



R.J. VICKERS

MAGICIAN
QUEEN

The Forbidden Queen Series

BOOK FIVE

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R.J. VICKERS

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Glossary of Terms

Itrea – A country founded by the magic races and other minorities who fled the Kinship Thrones centuries ago. Baylore is its capital, and Larkhaven its only port city.

The Itrean system of rule – Itrea has created a system of elected monarchy where five heirs share a thirty-year ruling cycle. Each heir is nominated by the current ruler from each of the five ruling families, and is usually a relative. When the ruling cycle switches, the heir of the king or queen currently in power takes the throne, and after three years, Baylore holds a vote as to whether that monarch should keep the throne or hand it to the next king or queen in line. If all five monarchs in the ruling cycle are voted off the throne after their three years are over, rule returns to the first monarch in line for that cycle.

Holden King/Holden Queen – The term for a king or queen in a current ruling cycle who does not sit the throne.

The five ruling families of Itrea – The original aim of this ruling system was to share power more evenly among the people, since the founders of Itrea had no royal blood. However, five royal families have now held power for centuries. These are the Reycoran family, the Aldsvell family, the Dellgrain family, the Vellmont family, and the Bastray family. Tradition dictates that all rulers and their relatives take the ruling family's surname, so these names have endured since the foundation of the royal lines.

Icelings – A race native to Itrea who live in the Icebraid Peaks. Little is known about them, so they often feature in fantastical stories.

Drifters – A race native to Itrea who live in the Wandering Woods.

They can choose to undergo a ritual to gain the use of healing powers.

The magic races – These are people born with one of a handful of magic powers. They are not closely linked by genetics (aside from Weavers), so anyone with even distant magic ancestry can end up with a magic power, and it can skip many generations. Also called Makhori (in the Kinship Thrones). The magic races include Weavers (who are born with silver hair that can be woven or otherwise incorporated into handmade objects to enchant them), Cloudmages (who can predict or even exert a slight power over weather), Minstrels (storytellers who pull named listeners into stories that feel like reality), Riders (who bond with animals), Potioneers (who create enchanted substances by channeling their magic into ordinary ingredients), Metalsmiths (who can sense veins of metal underground and use their power to forge delicate metal objects), and more.

The forbidden races – The forbidden races are not allowed within the walls of Baylore. The rationale is that these races are dangerous, especially in a heavily populated place like Baylore, but some magic races have been lumped into this category due to general mistrust or prejudice. Forbidden races include Extractors (who drain energy from those nearby), Braiders (who can fix the time and cause of a person's death), Curse-Weavers (who can curse people deliberately or accidentally unless the source of their power is cut from them), Dark Potioneers (who use less accepted substances such as blood and flesh in their potions), and Snake-Bloods (who can transform into snakes).

The Kinship Thrones – The name for the nine kingdoms joined under Whitish rule. Long ago, the expanding Whitish Empire was divided between the high king's nine sons, though some kingdoms had been settled long before Whitish influence. The Kinship Thrones are east of Itea. They include Whitland, Chelt, Dardensfell, Kohlmarsh, Cashabree, Ruunas, Northreach, Lostport, and Varrival.

Whitland – The country that rules all nine Kinship Thrones (at least in theory). Whitland does not accept Itrea’s autonomy and tries to curtail trade between Itrea and the Kinship Thrones. Most inhabitants of the Kinship Thrones are originally of the Whitish race, but are now known by their country of nationality (Cheltish, Varrilan, Ruunan, etc.). Whitish is also the official language of Itrea and most of the Kinship Thrones.

Makhori – A term used in the Kinship Thrones for those with magic blood (known as the magic races in Itrea)

Varos – A god worshipped in the Kinship Thrones, especially in Whitland. In Itrea, often shortened to “Varse” as a curse.

The Nine – The nine Whitish gods of light who pre-dated Varos. The days in a quarter and spans in a year have been divided up numerically to honor the nine gods (plus Varos, in the 10-day quarter).

The Seventeen Gods of Sin – According to Whitish religious teachings, the Gods of Sin birthed the magic races. Hence all Makhori are demons who represent the lingering presence of evil in the world.

Cloudy Gods – A joking term Itreans use to refer to things outside their control, sometimes as a mild oath. Itreans are not religious and have only adopted the parts of Whitish religion relating to general terminology (days/quarters/spans). However, some country folk genuinely believe in the cloudy gods, which causes no end of amusement to city folk.

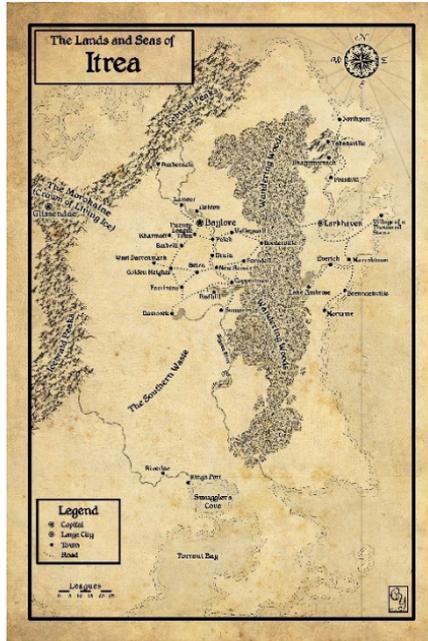
Dravs – Stamped tin coins worth a small amount

Varlins – A varlin is worth twenty dravs. Varlins are stamped coins typically made of silver, with a small gemstone in the center.

Span – A period of 40 days. There are eight full spans plus one incomplete span in a year.

Quarter – A period of 10 days. There are four quarters in a span. The days in a quarter are Aurumsday, Talonsday, Tensday, Tollsday, Samsday, Ilkayumsday, Tabansday, Daridsday, Varseday, and Sullimsday. These are named after Varos and the nine Whitish gods of light.

League – Equal to approximately 5 kilometers (3 miles)



To see full-sized maps of Itrea and the Kinship Thrones plus other exclusive content, [click here](#).

I

Midwinter

The last of the day's sun was fading from my royal suite, distant song and laughter rising from the streets far below. I had yet to light the lamps in my private office.

Four days had passed since my forces retook Baylore Palace, and in the midst of the chaos, Midwinter's Eve had arrived. We would be hosting the usual feast, welcoming the refugees who had joined us and celebrating our first true military victory. I should be readying myself for the dance and night-long gathering, yet I had not moved from my desk in hours.

Spread before me lay a pile of newspapers I had found while searching Holden King Dennoric's study in the vacated Darden wing. The papers bore provocative headlines—

When Will Her Reign of Terror End?

Demon Queen Torches Golden Heights in Yet Another Disgusting Display of Force

“She Destroyed Everything”: Peasants Speak Out

The Evil Forces at Work in Itrea

Both the Baylore Daily and the Palace Times had reported widely on my march through the countryside, and I could not stop reading the articles.

“In one move, she destroyed our futures. We will never recover from this blow.” Farmers from Embrill were found begging for shelter two days after their arrival, as the Demon Queen’s campaign of terror forced them from their homes. “She is pure evil disguised as a woman, and the royalty who voted her onto the throne are just as bad.”

Wincing, I tossed this paper aside and seized another, the words blurring in the growing darkness.

The spread of the Makbori taint threatens all peaceful society. As long as evil lurks in Itrea, honest civilians will never be able to succeed—they will be forever beaten back by the Makbori. For centuries, these demon-spawn have lain in wait, blending in with society and biding their time, but the Demon Queen’s arrival is the sign they have waited for. Your Makbori neighbors will rise up and seek to destroy you. They will cripple Itrea with plague and pestilence and evil magic. Our duty as proud Itreans is to contain and minimize the threat before it is too late.

This one spoke of direct Truthbringer influence, so I added the paper to a growing pile of evidence relating to the Truthbringers’ motives. If we were to regain full control over Baylore, we needed to parse out how far their influence extended, and exactly what final goal they pursued.

I sighed. That was not the true reason I was subjecting myself to this—I felt, in some twisted way, as though I deserved intimate

knowledge of how much my people hated me.

Rubbing my eyes, I reached for another newspaper. The room still carried King Olleack's scent, a thick aroma of pepper and woodsmoke; though I had burned scented candles in an attempt to banish this, the royal suite no longer felt like my own quarters. It was far too large and empty and foreign.

The sky outside had deepened to turquoise, the last rays of sun fading from the rooftops in the city below. Straining to see in the last of the light, I started the next article.

Prominent Baylore medics have affirmed that Queen Kalleah is losing her mind, evidenced by her descent into ruthlessness. In the words of one highly respected medic who asked to remain anonymous, "She has murdered dozens of men with her own hands, burned countless villages, and drunk the blood of innocents. No rational woman could do such a thing—it indicates clear evidence of insanity." Authorities also question her claims of "enemies" both in Baylore and abroad, as it seems likely these are either delusions or flimsy justifications for her brutality.

A knock rang out from my office door, and I flinched. Shoving the paper beneath the others and flipping the whole stack upside down to hide the headlines, I called, "Who is it?"

The door opened to reveal Baridya and Deance, both former ladies-in-waiting of mine, silhouetted in the light from my private sitting-room. Both were dressed for the Midwinter ball, Baridya in a stunning multi-layered gown of deep red and gold that I suspected she had borrowed from my wardrobe, Deance in a pale purple dress without flounces, the sleeves hanging past her wrists nearly to the ground.

"Why are you sitting in the dark?" Baridya asked, tapping my lamp to light it. I caught the scent of roses from her perfume as she bustled in and grabbed my arm. "You're meant to make a grand entrance in just a few minutes. When you didn't summon us, I wondered if you had found a new lady-in-waiting to attend to you."

“Of course not.” I allowed Baridya to pull me to my feet and away from my desk. My back twinged at the movement—I had been sitting still far too long.

“What were you reading?” Deance asked sharply. She flipped one of the newspapers over and glanced at the headline, her mouth tightening.

“I need to get an idea of what the public thinks.”

Baridya had stopped and turned to stare at the headlines as well. “Oh, Kalleah.” She shook her head. “You’re just tormenting yourself for no reason. Where did you get those?”

“Dennoric had quite the collection of newspapers. He seemed to take pleasure in reading about my evil deeds.”

“Bastard,” Deance muttered.

I turned sharply away from the desk. If I was to spend the night celebrating and winning the affection of those who had newly joined my cause, I could not keep dwelling on my failures.

Leading my ladies-in-waiting to my bedchamber, I found a deep blue gown already laid out on my bed. It was elegant yet simple, and my friends had me dressed and my hair pinned into a silver net in no time. Finally, Baridya settled one of my larger ceremonial crowns atop my head. I gave my appearance a cursory glance in the mirror before we left the royal suite—I looked somber and regal and not the least bit insane.

Just outside the royal suite, I paused and glanced at the stairway leading to the lower level of the Chelish wing. Leoth was still down there, hidden away in the medic’s office until he recovered from his torture; no one else knew he was in the palace. I clenched my right hand momentarily, a spasm of pain running up my arm from the deep gash my torturer had cut across my palm. Our medic had knit the skin back together with magic, but the pain would take longer to fade.

“What is it?” Baridya asked, following my gaze to the stairway.

“Nothing.” I sought a change of subject to distract her. “Where is Mellicante?”

“She headed down before me. I told her to reassure your parents that you were on your way.”

“Good,” I said distractedly.

We crossed the dimly lit common area and strode down the elevated walkway separating the Cheltish wing from the main Historic wing of the palace. Here the pale marble, delicate arches, and sweeping windows of the Cheltish wing gave way to high-ceilinged, windowless halls of blocky grey stone. If not for the enchanted tapestries radiating heat throughout the palace, the historic wing would have been forever cold and drafty.

At the foot of the steps, Viko waited for us, smiling broadly. He wore a well-fitted uniform of deep blue and gold—the Reycoran family colors—with his long hair tied back in a tail and a ceremonial sword strapped to his waist. I had appointed him my personal guard just before our return to Baylore, and he took the position seriously.

“You look ravishing, Your Majesty,” he said with a deep bow.

“Thank you.” I returned his smile. Though the newspapers had unnerved me, we truly did have much to celebrate. I needed to remember that. We had infiltrated a heavily guarded, walled city and reclaimed the royal palace with hardly any casualties, despite the fact that hundreds of my soldiers remained unarmed. And we had offered protection to many dozens of civilians and refugees who had lost homes and livelihoods in the war.

As we followed the cavernous hallways down toward the great ballroom, the smell of roasting meat and mulled wine drifted toward us, punctuated with strains of music and laughter. In past days, I would have gone everywhere accompanied by a cohort of guards, but so many of my soldiers now swarmed the castle that no enemy would be able to make a move without dozens leaping to my defense. Now the halls were empty and silent, our footsteps clicking loudly upon the stone floor.

At last we reached the ballroom. The doors stood open, light and music spilling up the stairs into the empty hallway, and bodies filled

every scrap of space on the floor. Tables along either wall groaned beneath the weight of countless overflowing platters and tureens, and behind these stood long benches, filled mostly with fidgeting children.

Across the room, on the raised platform where the five thrones sat, the Reycoran family mingled with the Bastray and Aldsvell families. All looked uncomfortable surrounded by so many in peasant garb. The wealthy families from Valleywall and Larkhaven who had joined my army had left behind all material possessions, and mixed among my soldiers were dozens of genuine refugees with not a drav to their names. From their expressions, it seemed a few of the nobles were only now realizing the nature of the rabble they had welcomed into their homes.

“Look at all these people you’ve saved,” Baridya whispered from my left.

“I don’t know if that’s the right way to put it,” I said wryly. “Dragged into danger, maybe. Persuaded to my cause. But I’m a long way off from saving anyone.”

With that, I straightened my shoulders and stepped forward to the top of the stairs, in the full light of the gleaming chandeliers. It took a minute before anyone noticed me; at last a hasty trumpet blast cut through the hum of voices.

Heads turned my way, and as my people recognized me, cheering swelled to fill the space. Some of my soldiers stamped their feet on the polished floor, and others shouted words that were lost in the roar. I raised a hand to acknowledge them, a genuine smile spreading across my face. Their support was all the sweeter since it had been so hard-won.

As I descended the stairs, Baridya, Deance, and Viko flanking me, the crowd parted with difficulty. Those nearest dropped to their knees as I passed, and others bowed low, the cheers subsiding. In the past, I would have felt uncomfortable with this level of deference, but now it felt right. These people were not just bowing to me; they were showing their devotion to our cause, a cause they now supported as fiercely as I did. Where the weight of my crown had once burdened me, now it

reminded me to stand tall, proud of all we had accomplished.

As we neared the throne platform, I caught sight of my parents smiling at me. My father put a fist to his chest in a salute, and my mother's eyes glistened with tears. Mellicante grinned at us as well, while Dakolth inclined his head solemnly. Only Leoth was missing.

"It seems auspicious that we reclaimed Baylore Palace in time to celebrate Midwinter," my father said softly as I ascended the steps. "Last year was a time of great suffering. I hope this is a sign that better days are soon to come."

"Things will get much worse before they get better," I whispered. "But yes, I hope this is a turning point."

Then I turned to face the crowd.

"My people," I said, letting the words resonate through the ballroom. The low voices and shuffling stilled, and every eye found me. How many times had I said those words? For the first time, they seemed true. These were *my* people.

"We have much to celebrate. War still lies ahead, yet we have come so far in these past spans. Where once I could see no future for Itrea, now we have secured a glimmer of hope. Our numbers are small and our voices often silenced. Yet together, we are mighty.

"Look around you. I see royals no longer certain of where their roles lie, nobles from Larkhaven and Valleywall who gave up everything to join this fight, and farmers who were forced from their homes to protect Itrea. Every one of you is equal in my eyes.

"And now, it is time to celebrate! The year past was filled with hardship, and I hope the close of this year will bring peace to our land. Cast off the sorrows of the past and keep vigil through this longest night with joy in your hearts."

Another storm of cheering resounded through the ballroom.

A few of the royals seemed to take my words to heart, for the crowd on the platform thinned as several descended to the main floor. I settled onto the throne, hungry yet unwilling to face the press of guests just yet. To my right, the great double doors to the banquet hall stood open;

from what I could see, that hall had been arranged similarly to the ballroom, with tables around the walls and a great space in the center cleared for dancing. People began filtering through the doors, their chatter rising to a din, until gradually a clearing opened in the middle of the room.

Our musicians struck up a stately Lavant, and the floor cleared still further as my father led my mother down from the dais. Ordinarily I would have led this dance, yet as usual, I had no partner. If Leoth had been here, I would have summoned him to my side in an instant, heedless of the gossip that would cause. *Oh, Leoth.* I hoped someone had thought to bring him something nice to eat in that cold, sterile hospital office.

Yet I needn't have worried. Just as my parents traced the first set of flowing steps, Cal materialized at my side and gave me a half bow.

"Would you dance with me, Your Majesty?"

I rose with a smile and set my hand on his arm. "I would be delighted."

No longer was Cal the blushing boy who once claimed a dance with me as a mark of honor. Now I suspected he wanted a chance to speak with me in private, or perhaps he was merely saving me from the embarrassment of sitting out the dance I should lead. He was taller than me now, our difference in age less pronounced, and we turned many heads as we cut across the ballroom toward my parents. Setting one hand on my waist and one hand in mine, Cal picked up the steps with flawless ease, leading me across the gleaming floor.

We danced in silence for several minutes, Cal holding my gaze without reticence, until at last a scattering of other couples joined us. I glimpsed Saniya and Carrick, and even Saniya's parents, her mother's face hollowed by illness.

"It's strange to be back," I said at last.

"It is," Cal said. "I haven't even talked to my mother since we returned. I think she knows I'm avoiding her, but..." He sighed. "I don't know what to say to her. She helped me escape, but before then

she didn't seem to care for my safety. She voted for every law King Leoth proposed, even if it endangered people like me."

"I think she knows by now that she was wrong. Whether you decide to give her the chance to apologize is your decision. You know you always have a place by my side, regardless of what your mother says."

"I know."

The steps took us on a weaving course between the nearby couples, and I smiled at Saniya as she caught my eye. Then I said softly, "You would rather be dancing with Nyla, would you not? You care for her a great deal."

Cal nodded glumly. "At least she'll be safe in King's Port. I'd rather her be there than here, even if I miss her. But I'm worried she'll forget about me."

I squeezed Cal's shoulder. "Nyla is very young. If she wants to return to your side when this is over, it will say a great deal for her devotion. And if not, perhaps this time apart was for the best."

"Maybe."

We had to pause our conversation as the dance grew livelier, and we traded partners twice before the pattern brought us back together. I was amazed at how easily the steps came to me after a year away from the palace—my feet moved almost without conscious direction, the dance sweeping me along as if trapped beneath a spell.

When Cal took my hand once more, he asked, "And what about Leoth? You ought to be dancing with him, not me. Why is no one speaking of him? Is he safe?"

"You must tell no one of this," I said softly. "I have spread word that he took shelter with a friend of his, a nobleman, during the confusion of the battle, and he waits for a safe time to join us in the palace. But he was badly wounded, first under questioning, and then when he was whipped in the main square. He doesn't want anyone to associate him with the man who was publicly exposed as a Curse-Weaver, so he's hiding out until he recovers."

"Oh." Cal blinked at me. "I still can't believe..."

“Hush. Let’s speak of it no more.”

We danced the rest of the Lavant in silence. When the last violin notes faded, we broke apart, Cal bowing while I curtsyed.

“Thank you for saving me from embarrassment,” I said.

Cal grinned. “My pleasure.”

I had expected to spend the rest of the evening watching the other couples from my perch on the throne, but to my surprise, I was dragged onto the floor for dance after dance. I hardly managed to snatch a few bites to eat between dances.

Viko claimed the next dance, and Dakolth the one after that; I had not expected him to know the steps, but he must have learned during his years as a child in the Larkhaven court. But I was soon dancing with all variety of soldiers and generals, many with a refined manner of speech that marked them as nobility or at least wealthy citizens. Some of these wore peasant dress, while others must have borrowed tunics and trousers from the royalty.

As the night went on, it dawned on me that I was now a hero in these people’s eyes. Any natural fear they might have felt on account of my forbidden power was overwhelmed by curiosity and awe.

Even elderly Holden King Pollard claimed a dance at one point, congratulating me on my victory and probing delicately into my plans. Soon after that, I noticed the mayor of Embrill sitting on a bench behind one of the banquet tables, a woman just a few years my senior at his side. I suspected it was the daughter he had spoken of; we had held him prisoner through most of our march across Baylore Valley, and once we had arrived at the palace and his daughter had joined us, it seemed she had talked sense into him.

From the banquet hall next door, strains of lively fiddle music competed with our stately ensemble. I caught glimpses of the country folk dancing in circles and lines, weaving in and out in complicated patterns with a great deal of tricky footwork. Several times they started clapping along to the music, the sound rising in a deafening rhythm that drowned out our own musicians. I smiled to see a few of the royals

casting disgruntled looks toward the banquet hall. Had I known the steps, I would gladly have cast aside these stiff formal dances and joined in the country folk's revelry.

By the time the ball wound to an end, I felt I had danced with half the men in the palace. My feet ached, and despite the energy I had drained from my partners, I would have happily sought my bed at the first opportunity.

Yet this was Midwinter, and tradition dictated a night-long vigil.

There were far too many guests to fit around the series of small tables we had used for last year's celebration, so instead an army of servants brought forth several long tables and benches. The room soon filled with a spiced, honeyed scent as our kitchen staff produced vat after vat of mulled wine, and my followers claimed spaces around the tables with much good-natured jostling. Most of the palace residents clustered together at the end of one table, though a few sat interspersed with my army.

I slid onto the very end of the bench beside Mellicante and Baridya, where I would easily be able to escape to give them a respite from my power. Cal, Viko, and Deance sat across from us, plucking greedily at the finger food we had neglected before now. I found I had very little appetite, despite my exertion, so I sampled a few pastries and slices of cheese and slipped most of the food I took into a handkerchief hidden beneath the table. The longer the night wore on, the more Leoth's absence gnawed at me; if I found the chance to slip away discreetly, I intended to pay him a visit and share the bounty of the feast.

Instead of games, our entertainment this night came from minstrels and tumblers and Flamespinners who took turns performing. Even Cal stumbled from his bench at one point, his face flushed from too much mulled wine, and held the audience spellbound with a towering spectacle of flames. He brought the battle of Larkhaven to life in flickering orange fire, the whole fight progressing like a carefully choreographed play, far more elegant than it had been in truth. Nearby, the flames cast a flickering orange light over his mother's face. Holden

Queen Ellarie was blank-faced with shock.

Halfway through Cal's performance, I tore my eyes from the spectacle and rose, a full goblet of mulled wine in one hand and the bulging kerchief of food concealed in my skirts. Only the guards at the door spared me a glance as I slipped from the ballroom.

My crown slid sideways as I hastened along the hall, so I tugged it off and looped it around my wrist instead. My stomach felt unsettled, and I fought off the urge to retreat to my bedchamber and collapse for a few hours. The halls seemed somehow darker and quieter than before; every small creak and rustle as the tapestries stirred from my passage seemed like an assassin ready to strike. I really ought to be more careful. If I met an unpleasant end on Midwinter's Eve, of all nights, it would seem an ill omen for the year to come. My followers would likely take it as a sign of defeat and give up without a fight.

When at last I reached the stairs leading to the Cheltish wing, I ran up them so hastily I nearly spilled the goblet of wine. Heart pounding against my ribs, I slowed in the common area and looked around. All was well.

Quietly now, my crown weighing on my wrist, I crept down the stairs to the hospital room. The room itself was empty, as I had suspected, though a few of the beds showed signs of recent use.

Setting down the goblet of wine, I opened the medic's office door a crack. All was dark and silent within.

"Leoth?" I whispered.

No response. I pushed the door open farther and peered in—Leoth lay huddled on his side, half-covered by a mound of twisted blankets.

"Leoth," I said softly. "I wanted to wish you a happy Midwinter."

With a strangled yell, he bolted upright and threw off the blankets. He stared around wildly for a few seconds before his eyes settled on me. I could hear his breathing, heavy and rasping, and his shoulders slumped as he seemed to recognize me. His sloppy black hair spilled across his face.

"Cloudy gods, Kalleah," he mumbled. "Don't startle me like that."

“I’m so sorry.” I knelt and fetched the mulled wine before closing the office door behind me. When I tapped a lamp on the medic’s desk, the soft glow illuminated the bruising on Leoth’s face. If anything, it had gotten darker and more mottled in the days since we had seized Baylore Palace. “I wanted to make sure you didn’t miss the entire Midwinter celebration.”

I handed Leoth the goblet, and he gulped the mulled wine down in seconds. “Did you bring any more?”

“No. I’m sorry.”

Leoth slumped back against his pillows, wincing. I sat gingerly on the bed beside him and unfolded my handkerchief, showing him the finger food I had scavenged. Many of the pastries were flaking into a pile of crumbs, but he selected a delicate cranberry tart and ate it without complaint.

“Did anyone bring you food from the feast earlier?” I asked.

“No. Just the usual bone broth. I’m not ill!” Leoth drew his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around them. “And that bloody medic won’t give me any brandy to take the edge off the pain.”

I frowned at him. “Shouldn’t your wounds be healed by now?” I held out my hand and showed him the seam where the medic had healed the deep gash through my palm. “She did this in no time.”

Leoth rolled his head sideways, staring resolutely at the wall. “I can’t stand it when she touches me. I know it’s stupid, but—I’m afraid I’ll lose my head and start yelling, and everyone will realize I’m here.”

“Oh, Leoth—”

“I don’t want your pity,” he snapped.

I laid a hand gently on his knee; he flinched but did not throw it off. “You don’t have to go through this alone. I might not know what you suffered, but I got a taste of it, and that was nearly too much for me.” I clenched my right hand reflexively. “It must be miserable lying in this cramped little office all day—is there somewhere else you can go?”

“Not without anyone stumbling across me.”

I broke off a corner of a hazelnut tart and nibbled at it, thinking

hard. Leoth watched me, and a shadow of his old smile crept across his face.

“How did you bring all of that up here without anyone asking questions?”

“I kept hiding pieces in my skirts all through the night.” I grinned at him. “Oh! I know where you can go. We can move your bed into my private office. It locks from the inside, and only I have the key. Even the cleaning staff can’t enter unless I leave it open for them. Then, while you’re lying around bored stiff, you can help me go through the documents the Truthbringers left behind.”

Leoth gave me a dubious look. “What happened to you not getting tangled up in this? If anyone finds out what I am, they’ll blame you as much as me for the deceit.”

“Haven’t you realized by now that I don’t care? I want you close to me. When the truth comes out, I’m not going to hide from it.”

He sighed and twisted his hands in his lap. “I still think you’re making a mistake. But I suppose it would be more comfortable than this cell of a room. Just—promise you won’t feed me bone broth. I want proper meals for once.”

I laughed softly. “I can do that.”

Leoth sat up slowly and extracted his legs from the bedsheets. He wore a linen shirt and soft deerskin leggings, and the back of his shirt was faintly rust-colored from dried blood that had soaked through. His feet were bare, and he drew in a hissing breath as they touched the cold stone floor. Gathering up my handkerchief of food, I held out an arm for support, but he ignored it. Perched on the edge of the bed, he set his face into a hardened mask. Then he stood.

Though the deliberate slowness of his movement bespoke great pain, Leoth did not betray it with any sound or expression. He walked stiffly to the door and let himself out to the hospital, while I stayed close to his side, ready to catch him if he stumbled.

With small, stiff steps, he crossed the hospital room and ventured onto the lower floor of the Cheltish wing. He paused here, looking

around with a wide-eyed expression reminiscent of a spooked deer.

“The whole wing was empty when I got back,” I whispered. Even so, I wished I had thought to fetch him a cloak to hide his face.

“Of course,” he said hoarsely. Then he shuffled away from the safe confines of the hospital and toward the stairs. The faint limp in his gait suggested his feet or legs had been damaged in addition to his back, but I did not want to probe too deeply into his torture. I didn’t think he could endure that conversation. Not yet.

As we began to climb the stairs, Leoth leaned heavily on the banister, and at the top, he gripped my shoulder convulsively. His limp was more pronounced now; when we reached my private office, he sank into the padded armchair and drew his knees up to his chest, shaking.

“Leoth.” I drew up a footrest and sat before him. “You’re safe now.”

“That was pathetic.” His voice cracked. “I wish you didn’t have to see me like this. Can’t you just leave me alone for a few quarters, until—”

“I’m going to look after you. I’ll bring you whatever you need and make sure you’re comfortable.” If only the stubborn man had accepted the medic’s care. He would no longer be in pain if he had; only the bruising on his face would have precluded him from rejoining society. I sighed. “I’ll fetch your mattress now. Do you want anything else?”

“A flask of brandy,” Leoth said with a tight smile.

“I’ll see what I can do.” I rose and set my bundle of food on the footstool.

Closing the door gently on my way out, I hurried down the stairs to the hospital room. The lumpy wool mattress from Leoth’s cot lifted away easily; the bedframe itself was far too large and cumbersome to carry up the stairs. He would have to sleep on the floor. Before I left, I scribbled a note to the medic.

The patient has been relocated at his request. Please do not enquire further.

Without knowing who had convalesced in the office, I did not think anyone besides the medic would be able to decipher this. I left the note on her desk and bundled the mattress into my arms, realizing as I did how foolish I must look doing a maid's job in a ballgown. On my way out, I fetched the crown I had nearly forgotten and hung it around my wrist.

I hastened back up the stairs to my royal suite, where I left the mattress and crown in a pile on the floor. Then I dashed back down in search of brandy. My father usually kept a stash of fine spirits in the sitting-room, and indeed I found a dusty bottle of brandy along with a raspberry liqueur I thought Leoth might enjoy.

Back in the royal suite, I found Leoth exactly as I had left him, staring blank-faced at the darkened window.

"Here," I said, unrolling the mattress on the floor. "I know it's not very dignified, but—"

"It's fine," Leoth said quickly.

I pushed the mattress up against the back wall, leaving a large enough space behind my desk to fit the chair, in case Leoth decided to do a bit of work there.

Easing himself gingerly from the chair, Leoth sat cross-legged on the mattress, dragging the mound of blankets around his waist.

"It's much warmer in here," he murmured. "I hadn't realized how cold it was in the medic's office until we left."

"True," I said. "And I can draw up a bath for you any time you want."

Leoth grimaced. "Are you saying I reek?"

"If you do, I hadn't noticed." I tried not to let my eyes flicker to the blood that had dried on the back of his shirt.

"Well, it'll have to wait." Leoth plucked a slice of cheese from the mess of crumbling pastries, and I realized he had eaten half of the bundle while I had been away. Good. I suspected he would recover quicker with solid food to strengthen him.

When I set the two bottles before him along with a small glass, Leoth uncorked the brandy and drank straight from the bottle.

Wiping his mouth on his sleeve, he said, "What are you still doing here? Don't you have a night-long feast to attend?"

"I missed you. It feels strange to attend a ball without you."

"Well, you'd better get used to it," he said roughly. "What if I'm a useless mess for the rest of my life? You won't want anything to do with me."

I reached for Leoth's hand; he flinched but allowed me to hold it. When I tried to meet his eyes, he took another long drink of brandy. I squeezed his hand gently. "I love you, Leoth, and I always will. I don't care how long it takes for you to re-enter society. I don't even care if it never happens. But I want you here with me, for as long as you want to stay."

"You'll get tired of it someday. Just wait."

I moved over to sit beside him and leaned my head on his shoulder. "No. I'll never leave you. I swear it, Leoth."

After a moment, he sighed and rested his head against mine. It seemed a small victory.

The False King's Court

When I finally left my private office, Leoth was nodding off, a combination of the spirits and my power lulling him to sleep. I corked the bottle of brandy and moved it aside so he would not kick it in his sleep, and locked the door on my way out. The key I hung on a chain around my neck, tucking it beneath my bodice.

Back in the ballroom, it seemed only my friends had noticed my absence. The entertainments continued, albeit in a far less organized fashion than before, and a gang of children both royal and common ran unsupervised through both halls. The night-long “stew” of mulled wine flowed freely, and voices had risen into a resounding din.

“Where have you been?” Mellicante hissed when I slid onto the bench beside her.

“I had to attend to business, and I’m afraid I dozed off for a few minutes,” I said. “What have I missed?”

“Only a group of acrobats making a tower nearly to the ceiling,” Mellicante said. “The quality of entertainment has degraded somewhat since Cal’s spectacle.”

I glanced across the table at Cal, who smiled smugly.

“I doubt your mother was pleased to see that display,” I said wryly. “That’s half of why I did it.”
I shook my head, smiling. “Of course.”

* * *

The night wound on slowly. As the gathering grew more and more chaotic, I wondered if I could have safely disappeared until sunrise without anyone noticing. Viko boasted loudly of his prowess in battle to a gaggle of young men and women, while a pair of generals challenged one another to a drunken bout of wrestling. All around the room, my soldiers placed bets on games of cards and dice, while at least twenty minstrels competed for attention. I drank little and ate less, watching the proceedings with a mixture of amusement and dismay. I feared this debacle would convince the palace residents that my followers were good-for-nothing peasants—though, from what I could see, the courtiers themselves were betting as loudly as any soldier.

It was a relief when a high, clear trumpet blast from the doorway announced sunrise.

“A happy Midwinter to you all, and may fortune favor us this new year!” I called out as the soldiers and courtiers and refugees began stumping from the ballroom.

“Happy Midwinter to you as well, Your Majesty,” Dellik replied as she passed.

I would have gladly stumbled off to bed along with the rest, but first I had to venture into the main square to offer a feast to the townspeople. Despite my father’s worries, Mother and I both agreed it was a valuable gesture of goodwill that could win more support than any speech.

My parents followed me to the palace entrance, and behind us trailed dozens of soldiers and a virtual army of kitchen staff. The smell of stew and fresh-baked bread filled the hall; after a night of hardly eating the offerings spread through the ballroom, I was suddenly

ravenous.

When we pushed open the grand entrance doors, I blinked to see a soft layer of snow settling on the cobblestones before us. Flakes continued drifting down, and dense white clouds hung low over the city. I accepted the cloak my mother draped over my shoulders with gratitude, tugging it tight about me and burying my hands in its warm folds. While we had marched through the central plains, the onset of a snowstorm would have meant days of fighting for warmth, nights spent huddled in a cold tent with only my thoughts for company. Now it reminded me how lucky we were to have the warmth of the palace to retreat to.

I ventured onto the top step, snowflakes settling on my hair, the raw air already freezing my cheeks and nose. For the past several days, Truthbringers and their city guards had controlled the main square, patrolling just beyond the palace gates in a provocative display of force. Yet now they were gone. Only ragged beggars remained in the square, huddled against the city council housing to the right of the palace and cathedral, where the high walls protected them from the worst of the wind.

“Where is everyone?” I asked the silent square.

“Perhaps no one realized we would offer the usual Midwinter feast this year,” Mother said from behind me.

“Word will spread quickly enough,” my father said gruffly.

I stepped aside for my soldiers to pass; they streamed down the palace steps and through the gates, spreading out to secure the square. Several beggars stared at them as they passed but did not move. Behind my soldiers, the kitchen staff carried a long wooden table down the steps, maneuvering with difficulty through the gates. As soon as the table came to rest near the center of the square, chefs and serving staff deposited bread rolls and vats of stew. The city folk would tear out the center of the rolls and use them as bowls for their soup. Both still gushed steam, which spiraled up toward the bleak sky. Falling snowflakes melted before they had a chance to settle atop the stew.

Though I had no great audience to address, I descended the steps as planned. Speaking directly to the beggars, I said, “Another Midwinter has arrived, and now it is time to celebrate. Come, enjoy the bounty spread before you and know that as your queen, I see it as my solemn duty to provide for my people. If you should find yourself wanting, come to me. I will gladly share the bounty of my table.”

With twitchy hesitance, the beggars approached the feast table in a tight clump. They grabbed bread rolls and filled them hastily, then trotted off toward Market Street, clutching their meals as though afraid they might vanish.

Now the main square stood empty.

It seemed we waited an eternity. Finally, as the cathedral bell rang out the hour, a pair of young men ventured from The Jeweled Moth, a fine teahouse across from the palace. They approached with a confident gait and bypassed the feast table to speak to me directly. Though they appeared unarmed, my personal guard closed ranks around me.

Both men bowed, and I inclined my head to them. They looked like brothers, both with the same long, knobbed nose.

“Your Majesty,” one said quietly. “We wish to congratulate you on your successful takeover of Baylore Palace. We are fervent supporters of yours, though we do not speak of our position openly.”

“Thank you,” I said graciously. “And do you know why none have come to the Midwinter feast?”

The brothers glanced at one another. “We heard whispers. Something is happening in the Gilded Quarter. People have been making their way to a particular manor since before sunrise, following back streets and avoiding the main square. We can see them from the windows of our home.”

“Ah.” I had no idea what this meant, but it was surely not good news. Had the Truthbringers established some sort of base in the Gilded Quarter? “Thank you for sharing this news with me, gentlemen. And now, will you partake in our Midwinter feast?”

“Certainly, Your Majesty.”

With another bow, the brothers retreated to the banquet table. Only one selected a roll and filled it with stew before both retreated to The Jeweled Moth.

Over the next hour, a few more townspeople ventured into the square, most either hooded and nervous-looking or beggars with nothing to lose. Several even sidled up to me to whisper their allegiance.

“My whole family is afraid, Your Majesty,” an elderly woman said in a quavering voice. “We are Flamespinners all, and we’ve been shunned since King Olleack came to power. We don’t dare join you openly now, since we’re in too much danger as it is, but we eagerly await the day when you free the city.”

“Thank you for your support,” I murmured. “It means a great deal to me. If you ever find your lives at risk, you may seek sanctuary in the palace.”

The old woman nodded, her face shadowed beneath her hood. “Thank you, Your Majesty.”

When the woman slipped away, an old man in a well-patched coat limped up to me. He was clean-shaven, a wild tangle of grey hair protruding from beneath his hood.

“Your Majesty,” he said in a voice more refined than his dress had led me to expect. Something about him seemed oddly familiar, but I could not recall why. “I don’t know if you can help, but I have no one else to turn to.”

“What is it?”

He opened his coat to reveal a tiny cage in which curled a snake no fatter than my thumb. “It’s a Snake-Blood. A person who can transform into a snake. I know the markings well. This little one showed up in the slums a few days back, and it’s so small—no more than a child. I don’t know if it remembers how to change back, and I haven’t the means to feed it.”

“What does it eat?” I asked.

“Goat’s milk and cow’s milk and little pieces of raw meat, Your Majesty.”

When he held out the cage, I accepted it without thinking. “I will see what I can do.” Surely we had a Snake-Blood among our ranks who might be able to help.

Turning to pass the cage to a guard, I found my father staring at the beggar.

“Do I know you?” he asked with quiet urgency.

The beggar pulled his coat tight once again, and in doing so, caused his hood to fall lower over his eyes. “No, Your Majesty. I cannot see where I would ever have crossed paths with a king.”

“Very well,” my father said, though he sounded troubled.

Without another word, the beggar turned and limped away. He filled a roll with soup on his way past the table and ate as he walked.

Still watching the beggar’s retreating back, I took a step closer to my father and whispered, “Who did he remind you of?”

“Someone I knew from childhood. A close friend of my father’s—his personal attendant. He was like an uncle to me. But I have not seen the man since I was ten. He vanished, and my father confided that he may have fled when word of his forbidden blood got out.”

“Oh,” I said softly. This seemed highly significant in some way, but the connection eluded me.

Before I had the chance to ponder this further, I caught a babble of voices approaching from the direction of the Gilded Quarter. A crowd soon flooded the end of the street, and after checking the newcomers for weapons, my guards allowed them to pass. Many drank heartily from tankards, while others cradled armfuls of pastries and scones and apples. They made directly for my feast table, where the leader of the crowd turned to me and shouted drunkenly, “All hail the false queen! Would ya look at her generosity!”

The crowd broke into hearty laughter.

Despite the snow, sweat prickled the back of my neck. What was happening?

One of the drunken townspeople filled a roll with stew and staggered toward me. My guards closed in around me, drawing their

swords.

“Not so powerful after all, are you?” he taunted. Then he threw the entire stew-filled roll at my guard.

The stew splattered all over the guard’s face, beans and chunks of tomato dripping down his uniform, but he did not flinch.

“What is the meaning of this?” I demanded. “You could be imprisoned for your insolence.”

The man laughed again. “You call this a feast? It’s peasant grub! You should see the banquet King Olleack’s put on for the town. Quail eggs and roast hind and wild boar and turkey. Now *that’s* a true feast fit for Midwinter.”

“King Olleack?” I said tightly. “Does he presume to call himself king even now?”

“Squatting in a palace doesn’t make you a queen, foolish child. King Olleack still rules Baylore, with Holden King Dennoric and Holden King Morrissa by his side.”

King Olleack's Banquet

“I thought he had gone into hiding!” I was nearly running down the palace hall, my parents hastening along in my wake. We had abandoned the feast to the care of my guards. “I thought he feared us! How could he set up a false court right under our noses?”

“He has the support of most of your citizens,” Mother said breathlessly. “If people have the choice to obey his law or yours, they will choose his. And not only because they agree with him—because he has the power to enforce his law. You do not.”

“I know that,” I snapped. “But I thought—”

I bit off the rest of my sentence, because I realized how foolish it sounded. What—had I thought a monarch's power came from the crown and the throne? No, I had known all along it would take more than simply seizing Baylore Palace to win the city to my side. Even so, I could not believe Olleack's audacity. And Morrissette by his side! I had thought him an ally, though perhaps I should have known better. I had once manipulated him to serve my ends, and he knew it.

I was nearly running by the time I reached the Cheltish wing, all tiredness gone. I wanted to speak to Leoth, to see if he understood his

father's motives better than I, but I could think of no excuse for disappearing abruptly into my suite.

To my disappointment, the common area was empty, my friends and advisors all abed. I stopped, breathing hard, and searched the room wildly.

When my parents hurried down the elevated corridor a moment later, I rounded on them.

"What can we do? If Olleack is still giving orders, we can't simply turn the city against the Truthbringers. That won't accomplish anything. Not if the Truthbringers are still working from behind the scenes. When the Whitish army arrives, Olleack will open the gates and welcome them into Baylore."

"We need to determine their plans and motives," my father said, his voice deep and steady. "But for the time being, we all need to rest. Nothing will change in the next few hours, and we will be able to approach this with clearer heads once we have slept for a spell."

Now that I looked at him closely, I could see his eyes were bloodshot with exhaustion.

"Very well," I said. "We will reconvene this afternoon."

I marched off to the royal suite and locked the doors behind me. But I had no intention of sleeping.

Knocking softly at the door to my office, I unhooked the chain with the key from around my neck. When no sound came from within, I unlocked the door and pushed it open.

Leoth blinked up at me from his mattress, the bruising on his face worse than ever in the weak daylight streaming from the window.

"What's wrong?" Leoth mumbled, sitting up with a groan.

"What do you mean?"

"You look furious. Have I done something?"

I tried to smooth my features, but it was no use. "It's your bastard of a father," I growled. "He's set up a false court somewhere in the Gilded Quarter, with Dennonric and Morrissie by his side."

Leoth squinted at me. "You're still wearing your gown from last

night.”

I looked down at it. I was indeed, and my crown as well. I removed the crown and set it on my desk, noticing only then how much my neck ached. “I’ve just returned from the feast in the main square. Hardly anyone attended—your father is hosting a far more elaborate feast somewhere else, and those who did come mocked me for my miserly offerings.”

“Miserable bastard,” Leoth muttered. “What do you want me to do about it?”

“You know your father better than I do. What is he playing at? How much do you think he knows of the Truthbringers’ plans?”

“I have no idea. But you’ve been up since dawn yesterday. Why don’t you get some sleep and let me think about this in the meantime?”

“I’m too worried to sleep!”

“I can tell.” With a sigh, Leoth patted the mattress beside him. I lifted my skirts and sat beside him, slumping against the wall. “Did you not expect something like this?”

“I thought we would be fighting the Truthbringers. And if we managed to spread word of their treachery and the approaching Whitish army, I hoped people might come to our side without us resorting to violence. But if the Truthbringers are still working through Olleack, even now...” I began plucking pins from my hair in agitation. “It’s going to look like nothing more than a grab for power on our part.”

“It’s going to be harder than we expected,” Leoth said. “But when has this ever been easy? At least we have the truth on our side. That has to count for something.”

Though his hand shook, Leoth reached up and stroked a tendril of hair off my cheek. I lowered my hands and closed my eyes as he pulled the last of the pins from my hair and ran his fingers through the tangled waves. The urge to take up a sword and storm King Olleack’s false court faded, replaced by exhaustion. And even a dash of contentment. I had never imagined I would have Leoth here, in my own chambers,

without stirring up a scandal. For once, I was not alone.

* * *

I hardly remember making my way to bed, but the light was fading by the time I woke. I bolted upright with the panicked sensation I had missed some important engagement. Dressing in a simple gown, I ventured first to my office to see how Leoth fared.

He sat at my desk, poring over the newspapers I had salvaged; when I greeted him, he flinched.

“What are you reading those for?” I asked with forced lightness. I feared he might change his mind about me if he read too many articles describing how evil I was.

“I had a good idea of what the Truthbringers were planning from my time on the throne,” Leoth said, pushing the newspaper to the side. “I was trying to figure out how far they had gotten.”

Stepping closer, I saw the headline of the article he had been reading.

