribs so closely that he knew he had barely avoided evisceration. The Valerium sword lanced out again, but the axes were there to meet it and repel it.

The Prince dodged away, and the axe hit another of the pillars, and as the pillar crumbled, the entire temple, weakened to the point of collapse, came crashing down.

The Prince dove to the ground and covered his head with his hands as an enormous rumble vibrated through his body, and then he was struck with falling rocks. He cried out in pain as a stone smashed into his spine, and he felt his hands go numb and his vision grow dark. If it wasn't for the strength of Tomaz keeping his body whole beyond the point of natural endurance, the Prince was certain he would have died. But eventually the shaking and crashing subsided, and he was able to pull himself out of the pile of rubble with one hand. His head emerged first, and he drew in a gasping, shuddering breath and set about freeing the rest of himself, dirt and powdered stone clouding the air and making it hard to breathe. Blood was in his eyes from a cut on his forehead that was bleeding freely, and his left arm was hanging uselessly at his side with no feeling; his legs still seemed to be working, though when he tried to stand he found that his strength finally failed him and he crashed back to the ground in a heap.

His sword was gone. The Prince looked around for it frantically, and finally saw it sticking straight out of the ground several yards away where it had lodged itself point first. He began to crawl toward it, looking warily around him for any sign of his brother. The entire building around them had fallen, and now that he was in the open air once more he could see the battle, far off on the second tier, still raging.

A huge pile of rubble not far off to his left shifted and then seemed to explode outward as Ramael stood up with a bellow of contemptuous rage, whole pieces of his armor missing and a large scratch marring his perfect

face. His helm was gone, his breastplate torn away, and one of his axes buried somewhere deep in the Temple's ruins.

"Nothing can stop me, little brother!" he roared at the Prince. "And now, I think it is time to end this."

The Prince pulled himself with all the strength left to him toward the sword. It was only an arm's length away now. He reached for it and his fingers just brushed the wire-wrapped hilt.

"Too late for that," Ramael said. A double-bladed axe rose high overhead.

A flash of steel shot through the air and sank into the Prince of Oxen's neck.

He let out a bellow of rage and pain and the axe went wide, burying itself in the ground next to the Prince. Another dagger streaked through the air, sinking its foot-long blade into Ramael's back and causing another convulsion that made him fall to the ground.

The Prince pulled himself the last few inches, wrapped his hand around the hilt of the Valerium sword, pulled it from the rubble, and with a cry of pain at the effort, sank the blade into his brother's chest, piercing his heart.

Light exploded in the Prince's mind as Ramael's life and memories were added to his own. His mind felt as though it had been exposed to the sun after being kept for seventeen years in the dark: one hundred and forty two years of memories, crystal clear and visceral, flooded into the Prince.

Someone slapped his face.

"Argh!" he sat upright, holding his head with both of his hands.

"Are you all right?" Leah asked.

"Parchment," he said through clenched teeth, "and something to write with!"

The memories of the Prince of Oxen were whirling through his mind, more than the Prince had ever absorbed before, and in any other case he was sure his body would have collapsed under the strain, but he felt as if he

had an unlimited source of strength that he could draw on, a power like the sun that would never die.

He wasn't sure when the parchment came, he wasn't even quite sure how he was able to write legibly, but he was later told that he wrote for the better part of an hour, and never the same sentence twice. Memory by memory, the Prince plumbed the depths of his brother's mind, doing his best not to think of what he was writing down, just putting it in words. He would deal with it all later - he had no time to judge it now, and he couldn't keep it in his mind.

The memories were on all topics, but among the most important were details about the layout of the castle of Roarke, the defenses of the Empire, the current state of politics, the names of various spies planted within the Kindred's scouting forces that had passed false information ...

And then, without warning, the memories from his brother's mind shifted, and the Prince was remembering another life. The life of a young boy, training with a sword bigger than any the Prince had ever seen.

Tomaz.

The next thing the Prince knew, he was up and moving, clutching his sword, the parchment having fallen from his numb hands, caught by whoever had been attending him. He left the ruins of the once great Temple and moved in a strange dreamlike trance through the city, memories playing in his mind of the big man who had given his life to save the Kindred.