*King Olleack Redirects Funding from Great Southern Road to Strengthen
Baylore’s Defenses*

“This was from Hearth-span,” Leoth said. “While we were marching through Baylore Valley. No one would have argued that a distant promise of trade was worth more than the lives of Baylore’s citizens.”

“Hmm.” I was just grateful he was not reading about me. “But the innkeeper down south said the road was already in use. So they haven’t ruined the trade route.”

“True. But maybe people don’t know that. Maybe the Truthbringers are trying to make it seem like you’re responsible for cutting off all trade, or maybe they don’t want people to realize they have access to another port city. I bet they want the situation to look dire when the

Whitish army arrives to ‘save’ Baylore.”

“I bet you’re right.” I stared bleakly at the article for another minute, phrases jumping out at me here and there.

...trade has suffered since the day Queen Kalleah first took the throne.

The Great Southern Road has been a folly from the start, a reckless financial gamble undertaken...

“Would you bring me something to eat when you have a chance?” Leoth asked, dragging my attention from the newspaper. “I’ve finished everything you brought earlier.”

I glanced at the handkerchief I had left behind and found it empty. He had even scooped up most of the crumbs that had flaked from pastries. “Of course. Maybe I can take up the habit of eating in my rooms, so my meals are sent up here.”

“Don’t go to too much trouble on my account.”

“Don’t worry about it,” I said, resting a hand gently on his shoulder. “I haven’t had much of an appetite these past few days, so it might be nice eating where I don’t have an audience.”

Looking up, past my cluttered desk, I saw snowflakes still drifting from the darkening sky. I stepped closer to the window and gazed down at the city, where a handspan of snow coated every rooftop and alleyway. I could not see the main square from here, but if the empty streets were any indication, those who had come to partake of our feast had long since retreated to their homes.

“Could you bring me a few books as well?” Leoth asked.

I turned. “What sort?”

He held out a scrap of paper. “These ones, specifically. They’re on Whitish military strategy. I studied them when I was growing up, but I wanted to refresh my memory and see if I had overlooked anything.”

“And you still remember all the titles?” I was impressed.

“I’m sure I got some of them wrong.” Leoth shrugged, and a spasm

of pain flickered across his face. I realized how hard he was trying to pretend everything was normal. I wanted to pull him into my arms and tell him he didn't need to be strong all the time—I would think no less of him for it. But I feared I would hurt him.

"I'll be back soon," I said. Bending over, I kissed him on the forehead. Then I left, the list of books clutched in one hand. Pausing just outside my suite, I tucked it beneath the leather straps of the sheath I still wore concealed on my wrist.

I found Mellicante and Baridya in their bedchamber, sitting on the floor beside a tiny gilded cage. Inside, the Snake-Blood sat curled in a tight coil.

"Viko brought this to us with a very interesting story," Baridya said with a sly smile. "Mellicante's taken quite a liking to it. I never thought she was fond of children, but—"

"It's a snake," Mellicante said. "That's very different from a human child. I never said we'd let it hang around after it transforms. Surely it has parents somewhere who want it back."

"Even so..."

Mellicante shook her head. Looking up at me, she said, "What are you doing here, then? You look worried."

"Haven't you heard? King Olleack has set up a rival court somewhere in the Gilded Quarter, with Morrissa and Dennoric by his side."

"Plagues," Mellicante said softly. "Viko neglected to mention that."

"I need to come up with a way to win people to my side," I said. "I thought I would just have to spread the truth about the Whitish attempt to conquer Itrea. But now this whole conflict looks like nothing but a desperate power grab on my part. Even if people do believe the Whitish army is on its way, why would they think I was any better prepared to face it than Olleack?"

"You have one thing going for you," Mellicante said.

"What?"

"The palace is much better fortified than any residence in the Gilded

Quarter. And you can fit your entire army behind its gates. I think we're past the time when grand gestures will win you approval, Kalleah. I think this is going to come down to a fight."

"Oh, that would be awful," Baridya said. "Fighting against our own people...they would never forgive you if you won."

The face of the Truthbringer who had questioned me while his cronies slit my hand open sprang to mind. "I would gladly cut the heart from every Truthbringer myself. But Olleack has the entire population of Baylore to recruit for his army, while we're stuck with what we have, plus a few half-starved refugees. If it comes down to that, I can't see us winning."

"And in the meantime, we need to think about protecting the magic races," Mellicante said, looking at the tiny snake in its cage. "Their lives are in danger as long as the Truthbringers control the city guard."

"I know," I said shortly. How were we meant to protect the entire city's population of Makhori if our control of the city ended at the palace gates? "Help me think of ideas, will you? I need to speak to my parents. They might know more about what's happening."

"You should speak to the refugees," Baridya said. "They can tell you what it was like in Baylore these past few spans."

"Good idea."

My parents were halfway through dinner when I joined them in the dining room. Around the table sat the oddest collection of people I had ever seen in the Cheltish wing—Dakolth, Kamarri, Dellik, Cal, and several other generals whose names I did not know, joined by a smattering of Reycoran courtiers who had remained behind.

When I claimed the seat at the head of the table, my parents to my right and Dellik to my left, silence fell. Every one of the dinner guests stopped eating, watching me with varying degrees of uncertainty and reverence.

"Carry on," I said, uncomfortable at the attention.

After a pause, the soft clack of silverware against plates resumed, though no one spoke. I selected a millet cake, just for something to

occupy my hands, and sliced a corner off delicately with my knife. During our long march, I would have eaten food like this with my hands, often while walking about camp overseeing preparations. And a simple millet cake would have been a delicacy compared to the hardened biscuits, porridge, and cured meat we subsisted on.

Eventually Kamarri made a quiet comment to Dellik, and the rest of the table took this as a cue to return to their conversations.

“Have you had any thoughts on how we ought to handle the situation with Olleack?” I asked my parents in an undertone. “We need to turn people against him or take him down, but I can’t see how.”

“Nor can I,” my father said. “And we learned of a new development this afternoon.”

“What?” I asked in alarm.

“King Olleack announced he intends to host a banquet every day at his residence—as a gesture of goodwill to his citizens.”

“Because they will face hard times after your destruction of crops,” my mother added shrewdly. “That was part of the announcement.”

I bit back a curse. Setting my knife and fork aside with shaking hands, I stood. “I need to speak to someone.”

On my way out, every eye following me, I asked the serving girl to send dinner up to my rooms. Then I stalked up the stairs to find Leoth. I could see exactly what Olleack was doing. How could anyone turn against him when he was so generous? And who would even think of supporting me when it was my actions that had caused hardship in the first place? Never mind that the refugees I had sent to Baylore had brought more than enough supplies to see the city through the winter. Never mind that it was the Makhori who visibly suffered as their businesses closed down and their neighbors turned on them—the same Makhori Olleack and his Truthbringers despised.

Leoth was stretched out on the bed when I threw open the office door. He lay on his stomach, head pillowed on his arms, eyes slitted.

“What?” he groaned when he saw me. “I thought you’d be away at dinner longer.”

“Do you want me to leave you alone? Are you regretting coming up here?”

“No, of course not.” Leoth drew his knees under his chest and sat up, rubbing his eyes. “What is it?”

“It’s your father. He’s not just giving the city a more elaborate Midwinter feast than they’ve ever had—he’s decided to host a daily banquet for everyone who wants to attend. He’ll bankrupt the city to keep the population on his side. No one will turn away from a king so generous.”

“Cloudy gods.” Leoth wrapped the blanket around his shoulders, eyes distant. “It’s worse than that. I don’t know if my father is aware, but it’s obvious the Truthbringers are trying to drain the city’s stores before the Whitish army arrives. We won’t last a quarter under siege with no supplies.”

Winter Rations

I sank into the chair by my desk, staring blankly at the mess of papers spread before me. “We can’t let them do that. But how will we stop them? We’re not prepared to fight off the entire city guard.”

“The only way to stop him is to seize the food stores yourself,” Leoth said. “And it won’t be easy. The warehouses are likely under heavy guard, and you’ll face resistance from civilians as well as the city guard if anyone catches you. No one will trust a queen who marches into the city, commandeers the palace, and uses her newfound authority to steal the city’s winter rations.”

“And here I was trying to think of ways to win their favor,” I said hollowly. “I seem to be doing the opposite.”

Leoth got stiffly to his feet and brought the footstool over to sit beside me. “You’re only doing what my father must have already done in secret.”

“Who usually manages the food stores, then?”

“It’s an independent company regulated by the city council. They sell supplies directly to vendors, to restaurants, and to Baylore

University and Baylore Palace. The food is stored in the Warehouse District, protected by the city guard.”

I glanced sideways at Leoth, whose dark eyes shone from amidst the puffy bruising. Despite the way he had first acted as though he cared nothing for the politics or logistics of ruling a city, he clearly knew a great deal. Free from the Truthbringers’ influence, he would have made a great king.

“And do you know exactly where the winter stores are housed?”

“I know where they used to be. But it wouldn’t surprise me if my father had moved them.”

“Very well. I’ll send scouts out to survey the Warehouse District, and in the meantime, we can plan our raid.” I sighed and rested my forehead in my hands. “They’re going to hate me more than ever for this. But I can’t let them starve through their own ignorance.”

* * *

That very night, I sent a group of soldiers out to find the city’s dry stores. All were dressed in civilian garb, tidy enough to pass for Baylore residents. I gave them strict orders to split up and spend the night at different inns, and then make their way through the Warehouse District at various times the next day. There were any number of reasons a solitary man or woman might have business in the Warehouse District; I hoped they would not be questioned.

Outside, the snow had finally stopped falling, though the cold had driven most people inside. When I ventured onto my balcony, shuffling my slippers into the one tiny corner that remained clear of snowdrifts, I could see no movement on the streets below. A few smoothed-over footprints dimpled the snow—the cobblestones had yet to be shoveled clear.

In the morning, I summoned my parents to the queen’s study as soon as the sun rose. Breakfast I ordered sent up to my suite once again—Leoth had devoured last night’s dinner—and I hardly had time

to eat in any case.

“What is it?” my father asked as he and my mother settled in chairs across from me.

“That daily banquet Olleack is hosting—it’s a ploy to drain the city’s food stores before the Whitish army arrives. We need to seize the stores before it’s too late.”

My parents shared a look, Mother surprised, Father thin-lipped.

“I see,” my father said. “And do you have an idea of how you will accomplish that?”

“I intend to send out my full army. But...I hoped you might help with the specifics.”

“Hmm.” My father tapped his fingers on my desk. “As long as King Olleack suspects nothing, we have a significant advantage here. Reports indicate King Olleack’s new royal residence is along the easternmost wall of the Gilded Quarter, about as far as you could get from the Warehouse District. If most of the city guard is stationed nearby, they won’t be able to respond in time to stop us. As long as we can reach the Warehouse District in secret, that is.”

I nodded, thinking hard. “If we move at night and take back streets, I can’t see how the city guard would catch us. Not until we reached the warehouse, in any case.”

“I dislike this,” Mother said. “Do you not worry it could be a trap? Committing so much of your army to a maneuver like this could give King Olleack the perfect opportunity to seize the palace.”

She was right. “Then we leave behind a force strong enough to defend the palace. It would take a while for Olleack’s forces to break through the gates. By then, the rest of our army would have returned to join in the fight.” I glanced at my father, who nodded. “Besides, I don’t intend to take any of my Makhori soldiers for the raid. Our Flamespinners can likely hold the gates without any help.”

“Very well,” my father said. “I will begin making arrangements. When are you hoping to make your move?”

“On Varseday. I sent scouts out to see if the supplies had been

moved to a different warehouse, and I hope they'll return tomorrow."

In the meantime, I had more than enough work to keep me occupied within the palace.

Once I dismissed my parents, I dug through the drawers of the royal study and gathered an armful of papers bearing Olleack's name and seal. It seemed the most recent papers were gone, likely carried off when he fled to the Gilded Quarter, but he had left behind hundreds of decrees and trade agreements and scribbled notes.

I made a detour to the library on my way back to my suite, where I fetched a handful of the books Leoth had requested. Then I delivered these to him along with the still-steaming breakfast that awaited me in my private sitting-room.

"Is no one asking why you suddenly want two meals?" Leoth asked when I joined him in my office.

"I haven't eaten anything yet," I said. "I hoped you might share. No one will question my preference for taking my meals in private—I don't have time for formal gatherings just now."

Leoth pushed aside the papers cluttering my desk to make room for the tray of food. "Well, there's plenty of food for us both. They certainly don't want you to starve."

"Maybe they saw how much you ate last night and decided I'm a complete glutton."

Leoth chuckled. "It was the first proper meal I've eaten since we got here. Can you blame me?"

He had already started on one of the miniature quiche pies, so I snatched the second and finished it in two bites.

"I need to speak to Cal. Try to leave me something."

"I'll do my best."

Cal was not in his room, and I could not see him from a brief glance into the dining room. I went in search of Mellicante and Baridya instead, and was surprised to see Cal kneeling on the rug before their fire. All three were clustered around the Snake-Blood's cage, exchanging worried whispers.

“What’s happening here?” I asked.

Cal whirled.

“The poor wee thing must have gotten too cold overnight,” Baridya said. “It seems dazed.”

As I approached, waves of heat rolled off the fire, sending sweat itching down my neck.

“Do you know if they’re poisonous?” Mellicante asked.

“I don’t think so,” I said. “But I wouldn’t—”

I was too late. She had already unlatched the cage and reached a hand inside. “Shh, little one,” Mellicante crooned. The snake’s coils loosened, and its tiny head ventured into her hand. Its scales were a bright aspen-leaf green, with a diamond pattern of yellow and black running up its spine.

“How much do you know about Snake-Bloods?” I asked. “Can they understand us? Do they still think like humans while they’re in their snake form?”

“From what I understand, they keep their minds while they’re snakes, but the longer they remain transformed, the more their human thoughts and memories fade away and the more they follow animal instincts. After enough time, I think they lose the ability to transform back.”

“I wonder how long this one has been a snake.”

Mellicante shook her head. “It might already be too late. If it’s a very young child, like that man thought, it might not have enough self-control to transform back. It might have already forgotten it was ever human.”

“Poor thing.”

Perching on the end of Mellicante and Baridya’s bed, I watched the snake. It had slithered up her forearm, still hesitant but evidently enjoying the warmth of her skin. I thought of the man who had delivered the snake—he had looked oddly familiar to both me and my father. How could that be possible? I had never known my grandfather’s personal attendant. My grandparents had both died years

before I came to Baylore. Something very odd was going on.

“I wonder...” Mellicante’s words pulled me away from these thoughts. As she stroked the snake’s head, its little tongue flickered out to taste the skin of her elbow.

“Yes?” Baridya prompted.

“Maybe we could find another Snake-Blood who could help this one. Snake-Bloods have an easy time hiding among normal people, since their markings only show when they’ve transformed recently. I bet there are plenty living in Baylore.”

“But how are we supposed to find them if no one knows what they are?”

Mellicante shrugged. “We need to think of some way to spread a message around Baylore in secret. It would be useful for the war effort overall—if we could contact the city’s Makhori population, I suspect a significant proportion of them would join your cause.”

When Mellicante tried to unwind the snake from her arm and set it on a pillow beside the fire, it hissed and tightened its coils. Laughing, she crawled on her knees toward the fire, which had grown hotter than ever.

“Speaking of which,” I said. “Cal—do you know where that Potioneer is staying? The one who helped you when the Truthbringers drugged you?”

He turned and looked at me in surprise. “Why?”

“I want to find out what happened while we were away. The palace residents were insulated from the worst of it, so I need to speak to someone who was living in the city.”

Cal nodded. “I think she’d be happy to talk to you. She’s probably in the Darden wing—I’m pretty sure Kamarri was trying to gather the magic races there.”

I got to my feet, smoothing my skirts.

“Do you have to go now?” Baridya asked. “It’s so lovely and warm in here.”

“I’m about to use my army to seize the city’s winter rations. I’d like

to know a bit more about what we might find before I do.”

Baridya’s eyes widened. “Why would you do that? I thought you were trying to win support.”

“Because if I don’t, Olleack will ensure we starve as soon as the Whitish army arrives.”

“Oh.”

Mellicante gave me a steely-eyed look. “Are we free to join the fight?”

“Of course. But not you, Cal. We need you and our other Flamespinners guarding the palace gates.” I secretly wished my friends would all stay safely locked away in the palace, but it was their decision to make.

As I turned to leave, Cal scrambled to his feet. “Can I come with you? I never got to thank that woman properly.”

“Please.” I paused and turned. “And Mellicante—will you join me in my study later? I found a mountain of documents Olleack left behind, and I need someone to help sort through them.”

* * *

When Cal and I approached the Darden wing, a cacophony of voices echoed down the stairs. We shared a cautious glance before ascending.

Makhori of all ages packed the high-ceilinged common area. Many were eating a simple breakfast of millet porridge and poached eggs, sitting on rugs or perched on the arms of chairs. No one seemed to notice my arrival. After scanning the room for a while, trying to make sense of the chaos, I spotted Kamarri crouched beside a small table. She was discussing something with a Weaver and two other magicians, a scrap of parchment spread before her.

I threaded my way through the room to her side; belatedly she looked up and blinked in surprise when she recognized me. She struggled to her feet and made an attempt at a formal curtsy, which was more respect than she usually showed me.

“What brings you here, Your Majesty?”

“I hope to speak with a Potioneer who accompanied Cal into the palace. She was a slight woman with hair to her shoulders, very nervous when we met her—do you know where she might be?”

“Ah, yes. I think I know who you want. We don’t have many Potioneers here yet, aside from the ones who accompanied us from Larkhaven. This way, Your Majesty.”

She inclined her head to the three Makhori she had been speaking with before cutting across the common area.

“I see you have our magic races organized and looked after,” I said as we followed a corridor I had never been down. Cal trotted along at my heels. “When you have a chance, I would appreciate a full report. How many can we count on to fight? What would persuade the rest of the city’s Makhori population to join us? Do you have adequate space to house them all here?”

“Of course,” Kamarri said. “Right now I’m trying to prove our good intentions to those who have joined us. Many have family who are still in the city, and I hope they might seek refuge here once they trust us. And, as always, we are hard at work devising ways to use magic in battle. If only we could ask for advice from the professors at Baylore University—they understand magic far better than most.”

“Why can’t we?”

“From what I’ve heard, Baylore University closed down several spans back, and the professors have since disappeared. Here we are.”

Kamarri pushed open the door to an enormous library with carved stone walls and a vaulted ceiling. At the center stood two long tables where thirty people sat poring over books.

“Most of these are Potioneers,” Kamarri said softly. “They are researching historic ways their craft might have once aided in battle. A few are already trying to devise a bottled explosive that reacts when the glass shatters.”

I recognized the woman who had helped us at once—her black hair was tucked behind her ear, her lips pursed in concentration. She noticed

me with a start and scrambled to her feet, curtsying awkwardly in her short skirt and leggings.

“Your Majesty,” she whispered. “Can I help you?” Her eyes flickered to Cal.

“I hoped to speak with you. Somewhere private.”

Kamarri led us around several shelves to the far end of the library, where a small table sat in an alcove surrounded by windows. The sun struggled to come out from behind a thin layer of clouds, casting pale light across the table. Kamarri, Cal, and I took seats, and the Potioneer joined us after a moment, her forehead lined with worry.

“What is your name?” I asked gently. “I realize we never introduced ourselves properly when we asked for your help.”

“Zarra, Your Majesty. And are you truly Prince Calden?”

Cal nodded solemnly.

“Well met, Zarra. And thank you again for helping Cal. I don’t want this to feel like an interrogation—I simply hoped to learn more about what the situation in Baylore has been like these past few spans. The palace residents can tell me precious little, whereas you would have been in the midst of it all, with your shop in the heart of the Market District. As a Potioneer, I imagine you would have suffered from the tightening rules against magic races.”

Zarra nodded tightly. “Yes, Your Majesty. It’s been very difficult for us since the middle of summer. Even ordinary merchants and craftspeople are suffering with trade so restricted. The Sullimsday market has more or less shut down after a few fights broke out in Harvest-span, and people are hoarding their dravs. No one wants to be seen going to a Makhori’s shop. That might be the next thing the Truthbringers ban. They hate Potioneers, Your Majesty, just as much as they do Flamespinners.”

“How did you get by?”

“I lived alone, so I didn’t have a family to look after, and I’d put aside money just in case. Also, a few people still visited me at night for potions they’d come to rely on. Mostly medical sorts. In fact, I was

likely doing better than the Weavers, and the Truthbringers don't say a word against them. But I was running out of food. I didn't feel safe going to the shops—when people recognized me, they threw things at me or took my coins without giving me anything. I used to have a neighbor who would shop for me, but I haven't heard from him in over a span now." She glanced out the window at the city below.

"What do you mean, the Truthbringers don't say a word against the Weavers? Have they not gotten around to it yet, or is there some other reason the Weavers are spared?"

"Oh, it's likely a political decision," Zarra said darkly. "Weavers are one of the most influential magic races in Baylore, and there are thousands of them in the Weavers' Guild. If the Truthbringers turned against them, they might have an uprising on their hands."

"Wouldn't that be helpful," Kamarri muttered.

"If it came to a fight, do you think they would side with us or Olleack?" I asked.

"I doubt they would side with anyone just now," Zarra said. "It's too dangerous. They have a great deal to lose if the Truthbringers turn on them."

"And the rest of the magic races? What do you think it would take to win them to our cause?"

"It's not a matter of winning them, Your Majesty. I'm sure they already support you. It's whether they can risk openly joining you. I have no family in the city to worry about, so it was an easy decision for me. But the others...the Truthbringers know where all of us live. If anyone defies them, their family will suffer."

"How do they know where you live?" I asked swiftly. A large proportion of Makhori did not hold professions relating to their power, so there was no way the Truthbringers could be certain who had magic and who did not.

"They forced us to register, Your Majesty. Two spans ago."

Ice crept down my spine. This was my worst fear come to life—back in the Kinship Thrones, the registration of Makhori had preceded

wholesale slaughter. History was repeating itself, and this time we had nowhere to flee.

“How did they force you to register?” Kamarri asked quietly. Her eyes lifted to meet mine, and I saw my horror mirrored there.

“When the tax collectors came around in Harvest-span, they offered to waive the entire tax if I just added my name, my power, and the details of any Makhori family members to their records. It was a larger tax than usual, too. They claimed the register was for a city improvement project—they wanted to know who might be able to help with the work. I saw right through it, of course.”

“Did you register?” I asked.

Zarra flushed. “I did. I could hardly afford the tax as it was—I mean, it was a question of feeding myself for another span or risking some unknown danger far in the future.”

“I suspect most other people came to the same conclusion,” Kamarri said. “That was a very clever move on their part.”

“Do you think people lied and pretended to be Makhori for the sake of avoiding the tax?” Cal asked.

I looked at him in surprise. He had sat in silence until now; I had nearly forgotten he was there.

“They threatened to charge us double the tax if they found out we had lied,” Zarra said.

Very clever indeed. Agitation prickled at me—I felt that every moment we spent sitting here brought the Truthbringers closer to making a direct move against the Makhori. My people were terribly vulnerable, with the Truthbringers controlling the city guard and all movement into and out of the city tracked.

I rose, unable to sit still any longer. “Thank you for speaking with us. You have given us much to consider.”

Zarra jumped to her feet and curtsayed again, eyes downturned. “You honor me, Your Majesty.”

“And thank you for looking after me,” Cal said. He gave Zarra a shallow bow, which heightened the color in her cheeks.

We did not speak again until we left the Darden wing behind. Viko and the rest of my guard fell into step behind us as we strode through the cavernous Historic wing, where soldiers and refugees and servants hurried aside to let us pass.

“I hadn’t realized it had come to this,” I said softly to Kamarri. “What do you think they’re planning? Will they round up the magic races now, or wait for the Whitish army to do their dirty work?”

“I don’t know,” Kamarri said sadly. “And it doesn’t really matter, does it? The point is that they have the power to do whatever they want at the moment. You need to seize control of Baylore before they abuse that power.”

“How?”

“I’m not sure, but you need to act fast. Destabilize them before they corner you.”

Her advice was nothing but empty words. We were already cornered. And how were we meant to destabilize a force larger and more established than ours? Magic could give us an edge, but I hated risking our Makhori in combat.

After a pause, I said, “We’re doing what we can.” Which was virtually nothing. More and more, I could see that diplomacy would get us nowhere. We had to seize the city’s food stores, convince as many Makhori as possible to seek refuge in the palace, and make a decisive move against Olleack.

As we turned the corner and climbed the stairs to the Cheltish wing, Kamarri set her mouth in a grim line. For once, she felt like a true ally.

* * *

The next morning, the first of my scouts returned. She reported directly to the common area, her cheeks still red from the cold. When she described the warehouse she had found, my father said, “King Olleack hasn’t moved the food stores, then. He must not think us capable of challenging his hold on the city.”

“Were guards stationed around the warehouse?” I asked the scout.

“Yes, but only a handful. Enough to fight off civilians who decided to cause trouble, but nowhere near enough to challenge our army.”

“So we should be able to seize the stores without a problem. It’s getting them safely back to the palace that might turn into a mess.”

“Exactly,” my father said.

The same agitation that had itched at me since I learned of the Makhori register spurred me on. “Then we make our move tonight. Ready our troops, Father. I want a small force left behind to guard the palace and every other armed soldier marching out with us.”

Several others in the common area had been listening in, and one courtier gasped.

Fearless as always, Kamarri sidled up and said, “You realize how dangerous this is, don’t you? It seems wrong to ask thousands of men and women to risk their lives while you hide out in the palace.”

“Lady Kamarri,” my father said sternly. “You speak out of turn. It is a queen’s job to lead, not to fight.”

“Surely there is some other way to secure the food stores—some way that does not throw so many lives away needlessly.”

“There is no other way,” I said. And then, because impatience and fear drove me to do something, anything, I added, “And you needn’t think I send my soldiers into danger I would be unwilling to face. I will be leading the army.”

The Raid

Despite my parents' protestations, I was determined to follow through with my plan. After all, my father and Mellicante and Baridya would be out fighting in the streets, while Cal led the Flamespinner in holding the palace gates. Why should I not fight by their side?

I did not tell Leoth what I intended to do. If I did not come back, he would take the throne. I left a note with hastily scribbled instructions beneath my pillow, where someone might stumble across it later.

When sundown came, I dressed in loose leggings and a shirt covered by several layers of woolen tunics. Over the top of it all, I donned my Weaver-reinforced coat and trousers that served as lightweight armor. Even after washing, they smelled mildewed and dusty from our long spans on the road. Finally, I strapped my sword over the coat, wrestling with the buckle to fasten it over the bulk of so many layers.

I did not say goodbye to Leoth. If he had seen me, he would have known at once what I intended.

Pausing in my private sitting-room, I stared at the door to my office for a long moment. My heart ached for Leoth—though his bruises were

fading, he still flinched at my touch. It would take more than just his wounds healing to restore his spirit.

Then I turned and strode from my room.

My friends waited in a quiet, restless huddle in the common area. All wore Weaver-reinforced coats like mine, and Baridya's hair was braided into a crown to keep it off her face.

My father pushed his way through the crowd and pressed a helmet into my hands.

"You must wear this," he said gruffly. "We can't risk losing you to a stray arrow."

I nodded and tucked the helmet under my arm. I could not deny it would ease my nerves. "Is everyone here?"

Mellicante scanned the heads of those gathered. "I think so."

One hand on the hilt of my sword, I led our silent procession across the raised walkway, down the stairs, and through the Historic wing to join the main body of my army. With each step, my misgivings grew. I had spoken so confidently of this raid, yet now I could see nothing but potential downfalls.

What if this was a trap? Olleack could have sent hundreds of soldiers to surround the Warehouse District. Or what if we didn't make it back to the palace in time? If Olleack's soldiers chose to disregard my army and make a direct attempt on the palace, they would easily overwhelm Cal's tiny Flamespinner force. I was leaving several dozen others behind with them, but they could never withstand the entire city guard.

As we neared the ballroom and dining hall, a low rumble of voices stoked my fears. My stomach twisted, but I held my chin high. Drawing near, I saw my soldiers arrayed in neat ranks, some in Weaver-reinforced coats like mine, a few wearing helmets. Though they still lacked a uniform, my army's training was beginning to show in their disciplined stance.

The undercurrent of voices died abruptly when I stopped at the top of the stairs.

"You know why I have called on you tonight," I began. Though I

did not speak loudly, my voice resonated through the high-ceilinged ballroom. “I won’t deny our work is dangerous. But if we succeed, we will have taken a great step toward securing Baylore’s future. We must seize the city’s food stores before the false king demolishes them. In the short term, the residents of Baylore will hate us for this. We may even face resistance from civilians. If this happens, be gentle with them. I don’t want any innocent blood spilled.”

No one moved. The silence was disconcerting from such a crowd.

I drew in a breath. “Our mission today is dangerous, but there are hundreds of thousands of lives at stake if we fail. I know you are brave enough and strong enough to rise to the challenge. I know I can trust you with the future of Itrea.”

A roar rose from my waiting army, and I raised my sword in a gesture of triumph.

Then I turned and started back down the hall. Behind me, thousands of boots thudded across the floor in unison as my army marched up the steps in a narrow column.

Down the hall, we led the army through a storage room with an entrance to the tunnels beneath the palace. These showed more signs of life than ever before—bright Weavers’ lamps illuminated the halls, and several rooms overflowed with refugees who had gathered to watch our procession, bleary-eyed from the late hour.

We followed the corridor as it twisted and turned, finally ending at the steps leading to the servants’ entrance of the palace. I did not recognize the gate guard—he was a younger man than the one he had replaced, and bulky with muscle—but my father addressed him by name.

“All clear, Your Majesties,” he said gruffly. “I’ve been watching for days now, and I’ve seen no sign of King Olleack’s guards on this side of the palace.”

“Very good,” my father said. “I suspect he is more concerned with his own safety at the moment.”

The gate guard unlocked the servants’ gate and stood back while my

army filed through. I had led the way through the tunnels, but as we emerged onto the street outside the palace, my friends closed in around me. I slid the helmet onto my head and immediately felt claustrophobic—with only the dim light of streetlamps to see by, the helmet’s narrowed slit of vision nearly blinded me.

We marched quietly around the back of the palace and into the Garden District, taking a meandering back route toward the Warehouse District. Olleack’s guards were likely patrolling the main square and Market Street, as well as the most trafficked parts of the Market District, so we cut far west before threading our way through the furthest reaches of the Market District. With each corner we turned, adrenaline tightened my nerves. I kept my hand fisted around the hilt of my sword, ready to react at the slightest disturbance. Hardly any streetlamps illuminated these less-trafficked reaches of Baylore, so I had to trust my footing on the uneven cobblestones without seeing the street.

Frost settled over the city as we marched; in a few places, the ground was slick underfoot. My toes grew numb from the cold, but our brisk pace kept the rest of me warm. The streets narrowed as we ventured deeper into the Market District—in places, the second stories leaned toward one another until the two balconies nearly collided. My sense of claustrophobia only worsened the further we marched through this twisting warren of streets. If someone wanted to ambush us, we would have little space to put up a fight.

At last the streets widened, and the ramshackle houses gave way to immense warehouses and workshops. This was where the city craftspeople built wagons and bedframes, where merchants stored and carved bricks delivered from quarries. And this was where Leoth and I had been captured and tortured when we returned to Baylore.

Even though I did not recognize any of the nearby warehouses, the whole place sent uneasiness itching down my neck.

I glanced around to see if my friends felt the same discomfort, but they were nowhere around. I did not recognize any of the soldiers

flanking me. Of course—we had been walking for more than an hour. They didn't want to enter a battle exhausted.

At last the soldiers just ahead of me stopped. A whisper rippled down the column—"That's the place."

The warehouse looked no different than any others. A single light shone from above a pair of wooden doors large enough to fit a wagon, and before the door stood a heavily armed guard in a fur cloak.

"Archers, to the front." I caught my father's soft voice from just behind me. "If we are fired on, bring down our attackers as swiftly as possible."

Around me, the column shifted as our archers shuffled forward. We did not have many, just a couple dozen; I hoped they would not serve as ready targets for any guards watching the warehouse. I drew my sword, resting the blade on my shoulder.

"Dashin—take down the guard at the door," my father said, his voice low and steady. "See if that triggers a response. If not, we'll rush the door and break it down."

A man I did not recognize nocked an arrow and drew his bow. He paused, the arrow trained on the guard beneath the warehouse doors. The man was still some fifty paces away, though he wore no armor I could see. His pale face, shining in the light from the Weavers' lamp above the door, would make an easy target.

Then, with a soft thwack, the arrow flew.

A second later, the arrow buried itself in the guard's forehead, just between his eyes. He jerked backward, colliding with the warehouse doors with a soft thunk, and then slid to the ground. His eyes bulged for a moment before he keeled forward.

It seemed the whole army held its breath. No sound came from the street running alongside the warehouse, so we began to creep forward until we reached the corner.

"Now!" my father said quietly.

With a soft clapping of hundreds of pairs of boots, we surged down the end of the street toward the warehouse doors. When the front of

our column reached the doors, a pair of men with hatchets made short work of the latch. The splintering wood and groaning metal rang through the streets—I was sure anyone within a few hundred paces would come running.

But no one did.

Inside, the warehouse was dusty and sweet-smelling, the light from above the door just barely illuminating mountains of sacks, barrels, and boxes.

“Take everything you can carry,” I said. “Leave any barrels of drink. They won’t be any use to us.”

I was carried forward amidst the press of bodies to the mountain of goods. Without taking time to think, I grabbed the nearest sack. It was heavy, almost heavier than I could lift, but I bent my knees and hauled it over my shoulder without complaint. Then I forced my way through the crushing press of bodies to the door.

Outside, hundreds upon hundreds of soldiers still waited their turn to enter. I lowered my sack and stood by the side of the warehouse to wait, wondering where Olleack’s guards were. Surely they had not enlisted just one soldier to guard the entire city’s food supply.

Had they tricked us? Were the sacks full of rocks? I loosened the rope binding the neck of my sack to check, but it was undeniably full of millet, not rocks. The tiny yellow grains rolled around at the top, clinging with static to the sides of the burlap. I tied the rope once more, my unease mounting.

Then, when about half of my soldiers had joined me in the street with armloads of supplies, it happened.

A wailing, earsplitting horn pierced the quiet of the night, rising from the direction of the city gates. I went rigid, cold sinking down my spine. Three times the long note sounded, and in its wake, I thought I heard distant shouting.

“They know we’re here,” I muttered to Mellicante and Baridya, who had joined me in the street. “What are we going to do? By the time we reach the palace, the entire city guard might be there to stop us. And

we can't exactly fight with our arms full of supplies."

"Send half the army ahead to drop off their goods and secure the main square," Mellicante said at once. "We might even beat the city guards if we run. Then we'll be able to help the other half fight when they arrive."

She was right. I hated the thought of dividing my forces, but we would never stand a chance against the city guard if my entire army fought burdened by sacks and crates of supplies.

I scanned the street hurriedly, seeking out my father.

"We need to reach the palace before the city guard does," I said when he met my eye over the heads of the nearby soldiers. "I'll lead the first half of the army to the main square."

"And I will stay behind to organize the remaining half," my father said gravely. "Go now."

I did not want him remaining behind—the second half of my army would face far more danger than the first. But his tone did not allow argument.

Bending over, I hoisted the sack of millet over my shoulder once more.

"After me," I called to the soldiers assembled in the street. "As quickly as you can. We'll avoid Market Street but cut directly toward the main square."

I started off at a slow jog, the weight of the sack reverberating through my knees with each footfall. My fingers already ached at the weight, while numbness threatened to break my grip altogether. Others quickly passed me, including Mellicante, who did not seem to mind the weight of the bulging sack propped across both shoulders. No one spoke, and I endeavored to quiet the slap of my boots on the cobblestones, but the sound of a thousand bodies hurrying down the street raised an undeniable clamor.

We turned toward the palace before we reached Market Street, and from a glimpse of the main street, I saw torches streaming toward the square, flames trailing out behind them. My stomach twisted with

dread—they would be waiting for us. Maybe not enough to fight off my entire army, but enough to give us trouble, weighted down as we were.

Still we hastened onward, up the sloping side street toward the city center. My slow jog lapsed into a brisk walk, my back bent under the weight of the sack. I was not the only one slowing. When I tried to adjust my icy grip on the burlap, I nearly dropped the sack. Digging my fingers beneath the rope, I just managed to catch it. The rope cut into my fingers, but I had no time to stop and fix my clumsy hold.

Closer to the main square, lights flared from Market Street, and a growing clamor of voices drifted our way. It was not only the city guard venturing out to harry us—even civilians were emerging from their homes, curious and worried. On our side street, a few second-story shutters creaked open overhead, and I glimpsed several surprised faces staring out at us. Most slammed their shutters as soon as they saw an entire army hurrying along below, perhaps afraid we would attack them in their homes if they drew attention, but one man shouted, “Help! We’re under attack! Someone help!”

We were getting close to the main square. Though my legs burned and my back ached, I broke into a run once more, the pounding of each footfall on cobblestones reverberating through my legs. My army picked up their pace as well, their tidy ranks long since disintegrated. I heard shouts from behind, but I couldn’t pause to see what was happening. We had to reach the palace before the city guard stopped us.

At last we turned a corner and burst onto the main square.

Light blazed from ahead. I slowed, standing on my toes to see over the heads of my soldiers.

Row upon row of city guards blocked the palace gates, the front two rows kneeling with spears held in an unbroken line, shields forming a wall over their heads. Behind them, guards waited with swords and bows drawn.

Varse. Dread coiled in my stomach—we had never fought spears

before. We had no training for how to break a wall like this, if indeed there was a way.

My army jostled its way to the center of the square before stopping. Several of my archers climbed onto the rim of the fountain and nocked arrows, the city guard mirroring their movement.

My mind was blank with panic. I wished my father were here, or Leoth—anyone who knew more about battle than I. As far as I could tell, any attempts to charge the wall of spears would end with my army skewered like wild boars for a roast. And if we started loosing arrows at one another, soldiers would fall on both sides with little gain for my forces.

“What’s your plan?” Mellicante’s voice hissed in my ear.

“I don’t have one.”

From the corner of my eye, I could see more city guards spilling into the square with each passing minute. Right now, only a few dozen guards blocked the palace gates; even that was enough to stop us. If Olleack’s entire force assembled, the palace would be overrun.

We had to act quickly. But what could we do?

“Look!” Baridya whispered.

The small door beside the grand palace entrance had opened, and a handful of people emerged onto the top step. In the light illuminating the palace doorway, I recognized Cal.

None of the city guard seemed to notice.

“Archers, steady,” I said. “Fire at my command.” I kept my eyes trained on the shield wall, not wanting to draw attention to the Flamespinners.

Then, with a crackling roar, a burst of fire flared in the middle of the formation.

Men shouted, and the wall of spears wavered. Even from here, I could feel heat rippling across the square. The flames were nearly blinding in the darkness, throwing the city guard’s white uniforms into stark relief.

But instead of retreating, Olleack’s archers turned and started firing

at the palace doors.

“Archers!” I shouted to my own forces. “Now!”

Bows twanged as a volley of arrows flew toward the city guard, and at least three men went down. But it was too late. The Flamespinners had already retreated into the palace, leaving the side entrance peppered with arrows.

The flames were gone as quickly as they had come, leaving my vision spotted with dark flecks. I couldn’t tell how much damage they had done—from here, the wall of guards seemed no less imposing than before.

“We need to charge at the gates,” I said quietly. “Anyone with barrels or crates, to the front. Use them to ram your way through the shield wall. The rest of us will follow. I have the keys to the palace, so I need to get to the front.”

I heard whispers rippling through my army as the command passed from soldier to soldier. Around me, the press of bodies shuffled about as the soldiers with barrels edged forward.

When the movement stilled, I hoisted the sack of millet back onto my shoulder. I could wait no longer.

“Now!” I shouted.

My army lurched forward, our charge impeded by the weight we carried. I lost track of anything except the heads before me, bare of armor. Thank the cloudy gods for the helmet I wore.

Screams rose from my soldiers—the work of arrows, I presumed—but I could think of nothing but forcing my half-numb legs ever forward. Head down, shoulders bent under the weight of the sack, I allowed the tide of soldiers to sweep me across the square.

I registered our clash with the city guards only by the sudden loss of momentum. The man before me slowed, and I collided with his shoulder, unsteady on my feet. Both sides were shouting now, a wordless roar that drowned out all thought. I had no idea what was happening, but I braced my shoulder against the soldiers before me and pushed forward, those around me following my lead.

Little by little, we gained ground. We were nothing but a solid mass of flesh, tangled together, too close to fight. I could see no enemies around me, so I kept my head down and bent my knees into the work. My back ached and my neck strained, and the shouting intensified. Metal rang against metal, and wood thudded against flesh.

Then, with an abruptness that left me staggering, the way before me opened up. Ahead lay the palace gates, gleaming dully in the light from behind. I let my sack fall from limp fingers and fumbled for the key around my neck. My fingers hardly wanted to work; it took several tries before I fitted the key into the lock. At last the gates clicked open, and I pushed them wide to allow my army through. I could not return for my sack of millet. I couldn't even see it in the press of bodies.

"In! Hurry!" I called over the din of battle.

Little by little, my soldiers began breaking away from the fighting and scrambling through the gates. A tall man scooped up my abandoned sack and hurled it onto the palace steps ahead of him, but I could see several dozen sacks spilling their contents onto the main square and still others neglected by the fountain.

Before my entire army had reached safety, the city guard started trying to shove their way through the gates after us. Several formed up into a human battering ram, shields creating a wall of steel around the small column, spears bristling out like porcupine quills. Most of my soldiers were too busy fleeing to notice.

I drew my sword and rushed at the column, trusting on the wall of shields to blind the soldiers to my attack. As they started up the stairs, a gap opened up between shields, and I darted between two spears to plunge my sword into the shoulder that emerged from the space.

A man yelped in pain. His shield snapped back over his shoulder, but not fast enough—blood spilled down his arm, staining his white uniform.

When another gap opened farther down the column, I struck again, lightning-quick, burying my blade between a man's ribs.

With a roar, he broke away from the column, staggering to his knees

and trying vainly to staunch the flow of blood with his fingers.

In his absence, the column of men fell into disarray. Several of my soldiers joined me in harrying them, until the whole formation crumbled. The spearmen fled, but only half made it safely back to the gates.

Once they were gone, I blinked and straightened, looking around. My vision had narrowed during the fighting; only now did I see what had transpired while I fought the column of shielded men. The last of my soldiers had forced their way through the gates, and as the last city guard stumbled back to the square, these swung closed. Palace guards had emerged sometime in the fighting, and one hurried down to lock the gates behind us.

“Wait,” I said breathlessly as the man retreated. “Half of our army is still out there.”

“Then we will keep watch for their return.”

The palace doors stood open, and my soldiers filed through, carrying the goods we had salvaged in a haphazard line. I lingered on the steps, dazed. Dozens of city guards still encircled the main square—we had a much bigger fight waiting for us when the rest of our army returned.

Then my eyes fell on the space right before the palace gates. My chest tightened—bodies lay piled just outside, nothing but shadowy mounds in the light. Almost all belonged to my soldiers.

“Holy Varse,” I whispered. So many dead. This had been no more than a small skirmish, half of my army pitted against a small fraction of the city guard, and it had laid our inadequacy bare. We had never seen the enemy fighting with shields and spears in this manner, and the unexpected change in strategy had crippled us.

For the first time, I appreciated how lucky we had been to seize the palace when we did. We had swept through Baylore before the Truthbringers could react, our soldiers emerging from every direction. The element of surprise had served us where training and weapons could not.

We had to do better next time. We had no hope of overwhelming the Truthbringers through numbers and skill alone, so we had to use the only advantage our side had: magic.

“Your Majesty?” Viko’s voice startled me from my thoughts. “The rest of your army is waiting for you inside.”

I wrenched my gaze from the square, where Truthbringers and white-clad city guards were scooping up the last of our abandoned supplies. The palace steps stood empty; someone must have already dealt with the bodies that had fallen within the gates. In their wake, only dark bloodstains and a few stray grains that had escaped our sacks interrupted the smooth marble.

Inside, soldiers and Flamespinners and other palace residents packed the entrance hall.

“What now?” called a man I recognized as one of our generals. “How will we keep the rest of the army safe?”

I had no idea. “We need to move swiftly,” I said. “We can’t allow a shield wall to block us like that again.” I scanned the crowd in search of inspiration, and my eyes alit on the Potioneer who had revived Cal. “Potioneers—have you found a way to make explosives?”

“We have,” said a man standing beside Zarra. “But the recipes haven’t been perfected. We can’t say for certain how large each explosion will be.”

“It should be enough for now.” I pulled off my helmet and tucked it under my arm, a plan beginning to form. “We need to throw Olleack’s forces into chaos—enough for the rest of our army to break through without facing a battle. We’ll start by raining explosives and arrows and fire onto the square, scattering our enemies, and as the space clears, a column of our soldiers will form a safe corridor for the rest of our army to pass through. I want that column armed as heavily as possible, with helmets, shields, and reinforced coats if we have enough to spare.”

“A sound strategy, Your Majesty,” said the general who had spoken before. Without further prompting, he began barking out orders and rearranging our army. The Potioneers and Flamespinners and archers

shuffled forward, with the most heavily armed and armored soldiers behind them. The rest of my army would remain inside to serve as backup in case our initial attempt failed.

I joined the armored soldiers who would make a push through the main square. I felt duty-bound to do my part—I had gotten my soldiers into this mess, so it was my responsibility to see them safely out of it.