He moved through the gate to the second tier of the city, passing cheering Kindred, hearing the sound of retreat blown on Imperial horns. But none of that seemed to matter.

The Prince turned a corner, and there he was, lying in the street, just as the Prince had left him.

Tomaz.

The Prince moved to the big man's side. He sank to the ground beside the body, feeling the rough stone of the street scrape his knees through his tattered clothing. How could Tomaz be dead? He still felt ... the Prince felt as

though at any second the big man would roll over, get to his feet, and laughingly ask the Prince what he was doing on the ground.

Tomaz.

"I'm sorry," the Prince said, voice full of emotion. He laid one hand on the gaping wound left by the Prince of Oxen's axe, as his other hand fell to the hilt of the Valerium sword sheathed at his side. He began to sob.

The memories of Tomaz's life continued to play in the Prince's mind ... Guardian training, a young woman long ago, hope and laughter and simple things ... and then the memories began to fade. In panic, the Prince tried to hold on to them, to keep them from leaving, but the harder he tried to hold them, the more quickly they seemed to fade and slip through his grasp. The Prince let out a growl of anger - he wouldn't let what was left of Tomaz die! He would keep these memories - he would keep Tomaz alive!

Concentrating with all of his might, the Prince mentally sank anchors into all of the memories, and began to reel them back toward him. Memories of Guardian Training, the young girl from his youth, the parents he had never known, and a man ... a man he'd been forced to kill. The Empress condemning him, the pain he'd felt as his name had been taken from him. And the first sight of the Prince - and the knowledge, the certainty, that he could be redeemed.

But the memories were fading, like lines drawn in sand before an advancing tide, and little by little the Prince felt them slipping away, try as he might to keep them with him. The power of the big man's life was going as well, dimming, dying.

So he drew on what strength he had, drew as much strength and power and energy as he could find in his body, and threw it into the memories, clinging to Tomaz and sobbing over his body.

A burst of light flung the Prince flat on his back as the memories were sucked away from him by an inexorable force, and then the strength that had kept him going, the strength he'd taken from his brother's death, was gone as well, and he fell backward into darkness.

Chapter Twenty-Three: Aspect of Strength

The Prince felt as though he was floating. He was lighter than air, and he was perched up high somewhere, his body pillowed by soft, fluffy, billowing white clouds. He wasn't thinking about much of anything, just existing. Vague impressions came to him, here and there, something about the sunlight ... something about the smell of pine trees ... and something about a pair of fiery green eyes. He liked the thought of those green eyes, but at the same time it all seemed rather unimportant ... so he floated on.

He came across a cloud that smelled like travel dust and lavender soap, and then a little while later a cloud that was black and stormy looking. It was pouting over in the corner all alone, trying to look dignified, but succeeding only in looking ... well, stupid.

Another cloud, slowly fading away, was revealing the sky behind it – a cloud that looked as if it had been a storm cloud once, but now appeared rather harmless.

And then it was as if a bubble had been popped, and he was falling. Down through the clouds, down through the sky, toward a vast plain of swaying grass, and a wolf was howling in the distance, accompanied by a lion's roar. An eagle screeched as it descended next to him and caught a small animal far below – a golden, furry thing whose luck had run out.

He fell and fell, down through the sky, and then as the grass grew closer he saw a small bed, far faaaaar below ... but growing, growing so quickly, with the sound of air rushing past his head, the wind pounding in his ears, the animals screaming with one voice!

Light – and softer sound. Voices.

“But ... how did he do it?”

“I'm not sure. One minute I'm telling him to kill me, the next minute I'm jumping up, the sun's rising, and there's the shadow-cursed Prince of Ravens lying next to me with a Valerium sword, looking like he'd been rolled through a briar patch, clubbed, and set on fire.”

The Prince opened his eyes. He was wearing a long white shirt, sitting in a small hospital cot, and it felt like every part of him was wrapped in some kind of soft white bandage. His eyes began to drag closed again ... he was very sleepy ...

"I felt myself die," rumbled a voice, like boulders running down a hill.

"That's impossible, Tomaz," the girl responded.

TOMAZ?!

"Argh!" his eyes flew open and focused on the giant, and then the Prince did a kind of twitching jump as he realized that there was a dead man standing by his bed.