We stood huddled in the entrance hall for what felt like hours. The great double doors stood ajar, and one of the Flamespinner kept watch through the crack. From outside, I could hear many pairs of marching feet and the occasional barked order; unable to see the square from where I stood packed amidst countless bodies, I imagined thousands of Olleack's city guard filling the square in neat columns.

With each passing minute, my agitation grew. Where was my father? What had happened to the rest of my army? I could see no reason for their delay, unless they had faced a fight elsewhere in the city. My shoulders and knees ached after carrying the sack of millet so far, and a tingling numbness spread down the bottom half of one leg. I shifted my feet, trying to send feeling back into my nerves, and gripped the hilt of my sword with sweaty fingers. Something had gone wrong. I was sure of it.

Gradually a different sort of sound rose over the even clomping of footsteps outside. I recognized it at once—the roar of an unrestrained mob. I had to see this for myself. Pushing my way past soldiers and Potioneers and Flamespinner, I joined the woman at the door.

“I think they must be getting close, Your Majesty,” she said.

Cal edged his way to my side. “What’s happening?”

Before I could answer, the front of my father's column burst onto the main square. The soldiers slowed as they saw the hundreds of city guards waiting for them, and as they did, a horde of shouting civilians surrounded them. It seemed they threw rocks and other small objects at my army, some swinging broom handles or axes. The roar of voices rose like waves before a storm, and from the midst of it I caught a few words echoing through the square.

“Thieves!”

“Barbarians!”

“You trying to starve us?”

I stepped aside from the door and caught the eye of the general who had taken charge.

“Clear the square of city guards as much as you can. Don’t harm any civilians. We need to move quickly, or my father’s army will be trapped.”

At the general’s command, the Flamespinners, Potioneers, and archers emerged onto the palace steps. This time the city guard had concentrated its defense on the southern end of the square, where my father’s half of the army emerged from Market Street, so no enemy archers waited to pick off my magicians.

“Now,” the general said calmly.

In a flurry of movement, the archers drew arrows and let fly. Half a dozen men fell under their first attack, and before the city guard could react, the Flamespinners followed with an uneven wall of fire. I edged outside to watch, fascinated. Though I couldn’t tell which Flamespinner was responsible for which section of flames, it was easy to tell which were deliberate and which a bit sloppier. Some bursts of flames flared bright before dying, while others swept back and forth across the line of city guards in a steady blaze. A few attempts barely cleared our palace gates, while other fires reached halfway to the fountain.

Instead of turning the attack back on us, the city guard retreated under the onslaught, scrambling to clear the charred cobblestones, their neat ranks falling apart. Several men roared in pain as they slapped at flaming hair, while one even jumped into the fountain, trailing flames. But the surface was frozen over; the blaze on the shoulder of his uniform reflected off the ice.

Into the growing chaos, my Potioneers began launching their bottled explosives. A few used slingshots to hurl the small glass bottles into the middle of the square, while others flung them one after another

like balls in a game.

As they fell, the bottle began bursting. A few simply gave a small *pop* and showered sparks around them, while others exploded in a deafening boom, sending Olleack's forces flying and raining broken cobblestones all around.

On the fourth big explosion, the entire city guard broke apart and fled. Some men yelled what might have been orders, trying to rein in the chaos, but these men lacked the discipline to obey. They had trained for less than a year, and had not expected to face such a deadly attack from our side.

In their wake, my soldiers flooded back down the palace steps and opened the gates. We dashed across the square in a tight column, swords bared, rubble crunching underfoot. When we reached the top of Market Street, we split in the middle to allow the other half of my army to pass between us.

The civilians fell back in the face of our deadly defense. Some continued to throw broken cobblestones and shards of pottery at us, but none came within reach of our swords.

"You'll get what's coming to you, demon!" howled a man whose face shone bright red in the light of his torch.

As the second half of my army hastened for the palace gates, the city guard ventured into the square once more, rushing at us in small groups. One tight formation charged my section of the column, and I was almost glad of the chance to fight. These men bore swords, not spears, and I bared my teeth as I stepped out of line to clash blades with the boldest of the guard. My helmet still narrowed my vision, but I was grateful for it when a blow clanged off the metal just above my ear. That could have killed me.

Adrenaline surged through me as I pressed forward, trading blow after blow with Olleack's guard. The force of his attacks reverberated through my arms, each movement so quick I reacted with instinct. His skill was greater than mine, but he wore no armor.

At last I knocked his blade aside on a parry and grazed the side of

his head. Blood darkened his hair, and he stumbled aside, looking dizzy. In his distraction, I lunged forward and buried my sword in his guts. Then, as he fell, I yanked the sword free. Bending over him, I wrenched his sword from his weak grip.

Stepping back into line with the rest of my army, I realized the last of my father's troops had made it safely through. I scanned the column frantically for my father, and at last I spotted him directing soldiers through the gate. My shoulders slumped in relief.

We closed in behind them, retreating as quickly as we could manage. This time Olleack's forces held back as we pushed our way through the palace gates and locked them once more.

In the noisy chaos of the entrance hall, I pulled off my helmet once again and sagged against the wall. No one spared me a glance. In the confined space, my heartbeat thundered too loudly in my ears. Both my sword and the one I had taken from the city guard hung from my slack grip.

We were alive. We had succeeded.

At the far end of the hall, I thought I heard Mother's voice directing the relocation of the goods we had captured. My father ordered all injured soldiers to seek medical attention in the ballroom, telling the rest to get what sleep they could and take the next day off from training.

Little by little, the entrance hall cleared out. I caught sight of Mellicante, Baridya, Cal, and Viko trudging off toward the Cheltish wing together, and the tightness in my chest eased. My friends were safe. We had lost many, but not those most precious to me.

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When only a few stragglers lingered in the entrance hall, I could find no excuse to linger. Turning to go, I noticed a man standing in a shadowed doorway, cloaked and hooded. Had an assassin crept into the palace in the confusion?

I shifted my sword into my right hand and tucked my helmet under my left elbow. He wouldn't dare attack with a dozen others around, would he?

As I strode past the cloaked man, he spoke.

"Kalleah."

That was Leoth's voice. My heart faltered, and I stopped mid-step, wheeling to face him.

"You're alive. You're safe."

"Yes." My voice caught on the word—seeing him here, facing the world rather than hiding away in his sickroom, put a lump in my throat.

"I should have been out there. You risked your life in that fight while I sat here like a coward."

"That's not true," I whispered. "You're trying to protect my reputation. That's not a coward's decision."

“No,” Leoth said. “I can’t keep doing this. I’m not ready, but—I need to face the court again. I need to help our army train if we’re ever going to take this city back.”

Awkwardly, still juggling two swords and a helmet, I wrapped my arms around Leoth and nestled my face against his chest. He flinched, standing stiff as an ice sculpture, but after a moment he drew me into his embrace and kissed the top of my head. I knew people could see us, but I didn’t care. Let them gossip about the queen’s mysterious, faceless paramour. The horrors of the night seemed to dissolve, until nothing existed beyond the warmth of his embrace.

At last I released him and straightened. We fell into step together as we started back toward the Cheltish wing; once the remaining soldiers were out of sight behind us, Leoth said, “How did it go?”

“It was messy.” I transferred the second sword back to my left hand and prodded at the tight knot on my shoulder. “Olleack’s city guards sounded the alarm not long after we reached the warehouse, so they were already gathering in the main square by the time we returned. My entire army nearly crumbled before a couple dozen men with spears forming a shield wall. We had no idea how to fight them.”

“How many casualties?”

“I couldn’t tell in the dark. At least thirty, though it may have been twice that.”

“But you succeeded.”

I sighed. “That will only matter if we manage to take control of the entire city before the Whitish army gets here. And that seems unlikelier than ever.”

The Cheltish wing common area was empty aside from Kamarri, who sat in a bathrobe reading a long piece of parchment. She threw us a cursory glance as we entered, but I knew she would not gossip, so I held the door of my suite open for Leoth without hesitation.

Once the door was locked behind us and the lights tapped on, Leoth lowered his hood. His bruises had changed from a deep purple to a sickly yellow-green, the cut above his eye nothing but a puckered line.

“I know,” he said hollowly. “My face is still a mess.”

Carefully I wiped my sword on a handkerchief and set both blades aside, with my helmet balanced on top. Then I took Leoth’s hands and pulled him close.

“You look as handsome as ever. Those will fade before long—and in the meantime, we can try to hide them with cosmetics.”

I kissed him, and for once he did not turn his head aside. Instead he deepened the kiss, drawing me into his arms and brushing one gentle thumb down my cheek. I hugged him fiercely, clutching him as though afraid he might melt away. His muscles tightened fractionally, but he did not push me away.

When at last we broke apart, Leoth’s eyes were dark with desire. I took his hand and led him into my bedchamber, which did not feel nearly so vast and empty with him here. As I untied Leoth’s cloak and let it fall to the floor, he undid the buttons on my coat. I wanted to see the damage the Truthbringers had done to his back, but I didn’t want to make him self-conscious, not now. So I untied the laces of his shirt and let it fall open, pressing a palm against his warm chest.

Tugging off my coat and discarding it, Leoth scooped me into his arms and dropped me into the middle of my soft blankets. His bruises seemed to fade before my eyes; I saw only the handsome man who had teased me and charmed me and bared his heart to me. Then he kissed me again, and nothing else mattered.

* * *

Afterward, we lay tangled together in the mound of blankets, Leoth’s breathing evening out as he drifted toward sleep. He was in no danger—it had been no more than half an hour since I joined him in the entrance hall—so I allowed myself to linger in his warm embrace. I was still far from sleep, adrenaline and the energy I had drawn from my soldiers coursing through my veins. Most people would give no thought to a moment like this, but to me, it felt as rare as a sapphire. I

could hold Leoth forever and not make up for the years of loneliness I had endured.

When Leoth began snoring softly, I extracted myself from his arms and donned a nightdress and robe. I wanted to fetch something while the palace was still asleep.

Outside my royal suite, Kamarri still sat in the common area, though the fire had burned down to embers. She glanced at me with a raised eyebrow. “So? Who is your mysterious lover?”

“That does not concern you. And I’d thank you not to speak of it again.”

“No, of course not,” Kamarri said, though I sensed an edge of sarcasm in her tone. “I’m sure I’ll find out soon enough. Unless you intend to hide him away in your rooms forever?”

“Goodnight, Kamarri,” I said sharply, turning away.

She made a good point, though. If Leoth was planning to re-enter the court, he would need to return to his own rooms—without anyone seeing him. I started down the stairs with a sigh. I did not want to lose his company.

As I had suspected, the hospital stood empty. Our medic was likely in the ballroom, treating the injured soldiers, and her office door was unlocked. I ran my fingers along her shelves, scanning the labels of the jars and vials and bottles stored there, until at last I found a healing salve. According to the label, it warded away infection and hastened recovery time.

Tucking the jar into the pocket of my robe, I left the hospital as quietly as I had come.

Back in my chambers, Leoth was fast asleep amidst a nest of blankets. I rolled him gently onto his stomach and eased his shirt off—the laces still hung untied.

Leoth raised his head and blinked sleepily at me. “What’re you doing?”

“Treating the wounds on your back.”

Leoth’s eyes flew open wider, and he yanked the blankets up to his

neck. “Varse, Kalleah. You don’t want to do that. They’re disgusting.”

“You don’t have to hide from me. I know what you went through.”

“But—”

“Besides, they obviously still hurt quite a bit, the way you keep flinching. If you want to take your place in the palace once again, you’ll need to heal properly. People expect you to fight.”

I suspected part of Leoth’s hesitation came from lingering self-consciousness about baring his much older scars, the marks where his power had been removed as a young child. I had seen them several times now, so they no longer made much of an impression, but it would take a long time for Leoth to come to terms with that. His scars were bound up with his messy childhood and young adulthood—years of being told he was worthless, of putting every effort into hiding what he truly was, of disassociating himself so completely from his own identity that he could actively campaign against people like himself.

When Leoth made no further argument, I loosened his grip on the blankets and folded them down to his waist.

At the sight of his back, I winced in sympathy. His skin had been torn into ribbons, dozens of angry red lines overlapping and slicing deep into his flesh. I hoped they were not getting infected.

“You pretend you don’t care, but I saw you flinch,” Leoth mumbled, his face half-buried in his pillow.

“I was just imagining how painful it must have been.” I kissed his forehead gently. “I saw you in the square. I heard you screaming, and I nearly abandoned our entire scheme to rescue you. I was in the warehouse too, Leoth. I might have suffered the same fate if my interrogators hadn’t collapsed before they could do any worse.”

“Mm.”

Pulling the jar from my pocket, I began layering salve onto the open wounds. I started with the ones that had not split the skin too deeply, afraid I would hurt Leoth if I touched the deep gashes. He really should have accepted the Drifter medic’s help; I wasn’t sure how much I could do. Without her healing magic, many of these wounds would need

stitches.

As I moved on to a deep laceration, Leoth drew a sharp, hissing breath.

“Is this okay?”

“Just get it over with.” He spoke through gritted teeth.

I smoothed on salve as gently as possible, leaving it clumped where I didn’t dare apply pressure to even it out. Even so, Leoth flinched each time I touched him, the muscles in his neck standing out in taut cords where his hair had fallen to the side. His breathing grew uneven and rasping; I feared he would lose consciousness. In some places the lashes had ripped apart his older scars, leaving deep lesions in the knotted line. Many of these wounds would never fade—his back would be a mess of scars for the rest of his life.

At last I had done what I could. Salve caked his back like sap oozing from a pine; I had used half the jar already.

“Do you want to put your shirt back on?” I asked softly. “It might stain the fabric beyond repair.”

Leoth just grunted. Taking that as assent, I dressed him as though he were a child, sliding his arms into the sleeves before pulling the shirt up to his shoulders. If he rolled onto his back during the night, it would keep the salve from smearing over my bedsheets.

“Go to sleep,” I murmured. I leaned over and kissed him on the lips, smoothing his hair back from his forehead.

“But you need your bed.”

“No I don’t. I want you to rest well and recover.”

Leoth’s eyes slid closed, and I tiptoed away to take his usual mattress on my office floor.

* * *

Morning came too soon. It seemed I had hardly closed my eyes when sunlight began filtering through the window—the office had no curtains to block it out.

Then a distant knock sounded at the door to my suite, and I realized that was what had woken me. I tugged on my bathrobe over my nightgown and hurried barefoot to the door, opening it with a crack.

Mellicante stood there, hands on her hips. “When did you start locking the doors to your suite?”

I realized belatedly that a small crowd had gathered in the common area, and they cast curious glances our way. I opened the door wide enough to admit Mellicante before closing it sharply behind us.

“And is that a mattress on your office floor? What’s happening?”

I flushed. Since Leoth was not in the office for once, I had forgotten to close the door behind me.

“What are you doing here?” I asked, hoping to distract her.

Mellicante brandished a newspaper. “You need to see this. But don’t be evasive—are you hiding someone in here?”

Leoth chose that exact moment to stumble from my bedchamber, his shirt still hanging open, his hair mussed.

He stopped in his tracks when he saw Mellicante, his face going bright red where it was not mottled from the lingering bruises. I felt my face heat up as well as Mellicante looked from me to Leoth, a smug smile tugging at her lips.

“I thought so,” she said with satisfaction. “But weren’t you rivals for the throne? How did this happen?” She gestured vaguely at Leoth with the rolled-up newspaper.

Neither of us spoke, though Leoth fumbled with the laces of his shirt.

“And what is Leoth doing here, anyway? I thought he was somewhere in the city.”

“He returned last night,” I said hurriedly before she jumped to any conclusions. “In the chaos of the fighting, he slipped into the palace.”

“What’s happened to your face?” Mellicante asked baldly.

“It’s nothing,” he said, with an attempt at his usual breezy tone. “The Truthbringers just battered me around a bit while they were questioning me.”

Mellicante turned a hard look my way. “You didn’t mention that. I thought you were just questioned and released. Did they hurt you as well?”

I fisted my right hand, where the healed gash gave the slightest twinge. “No.”

“Then why did they hurt you?” she asked Leoth. “Did they recognize you?” She was getting uncomfortably close to the truth we were trying so hard to conceal.

“I was being a bit difficult,” Leoth said, and this time I almost believed his casually arrogant tone. “They thought they’d teach me a lesson.”

“Well, I’m sure the army will appreciate having you back in any case.” Mellicante pressed the newspaper into my hand. “Come on—you’ll want to read this too.”

I settled onto a divan with Mellicante and Leoth on either side. As I unrolled the newspaper, the headline snagged my gaze—*Demon Queen Reveals Plan to Starve Baylore’s Citizens.*

“No, not that,” Mellicante said. She dragged the newspaper open to the middle. “See that?”

It was a moment before I realized what I was seeing. A four-columned list covered the full page and ran onto the next.

Then I looked at the heading.

The Makbori Among Us

It was a list of every magical citizen in Baylore, organized by race.

“No,” I breathed. “They can’t.”

Leoth’s eyes rose to meet mine. “It’s begun.”

The False Attack

“People are rioting in the streets,” Mellicante said. “They’re furious you seized the winter stores, and instead of attacking the palace, they’re taking their anger out on the city’s magic races. Mobs are breaking windows and setting fire to shops and dragging people into the streets.”

“This is my fault,” I muttered. “I should have expected something like this. Instead of seizing the city’s food stores, we should have rounded up the city’s Makhori population and brought them to safety.”

“How could we have done that? We didn’t know who they were until just now. And even if we had, do you have any idea how many names are on this list? It must be at least thirty or forty thousand.”

I knew she was right, but I still felt a crushing sense of inadequacy. These were the people we had returned to Baylore to save, yet our return had done nothing but hasten their demise. If we tried to escort them safely to the palace, it would not be just Olleack’s guard we would face but the entire non-magical population of Baylore, riled up after reading about our theft of the winter food stores and thirsty for revenge.

“What can we do?” I asked, not expecting a response. “How can we keep them safe?”

Neither Mellicante nor Leoth replied.

Numbly I turned the pages of the newspaper, my eyes glazing over as the names continued in an endless set of columns.

“There are no Weavers on this list,” I said when I reached the end of the newspaper.

“No,” Mellicante murmured.

Without thinking, I flipped the newspaper back to the front and started reading the article I had first noticed. Where once I would have been cowed by the lies printed about me, I felt nothing.

The usurper queen revealed her true motives in an unexpected move against Baylore’s innocent civilians. Late last night, her demon army attacked the city’s grain stores and looted hundreds of stores of winter rations.

Brave townspeople, city guards, and Truthbringers fought to stop her rampaging forces, but to no avail.

“This is the end of Baylore,” says Marcie Bridlesor, a widow with five young children. “The kindness of King Olleack was the only thing keeping my babies from starving. Now we won’t last the winter.”

King Olleack is working hard to find a solution for his people. “This is a disaster for Baylore,” he said this morning in a speech from the new royal residence. “Queen Kalleah will surely use the city’s rations as a means to bully the good people of Baylore into submission. We must remain vigilant. We cannot submit to her tyrannical ways.”

Amidst the chaos surrounding the raid on Baylore’s food stores, fear has risen that the Makbori still among us are biding their time, waiting to attack their helpless neighbors. As the usurper queen gains power, many civilians fear the time of uprising is drawing near.

In concert with the Truthbringers who have guided us through these hard times, we at the Palace Times have decided to release the names of all registered Makhori within Baylore, to allow the good people of Baylore to keep a watchful eye on their neighbors. When the day comes that the Makhori reveal the corruption within and turn against us, we will be able to quell their revolt quickly and with minimal innocent blood spilled.

“Have the Truthbringers taken over the Palace Times, then?” I asked dully. “Or did they print this of their own volition?”

“Does it matter?” Mellicante said. “They’re determined to work against you either way.”

“True.” I set aside the newspaper with a sigh and stood, smoothing down my bathrobe. “Will you summon my advisors to the council chamber in an hour, Mellicante? I need advice on how to protect the city’s Makhori population.”

“Of course.” Mellicante shot Leoth a sharp look. “Will you be there?”

Leoth inclined his head. “I will.”

Once we were alone, I locked the doors to my suite and turned to Leoth. He gave me a wry smile, running a hand through his rumpled hair.

“That was unfortunate,” he said. “Do you think she’ll tell anyone?”

“Only Baridya. But people will know soon enough. It’s impossible to keep a secret in this palace—unless you plan on staying away from me at all times.”

Leoth gave a short laugh. “I couldn’t do that.”

“No. And even getting you out of my chambers in the first place is going to be a challenge. People will be watching.”

I found I didn’t care as much as I once had. The direct attack on the Makhori in Baylore—the recurrence of the exact same events that had led to our ancestors’ near-destruction in the Kinship Thrones—had pushed all other concerns to the back of my mind.

Wrapped up in my thoughts, I crossed to my bedchamber and pushed open the door. My bedding lay in a crumpled heap in the middle of the bed, but I gave it only a cursory glance before turning to the balcony.

As soon as I pushed open the doors, I could hear it—the low roar of shouting and smashing glass and crackling flames rising from the streets. Smoke curled into the clear sky, foul-smelling and darker than chimney smoke, and I caught a whiff of excrement drifting from a suspicious-looking mound just beyond the rear wall of the palace.

Even in the garden district, I could see people running from street to street, torches trailing flames behind them. A gang of young men armed with axes and shovels and hammers sang raucously as they marched past tidy houses.

How would we fight back against that? We no longer faced just a small force of city guards; it was as though the entire city had turned feral, a beast intent on ripping itself apart.

I didn't notice Leoth behind me until he touched a hand to my back. "Is this what it felt like last time you held the throne? Things spiraling out of control while you tried your best to maintain order?"

"Last time I was the only one in danger. Now I have thousands of people I have to protect and no way of doing it." I leaned forward, elbows on the stone balustrade. "But at least I have the support of the palace this time. Last time I faced enemies every way I turned. I have allies now—just not enough. Not even close." The cold from the stone was already seeping through my robe and up my arms.

"We'll come up with a way. I promise."

"I hope you're right."

I stood motionless for several more minutes, trying to take in the scale of the chaos unfolding below. I sensed this had been building for months—people growing steadily angrier as news came from the countryside, where I burned town after town on my way to Baylore. And now, at last, they had somewhere to direct their fury.

At last I tore my eyes from the streets below. I would miss my own

assembly if I did not start preparing now.

Leoth followed me back into the bedchamber, where the heat seemed suffocating after the icy air outside. The stench of smoke and manure trailed us.

“How is your back?” I asked Leoth.

He smiled tightly. “Still painful, but manageable. That salve must have been enchanted.”

“Can I see?”

He peeled off his shirt with gritted teeth and turned to show me the mess of scars and still-raw gashes. A few patches of skin still glistened from the oily salve. But he was right—the cuts that had burned red yesterday had now faded to a pink tinge, and some of the deeper lacerations looked as though they were beginning to heal.

“Thank the gods,” I said softly. “You could be using a sword by next quarter at this rate.”

“That’s not fast enough.”

“Well, you could have allowed the medic to heal you.”

“Hmph.” Leoth shrugged his shirt back on. “I have nothing suitable to wear.”

“Then you’ll have to fetch something from your own bedchamber.”

He cast me a horrified look. “And walk out of here like this?”

“I’ll try to cover up your bruises first, and you can wear one of my coats if that will make you feel better.”

* * *

An hour later, I strode through the cavernous halls of the Historic wing toward the council chamber. I wore a ceremonial general’s uniform my father had brought to my chambers once he heard the summons, with shiny black boots and my sword strapped to my waist.

Nearly twenty others flanked me—friends, advisors, and guards—and a few of the soldiers and refugees we encountered dropped to one knee as we passed.

Leoth had emerged from his chambers to much excitement, looking more dashing than ever in a deep blue uniform with gold trim. The makeup I had layered over his bruises had done its job—I could see no trace of discoloration. If anyone had seen him slip from my suite earlier that morning, they made no remark.

When we reached the high-ceilinged council chamber, all white marble and gleaming chandeliers, we found Holden King Pollard, Holden Queen Ellarie, Dellik, and Kamarri waiting for us. All stood as I entered.

“Prince Leoth,” Dellik said as we approached. “You returned.”

“Just last night,” he said smoothly. “I took advantage of the chaos at the palace gates and slipped in along with our army.”

I settled onto the throne at the front of the chamber, my parents on one side, Mellicante, Baridya, and Leoth on the other. We made an odd collection—Cal was there, along with Dakolth, an imposing collection of royalty interspersed with others who had yet to grow accustomed to palace life. I noticed Cal studiously avoiding his mother’s eye.

“You know why I have called this meeting,” I began without preamble. “The Palace Times released a list of Makhori in Baylore, and riots are breaking out throughout the city. We need to find a way to protect our magic races. Do you have any ideas?”

“This is too large a battle for us to fight,” my father said. “We must focus instead on winning support. Once the citizenry is willing to listen to us, we will be able to protect our most vulnerable subjects.”

“Did you not see the chaos this morning?” I demanded. “People were attacking our magic races outright, and doing everything they could to destroy their homes and businesses. Do you really think people like that will ever come around to our side?”

“They could be nothing more than a violent minority,” Mother said. “We have no way of knowing how many were on the streets this morning and how many cowered inside their homes. If we could reach those who weren’t involved, it could make a difference. It might even be that most of the city supports you, only they have been so worn

down by the Truthbringers' threats and the growing unrest that they fear to speak or act out."

"Like in Larkhaven," I said. I doubted that was the case here, but it was an inspiring thought. "And if that were true, how would we reach out to them?"

"I don't think that's right," Viko said unexpectedly from the back of the room. He had stood at the doors along with the rest of our guard, but now he stepped forward, embarrassment warring with determination on his face. "When I was in Wolfskin Alley, the people I talked to hated King Olleack, but they still believed almost everything he'd said about you, Your Majesty. It's those damn newspapers. Even people who don't pay attention to King Olleack's decrees are reading the Palace Times."

"Those who frequent Wolfskin Alley are hardly a good representation of our population," Ellarie said scathingly.

"No, he's right," I said. "The sort of people who seek contraband goods are more likely to be biased against the government than the rest of the population. If even they believe what the newspapers publish, that's a good indication of where the rest of the city stands."

Viko threw me a grateful look and retreated to the back of the room once more. In the wake of my words, a strained silence fell. What was anyone supposed to recommend? Our few thousand soldiers were facing a hostile population of five hundred thousand, and we had no time to win our people's support through subtle means. The Whitish army was on its way. With every day that passed, spring drew closer, and with it the arrival of the greatest army Baylore had ever seen.

"We need to build an army of magicians," Kamarri said at last, her voice echoing strangely in the silence. "It's the only way we can win."

"And how will we get the magic races safely into the palace in the first place?" Mellicante asked. "Isn't that the whole point of this discussion?"

Kamarri narrowed her eyes at Mellicante.

"We know force alone will not work," my father said. "That was

made abundantly clear during last night's attack. This leaves us with persuasion, bribery, or magic."

"Are you thinking of withholding food until people come to our side?" Dellik asked swiftly.

"It could be an option," Mother said. "If we distributed food outside the palace, we could speak to each person who arrived to see where they stood. Any Makhori who came to collect their rations would have the choice to seek refuge in the palace—and join our fight."

"Unless the Makhori were afraid of leaving their homes," I said. "If only we had some way of getting to them directly. A Rider bonded with a bird, for instance."

"They would be a ready target for arrows," Kamarri said dismissively.

"What do you think, Holden King Pollard? Holden Queen Ellarie? You know more about the current situation in the city than most of us do. What do you think would persuade people?"

"The population has been growing more restless with each span that passes," Pollard said in a gravelly voice. He seemed to have aged ten years in the time since I had fled Baylore. "We all felt powerless before you returned—including, to some extent, King Olleack. From what I could see, he served as nothing more than a puppet for the Truthbringers."

Three chairs to my right, Leoth shifted, his mouth drawn into a tight line.

"Distributing rations should keep the peace, at least temporarily," Pollard continued. "No one will attack the palace if they know it will mean risking an end to their food supply. Aside from that...I'm sorry, Your Majesty. I have no idea how to protect the city's magical population."

"Thank you." I turned to Ellarie. "And what do you think?"

She was frowning at Cal, who still avoided her eyes. "Much of the palace started to come around once we realized how far the Truthbringers were willing to go. When we saw they were happy to

destabilize our very government and persecute Makhori with royal blood.”

“Yet two of the royal families still followed Olleack to his new court.”

“They may have been coerced,” Mother said.

“Indeed,” Ellarie said. “Or perhaps they feared you more than they feared King Olleack. You can’t imagine what it was like while you were away, Your Majesty. Everyone was afraid, and no one trusted anyone. We knew the palace was full of Truthbringers and their allies, and occasionally someone would go missing. So we mostly kept to our own wings, and rarely ventured outside the palace. Most of what we knew was rumor and speculation.”

“Are you saying the city is the same way?”

“Precisely. Most people don’t realize the extent of the Truthbringers’ plans. They’re worried, and even if they haven’t been targeted yet, they realize they might be next. If you gave them more to base their fear of the Truthbringers on than rumor and speculation, they might start listening to you.”

I nodded, trying to conceal my surprise at her insight. Last year, Ellarie had sought to undermine me at every turn; perhaps she could prove a useful ally. Even Cal gave his mother a startled glance, though he quickly dropped his eyes when she looked his way.

“Thank you, everyone,” I said. “You have given me much to think about. If you have any other ideas, please come to me at once.” A plan was beginning to form, but I wanted to see if it held any merit before I brought it forward. “Kamarri, would you stay behind? I wish to speak with you in private.”

As the others began to disperse, apart from five guards still standing watch by the door, Kamarri approached with a frown. I noticed Cal lingering near the back of the room, but I did not draw attention to him.

“What is it, Your Majesty?” Kamarri asked shortly. “Did I speak out of turn? You know I’m not accustomed to court protocol.”

“No, it’s not that at all.” Grasping the arms of my throne, I leaned back. “Do you remember what Viko said? It’s the newspapers that have poisoned everyone against me. If we could seize the printing presses and distribute the truth, maybe people would start listening. And at the very least, we could stop the Truthbringers from printing anything else like that Makhori register.”

“They’ve already made the names public. What more could they do?”

“They could print addresses. Or they could turn against the Weavers as well—that’s a significant portion of the Makhori population they haven’t yet slandered.”

“True.” Kamarri folded her arms. “It’s a good idea, but I don’t understand why you wanted my opinion.”

“I don’t want to repeat last night’s disaster. If we commit our entire army to the job and get caught fighting the city guard again, we’ll lose more lives we can’t afford. Do you know of any way our magicians can help carry out the raid in secret? Clothing that will conceal our soldiers from view, perhaps, or potions that will make anyone nearby oblivious to what they’re seeing? Both printing presses are close to the palace, so if we can move swiftly and silently, no one will know what we’ve done until morning.”

Kamarri tapped her foot, her gaze distant. After a minute, she said, “I have another idea that might work better.”

“What is it?”

“You need to draw the city guards away from the town center. If we staged an attack on King Olleack’s residence, his entire force will race that direction.”

“How can we do that without endangering our soldiers?”

“It wouldn’t be a *real* attack.” Kamarri’s eyes glinted with enthusiasm, and I knew at once that she had thought of a use for magic in battle. “If we station a handful of soldiers and magic races nearby, we can create the illusion of a major attack. Just think—explosives in the square, Flamespinners sending up columns of fire visible

throughout the city, and colored smoke to confuse the whole scene. I wouldn't be surprised if half the city rushes over to see what's happening. The streets around the newspaper headquarters will be deserted."

It was a brilliant idea—provided we could sneak a handful of Makhori and soldiers into the right part of town. "Why didn't you say anything before, when we were planning to seize the city's food stores?" I asked. "We could have saved dozens of lives."

"Most of the plan depends on the Potioneers' explosives. Until we launched them into the square last night, we weren't sure if they would work. At least half did nothing at all, and most of those remaining just produced a few sparks. But a few were hugely successful. We can work on producing more of those straightaway."

"And the colored smoke you mentioned? Has that been tested?"

"Of course. We can set those off inside, whereas we really need some sort of cleared field to test the explosives."

"Very good." More than just providing a distraction, I liked the idea of catching Olleack off guard and making him worry. And if this proved successful, we could refine the idea for a real attack in the future. "If we can find somewhere safe to station our troops, it should work. I'll speak with my lady-in-waiting—she grew up in the Gilded Quarter."

"Thank you, Your Majesty." Kamarri bowed, her eyes still gleaming. I was glad to finally give her the chance to prove her Makhori troops' use in battle.

"One more thing—how long will it take for our Potioneers to create more of the explosives?"

"Eight or ten hours, I'd guess. I need to ask them."

"Please do. Ask them to start work right away, and report back to me as soon as they do."

"Yes, Your Majesty." With another bow, Kamarri turned and strode from the room, her shoulders squared.

I watched her go, lost in thought. I wanted to send our troops out tonight, if we could manage it, yet it seemed reckless to plan an attack

so soon. But each day that passed gave the newspapers a chance to do more harm.

Getting slowly to my feet, I started across the council chamber in a daze. My heels clicked on the marble floor, echoing in the silence. How would we sneak our soldiers close to Olleack's residence without raising suspicion? How heavily was the area guarded? I wished we knew more about his court. I wouldn't even be able to place the residence on a map.

It was not until I heard footsteps beside me that I remembered Cal, who had lingered behind while I spoke to Kamarri. He cleared his throat with uncharacteristic nervousness.

"What is it?" I asked, snapping back to the present. We had already climbed the first set of stairs without me noticing.

"I want to help with the attack," Cal said. "I heard what Kamarri said—I can set off flames high enough that people can see them across the whole city. I don't think most of our Flamespinner can do that."

I sighed. The last thing I wanted was for Cal to risk his life yet again. "It's going to be very dangerous. I have no idea how my soldiers are going to get close to Olleack's manor, let alone how they'll escape while the entire city guard tries to track them down."

"And if you're willing to send other soldiers into that sort of danger, why not me?"

Because you're too young jumped to my lips, but I swallowed it back. I knew what Cal would say to that—and it was true that he had proved his bravery a hundred times over. "You're Ellarie's heir," I said instead. "If something happens to me, I would feel much safer knowing you were still around to take up the throne."

"Someday. Maybe. Twenty years from now," Cal said bitterly. "And besides, are you really going to hand over your throne to Dennoric once the three years are up?"

"No." He was right. But I didn't want to voice the real reason I dreaded putting Cal in danger—because I suspected he would be deliberately reckless, either because he missed Nyla or because Kamarri

had goaded him into it.

Before I could think of any further argument, we had reached the Cheltish wing. Cal hurried up the stairs ahead of me, and I knew he intended to join the attack regardless of what I said.

Leoth met me in the common area, his face studiously nonchalant. I realized a number of courtiers were lingering in the corners, casting him surreptitious glances and whispering behind their hands.

“What took you so long?” he asked in a low voice.

“I wanted to talk to Kamarri. We’re going to stage a false attack on Olleack’s residence, and while the city guard is distracted, we’ll capture the two printing presses.”

Leoth blinked at me. “How will that help the Makhori?”

“Remember what Viko said? It’s the only way to stop the Truthbringers from feeding lies to the whole city. It’s not much, but it’s a start.”

“True.” Leoth glanced at the cluster of guards—including Viko—who now stood in the elevated corridor. “And when will it happen?”

“Tonight.”

An Outpost of the Kinship Thrones

Just after nightfall, I ventured up to the rooftop courtyard to watch the staged attack unfold. Though I had eaten little, the rich cream sauce from our sage chicken sat uneasily in my stomach. I hated watching from afar. I hated sending my friends into danger while I remained safely behind the palace walls.

The chill air bit through my cloak, grazing my cheeks and numbing my toes, but I paid it no heed. Instead I strained to see through the darkness. Glowing streetlamps marked out the winding lanes of the Gilded Quarter, and squares of light shone from behind windowpanes, but none gave any indication of where Olleack's residence lay. One of our scouts had pointed it out on a map earlier this afternoon, but I was not familiar enough with the Gilded Quarter to recognize it in the dark.

Deance had marked out several manors near Olleack's residence that belonged to Makhori—our small contingent of soldiers would approach these, asking for safe shelter, and carry out their attack from within.

Soft footsteps scuffed the stairs, and I whirled. Leoth emerged from the stairs, heavily bundled in furs, a hood shadowing his face. His teeth

gleamed in the moonlight.

“I thought I might find you here.” He reached out his hands.

Extracting mine from the folds of my cloak, I clasped his hands gratefully—his skin was still warm from inside. “Oh? And where have you been all afternoon?”

“After everything was in place, I returned to my room to go over the plans one last time. But I must’ve fallen asleep.” He smiled sheepishly. “How are you still awake?”

“There isn’t enough time to sleep. Everything is happening too fast.”

Though I had spent nearly twenty-four hours draining energy from my friends and advisors and soldiers, even that false vigor was wearing thin. Eventually I would collapse.

“Aren’t you freezing?” Leoth asked. “Your hands feel like ice.”

I shivered reflexively, the deep bite of the cold registering for the first time. “I suppose so.”

He drew me into an embrace, the warmth of his body radiating through my thin layers. I leaned my head against his chest, still watching the lights below.

“It’s strange not having you in my suite any longer,” I said. “It seems far too large for one person.”

“I could remedy that. I’m sure no one would notice if I sneaked in late at night.”

“Please do. Not tonight, though—I don’t think my body will keep functioning if I deny it sleep any longer.”

Leoth chuckled and pulled me closer, kissing the top of my head.

Just then, a burst of flame streaked into the sky above the distant streets of the Gilded Quarter. Following in quick succession, three loud booms rose from below the flames, resounding through the city like ice collapsing from a glacier.

Leoth and I broke apart, the warmth he had given me fleeing with the first breath of wind. Leaning against the balustrade, we watched as the attack unfolded.

Bursts of flames continued to flare in the sky above Olleack's manor, some rising through the air in towering columns, others roaring to life just above the nearby rooftops. They illuminated a cloud of smoke billowing out to fill the streets below, a few trails of fire flickering within like lightning. Beneath it all, explosions continued to reverberate off the stone walls of manors.

As the attack intensified, chaos spread through the city. Clusters of lights emerged on the streets below, some running toward the noise, others fleeing. Distant shouts rose from all around, though they sounded like no more than squeaking mice compared to the thunderous explosions. Even from half the city away, they rattled through my chest. Up close, the sound must have been deafening.

"They're going to see where our soldiers are hiding," I muttered. "I shouldn't have let him go."

"Cal?"

I nodded.

"He would have found a way. I was the same when I was his age—always looking for ways to put myself in danger."

"And somehow you're still alive."

"Exactly."

I slumped forward, elbows on the balustrade. Leoth's words did not make me feel any better. Someone was bound to see which windows the attack had come from, and Olleack's city guard could be rounding up my soldiers even now.

"That smoke is going to confuse everything," Leoth said as though reading my thoughts. "I think our troops will be fine."

"I hope you're right."

* * *

By the time we left the roof, the attack had dwindled. Smoke still engulfed the streets around Olleack's residence, but the explosions and flames had long since tapered off.

I did not realize how cold I was until we reached the warmth of the Cheltish wing. As the radiant heat from the tapestries washed over me, I began shivering violently.

With only a pair of guards serving as our escort, we hurried through the Historic wing to the palace entrance. Though it was past midnight, soldiers and palace staff still scurried about in the shadows. As we neared the entrance, I heard raised voices and a series of loud thunks.

Grabbing Leoth's hand, I broke into a jog, anticipation tightening my chest.

At last we came into view of the entrance hall. I dropped Leoth's hand abruptly and strode forward, skirting around soldiers who hardly paid me any mind.

Just inside the palace doors, armed soldiers restrained a gaggle of what must have been newspaper staff. The staff all had sacks over their heads; most stood obediently, not attempting to struggle. Heaped nearby stood the pieces of two enormous printing presses, which my soldiers hefted one by one and carried down the hall. A mountain of burlap bags towered over the printing presses—from the rattling sound they made when my soldiers lifted them, I assumed they were filled with metal type.

Dellik approached as I drew near. "Your Majesty. Would you like to speak with the newspaper staff?"

"Yes, of course. Did they put up much resistance?"

"Not yet, but that doesn't say much about their stance, Your Majesty. After what they've been printing, they're probably frightened of you. Too frightened to disobey."

I nodded briskly—that did not surprise me. "Lead them to the second story tearoom. I don't want them getting in the way."

While Dellik shepherded the newspaper staff away, I joined my father beside the door, where he directed the soldiers relocating the printing presses.

"How did it go?" I asked.

"Very smoothly. The streets were empty, and as far as our soldiers

could tell, no one saw them.”

“Good.”

“Perhaps Lady Kamarri’s plan to retake the city using magic has merit after all.”

“I’m sure it does,” I said. “It’s just the logistics we have to work out. How can we send our small force of Makhori into battle without getting them all killed? And do we risk destroying half the city if the fires and explosions get out of hand?”

“We need a solid strategy, that’s all.” My father frowned at me. “But right now, you look like you need sleep. Talk to the printing staff if you must, and then go to bed. I can handle the rest of this.”

I wanted to protest, but a yawn stopped me. Stifling it behind a hand, I smiled sheepishly. “Thank you.”

Leoth rejoined me when I started back down the hall.

“No sign of Cal?”

I shook my head.

“He’ll be fine. I promise.”

I hoped he was right.

In the tearoom, I found the newspaper staff sitting in dainty chairs, still wearing sacks over their heads, restrained by two soldiers apiece. There were fourteen staff in all, which surprised me—I had expected perhaps one or two guards minding the offices at night, not a full set of employees.

I studied them for a minute while they sat limply, not fighting their captors. They were an equal mix of men and women, all dressed simply yet tidily, many with ink-stained fingers.

At last I said, “You sit before your queen. Do you know why I have brought you here tonight?”

Several heads snapped in the direction of my voice, and a couple newspaper staff surged forward in their chairs as if trying to stand.

“Don’t say a word!” snapped a portly man with clean fingers and finer dress than his companions. “You’ll be executed for treason if you bow to this demon’s demands.”

“Who’s to say you won’t be the one getting executed?” asked a woman in a mocking drawl. “We’re in the palace now, I’m sure of it, which means those bloody Truthbringers can’t touch us.”

“Hush!” another woman said. “Don’t go slandering our employers while they might be listening in!”

The portly man struggled against his captors, but to no avail. The soldiers pinned his arms behind the chair, forcing him backward.

“You may remove their blindfolds,” I said. I wanted to see their faces; from their whispers, it seemed at least one was not loyal to the Truthbringers.

As their captors tugged off the sacks, the newspaper staff blinked at me and at the finery around them. The dainty chairs and tea-tables were incongruous surrounded by armed and uniformed soldiers.

“What’ve you brought us here for?” asked a scrawny young man who looked barely older than me. He had a faint tuft of hair on his chin, an early attempt at growing a beard.

“Didn’t you see the story from the Palace Times?” an older man hissed. “The one with the list of Makhori?”

“Aye, but we’re from the Baylore Daily,” the young man said.

“And both newspapers have been slandering me for spans,” I said sharply.

Both men recoiled.

“To whom are you loyal?” I asked the room at large.

“We wouldn’t be very smart if we told you the truth, now, would we?” asked the same woman who had contradicted the portly man. “If we say we support King Olleack and the Truthbringers, you’ll likely burn us alive. And if we say we’re behind you, we’ll get killed just the same when King Olleack kicks you out in the end.”

“Let me make one thing very clear,” I said tightly. “I do not burn my enemies alive. That has always been the Whitish army’s specialty. And as for King Olleack—I don’t know. Maybe he will reclaim the city someday and destroy me. But you must have seen the riots today. Neighbors were attacking neighbors, all because of that list of

Makhori.”

A few of the newspaper staff shifted uncomfortably.

“This is not just a power struggle. I have no interest in the throne apart from its role in keeping Itrea safe. This is war. The Whitish army is on its way, intending to eradicate all magic from Itrea, and they are willing to resort to brutal measures to accomplish that goal.

“If you wish your families and friends and neighbors to die, then by all means, keep quiet. Stand behind the Truthbringers and let them do what they want—anything to keep your own neck out of danger. But there may come a time when they turn on you as well, because your skin is darker than theirs or because you’re a woman who dares to claim equality with men. And when that happens, there will be no one left to protect you. Can’t you see what this has become?”

None of the newspaper staff spoke. Several hung their heads; only the portly man looked angry.

“You don’t look like Truthbringers to me,” I said, my voice gentler this time, “so I would like to believe you have either been coerced or misled into printing falsehoods. I have captured the newspaper presses because I need people to hear the truth before it’s too late, and I fear they won’t listen to me any other way. If you would like to help with this mission, I will gladly welcome you to my cause. And if not, we will replace you.”

“Why do you think the Truthbringers are Whitish?” asked a young woman with a silver comb in her sloppily-twisted hair. “Most of them look like they’re from Baylore. They say they are, too.”

“The original Truthbringers are Whitish, but they have recruited many Itreans to join their cause, which has helped them blend in. And I know they are Whitish because we fought the Whitish army in Larkhaven. We defeated them, but reinforcements have arrived. They have overrun Larkhaven and wait for spring to launch their attack on Baylore. The Truthbringers were the first part in a plan the High King of Whitland made to conquer Itrea once and for all.”

The portly man struggled against his captors. “Lies and blasphemy!”

“Well, I support her,” said the woman who had spoken first. “I’m not going to cower like you lot. Didn’t we complain when the Truthbringers took over our work? Didn’t we lament the end of free journalism?”

“Traitor!” the portly man said.

“Please remove him from my presence,” I said.

Sharing a satisfied look, my soldiers covered his head with a sack once again and dragged him away.

“What are you going to do with him?” asked a nervous-looking woman.

“Keep him out of trouble. Don’t worry—I won’t execute him. Now, does anyone else want to help our cause, or should I speak with this young woman exclusively?” I inclined my head toward the outspoken woman.

No one else spoke.

“Very well. Soldiers, please see to the comfort of the staff. I will need their help operating the printing press, so ensure they receive a good night’s sleep and a hearty breakfast.”

Once the rest of the captives were led away, I gestured for the outspoken woman to join me at a table. A small smile tugged at her lips; I wondered if she was mocking me or laughing at her coworkers. She was short and brown-skinned, her hair tied in a loose knot, and a strong nose dominated her features.

“So,” I said once we were seated. “I would love to hear everything you know about the two newspapers. Which one did you work at?”

“The Palace Times.”

I raised my eyebrows at her.

“I know, I know. It’s not exactly famous for its accurate reporting. But I wanted a job as a journalist, and working at the printing press was the only way I could convince my parents to let me leave home.” She shook her head, smiling. “You know, in all the times I imagined seeing the inside of Baylore Palace, I never quite envisioned these circumstances.”

“You said something about the Truthbringers taking over the newspapers. What did you mean? Have they overrun your offices with force, or are they bribing you to print their stories?”

“It’s been a gradual change. I’m not that much older than you, Your Majesty, so I was a child when the Truthbringers first appeared in Baylore. My family was immediately suspicious of them, and we were sure they would be kicked out in no time. People didn’t stand for that sort of thing, at least not in the Baylore we knew.”

She sighed. “But then the unthinkable happened. People started listening to them and spreading their lies. The newspapers exposed them for the villains they were, reminding people there was no reason to be afraid of the forbidden races, and my parents subscribed to both papers so they could find reason in the face of everyone’s paranoia. The papers were impartial. Sure, the palace kept an eye on them in case they tried to slander any royalty too badly, but otherwise you could count on them to report more or less the truth. Or at least the more entertaining rumors.”

“Then...” I prompted.

“It was after you left the city, and after King Olleack took over, when the Truthbringers came knocking on our office door. Midsummer, it was. They said we had a choice: either we’d be arrested for treason and replaced by their supporters, or we had to start printing the stories they wanted everyone to hear.

“Two of my friends stood up to them and got hauled off, and that was when we realized they were serious. We didn’t want to rot away in a cell, so we did as we were told. Every day we’d get a list of stories the Truthbringers wanted printed, and we had to write them and put them to press overnight. Our reporters were out of work, but at least they weren’t in jail.”

“So were most of your coworkers opposed to the takeover?” I asked.

“I have no idea. We don’t like talking about that sort of thing, because anyone who opposes the Truthbringers somehow ends up

getting caught. We just go along with it and keep our heads down.”

I sat forward, hands clasped on the table. “Can I count on your help?”

“Of course, Your Majesty.” She gave me a savage smile. “Those bastards have been asking for it.”

I couldn’t help smiling in return. “Excellent. I need to start printing the truth again, and it will be easiest if I have someone knowledgeable to run the operation. We can’t send reporters into the city yet—”

“No way. It’d be way too dangerous.”

I nodded. “But you can help us write the stories. Share what you know, and we’ll supply the rest.”

“Brilliant. Only...”

“Yes?”

“We won’t be able to print anything for tomorrow. It takes hours to assemble the type, and we don’t even have articles to work with. People will know something’s happened to the newspapers.”

“People will know when the Truthbringers visit and find both offices stripped bare,” I said. “We weren’t going to keep that secret for long.”

“True.”

I stood, fighting to suppress another yawn. “What was your name?”

“Vyrna, Your Majesty.”

“Very good. Get some rest now, if you can. Tomorrow I need you to lead both newspaper teams in writing a completely new set of stories.”

* * *

The next morning, I startled awake at a loud knocking. For a moment I couldn’t figure out where I was—I hardly remembered returning to my rooms the previous night.

The knocking continued, so I threw off my bedcovers and pulled on a robe. I had no time to tame my hair. Outside, low clouds

smothered the sun, so I had no idea what time it was.

When I pulled open the door to my suite at last, Kamarri nearly fell into my sitting room.

“What is it?” I snapped.

She winced, and I immediately regretted my harsh tone. “We found this among the printing supplies, Your Majesty. I thought you should see it.” She held out a thin, leather-bound journal with cords hanging untied.

“What is it?”

“Just read it.”

I took the journal and thumbed through the first few pages. Several held rough drawings of what looked like Baylore, including more detailed sketches of certain parts of the city. Then I found a heading in tidy script.

A Five Step Plan for Eliminating the Makbori Threat

Blood pounded in my ears as I continued to read.

- 1. The so-called Forbidden Races are easily targeted. Turn public suspicion against these demons and make their influence and numbers appear widespread. Nudge the good people of Baylore to turn to Varos when their own heathen ways provide no answers for why evil has been allowed to fester in Itea. Once civilians are accustomed to the execution and incarceration of the Forbidden Races, the campaign can continue.*
- 2. Cast suspicion on dangerous forms of magic that should have been designated Forbidden, i.e. Flame-Spinning and Potion-Making. Once public opinion has turned against these magic forms, ban their use in public and begin arresting known practitioners. Accustom people to the criminalization of common forms of magic which should never have been allowed to spread so insidiously.*

3. *Now that Itreans are accustomed to treating magic as the scourge it truly is, begin spreading the word of Varos and teaching them that all evil in this world stems from the Makhori, demon-spawn of the Seventeen Gods of Sin. Until all magic is wiped from our good earth, suffering and sin will prevail.*
4. *Create a register of Makhori living in Baylore so as to monitor their evil deeds. If all goes according to plan, the good people of Baylore will begin exposing the demons for what they are and will report their suspicions to the Truthbringers. Round up any who protest or who are reported by their neighbors. Those who submit peacefully to the will of Varos will be treated gently. Those who threaten our forces will be executed in public, to make an example for those who would follow their lead.*
5. *When reinforcements arrive, all remaining Makhori will be dealt with, as per the registers. Any dangerous or noncompliant Makhori will face immediate death. Any who show support for the cause of good will be spared. These docile Makhori will be sterilized so as to prevent the further spread of the taint through breeding, and will be enlisted to provide labor for infrastructure projects necessary to turn Itrea into the next great outpost of the Kinship Thrones.*

Nausea rose in my stomach. How had people overlooked this for so long? Every step of the Truthbringers' work had been carefully mapped out in advance. How had no one realized their end goal before now?

And they had already reached the fourth part of their plan. All that remained was for the Whitish army to march in and deal with the remaining magic races.

"Thank you for bringing this to me," I said quietly. I fought to keep my voice steady. "Has anyone else seen it?"

"Not that I know of," Kamarri said, "though the newspaper staff

might know about it.” Now that I looked at her more closely, I realized her eyes were red-rimmed and bright with fear.

For the first time, I felt a surge of compassion for the woman. She might not approve of everything I did, but she was doing her best. Just like the rest of us.

“Oh, and—and one more thing, Your Majesty.” She twisted her hands together.

“What is it?”

“Prince Calden is missing.”

The New Baylore Daily

I sank onto the sofa with a groan. This was too much, on top of everything else. My head felt as though it were stuffed full of rags; I had not slept enough, and my thoughts struggled to catch up. Fear for Cal settled in the pit of my stomach—I wished I had forced him to stay behind. If anything happened to him, I would never forgive myself.

“Did the rest of our troops return, then?” I asked at last.

“Mostly,” Kamarri said. “As far as they could tell, no one was caught, but some might still be in hiding. I hope that’s where Prince Calden is.”

I nodded wearily. “If they had captured him, surely we would know.”

“Surely.” Kamarri rocked back on her heels. “Oh—and that printer you wanted to speak to is waiting outside.”

After dismissing Kamarri with a wave of the leather journal, I rose wearily and shuffled back to my bedchamber. I had a duty to my people, regardless of the fact that I’d slept less than six hours in the past two nights combined. Cal’s absence did not change that. He had made his

choice.

As I dressed, the words from the journal floated back to me.
Round up any who protest.

Dangerous or noncompliant Makbori will face immediate death.

I had known all along this was the Whitish army's aim, yet to see it written so baldly...it made the threat real in a way it never had been before. And the Truthbringers had followed this outline to the letter. Nothing I had done had made a difference.

*Dangerous Makbori will face immediate death...*was this confined to the forbidden races, or did Flamespinners and Potioneers fall under the same category?

My stomach twisted in fear. *Oh, Cal, please be safe.*

When I emerged from my suite at last, I nearly tripped over a serving girl holding a tray of food. Of course—the kitchen still thought I was taking breakfast in my chambers. I thanked her and took the tray, though the smell of eggs turned my stomach.

Vyrna was waiting on a sofa near the fire, her hands folded in her lap. She had evidently borrowed clothes—instead of the plain dress from yesterday, she wore a nobleman's hunting costume, with leather trousers and a deep red coat. Her hair hung down her back in a braid.

"Your Majesty." She scrambled to her feet when she saw me and gave a stiff bow.

"Good morning, Vyrna." I set the tray down and selected a buttered scone. "Help yourself to breakfast, if you would like."

"Thank you, Your Majesty."

"I trust my staff found a suitable place for the printing presses?"

"Yes, Your Majesty." After a moment's hesitation, Vyrna picked up a slice of quiche and bit off the end. Her manners would have horrified my mother, but we did not have time for niceties.

When I had finished the scone, I said, "Come. Show me to the printing presses, and we will begin our work at once."

With the help of several guards, Vyrna led me to a part of the historic wing I had never ventured into before. It was up several flights

of stairs, tucked just below the roof, and it was full of what looked like disused classrooms and craft studios.

“What is this?” I asked under my breath.

“His Majesty King Baltheor said it was where the palace trained its own merchants and Weavers long before the University was founded. The royalty wanted a monopoly on trade and magical talent, so they recruited as many Weavers and merchants as possible to join their staff, promising titles and wealth to any who agreed to move into the palace.”

“Interesting. I wonder if we can move some of my army up here to train and work on uniforms and weaponry.”

The only lights on the whole floor came from a room near the back, from which spilled loud chatter and a brilliant golden glow. Inside, the two printing presses loomed like enormous beasts at either side of the room, while the staff of both newspaper offices sat at desks in the center. Bags upon bags filled with tiny pieces of type were piled along every wall, along with vats of ink and vast rolls of paper. I was amazed my army had managed to relocate it all in such short order.

“Good morning,” I said brusquely.

The chatter died at once. Several of the staff paled in fear, while others stared at me wide-eyed.

“I don’t think they expected you to oversee things in person,” Vyrna whispered from behind me.

“You know why you are here. We need to create a new set of articles and put them to press by midnight tonight.”

“By midnight?” asked an elderly man who had been scribbling something on a scrap of paper. “Usually we have the print run ready for delivery at seven o’clock.”

I gave him a hard stare. No matter what these people thought of me, I was still their queen. “King Olleack and his guards will not allow an unauthorized newspaper to be delivered at the usual time. We will work under cover of darkness, and disregard who has subscribed to each newspaper. From now on, we deliver to every citizen we can reach without endangering our soldiers.”

No one argued with this.

“People will know the newspaper has come under new control. I’m sure the Truthbringers are spreading the word even now. But we will continue to print the news under the Baylore Daily banner—”

“Hey!” said a man I assumed came from the Palace Times.

“—because people tend to trust the Baylore Daily more. Any questions?”

“What’s our pay?” a bold-looking young woman asked. “My parents are expecting me to send home half my income every quarter, and if they don’t hear from me, they’ll come here and drag me back.”

“You will receive the same rates you received before. I’m sure someone has a record of the payroll amongst all this paperwork.”

One of my guards held up a folder. “Lady Dellik found this last night, Your Majesty. Said to give it to you this morning.”

“Thank you. Now, we must decide which news will be printed tomorrow. Can someone tell me the requirements for each article?”

We spent the rest of the morning agreeing on the content of each of the ten articles that would fill the new Baylore Daily.

The front-page article sprawled several more pages in the middle of the newspaper and usually ran 2,000 words, while shorter articles were between 100 and 1,000 words apiece. I had no idea how the staff could decide on a topic and write exactly the right number of words to fill the allotted space, but they assured me it was not a problem.

We reserved the front-page article for a huge spread on the Whitish invasion of Larkhaven and the coming attack on Baylore. One of the staff even promised to carve a woodblock with an illustration of ships descending on a flaming city, which we would print directly below the headline.

Other articles were reserved for instructing civilians how to prepare for siege—and revealing Olleack’s scheme in attempting to drain the town’s stores—as well as recounting the history of Whitish persecution against the magic races, to remind people this was no new threat. A small article near the end of the paper instructed readers how to spot

Whitish men among the Truthbringers, from their fair hair and skin to their clipped accent and religious leanings. I did not want to start an unnecessary crusade against my own people who fit those descriptions, but I hoped it might prompt people to see Truthbringers as the foreign invaders they really were.

By the time we finished making arrangements, the workshop was already humming with activity. Some newspaper staff were scribbling and carving away, while others re-stacked the tiny metal type into boxes.

I left Vyrna in charge of the operation, with fifteen guards to ensure her orders were obeyed. I would be amazed if the staff managed to print the newspaper in time.

* * *

Snow began falling that afternoon, driving the last of the rioters inside. The streets sank into an eerie stillness, smoke curling from chimneys and burned-out shops like tendrils of seaweed. If the Truthbringers had noticed our takeover of the newspaper offices, they gave no indication.

Too exhausted to venture anywhere else, I spent the afternoon closed away in my royal suite reading the journal Kamarri had given me. The more I read, the more I suspected someone from Baylore had had a hand in planning the Whitish takeover. The notes were extensive, from religious texts that supported the persecution of Makhori to evidence that could be used against certain magic races. And after that, page after page of details describing all manner of Itrean customs, beliefs, and language that would help a Whitish spy blend in.

But who would have done such a thing? Who would have knowingly led our greatest enemies into the heart of Baylore?

As darkness fell, the door to my suite opened a crack. I sat up straight, lowering the journal, and stared as Mellicante, Baridya, Leoth, Deance, and Viko filed in without waiting for my invitation. They carried platters of cakes and pastries and cheese, and Leoth held a

pitcher of what smelled like mulled wine, rich and spiced.

“What are you doing here?”

“Leoth mentioned he hadn’t seen you eat anything today,” Baridya said. “We thought you could do with a bit of company and sustenance.”

Leoth took a seat on the sofa beside me. “What is that?” He tugged the journal from my grip.

“It’s an outline of everything the Truthbringers have planned. Right down to killing off any dangerous magic races as soon as their reinforcements arrive.”

“Where did you get that?” Mellicante asked sharply.

“Kamarri said someone found it in one of the newspaper offices. The Truthbringers must have been supervising the staff closely if they were spending enough time at the offices to leave that lying around.”

Leoth started thumbing through the journal, stopping when he came to the page titled *A Five Step Plan for Eliminating the Makhori Threat*. As he read, Mellicante and Baridya crossed behind the sofa to look over his shoulder.

I poured a brimming gobletful of mulled wine and drank deeply, my hands shaking. It was all too much—the heavy losses we had sustained while fighting our way back into the palace, the Makhori register, the riots, and now this. The Truthbringers were very close to achieving their goal, while we scrambled to patch up disasters in their wake.

I knew what we had to do, but it seemed a distant dream. We had to get the city’s Makhori population to safety, recruit as many as possible to our army, and launch a coordinated attack against Olleack’s royal residence, using magic to overcome his guards’ superior strategy. All in the couple spans before the Whitish army arrived at our gates.

I drained my goblet and poured another. The wine was already going to my head—Leoth was right that I had eaten very little. My appetite had been nonexistent lately; rich foods turned my stomach. Likely it was a result of the ever-growing weight of fear and hopelessness that had burdened me in recent days.

“So they intend to enslave us,” Leoth said, reaching for my goblet

and taking a deep swallow.

“Not us—I mean, not me. They’ll execute me along the rest of the forbidden races, and maybe Cal too.”

Leoth nodded solemnly. “And they’re nearly finished. All that remains is for the Whitish army to march in and tidy up what the Truthbringers started.”

“What can we do to stop it?” Baridya asked in a hushed voice. “We’re not just fighting against the Truthbringers and King Olleack. We’re fighting our own people. They all believe these lies.”

“We’re doing everything we can,” I said, seizing the goblet back from Leoth. “It’s not enough. I know it’s not enough. But we’re trying.”

Mellicante tugged the book from Leoth’s hands and snapped it shut. “This has just confirmed what we already suspected. There’s no reason to dwell on it.”

“Even wealthy Makhori have been retreating into their homes lately,” Deance said. “My mother says some of her friends no longer dare to venture out after dark, and when they head to the Market District for a bit of shopping, they travel in large groups for safety. I think people know instinctively what is happening, but they either support it or they’re too frightened to say anything.”

“Maybe they’ll pay attention when you give them another version of events,” Baridya said. “Is it true the newspaper staff are writing up a new Baylore Daily tonight?”

“It is,” I said with a grim smile. “We’ll distribute it tonight. I don’t know if it will accomplish anything, but at least it will give people reason to question Olleack’s word.”

“Most of them have no idea the Whitish army is on its way,” Leoth said. “Even if they don’t believe it, the truth should at least raise doubts. With any luck, people will start questioning my father.”

I nodded, looking sideways at Leoth. From close up, I could see the layer of facepaint that concealed the last of his bruises. If his back still pained him, he gave no sign.

“You should try these pastries,” Baridya said, holding one of the

platters my way. “They’re divine.”

I reluctantly selected a flaky pastry with a custard-apple filling. She was right—the flavors were delicious, the baked apples melting into the custard, a delicate hint of vanilla laced throughout. And to my surprise, I managed to eat the whole thing without any protest from my stomach. It was a good thing too—I was already feeling dizzy from the mulled wine.

“Oh, I love these!” Deance said, reaching for the platter. “My mother and I used to buy two apple tarts every Sullimsday for breakfast. Until the baker moved away, that is. The Sullimsday market was so much better when I was young.”

“It just seems that way because everything is more exciting when you’re a child,” Baridya said with a smile.

“No, I swear it was better. More festive. But as the Truthbringers’ influence spread, merchants started moving to Larkhaven and the whole market grew more subdued. I didn’t know what was happening at the time, but it’s obvious now.”

I sank back on the sofa, and Leoth dropped his hand to rest at his side, just barely touching my leg. The wine seemed to push away my worries, blurring the Truthbringers and the looming war until they were nothing more than shadows. A fire flickered in the grate, casting its warmth through my private sitting-room, and outside, snow continued to fall, wiping clean the streets and burying the roofs of the city.

“I hope I can see Baylore as it once was before I die,” I murmured. “I always dreamed of the beauty of this city, but I’ve seen only ugliness.”

“It might never be the same,” Mellicante said. “I don’t think this is something we can just forget and move on from. Even if we manage to overthrow the Whitish army, the very foundation of this place will have changed.”

“I know,” I said. “It was just a fool’s hope.”

Deance leaned forward, her hands clasped over her knees. “I don’t know if you remember, Your Majesty, but I’m a Minstrel. I could show

you what Baylore was like before the Truthbringers.”

“I’d love to see that,” Viko said unexpectedly. I realized he no longer wore his Reycoran guard uniform—someone must have relieved him of his duties for the evening.

“As would I,” I said. I had forgotten Deance was a Minstrel—I had never seen her using her powers before.

My only familiarity with Minstrels’ power came from our preparations to retake Larkhaven, when Kamarri had worked with our Minstrels to develop stories that would win townspeople to our side. Apparently they wove a spell with their words that made any named characters feel as though they were living the story. But I had never experienced one for myself.

Judging by my companions’ expressions of excitement, they hadn’t either.

“Very good.” Deance gave me a satisfied smile. “Close your eyes.”

I took one last sip of mulled wine before setting my goblet aside. My eyes drifted closed, and I leaned back against the cushions of the sofa. Leoth’s hand crept over mine; I shot him a sideways look from beneath my eyelashes, and he grinned.

“Princess Kalleah is approaching Baylore,” Deance began in a clear, melodic voice. Her usual clipped tone was gone. “She has grown up on a comfortable estate not far from the city, and she is accompanied on this visit by her friends—Baridya, Mellicante, Deance, and Viko—and her suitor, Leoth.”

I could feel myself blushing, and Leoth squeezed my hand.

Then the spell began to take hold, and the mottled darkness behind my eyelids was replaced by a scene so vivid I felt as though I had been transported there. The sun was bright and the sky clear, the fields bristling with summer growth. Such was Deance’s skill that I could feel the warmth of the sun’s rays on my arms and smell the sunbaked dirt of the road. Deance’s voice faded away, replaced by the rustle of wind passing over the stalks of grain and the scuffle of our footsteps.

Ahead, the gates of Baylore hung open, and a vast stream of people

poured through onto Market Street. Farmers drove cartloads of fresh carrots and lettuce and eggplants, while merchants guided wagons laden with finely-spun and dyed wool, expensive wooden furniture, and intricate metalwork.

“It’s the Sullimsday Market,” Mellicante said. “This is what it looked like in its heyday.”

She was walking arm-in-arm with Baridya, and I had my elbow linked with Leoth’s. We all wore sensible boots and trousers, though my silk shirt was rather finer than my friends’.

When we passed through the gates into Baylore, my senses were assaulted by the overwhelming bounty of the Sullimsday Market. Hawkers shouted over the general din of crowds passing along the bustling street; sharp, pungent aromas rose from copper bowls piled full of spices from distant lands; brightly-dyed fabric and wool caught my eye; and musicians played lutes and pipes and fiddles on every corner, the melodies rising in a lively chorus that transformed the chaos into an elaborate dance of sorts.

“Here, you must try these!” Deance said, pulling us to a stand piled with steaming millet cakes. As the rich honeyed smell wafted to us, I closed my eyes and breathed deeply.

“Your Highness,” the stall-owner said, bowing and smiling. “For you, anything you would like, free of charge.”

I immediately wondered if he was trying to poison me. Then I felt stupid—this was nothing but a beautiful story. There was no danger.

We each took a millet cake, still warm from the oven, and tasted the delicate, crumbling pastry. It was the best I’d ever eaten, flaky and sweet, better even than what I’d eaten in the palace.

“Thank you, good sir,” I said, and the stall-owner beamed at me.

“Come this way,” Deance said, beckoning us down a side street. “We have to prepare for the Midsummer dance tonight.”

She led us to what must have been her mother’s manor—I assumed she was hurrying the story along, because what should have been a several-hour walk was over in a trice—and helped us pick out rich

gowns and a suit each for Leoth, Mellicante, and Viko. By the time we were dressed and ready, night had fallen, and the streets were strung with Weavers' lights that glowed like stars. I glanced in a mirror on the way out and saw that we were all a shade prettier than in real life—Leoth's fading bruises were gone, and we almost glowed with happiness.

At the main square, the palace was lit up like an enchantment, and countless strings of Weavers' lights crisscrossed the space. Musicians played lively, beautiful tunes, and though the music was foreign, our feet somehow knew the steps. A handsome man immediately asked Deance to dance, while Leoth swept me away with an irresistible smile. Baridya dragged Mellicante into the square behind us, leaving Viko to meander around the perimeter, watching with great interest.

"I've never experienced a Minstrel's tale before," Leoth said, "but I have heard they can be dangerous. Some people grow addicted to the story world and never want to leave."

"I can see why." I did not need to concentrate on the dance at all—my feet swept me along of their own volition. "Do you think we're actually having this conversation, or is Deance narrating it for us?"

Leoth laughed. "I hadn't thought of that. No...I think it's us."

"I could live in this world forever. Blending in with these people...enjoying the bounty of the market..."

"Not to mention, we've spent hours together in the story world, and your power isn't affecting me at all."

"Cloudy gods. You're right." I lowered my voice. "Do you think I'd be able to sleep all night in your arms here, without any consequences?"

"Probably." Leoth grinned. "Wouldn't it be funny if we were mumbling to ourselves back in the sitting room, and Deance was just listening and thinking we were right idiots?"

I laughed self-consciously. "I hope that's not how it works."

We danced until late that night, the moon rising overhead, wine flowing freely. Viko disappeared somewhere along the way—I hoped he was enjoying himself, wherever he was.

At last we retired to Deance's manor, where she allocated us each a richly appointed room with a bed softer than meringue.

I kept expecting the story to end, but instead the door creaked open and Leoth tiptoed in.

"I wasn't sure this would work," he whispered.

Then he climbed into my bed and wrapped me in his strong, warm embrace. I nestled my face to his chest, surprised to find his back smooth and free of scars. Then I let my eyes drift closed, more content than I had ever felt, trying to push aside the knowledge that this was not real.

All at once, the story world dissolved, and I was once again slumped on the sofa in my private sitting room. I blinked a few times, waiting for my vision to clear, and saw my friends stirring around me. Viko shifted uncomfortably in his chair; I wondered where he had disappeared off to during the night. Leoth's hand was still in mine, and he squeezed it, giving me a sad smile.

The loss of that story world felt as though a part of me had been wrenched away. The memories felt real, and they ached more for their falseness.

"That was remarkable," Baridya said, her voice dreamy and distant.

"Was that really how Baylore used to be?" I asked softly. I reached for the goblet of wine once again, seeking a way to return to that blissful time.

"More or less," Deance said. "I embellished a bit, but the Sullimsday market really was that exciting."

"Could you hear us talking during the story? That was us talking, wasn't it, not the story?"

Deance smiled. "No, I couldn't hear you. That was all in your heads. And I don't provide any dialogue except my own."

Relieved, I glanced at Leoth, who shared my sheepish expression.

"Thank you for that," Baridya said. "I'd forgotten what it used to be like."

"It reminds us what we're fighting for," I said. "The idea of

returning to a time like that—when people were prosperous and welcoming—”

“And didn’t throw rotten fruit at their queen,” Leoth added.

“And that. Anyway, it was beautiful.”

Baridya nodded emphatically.

“I’m glad you enjoyed it,” Deance said. “I need to get some rest now, though. Storytelling takes it out of me.”

I stood and stretched, arching my back. “I’m tired too. Goodnight, everyone.”

As the others dispersed, Leoth lingered in the royal suite. Once the doors fell closed, he murmured, “Did your story go the same way mine did?”

My neck grew hot—it was different now, talking about what we had shared in a dream world. “You mean the way we fell asleep in each other’s arms?”

He nodded, and his eyes were suddenly hungry. “Oh, Kalleah, I wish more than anything that we could have that.”

“I know. Waking back up from that story was painful.”

He crossed to the door and slid the bolt into place. “You don’t have any servants lingering around here, do you?”

“No.”

He took my chin in his hands and kissed me, starting lightly but deepening it until I wanted to melt.

I seized his collar and dragged him closer, one hand in his thick, shaggy hair.

“Kalleah,” Leoth breathed. He began unlacing my gown, his hands nimble and sure, and I broke the kiss to tug his shirt over his head.

My gown fell to the floor, and I stood in just my shift. The chill air rose goosebumps down my arms, but Leoth’s skin was warm and soft against mine. I ran a finger over the ridged scar on his arm, where the source of his forbidden power had been sliced roughly away, still afraid to touch his injured back.

He drew back, looking at me with dark, sorrowful eyes.

“Does it hurt?”

“No, but it’s disgusting, isn’t it?”

“Not at all.” I turned him gently to see his back; to my surprise, the cuts had healed dramatically in the past two days, leaving nothing but a mess of scabs and raised lines. “Do they still hurt?”

“Nothing like before.”

Leoth guided me over to my bed and loosened the stays on my shift, which pooled by my feet on the floor.

“You’re so beautiful, Kalleah,” he murmured.

I leaned into his kiss once more, feeling as though we had slipped back into that seductive story world. It was Midsummer, and we had spent the night dancing away in a crowd that welcomed me among them. My power had lost its potency.

Then we sank into the depths of the vast royal bed; I clung to Leoth as though afraid he would turn to mist and drift away like the memory of a sweet dream, and he trailed kisses down my jaw and neck, his hands gentle yet persistent.

Afterward, we lay twined together for as long as I dared. I was far from sleep, but Leoth’s breathing quickly evened out; my head rested on his chest, so I could feel it rising and falling gently.

I did not want him to slip into such deep sleep that I couldn’t rouse him, so I nudged him gently.

“Mmm?” he mumbled.

“Time to go,” I said.

“Why can’t I stay?” He still sounded half-asleep.

I rolled him over and kissed his ear. “I want you alive. Which means sleeping in your own bed tonight.”

His eyes struggled open, and he yawned hugely. “I’ve never fallen asleep that easily before. Gods, I wish I could stay the night here.”

“Maybe we can set up a bed in the far corner of the room,” I teased. “But for now, you have to go!”

He tugged on his clothes, kissed me once more, and sloped from my room with his hair still a tousled mess.

* * *

It was three in the morning when a knock sounded on my door. I was so exhausted from my string of sleepless nights that at first I thought it came from a dream. Then I heard the muffled voice of my guard saying, “Thank you. I’ll deliver it at once. Please wait here.”

I struggled to sit up just in time for my guard to approach with a newspaper that still smelled of ink.

“I was told to give this to you at once, Your Majesty.”

“Th—thank you,” I said around a huge yawn.

Tapping my lamp to light it, I hunched over the newspaper.

Then a smile spread across my face.

Over an intricately detailed miniature stamp of the Larkhaven harbor under attack from Whitish ships, the heading blared,

*YOU HAVE BEEN LIED TO:
THE WHITISH ARMY IS COMING TO CONQUER BAYLORE,
AND THE TRUTHBRINGERS WILL DO ANYTHING TO HIDE
THE TRUTH*

Unfolding the newspaper, I began to read.

War is coming to Itrea.

Larkhaven has already fallen to Whitish invaders.

Baylore is under attack from enemies disguised as Truthbringers.

These are the headlines you should have been reading. While the Whitish spies calling themselves Truthbringers have spread hatred, mistrust, and instability, they have been distracting attention from the true problem at hand: the coming war.

High King Warrow of Whitland is moving to conquer Itea and add the independent nation to his ever-expanding empire. Yet these advances have been carried out in secret. The High King has cleverly directed hatred and mistrust at the Itean royalty, allowing the Truthbringers to pose as forces of good rather than foreign enemies.

The Forbidden Races have become a convenient target for the ire of Baylore's people, and as the Truthbringers have spread their teachings and bigotry further still, it has grown to encompass most magic races.

Yet this has done nothing but distract attention from the true threats facing Baylore.

Queen Kalleah and her supporters witnessed the might of the Whitish army firsthand while defending Larkhaven against attack from the sea. Many lives were lost in freeing Larkhaven from Whitish influence, and all was for naught.

An estimated twenty thousand... (story continues on page 5)

It was brilliant. The newspaper staff had outdone themselves.

I scanned the remainder of the newspaper as quickly as I could, unable to suppress a smile. I needed to make sure all of the stories conveyed the truth as clearly as possible, and without any secret meaning that would undermine my work.

But the newspaper was perfect. Vyrna had done her job well.

No longer tired in the slightest, I leapt from bed, dressed in the simplest gown I could find, and brushed my hair hurriedly. No time for formality now, when it was still hours before sunrise.

Vyrna was waiting in the main Cheltish wing sitting room, looking satisfied despite eyes red from exhaustion.

"Well?" she asked, grinning nervously.

I beamed at her. “It’s fantastic. Well done. Are the newspapers ready to be delivered?”

“They should be. I think your soldiers were waiting for us near the ballroom.”

Tugging a cloak over my shoulders, I swept off toward the ballroom, Vyrna trotting along behind me. The halls stood empty and dark, though light shone from the stairs leading down to the ballroom. A small contingent of soldiers huddled at the top of the steps, all dressed in dark colors and bundled beneath copious layers. Nearby lay a pile of burlap sacks crammed to bursting with newspapers.

“Have you received orders?” I asked as they shuffled about, attempting to fall into a neat formation.

“We’re to deliver the Baylore Daily, Your Majesty,” said a young soldier with freckles across his chin.

“Precisely.”

“But we don’t know the paper routes, Your Majesty.”

“That doesn’t matter. I no longer care who has subscribed to the newspapers—just deliver these to every house you can reach without coming into contact with the Truthbringers or the city guards. The Gilded Quarter is likely unreachable, but most of the Market District and Garden District should be safe. If there are mail slots, slip the newspapers through; if there are doormats, put them underneath. Keep them hidden and deliver them directly into people’s homes as much as possible, because if we don’t, I suspect the Truthbringers will collect them before my people even glimpse the headline.”

The freckled soldier saluted. “Yes, Your Majesty. At once.”

“Oh, and one more thing—keep yourselves safe. I don’t need to lose any more soldiers tonight.”

I passed around small vials of the Potioneers’ explosives, tightly stoppered. They would be enough to give my soldiers a chance to flee without causing much true damage. “Take care with these. If the potion is exposed to the air, it will explode. If you’re attacked, throw them at the city guards, making sure the glass shatters.”

With wary looks, my soldiers tucked the vials into belts and coin pouches.

“Make haste. I doubt the city guard will be patrolling in the snow, but I want you back well before sunrise.”

At that, my soldiers collected the sacks of newspapers and started toward the palace doors. I followed, watching as they emerged onto the top step. Snow still fell, the flakes fatter than before, glinting in the light that shone above the doors. On the square below, a hand’s breadth had already collected. My soldiers would leave footprints everywhere they went.

I ventured to the doorway, where cold air swirled around me. A few snowflakes blew onto my face, stinging before melting away. I could smell the snow, crisp and fresh, smothering the ashes and blood and rubble from the riots beneath a coat of pristine white.

“Keep snowing,” I whispered into the darkness. “Bury my soldiers’ footprints before morning.”

The Bonfire in the Square

I woke to the smell of smoke. The light from my windows shone pale grey; for a moment I thought it was not yet dawn. Then I caught sight of the snow mounded on my balcony railing, flakes still spiraling down from a blank sky.

It was deep enough to cover all trace of my soldiers' footprints.

Excitement bubbling within, I scrambled to dress. The Cheltish common area was empty, though Viko stood guard just outside my doors.

"Any news?" I asked him eagerly.

"Huh?"

"About the newspaper we delivered last night!"

"Everyone's still abed, as far as I can tell," he said. "We weren't the only ones who had a late night."

Now that I looked at him more closely, he looked paler than usual, his eyes bloodshot.

"Well, let's find out, then! Come along."

Viko hastened after me as I strode from the Cheltish wing. The palace was beginning to wake up around us—Weavers and blacksmiths

marched past on their way to work, while small groups of soldiers slouched toward the dining hall, following the smell of porridge and fresh bread. I almost envied my soldiers, safe in the knowledge that they were following a plan, that their work would pay off someday. If they knew how blindly I led them into war...

As we neared the entrance, a babble of voices rose to greet us. We rounded the corner to find several dozen soldiers and newspaper staff clustered around the main doors, talking over one another as they took turns peering through a crack in the side entrance. The smell of smoke intensified as I approached, and my excitement soured.

"Has something happened?" I called over the noise.

The voices died out, and my soldiers and newspaper staff turned, some bowing or curtsying hastily.

Vyrna emerged from the cluster, dark circles under her eyes, tufts of hair sticking from her braid. She didn't appear to have slept all night. "They're burning the newspapers, Your Majesty."

My soldiers and newspaper staff parted to allow me through. One hand on the wall, I peered through the gap in the side entrance, snow swirling in my face.

A bonfire raged in the square, consuming what looked like three whole trees. Around it stood Truthbringers tossing armful after armful of newspapers onto the flames. A wide circle of snow had melted around the ravenous fire, and the rest of the snow on the square lay trampled and dirty. The fat flakes falling over the bonfire melted and evaporated long before they touched the flames.

"All our work is wasted," Vyrna said tightly. "I thought people might actually pay attention, but..."

"We will try again," I said. "And again and again, until they listen." I had expected something like this, yet each newspaper that fell into the bonfire with a shower of sparks still tore at me. "Some people will have read the paper before handing it over. Others will surely keep it. Even if most just saw the headline and that engraving, it might be enough to sow doubt."

“I hope so, Your Majesty,” Vyrna said.

I stood in the doorway for what felt like an hour, the wind numbing my cheeks and nose, snow settling on my hair. I could not tear my eyes from the bonfire.

Eventually a palace guard emerged from the watching crowd and jogged toward the gates, clutching a piece of paper in one hand. At first I thought it was a salvaged newspaper article; then I caught sight of the words in solid black type at the top. He let himself through the gates and ran up the steps, doing a double-take when he saw me at the door.

“Your Majesty,” he panted. “Have you seen these?”

I snatched the paper from him.

Possession of the Baylore Daily Punishable by Death

A dreadful curse has been laid upon the newspaper known as the Baylore Daily, and any found in possession of this newspaper is helping spread this deadly infection.

To help contain the curse, all citizens found in possession of said newspaper will be put to death. It is the only way to save our people from the spread of plague.

This order is signed

*His Majesty Olleack Keycoran
King and Protector of Itrea*

My hands were shaking with fury, and the page crumpled with the force of my grip.

“He can’t do this! He can’t target innocent people like this!”

Even through my anger, I could see it was a clever move. If I continued to deliver the newspaper, I would be sentencing my people to death.

A clever move, and a twisted, heartless way to control the people of Baylore.

“People will protest, surely,” I muttered. “Olleack has gone too far this time.” I turned back to the palace guard. “Has anyone been killed over this yet?”

“No, Your Majesty. Not publicly, at least.”

I looked back out at the square, noticing details that had not drawn my attention before. More city guards than usual ringed the perimeter, and alongside the council building, in a pocket of clear space where snow had not fallen, stood a cluster of townspeople watching the bonfire with excitement.

“I’ve just pushed them to act sooner and more brutally than they had planned,” I said under my breath. “The more this happens, the less people will protest when it comes time to round up the magic races.”

“Maybe it’s good,” Viko’s voice said from behind me. “In Larkhaven, the worst part was that the Whitish never acted openly against us. If they had made a move like this, it would’ve riled people up. We would’ve realized they were our enemies and dealt with them much sooner. I bet there are people sitting in their homes right now who are angry enough to fight back as soon as you give them a chance.”

“I hope you’re right.” But how was I supposed to reach out to them?

I needed to speak to my advisors. We could leverage this situation if we acted swiftly—if we found a way to reach those who supported me.

But just as I tore my gaze from the square, a shout pulled my attention back.

A cluster of white-clad city guards emerged from Market Street, marching toward the bonfire. They dragged a man who thrashed about and yelled for help, his eyes wide and panicked. The guards might have been restraining a child for all the heed they paid to his struggling.

When they hauled the man before the bonfire, a Truthbringer shouted, “You were caught with the cursed newspaper in your kitchen. By order of King Olleack, you are hereby sentenced to death.”

“No! I had nothing to do with it!” the man yelled. “It was shoved through my mail slot!”

“That doesn’t matter,” the Truthbringer bellowed. “You have been exposed to the demon queen’s curse, and as long as you live, you will spread her vile disease.”

“No! That’s—”

His protest died as the city guards shoved him forward into the flames.

Screaming, he jumped back, but one of the city guards prodded him with the tip of his sword. His hair was already smoldering. Again he screamed, his voice hoarse, and the sound cut right through me.

Without consciously deciding to act, I shoved the side door open and dashed down the palace steps.

“No!” I shouted. “I will not allow the slaughter of innocents!” Behind me, I heard footsteps muffled in the snow as my soldiers charged after me.

I unlocked the palace gates and bounded into the square, Truthbringers scattering. My sword slid easily free of its sheath, and I heard a chorus of rasping metal as my soldiers behind me followed suit.

As we charged at the city guards, they backed away from the bonfire, drawing swords and falling into a tight formation. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the captive crawl from the bonfire and collapse into the trampled snow, extinguishing the embers in his clothes and hair.

We collided with the white-clad city guards in a clamor of ringing metal and wordless shouts. I traded blows with one city guard, just barely reacting in time, but soon my soldiers closed in around me and forced me back from the fighting. Unable to see what was happening from behind the backs of my soldiers, I pushed away a spike of annoyance. I should not have ventured from the safety of the palace in the first place; my soldiers were merely doing their duty in protecting me.

Then, all at once, the city guards broke apart and retreated. They must have realized this was not a fight worth pursuing. We turned and

jogged back to the palace in a tight clump, in time to see a bystander helping the wounded man through the palace gates. One arm around the man's waist, the bystander led him up the steps to the doors.

When we reached the palace steps, I called out to the civilian, "You should stay here too. People might turn against you."

He lowered his hood, and I did a double-take as I recognized the man from the slums who had brought the Snake-Blood to us. "I'm still needed out here, Your Majesty."

With a bob of his head, he turned and slunk back onto the square, his swift gait belying his age.

At the top of the stairs, I found my father waiting for me, Dellik by his side. Both wore Weaver-reinforced coats and swords, as though they had been moments from joining the battle. My father's expression was unreadable.

"Do you have a complaint?" I asked him shortly, sheathing my sword with a snap.

"No." He lifted his eyes to the bonfire, face still blank of emotion. "What orders do you have for me, Your Majesty?"

Did he disapprove? I had no idea what he was thinking. But if he would willingly follow my orders, I would make the most of it. "Summon the entire army to the entrance hall. If the Truthbringers or city guards try to harm anyone else, I want you to protect them. Bring them into the palace to seek refuge."

"At once, Your Majesty."

With a brusque nod, I stepped past my father to find Vyrna waiting for me with her mouth ajar.

"What now?" she asked.

I had no idea, but we had to try something. "Print fifty more copies of today's newspaper, just in case. And begin writing content for a new issue. Leave the cover article for now."

"But—"

"Once we find a way to do so safely, we will distribute it as the Palace Times. That hasn't been banned yet. This might be our last

chance to tell people the truth, so we need to make it count.”

* * *

All that day and the three days that followed, snow continued to fall. Deep drifts blanketed the entire city, driving its population inside and burying the remnants of the bonfire that had blazed in the main square. Though it meant Olleack could no longer persecute those in possession of the Baylore Daily, it presented a more serious problem—while stores remained shut, my population risked starvation.

With each passing day, my fear for Cal grew. Ellarie did not know her son was missing—she thought he was spending his days in the Cheltish wing—and I dreaded the prospect of her discovering the truth. I tried to convince myself he was safe, but I could not banish the anxiety that knotted my stomach. Why had he not returned? Was he injured? Held prisoner? My only consolation was that if he had been captured, he would likely have been used as leverage against me once again. So he was out there somewhere, biding his time until he could return.

From the roof of the Cheltish wing, I could barely make out the towers rising from the rest of the palace. Clouds smothered the sun, and snow fell thick and fast. Even in Ambervale, I rarely recalled a storm that lasted so long. On top of food, my people would start running out of kindling and fire-twists before the end of winter if this kept up.

Down in the warren of tunnels and storage rooms beneath the palace, my army was hard at work dividing the city’s food stores into sacks of rations that should each last a family half a span. Delivering these would be more of a challenge—with the snow as deep as my waist, it would take days for my soldiers to wade their way through to every corner of the city. I could send a Flamespinner to melt the snow ahead of my army, but such a blatant use of banned magic might draw Olleack’s guards to the scene. Back in Ambervale, we had fashioned snowshoes to help us walk through the deep drifts each winter without

falling through the crust, but the palace had none on hand, nor the materials to make any.

Vyrna's team continued to work on the final edition of the Palace Times, and I left them to do their work unsupervised. Each time I thought about the newspaper, hopelessness swept through me. It seemed a symbol of everything we were incapable of achieving.

On the third day of snow, while I sat in my private office trying to make sense of the documents we had recovered from other wings of the palace, Baridya dropped by to ask if I wanted breakfast sent up.

"I'll find something to eat later," I said. My stomach was feeling unsettled; I could not stand the thought of food just yet. "And speaking of breakfast, how the plagues are we going to deliver rations? If we wait until this snow melts, it will be too late."

"Are you okay, Kalleah?"

"I'll be fine. Don't worry about me." I forced a smile.

"The Snake-Blood is doing well, at least," she said. "It's becoming quite friendly."

"Good. I'm glad." My voice came out wooden.

When I was alone once again, I drew up a bath and sank into it, desperate to forget everything for at least a short while. The hot water eased my muscles, and my eyelids drooped as I lay there. I could still see the snow falling through the window; the clouds were so thick it could have been night.

I could not remember the last time I had slept a full night. For days now, I had been running on power I'd drained from those around me, and it was no longer enough to keep me from collapse.

The challenges facing us seemed insurmountable.

I had no way to reach my people while Olleack's troops controlled the city, and even while the streets remained empty, we could not venture out through the snow.

Meanwhile, the more my people suffered, the more they would blame me for their hardship, and the more support Olleack would gain. Unless I could deliver that final newspaper, I had no way of recruiting

additional soldiers. We were trapped in the palace, as powerless as we had been before we entered the city.

I sank deeper in the scalding water, sweat itching my forehead, and submerged my hair. Tendrils crept up my sides, brushing my skin with a ticklish sensation, and the sickly-sweet aroma of lavender soap permeated the air.

“Kalleah?” Baridya’s voice called from what seemed a great distance.

“Mm?”

I heard her footsteps approach, and she opened the bathroom door a crack. “I mentioned over breakfast that we needed to find a way to deliver rations, and a nobleman—I think his name is Jassor—said he has a pair of skis he once used for winter hunting trips. Apparently they were quite popular with young courtiers. So if we can find enough skis lying around, your soldiers might be able to use those.”

“That’s brilliant!” I sat up abruptly, steaming water sloshing around me. “And we’ll hide the newspaper inside the rations we distribute. Only Makhori will receive it.”