"Whoa! Calm yourself, princeling," the big man said, shock turning to laughter as he began smiling from ear to ear. "Nice of you to come back to us."

"How are you - you're dead!" The Prince wasn't certain what was happening. His memories were all confused, his brain foggy as if it had been overworked and was now sore and uncooperative.

"I killed you!"

"And brought him back," a voice said from the door, "which I find more interesting."

Leah and Tomaz both started and spun around. The Prince looked too and saw Elder Crane entering through the door of a rather small infirmary room. The Elder was wearing a simple gray-green cloak with a soft brown tunic and loose pants tied at the waist. Something hung around his neck, but the Elder tucked this inside his shirt when he saw the Prince looking at it. Crane came forward slowly, using a long wooden cane to steady himself.

"Elder," Tomaz and Leah said, respectfully bowing their heads to him in deference. He nodded back, and then a smile brightened his face. The Prince felt as though the room had just grown lighter.

"I am sorry to intrude on your recovery," Crane said, "but I wished to be the first to thank you, on behalf of the Kindred, for what you did last night. Elder Keri notified me when she thought you were about to wake; the

woman seems to be almost clairvoyant – I expected to wait for a while, but it appears I arrived at precisely the right moment.”

The Prince looked at him, trying and failing to get his mind into some semblance of working order.

“Thank me?” he finally managed to ask. His tongue felt unwieldy and too large for his mouth. “Why is that necessary? I promised I would help, and I did not do it for you.”

He realized that what he’d just said sounded a little rude, and tried to speak again, but the Elder motioned him to silence, smiling as he did so.

“Please, there is no need to fret,” Crane said. “I understand what you are trying to say. You did not help the Kindred out of loyalty, and you did not do it out of belief in our cause. I understand this, and I know that your reasons are your own. But the Kindred do owe you thanks. You had the chance to betray us, a chance to end the Exiled Kindred forever, and you did not. You turned against your society, your nation, and even your family in order to do what you thought was right. And for whatever other reasons you might have had, I think that you did it out of duty to the realm, and out of an understanding of the worthiness of life. These are qualities that are found in true princes, those men and women who are not merely rulers but leaders as well. And it is for that I, and the Kindred, thank you.”

The Prince opened his mouth to respond, but he wasn’t quite sure what he could say to such a statement. His body ached, and he again began to question if this was all a dream.

“As to what I overheard when I was entering,” Crane continued, breaking the silence that had fallen, “I believe I might be able to shed some light on how your friend Tomaz came to be here. Do not worry,” he continued, as the Prince recoiled slightly, “he is very much alive and kicking, as the expression goes.”

“How?” the Prince asked. His throat felt sore, and his voice came out low and gravelly. “Is it real? Or have I gone mad?”

“Well – I think you might be a better judge of that than I,” Crane responded. “I have gathered that you have the ability to sense the life in others. A great gift indeed. Can you sense life in Tomaz?”

The Prince looked at the big man, taking in his appearance. He looked the same – that much was certain. The Prince squinted his eyes, and the man stayed where he was. Tomaz reached out a hand and briefly squeezed the Prince’s shoulder.

“Go on,” he said. “I promise I’ll still be here when you open your eyes.”

The Prince, still unsure, took a deep breath and let his eyelids flutter closed. He reached through the Raven Talisman, searching ... and there he was. To his surprise, Tomaz *did* feel like Tomaz ... and more. Much more. The Prince couldn’t understand it, but it felt like something out of his childhood ... no, that couldn’t be. His mind was still hazy, and he was confused ... but what was important was that the Elder was telling the truth – the man was alive. And he was certainly Tomaz.

“But how?” he repeated, slowly opening his eyes again.

“What you call the Raven Talisman is known to the Kindred as the Aspect of Life,” Crane said, “and it is my belief that when you refused to accept the death of your friend, you forced the life you had absorbed from him back into his body.”

The Prince stared at him blankly for a long moment.

“What?”

“When you absorb a person’s life,” the Elder began, “they become a part of your subconscious, yes? Correct me if I’m wrong, for I have never studied this myself, only gleaned the information from others who read it in old books that have long since crumbled to dust. When you kill someone, they become a part of you, yes? And so it was an easy thing for you to bring him back – he was a part of you. He was still alive in a sense, and you carried the strength and the power of enough men to force those memories and that strength back into him.”

“But why couldn’t he do it before?” Leah asked. “He’s killed men before, and I’ve never seen him do anything like that.”

“I believe the answer lies there,” Crane said, motioning to the sword that had been laid, in its sheath, on a table by his bed on top of a pile of his clothing.

“A sword?” Leah asked.

“Look closer,” Crane said.

Leah leaned in, brow furrowed in concentration. A bare second later she gave an uncharacteristically large gasp of surprise and turned to stare at the Prince, one hand holding the pit of her stomach. The Prince looked at her dumbly, his head still feeling like it was full of cotton, unable to hold form or thought without a good deal of effort. To his surprise, she crossed to his bedside, grabbed a handful of his hair and pulled his face close enough to hers that they were almost nose to nose.

“How did you get it?” she asked.

“It’s – it’s the sword I got back in Vale!” he sputtered, trying to understand what had caused this reaction. She released his head, and stepped back, pointing at the sword.

“This is Aemon’s Blade! It’s not just *a* sword; it’s *the* sword! The first Valerium blade!”

The Prince’s first reaction was to laugh at her. She had picked an odd time to make a joke ... he looked over at the blade and began to think they were all playing a joke on him. Aemon’s Blade should be somehow ... special. But this – it was just a plain sword. Yes, it was made of Valerium, but it had a simple handle wrapped in copper wire to prevent slippage, a strong but simple cross guard, and a plain oval pommel to counter the weight of the long, curved blade. It was just a sword.

“That’s impossible – why would you say such a thing?” he asked Crane, looking over the girl’s shoulder skeptically.

She reached over, and tried to grab the sword.

There was a flash of light, and she was flung backwards into the Tomaz's arms, unharmed but obviously shaken. She shook her head and refocused her eyes on the Prince.

"How? How?"

The Prince had no answer, but could only stare dumbfounded at the blade.

"I heard a few soldiers talking about the battle between him and the Prince of Oxen," Tomaz said slowly, scratching his bearded chin thoughtfully. "It seems at one point, he was thrown into the Temple - the Temple of Aemon. The Prince of Oxen followed him and brought the entire place down; there's barely a single column left standing. One of the only things they found in the rubble was a plain Valerium blade."

"I lost my sword," the Prince said thickly, "but I found it again."

"It wasn't your sword," said Elder Crane, hands folded behind his back, a strange look on his face. "It was Aemon's."

"But ... how was I even able to touch it? Leah told me it was buried where he died, because they couldn't move it."

Crane looked at him for a long moment before glancing at both Tomaz and Leah.

"I will now tell you something I must ask you not to repeat outside this room. It is information that is known only to myself and the members of the Council of Elders, with perhaps a handful of others. I would ask Eshendai Goldwyn and Ashandel Banier to leave, but what I have to say concerns them too."

The Elder took a deep breath as if steeling himself.

"It concerns your father."

Fire shot through the Prince's body, gathering in his fingers and toes and lifting the hair on his arms and neck. His vision narrowed in on the Elder to the exclusion of all else. The fuzzy feeling in his head was replaced with the sharp, cold feeling of a well-honed razor.

"My father?" he asked breathlessly. The Elder nodded.

“Twenty years ago your father was sent on a mission to the Empire.”

“Mission?”

“Yes. He and his Ashandel partner were Rogue scouts.”

“He was ... my father was an Exile?”

Crane nodded.

“One of our most skilled Spellblades, born here to Exiled parents. His father died before he was born, and his mother, your grandmother, died in childbirth. He was raised by all of the Kindred, as our orphans are; he was everyone’s son, everyone’s brother. He was the last of his line, and he was treated with respect because he showed such promise.