Baridya grinned. “I like it.”

I sank back into the hot water as the pieces fell into place. Olleack would not stop my soldiers from delivering rations; he would lose all support if he was seen actively trying to starve the populace. It was the perfect cover. And along with the newspaper, I would include a call to arms for all Makhori. The time had come for my people to take up the fight.

II

The Ones in Hiding

Later that day, I sought out Vyrna and asked if the newspaper offices had a copy of the Makhori register that had been printed. “I’m sure it’s still among the paperwork,” she said. “Why?”

“I want to reach out to the magic races directly. If I have names, I can ask if anyone in the palace knows where they live.”

“We can do better than that,” Vyrna said with a tight smile. “We have a copy of the official document where King Olleack collected every piece of information about the magic races. That includes their addresses. We can find out exactly where every single magician lives.”

“Good,” I said, though it chilled me to think Olleack still had a copy of that same document in his possession. “We need to plan this newspaper very carefully. This is likely our last chance to reach our potential supporters, so we need to make an impact. For the cover story, we need something no one can ignore, something that will convince the Makhori to join us.”

“I think individual accounts of suffering at the hands of King Olleack will make the most difference,” Vyrna said. “Unfortunately, I don’t know any of those. Should we invent a few?”

“No. Hold off on that until later—I need to think of more ideas.”

Leaving the printing staff hard at work, I ventured alone through the halls of the historic wing, Viko and the rest of my guard trailing me. I followed the dark passages of the top story as far as I could before hitting a staircase, where I descended and found myself in a part of the palace I hadn’t ventured into before.

I felt trapped and useless in here, and the guards shadowing my every footstep did not help. Though I thanked the cloudy gods we had reached Baylore before this blizzard hit, at the same time I almost missed the spans of marching through the plains. At least we had been able to make visible progress each day, simply by putting league after league behind us.

Eventually I managed to wind my way back through a maze of smaller corridors to reach a room I recognized—the empty chamber overlooking the main square. If my guards wondered what I was doing, they did not ask.

Crossing the room, I wiped cold condensation from the window. Even from here, I could barely make out the palace gates. Snow had accumulated on the glass, and beyond that, the blizzard still raged. As far as I could see, the main square was completely empty—no one was foolish enough to venture out in this weather.

That gave me an idea. It might be too hard for my army to traipse across the entire city in waist-deep snow, but I could surely make it a few blocks.

Ignoring Viko’s bewildered expression, I hurried back through the empty halls to the newspaper room.

Vyrna blinked up at me. “What is it, Your Majesty?”

A could feel the smile tugging at my lips. “How would you like to test out your reporting skills?”

* * *

We bundled ourselves in as many layers as I could find, tucking our hair

into our coats and trading our skirts for trousers so no one would identify us as women at a glance.

As we tried to slip from the Cheltish wing unnoticed, Leoth accosted us; when he insisted on hearing what we were up to, he immediately asked if he could join us.

“The more people we bring, the more likely we are to attract attention,” I said.

“Yes, and the better you’ll be able to defend yourselves if something goes wrong. You should bring a guard as well, just in case.”

I sighed. “I suppose it couldn’t hurt.”

So we dragged Viko into our preparations along with Leoth.

“You know you’re insane, don’t you?” Leoth asked as we tucked several daggers apiece into pockets, sleeves, and boots. To my surprise, he was grinning—the old light of mischief in his eyes had rekindled.

“That makes you just as bad for following me, then.”

On our way to the palace entrance, we encountered no one. With the weather as bad as it was, I suspected most of my followers were huddling around fires—or, in the case of my army, training hard to keep warm. Even the heat radiating from the enchanted tapestries could not keep the chill at bay.

At the main doors, the guards bowed and barred my path.

“Your Majesty. What business do you have outside?”

“Royal business,” I said imperiously. “I thank you for your concern, but I am your queen, not a child you were asked to mind.”

They stepped reluctantly aside. “Do you need a guard, Your Majesty?”

“As you can see, I already have one.”

Leaving the guards staring after me in confusion, I slipped through the door with Leoth, Vyrna, and Viko close behind.

Despite our copious winter layers, the cold bit straight through me. Snow blew beneath the hood of my cloak and melted in drips down my face, and the freezing wind found every scrap of exposed skin.

The deep snow had smoothed the palace steps into a featureless

slide. I plowed my way forward, creating a deep trench with my passage, my companions trudging along behind me.

We could hardly hear or see above the howling wind, so I beckoned my companions into the square. A guard followed and locked the gates behind us—I hoped he would be able to see us to let us back in when we returned.

Earlier that day, Vyrna had found the Makhori register and pinpointed several dozen addresses she was familiar with. It was a good start—we were unlikely to make it to more than a handful in this weather.

We trudged across the main square, heads down to protect our eyes from the onslaught of blowing snow. As I began to lag, Leoth took the lead, plowing a deep path the rest of us could follow. When we reached the opposite end of the square, I looked up, squinting into the blowing snow, and saw the inn called the Queen’s Bed directly ahead.

“This way,” Vyrna shouted over the howling wind. She skirted around Leoth and trudged right toward Market Street, wraithlike and insubstantial behind a curtain of blowing snow. We followed her slowly, laboriously, down Market Street and onto a side lane. By the time we stopped outside the first house, I could no longer feel my feet or my cheeks.

Lights shone from within, but the curtains were drawn, whether to preserve warmth or keep the Truthbringers from spying I was not sure.

Vyrna knocked and stood back, waiting.

No one came to the door. If voices rose from inside, I could not hear them over the howling wind.

Vyrna pounded on the door harder this time. “Open up, in the name of your monarch!”

Someone must have been waiting by the door, because it slid open a moment later, just enough to reveal a man’s weathered face nearly obscured by a busy black beard.

“Who’s there?” he demanded.

I lowered my hood and straightened, though I hardly expected him

to recognize me with my cheeks bright red and my hair bedraggled. “I am Queen Kalleah, and I wish to speak with your family.”

The man tried to close the door, but Vyrna put her foot in the gap.

“It’s dangerous business dealing with the likes of you,” the man said gruffly. “I can’t risk it.”

“There’s no risk this time,” Vyrna said. Though she was short, she put her weight behind the door and shoved it back. To my surprise, it worked—the door opened enough for us to slip inside.

“No one can see us in this weather,” Vyrna said. “And we will not mention you by name.”

The bearded man slammed his door shut and barred it. “What’re you on about?”

Now that we were inside, I could see the remains of a meal spread across a woven reed table. Places had been set for five, but no one else was in the room. From the way the chairs were displaced, I guessed the rest of his family had fled when we knocked.

My throat tightened with sorrow for my people. This tableau, more than anything, demonstrated the fear they must live with each day as they waited for the Truthbringers to make their next move.

“Your family can come down, if they wish,” I said gently. “We truly mean them no harm.” From the Makhori register, I knew the family comprised two Potioneers, a Cloudmage, and a Metalsmith. The fifth member either had no talent or chose to hide their magic. With so much magic in one family, these would be some of the Truthbringers’ first targets.

“First you’d better tell us what you’re doing here. Why the plagues is the queen of Itrea standing in my dining room?” The man’s voice rose in anger as he spoke.

“You must have heard about the newspaper we printed a few days back,” I said.

“That bilge! We thought it was a trap for sure.”

I winced. “No. We merely wanted people to know the truth. The Truthbringers and all of Olleack’s court have been lying to you for years

now, and if people don't realize what is happening before long, all will be lost."

I gestured at Vyrna. "Not all of the newspaper staff support Olleack, and this journalist wishes to share what life is like for those who suffer under the Truthbringers. We are seeking brave people who are willing to tell us their story. Too many of you have suffered in silence; even I had no idea what the conditions were like in Baylore until I spoke to the refugees who sought shelter in the palace. If we can share your story, others might be moved to support us. Others might remember the value of our magic races."

"I don't know why I should talk to *you*." He crossed his burly arms and glared down at Vyrna, who stood her ground. "Things were never this bad before you came along. It's your fault we're starving here, *Your Majesty*."

"The food shortage is a temporary situation that we're working on rectifying," Leoth said. "But it's not Queen Kalleah who drags Makhori from their homes and tries to burn them in the square. It's not Kalleah who forced you to register your names so she could hunt you down whenever she wanted. It's not Kalleah who criminalized the use of certain types of magic. It's not Kalleah who cut off all trade and ruined our economy in the first place."

"Wait a minute." The man frowned at Leoth. "You're King Leoth, aren't you? Why the blazes are you both in my house?"

"Because this is crucial," I said. "We don't want to retake Baylore with arms—we want to win the trust of our people through honest means. And if you believe that your family, as Makhori, deserve the same rights and protections as any citizens of Itrea, you should put your faith in us."

"I still don't—"

"Wait," a woman's voice called from upstairs.

"Don't you dare come down here!" the man bellowed.

A woman ventured down the staircase with a child in her arms and two others trailing behind. "Don't tell me what to do," she told her

husband.

Then she gave me an awkward curtsy, off-balance due to the young boy she still held. “Your Majesty. I recognize you from the Midwinter feast. I was one of the few who attended.”

She shot another hard look at her husband, who had opened his mouth to speak.

He dropped onto one of the dining chairs, arms still crossed and brow furrowed in annoyance.

“My family is in danger every day. If you can’t change things soon, I’m afraid we’ll lose our lives. I’m willing to do whatever you need if you think it might keep my babies safe.”

“May we sit?” Vyrna asked, drawing a damp notebook from the pocket of her coat.

“Please.” The woman sat beside her husband, while Leoth, Vyrna, and I claimed the remaining seats. Her children slipped away to kneel on cushions by the fire.

“We want to hear everything,” Vyrna said. “What has it been like, living under King Olleack and the Truthbringers? What prejudice has your family faced? What do you want your fellow citizens around Baylore to know?”

Leoth and I sat in silence while the woman spoke. She described the bullying her children had faced at the hands of fellow classmates, until she finally withdrew them and began tutoring them at home; the way one vendor after another had refused to sell to her family, until they were rationing every meal; the threats and intimidation the Truthbringers had used to persuade her family to add their details to the Makhori register; the way a neighbor had been beaten to death on suspicion of hiding forbidden blood, with the brutality going unpunished and unreported.

Vyrna was a skilled interviewer, despite her lack of experience. She gently prompted the woman when she faltered, and offered sympathy when the words seemed to catch in her throat.

“Now we’re hiding here, afraid to go into the streets, waiting every

day for the summons. We'll be imprisoned or burned alive or beaten into submission. No one talks about it, but we all know what's waiting for us."

As her voice trailed off, silence hung in the air. The wind howled through gaps around the shuttered windowpanes, and the fire crackled in the hearth.

Vyrna closed her notebook at long last and tucked her pen into her pocket. "Thank you so much for everything. I won't give away any details that will identify your family."

I rose and approached the woman, unsure how to convey the depth of my gratitude.

She stood as well, her shoulders rounded in worry, and I clasped her hand in both of mine before she could back away.

"Your bravery will be remembered forever. Your voice is the beginning of a movement that will overthrow the Truthbringers and return justice and equality to Baylore. I cannot tell you how much impact your words will make."

She withdrew her hand from mine and retreated a step. "What happens next, Your Majesty? Will you help my family get food, and protect us when the Truthbringers come for us?"

I did not want to give her false hope. "We are doing everything we can. I hope it does not come to that. Rations are on their way soon, and they should sustain you a while longer. If you wish to seek refuge in the palace now, we will welcome you with open arms."

"I wish we could," the woman said, glancing at her children, who were playing very quietly with a pair of corn-husk dolls. I wondered if they understood the gravity of the situation. "But I have a sister in the city whose family is in as much danger as mine, and I'm sure their house will be raided as soon as we vanish. We need more time to prepare."

"Of course," I said. "In that case, you can join us when we send out a call for support. It will happen soon."

We buttoned up our coats, wrapped our scarves tightly about our throats, and raised our hoods. My scarf was still damp from melted

snow, though it had warmed by the fire while we lingered inside.

Vyrna hugged the woman before we left, and waved to the children, who watched her with wide-eyed innocence.

As soon as we ventured outside, the wind swept up around us, the snow billowing like a wave of sea foam.

“You were fantastic,” I shouted to Vyrna over the keening wind.

I could not see her face beneath her hood. “It feels cruel, doesn’t it?” Her voice was so quiet I had to strain to hear it through the storm. “We force ourselves into their lives and extract the sort of intimate details they would never willingly share, and then we go on our way without changing anything.”

“But it will make a difference, in the end,” I said. “We have to believe that.”

* * *

As the storm worsened, we continued through the Market District, visiting house after house. Several refused to answer the door despite our pleas and threats, while others welcomed us gladly. One pair of men insisted we share their evening meal—we accepted reluctantly, knowing they were sacrificing the last of their rations for us. I let Vyrna do most of the talking while I hovered in a far corner, trying not to let my power tire her or Leoth too much.

In every house, we heard stories of silent suffering. No one had reported the attacks on Makhori before now, and no one wanted to show friendship to anyone the Truthbringers demonized for fear their families would be targeted next. Each household remained cut off from its neighbors, hiding and waiting and counting down the days before their demise.

At last it was so dark we had to give up our work and trudge back toward the palace. For one panicked moment, we got so turned around in the snow that we weren’t sure which way it was; then we stumbled onto Market Street and realized we were closer than I had guessed. The

snow and blowing wind had already filled in the deep trench we had carved on our way across the square just hours before.

At the square, Viko shouted, "I've had an idea, Your Majesty. Leave me out here, and I'll see if I can find Prince Calden before this storm ends."

"You'll freeze to death!"

"I know somewhere I can shelter inside."

If he truly thought he could bring Cal safely home, I did not want to dissuade him. "Take care of yourself, then."

"I will."

We stood watching as he cut a slow line across the southern end of the square, disappearing only a few steps away in a swirl of snow. Then Leoth started forward again, and I reluctantly fell into step behind him.

A guard emerged from the side door as soon as we reached the palace gates, spilling orange light onto the snow—he must have been waiting for us. When he battled his way down the steps to let us in, he shouted, "I nearly sent soldiers after you, Your Majesty! Then a few folks showed up and said you'd told them to seek sanctuary in the palace, and we figured you were all right after all."

"Thank you," I yelled over the wind.

Heads down, we waded through the deep snow into the quiet warmth of the entrance hall. We trailed clumps of snow as we started down the hall; in our wake, servants hurried to mop up the mess.

"What would you like me to do now, Your Majesty?" Vyrna asked, brushing snow from her cloak.

"First of all, you should join us for dinner. You must be ravenous." As if in agreement, my own stomach gave a loud rumble. "Tomorrow, I want you to write the most powerful piece of journalism our city has ever seen. Cast a light on the injustices we saw today, and instill a sense of urgency in my people. This is our last chance, and I want it to count."

The Final Edition

The blizzard continued for two more days. Outside, all was silent and still, the snow so deep it touched the roofs of houses. Viko did not return, and no trace remained of our foray into the city.

Inside the palace, a flurry of activity swept through the halls.

Vyrna and her team were busy working on the final edition of the Palace Times; even those who had questioned my authority seemed eager to pitch in this time. My soldiers trained harder than ever, this time concentrating on how to break a shield wall, while my father and Leoth pored over Whitish battle accounts in search of advice for how best to prepare for siege. Everyone skilled with a needle and thread worked on sewing uniforms for my army, some enhanced with Weavers' enchantments, while a team of blacksmiths churned out rough weapons as quickly as possible from their smithy in the underbelly of the palace. They were running low on the supplies they had salvaged from their own workshops; soon we would be stripping the palace of every metal fastening and tool we could find.

An enormous map of Baylore lay spread across the Cheltish sitting-room floor; every house had been drawn meticulously onto the tiny,

precise streets, including each permanent hovel in the slums, and we had marked each Makhori residence with red ink. Parts of the Market District were uninterrupted blocks of red, especially the Weavers' Guild—though their names had not been printed, the Weavers of Baylore were listed on the Makhori register all the same.

The red markings were intended to help my soldiers distribute newspapers to the correct homes, but they also gave us a good indication of where we should head first if the Truthbringers made a move against the city's magic population.

Each time I found a window of spare time, I reverted to reading the journal with the Truthbringers' plan for overtaking Itrea. I felt as though it would reveal some crucial secret, some key to our success in the war ahead, if only I looked at the right pieces.

So it was that Leoth found me curled in a chair in my private sitting room, poring over the journal once more.

He looked excited, though his expression soured when he saw what I held.

"What are you still reading that for?" he asked, approaching and tugging it from my grasp.

"I'm hoping it will tell us something about the Truthbringers' plans."

Leoth was staring at the page before him, mouth hanging open.

"What?" I demanded. I had seen nothing of interest on that particular page. Had I missed something?

"That handwriting..." Leoth said faintly.

"What do you mean?"

"I recognize it. I'd know it anywhere."

I tried to peer over the edge of the book, but he tilted it up again. "Whose handwriting is it?"

The lump in Leoth's throat bobbed as he swallowed. "My mother's."

"No." My voice came out louder than I'd intended. "You think *she's* behind the entire Whitish invasion of Itrea?"

“Not her specifically. It could have been my father, with my mother acting as scribe.”

Leoth sank onto the sofa beside me, his face pale. “That’s definitely her handwriting. I’ve never seen anyone else write the way she does.”

“But why? Why the plagues would they sell out their entire country to the Whitish?”

“Maybe they didn’t realize how far it would go,” Leoth said. “Before you were born, they thought I would be the undisputed heir. Maybe they just thought the Whitish would turn people against the forbidden races and ensure you never had a chance at the throne.”

“But why would they go to Whitland? Why not try something a little closer to home? Something that doesn’t involve our ancient enemy?”

Leoth just shook his head, staring blankly at the journal.

Then he leapt to his feet. “Varse. I’d forgotten. But—”

“What is it?”

“It can’t be coincidence. Bloody Varse, Kalleah. Maybe it was my mother.”

“What are you on about?” I said.

Leoth started pacing back and forth behind the tea table. “I never thought anything of it, but she’s half-Whitish. She never talked about that side of the family. My grandfather was a diplomat who spent a lot of time in the Kinship Thrones, and all we heard about my grandmother was that she was his mistress who stayed behind when he returned to Baylore. But when I was young, my mother went overseas to spend a year with her relatives. So I guess my grandmother wasn’t as insignificant as they always made her sound.”

“So you think...”

“It might not have been intentional,” Leoth said. “Maybe my mother was just complaining about your forbidden blood and how you’d stolen my rightful throne, and someone realized it was a weakness the High King could exploit.”

“But she obviously knew something of what they were planning, if she shared this much information,” I said grimly.

“Exactly. And I wonder if her Whitish relatives are more important than I’d ever guessed. If they had the High King’s ear, they must have been at court.”

I stared at the journal in blank disbelief. To think someone within our own court had orchestrated the downfall of Itrea...

“Do you think your father knows the extent of her involvement?” I asked.

“Does it matter? He allowed this to happen. He’s every bit as guilty as her.” Leoth’s voice was low and angry. “Gods, I could strangle the pair of them right now. I used to think my father genuinely believed the Truthbringers were acting in our best interests. But now it seems like nothing more than a grab for power.”

I pictured Nashella, with her smug, mocking smile. I had thought little of her before now—she had seemed nothing but an accessory to Olleack’s ambitions—but as I recalled the fatal first spans of my rule, I realized her hand had been present in more than one of my defeats. She had overheard me planning to raid the Truthbringers’ meeting, and the next thing I knew, Cal had been taken hostage. She had caught me giving Quendon orders to relocate a large chest into the tunnels below the palace, and it had soon resurfaced in my trial, exposing the body I had tried to hide.

Had Nashella been swept unawares into events that would change the future of Itrea? Or had she planned the entire thing?

“The worst part is, I would have probably gone along with all of it if I’d never met you,” Leoth said. “If the Truthbringers had never found out what I was. I didn’t realize how much we stood to lose until you forced me to confront it.”

I slumped back in the sofa, kneading my temples. “I suppose it doesn’t matter at this point. It wasn’t just Nashella’s doing—many different pieces led to this moment. It was my forbidden blood, your parents’ lust for power, Nashella’s scheming, and High King Warrow’s decision to pursue war. I’m as guilty as she is, simply by virtue of existing.”

“But that’s—”

“What did you come here for, anyway?” I did not want to contemplate Nashella’s treachery now. It would only distract us from what needed to be done.

“Oh.” Leoth ran a hand through his hair. “I’d completely forgotten. Vyrna wanted me to tell you the newspaper is ready.”

It took a moment for his words to sink in. The newspaper. Of course—her team had finished writing the final edition of the Palace Times.

“Good,” I said. “Can you ask Vyrna to bring it here? And summon Mellicante, Baridya, and Deance. They’ll want to read it too.”

“Right. Of course.” Leoth set the journal aside at last, gave me a distracted kiss, and strode off.

I crossed my bedchamber to gaze out the window. My thoughts were still far away, imagining Nashella in some Whitish court scheming with the High King; it took me a moment to register that the snow had ceased at last. Even so, the streets lay buried deep in powder, the city in hibernation. No one had ventured out to shovel away the snow—normally that was a task for the city guard, but perhaps Olleack intended to leave the work to my army.

Before long, Vyrna and Leoth returned with the newspaper, Mellicante, Baridya, and Deance joining us moments later. As they took seats, I spotted the Snake-Blood’s head peeking from the end of Baridya’s sleeve. They were like besotted parents.

“So?” Baridya asked Vyrna. “Did it come together well?”

“I think so,” Vyrna said. Her knees were crossed, one foot jiggling up and down. I could understand her nerves—this was her first big piece of reportage, and its success or failure would decide the future of Baylore.

While Vyrna sat and watched, arms crossed over her chest, foot still jiggling, the rest of us leaned together to read.

THOSE WHO SUFFER IN SILENCE

As the Truthbringers' hold over Baylore tightens, thousands of innocents suffer threats, starvation, and brutality...in silence.

This is how the Truthbringers maintain their grip over Baylore: they ensure none who speak against them go unpunished. The magicians who once ensured our country's prosperity have now been relegated to their homes, afraid they will face death or torture if they speak out.

Now, for the first time, we have spoken to our city's oppressed. Each family feels they bear the burden of the Truthbringers' reign alone—that they are adrift in a sea of enemies, with none willing to stand beside them—but the truth comes through in the aggregate. Though you are silent and remain in hiding, your numbers are great. If you rise up together, you have the potential to change the course of Baylore's future.

All interviewees will remain anonymous for their protection.

* * *

We speak first to a family with three beautiful young children, all hiding from the Truthbringers, afraid that any who leave home might never return. The children have been taken from school—an all-too-common phenomenon these days, further isolating our magic races—and though they are young, they seem to understand the gravity of their situation.

"I wish we had left when we first kept our children home from school," the mother says, hanging her head. "All the signs were there. We just refused to believe people would turn on us this way. My ancestors traveled here with the First Fleet, and they were among the founders of Baylore. But it seems everyone's forgotten that now. Baylore doesn't feel like home these days."

The parents are no longer able to practice their craft, as public displays of magic have been banned, and they ration their food carefully, dreading the not-too-distant day when the last grain of millet runs out.

Where will they turn then? Their neighbors have spurned them, and the Truthbringers know their names and where they live. They wait every day for the knock at the door, the rounding up of Makbori. It has happened before, and it will happen again. Unless we take swift measures to stop the Truthbringers.

* * *

An elderly woman invites us into her home, shoulders bent with the burden of sorrow, eyes bleak. She owns a shop selling fine metalwork from Valleywall, but she was forced to close her doors spans ago, her stock depleted and all trade cut off.

Her son used to make a living from his magic, careful to visit only taverns that showed tolerance to Makbori, yet someone must have turned him in just the same.

"I don't know what happened." Though his mother's eyes are damp, her voice is steady. "One day he went out, just as always, and that was it. He never came home. I've heard—" She pauses to dab at her eyes, and I find tears springing to mine as well. "Sorry," she continues. "I've heard stories of Makbori getting beaten to death in the streets. It's..." She shakes her head, tears coming faster now. "By their own neighbors, too. It's not just the Truthbringers brutalizing us. Everyone's part of it now. I don't know if my son is locked up somewhere, if he managed to escape the city by some miracle, or if his body is lying in—in some gutter—mangled and forgotten."

* * *

Two young men share their meal with us, a meager stew that represents the dregs of their rations.

“We met at Baylore University,” the taller man says. “It seemed like the whole world was within our grasp. I come from a farming family, and I’m the first in several generations to have a magic talent, so I went from dirt-poor to this place where my power could open up so many opportunities. I wanted to travel, to learn new languages, to discover everything I could get my hands on.”

“My family’s lived in Baylore for several generations,” his partner chimes in, “so we saw how things changed as the Truthbringers spread prejudice and old-fashioned hatred. When I started at Baylore University, I knew it wasn’t long before that was no longer an option for us. He didn’t have any idea what he had gotten himself into. If I’d known him back then, I would’ve told him to stay far away from Baylore.”

Both men laugh.

“But no, I’m still glad I came here,” the first says. “I never had a purpose until I started studying. I didn’t realize I had so many opportunities. And now they’ve been snatched away from us. I’m afraid I’ll never have a chance to travel, or even to leave Baylore again. I can’t see a way through this. I’m afraid we’ll both be dead before this is over.”

“Yeab, ‘cause that’s the other thing,” his partner says. “Our relationship wouldn’t be legal under Whitish laws. So if the Whitish army takes over, we’ll have to either abandon each other—”

“Or die as martyrs.”

“Yeab. That.”

The men laugh again, and it tugs at my heart to see how they still manage to find humor when everything they ever dreamed of has been stolen from them.

* * *

At the last house we visit, a girl of perhaps twelve years opens the door. She stares at us with a mixture of fear and resignation.

“Where are your parents?” I ask.

“They’re not here right now.”

Her older sister appears from the kitchen, eyes wide. “Hey. That’s Queen Kalleah. Let them in.”

The girls are quick to trust us, and after some probing, we discover they have been living alone for quarters now. Their parents disappeared without a trace in early winter, after giving their daughters strict orders to keep their heads down and their mouths shut.

“Our mother’s got forbidden blood,” the older girl says.

The younger girl shushes her. “We’re not supposed to say that!”

“Queen Kalleah is an Extractor,” her older sister says, crossing her legs on the chair. “She supports the forbidden races.”

From the girls’ guesses, we work out that their parents have likely either been arrested due to the mother’s forbidden blood or have gone into hiding separately so as not to associate their children with the mother’s taint. The older girl is perhaps sixteen, and has managed to keep herself and her sister warm and fed for the past span.

“But I don’t know what we’re going to do when the food runs out,” she says, hugging her arms over her chest. “No one trusts us, because of our ma, and we’ve never worked before. I don’t even know where our parents used to buy food. We might have to go to the slums and see if they’ve got anything for us.” She drops her voice so her sister doesn’t hear. “Some of the Truthbringers have offered to keep me as their mistress, and look after my sister in the meantime. I’m not sure if that would be worse than the slums.”

“No,” I say quickly. She is a pretty young woman, light-skinned enough to appeal to the Truthbringers, and it horrifies me to think what they might do to her. Their reputation for brutality extends beyond the battlefield.

“Can you help us, then?” she asks. “Can you give us food when ours runs out?”

* * *

These are the stories hiding behind closed doors all across Baylore. These are the innocent people whose lives have been destroyed by the Truthbringers. They were once honest workers, and now they face the choice between starvation and prostitution—or worse.

Each one of them counts down the days until the Truthbringers round them up.

When they added their names to the Makbori register, they knew the end was near. Centuries ago, a similar Makbori register presaged the slaughter of magic races throughout the Kinship Thrones.

We would like to think this situation is different, but it seems less likely by the day.

The Whitish army is coming to supply the manpower the Truthbringers currently lack, and when that day comes, it will spell the end for these innocents. The slaughter of Makbori will begin.

Our only hope is to stand behind Queen Kalleah and reclaim our city from the Truthbringers.

I sat back as I finished reading. Baridya was wiping her eyes discreetly on her sleeve, and Mellicante's jaw was tight.

"Is it good enough?" Vyrna asked, hands pressed together between her knees.

"It's perfect," I said. "Anyone who reads that and still doesn't care is a monster."

"But how are we going to get people to safety?" Mellicante asked.

Vyrna pointed to the newspaper. "Read the last page."

Though Baridya was still reading, we flipped the paper over to the back and read a small line of text in one corner.

Ready to make a difference? Join the fight to take back Baylore. If you seek only safe refuge, make your way to the palace before the snow melts. This is your one opportunity to escape while the city remains dormant. And if you wish to fight, join Queen Kalleah at Baylore University. Together we will raise the greatest army Itrea has ever seen.

"Baylore University?" I asked Vyrna.

She blushed. "It seemed like a suitable place. The Truthbringers shut it down nearly half a year ago, and it's stood empty ever since. No one guards the gates, as far as I know."

"Very good. It seems we have a great deal of preparations to make, in that case."

"Someone's going to report this," Mellicante said. "Someone will tell the Truthbringers that everyone who has received a copy of the Palace Times is in danger of joining your army."

“We won’t deliver it to anyone who is likely to report us,” I said. “No Weavers. And we might want to target families with at least two magicians for now. Once we manage to get the most vulnerable families to safety, we can start reaching out to others.”

“There will be no turning back after this,” Mellicante said. “You must know that. If any Truthbringers see it, they’ll realize we’re trying to raise an army behind their backs. They’ll turn to violence to keep people in line.”

“I know,” I said. “But we have to risk it. We’re running out of time.”

The Call to Arms

The next morning, my army began delivering rations around the city, a newspaper hidden in each sack going to a Makhori household. Only twenty soldiers ventured out, all on skis they had borrowed from various nobility; behind them they dragged sleds of wood salvaged from empty crates, piled high with sacks of supplies. We were counting on Olleack allowing us to deliver rations unchallenged. Surely he knew he would lose all support if he attempted to starve his populace.

I would gladly have joined my soldiers, but I had other business to attend to. Most importantly, I had to relocate a large portion of my army to Baylore University. Every one of my Makhori soldiers would move there to train alongside my new recruits, but we also needed archers and regular soldiers to guard the gates, along with enough cooks to feed the entire crew. I expected people to begin appearing that very night, so we needed to work swiftly.

Midway through the afternoon, the first few refugees started appearing at the palace. First came the sisters we had spoken to, followed by a large family with threadbare clothes and hollow cheeks.

Baridya and my mother waited to welcome each new arrival, leading them first to the dining hall, the tables heaped with food, and then to a room where they could claim bedrolls on the floor.

I heard about the first arrivals from Mellicante, who paid a visit to the entrance hall near sundown.

“Are you staying here or going to the University?” she asked when she returned.

I glanced up from the list where I was tallying rations. “The University. I know magic is the key to winning this war—I just need to come up with the right strategy. If I can train with the magician army, maybe I’ll get a better idea of how their talents will work together.”

“And who will rule in your absence?”

I hadn’t thought of that. “My father, I suppose. The University is only a couple blocks from here—surely I can pass orders on to him if I need to.”

“Unless Olleack stations his guards outside the University.”

“Do you think I should stay here?”

Mellicante shrugged. “It’s your decision. But the majority of your forces will be in the palace.”

“Yes, and they can carry on training without me. I’m not particularly skilled at swordfighting. I contribute nothing to their practice sessions. My father and Leoth know far more about strategy and technique than I ever will, and no one will notice my absence.”

“Is Leoth staying here, then?” Mellicante asked shrewdly.

“Why all the questions?”

“Because I’m staying here, and I know next to nothing about what you intend to do once you recruit the city’s Makhori. Have you given someone else directions? Or are we training with no plan in mind?”

I sank into a chair, staring at the map of Baylore that still lay sprawled across the sitting-room floor. In this scale, Baylore Palace and Baylore University appeared to be neighbors, close enough to shout from the walls of one to the roof of the other. In reality, several blocks of stately businesses and manors separated them. Mellicante was

right—I was about to split my army in half, leaving each side more vulnerable than before, with very little idea how to proceed from here.

“I suppose I keep hoping some magical solution will spring up and make our way forward obvious,” I said at last. “If not...I have no idea how we’re meant to win this war.”

“The staged attack on Olleack’s manor went well,” Mellicante said, sitting beside me. She looked as restless and fidgety as I felt. “If you build on that...”

“That was my plan. All of it.”

She laughed softly. “It’s something, I suppose. So, what orders do you have for us in your absence?”

“Keep training. Protect as many townspeople as possible. Wait for my command before taking any military action. Oh—and once we’re in a better position, we can distribute that newspaper to Weavers and families with only one Makhori.”

Nodding, Mellicante looked over her shoulder. I followed her gaze to the windows, where the last light of evening was fading away. A sliver of a moon illuminated the snow blanketing rooftops far below, and all around, streetlamps and lanterns cast a hazy yellow glow.

“I need to go,” I said, fetching the list of rations once more. “Take care of yourself, will you? And—and keep an eye out for Cal.”

“And Viko,” Mellicante added in a low voice.

When I met her eyes, her expression was closed-off. Did she blame me for his disappearance?

But I had no way of finding either one, not without another fight. If they were still safe and well, they would return someday. And if not...

“I’ll see you later,” I told Mellicante, turning away before she saw the fear in my eyes. I was terrified Cal would never return; if he was still out there, surely he would have made his way to us during the snowstorm, while the streets were clear of city guards. Was he alone? Suffering? I felt sick just thinking about him.

Upstairs, the common area bustled with noise and movement. The residents of the Cheltish wing had assembled, gossiping and asking

questions of my soldiers as they hurried to and fro, while a small contingent of Makhori waited near the raised walkway, bundled in thick winter layers and carrying what they would need for their stay at Baylore University. Deance was there, along with a couple of courtiers I recognized as distant members of the Reycoran family, and along the wall, a hood casting most of his face in shadow, stood Leoth. Was he planning to join my Makhori army? My heart leapt at the thought.

When a soldier came running to report they had finished the first round of deliveries, I took it as our signal to leave.

“We didn’t reach as much of the city as we’d have liked,” he panted, hands on his knees. “It’s hard work getting through that snow, and half the people we visited had to dig out their doors before we could even hand the supplies to them!”

I frowned—that could throw our plans into disarray. The safe evacuation of Makhori would only work if we pulled it off quickly and quietly, before Olleack noticed what we were doing. If it dragged out over too many days, he would surely send troops to patrol the city once more, ruining any chance my citizens had of safe passage.

“Deliver to the entire Market District before venturing elsewhere in the city,” I said. “If you can find more skis, double the number of soldiers and work as swiftly as possible.”

The soldier bowed and jogged off, while I stared after him, thinking hard. If they had not reached every house we’d planned for tonight, it could take more than a quarter for them to cover the city. Everyone would receive rations eventually, but those households who saw the call to arms later would have no hope of reaching us in secret. *Make your way to the palace before the snow melts*, we had written. How disheartening it would be to receive that summons long after the streets were clear, knowing you’d had a chance and lost it.

“Are you ready?” Leoth asked right by my ear.

I jumped. “Yes. I suppose. Are you coming to the University, then?”

He nodded.

Turning to those assembled, I raised my voice. “To the University!”

A scattered cheer rose from the common area. The courtiers moved aside while Leoth and I led our Makhori soldiers across the raised walkway and down the stairs into the historic wing. As we passed the Darden wing, Kamarri emerged to join us, with a dense crowd of Makhori in her wake.

“Do we have everything we need?” I asked her.

“I think so.”

“Weapons? Bedding? Warm clothes? Food?”

“And supplies for the Weavers and Potioneers.”

“Very good.”

Her soldiers fell into line behind me, forming a column that stretched back around the corner. Her Makhori recruits must have numbered at least two hundred; I’d had no idea so many had joined us. Before we returned to Baylore, the magic races had fought interspersed with the rest of my army. Now, seeing them gathered like this, I felt a burgeoning hope. Perhaps the city was within our grasp after all.

At the palace entrance, I found Mother welcoming yet another family while my father watched from a shadowed corner, hand resting on his sword.

“Father,” I greeted him. “I give you control of the palace while I’m away. Continue training, but make no move until you hear word from me.”

“And if the Truthbringers make a direct move against the city’s magical population?”

“Protect our citizens if you can, but don’t commit our troops to any situation that might devolve into open battle. We can’t risk losing any more soldiers.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.” My father raised a hand toward the dark corridor behind him, and a contingent of soldiers emerged from the gloom, the rhythm of their marching like drumbeats on the marble. “I give you my most skilled archers and swordmasters. Baylore University is not easily defensible, Kalleah. Please guard yourself carefully.”

“I will.” I was touched by his concern. Rather than argue with my

decision, he had taken measures to protect me as best he could while I followed the course I deemed right.

Mother approached in a rustle of skirts and clasped my hands. “Take care of yourself,” she whispered. “You look very tired. Don’t forget to eat well and sleep enough each night—your power is no substitute for proper rest.”

“I know,” I said with a wry smile. “And you look after the families who join us. They need your concern more than I do.”

Mother smiled. “Of course.”

Then we dimmed the lights in the entrance hall and opened the great palace doors, emerging onto the steps. The air bit at my cheeks and hands, the night far colder now the clouds had cleared. My breath steamed before me, the icy air clawing at my lungs. Someone had shoveled snow from the palace steps, and the crust of ice that remained was strewn with dirt for traction.

A few sets of footprints crossed the main square, most cutting directly toward the palace, while a clear line of ski tracks traced the distance from the palace gates to Market Street.

Six of my father’s soldiers ventured through the gates before me, forming a column two-by-two and trampling the snow slowly and deliberately with their passage. Leoth and I followed, treading easily on the flattened snow in their wake.

“We need to send troops out to start clearing the main streets,” I whispered to Leoth. “Otherwise the city guards will know exactly where we’ve gone.”

“We can send soldiers to clear the roads behind us. Don’t worry—no one will be out patrolling tonight. Not in this weather.”

I hoped he was right.

Our narrow column made slow progress across the square and down the street leading toward the University. With each step, the cold sank deeper into my skin, until I doubted I would shake off the chill without help of a scalding bath. Far more than the map of Baylore spread on the sitting-room floor, this painstaking walk proved just how

much distance lay between the palace and the University. We could easily end up cut off from the palace, unable to communicate or resupply.

Streetlamps illuminated our passage, and snow crunched underfoot, damp and heavy beneath a crust of ice. My cloak dragged on my shoulders as it collected a skirt of snow.

At last I glimpsed the archway leading to Baylore University, a lamp hanging from above the doors. I had expected the doors to stand locked, a ladder the only way to gain entrance to the University, yet when we approached, they opened a crack.

“Your Majesty?” a man’s voice asked from within.

I waded forward into the deep snow, breaking away from the column. “Who are you?”

The door opened wider to reveal a middle-aged man with a grey moustache and beard framing his mouth. “Your Majesty. I am Professor Warrick Tabernath, and I once taught at Baylore University. I have been hiding out with my brother’s family ever since the University closed. However, when I saw your summons in the paper earlier this day, I knew I was needed.” He smiled, his teeth bright white. “Thankfully I still possessed the key to the door.”

“Professor Tabernath!” a soft voice called from behind me.

The professor raised a hand to what must have been a former student of his. Then he pushed the University doors open, leaning his entire body into the effort to shove the deep snowdrifts aside.

“Welcome, Your Majesty. It’s an honor to have you.”

I waded through the sloping wall of snow before reaching a patch of cleared stone beneath the archway. Through the doors, I stopped, blinking at the courtyard spread before me.

Lights shone all around the space, and many windows glowed yellow as well. Skeletal trees lined the courtyard, and beneath them, the entire space had been shoveled clear, snow piled several paces high in the corners. At the middle of the cleared space stood dozens of people bundled in layers; some clapped softly as my Makhori soldiers began

filing through the doors.

“Who are they?” I asked Professor Tabernath.

“Some are Makhori who responded to your summons, while others have remained at the University for the past several spans, continuing their work in secret.”

Professor Tabernath, Leoth, and I stepped to the side while my Makhori soldiers continued pouring into the courtyard. In this confined space, the numbers looked greater than before, though the University had evidently been designed to hold a few thousand students.

“How did they manage that?” I asked.

“We have tunnels running beneath the school, along with offices and storage rooms. The professors held classes in the tunnels for a while, until the city guards stopped patrolling the University gates, and eventually they dared to venture into the main part of the school again.”

“And you didn’t choose to remain behind and teach?” Leoth asked.

“I hoped I could reach out to my students within the city, though that proved more of a challenge than I expected.” Professor Tabernath smiled, again showing his brilliantly white teeth. “I’m a huge admirer of your work, Your Majesty, and a few of my students have been visiting my home for the latest news ever since the University closed down. That’s them over there.” He gestured at a knot of students standing apart from the crowd. “We read every piece on your approach to Baylore, and one of my students actually guessed what you were planning when you sent cartloads of refugees into the city.”

“Thank Varse the Truthbringers aren’t as clever as your students,” I said.

Professor Tabernath’s eyes twinkled. “No danger of that, I assure you. And I must say, your recruitment drive was beautifully executed. That article in the Palace Times...” He shook his head. “Marvelous. No one with a shred of empathy would have ratted out their neighbors after reading that.”

“Thank you,” I said, embarrassed by his praise.

Leoth nudged me in the side, grinning.

Behind us, the University doors swung closed with a thud, and one of my soldiers slid a bolt into place. I stepped forward, straightening my shoulders, to address my army.

“Friends. Soldiers. Professors. Students. New arrivals. Welcome, all. We have come to train the greatest army Itrea has ever seen. A magician army.”

A murmur of voices swept through the courtyard.

“Professors and students—we hope you will pass on your knowledge and help us refine our varied talents until we can serve as deadly weapons. And in the meantime, Prince Leoth will train us in battle strategy and swordfighting so we can hold our own against the city guard.

“But now it is late. My soldiers will guard the gates tonight, and the rest of us can sleep soundly knowing we have nothing to fear within these walls. I expect several hundred more to join us over the coming days, so we must prepare quarters for all.”

Professor Tabernath’s students applauded when I finished speaking, and one waved, blushing furiously. Smiling, I raised a hand in return. They would become used to my presence soon enough.

Though he had been away for some time, Professor Tabernath fell easily to directing the crowd. He sent the palace cooks to the kitchens, followed by the soldiers carrying supplies, and allocated dormitories or vacant classrooms to different groups to use as sleeping quarters. Without asking, he pointed me to one of the squat square towers in the center of the University, where a block of classrooms and offices divided two courtyards; the space would keep me well removed from my recruits so I would not endanger them. Two others followed me; I suspected they were Extractors as well.

An archway in the block of classrooms allowed passage between the two courtyards, and it was here that a door opened to the wing. On the ground floor, my Makhori soldiers were already filing into a pair of classrooms, Kamarri bustling about and organizing them as best she could. As much as she irked me at times, she did her job well.

“It’s up this way,” said the woman who had followed me. She was short and round-cheeked, her brown hair streaked with grey.

“Have you been here before?” I asked.

She beamed at me. “Oh, many years ago. My husband and I attended Baylore University for a few years. My name is Tylie, by the way, and this is Farrence.”

Smiling, her husband bobbed a bow. He was no taller than his wife, his hair a mane of grey around his face.

“But are you Extractors?” I asked, starting up the stairs. Distracted as I was, I paid no heed to my surroundings.

“Of course,” Farrence said.

“I thought the forbidden races couldn’t study at Baylore University.”

“We studied magical theory,” Tylie said. “The University takes a few non-magical students every year, serious scholars who want to research the history of Makhori or investigate interdisciplinary uses of magic. The professors knew what we were, but officially we were down as non-Makhori.”

At the top of the steps, Farrence took the lead, directing us down a long hallway lined with classrooms.

“We’re from Larkhaven,” Farrence said over his shoulder, “and we moved to Baylore when word of the Truthbringers’ teachings started spreading. We hoped to persuade people of the danger before it was too late.” He laughed humorlessly. “We thought too highly of ourselves. Even King Baltheor could do little against the Truthbringers.”

“But we’re here now. And if we can make a difference now, it will all have been worthwhile.”

Up another flight of stairs, Tylie and Farrence finally stopped outside a dark wood door.

“You’re up there.” Tylie gestured at a narrow staircase spiraling up one final level. “We’ll sleep in here.”

I ascended the spiral staircase alone, stopping outside the door at

the top. I knocked and hesitated before pushing it open.

The square tower was much larger than it had looked from the outside. A partition divided the room in half—the front half was set up as an office, dominated by a vast wooden desk, while the back half held a bed, a dresser, and a tiny bathroom. The smell of dust and cloves filled the space, and when I slid open a drawer, it rattled empty. Though the room was unfamiliar, I found it oddly comforting to sleep in a tower once again.

I sank onto the sagging mattress and immediately sneezed as dust billowed up. We had made it safely to the University. Now the hard part remained—turning a disorganized rabble of Makhori into an army.

The Magician Army

By morning, another eighty recruits had joined us. Some were younger than Cal, while others were old and stooped, yet each one insisted they were here to fight, not to hide.

The dining hall just barely held us all. I found myself sandwiched between Leoth and Deance over breakfast, the space ringing with chatter.

Afterward, as a weak sun struggled to break through the clouds, I summoned my Makhori army to the rear courtyard to announce our plans. Leoth, Professor Tabernath, and I had devised a schedule that would allow time for both sword training and magic lessons; Professor Tabernath warned me that most Makhori did not fully develop their skills without formal training, so we should temper our expectations.

Paved in even, dark grey stone, the rear courtyard was bare of trees. It would serve well as a practice ground for sword lessons.

When the voices died out at last, I stepped forward to address my magician army.

“We have much work to do. The Whitish army will arrive at our gates soon, and before they do, we must take control of Baylore. Each

day is crucial, so we must use our time well. Each morning, we will rise at first light for weapons training and discussions of strategy with Prince Leoth.”

Leoth stepped forward, hand resting on the hilt of his sword, resplendent in our new uniform of deep blue.

“The afternoons we will devote to magic. You must both practice your own art and become accustomed to working with other disciplines, so we will trade between separate and joint classes. Meanwhile, I will spend time observing each class along with Prince Leoth and my assistant Kamarri. Prince Leoth, if you will begin.”

Leoth nodded crisply. “Many of you have been with us for a while now. If you trained and fought with us in Larkhaven, please come forward. I will need your assistance.”

The crowd shuffled as close to a hundred recruits jostled their way forward.

“Very good,” Leoth said, while I blinked in surprise. “By the end of Loak-span, I expect every one of you to handle a sword competently. But first, I want to outline what we can expect from the city guards and, later, the Whitish army.

“From everything we can tell, it appears the Truthbringers are highly trained Whitish soldiers in the guise of priests. We can therefore expect any city guards fighting by their side to use Whitish battle strategies. One of their primary tactics is the use of tight formations and discipline in the face of chaos, which we saw outside the palace gates not long ago. It takes a great deal of strength to break a shield wall using swords, but this is where our magic can give us the upper hand. If we throw the battlefield into disarray, our soldiers will be up against individuals, not an impenetrable wall of spears.”

Leoth spent the next hour discussing common Whitish battle tactics and suggesting ways we might overcome them. After that, he distributed newly-forged swords to each of my recruits. Most of the swords had yet to be sharpened, so they would serve well for practice. We just had time to practice the first two sword strokes before

retreating inside for lunch. Even though I wore gloves, my hands were stiff and numb by the end; I pitied those who had none.

“I’d say that went well,” Leoth said over lunch. After hours on my feet in the cold, my appetite had returned with a vengeance, and I tore eagerly into the brown roll propped beside my soup.

“People are eager to learn,” Deance said. “At least, I certainly am. I would have joined your soldiers from the beginning if I’d had my way.”

“Why didn’t you?” I asked.

“Because I’ve never held a sword in my life, and I doubt anyone would have patience for someone as raw as me.”

“I’m not that good myself,” I said. “You would think, after all these spans, I would have progressed at least a little, but it just doesn’t seem to come naturally.”

“Or maybe you’re just too busy ruling a country to devote your attention to swordfighting,” Leoth said.

“Maybe.”

After lunch, we filed out to the courtyard once again. Though the soup had helped ease the morning’s chill, the wind had picked up; I was glad the afternoon lessons would take place inside.

“We will begin with dividing you by power,” Professor Tabernath announced in booming tones. “Before we can start turning your talents toward battle, we need to get an idea of what disciplines we can work with and what level of skill you already possess.” He gestured to a row of professors lining one wall of the courtyard.

“Weavers, to me,” called a woman with only a few streaks of silver hair remaining amongst the black.

“Potioneers, over here!”

“Flamespinners, this way.”

As the professors called out their disciplines, my recruits reshuffled themselves into the appropriate groupings. We now had sixteen Weavers; Potioneers, Flamespinners, Metalsmiths, and Cloudmages made up the vast majority of those remaining.

“Are Minstrels quite rare, then?” I asked Deance as a handful of

recruits threaded their way to the Minstrel professor.

“I suppose. I’ve seen them performing before, but I’ve never known any personally. I should join them, Your Majesty.”

As Deance hurried away, Professor Tabernath called out, “If we have not announced your race, please remain out here with me.”

None of the forbidden races had been called. Soon the courtyard had cleared, only a handful remaining outside, Leoth, Kamarri, Tylie, and Farrence among them. We clustered around Professor Tabernath, trading curious glances.

“I suspect there are more forbidden races among us,” Professor Tabernath said with a grim smile. “They’ll join us in the end.”

“Why would they hide?” I asked. “Surely they know they’re safe here.”

Professor Tabernath shook his head. “I understand it’s different outside Baylore, but here the other magic races take great pains to distance themselves from the forbidden races.”

“It’s true,” Tylie said. “Even among Makhori, they likely don’t feel safe.”

“Shall we get inside out of the cold?” Professor Tabernath asked.

A few of those gathered nodded or mumbled their assent. Some wore hoods shadowing their faces, while others hunched their shoulders as though hoping to make themselves as small as possible. It made me angry to see that even here, beneath the protection of an Extractor queen, these forbidden races feared for their lives. How much had they suffered in their lifetimes?

As we followed Professor Tabernath into the block of classrooms, he said, “It used to be that any forbidden races without obvious markings could live quite happily in Baylore, as long as they kept a low profile. And when children with forbidden blood were born within the city, parents knew to take them to Baylore University. We had an arrangement with a place called Backwater College, which would supervise and train the forbidden races without endangering anyone. More recently, though, the Truthbringers have been actively hunting

down the forbidden races. They either imprison them or mark them before throwing them out of Baylore.”

“The cross on their wrists,” I said. “I’ve seen that.”

Professor Tabernath nodded. “Now people fear the forbidden races, and those who have managed to remain hidden in Baylore live in constant fear of discovery.”

He pushed open the door of a high-ceilinged classroom and waited for us to file in. The walls and floors were polished stone, the desks a dark, heavy wood. It was a mark of the wealth and power Baylore University had once held.

“Her Majesty will only have a short time with us,” Professor Tabernath said to the other forbidden races, “but before she goes, I wanted you to introduce yourselves. She has proven herself a firm ally of the forbidden races, and welcomes all Makhori who come to fight by her side.”

“I’ll begin,” I said, while the other recruits settled onto chairs near the front of the room. “You all know I’m an Extractor. My mother fled the city in disgrace at my birth, and I still have a long way to go in familiarizing myself with Baylore. Even if my power were accepted widely, I would still find it a burden. I will never live a normal life as long as I drain the power of those around me.”

Tylie and Farrence nodded.

Kamarri spoke up before anyone else could. “My name is Kamarri, and I’m a Curse-Weaver. Even though the source of my power was removed, as is common, I remain an outcast.”

Tylie and Farrence introduced themselves, and after them a young Braider woman spoke up. She gave her name as Grella and explained in a thin, nervous voice that she hid her markings with makeup.

“It’s not very good,” she said, head hunched forward, “so I don’t like talking to people. I was born here, or I’d never have gotten past the Truthbringers.”

A battered young man introduced himself as Shoan, and said nothing else apart from his race—he was a Snake-Blood.

Leoth remained silent.

“How can we help?” Tylie asked, leaning forward with her elbows on her knees. “Our magic isn’t much use in battle, but we want to be useful.”

“Someone once told me Extractors are practically designed to be warriors,” I said with a small smile. The memory of the Foxes’ tent half-buried in snow came vividly back to me—I could almost smell the spices in the air, and see the riotous colors. “We gain strength while those around us tire, so if we learn to fight well, we can overwhelm our enemies through endurance alone.”

“Indeed,” Professor Tabernath said. “And Snake-Bloods are highly useful as spies and assassins, provided they are willing to transform regularly.”

Shoan held open his palms, which were bright green in the center, fading back to tan toward the edges.

“Very good.”

“So it’s just Curse-Weavers like me who are useless in battle,” Kamarri said airily. “But I don’t intend to sit around doing nothing. I will help Queen Kalleah with strategy until we have our attack down to an art.”

Professor Tabernath smiled. “That’s the spirit.”

Eventually Leoth, Kamarri, and I left Professor Tabernath behind to visit the other classes. I was sure Leoth appreciated the irony of his being grouped with the forbidden races. Tylie and Farrence departed as well, reminding Professor Tabernath that it wasn’t safe to expose the other recruits to so many Extractors for an extended period of time.

We first visited the Potioneers’ class, where my recruits had been divided between high tables. Each appeared busy concocting some sort of potion, many with looks of frustration. I led the way through billowing steam to the professor’s desk, where she greeted me warmly.

“How goes your work?” I asked.

“I’ll be able to tell you that in another two hours.” She smiled wryly. “I’ve set them each a very simple potion as a way to gauge their level

of skill—I suspect we’ll split them into several classes starting tomorrow. A good number are Dark Potioneers as well, attempting to hide amongst the regular Potioneers, which means they’ll struggle with our sort of potions. One of our professors will be able to work with them. You would be surprised how often we get Dark Potioneer students thinking they can pass for ordinary Potioneers. We don’t mind, of course—Dark Potioneers cause no harm when they use their powers properly, despite their designation as forbidden races—but they won’t be able to take advantage of their full potential until they admit what they are.”

“I don’t understand how this works,” I said. “Can’t anyone mix together a certain list of ingredients and create a potion?”

The professor shook her head. “Effective potions are the result of magical change. A Potioneer needs to mix the right ingredients and feed magic into the process at the right stage—they could hypothetically transform ingredients someone else mixed, but most find they need to be involved in every step of the process for an effective result. Young children often discover they are Potioneers by accidentally transforming common mixtures of ingredients.”

“Such as?” Leoth asked with a grin.

“The most typical is flour, water, oil, and salt. Mixed in the right proportions and with the correct spell applied, they transform into a brittle rock-like substance that shatters when dropped and turns the floor of the entire room black.”

I laughed. “So they’ll be kneading a loaf of bread, and the next thing they know...”

“Exactly.”

“What about Dark Potioneers?”

“They require something from a living creature to complete their potions. Blood, flesh, hair, or bone. So they could create a version of this potion with a modified recipe, but it will never work for them as written.”

“What does the potion do?” Leoth asked, eyeing one of the nearby

cauldrons, which belched blue smoke.

“It produces warmth for about a day—almost as much as a fireplace, but not enough to set anything nearby on fire. You can bottle it up and seal it, and the reaction continues when the seal is broken. The finished substance isn’t harmful, so Potioneers sometimes sell it as a way to warm up bathwater without heating pots over the fire.”

I wondered if that was how we heated water in the palace, though I did not ask for fear of sounding ignorant.

We ventured next to the Flamespinners’ classroom. They had assembled in a circular room with tiered seating, and at the front stood a set of wooden blocks they appeared to be using as targets.

“Is it safe practicing in here?” I asked the professor.

“Safer than outside,” he said, folding his arms across his chest. “Unless you wanted the whole city alerted to our presence.”

“No. Of course not.”

As we watched, a middle-aged recruit near the front of the room sent up a shower of sparks directly over his desk. He dove out of the way as the sparks fell, slapping at his sleeve to put out an ember.

“They’re awful,” Leoth said under his breath.

“Only a few learn how to use their power with accuracy, and fewer still can create pictures in the flames. Not many receive formal training. After all, performing on the streets is hardly a trade many parents would choose for their children.”

“I hadn’t realized Cal’s talent was so rare,” Leoth whispered to me.

My chest tightened. He should be here, helping teach classes, and Nyla as well.

We spent the rest of the afternoon dropping in on each set of classes, though I could decipher little from the others. The Weavers were already hard at work on reinforced coats—most had spent spans in my army and had long since perfected their talent—but the Minstrels and Cloudmages and Dreamweavers and Metalsmiths sat in silence, eyes closed, or else discussed aspects of their power that meant nothing to me. We stood in the doorway of each classroom for a while, Leoth

and I trading confused looks, before retreating.

“I didn’t realize so many types of magic came down to sitting there doing nothing,” Leoth said as we headed toward the dining hall. Kamarri had turned back to Professor Tabernath’s classroom; by unspoken mutual agreement, Leoth and I had parted ways with her, eager to have time to ourselves.

“Maybe it’s some secret University tradition,” I said.

“Or maybe they’re all communicating with their minds, conspiring against us, and we have no idea.”

“That’s almost what Deance did, wasn’t it?” I said. “We were able to talk and interact in her story world, but it was all in our heads.”

“True. Well, all I know is I’ve never been more jealous of the magic races.”

“You say that as if you aren’t one yourself.”

* * *

Over the next quarter, as our training continued, the snow melted incrementally from the roofs around Baylore University. From my room in the tower, I could see over the walls; each morning I stood watch before heading to breakfast, alert for any sign of patrols by the city guard. Elsewhere in the University, I could almost pretend the rest of the city had ceased to exist.

Through it all, recruits continued to arrive, sometimes as many as forty in a single day. Most appeared at night, but a few crept in just before sunset. Kamarri took responsibility for welcoming new arrivals, providing each with a hearty meal and a place to sleep before assigning them to the correct professors come morning.

After the seeming chaos of the first few days, life at the University settled into a comfortable routine. Current and former students took on less experienced recruits, while the professors worked exclusively with the most skilled Makhori. New projects and experiments were undertaken each day, some with more than one magic race working in

conjunction.

Weavers and Metalsmiths conspired to craft a blade that would slice easily through steel. Cloudmages attempted to combine their power to gain greater control over the weather. Potioneers trialed ancient recipes recovered from the bowels of the University, all the while brewing up batch after batch of explosives and thick colored smoke. Minstrels practiced creating stories realistic enough that listeners could not tell when they had fallen under the spell. And Flamespinners worked on improving their accuracy so they could use their magic in battle.

Little by little, I could see our ragged group of magicians transforming into something more. And it wasn't just magic they were improving at. The morning training sessions with Leoth went more smoothly every day, until most of our new recruits could trade several blows with our experienced soldiers. We delayed sharpening the swords, as we had no practice blades to replace them with, but it made me uneasy to think we had almost no genuine weapons at our disposal if we came under attack.

As Dead-span gave way to Loak-span, the city guard began patrolling the streets once more. Workers had shoveled away the last of the snow, and life returned to the city, albeit more quietly than before.

The longer I spent at Baylore University, the more I dreaded returning to the palace. Here my recruits treated me like another professor, deserving of respect but not fear, and Leoth seemed more open than usual, more honest. It was a treat to walk from bedroom to dining hall to classroom in the brisk winter air, freed from the stuffy confines of the palace, and I found my stomach protested less at the simpler, heartier fare of the University kitchens.

Then, halfway through Loak-span, a soldier interrupted my dinner with a summons.

"You have visitors, Your Majesty," he said in a carrying whisper. "In the courtyard."

My thoughts immediately jumped to my father—had he come to

discuss our next move? But he wouldn't have ventured outside the palace without a sizeable guard, not with the Truthbringers patrolling the streets once more. Perhaps he had sent a messenger.

I abandoned my dinner and hurried after the soldier, pulling on my cloak as I went.

Two hooded figures stood just inside the University archway, faces in shadow. As I approached, first one lowered his hood, followed by the second.

I clamped a hand to my mouth to stifle a shriek.

Cal and Viko had returned.

Battle Plans

Abandoning all thought of dignity, I dashed across the courtyard and threw my arms around Cal and Viko. Cal returned my embrace fiercely, while Viko shifted as though embarrassed.

I released them at last, my eyes stinging. “I can’t believe you’re alive, Cal! I didn’t want to give up hope, but...”

“I’m fine. I thought I’d never get out of there, but somehow Viko found me.”

Viko’s smile looked strained.

“Where were you? Olleack didn’t capture you, did he?”

“No. He nearly did, but I was well hidden.”

Footsteps scuffed the flagstones behind me, and I turned to see Leoth hurrying toward us, beaming.

“I could’ve sworn you were dead!”

“Not quite,” Cal said, grinning back.

“Let’s get inside, out of the cold, and you can tell us everything.”

“You’ll want dinner too, I expect,” I said.

“Yes, please,” Cal said eagerly.

Before long, we were sitting around a desk in an empty classroom,

digging into bowls of stew and baked potatoes.

“So,” I said. “Where have you been all this time, Cal?”

He swallowed a huge mouthful of stew before speaking. “For that staged attack, I hid out in one of the manors near King Olleack’s royal residence, just like we’d planned. The man who lived there was great—he must’ve been at least eighty, with a massive bushy beard and a collection of random things from around the world. He had skulls of animals I’d never even heard of, model ships as tall as he was, and a full suit of ornamental armor that apparently came from Varrival. He treated me like his grandson, and his cook must’ve baked me a dozen different pastries and scones that first day.” Cal’s face fell. “I don’t know where he is now. I hope he’s safe.”

“So the attack happened...” I prompted.

“Yeah. It all went better than I’d imagined. The whole street outside King Olleack’s manor was a mess—guards running every direction, smoke and flames and explosions everywhere. I was the one sending up flames high into the sky.”

“I saw that.”

Cal nodded. “Anyway, they must’ve seen me. When the smoke cleared away and the explosions stopped, about twenty guards barged into the manor I was in. The old man sent me up to hide in his attic, which you could only access up a hidden ladder, and he gave me enough food to get by for a while. I could see the street from a tiny window at the end of the attic, and I watched the city guard dragging him off. After that, I heard people stomping around the house every day. King Olleack must’ve stationed guards inside the house, so I never had a chance to leave. I ate the last of the food the man had given me days ago, and I was starting to wonder if I could sneak out while the guards were asleep. But every time I nearly left the attic, I heard footsteps just below.”

“And then Viko found you?” I asked, glancing at Viko, whose eyes were on his stew.

“Just last night. I don’t know how he figured out where I was. It was

getting late, but all of a sudden I heard the guards downstairs running and shouting, and I could see smoke pouring out of the windows. I thought the place was on fire, so I left the attic and started crawling through the smoke. It smelled like a fire too. Then Viko ran into me on the stairs—he had thrown a bottle of Potioneers' smoke through the window, and once he slipped inside, he lit a small fire so it smelled convincing."

"That was very clever," I told Viko, surprised. "But why did you wait until the snow had melted? Didn't that mean there were more guards around?"

"Not outside King Olleack's residence," Cal said. "They kept the streets around his manor cleared through the whole storm, and they were patrolling just like always."

I still had no idea why Viko had been away for so long, or how he had figured out where Cal was hidden, but he seemed unlikely to divulge that at the moment. I would speak to him in private later. For now, I would simply rejoice at Cal's return.

"I still can't believe you're safe, Cal," I said. "It's wonderful to have you back."

"What have I missed?"

"Only some of the worst Flamespinners I've ever seen trying to aim at targets," Leoth said.

Cal laughed. "Are you planning an attack on King Olleack's residence, then?"

"Not specifically. At the moment, we're just training everyone and coming up with ways to use magic in battle."

"I can describe King Olleack's residence for you, if you want. I could probably draw it with my eyes closed. I must've spent days sitting by that tiny attic window, watching the guards march around the fence. I was about to lose my mind from boredom."

"That's excellent," Leoth said. "If you can sketch the area from memory, we'll be able to make plans using what you know."

"Tomorrow, though," I said quickly. "For now, eat as much as you

want, and then rest.”

“I could do with another ten bowls of stew,” Cal said.

Smiling, I lifted my untouched baked potato onto his plate. “Start with this. I’m not hungry.”

When Cal and Viko finished eating at last, Leoth stood with a yawn. “I’ll show you to your quarters. You might have to share with a few others—the University is filling up fast.”

I trailed behind as Leoth led them to an empty room at the back of the University dormitories. Four bunk beds filled the space; it would allow students very little privacy.

“Where are you sleeping?” I asked Leoth, suddenly struck by the thought that he might be sharing a room with strangers.

He grinned. “Not in a dormitory. I’ve got a bed in one of the unused teachers’ rooms.”

“Just like me.”

“Only mine isn’t a tower.” Leoth turned back to Cal and Viko. “Sleep well. I expect to see you up at first light for sword training.”

As Cal and Viko crossed to the bunks at the back of the room, Leoth made to close the door. I stopped him with a hand.

“What?”

“I want to talk to Viko,” I whispered. “Alone. He’s hiding something, and I need to make sure whatever it is doesn’t endanger us.”

Leoth sighed. “You’re right. Well, I’ll see you tomorrow, then.”

Ducking behind the door so Cal and Viko couldn’t see, Leoth gave me a lingering kiss. We’d had precious little time alone since arriving at the University, and I clung to him, half-tempted to invite him to my room that night. But we did not want to incite a scandal now, while every day brought us closer to the Whitish army’s arrival. We could not afford to distract our soldiers.

At last he turned to go. I pushed the dormitory door open once more and found Cal and Viko staring at me.

“Viko. I want to speak with you,” I said softly. “Will you come for a walk with me?”

His whole body sagged. "Of course."

What was he afraid of?

We paced softly down the dormitory corridor and out to the courtyard, where the flagstones were beginning to sparkle with frost. Soldiers stood watch by the gates, but the rest of the courtyard stood empty. As we started a slow circuit of the yard, winding around the trunks of leafless trees, I pulled up my hood and tucked my hands into my sleeves, the cold already biting.

At last I said, "You know why I wanted to talk to you."

Viko made a noncommittal sound.

"Cal's story had several gaping holes in it, and I need you to fill them for me. Why were you away for so long? How did you figure out where he was hiding? How did you know to join us here, instead of returning to the palace?"

Viko continued to walk in silence, his head hanging, his face lost in shadows. Our feet crunched softly on the frosted stone, occasionally kicking up rotting leaves.

"Viko. I need you to talk to me."

"I've messed up," he muttered. "You're going to hate me."

"That depends on what you've done. I won't treat you harshly, I promise. I just need to know if there's any threat to my plans."

We turned down the side of the courtyard where my soldiers guarded the gates; neither of us spoke until we reached the row of trees on the opposite side. Our breath steamed before us, illuminated in the lanterns circling the courtyard.

"It was that stupid Minstrel's story," he said at last, so quietly I thought I'd misunderstood him. What did Deance's story have anything to do with his disappearance? "She recreated Baylore so well that everything was in the right place."

"What do you mean?"

He rubbed his eyes, hunching his shoulders even farther forward. "You know how I disappeared while the rest of you were dancing in the main square?"

“Where did you go?”

His let out a ragged breath. “To Wolfskin Alley.”

Gods. I thought I knew where this was going.

“It was all there, just like I’d seen when we first got to Baylore, and even the Demon’s Draught was almost exactly like I’d remembered. I thought it couldn’t hurt. It was just a story.” Now he was speaking in a rush, as though desperate to get the words out. “But after that day, I couldn’t stop thinking about it. I spent half my time trying to figure out how I could slip off and have another taste. I thought maybe if I tried it one last time, that would be enough.”

“Oh, Viko.”

“So when you brought me along for those interviews, I knew it was my only chance. Cal was a convenient excuse. I figured I’d spend the night in Wolfskin Alley and hunt Cal down the next day.

“Then I got there, and I—I couldn’t leave. I felt wretched for betraying your trust, and the draught helped with that too. I was afraid to let it wear off, or I’d have to face what I’d done.”

Viko’s voice shook, and he wiped at his eyes. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to hug him or slap him.

“But you left in the end. You actually did what you set out to do.”

“Not because I had any say in it. After the snow melted, the city guards raided Wolfskin Alley and brought everyone they found to the cells for a night. It sounded like they thought you were smuggling weapons through the place somehow—I think the city guards are watching the whole street now. Anyway, I sobered up in the cells and realized I’d just ruined my chance of a respectable life. I thought if I managed to find Cal, you might not notice I’d been gone so long. So I started asking around the cells if anyone knew much about the area around King Olleack’s manor.”

We had reached the front of the courtyard again, and Viko lapsed into silence as we passed the soldiers at the gate. Beyond the University walls, the moon was rising, hazy beneath a thin veneer of clouds.

“One of the prisoners said he was familiar with that street,” Viko

continued, quieter now. “He was an old man, and his clothes were much too nice for a criminal. He questioned me about a Flamespinner who worked for Queen Kalleah, and when he was convinced I knew Cal, he revealed that he’d hidden Cal up in his attic. He gave me directions, so as soon as I was let out, I set off to find his manor.”

“Which you managed.”

Viko nodded, his face still lost in the depths of his hood.

“And how did you know I was here?”

“While I was in Wolfskin Alley, a tavern-keeper found a copy of your newspaper in his rations. He passed it around to all of us before the raid. I wouldn’t be surprised if half the people who were locked up with me headed to the palace as soon as they were let out.”

I laughed softly. “I doubt my parents will be pleased about that.”

Viko walked a few more paces in silence before stopping. He leaned against the stone wall and raised his eyes to mine, his hood slipping back to reveal tearstained cheeks. “What are you going to do with me now?”

I sighed. “You did very well to save Cal, but I can’t say I trust you any longer.”

“I know,” he muttered.

I studied him for a long time, until he dropped his gaze once again. Even in the short time he had spent away, his cheeks had hollowed out, his skin regaining the sickly yellow pallor I recognized from his time in Larkhaven. Where had he gotten the money for the Demon’s Draught? Had he stolen it or returned to his old profession? I found I didn’t want to know.

“Mellicante was terrified when you went missing. You should’ve gone back to the palace to find her.”

Viko shook his head, eyes fixed on the flagstones. “I can’t face her. Not now.”

“You think I’m more forgiving than her? The ruthless marauder who burned half of Itrea to the ground?”

“That’s not true. You’re not like that.” He paused. “But if you want

to lock me up, I understand. I deserve it.”

I leaned against the wall beside him, gazing up at the nighttime sky through the latticework of branches. “You’ve made a huge mistake, Viko. But you were also the one who rang the cathedral bell to summon my army. You rescued Cal, and now you’ve returned, despite everything. I won’t lock you up. I expect you to resume your position as my personal guard, and tomorrow I’ll assign someone to keep watch on you at all times.”

Viko sniffed, and I glanced sideways to see tears spilling from his eyes once again. “Thank you.”

With a sigh, I gathered him into my arms. “You’re safe. That’s all that matters.”

* * *

Over the next quarter, we began putting together the pieces for an attack on Olleack’s royal residence. My aim was to strike directly at the heart of his power, capturing as many Truthbringers and royals as possible. With any luck, the city guards would accept my authority once Olleack had fallen—or, at the very least, they would descend into chaos without clear orders to follow, allowing my soldiers to subdue them more easily.

If we could move swiftly, my Makhori soldiers alone might be able to overwhelm the guards stationed around Olleack’s residence. The rest of my army would then hold the city guards at bay while we rounded up his court.

The day after Cal’s return, he sketched a rough map of the streets around Olleack’s royal residence, as well as a drawing of the front lawn and façade as he had seen it from the attic window. His drawing skills were rudimentary, but when we compared his map to a less detailed map of the Gilded Quarter, we got a better idea of how the area was laid out.

“I bet there are guards stationed in most of the manors around King

Olleack's residence," Cal said. "So we can't count on hiding in them again."

"And we have to expect attack from all directions," Leoth said. "This will be tricky."

Our plan revolved around causing as much chaos as possible. While the city guards panicked, we would strike quickly and quietly.

With magic at our disposal, we would have no trouble creating pandemonium. But the larger issue would be coordinating our work in the midst of the chaos. As long as we hoped to conceal our presence at the University, we could not carry out a mock version of the attack, so our discussions were purely theoretical. When we threw hundreds of Makhori who had never fought before into battle, I had no idea what would happen.

We planned to distract Olleack's troops with every means available. The day before the attack, Cloudmages would call up a blizzard that would reduce visibility and hamper the city guards' efforts to reach the royal residence. As with the initial attack, Potioneers would create dense clouds of smoke and explosions throughout the street, while Flamespinners used fire to distract and ward off Olleack's guards. Armed with unnaturally sharp swords and reinforced coats, my Makhori soldiers would hold an advantage over Olleack's guards even if they lacked the same level of training.

* * *

As winter gave way to spring, my soldiers began to surprise me with their progress. The team of Cloudmages had grown so adept in their control of the weather that they could make a solitary cloud circle the city for hours; a few of the Flamespinners who had started out as raw beginners could now accurately hit a target from fifty paces; and the Potioneers had refined their explosive mixture to the extent they could predict exactly how far the blast would expand.

With help from Tylie and Farrence's unfailingly cheerful demeanors,

my soldiers soon began treating the forbidden races like any other Makhori. Almost thirty Dark Potioneers had confessed their race, and they were hard at work attempting to develop a means of long-distance communication. Our new recruits had tapered off to just a handful each quarter, but as the University was nearing capacity, this did not concern me.

Though most of our new arrivals joined us at night, while the city guards were not patrolling the area, I did notice a handful of guards walking past the University gates more often than usual. They had likely guessed something was happening at the University, but did not think it strategically worthwhile to attack.

The weather grew warmer, the days longer, and buds began to sprout on the trees in the University courtyard. Birds flitted among the branches, trilling out their songs, and our work took on a lively, festive air.

But I found myself watching the excitement as if from behind glass. Those around me seemed to have forgotten what the arrival of spring signified—that the Whitish army was even now on its way to Baylore.

Only Leoth and Cal appeared to share my concern. We spent many late nights agonizing over what would happen if the Whitish army arrived before we managed to gain control over the entire city, but these brought us no closer to an answer. We had to risk attacking Olleack's manor soon, without first testing our Makhori soldiers in a less crucial battle.

When my father finally sent word that he was sending out the second round of newspapers to all Weavers and remaining Makhori, I was relieved. His announcement came in the form of a scrap of parchment tied around a rock and thrown over the rear wall of the University, but I knew his signature.

This next move was risky. My army was not strong enough to subdue the city guard yet, so we were counting on a final influx of Makhori—especially Weavers—to tip the balance in our favor. But the people we were reaching out to this time were less vulnerable than

those we had originally contacted, which meant they were more likely to betray us.

“What if we attack now? Before the newspaper goes out?” Kamarri asked when we shared the news with her over breakfast.

“We might win, but with heavy casualties,” Leoth said. “Makhori in particular. Our soldiers would be facing the worst of the fighting, and there’s no way we would be able to retreat in time to avoid getting pinned by the city guard. Without enough reinforced coats for our entire Makhori force, we would be slaughtered.”

“What have we been planning this whole time, then?” Kamarri snapped. “Is this a game to you? Are you trying to distract our magician soldiers so they don’t get in the way when the real fighting breaks out?”

“Of course not,” I said with exasperation. “We wouldn’t be able to regain control of Baylore without them. But every time we discuss scenarios, we run into the same problems. First, we assumed our Makhori soldiers would all wear reinforced coats, when in reality we only have a few dozen completed. Second, we planned to overwhelm Olleack’s guards with swords sharp enough to cut through steel, but we have yet to succeed in that project. And third, if Olleack barricades himself in his manor and we can’t break down the doors, we wouldn’t make it back to the University before the city guard surrounds us. Two of those problems can be solved by recruiting the Weavers’ Guild, so we ought to wait until they join us before we throw everything into a battle we can’t win.”

“I thought we were planning to overwhelm King Olleack’s guards with our diversions and round up his court before they had a chance to summon help.”

“Diversions are not the same as fighting,” Leoth said. “We can confuse the battle, but we can’t disarm and capture our enemies through magical means alone. Kalleah is right. We need to wait until our soldiers are properly armed and armored.”

Kamarri pushed back her chair and stood, her face red. “I’ll ask Professor Tabernath how he feels about that. It would be a shame to

throw away all the work we've done because you're too timid to try your skills in battle."

As she stalked off, I pushed my breakfast away, feeling queasy from the smell of the dining hall. Viko was watching me with a strange look—he had been very quiet ever since his return, throwing himself into training with single-minded determination bordering on obsession.

"She's right that this could ruin everything we've been planning," Leoth said, pushing his potatoes around on his plate. "If someone exposes us..."

"Are we ready to attack your father's residence today, then?"

"No."

"Or tomorrow?"

"It's too great a risk."

"Exactly." I folded my arms, watching my recruits as they cleared away little by little. "We could win, but at what cost?"

The March of the Truthbringers

Viko cornered me on my way up to my room after breakfast. The sky had just opened up, rain hammering on the rooftops and cascading from gutters, and I needed to find my oilskin coat for our morning training session. Leoth had not cancelled our swordfighting lessons even in the downpour, reminding me that we could face any weather in battle—even the Cloudmages were not infallible.

“What is it?” I asked, slowing at the foot of the spiral stairs leading to my tower.

“Um. I—” Viko shifted from foot to foot, twisting his hands together.

I braced myself. “What have you done now?”

“No! It’s not that. I haven’t done anything. You can ask that obnoxious man who’s been following me for the past quarter. It’s...”

“Just say it, Viko. Leoth will have us both doing extra drills in the rain if we’re late.”

He spoke in a rush. “Have you been feeling...odd lately?”

His question caught me completely off guard. I frowned at him.

“What do you mean?”

Viko flushed. “I just noticed you haven’t been eating much, even though we’re spending all day training. You used to eat as much as the rest of us, back when we were in Larkhaven.”

“Are you trying to take my mother’s place?” I asked with amusement. “I hired you as my guard, not my nursemaid.”

“No, no, of course not. But—I mean—do you think you might be—you know—” He cleared his throat and then whispered, “With child?”

I gaped at him. “Where did that come from? I can’t have children. My power would kill them before they were born.”

Then, as Viko and I stared at each other, his face still bright red, something clicked into place. My menses were well over a span late. In the chaos of reclaiming Baylore Palace and training my magician army, I hadn’t given it any thought.

I whirled, suddenly afraid someone might have overheard. But the corridor was empty.

“Come with me,” I hissed.

Grabbing his sleeve, I dragged him up the spiral stairs to the office half of my bedchamber, where I sank into the chair behind the desk. Viko perched on a stool opposite me, still fidgeting.

“Why do you think I might be with child?” I asked, trying to keep my shock from showing on my face. I did not want to admit I knew virtually nothing about childbearing—my mother had assumed, just as I had, that I would never bring a live child into the world.

Viko held my gaze, though his cheeks were still flushed. “Where I used to work, women ended up pregnant all the time. It wasn’t good for business, so they took herbs to stop it, but they didn’t always work. The tavern owner hated that. He watched his girls like a hawk at meals, and if they didn’t finish their portion for three days in a row, he forced them to drink an awful potion that made the child bleed right out of them. They usually ended up sick for a quarter, and one even died.”

“That’s horrible,” I whispered.

“I know.” Viko gave me a lopsided smile. “I’m terrified of the thought of ever getting a woman with child, because I can’t forget the look on their faces.”

I imagined there was little danger of that—I had never seen him showing particular interest in anyone, woman or man, the whole time I’d known him.

“Did you suspect anything?” he asked.

“No. It hadn’t even crossed my mind,” I said honestly. “How do I know for sure?”

“You won’t, until your stomach starts growing. But the women I’ve known always say they feel odd for the first couple spans. Tired and queasy and unable to stomach large meals.”

I shook my head. “Gods. This is the last thing I need right now.”

“You need to be careful. You really shouldn’t fight in any battles, unless you want to risk losing the baby. That’s why I wanted to say something. Even though—” He flushed again.

“Thank you, Viko.” I stood and started pacing behind the desk, hands on my hips. What was I supposed to do now? Would Leoth even want a child of ours, illegitimate and twice-cursed as it was?

“Is it Leoth’s?” Viko asked quietly.

“Of course.”

I crossed to the window and pressed my forehead against the glass, gazing down at the rain-drenched courtyard. My recruits were already going through the motions; I could not pick out Leoth in the crowd.

Was Viko right? Though I didn’t want to believe it, everything added up. I had been feeling odd since Midwinter, and had I not been so distracted with the upcoming battle, I would have worried about my missed menses before now.

Plagues. This would make a mess of everything. And what would Leoth say?

I wasn’t ready to tell him. Not yet. The child might still perish before birth; there was no point dragging Leoth into this until I was certain it would live.

Someone knocked on the door, and I whirled, my forehead damp from the condensation on the window. Viko hurried to answer it.

Leoth stood there, his coat dripping onto the top of the stairs, his expression thunderous.

“What are you doing here?” he demanded of Viko.

Without answering, Viko slipped past him and fled down the stairs.

Leoth closed the door behind him, a pool of water spreading across the floor of my room. “I wondered where you had gone. I’m considering calling off the training.” His voice was wooden.

My heart was thudding as though Leoth had just caught me having an affair. How could I explain this away without telling him about the child?

“I just came up here to get my coat,” I said cautiously. “Viko followed me because he wanted to ask me something.”

“I see. And what did he want to ask?”

I hugged my arms across my chest. “It was something private. He was embarrassed and didn’t want me to tell anyone else.”

Leoth just stared at me.

“I have no interest in him as a lover whatsoever, if that’s what you’re afraid of!” My voice seemed too loud. “I pity him. I want to help him. But I will never see him as more than a friend.”

“I see.”

“Why do you doubt me? When have I ever given you cause to doubt my love for you?”

Leoth hung his head. “You haven’t. But I’m a Curse-Weaver. Sooner or later, you’ll cast me aside.”

“I won’t, Leoth. I never want to lose you.” I thought of the child I might be carrying, and the words almost slipped from my mouth. Then Leoth closed the distance between us and kissed me, his sodden coat clammy beneath my hands.

No. Better to wait.

* * *

I could hardly sleep that night. I tossed back and forth, the blankets tangling around my legs, eyes wide open and staring into the darkness.

How could I lead our country through war while I was burdened with a child?

The women I had seen bear children at court often disappeared spans before the babe was due, resting in the quiet of their rooms rather than risk the child coming too early. I had seen women in Ambervale still tending to their gardens or selling candles at the market with their stomachs so swollen they looked ready to burst, but that was different. Everyone knew giving birth was risky out in the countryside, away from the care of a medic or healer.

And how would I cope with a child? The idea excited and terrified me in equal measure. I had never imagined myself a mother. Would my child resent me for passing on my forbidden blood? I prayed it would be spared that misery.

I could already imagine what Mother would say—she would remind me that a blood heir was crucial for cementing my power. But as long as I held the city by force, that didn't matter.

What sort of world was I bringing this child into? Would I celebrate its birth just in time to see Baylore go up in flames around us?

At last I fell into a fitful sleep, dreaming of towering beings of fire that strode toward Baylore, leaving burning fields in their wake.

* * *

I woke before dawn the next morning. The rain had cleared off, leaving the courtyard damp and glistening in the lamplight. From the window of my squat, low tower, I could just see movement on the street in front of the University.

Were my soldiers delivering the next round of rations?

I dressed hurriedly and dashed across the courtyard to the University entrance. Venturing up the guardhouse stairs, I joined a line

of archers keeping watch behind a low wall. From there, I could see a cluster of my soldiers turning down a side street. They made an impressive sight, dressed in the new midnight-blue uniform, sacks of rations over their shoulders and swords belted at their waists.

“When will the Weavers join us?” Professor Tabernath asked when I reported the news over breakfast.

“Very soon, I hope. If they can make it here safely, they might even start arriving tonight.”

“We’ll ready their rooms, then. There are several thousand members of the Weavers’ Guild, so our numbers could more than double in the coming days.”

I blinked at him in surprise. Did we have space to house that many at the University? And more importantly, would we be able to feed them all? But the professor did not seem concerned.

Our recruits took a break from training that day to prepare for the new arrivals. The dormitories were full, so we cleared desks from a row of vacant classrooms and collected as much bedding as we could spare. Most of our Makhori soldiers had been half-starved and desperate when they joined us, so they had gladly accepted whatever quarters we offered. But the Weavers were generally wealthier and less affected by the growing prejudice around our magic races. I wondered if they would protest at the indignity of sleeping on the floor like refugees.

I lingered in the dining hall after dinner, intending to stay awake to welcome the first of our new recruits. We’d heard very little news since our arrival at the University; I hoped the Weavers could give us a better idea of the situation in the city. If our attack on Olleack’s manor was to be successful, we had to know how heavily the city guards patrolled the streets.

Leoth, Cal, Viko, and Professor Tabernath joined my table as the last of the soldiers cleared out.

“I’m worried the city guards will stop people from reaching the University,” I said. “Maybe we should have asked our Cloudmages to call up another blizzard before we tried recruiting them.”

Leoth shook his head. “I spoke to the archers at the gates earlier today, and from everything they’ve seen, only a handful of guards patrol at night. I’d imagine most are stationed around my father’s manor.”

“I hope you’re right.”

The dining hall now stood empty apart from our small table along the rear wall. When they noticed us, the kitchen staff brought out a pot of cinnamon tea and cranberry-lemon biscuits, delicate and flakey and full of flavor.

“Anyone interested in a game of cards?” Leoth asked. “Something to help pass the time.”

Professor Tabernath dealt the first hand, shuffling and passing out cards with deftness that spoke of long familiarity. “It still seems odd to be back here,” he said. “When the University closed down, I expected years to pass before it reopened. It’s thanks to you that we’re here, Your Majesty. You inspire people.”

“It’s true,” Leoth said. “I never thought there was any point in fighting back until you came along and proved we still had a chance.”

Cal held his cards fanned out before his face, and he scowled at us. “Are we going to play or not?”

I laughed. “Of course we are. Do you want to go first?”

Leoth won this round and the next, and we moved from weightier topics to a debate on whether he was cheating. After the countless game nights I had attended with his friends, I wouldn’t put it past him.

As the night grew later, we finished off our first pot of tea and demolished the plateful of biscuits. When Professor Tabernath went in search of a refill, he reported that the kitchen staff had retired for the night, leaving the fire-twist smoldering in the grate.

Leoth had just started dealing a new round, the fresh tea steeping in its pot, when I heard it.

Distant shouts rose from somewhere in the city. A second later, something like an explosion resounded through the streets.

I stiffened. “Did you hear that?”

Cal’s eyes widened as another *boom* echoed from the city, closer this

time.

“It sounds like an attack,” Leoth said.

I jumped to my feet, dropping my cards. “Do you think that’s the Whitish army? We wouldn’t stand a chance if they arrived now.”

“It shouldn’t be,” Professor Tabernath said. “We wouldn’t be able to hear the fighting if it was at the city gates.”

“Unless they were using catapults,” Leoth said grimly.

“Plagues.” I took off at a run toward the University gates, Leoth, Cal, Viko, and Professor Tabernath scrambling to keep up.

As soon as we left the dining hall, the shouts increased in volume. A low roar swelled from the streets around the University, as though the city had transformed into a many-headed beast. Others must have heard the commotion, because lights were flickering on all around the University.

At the main gates, I bounded up the stairs onto the top of the wall, nearly toppling one of the archers in my haste.

“What’s happening?” I asked frantically.

“We can’t tell,” an archer said, moving aside to make room for us at the wall.

I peered down the dark street, unable to see the source of the noise. The shouts and crashes seemed to be coming from the main square—was Olleack attacking the palace?

Then a line of Truthbringers and white-clad city guards marched into view, passing directly below us. They brandished torches, the acrid smell drifting up to us, flames trailing in their wake.

“All Makhori, report to the main square now!” bellowed a Truthbringer near the head of the column. “We know where you live. Any who fail to appear will face King Olleack’s wrath!”

Just past the University, a manor door opened and a middle-aged woman ventured down the steps. She wore a coat over her nightgown, and her eyes glowed round and frightened in the torchlight.

“Move it!” the Truthbringer barked.

She scuttled into the street and trailed along in the guards’ wake,

head bowed.

“Someone must have handed over our newspaper,” I said, dazed. I had expected repercussions from this most recent round of recruitments, but not *this*.

“We’re not ready for this,” Leoth said. “With all the city guards in the main square, King Baltheor won’t be able to respond.”

“We need to send out our Makhori soldiers,” I said quietly. This was exactly the sort of situation I had wanted to avoid. “We can’t abandon our people. It will be a slaughter, but we have to do what we can.”

The Weavers' Guild

Down in the courtyard below, my Makhori soldiers were already assembling. As we descended the stairs, I heard scattered voices.

“What’s happening?”

“Why are people shouting?”

“Is it time to fight?”

When I emerged from the guardhouse, the nearby voices quieted, though the distant roar continued.

“Someone must have tipped off Olleack’s forces,” I said, my voice carrying over the confused din. “His guards are rounding up Makhori as I speak. We can’t wait to attack his residence. We need to act now, to get as many Makhori as possible to safety.”

“What about the rest of your army?” a professor shouted.

“They will join us if they can. But the city guards are assembling on the main square, which means my army could be trapped inside the palace. We can’t wait for them.”

“What are your orders?” Leoth asked.

“We need to reach the Weavers’ Guild first. They’ll be in the most

danger. Use everything we've been practicing to throw the streets into chaos. This will be a test to see if our strategy works. If the city guards are trying to round up every Makhori in Baylore, I imagine their forces will be spread thin. Overwhelm any you encounter and direct the Weavers to the University or the palace."

"Who will lead the attack?" Leoth asked.

"Professor Tabernath—would you be willing to take this responsibility?" I asked.

Leoth gave me a hurt look.

"It would be my honor," Professor Tabernath said.

"Quickly, then, and don't put yourselves in unnecessary danger. Your lives are far more valuable than the Truthbringers'. It's not cowardly to run away from an unmatched fight. And take back streets where you can—stay far away from the main square."

As Professor Tabernath began shouting orders, Leoth said, "What about you? Are you planning to fight?"

"No. But I need to reach the palace, and I want you to come with me. You can lead the main bulk of our army against the city guards."

"Right. Then we need to get ready."

While Professor Tabernath organized the rest of our troops, Leoth and I hurried to our rooms to fetch our swords. I returned to find the courtyard in chaos, Makhori running every which way as they gathered weapons, explosives, and bottled Potioneers' smoke.

"Flamespinners, you must take utmost care," Professor Tabernath called over the pandemonium. "It's dark out there, the streets are narrow, and the city guards will be leading innocent Makhori. Don't even think about using our power to attack anyone. And keep the flames well clear of any buildings or people."

"Yes, Professor," Cal's voice rang out.

"Weavers, to me!" one of the Weaver professors shouted. "We need to speak to the Weavers' Guild if we can and persuade them that joining Queen Kalleah is their only chance at safety."

I threaded my way through the crowd to the University entrance.

“Archers!” I called up to the men and women stationed over the doors. “I need you to protect my Makhori soldiers.”