“It was thought that he died on his first mission to Lucien. The last report we had from him and his Ashandel said they were infiltrating the Fortress itself. He no doubt sent it when he did, knowing we wouldn’t be able to stop him. He was smart and headstrong, and in the years since I have often thought that we should have waited to send him out ... but his Ashandel was older than he, as was customary, and it was thought that the two of them were so well paired that this would be our first chance to see the inner workings of the Imperial Fortress with your father’s skill and his Ashandel’s experience. They sent word that they were attempting to gain access to the palace on the previously noted night, and then they disappeared. What we have learned since, is that your father infiltrated the Most High, and was brought into an audience with the Empress herself, where it is rumored he fell in love. He became her consort, though we cannot be certain whether it was for true love or in an audacious attempt to gain information. In any case, once you were born and found to be a viable Child of the Empress, she had your father killed. It is a perverse sign of the respect she had for him that he was killed by a Blade Master, not by the Death Watchmen; he was thought too dangerous for anyone else to deal with.”

The Prince had to work moisture back into his throat before speaking.

“How do you know all of this?” he asked.

The Elder looked to Tomaz and raised an eyebrow. The big man, face white and eyes wide, nodded his head the barest fraction, and the Elder continued.

“This information came to us when Tomaz joined our ranks.”

The Prince looked up at the big man, whose face was now a mask of grief and pain as well as unquestionable shame.

“What does he mean?” the Prince asked Tomaz. The big man took a deep breath, his brows drawn together and his mouth turned down at the edges; his black eyes bore a deep sorrow, making him look suddenly much older than his years.

“I told you I was asked to commit an act that led me to betray the Empire.”

The Prince nodded numbly.

“That act was to kill the Empress’s consort and his travelling partner. To kill your father and his Ashandel.”

His eyes were locked on the Prince’s, wordlessly asking for forgiveness and understanding, but not expecting it. It was clear that no matter what pardon the Prince could try to give, Tomaz had already eternally judged himself unworthy.

“That’s why you wouldn’t let me leave in the mountains,” the Prince said softly. “That’s why you came back for me in the Seeker’s dungeon, and that’s why you took the blow from Ramael’s ax that should have killed me. You thought you were in my debt.”

Tomaz nodded. He cleared his throat gruffly and shifted his weight, putting his hands on his hips; the Prince realized the big man was close to tears.

“I can never bring your father back,” Tomaz said, his voice rough and heavy with years of regret, “but when we found you in the mountains, I made it my duty to protect you. I couldn’t save your father, but I could save you. Even if it meant saving you from yourself.”

There was a long moment when no one spoke. The Prince's mind seemed to have gone blank. Fatigue and shock had addled him, and he couldn't put coherent thoughts together anymore.

"But what does any of this have to do with the sword?" Leah asked. Elder Crane nodded and continued.

"The sword was the first Valerium weapon forged, but also the first sword enchanted as a Spellblade's weapon. Being a Valerium weapon, the link forged was much more powerful than anticipated, and when Aemon died, we found that none could touch the blade. Aemon had a power in his blood, the seed of the same power that the Empress had. They brought it with them from across the sea, and when they settled here that power began to dim. The Empress found a way to sustain that power, but Aemon had fled before he could learn from her and his power died out, though some trace of it remained in his blood; when he came here and found Valerium, and used his blood to bind it to him, that dormant seed grew and blossomed, allowing him to fight and defeat the Tyrant when she invaded. That seed was, we believe, passed down from him to his son, from that son to his daughter, and so on and so forth until your father."

Leah and Tomaz both looked as though they'd been punched in the gut. The Elder fell silent as he gave them time to absorb this piece of information, and the room became heavy with unspoken disbelief.

"But the line died out with Aemon!" Tomaz said in shock. "Aemon had no child!"

"He did, though it was kept secret," Crane responded calmly in the thundering silence of the room. "The Empress had invaded to kill Aemon, and with that accomplished she retreated. It was imperative to keep Aemon's continued line from her knowledge, which was part of why Aemon could not let the Empress take him alive. It is why he fought to the last on the spot we now call Aemon's Stand."

"His father was the last of Aemon's line?" Leah asked in a hushed voice of awe. But Crane was shaking his head.

“No no,” the Elder said, “*he* is the last of Aemon’s line.”

Tomaz and Leah slowly looked at the Prince.

“No other of his line has been able to touch the sword, though we have tried again and again, obviously without telling them why. You are the first to know of your heritage, in fact. But it is my belief that because you are also the son of the Empress, you have the same seed of power in your blood that Aemon had, allowing you to handle a sword originally paired exclusively to him, and to his power of healing. That was the secret he stole from the Empress, the ability to bring a person back from the edge of death as long as there was the smallest bit of life still in them. To this day she does not have this power, for she did not deem it worth having and so gave it to Aemon while she kept the other Aspects, what you called Talismans, and gave them to her Children to help her rule. And you, with all of Tomaz’s memories conveniently stored away in your mind by the Raven Talisman, had more than enough to work with in order to bring him back. For you see, Aemon’s blood is in that blade, and I suspect that his sacrifice turned it into a Talisman of its own in a way, allowing you to turn the Raven Talisman from its black, corrupted purpose, back to what it was intended to be. Even still, the task was enormous, and in your exhausted state I do not think you would have been able to manage it without the strength you gained from Ramael - some of which was passed into Tomaz.”

A quick exchange happened between the two Rogues, but the Prince took no notice of it, for he was staring, uncomprehending, at the Elder, and continued to do so for a long time.

“I know it is a lot to take in, particularly after what has just happened. I will leave you alone, though once you feel adjusted enough to be up and walking I would like to speak with you further. There is the matter of the information you gave us on the castle of Roarke - the information you gleaned from your brother’s memories. Part of it is incomplete, and I would very much appreciate your help in filling in the blanks. But more than that ... I will make no secret of the fact that you are the hero of this battle. The

Kindred know your story, they know your identity as the Prince of Ravens and also, now too, as Aemon's Heir. You gave me your loyalty until this crisis has passed, and passed it has. Now ... you are free to choose. And I would like to know where that decision will take you. Where it will take us all."

With a respectful nod of the head and a slight smile at the stupefied look on the Prince's face, he made for the door, motioning for Leah and Tomaz to follow him and leave the Prince alone.

"Wait!"

The Elder turned.

"I have two questions," the Prince said.

The Elder nodded, and waited.

"First ... if I decide to leave, will you let me?"

"Yes," the Elder said immediately. The Prince felt a huge weight fall off him that he hadn't known he'd been carrying around. The Elder continued: "The Kindred are in your debt for our very existence. You are not our prisoner. The Council unanimously decided that should you wish to leave us, it is only right of us to let you. Though please know that you will always have a place here with us. You need not leave ... you need not continue to run."

The Prince couldn't do anything but nod. He needed time to think about that.

"You had another question?" Elder Crane prodded.

"Yes ... what was my father's name?"

The Elder's face took on a look of surprise and ... hope.

"Relkin," came the answer. "It is one of the oldest names of the Exiled Kindred. It means 'true son.' Your father chose it on his name day, when he turned eighteen. He chose it because he saw himself as the son of all the Kindred, who had brought him up together."

"Relkin," the Prince said, seeing how the name sounded. The Prince looked up to the Elder and said, quite simply, "Thank you."

The Elder nodded, concealing a smile, and turned to leave. Tomaz and Leah, however, did not go. Crane turned and looked at them expectantly from the door, but neither of them moved.

"I think we should speak with him alone Elder," Tomaz said. "About the matter we discussed before."

The Elder looked momentarily surprised, but then nodded as if he should have expected this.

"It is your gift - you have the right to share it with whom you wish."

And with that, the man turned and left, closing the door quietly behind him. Tomaz and Leah turned back to the Prince.

"Leah," he began, before they could speak, "thank you for helping me -"

"Not necessary," she said with one of her rare, dazzling smiles.

"It is," the Prince insisted. "You seem to be making a habit out of saving my life."

"Don't forget that you saved mine too," she responded quietly.

"I'm grateful all the same," he said. She rolled her eyes.

"You princes and your manners," she mocked. But then she grew quiet and silent, and even looked troubled. She turned to look at Tomaz, and the Prince looked to the big man as well.

"Tomaz ... thank you for what you did. What you were willing to do, sacrificing your life the way you did to save the Kindred ... to save me."

Tomaz nodded, face drawn and still tight with emotion. The Prince cleared his throat, which had a sudden lump in it.

"Thank you," Tomaz said, "for bringing me back."

There was a long pause, in which Leah and Tomaz looked at each other once more. The Prince, finally realizing that there was something that had been left unsaid, looked at them with curiosity.

"What is it?"

They both looked at him, and then Leah cleared her throat.

"When you brought Tomaz back ... you gave him something."