They filed down to the courtyard, waiting in a silent line while the rest of my army bustled about.

As I watched my soldiers gradually fall into columns, I realized many carried the same swords we had used for practice, some still dull and unfinished.

“I don’t want anyone venturing out there unarmed,” I said as the din quieted. “If you don’t have a proper weapon—a weapon with a sharp blade—stay behind and help organize the new arrivals once they get here.”

I didn’t mention that I wasn’t sure we would be returning to the University at all. If this turned into a full battle, we couldn’t afford to split our forces.

“Is everyone ready?” I called.

An answering cheer rose from my army.

“Wait for my signal.”

While the Makhori watched in restless silence, I climbed the stairs to the now-empty wall. Below, the street was empty save for a single white-clad guard jogging to catch up with the rest of Olleack’s forces. Shouts and thuds still echoed from the main square—despite my confident orders, I had no idea what we would find there. If my few hundred Makhori ran into two thousand fully-armed city guards, it would be a massacre.

Swallowing, I turned back and looked over the courtyard, which glowed golden in patches from the lamps lining the perimeter. The bare-branched trees loomed over the flagstones; from up here, the tidy columns looked like nothing but disorganized clumps of soldiers, mismatched and undisciplined.

“It’s time,” I called out. “Luck be with you.”

A few scattered cheers rose from the magicians, but most were silent and sober. They were not battle-hungry—they knew, as I did, how much we risked by venturing into the middle of a fight unprepared.

Professor Tabernath dragged open the main gates, and my soldiers began marching through the archway, one column at a time. The Flamespinners led the way, followed by the Potioneers and Weavers, all huddling close together, skirting around the pools of lamplight that spilled onto the cobblestones. Behind them came the Makhori whose power would not serve them in battle. I saw Kamarri leading a small group of forbidden races, their column more orderly than the others.

Footsteps approached, and I glanced back to see Leoth emerging onto the wall.

“I can’t help but think something is going to go terribly wrong.”

“I know,” I said. “This is exactly what I wanted to avoid.”

“Honestly, I think this is less dangerous than the attack we were planning on my father’s manor. If we can’t pull this off, we were fools to think we ever stood a chance against his forces.”

We stood in silence as the last of our Makhori forces passed beneath the archway into the city. Past two looming manors, they turned left into the warren of streets where the Gilded Quarter merged with the Market District. Seconds later, I could see no trace of my army.

“To the palace now?” Leoth asked softly.

I nodded. For one last minute, I looked out over the dark rooftops, wondering when the first sign of smoke and flames would rise from the Weavers’ Guild.

Then I tore myself away and hurried down the stairs.

Only a few stragglers remained in the courtyard—a few young children, an old woman with a cane, and a clump of University staff who had emerged to see what was transpiring. I realized my mistake too late—there was no one left to guard me and Leoth as we made our way to the palace.

Leoth must have had the same thought, because he looked sideways at me and said, “Good thing I stayed. It wouldn’t look very good for you to go walking around on your own during a battle.”

“We need to go. Now. I don’t care how dangerous it is.”

“Let’s see if they left any Weavers’ armor behind.”

But the classroom where we had stored the reinforced coats stood empty, and the swords strapped to our waists would do us little good if we ran across more than two Whitish soldiers. I still had yet to gain confidence with a sword, despite our recent quarters of training; I knew I needed to work at it harder, for my own protection, but there were so many other matters of greater urgency to attend to that I frequently missed training sessions.

Leoth tugged open the wardrobe and peered behind a chair, but there was no Weavers' armor to be found. "This is bad."

"We'll take back streets," I said. "Come on. We can't leave our Makhori forces to fight off an entire army on their own."

Leoth sighed. "You should let me go alone. You're the queen. It's foolish to risk your safety like this."

"No. I can't stay. If this turns into a full battle, you'll need my authority to send out our army."

Leoth's mouth tightened, but he nodded.

As we started toward the University gates, swords strapped beneath our cloaks, I wondered if it had been callous of me to remind Leoth that he lacked authority. He held no official position in court; he was neither an advisor nor an army captain. With his father fighting against me, he could not claim status through his birthright either. At the moment, he was nothing but my lover.

Now was not the time to worry about this, though. We had reached the gates, and one of the University staff members waited to lock the doors behind us.

"Take care, Your Majesty," the man at the gates said with a slight bow. "We await your return."

"Thank you." I squeezed Leoth's hand—his fingers were cold—and then slipped through the gates onto the shadowed street.

As soon as we left the safety of the University, my every sense went on high alert. I flinched at each distant crash, and the acrid smoke lacing the air gave me the claustrophobic feeling the city was on fire.

We turned left, away from the palace, intending to circle around the

back of the University to approach from the heart of the Gilded Quarter. There were unlikely to be many soldiers rounding up wealthy civilians just yet.

I walked as fast as I dared, hood draped so low over my face that my vision was reduced to a slit, one hand trailing along the stones that formed the University wall.

A shout rang out from ahead. I glanced at Leoth in alarm—his face was also obscured beneath his hood—and we broke into a run. Our footsteps slapped too loudly against the cobblestones; I was sure someone would hear us.

“To the Weavers’ Guild, hurry!” a man’s voice barked from what sounded like mere paces away.

“Faster!” I whispered sharply.

We sprinted forward. My hood fell off, but I had no time to pull it back up. Our footfalls resounded off the walls, and I feared I would trip on the uneven cobblestones.

Lantern light emerged from around the curving street, and a contingent of white-clad city guards jogged into view.

A second later, we reached the end of the University wall and dashed around the corner. The shadows were deeper here—only three streetlamps broke through the gloom.

“What was that?” a guard asked.

My heart thudded against my ribs. “Varse,” I gasped.

“Don’t stop!” Leoth panted. “There’s another street here somewhere...”

We kept running, pushing ourselves faster and faster, heedless of the uneven footing.

The guards’ footsteps approached again; if they saw us now, we would never outrun them.

Suddenly, Leoth’s hand closed on my arm, and he yanked me sharply to the right.

I hiccupped in surprise and nearly tripped. A second later, I regained my balance and scrambled after him into a narrow lane between two

manors. No lights shone here, and a large evergreen shrub had bulged past its fence, obscuring part of the street from view.

We darted behind the shrub and crouched down in the shadows, my pulse still racing. Every sense told me to run; crouching here, I felt like a rabbit in a snare.

“Don’t breathe so loudly,” Leoth whispered.

Gulping, I tried to slow my heartrate. It took some effort to keep each breath from rasping in my throat—I hadn’t run in months, and the winter air was dry and harsh on my lungs.

The slapping footsteps slowed as they approached.

“Did you see where they went?” a man’s deep voice asked.

“Might’ve just been my imagination,” another said.

“Get moving!” said a commanding voice. “It’s not worth chasing a few vagabonds. We’ll find them in the end.”

The footsteps started up again, but this time they receded.

The pressure in my chest eased, and I began breathing deeply once again. Sour-tasting acid had coated my throat after our sprint, and I coughed as quietly as I could manage.

“Plagues, that was close.” Leoth ran a hand through his hair—his hood had also fallen back during our run.

“I thought that would be the end of us.”

“So did I.”

We clambered to our feet, holding the bars of the ornate wrought-iron fence for support, and ventured back onto the wider street that encircled the University. With the University walls rising to our left, we could see nothing from the city center; even the sounds of fighting were muffled from here.

Walking so quickly we were nearly running, we reached the rear of the University without further incident. Here we turned left onto the street that would lead us to the northern end of the palace grounds.

Now I could see the towers of Baylore Palace rising above the nearby rooftops. All was quiet and dark in this part of town, domain of wealthy families whose mansions sat amid stately gardens.

We picked up our pace, walking at a quick trot that was nearly a run, images of fire and blood and clashing swords flickering before my eyes. Just as we reached the end of the University, Leoth tripped over an uneven cobblestone and nearly fell; I barely managed to catch him.

“Are you okay?” I asked as he straightened.

“Of—of course,” he said around a huge yawn.

This was bad—my power was starting to affect him.

“Go ahead,” I said. “You’ve spent too much time around me tonight.”

“No, I’m fine,” Leoth said. “It’s just getting late. It’s not you.”

Five steps later, he crumpled to the ground.

The Golden Thread

My heart leapt into my throat. “Leoth?”

He made no response.

I needed to get away from him, but I couldn’t leave him unconscious in the middle of the street. The nearby houses were silent, the curtains drawn, and Leoth lay sprawled in a pool of darkness between streetlamps.

As I stood there, trapped in indecision, I caught sight of a faint gold thread of light stretching from Leoth to me. It grew brighter as I watched, until I was convinced it had enough substance to grab ahold of. In fact, I felt a sudden, powerful urge to take hold of the thread and yank it. The golden thread was power, pure, unfiltered power, and I could almost taste the heady euphoria of drinking it in. My hand closed around the thread, warm and alive and pulsating with vitality.

Then I yanked my hand free as though burned. I scrambled away from Leoth, tripping over a cobblestone; two steps farther, I fell backward and landed heavily on the cold stones.

The golden thread vanished.

My whole body shook. What had I been thinking? I knew what that

golden thread was—it was Leoth’s strength, his lifeblood. If I had ripped it away...

But the urge had been overwhelming. It had come over me like a haze, muffling my senses until no other thought could penetrate beyond a fierce craving for that jolt of power. Was this how Viko felt when he was faced with the Demon’s Draught?

Even now, I could feel a faint tug of desire. It terrified me. If this was what it meant to gain control of my power, I never wanted it to happen again. I had been on the brink of losing control. What kind of monster would I become if I were faced with this again?

Still trembling, I brushed grit from the palms of my grazed hands. Leoth still lay in a heap on the cobblestones, motionless, but I could hear the faint whistle of air passing between his lips.

What was I supposed to do now? I was frightened of venturing closer to Leoth, but I couldn’t leave him unconscious in the middle of the street.

Clambering to my feet, my tailbone aching, I crept toward Leoth. I held my breath, bracing myself for the overwhelming pull of his lifeblood, but the golden thread did not reappear.

I couldn’t lift him, and I couldn’t drag him all the way back to the palace. I scanned the street, heart racing, and my eyes alit on the nearest manor gate. A sizeable garden with trees and empty flowerbeds stretched before the manor—if I could just move him off the street, he might be safe.

Cautiously I closed the final distance between us. The golden thread did not reappear. Untying my cloak, I laid it on the ground beside Leoth. Then I knelt and rolled him onto it with difficulty.

Grabbing the cloak near his shoulders, I leaned backward and yanked as hard as I could. He slid a handspan over the cobblestones, his head flopping to the side. This was harder than I had expected, and as my panic faded, I remembered that my magician army was waiting for me to send help. The longer I delayed, the worse their chances of success.

Getting to my feet, I leaned down to grab the cloak once more, putting my full weight into hauling it backward. This time it slid farther, and I yanked again, closing the final distance to the manor gate. The latch opened easily, and the gate swung inward with a creak of hinges. The garden smelled strongly of decomposing leaves, and untidy shoots marred the symmetry of the once-manicured hedges. The manor almost seemed abandoned.

I dragged Leoth with difficulty up the half-step leading into the garden, and there I left him slumped in the shadows behind an evergreen hedge. Dropping to my knees, I kissed his forehead.

“Be safe,” I murmured.

Then I retreated, closing the manor gate gently behind me.

On the street, I broke into a run, dashing past the last seven mansions. The palace loomed before me, lit from the outside, and as I neared, the roar of noise from the main square surged in volume. When I reached the palace wall and skidded around the corner, I could make out what looked like Potioneers’ smoke rising from somewhere in the Market District.

To my surprise, the street running beside the palace wall stood empty, though I glimpsed chaotic movement at the end of the street, where it opened onto the main square. I sprinted the final distance to the servants’ gate, expecting at any moment to hear the whistle of an arrow or a shout as someone spotted me, but the street remained still.

A fully armored guard stood just inside the servants’ gate, and he did a double take when I skidded to a halt before him.

“You Majesty! What’s happening? There are city guards everywhere, and—”

“I don’t have time to explain,” I gasped. “Just let me through.”

He unlocked the gate with haste and stepped back.

I darted through and dashed around the exterior of the Mountain wing to the palace steps, which were crowded with soldiers watching the chaos on the square. They shifted where they stood, holding swords at the ready, as though awaiting orders. Flashes of light from the square

illuminated their faces with an eerie glow.

“Where is King Baltheor?” I demanded breathlessly.

“Inside, Your Majesty.”

I sprinted up the steps two at a time, guards scattering. The palace doors hung ajar, so I slipped through, nearly colliding with a solid wall of soldiers that stood waiting just inside.

“Father!” I shouted. “King Baltheor!”

The waiting soldiers moved aside, and my father jogged forward, clanking. He wore proper metal armor, not just Weaver-reinforced clothing, and one hand rested on the hilt of his sword.

“What’s happening, Kalleah? The Truthbringers have taken over the main square, and they seem to be dragging people from their homes.”

“They’re rounding up Makhori,” I gasped. “Someone must have handed over that newspaper. The city guards are marching around town right now, threatening to punish anyone who doesn’t hand themselves over.”

“Why aren’t you at the University?”

“I sent my magician army out to rescue as many people as they can. But they’re badly outnumbered. Your forces need to step in and clear the main square so we can get everyone to safety.”

Dellik had been listening; she pushed her way through the crowd to my father’s side. “Your Majesty, it’s too dangerous for us to go out there now. Olleack’s entire city guard is mobilized, and there’s a mob of civilians helping them as well.”

“I don’t care. We need to save as many of my magicians as we can. Cut a path to the Weavers’ Guild and get them out alive.”

“Kalleah—”

“Don’t argue,” I ordered my father. “We need to move fast.”

Though my father and Dellik shared a look, they said nothing more. My father turned to his waiting column of soldiers and bellowed, “Prepare for battle! We must make haste!”

“Our people are in danger,” I cried over the explosions and shouts still rising from the square. “Our worst fears have come to pass—King

Olleack is rounding up Makhori. Any he captures might be enslaved or tortured or killed. These are your brothers and children and neighbors. We can't abandon them.

"Make for the Weavers' Guild and take over the fighting from our magician troops. Once you have escorted the Weavers safely back to the palace, spread out and secure as much of the city as you can manage. We must save our people."

My father and I leaned against the double doors and pushed them open as wide as they could go, and my army poured down the steps into the icy night.

I stood with my back pressed against the door as they streamed through the gates, city guards and civilians scattering as they cut across the square. Some dragged their prisoners into the cathedral, the inside of which glowed with brilliant yellow light. Several blocks away, purple and red smoke rose above the peaked roofs of the Market District, flames flickering amidst the enchanted haze.

At a pause in the flood of soldiers, my father crossed the steps to join me.

"How do you think our army will fare?" I asked.

"Badly. I know you want to protect the Makhori, but in this instance, I fear you have sacrificed the long-term success of your campaign for an immediate victory."

"If Olleack kills the magic races, what are we fighting for?" My voice was hard. "If the Makhori are dead and gone, I will have gained nothing but an empty throne. We may as well let Whitland take over."

"I understand. Even so, I think you've made a mistake."

Without waiting for my response, my father turned and fell into pace with the final column of soldiers pouring down the palace steps. I watched him go with a prickling of unease. In the yellow light of torches and lanterns, I could see trails of mist rising from my soldiers as they breathed into the cold darkness.

I feared my father was right. Yet I could not turn back. If we did nothing to stop the wholesale slaughter of Makhori, it would be the end

of Itrea. Our kingdom was the last refuge of magic—if we lost that, my people would have nowhere else to turn. We had no island to sail to this time, no undiscovered land to claim. If I allowed my Makhori citizens to die when I had the power to save them, I would be no better than Olleack.

As the last of our soldiers reached the main square, the gates clanged shut behind them.

“Your Majesty?”

I started.

One of the palace guards had approached and stood with a hand on the palace door. “Would you like to come in out of the cold?”

I stared blankly at him. My thoughts were still with my army, fighting a desperate battle in the narrow, dark streets of Baylore. Then I remembered with a jolt—*Leoth*.

“No,” I said quickly. “If you can spare them, I need a few guards to come with me.”

* * *

No one paid me any heed as I slipped back around the side of the palace to the servants’ gate, five palace guards jogging behind me. We emerged onto the street and turned away from the main square, screams echoing from behind us. This part of town remained deserted.

My throat was tight as we ran—I had a terrible feeling someone had watched from a nearby window as I hid *Leoth* in the manor garden. What if someone had found him and recognized him? Would he be taken captive by his father? Would Olleack use him as leverage, as the Truthbringers had once used *Cal*?

Beneath it all, fear for my army swelled in my chest, nearly choking me. I had acted rashly. We couldn’t abandon our Makhori citizens, yet sending my army into battle with no direction, no clear plan, was almost as bad as doing nothing at all. My father was right. I might have just thrown away our chance of securing Baylore before the Whitish army

arrived.

Then we barreled around the corner, onto the street where I had abandoned Leoth, and my mind went blank with worry. I counted the manors as we ran past—*one two three four five six seven...*

Was it this one? Thrown into relief in the light cast by my guards' lamps, the gates looked unfamiliar.

"Wait here," I wheezed, and the palace guards closed in around me, lamps raised. Though I struggled to catch my breath, the guards were hardly winded.

I pushed open the gate, wincing at the loud creak. For a second I thought I had trespassed in the wrong garden—I could see nothing. Then one of the palace guards followed me through, his lamplight falling across a body heaped against the hedge.

My knees went weak with relief.

"Carry him back to the palace for me, and take him to the Cheltish wing hospital."

Two guards lifted Leoth between them, as easily as though he were a child, and I followed at a distance as they hastened back toward the palace.

We parted ways at the palace gates. As their footsteps receded, I lingered by the side entrance, watching a series of small-scale skirmishes play out in the main square. The bulk of the fighting had moved to the Market District, and I took it as a bad sign that I could no longer see colored smoke or flames rising from the direction of the Weavers' Guild.

Soft footsteps approached, and I turned to see Saniya walking toward me, head bowed as though uncertain whether she was welcome. I had hardly spoken with her since my return to Baylore, wrapped up in preparations as I had been, and I suddenly regretted my neglect. She had been one of the only people who accepted me when I first arrived in Baylore, my first true friend. Tonight she wore a velvet cloak over a tunic paired with a split skirt, her frizzy black hair bound in a coil.

"I heard the commotion, but no one could tell me what was

happening,” she said. “Is our army out there fighting?”

I nodded grimly. “The Truthbringers are rounding up Makhori. I don’t know what they intend to do with them.” I looked over the square once more, but I did not see what lay before me; scenes of death and bloodshed crowded my vision. “I think I made a terrible mistake, Saniya.”

“What did you do?”

“I panicked. I sent my magician soldiers into battle as soon as I heard what was happening, not waiting for the rest of my army to provide backup. I’m—I’m afraid I’ve killed them all.” My voice was barely above a whisper.

Saniya squeezed my arm. “You were protecting those who needed it. That was the right thing to do, no matter what comes of it.”

“I hope you’re right.”

But my father’s words returned to me—I *fear you have sacrificed the long-term success of your campaign for an immediate victory*. Had I miscalculated? Would this battle hand the fate of Baylore to the Truthbringers?

We stood there in silence, looking out over the darkened square. I wondered what Saniya was thinking. She had seen nothing of the battles we had fought to reclaim Baylore, of the hardened, ruthless leader I had become. Smoke rose in a distant column, but this was no Potioneer’s concoction. I hoped the city was not on fire.

Eventually a cluster of soldiers in my dark blue uniform charged up Market Street, clearing aside stragglers from Olleack’s army as they went. I recognized my father’s voice bellowing, “Retreat! Clear a path to Baylore Palace!”

I didn’t see any townspeople among them. Had my father given up and abandoned the Makhori?

More soldiers began emerging from Market Street, many fleeing while Olleack’s guards pursued them. But my army outnumbered them, and as more and more of my soldiers swarmed into the square, my father’s forces beat back the city guards.

“Where are the Weavers?” I whispered, staring in dismay at my retreating army.

Saniya merely shook her head.

Then, at last, civilians began staggering up Market Street. Some were Weavers, but the majority were Makhori with no visible markings. Unseen archers shot at them from windows as they passed, and they broke into a run, screaming and shoving each other in their panic. Many fell, my soldiers going down with them.

Dellik rounded up a small band of our archers and sent them to return fire on the attackers, but it was impossible to tell whether the arrows soaring up through open windows struck their mark.

“Through the gates!” my father roared. “Quick! We can’t hold them off much longer!”

The escaped Weavers and other Makhori broke away from the soldiers escorting them and sprinted for the palace gates.

Saniya and I moved aside as the refugees and soldiers surged up the palace steps. As Market Street cleared, I could see the detritus of bodies piled on the cobblestones. Many of my soldiers were injured, and there were far fewer Makhori among them than I had expected.

We had saved but a fraction of our city’s magical population. The rest were in Olleack’s hands.

In the confusion, no one seemed to notice me, so I followed at a distance while my father led the soldiers and evacuees down to the ballroom. I tried to pick out familiar faces among the Makhori, but the bodies were packed so tightly that I could only make out a jumble of hair, silver and black and brown.

When we reached the ballroom and dining hall, I realized my father had prepared for battle long before I gave the orders. Medics were already waiting with bandages, healing salve, and thread to sew up the worst of the injuries, and blankets formed makeshift cots along both walls.

There were far too many injured. We had not anticipated archers firing from civilian houses; I wondered if they were the homes of

Makhori who had been seized by the Truthbringers. But more than anything, I was shocked by how gaunt my people were. Even the Weavers were half-starved—they had once been among Baylore’s most affluent citizens, yet now they were little more than beggars.

“Any soldiers with serious injuries, report directly to the head medic,” my father barked. “If you have minor injuries, wait in line along the right-hand wall. Uninjured soldiers, assemble in the dining hall and wait for further instruction.”

As he scanned the room, his eyes alit on me, and his expression darkened. While soldiers shuffled to the appropriate areas of the two great halls, my father paced toward me, mouth drawn into a tight line. By my side, Saniya shrank back. I hadn’t even realized she had followed me down to the ballroom.

“What happened?” I asked nervously.

“It was a rout,” my father said flatly. “As I suspected, King Olleack’s guards had already secured the streets of the Weavers’ guild before they started rounding anyone up. Your Makhori soldiers were everywhere, completely disorganized and ineffective at achieving anything except chaos. Their presence hurt us as much as it hurt the city guard.”

I felt as though my stomach had dropped to the floor.

“It took all of our strength to cut through the city guards’ defenses, and the Weavers helped nothing by fleeing in every direction. Half of them seemed more frightened of us than of their captors. By the time we started making progress back toward the palace, archers had taken up posts in every window and begun firing on civilians and soldiers alike.”

“I saw.”

“I know you think magic is the way to win the fight against Whitland, but if you send untrained soldiers into battle, they help no one. We would have done better without the interference of your Makhori army.”

“They *were* trained,” I said angrily. “But none of us were prepared for this situation. I didn’t think Olleack would dare round up the

Makhori until the rest of the Whitish army had arrived.”

“Which is why I counseled you to refrain from engaging in battle.”

“I would do it again, for the sake of the magic races,” I said, my temper rising.

“Would you? We have saved perhaps a thousand Makhori tonight. If that register is correct, it means more than twenty times that number remain in the hands of the city guard. Was it worth throwing away your soldiers’ lives for a small fraction of our Makhori population?”

“At least we did something!”

My father shook his head. “It might be best if you don’t address the army until we have a chance to strategize and decide on our next move. Leave me to clean up this mess. Your advisors might be able to help you create a less dangerous plan of attack.”

I bit back the furious retort that sprang to my lips. Instead I whirled and marched off, wishing Saniya had not followed me. The battle had been a disaster. Could we still salvage the war?

The Chance to Flee

The sky was still black when I rose the next morning. When I emerged from my room, the only people awake were servants lighting the fire in the upstairs common area and guards stationed by the entryway.

I had hardly slept all night. An ache had lodged itself in my temple, and as I made my way silently down the stairs to the hospital room, I felt like a stranger trespassing in the palace.

Though the medic was away, the hospital room was occupied by nearly a dozen soldiers who had been injured in the previous night's battle. My heart leapt with relief when I spotted Cal on the bed beside Leoth. His face looked younger than ever in sleep, and his only injury appeared to be a heavily bandaged cut on his chin.

Rubbing my puffy eyes in relief, I tiptoed over to Leoth's bedside. Surely he had slept off the effects of my power by now; I could wait no longer to see if he was safe.

When I reached his side, I brushed a hand down his cheek to his chin, which was bristly with stubble. His black hair was a tangle of soft waves, his lips parted.

I leaned over and whispered, “Leoth.”

“Hmm?” he murmured, rolling his head to the other side.

I ran a hand through his hair, straightening the untidy locks, and he slowly blinked his eyes open.

“Kalleah?” he mumbled.

“Shh.” I put a finger to my lips. “Can you get up and follow me quietly?”

Leoth groaned and stretched, yawning; after a moment, he pushed off his blankets and rose. Then he stopped, blinking in surprise.

“Where the Varse am I?”

“Shh!”

I beckoned him to follow me to the door, and he did, his bare feet slapping softly against the stone tiles.

Once I had closed the door to the hospital, I said, “How do you feel?”

“Groggy.” He ran a hand through his hair and yawned again. “What time is it?”

“Just after six. What’s the last thing you remember?”

He stopped abruptly, eyes flitting upward as he tried to remember. From below, I could hear the sounds of our family’s cooks starting breakfast—pots clanking, water pouring, and knives chopping on boards.

“It’s all muddled,” he said at last. “I had this strange nightmare that there was some attack, and we were running for our lives.”

“We were. I drained too much power from you, and you passed out in the middle of the street while we were trying to raise the alarm.”

“Holy Varse! I remember now.” He chuckled and gave me a lopsided smile. “Well, that answers the question of what happens when you drain too much energy from someone. I feel like I’m recovering from the worst hangover of my life.”

“Sorry.”

His smile widened. “No need to apologize. Let’s chalk it up to scientific research, shall we?” Leoth started up the stairs, and I hurried

to keep up. “Did I miss anything in the meantime?”

I didn’t want to tell him any of it—how my rash decision had led to the deaths of countless soldiers; how I had nearly lost control and drained his lifeblood; the way my father had lost all respect for my leadership—so instead I said, “I dragged you into someone’s garden and abandoned you in a pile of rotting leaves.”

Leoth burst out laughing. “Really? Gods, I should be grateful some rat didn’t nibble my finger off.”

I couldn’t help but smile, though I still felt weighed down with guilt. Having Leoth back didn’t make things even close to right.

Once Leoth recovered, he seemed to catch the darkness behind my smile. “How did the battle go?”

I didn’t answer until we had reached my suite, the doors locked behind us. I sank onto a sofa in the sitting room, Leoth sitting beside me.

“It was a disaster.”

Leoth’s expression sobered at once. “What happened?”

“It took me too long to send the army after our magicians. I shouldn’t have sent them in the first place. My father said it was chaos, and Olleack’s archers picked off countless Weavers while we tried to get them to safety. My people might have been safer without my interference.”

“You didn’t know there would be archers. It would have been fine—”

“No. It would have been a mess either way. I had too much faith in my magician soldiers. But we were training for a very specific attack on Olleack’s manor, and they had no idea how to work with the rest of my army in a full battle.”

Leoth shook his head. “It was as much my fault as yours. I’m the one who spent years studying military strategy, but I didn’t think there was anything wrong with sending our Makhori soldiers into battle.”

We sat in silence for a moment, each wrapped in our own thoughts. Leoth reached for my hand, tracing circles in my palm with his thumb,

and I wondered once more what he would say if I told him about the child.

At last I said, “I don’t even know where we should go from here. Our chances against the Truthbringers are worse than ever, but we’re running out of time. If the Whitish army shows up before we take control of the city...”

“And who knows what my father will do to the Makhori he’s captured in the meantime?”

“That’s the worst part.” I kneaded the ache in my temple with my knuckles. “I need to make a decisive move. No one else is going to join us—we have to make do with the numbers we have. We need to throw everything into one last battle. Maybe the Weavers we rescued will tip the balance in our favor.” I sighed. “I don’t know. What would you do if you were king?”

“Drink myself silly and let someone else deal with it,” Leoth said with a dark smile. “I think you’re right, though.”

* * *

When Leoth headed back to his rooms to change, I could find no further excuse to delay. I had to face breakfast and the inevitable confrontation with my father.

Though it was still early, my father was already sitting in the dining room, gripping a mug of tea in one hand. He had claimed my usual seat at the head of the long table. Mother sat beside him, Lyla on her right. The only others present were Dellik, whose right hand was bandaged, and Jassor, the crooked-nosed nobleman who had always been decent to me.

Although it was ridiculous with so few joining us, I sat at the opposite end of the table, asserting my authority. I was still queen.

My father set aside his mug, expression stony. “The dead have been counted and cremated.”

“How many?” I asked weakly. I wasn’t sure I wanted to hear the

answer.

“Three hundred and twenty-seven.”

I lowered my head, unable to meet his eye.

“Thirty-two of the dead were Makhori, Kalleah. I’m not convinced they belong in battle, unless they train as regular soldiers.”

“They did,” I said, bitterness rising to my tongue. “But as always, we were outnumbered and outmatched. You can take over their training, if you think that’s best. But I won’t stop using their magic in battle. Someday they will be the reason we win the war.”

“You keep acting as though this is a sure thing. Maybe we need to start planning for failure. Maybe it would be wisest to use our considerable military force to escort our civilians to safety.”

“Where would we find that?” I snapped.

“In King’s Port.”

“And how long will we be welcome there? How long before the Whitish army marches south?”

“Kalleah—”

Mellicante appeared in the doorway just then, trailed by Baridya. I thought I saw a snake’s head peek from Baridya’s sleeve before vanishing. My friends took seats on my left, creating the impression that my side of the table and my father’s were rival courts each making a show of power.

“This looks fun,” Mellicante whispered drily. “It’s good to have you back.”

I managed a small smile.

My father’s tone was more measured this time. “Kalleah, you must remember the lessons history has taught us. When Morvain fought against the Whitish army centuries ago, supported by thousands of highly-trained Makhori warriors, he still lost. The Whitish army is the greatest military force our world has ever seen. They—”

“But we’re not fighting in Whitland this time,” I said. “We have the advantage of familiarity.”

“I’m not finished,” my father said sternly. I wanted to kick him.

“Morvain kept fighting long after he should have admitted defeat. He wasted many lives in his desperate campaign. As soon as he was dead, his followers realized they had been mistaken. Their time was up, and they had nearly lost the opportunity to flee.”

“Are you comparing me to Morvain?”

My father said nothing.

“That’s not fair! Morvain was ruthless—maybe even insane. He went too far. He...”

I trailed off as the memory of the Foxes’ camp returned to me. They had drawn unmistakable parallels between my campaign and Morvain’s, yet they had treated him as a hero, not a villain. Was I truly as ruthless as he?

But my decisions had been justified. I was not bloodthirsty, just willing to do what was necessary.

Where did the distinction lie? Had Morvain’s righteous campaign been twisted by history to turn him into a villain, or was I the one who was mistaken? Was I on my way to becoming his mirror image?

Leoth stepped into the dining room—he must have been standing in the doorway for a while without anyone noticing. “Kalleah is no Morvain. She doesn’t lust for battle or crave power. She’s driven by necessity. Can’t you see that?” He pulled out the chair to my right with a scrape.

“Besides, Your Majesty,” Mellicante said, “King’s Port hardly offers the same protection the whole continent of Itrea did to our ancestors. The Whitish army can march straight down and take King’s Port. They won’t have to contend with a vast ocean or the Wandering Woods. I’m fairly certain the pirate city doesn’t even have a wall.”

I silently thanked Mellicante for her willingness to contradict royalty.

“No one knew Itrea was safe,” my father said. “Our ancestors hadn’t discovered the port of Larkhaven when they set sail for this continent. The First Fleet was in a far worse position than we are today.”

“That doesn’t mean we should follow their example,” I said. “Our

ancestors started from nothing and scraped by for many years before they managed to build a great kingdom. Do we want to abandon centuries of progress and success for the dream of something that may not exist?”

“The question you’re asking is whether I value the lives of our people more than the land that sustains us. Of course I’m going to choose our people. Any good monarch would.”

“It’s not that simple,” I snapped.

Then I stood and stalked off, though I had eaten nothing. My feet carried me almost unconsciously up to the rooftop courtyard, which was damp from a sleety drizzle. I had no cloak—my gown would quickly grow soaked—yet I stayed there nonetheless. I knew what I had to do, and I needed the space and clean air to let my decision crystalize.

As I paced in circles around the balcony, wind whipping my damp skirts around my legs, drizzle stinging my cheeks, I felt like a goddess twining the fate of Itrea through my hands.

We had gone too far to give up. The time to lay down our swords and flee had passed.

There was no undiscovered continent waiting out there to provide us safe haven, no earth-shattering magic that would distract the Whitish army while we fled.

Baylore was our home, a symbol of everything we believed in, and it was here we would make our last stand. We would defend Baylore until there was no one left to fight.

If we left this city, we would be defenseless, scattered. We would be reduced once more to refugees, hiding in the shadows, afraid our magic would be discovered.

That was no life for us. I would rather die here than live forever in fear.

My father would never understand. He was not registered as a Makhori; he had not been singled out for slavery or slaughter in the hands of the Whitish High King. It was not my own life I feared for, but the lives of countless thousands who would lose everything if

Whitland took over.

Perhaps I would be remembered as a second Morvain. It didn't matter. Let the histories say what they liked. I would never stop fighting for my people.

The Truthbringer's Promise

Back in my room, I stripped out of my sodden gown with clumsy, numb fingers and dressed in the dark blue trousers and coat of our soldiers.

I found Dellik and my father in the study downstairs, looking through papers I had set aside to examine more carefully later. What made them think they had the authority to enter my study uninvited and disturb my work? Were they planning to overthrow me?

I bit back my irritation. "Father. Dellik. Please summon every resident of Baylore Palace to the ballroom. This includes all servants and palace guards who can be spared."

"What are you planning?" my father asked suspiciously.

I turned and strode away without answering.

Upstairs, I summoned Leoth, Mellicante, Baridya, Deance, and Cal—who had emerged from the hospital with his jaw still bandaged—to follow me to the ballroom.

"What is this about?" Mellicante asked.

"You'll see. I want all of you standing beside me. My father might try to countermand my orders, so I need to make a show of force."

“Should we dress in uniform as well, then?” Baridya asked. “That would look impressive.”

“Good idea.”

* * *

Dressed in uniform, swords belted to our waists, we strode down to the ballroom flanked by six guards. We made an impressive sight; everyone we passed in the hall hurried out of our way and bowed deeply.

My father’s orders must have traveled fast, because soldiers and refugees and staff members were already lining up when we reached the ballroom, leaving a clear path down the middle.

As we made our way through the ballroom, the crowd drew aside, the din of voices dropping to a low murmur. I claimed the monarch’s throne for myself and instructed Leoth in a whisper to take the one on my left. Mellicante, Baridya, Cal, and Deance arrayed themselves on either side of the two thrones, while Viko took up a position beside the platform, the other guards around him.

People continued to flock to the ballroom, packing every hand’s breadth of space and filling the stairway, and still they arrived, crowding the dining hall as well and spilling into the hallway above. It was odd to see such a mix of people together—cooks in aprons splattered with sauce; newly-arrived townspeople in rags, staring at the high ballroom ceiling in awe; Weavers clustered near the front of the room, their silver hair gleaming in the light from the chandeliers; soldiers in simple blue uniforms that matched the one I wore; courtiers in gowns and lavish suits, looking affronted by the common rabble that had joined them; and my Makhori soldiers, still grouped together by magic race, not wearing uniforms yet standing tall and proud. My chest tightened with affection for these people who had placed their last, desperate hope in me.

At last, my father squeezed his way down the stairs and dropped to

one knee at the opposite end of the ballroom. “Your Majesty. Your people have assembled.”

I let out a breath. He did not intend to challenge me outright, then. I rose from my throne, and as I did, the murmur of voices died.

“My people,” I began, my voice heavy. “It was a brave thing you did last night. For the first time, Olleack moved directly against civilians, and though we were not ready to face his might, we tried. We saved as many Makhori as we could, but we were beaten back.”

I looked to the knot of Weavers, who regarded me with a mixture of suspicion and gratitude. “Weavers. The future of Baylore now rests on your shoulders. If we are to defeat Olleack before the Whitish army arrives, we must use every magical advantage we can.”

I raised my eyes to the countless uniformed men and women arrayed before me. “Soldiers. We must train harder than ever, for we have only one more chance to save Baylore. We must ready ourselves for a final attack on Olleack’s seat of power, and this time we must win. If we don’t, the war is lost before it even begins. The Whitish army will sweep through Baylore and trample us.

“Nobles, royals, castle staff—I need your help as well. If you are skilled with metalworking, help our blacksmiths forge weapons and shields. If you can embroider, lend a hand to the tailors working on uniforms for our army. If you have magic blood, speak to me later to see where your talent fits in.

“This is it. The future of Baylore is teetering on the brink—even the smallest pebble could tip it one way or another. I know our time is short, and our numbers small, but we must do everything we can to turn ourselves into an army strong enough to stand against the might of Whitland. I believe in you. Olleack’s guards might have superior training, but we have passion. Love for our country. Belief in the righteousness of our cause. That has to be enough.”

In the silence that fell once I finished, no one moved. Mother smiled up at me, eyes gleaming with pride, while my father’s expression had settled into an unreadable mask. I saw determination on the faces of

my soldiers, and fear in the refugees' eyes. All seemed ready to heed my orders.

“Generals, gather all soldiers, non-Weaver Makhori, and new volunteers in the dining hall. The attack will happen before the end of Dawn-span, so we must train every day, for as many hours as we can. All non-essential work must cease in the meantime—no more polishing, dusting, or sewing new gowns until the battle has ended. Meals should be kept simple, so we can spare as many kitchen staff as possible, and all palace guards should train with the rest of our army.

“Weavers, we need your help arming our soldiers with reinforced clothing, pain-resistant boots, flying cloaks, and anything else you can come up with. Please join me in the entrance hall so I can introduce you to Professor Tabernath, who is organizing all Makhori soldiers.

“Everyone else who has useful skills that might help arm or clothe our army, follow our blacksmiths into the tunnels for instructions.”

This time, when I stopped speaking, everyone began moving at once. Voices resounded off the high ceilings and colorful clothing swirled like paint. Eventually my army pushed their way into the adjacent dining hall and left a bit more breathing space in the ballroom.

“Won't the end of Dawn-span be too late?” Baridya asked softly while we watched the chaos unfold. “I thought the Whitish army was expected to leave Larkhaven as soon as spring arrived.”

“I know,” I said softly. “It might be too late. But if we try to pull this off sooner, we'll just end up with another disaster like last night's battle.”

A familiar face approached—Vyrna, the journalist who had been so instrumental in raising the support of Baylore's magic races. Several others whom I recognized as the rest of her printing team trailed after her, looking dubious. I still wasn't sure if I had their support, but at least none of them had tried to assassinate me.

“What would you like us to do, Your Majesty?” Vyrna asked. Though she was short of stature, she clearly held authority over the rest of the printing team. “Are there any more articles we can write up,

or...

"I'm afraid not. It's your choice—your team can either join the laborers or train as soldiers."

The rest of the printing team exchanged worried looks, while Vyrna turned and regarded them with a hand on one hip.

"*I'm* going to fight. You lazy sods can do what you want, but don't expect to get fed if you don't find something useful to fill your time with."

Then, without waiting for her team to decide, she marched off to the dining hall.

"I like her," Baridya said.

"Me too," I said. "Now, do you want to help me deal with the Weavers?"

"You say that as though you expect them to give you trouble," Mellicante said drily.

"Well, they didn't necessarily support me to begin with, and I've dragged them to the palace against their will. And if they had gone quietly with Olleack's guards, none of them would have died."

"Yet," Leoth said.

"Just think of them as merchants like me," Mellicante said. "Willing to support whoever will give them the best deal—in this case, the chance to keep living a normal life. If you talk to them in those terms, maybe they'll listen."

"Right," I said. "Are you sure you don't want to talk to them for me?"

Shaking her head with an amused smile, Mellicante led the way up the stairs to the entrance hall. The Weavers who waited for me numbered close to a hundred, and I spotted nearly a dozen children among them. The Weavers were the only magic race that could be traced directly through bloodlines; two Weaver parents were almost guaranteed Weaver offspring, unlike the other magic races, where powers could emerge at random, often generations apart. None looked happy to be there, or perhaps I was simply reading what I expected

from their wary expressions.

“Thank you for taking the time to listen to me,” I said gently. “I know everything has been very chaotic today, and I apologize for evacuating you without warning. Unfortunately, we had no choice.”

“What do you mean?” asked a sullen-looking man whose hand was on the shoulder of an equally sullen-looking teenage boy.

“King Olleack gave orders last night to round up all Makhori. I don’t know what he plans to do with them, but it can’t be good.” I pulled the journal Vyrna had given me from the pocket of my coat and held it up. “Earlier this year, we found this in the office of the Palace Times. It appears to be a set of instructions from someone in Whitland who has devised a plan to wipe out the magic races once and for all. The Truthbringers plan to do away with *all* Makhori in the end. Weavers as well.” I looked the man in the eye. “This is likely the beginning of an outright campaign against Makhori. Anyone who was taken last night might not survive.”

“How d’we know you’re not making this up?” demanded a woman leaning on a crutch, one foot bandaged. “You could’ve written that bloody thing yourself.”

“I can’t prove that I didn’t,” I said. “But think of last night. Did King Olleack’s actions give you the impression he cared for your safety?”

I let them think on that for a moment.

“They were threatening to hurt us if we didn’t go to the main square,” a young man muttered. “We didn’t really understand what was going on.”

“Remember the Makhori register?”

A few heads nodded, and the same woman with the crutch said, “We weren’t on it. They’d never do anything to us. We’re too valuable.”

“That’s not true,” I said. “The full list of Makhori was in that same newspaper office, and it included Weavers along with every other magic race. The Truthbringers were waiting until people were ready to turn against Weavers before they targeted you. They started with the

forbidden races because we were an easy target, but you must have noticed they've expanded their campaign to include Flamespinner and Potioneers more recently. Their plan all along has been to do away with every Makhori in Itrea. I need your help. I won't send you into battle, but I will require your enchantments. We won't win without your magic."

"What if we refuse?" the woman asked. "You gonna torture us 'til we do what you say?"

"Shush, Ma," the young man hissed. "I'm going to help. I don't care what you say."

I silently thanked him. "Does anyone have objections?"

"Just a question," an elderly woman said. Her silver Weaver's hair was mostly gone, replaced by black hair that was gently greying. "If we do agree to help you, what does it mean for us? Will we be forced to live in your palace forever, or are we free to go as we wish after a certain date?"

"A very good question. If all goes well, we will rid the city of the Truthbringers and their supporters when we launch our attack on King Olleack. At that point, it will be safe for you to return to your homes. If not..."

"The Truthbringers have their way with us," the elderly woman said. "Understood."

I noticed the handful of Weavers who had trained with me at the University were among those gathered, and I beckoned to the Weaver professor. When he joined me, I said quietly, "Can I put you in charge of organizing all of the Weavers here?"

He gave me a short bow. "Of course, Your Majesty."

"One of my guards will lead you to the workrooms on the top floor, where you can settle in. By the end of the quarter, I would like an update of expected inventory and what types of enchanted goods we can expect."

"Consider it done."

With the professor taking matters in hand, I no longer needed to

supervise the Weavers. I suspected they would trust a University professor before they trusted me—the University was widely respected by all Makhori. I turned away, my friends trailing behind; once we had turned a corner, I let my shoulders sag.

“That could have gone worse,” Mellicante said. “Everything seems to be in order, doesn’t it?”

“I suppose,” I said. “But it doesn’t seem like enough. We’re scrambling just to organize ourselves, while Olleack has full control of the city and can do what he likes with the rest of our citizens.”

“I don’t think he plans to kill anyone just yet,” Leoth said. “My father is cautious. He won’t want to risk losing civilian support by doing anything too drastic. Either side would be doomed if we had a civilian uprising.”

“What would it take to get the civilians on our side?” I asked under my breath.

“If we knew the answer to that,” Mellicante said, “we’d have won by now.”

* * *

The next few days passed in a blur of activity.

My friends and I joined in weapon training, seeking to inspire our troops, and I pushed myself to my limit, desperate to learn my way around a sword at last. It felt good to practice swordstrokes and endurance exercises until sweat poured down my neck and my muscles screamed for relief; it helped keep my mind off my failure, off how little chance we had of overthrowing Olleack. And more than that, I found I was able to stomach a proper meal after a hard day of training.

I fell asleep easily at night, for what felt like the first time in years—I managed to burn through even the energy I drained from my fellow soldiers. Mellicante reported that the soldiers appeared to work harder and grumble less when I was there; they could tell I was in this with them, not just going through the motions.

And gradually, little by little, the strokes and blocks I had practiced hundreds of times began to come together. The sword felt natural in my hand, and when I sparred with Mellicante after a particularly exhausting practice, I managed to hold my own for several minutes.

“You’re getting it,” she said, taking her sword from my throat and helping me back to my feet. “You’re actually getting it.”

“You sound surprised.”

She eyed Baridya, who was extremely graceful with the sword but had a tendency to jump out of the way rather than pressing her attack. “You have an instinct for battle. I don’t think that’s something you can learn.”

“Is that a good thing?”

Mellicante chuckled.