The Prince looked from the girl to the man, confused about what she was saying, trying to see if this was one of her jokes.

"I ... uh ... I don't understand," he said, trying to be polite about it.

Leah opened her mouth again to speak, but then closed it and turned to Tomaz. He quirked an eyebrow at her, and she shrugged in response.

"I think I'll just show him," Tomaz rumbled. He began to undo the lacings on his simple cotton shirt.

"What are you doing, Tomaz?" The Prince asked, very confused.

"Just ... just wait," Leah said, looking at him anxiously, and the Prince realized that they were both frightened of how he would react to what they were about to show him. His mind began to race through all the possibilities as Tomaz undid the final lacings on his high-necked cotton tunic. Had the Prince somehow left him so badly scarred it would affect his life? Was there a gaping hole in his side, a permanent wound that would not close? What could frighten them this badly?

The giant pulled the shirt over his head, and the Prince felt his mouth drop open.

Tomaz's chest was covered with dimly glowing red lines that seemed to pulse and twist as he moved. They outlined the muscles of his chest, his shoulders, his arms, his stomach. They moved up the sides of his neck and stopped just short of his chin, and now the Prince understood the purpose of the shirt's high-necked collar. Tomaz turned slowly, and the Prince saw that the markings, like carefully banked coals ready to burst into flame, continued on his back as well, lining every muscle.

"How is that possible?" the Prince asked. "I killed him. It should have gone back to the Empress."

"We think you absorbed it along with his life," Leah said, speaking slowly and watching him closely for his reaction. "And when you brought back Tomaz, you passed it to him along with his memories."

Tomaz turned back to face the Prince, who found himself speechless. The Ox Talisman, for its part, continued to pulse with a fiery red light, beating in time with the giant's heart.

Epilogue: Prophecies Fulfilled

The carrier pigeon landed on the man's knee. He reached down and pulled the message from the small leather pouch tied to its foot. The bird flew off again, back to the south where it had come from.

"What's the news?" a voice asked from behind the man.

The first man untied the small roll of parchment and read. He did so slowly, not wanting to miss any of the details.

"The first step is complete. The boy has defeated Ramael."

The second man let out a low, rich chuckle.

"Good," he said languorously, tasting the word. "What is next?"

"We wait," the first man said. "He will come to us."

"What was the prophecy from the Visigony?"

"It is only part of the larger cycle," the first man reminded him.

"Yes," the second man purred, "but this one mentions *me*."

The first man recited it for him in the sing-song voice of a bird:

*The Raven shall kill the Ox
The Kin will gain a throne.
The Blood will stain the rocks
And all the land shall moan.*

*But once the Veil falls,
And after the castles crumble,
The Raven for his vengeance calls
And over his pride will stumble.*

*The Sword shall be reclaimed,
The fruits of Empire sour;
But once the Lion shakes his main,
So ends the Raven's power.*

The second man laughed – a long, rolling sound that sent pleasant vibrations through the first man’s skin, as he turned to walk away, his boot heels clicking on the stone floor of the aviary. A woman stood up abruptly from a chair in the corner where she had been waiting. Green lines ran along her neck and hands, slowly pulsing as she walked after the second man, undulating with each step. Two other figures, a man and a woman, both rose as well, the former with half of his face blackened as if burned and covered with glowing golden lines, the latter with grizzled gray hair that hung lank about her face.

“Well that was fun,” said the burned man. “I’ve always enjoyed sitting in drafty stone birdcages. But pray tell *why* we were invited to this again?”

“Hush,” said the gray haired woman. She bared her teeth at him in annoyance. “Would you rather they had left us out?”

“No,” said the smaller man, “I’d rather they had left us alone. I’d rather they had left everything alone – this world is full of pleasant distractions and there’s no need to change it. They meddle too much. They always have.”

“Not all of us can depend on luck to make things turn out in our favor,” said the first man, still seated with the pigeon’s message held lightly in his hand. He turned a single, piercing blue eye on the short man, whose golden eyes were laughing back at him, mocking him. “And not all of us have your appetite for ‘pleasant distractions.’”

The golden-eyed man snorted, and then turned to leave. The gray-haired woman followed him with a slow, loping walk, but stopped at the door and turned back.

“I do not approve of this plan,” she growled at the first man. “I do not think Mother would approve of it either.”

“Mother knows of it,” said the first man. “Do not underestimate her ... there is very little any of us do that goes unobserved.”

The woman’s lip curled momentarily in contempt and disgust, and then she left.

The first man remained seated. Once the door had closed, he allowed himself a brief, small smile that pulled at the scars around the corners of his mouth, twisting them into a grotesque expression that had more than a hint of anticipation to it. The light of the setting sun played on his bald head, bare chest, and bootless feet. Strange markings, cold as ice and blue as the sky, swirled and began to glow, running from the crown of his head, down the back of his neck, branching along his arms to his fingertips, down his spine and around to his feet. He cast his sight outward, and looked into the future once more.

“Hurry along, little brother,” he whispered. “I have plans for you.”

###

Glossary

Ashandel (AH-shawn-DEL): Meaning “Sword” or “Blade” in the old tongue of Kindred, an Ashandel is part of a Rogue or Ranger pair. He or she is meant to compliment the Eshendai to which he or she is paired. Ashandel are typically the physically stronger of the two, though this is not always the case. Ashandel can be Spellblades, but it is exceedingly rare.

Bloodmage: A Bloodmage is a member of the Empire who, through ritual sacrifice, has given up his life in exchange for the ability to manipulate the lives of others. They are exclusively male, and ritualistically shave their heads. They do not eat, but instead subsist on the strength of the lives they harvest. The basis of their magic is the Raven Talisman, as well as the other Talismans to varying degrees, and as such their magic and enchantments cannot bind the Children. Their nominal head is The Seventh Child, the Prince of Ravens, but until he comes of age they are under the command of Rikard, the Prince of Lions.

Children, The: The seven living children of the Immortal Empress. Each of them bears one of the Seven Talismans and rules a province of the Empire of Ages.

Daemon (DE-mun): An elemental creature created by Bloodmagic. The formation of a Daemon requires raw material – i.e. the essence of a storm, the heart of fire, or the strength of earth – in addition to human sacrifices, and all Daemons require a full circle of thirteen Bloodmages to summon. Once Daemons are summoned, control is in the hands of the leader of the circle, and the Daemon is connected to that Bloodmage’s Soul Catcher.

Elders, The: The governing body of the Exiled Kindred, made of thirteen men and women who are responsible for distinct areas of Kindred society.

Eshendai (EH-shen-DIE): Meaning “Dagger” or “Knife” in the old tongue of the Kindred, an Eshendai is part of a Rogue or Ranger pair. He or she is meant to compliment the Ashandel to which he or she is paired. Eshendai are typically the smaller of the two, and are extensively trained in healing,

strategy and tactics, and map-making as a basis for their work. The majority of Spellblades are Eshendai.

Exiled Kindred: A people made up of the original inhabitants of the land of Lucia, of which there were few remaining survivors following the war between Aemon and the Empress, and those who have been Exiled from the Empire itself. No one knows how large the nation is, though the population has varied throughout the reign of the Empress. All who escape the law of the Empress are known as Exiled, and are hunted throughout the Empire. They are traditionally known as a refuge for thieves, criminals, and murderers.

Lucia (Loo-see-uh): Refers to both the continent and the Empire placed upon it.

Lucien (Loo-see-en): The capital city of Lucia, and the seat of the God Empress.

Ranger Pair: A pair of Exiled Kindred made up of one Ashandel and one Eshendai, who are charged with protecting the borders of the Kindred lands, as well as searching the Empire for any Imperial men or women who have been Exiled and wish to join the Kindred.

Rogue Pair: A pair of Exiled Kindred made up of one Ashandel and one Eshendai, who are charged with various infiltration and sabotage missions executed throughout the Empire.

Spellblade: A man or woman among the Exiled Kindred who has undergone a process of binding that has linked them to a specific weapon. The binding is not possible for most people, but those who have the ability can link themselves to their weapon of choice, enabling them to exercise a limited amount of mental control over that weapon. The binding also lends them strength and endurance, and speeds their recovery time.

About the Author

Hal Emerson lives in the San Francisco Bay Area, where he works as an author. He graduated from UCLA with a BA in Musical Theatre, and has an undying obsession with raspberries.