When I wasn’t training with the army, I made rounds through the palace, monitoring the work of my people. The blacksmiths, toiling away in the cellars, were finally close to arming my full force. The tailors, cloistered away in unused sitting-rooms, sewed uniforms for each soldier, while Weavers added their reinforcement charm in the final step. We had run out of deep blue cloth, so the original set were joined by black and lighter blue uniforms.

All smaller kitchens had closed down, so we now had to fetch our own meals from the historic wing dining hall. The kitchen staff had been reduced to the head chef and a handful of boys and girls too young to fight, and I overheard several nobles in the Cheltish wing grumbling about the indignity of eating peasant food in a dining room that had been reduced to a mess hall.

I spent several days with my Makhori soldiers from the University, who seemed to feel a special solidarity with me. They did not blame me for the failure of the attack, for they would have raced out to save their fellows even without my orders. Shoan, the young Snake-Blood whose face had been battered when he first joined us, was missing. I wanted to believe he had transformed to a snake and hidden somewhere in the city. Tylie, Farrence, and Grella had survived, which was not surprising;

they had not been at the forefront of the attack.

Most of my Makhori soldiers were determined to play a larger part in the upcoming attack, so in addition to spending their days training with the main body of my army, they gathered in the evenings to discuss strategy and new uses of their powers. I was heartened to see the different races intermingling; following the example of their fellows, my new recruits seemed to accept Tylie and Farrence without question.

Then, less than a quarter after our intensive training began, I received word that a Truthbringer had appeared before the palace gates and requested an audience with me.

I was sparring with one of my generals when the news came, and I let my sword drop limply to my side as I wiped sweat from my brow with the other sleeve. I was in no shape to receive a guest.

“Did he give any reason for his visit?” I asked the guard.

“None, Your Majesty. He appears unarmed.”

“We should just shoot him,” Leoth muttered from behind me. He had also lowered his sword; he looked more dignified and less sweaty than I felt. “One fewer of the bastards to pick off.”

“Better to see what he’s up to.” I turned back to the guard. “Have him searched thoroughly for hidden weapons or any other unknown objects. If King Olleack is forcing his Makhori prisoners to do his bidding, that Truthbringer might be carrying a poison or explosive. Keep him under heavy guard, and lead him to the small audience chamber just off the entrance hall. I don’t want him to see what we’re doing here.”

“Yes, Your Majesty.”

“I’ll join you as soon as can.”

Once the guard had left, I set aside my practice sword and hurried from the ballroom. As soon as I was alone in the hall, I broke into a run. It was already halfway through Dawn-span, spring well under way. Had the Whitish army arrived, and the Truthbringer come to gloat at me while twenty thousand Whitish soldiers filed into our city?

No, they couldn’t be here yet. Surely they wouldn’t have left

Larkhaven while the snow lay at its deepest. Even so, I couldn't banish the fear that we were too late to save Baylore.

As I had expected, I was a mess, my face flushed from exertion, sweaty hair plastered to my forehead and neck. I did not have time to wash my hair, so I simply brushed it out and wiped away my sweat with a rag before wriggling into a deep red gown. My nerves were buzzing; I dropped my brush twice and fumbled with the stays on my gown.

Last of all, I donned the heavy gold crown I had worn at my coronation. I had rarely touched it since that day, yet this seemed an appropriate time for a display of power.

When I burst from my room, I nearly ran into Leoth, Baridya, and Mellicante, who were standing at attention like an honor guard. All still wore their army uniforms, yet they had tidied their hair and wiped away all traces of sweat.

"What are you doing here?"

"I wanted to send my father a message," Leoth said grimly.

Baridya glanced at Mellicante. "We were just curious."

I laughed. "I could probably do with the support."

When we reached the audience chamber, we found the Truthbringer chained to a chair in the middle of the room, surrounded by guards, his white robes spilling onto the floor around him.

Then he raised his head, and my heart gave a jolt.

It was the Master, the man who had orchestrated the whole takeover of Baylore. I had to suppress the urge to strangle him right there. If he truly had come here unarmed and alone, he must be confident that I would spare him.

I wasn't so sure.

He smiled, his face open and kindly. "Kalleah. What a pleasure to see you again."

"I couldn't say the same," I said tightly.

"And for that I am very sorry. Is this how you usually treat your guests?" He raised his arms as far as the handcuffs allowed, the chains clanking against the side of his chair.

“Is it a custom in Whitland to treat civilians like criminals? To put arrows through the hearts of countless innocents?”

“It was regrettable. Of course we did not want to harm civilian, but you gave us no choice. It was dark, and King Olleack’s guards were aiming for soldiers.”

“Soldiers with silver hair? Without uniforms?”

The Master shrugged, still smiling that fatherly smile that grated on my nerves. “How were we to know the distinction? As I recall, your army includes both Weavers and soldiers without uniforms.”

I bit back an angry retort. This was getting us nowhere, and I did not want this hateful man to see my composure cracking.

“Why did you come here? I could kill you now. What was worth that risk?”

“Oh, no, no.” The Master chuckled, shaking his head. “You won’t kill me.”

“Give me one good reason to spare you, then.”

He leaned forward, still smiling, though his eyes were serious. “A few nights back, King Olleack apprehended nearly thirty thousand Makhori. That makes the majority of the city’s Makhori population, I believe. These people are safe at the moment, but they are awaiting execution.” He paused. “Unless you surrender.”

The Prince and the Snake

I went rigid, my heartbeat thundering in my ears. Had it come to this already? Were my people ready to accept the wholesale slaughter of Makhori? I couldn't find my voice.

"What was that?" Leoth demanded from beside me. "Are you going to murder thirty thousand innocent civilians unless Queen Kalleah gives up her throne?"

"Oh, I would hardly call them innocent," the Master said. His smile now looked sinister, and it took a great deal of effort to restrain myself from throttling him. "They are demon-spawn, servants of the Seventeen Gods of Sin. Until their influence has been cleansed from our world, suffering will prevail. By eliminating the source of evil, we save many more truly innocent souls."

"You are cruel," Leoth spat. "Perverse. I can't believe my father listens to your lies."

"Oh!" The Master sounded delighted; his eyes widened in exaggerated surprise. "I know who you are. Leoth, my dear boy! Does your queen know about the taint you hide?"

"Yes, she does," Leoth said coldly. "But we don't murder people

because of their magic blood.”

“Which is why Irea continues to fester, leaking its corruption to the good Whitish Empire.”

Throughout this exchange, I had been thinking fast.

If Olleack felt confident enough to make such a dire threat—if he had enough force to hold thirty thousand civilians captive—he likely wasn’t worried about our ragtag army. Which meant he suspected my hands were tied.

I could use that to my advantage. But it was a dangerous game we played, and with so many innocent lives in the balance, I couldn’t afford to be rash.

“I need to consult with my advisers,” I said, trying to sound hesitant. Let the Master think I was an incompetent ruler, unable to make decisions for myself. “We need time to decide. Would two quarters be enough? And I want a list of terms so we know exactly what surrender will entail. Will we be allowed to remain in Baylore, or will we be exiled? Are the members of my court in danger, or can they join King Olleack when he retakes the palace?”

Leoth looked taken aback for a moment, but then he jumped in. “And I want it written in my father’s hand,” he said sharply. “I recognize his handwriting. I don’t want someone else acting on his behalf.”

“Of course,” the Master said. “But do you really need two quarters? Surely one would be enough.”

“One quarter from the day you present the terms of surrender, then,” I said, though I knew that was far too soon.

“Very well.” The Master inclined his head. “It was a pleasure doing business with you, Kalleah. I hope you live to see Baylore raised to its full potential.”

Ignoring the threat behind his words, I said, “Guards, take him away.” I let an edge of panic tinge my voice.

One guard holding each shoulder, a third unlocked the Master’s handcuffs and marched him away.

Once we were alone, I sank into the recently vacated chair and put my head in my hands. My crown slipped forward but stopped when it hit my fingers.

“This is a mess,” I mumbled.

“Are you planning to attack before the quarter is up?” Leoth asked softly.

“That was my thought. It’s too soon, but I don’t know what else we can do.” I lifted my face out of my hands. “I shouldn’t have started out acting so confident. I tried to make him think I was a weak opponent near the end, but it might have been too late by then. Olleack might get suspicious when he hears our terms.”

“I don’t know,” Leoth said. “The fact that he agreed to wait means he’s confident Olleack will win. He’s not afraid of our strength. We’re not a real threat.”

“We should let them keep believing that,” Mellicante said.

“It’s probably true,” I said morosely. “Until we figure out how to use our Makhori soldiers the right way, we’ll be outmatched. But a quarter isn’t nearly enough time to come up with a completely new strategy.”

Leoth grabbed my hand and hauled me to my feet. “Come on. We need to tell the commanders our new plan.”

We were near the top of the stairs to the ballroom when Baridya stopped in her tracks.

“Oh!” she said. “That’s it—we should use Deance to tell the story of the attack, so we can all visualize it ahead of time! Your magician soldiers will be able to figure out how to work together in the story world, where no one will get killed.”

I stared at her in disbelief. “Gods, Baridya, that’s brilliant! Maybe we do have a chance after all.”

* * *

We left Leoth to pass the news on to our commanders—and to my

father, whom I had avoided since the day of our disastrous fight—while Baridya hurried off to find Deance. While Mellicante and I waited for her in my private sitting room, Mellicante asked, “What did that man mean about a taint Leoth was hiding? Does he have magic blood?”

“That’s not for me to say.”

“He *does*, then.” Mellicante looked satisfied. “Forbidden blood, perhaps? That’s the only reason I can see for him to hide it.”

Though I said nothing, Mellicante’s lips curved into a smile.

“I see. This whole situation has suddenly become a lot more interesting. Because if Leoth had forbidden blood, and the whole basis of his father’s campaign against you was the illegitimacy of *your* forbidden blood, that means his entire rise to power was founded on a lie.”

I couldn’t let Mellicante speak of this to anyone else; I had to say something. “It was. But you have to swear not to say anything—not even to Baridya.”

“I won’t. Oh! Is that why you forgave Leoth when he joined us in Larkhaven? I never understood that.”

I nodded brusquely. Even though Mellicante had guessed the truth without my prompting, it felt like a betrayal to speak of Leoth’s secret behind his back. I was relieved when Baridya returned with Deance moments later, giving me an excuse to change the subject.

“How goes your work?” I asked.

Deance shrugged. “Well enough. I’ve joined the tailors—we Minstrels were no use in battle. I can’t see us using our powers in the fight for King Olleack’s manor.”

Deance and Baridya settled into chairs across from me. I wished I could offer tea and refreshments, but we had no kitchen staff left in the Cheltish wing.

“We might have a use for your powers after all,” I told Deance.

“What is it?”

“I got the idea from the crowds we saw when you narrated that Midsummer’s festival for us,” Baridya said. “You can fill your story with

all sorts of background people, can you not?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Well, I thought we could use your story world to rehearse battle scenarios with our magician army. They aren’t used to fighting, and we don’t know how to approach the attack on King Olleack’s manor.”

Deance’s lips parted as comprehension spread across her face.

“If we could live that battle beforehand, our magicians could get used to fighting,” Baridya continued. “And they could try different strategies to see what worked and what didn’t.”

“I’m sure I could do that,” Deance said. “I’ve narrated stories of epic quests where the characters had to fight against monsters. I could easily come up with something.”

“You don’t mind?” I asked. “It would be hard work, especially if we played out different scenarios, but—”

“I’m finally getting a chance to be useful,” Deance said. “Of course I don’t mind.”

* * *

We spent the rest of the day gathering the information Deance would need to create battle scenarios. Leoth talked her through Whitish battle strategies and formations, as well as the tactics we had seen the city guard use against us. My father handed over a book with diagrams of Whitish armor, so we could practice against that if necessary. And Deance asked if Cal would describe the area around Olleack’s manor so she could bring it more realistically to life.

“Where is Cal, anyway?” I asked Mellicante and Baridya, who were examining the map of Baylore alongside me. “I haven’t seen him all day.”

“Oh, he’s looking after the Snake-Blood,” Baridya said. “He’s grown quite attached to it.”

Abandoning the map, we traipsed up to Mellicante and Baridya’s room to find Cal. But when she opened the door, Baridya froze.

I peered around her shoulder to see into the room. The lamps were extinguished, the only light coming from a tableau of flames playing through the air before Cal. He sat with his back against the end of the bed, hands moving fluidly as he created a glowing, leaping scene. Horses pranced on clifftops and dolphins leapt in the sea below, all of it soft and fluid and alive with fire.

Then I saw who he was performing for.

The Snake-Blood sat coiled in a loop, its head raised, transfixed by the flames.

Baridya and Mellicante slipped silently into the room, while Leoth and I leaned against the doorway, not wanting to disturb either the prince or the snake.

As we watched, the oceanside scene transformed into a snake fashioned from orange fire, its tongue flickering as it coiled and slithered through the air like a wingless dragon.

Then, with a slow shimmering, the fire-snake approached the real snake before transforming slowly into a child wreathed in flames.

The Snake-Blood's head wove side to side as it stared at the apparition in the flames.

Cal's hands moved faster, and the flame-child morphed back into a snake, which rose toward the ceiling. Then, with a puff of smoke, it winked out.

"I'm sorry," Cal said, crawling toward the snake. "I'm too tired to keep that going much longer." He reached out a hand for the Snake-Blood.

Instead of approaching, the bright green snake buried its head in its coils. At first I thought it wanted to sleep, but then it began growing, its scales turning from green to brown.

Then, all at once, it was over. A tiny girl lay curled before us, her black hair falling into her face, her clothes tattered and a size too small.

The Minstrel's World

“Gods,” Baridya breathed. She crept toward the girl lying curled beside the hearth, but Cal held up a finger. “She might change back if she’s startled,” he whispered.

Baridya reached for Mellicante’s hand, watching from a distance as Cal reached out tentatively and brushed the tangled mass of curls from the girl’s face.

“Are you okay?” he asked softly. “My name is Calden, but you can call me Cal. I think we’re going to be good friends.”

The girl curled in a tighter ball than before, burying her face in her arms. Then she lifted her head tentatively. She looked no older than four, though her growth might have been stunted due to the amount of time she spent as a snake. I wasn’t sure how these things worked.

“Am I going to be arrested?” she whispered. “Momma said not to change back.”

“No, you’re safe here,” Cal said. “Where are your parents?”

She put a thumb in her mouth and shook her head. After a moment’s pause, she uncurled, crossed her legs, and spoke around her

thumb. “Momma and Grandda got taken away by mean men. They told me to turn into a snake so I didn’t get caught. I don’t know what happened to them.” Tears sprang to her eyes, though she didn’t look away from Cal.

“We’ll see if we can find them. Until then, you’re safe here. What’s your name?”

“Ilola,” the little girl said, thumb still in her mouth.

Cal reached for her hand and pulled her to her feet. “It’s very good to meet you, Ilola. Can I introduce you to my friends?”

Her eyes widened when she saw the four of us standing in the doorway, silhouetted by the light from the hallway behind us. “I think I know them.” She gestured at Mellicante and Baridya.

“We’ve been taking care of you,” Baridya said gently. “We want to keep looking after you, if you’ll let us.”

Ilola nodded solemnly. “Where am I?”

“You’re in Baylore Palace,” I said. “My name is Kalleah, and I’m the queen here. I want to make sure you never have to hide again.”

The girl shrank back a few steps, her mess of curls falling into her eyes. “You’re the queen? But I thought the queen was evil.”

“I’m not evil. I promise.”

She just stared at me with liquid brown eyes.

“Let’s give the poor girl a bit of space,” Mellicante said. “Besides, don’t you have a battle to plan?”

* * *

I made my way alone to the Darden wing, wrapped in thoughts of Ilola. I had never expected to see her transform back; she had remained in snake form for so long I had lost hope. Then I remembered Shoan, who had vanished in the midst of the recent battle, and I swore to myself that I would never put Ilola in danger.

The common area of the Darden wing was packed with Makhori, including Professor Tabernath and Zarra, the Potioneer who had

revived Cal after he collapsed. Professor Tabernath summoned as many as could fit to listen, while others hovered in doorways and hallways leading off the common area.

After I explained our plan, every soldier listening with rapt attention, Professor Tabernath said, “How are we going to approach this mock battle? We need some sort of plan. Even in a Minstrel’s world, throwing a bunch of magic at trained soldiers won’t accomplish much.”

“We can play out several scenarios,” I said. “We can try fighting against the full might of Olleack’s city guard, or we can see what would happen if we caught the guards by surprise.”

“And we can try fighting both night and day.” Professor Tabernath turned to the assembled Makhori, who had been listening with undisguised curiosity. “You remember the plans we were working on, of course?”

Many nodded.

“As before, we’ll send our Potioneers and Flamespinners first to create confusion. The mistake we made with this last battle was unfamiliarity with our battle grounds. Instead of confining the chaos to one area, so it would only confuse King Olleack’s troops, our smoke overtook the entire street, muddling everyone together. We had Weavers tripping over Flamespinners and colored smoke obscuring our view of the very people we had hoped to rescue.”

A few listeners grimaced or hung their heads, looking ashamed.

“Flamespinners and Potioneers, you need to stay out of the way while you’re working. We don’t want to run into you, and we don’t want you getting injured in the confusion. King Olleack’s forces think we’re incompetent, which we can use to our advantage. When they see us try the same tactics we used last time, they’ll expect chaos and a complete lack of strategy on our part. Let them think we’re not a threat.”

Professor Tabernath turned to me. “Your Majesty. Would you like to lead our main charge?”

I blinked at him. “But I won’t be fighting in the real battle, will I?”

“No, of course not. But I suspect we would benefit from your decisive leadership. If our Makhori army gets used to your style of command, with any luck they can internalize your decisions so they can follow your lead even in your absence.”

“I like that idea,” I said, fighting to keep my voice level. I was secretly thrilled at the prospect of fighting a battle of my own, even if it was just in Deance’s story world. I hated waiting in safety while those I loved died for me. “I would be honored to lead my Makhori army.”

Professor Tabernath spent the next hour laying out the plan we had worked on during our time at Baylore University. Several other professors chimed in with suggestions, and gradually the pieces fell into place.

By the time we finished, I was buoyed with confidence in my Makhori soldiers. Victory seemed within our grasp, even if we faced Olleack’s entire force, because we had the support of our full army as backup.

* * *

That evening, my father brought Olleack’s list of terms for surrender to my study while I reviewed battle formations one last time.

“One of his guards delivered this just now,” my father said.

“Thank you,” I said shortly, taking the folded square of parchment. That was faster than I had bargained on. “Will you ask Leoth to join me here?”

When Leoth arrived, I pushed the parchment toward him. “Is that your father’s handwriting?”

“It is.”

Together we bent over the list to read. I was curious even though I had no intention of surrendering.

Terms of Surrender for Her Majesty Queen Kalleah Reycoran

I, King Olleack Reycoran, solemnly swear that in the event Her Majesty Queen Kalleah Reycoran surrenders on or before the twenty-fourth of Dawn-span, the lives of all Makbori currently in captivity under my watch will be spared.

The terms of surrender for Queen Kalleah Reycoran are as follows:

- ~ That she shall renounce all titles and power within Itrea*
- ~ That she and her supporters shall vacate Baylore Palace on or before the twenty-fourth of Dawn-span*
- ~ That all Makbori with forbidden blood shall declare themselves, submit themselves for branding, and leave Baylore immediately*
- ~ That all Makbori without forbidden blood shall add their names to the Makbori register and submit to questioning*
- ~ That every object enchanted by Weavers shall be collected from Baylore Palace and destroyed*
- ~ That every member of her immediate family shall renounce all ties to Kalleah Reycoran and shall swear loyalty to King Olleack Reycoran, or else face imprisonment or execution*
- ~ That Queen Kalleah Reycoran shall agree to a period of confinement equal to no less than one span*

These terms are laid out and signed,

*His Supreme Majesty,
King Olleack Reycoran*

Though the terms were harsh, I had to laugh at the fifth item. Did Olleack really want every Weaver-made item in the palace destroyed? He would find it intolerably cold once the enchanted tapestries were gone.

“It’s no worse than I expected,” Leoth said when he finished reading.

“But will we have time to attack before the twenty-fourth? I had hoped for another few days at least.”

“Either way, the attack will have to go ahead. We’ve been training for over a span now—another day or two won’t make a difference.”

I hoped Leoth was right.

* * *

By afternoon the next day, the palace was abuzz with excitement. Even the non-Makhori soldiers were eager to hear how the mock battle played out, and my Makohri troops seemed anxious to prove themselves when the stakes were low.

I didn’t know how long the battle story would take, so I spent most of the day by myself, not wanting to drain energy from anyone who would be involved. The generals of my main army would take part as well—one working alongside me to coordinate our Makhori soldiers, the others watching from nearby windows to assess our work—so it would be a crowded story.

When the time came, we cleared the ballroom of everyone who was not taking part in Deance’s story battle. Each participant wrote their name on a long scroll so Deance could add us into the story, and we sat in concentric circles, cross-legged and straight-backed with anticipation. I was in the innermost circle, along with Leoth, Mellicante, Baridya, Cal, and Professor Tabernath, and the generals ringed us. Several guards stood watch beside the door, just in case someone interfered with the story; while we were under Deance’s influence, we would be oblivious to our surroundings. Our hushed voices and slight shuffling filled the ballroom with a whispering sound like waves over pebbles.

“Can everyone hear me?” Deance asked. Her voice was clear and confident; she was evidently used to speaking before an audience.

A few murmurs of “Yes” rose from those gathered, and the small sounds of movement subsided.

“It is afternoon. The streets are clear of snow and ice, and the sun has sunk behind the nearby buildings. All is quiet in the city.

“Queen Kalleah waits in the tunnels beneath the palace, waiting to lead her army...”

Deance’s voice faded, as did the room around me, and I found myself standing in a very familiar tunnel, at the foot of the stairway that led to the servants’ entrance to the palace. Leoth stood by my side, and when I looked back, I could see more and more Makhori soldiers emerging as they were named into the story. It was as though the darkness solidified into human shape around me; the sight was unsettling.

“This is bizarre,” Cal said from nearby.

“It will get stranger as the story goes on,” Leoth said. “Everything feels very real in this world.” He glanced slyly at me, and I tried not to blush.

Looking down at my clothes, I saw that I wore my usual blue uniform; when I knocked against my arm with my knuckles, it felt like stone. So I was wearing a Weaver-reinforced coat. A flying cloak hung from my shoulders as well, and when I glanced back at my magician army, I saw most of them were similarly equipped.

“Is everyone here?” I called down the hallway.

“I think so, Your Majesty!” a man’s voice shouted back.

We crept up the stairs into the castle grounds, which were deserted. No city guards patrolled this side street, though we might not be so lucky in real life.

The man at the gates—a made-up character, not anyone I recognized—let us pass, and we filed onto the street beside the palace. Not waiting for my full army to assemble, I crept toward the rear of the palace, hand on the hilt of my sword.

As I turned down the street that paralleled the rear wall of the palace, I couldn’t help but look for the manor where I had hidden Leoth behind the evergreen hedge. There it was. The shape of the garden was familiar—Deance had evidently studied a map of this part of the city—

but the façade looked different, and the pile of rotting leaves was replaced by an even, featureless grassy lawn.

I elbowed Leoth and whispered, “That’s where I abandoned you.”

He burst out laughing and had to clamp a hand over his mouth. I was very glad my father had chosen not to take part in the story battle.

Soon we were past the part of the city I recognized, so Leoth took the lead. Olleack’s manor lay along the northeastern wall, which meant Whitish archers stationed along the wall could be waiting to pick off any attackers who came within range. One street led past the front of Olleack’s manor, and one down the southern side of what looked like a vast garden, so we had three possible approaches from which to attack his residence—apart from rooftops, of course.

The sun sank lower in the sky as we walked, and I could feel the cold seeping through my uniform and stiffening my hands. It was brilliant of Deance to include such small details; if our hands were clumsy from the cold, we would have to compensate during the fight.

At last, just when I was beginning to wonder if we had taken a wrong turn and might soon wander off the edge of Deance’s story world, Leoth stopped and held up a hand.

“It’s around that corner,” he whispered, just loud enough for me to hear. “I’ll take half our force to the opposite side, and you can lead the other half that way.”

“His manor is white, and the gardens are bigger than any of the ones around it,” Cal said softly. “I told Deance about that.”

“And I presume it will be surrounded by guards,” Leoth teased. “That should be a dead giveaway.”

Cal made a face.

Despite their levity, and despite the fact that I knew this battle would have no real-world consequences, I could feel adrenaline racing through me. My muscles tensed as I prepared to fight.

“You ready?” Leoth asked me, still in an undertone.

“I hope so.”

With a nod, we parted ways. I led my half of the army to the street

corner, to a point where I could see the sloping lawn that led to Olleack's imposing white manor, while Leoth took the other half in the opposite direction.

From where I stood, I could see at least fifty of Olleack's city guards ringing the perimeter of the manor lawn. Behind the property, still more stood watch on the city wall, their attention trained inward.

I turned to my soldiers, who had bunched together, fidgeting with nerves. From that alone, their lack of training was apparent—my more experienced soldiers were accustomed to moving in formation.

"Flamespinners and Potioneers, are you ready?" I whispered.

Several soldiers pushed their way to the front of the cluster, and Cal whispered, "I can't wait." He did not seem afraid in the slightest. Then again, he had been training with the bulk of my army since Larkhaven, and had faced real-world battles many times over.

"It's time," I said.

While my forces moved forward, I let myself through the gate of a nearby manor and pressed my back against the wall so I could watch without being seen. I doubted Deance had populated her story world to the extent that set pieces like this manor would be occupied.

Cal led the assault by launching a ribbon of flame straight at the fence ringing Olleack's manor. The fire enveloped three city guards on its way past, and they roared in pain.

While the other guards panicked, looking around for the source of the attack and trying to smother the flames devouring their companions' uniforms, the Potioneers began hurling their bottles of colored smoke toward the middle of the street. Purple, green, blue, and yellow smoke burst up like clouds each time a bottle shattered, expanding and growing darker until the whole street was shrouded.

"Soldiers, scatter the guards!" I called out softly. "Potioneers, aim to break down the fence and surround the manor."

Hesitantly, the rest of my waiting magician soldiers ventured into the mess of swirling smoke. Cal hung back, still sending bolts of flame at any guards within range. The other Flamespinners copied him,

though their aim was off; most of the time, they just lit the inside of the billowing cloud with fire that flickered like lightning.

I thought I could see movement beyond the cloud—with any luck, it meant Leoth's soldiers had entered the fray—but it was impossible to coordinate our attack with visibility gone. By the time my soldiers drew their swords and plunged into the cloud, Olleack's guards appeared to have regrouped.

That was when our attack fell apart.

Olleack's guards formed a line within the smoke, swords drawn, shields ready. Most of the line was shrouded, but I could see the ends of it. Somehow they had managed to organize a defense even with no visibility.

As soon as my soldiers vanished in the cloud of smoke, screams rose from within. The line of white-clad city guards advanced, pushing my soldiers back, cutting them down and stepping over their bodies.

"No!" Cal bellowed. Yanking his own sword from its sheath, he barreled into the fray, forgetting his magic completely.

"Cal," I groaned.

Seconds later, his limp form collapsed near the ragged edge of the smoke, crumpling lifeless on the ground.

My breath caught in my throat. Though I knew it wasn't real, my mind had a hard time accepting it when every sense said otherwise.

Before I knew what I was doing, I had drawn my own sword and leapt the fence of the garden where I had stood watch. I paused a moment, catching myself. *Should I really be doing this? Am I setting a bad example for my troops?*

I shoved aside these doubts. My blood was pounding in my head, and I was desperate to avenge Cal's death. Consequences didn't matter here; I was hungry for blood, and I wanted the chance to prove myself.

Back against the fence, I edged into the smoke until I could see nothing around me. Then I crept forward, searching for someone I could attack.

Forms appeared and faded in the gloom like wraiths; all looked like

my own soldiers. I ventured closer still.

At last I came upon it—an unbroken line of Olleack's guards, shields raised, protective padding bulging beneath their white uniforms, silver helmets covering every head. Despite my rage and lack of caution, this line brought me to a halt.

How was I to break past their wall of shields with just one sword? Though I wore Weaver-reinforced clothing that should prove as effective as full plate armor, my face and head were unprotected. This was why my army had failed.

But I had to try something. Raising my sword, I let out a guttural battle cry.

I charged toward the line of Whitish soldiers, my vision narrowing, the sounds of fighting growing muffled.

As one, the city guards raised their shields to block my first wild sword stroke. I swung again, and again, but it was like trying to chop down a tree in the Wandering Woods with a butter knife. All of my training thus far had prepared me to face off against a single foe without a shield. Against a dozen soldiers, I was helpless.

"It's the queen!" shouted one of the men I had just swung my sword at.

The line of soldiers broke apart, swarming around me.

I took off running in the opposite direction, sword hanging limply at my side, feet clumsy in my haste.

A hazy white uniform emerged from the fog, busy fighting one of my soldiers, and I cut at the legs. When the man collapsed, howling, I felt a surge of savage triumph.

I took off running again, but a second later I collided with a shield.

I spun, looking for an escape, but I was surrounded. As the Whitish soldiers grabbed my arms and wrestled my sword away, I struggled, though I knew there was no point. We had lost.

"Retreat!" I shouted. "The battle is lost! Fall back!"

A Whitish guard slapped a hand over my mouth. Then, as he dragged me away, the whole street faded.

Swordplay

I blinked several times, blinded from the light of the chandeliers after the shadowed, smoky street. Around me, the other soldiers were stirring, some staring around with looks of wild-eyed confusion.

Even now, it was hard to believe that battle had been nothing but a Minstrel's story. Several soldiers rubbed arms or legs, as though nursing nonexistent wounds, and Cal hugged his stomach, his face pale.

"I saw you die," I said blankly.

"It was really strange," Cal said, staring straight ahead as though dazed. "I could feel the wounds—it hurt like bloody plagues—and then I was just hanging there, suspended in darkness, waiting for the story to end. Is that what happens when you die, do you think?"

"No one knows," Deance said gently from behind me. "It was simply what I imagined for this story. I haven't ever told a story where named characters died, and I wasn't sure if it would be too much."

Cal gave his head a little shake. "No, it's fine. I'm fine."

I was ashamed by my own reaction. Yes, I had been shocked by Cal's death, but that was a reality of war. I could not afford to lose my

mind whenever something happened to someone I cared for. Professor Tabernath had assumed I would be a clear-headed leader, but I had proved myself the opposite.

When I replayed the battle in my head, I realized I had started thinking of Olleack's guards as Whitish soldiers. They were wearing white, just like the army we had faced in Larkhaven, but they were simply Itreans who had been led astray. I had to remember who the true enemy was.

Then I realized most of the room was watching me. They were waiting for my lead. I had expected this to be an easy victory, yet we had crumbled at the first challenge. Somehow I needed to persuade them we could do better.

"That was...an interesting experience," I said. "Even from that first attempt, we've learned a lot. My generals will go through lessons we should keep in mind for future attacks, but first I want to hear from you. I think what surprised me most was how King Olleack's guards managed to work in concert even when they couldn't see anything. That might have been a side effect of the way Deance set up the story, but I suspect this would still hold true in a real battle."

A few of my soldiers nodded, looking ashamed.

"I was also dismayed at how hard it was to break through that shield wall. I thought our Potioneers and Flamespinner would scatter the city guard, but they managed to re-form ranks before we could get past. We need to find a way around that. What else did you observe?"

"They've got helmets," Cal said. "They aimed straight for our heads, so I got stabbed in the eye. It was awful." His voice broke.

"We don't have time to forge helmets for everyone in our army before the attack," I said. "It's been hard enough arming our troops. But we need some way to protect our heads. Shields, maybe, or something the Weavers can throw together in a few days."

"There weren't any archers around King Olleack's manor," Mellicante said. "Was that true when you were there, Cal?"

Cal nodded.

“So we could think of stationing our own archers on roofs nearby. It would help throw King Olleack’s guards into chaos.”

“Good idea,” I said. “Now, would one of our generals like to give us tips for the future?”

An older man cleared his throat. He had brought a cushion to sit on, and his face was heavily scarred. “Your Majesty. I come from Chelt originally, and I worked as a mercenary for the Whitish army for most of my life before retiring to Larkhaven.” Now that he mentioned it, I was sure I recognized him from the march to Baylore, though I had not spoken to him before. “I might be able to give more insight into this war as a whole.”

“Please. We welcome your insight.”

He cleared his throat again with a deep, phlegmy sound. “No matter how much training a soldier goes through, it cannot prepare him for true battle. I suspect many of you learned a great deal about yourselves there. Some of us are fearless in battle, and some are timid. Some lust for blood, and some work with a singleminded concentration that proves much more effective than any training session. Others forget everything they’ve ever learned.

“Most soldiers don’t have the chance to go back and try again if they freeze up or forget their training when their first battle starts. This is especially true in Whitland, where the first wave is led by the youngest and least experienced soldiers.”

He broke off, coughing, his whole narrow frame shaking.

At last he regained his breath. “Apologies, Your Majesty. Anyway, I swear it doesn’t matter how your soldiers perform the first one or five times they face battle. Simply getting used to how your body reacts in that situation will make all the difference.”

“Thank you,” I said, and I meant it. His words meant more than any empty reassurances I could have come up with.

* * *

As the twenty-fourth of Dawn-span crept ever closer, we threw everything into our battle scenarios. Deance could manage at most three a day, though that was a push; we gave her a rest by starting the story closer to Olleack's manor rather than walking through endless streets before we started fighting.

After each battle, we discussed at length what we had done right and wrong, scheming of ways to improve the fight and minimize casualties. Little by little, we began to win.

Deance played her part well, constantly switching up the battle scenarios to make sure we didn't grow complacent. Sometimes we fought with shields and helmets; other times Olleack's guards were armed in full plate mail while we lacked even our Weaver-reinforced clothing.

The number of enemies grew with each success, and sometimes we had to contend with the entire force of thousands of Olleack's guards descending on us, with no help from our own army. Once, Deance had a fire break out near Olleack's manor, which threw the entire scene into chaos as the Flamespinners tried to beat back the blaze while the rest of my Makhori soldiers scattered; another time, mythical creatures—dragons and winged leopards and monstrous horses—burst from Olleack's grounds and started attacking at random.

Over time, my soldiers grew bolder and more inventive. They began to throw unexpected elements into the battle, from explosives launched onto the roof of the manor by slingshot to Snake-Bloods transforming and sneaking through the back windows. Yet at the same time, our coordination grew tighter and tighter, until these seemingly random, disparate attacks worked seamlessly.

I died more than once, and the first time it happened, I felt as shaken as Cal had looked. While I floated in that void, waiting for the story to end, I couldn't push away the fear that this really was the end. What if I had messed up? What if I had grown so tired that I had plunged into the real attack with no more caution than I had in the mock battles? I had taken an arrow to the chest early in the scenario, so I had plenty of

time to worry.

Was this why the Whitish clung to their gods? Because they feared what came after death? As far as I understood, they believed that when a devout worshipper died, their life force added strength to the god they worshipped. Conversely, Makhori and heretics would lend their life force to the Gods of Sin when they died—unless they were burned alive.

What I didn't know was what the teachings said about consciousness after death. In Baylore, we believed our death was no different than the death of a tree—as soon as our life force was snuffed out, we ceased to exist.

But what if we were wrong? What if we were instead doomed to an eternity floating in this void, unable to see or hear or feel anything around us?

I had faced death many times, yet this void smothered me beneath a prickling weight of fear more unsettling than any I had felt before.

When at last the ballroom faded back into view, I found myself shaking. My hands were cold, and I gripped my knees just to convince myself I was still there.

That night, I visited Leoth's room once the common area had cleared out. He answered the door with his hair tousled, the laces of his shirt half-undone; without explanation, I crawled into his bed, clinging to him as long as I dared.

“What's wrong?” he murmured.

“I died today. Now I know why Cal was so shaken.” I nestled my face against Leoth's chest, and he stroked my head, fingers combing through my hair. “I hope Deance is wrong. I hope we just...cease to exist.”

“Same. I couldn't sleep at all the night after my first time.”

I lifted my head to look at him in the dark. “You didn't tell me you'd already died!”

“I didn't want you to see how much it had gotten to me.” He chuckled. “I'm more of a coward than you.”

At that, my thoughts suddenly turned to the child I might be carrying. It was cowardly of me to keep this from Leoth. My menses still had yet to begin, and though I had not dwelled on it since our training with Deance began, I could recognize subtle changes in my body. My breasts were more sensitive than usual, I still had trouble eating much at mealtimes, and I nearly collapsed from exhaustion most nights despite the amount of energy I had soaked in from those around me.

“You’ve gone quiet,” Leoth teased. “Have you changed your mind? Are you ready to cast me aside and choose someone more suitable?”

“Of course not. I’m just tired,” I said, hating myself for the lie.

* * *

By the twentieth of Dawn-span, I was confident my magician army would win the true fight ahead. I had stopped leading our forces a few days ago, instead watching from the window of a nearby manor, and the attack played out seamlessly even without a strong central command. Each group of Makhori knew their role and could anticipate any number of possibilities.

After running through the scenario one last time that evening, I clambered to my feet, surveying the rings of Makhori soldiers who filled the ballroom. Where once they had looked shaken and embarrassed after each mock battle, now their faces were alight with confidence. Even those who had died in this most recent scenario had evidently grown accustomed to the feeling and did not betray any sign of discomfort.

I looked around the room, catching the eyes of my soldiers and smiling. There was Kamarri, her teeth showing in a fierce grin; there was Cal, straight-backed and confident; there were Tylie and Farrence, holding hands and beaming.

“I think you’re ready,” I said. “You have made me very proud.”

“When will the attack happen?” Leoth asked.

I hadn't officially decided, but the answer came readily. "Early on the morning of the twenty-second. Take tomorrow to rest and prepare yourselves, and make sure you have whatever armor and Weavers' goods you've grown accustomed to using. I suspect you will face greater danger than the main body of my army, so if there are insufficient bows or helmets, you will receive priority.

"The rest of my army will precede you through the servants' gate. While you make your way to Olleack's residence, the main army will spread through the city, capturing or killing any city guards they encounter. We need to take down every single enemy in one move. This is our only chance. Once Olleack has been captured and the most powerful Truthbringers taken out of action, I hope the rest of his forces will surrender rather than fight to the death."

"What if there are spies in the palace, and King Olleack hears about our plans?" Mellicante asked. "Do we have a backup plan in case they're waiting for us?"

"We haven't allowed anyone to enter or leave the grounds since the Master came with his threat. If we have a spy among our soldiers, they haven't had a chance to report to King Olleack yet. Even if they reach Olleack in time to warn him, it won't ruin our plans. We've practiced fighting against his guards when they're ready and waiting for attack. We know what to do."

Mellicante nodded, looking satisfied. I suspected she had only asked to put that possibility in the minds of my soldiers, so they wouldn't think it a crisis if we were betrayed.

"Go now, and rest. Be sure to eat well, stretch, and keep limber. Try to sleep as well. You've fought in more than a dozen battles over the last several days, and you know how to conduct yourselves. Don't overthink this. It's just another exercise."

"And at least we know there won't be any dragons," Leoth said.

This elicited a few chuckles from my army.

Little by little, my magician army began clearing away. I remained standing while they did, and many came to thank me or ask private

questions on their way out.

“How long should I wait before transforming? Do you need me more urgently on the roofs or in the manor?” This was from a Snake-Blood who had also proved one of our most talented archers.

“Was that okay, what I did with the fire last time?”

“Did you want a blizzard, like you mentioned yesterday?” asked the most powerful of our Cloudmages. “If so, we need to start working tonight. There aren’t any clouds at the moment—I checked just before I got here—so I can’t guarantee it will work.”

“Give it a try,” I said. “If it doesn’t work, we’ll be fine without it.” The blizzard was intended to clear the main square of city guards, who would hopefully station themselves in side streets with more shelter. This would give us a better chance to deploy our army into the city without Olleack noticing.

Eventually, the only ones left in the room were Leoth, Mellicante, Baridya, Deance...and my father.

When I met my father’s eye, his mouth tightened. “Could I have a word with you, Kalleah?” he asked gruffly.

I moved off to the side of the ballroom, while my friends drew together and started talking softly. I caught Leoth throwing us sidelong glances, and set my back to him.

“What is it?” I asked my father bluntly. “Have I done something wrong? Made an irreparable mistake? Led my soldiers astray?”

“No, no, nothing of the sort.” He rocked his weight from his heels to his toes. “No, I just wanted to say I’m very proud of you. I—may have been harsh on you after our recent failure. You merely did what you thought was right. And rather than let that failure slow you, you’ve turned it to your advantage. I believe your followers were right to place their trust in you.”

“Thank you,” I said stiffly. “I hope your trust is merited.” It felt strange receiving praise from my father; we were at odds so often that I assumed he disapproved of every decision I made.

We regarded each other uncomfortably for another moment, still

strangers despite our shared blood, and then I turned away to rejoin my friends.

* * *

By morning, clouds had gathered, and the temperature dropped as the day went on. I hoped this was the work of the Cloudmages, though I didn't want to ask for fear of disturbing their concentration.

It was an odd, unsettled day. Perhaps I should have scheduled the attack for the prior morning, because the day of rest did nothing but make my soldiers anxious. Still, the Weavers needed as much time as they could to finish last-minute enchantments and distribute their reinforced clothing, while the blacksmiths were busy sharpening swords and hammering out a few last arrowheads.

Leoth, Mellicante, Baridya, and Cal would be fighting alongside my magician army; I couldn't shake the feeling I would lose someone dear to me, so I spent as much time as possible with my friends, playing Kins and sparring in the ballroom and sneaking into the empty kitchen to make tea, an indulgence we had done without ever since most of our kitchen staff had joined the army.

"Can you watch Ilola while we're away?" Baridya asked as evening approached.

"As long as the battle doesn't drag on," I said. "But what if something happens to both of you?"

"I'd hoped you would take her in."

"Of course," I said automatically, though the idea terrified me. It was yet another reason I could not come to terms with the fact that I might be carrying a child of my own—unlike Baridya and Mellicante, who had warmed to Ilola at once, I feared I had no motherly instincts of my own. *Don't you dare die in battle, Baridya.*

* * *

I barely slept that night. When at last the call to arms rang through the Cheltish wing, I rose with relief, shaking off the cobwebs of restless slumber. It was just past four in the morning, which meant sunrise was still hours away. That would give us time to put our troops in place under cover of darkness, while the first light of dawn would illuminate the battlefield.

Emerging from my royal suite, I found a cluster of people in the Cheltish wing common area, all hurrying to ready themselves, some still half-asleep. A surprising number of nobles had joined the army; all wore Weavers' armor, possibly because they had paid a bribe to put their names at the top of the list, and several carried helmets as well. Mellicante was dressed and ready, her jaw set, while Baridya fumbled with the buttons of her uniform, her hair still loose and uncombed.

Leoth pushed through the crowd to my side, where he kissed me fiercely. We still hadn't acknowledged our relationship in public, so that drew a few surprised looks, but I was too worried to care.

"You'd better come back alive," I told Leoth in a hard voice. "There's something..."

"What?"

But I had lost my courage. I shook my head, and Leoth did not have time to press me further.

Then my father's voice called from outside the Cheltish wing, and my friends scrambled after him.

I was alone.

The Silent Battle

I lola was not yet awake, so I left an elderly lady-in-waiting outside her room with instructions to fetch me as soon as she stirred. Then I ventured up to the rooftop courtyard, where I hoped I might be able to see the enchanted smoke and flames rising over the battleground from afar.

I had forgotten the blizzard.

As I let myself onto the open stairway leading to the rooftop, with its roof and wide arches forming the impression of windows without glass, a sharp wind flung snow against my cheeks, where it caught and melted. I bared my teeth in a triumphant grin as I climbed the stairs, placing each foot carefully on the snow-slicked stone, wind howling through the arches.

When I reached the top and emerged onto the rooftop, the full force of the blizzard assaulted me.

My Cloudmages had succeeded beyond my every expectation. Low clouds swathed the nighttime sky, dimly visible from the way they reflected the city lights, and snow was falling steadily, great white puffs whipped about by fierce gusts of wind. A snowdrift had already

accumulated at the edge of the courtyard, smoothing out the corner between the paving stones and the balustrade, and I could barely see the other towers of Baylore Palace, let alone the city far below.

I pulled my coat tight as I ventured across the rooftop. I was wearing my military uniform, which was inadequate for the cold—I hoped my soldiers did not freeze.

When the towering curtains of snow parted for a second, I thought I glimpsed a huddle of bodies on the rooftop garden of the Forest wing. My Cloudmages.

I lingered on the balcony as long as I could, while the cold bit deeper still and my cheeks grew raw from the wind. The snow was heavy and wet—spring snow—and it quickly soaked my uniform. I hoped my soldiers would be safe. We had practiced fighting in a blizzard in three scenarios, but the flakes had always been dry, so they had slid off our coats rather than soaking through. If our diligent practice ended in half my army dying of hypothermia as a result of our Cloudmages...

I shook my head to dispel these grim thoughts.

Even after running through countless scenarios, I feared there was something we had overlooked.

What about the prisoners? The thirty thousand Makhori we fought to save? I assumed they were held captive in the Warehouse district, as I couldn't think of another place large enough to hold that number, and had sent half my army to that part of town to free them.

But what if I was wrong? What if they were somewhere else—hidden in some secret tunnel we knew nothing of, or even outside the city, suffering the full brunt of the blizzard—and the Truthbringers murdered them as soon as we attacked to punish me for breaking my promise?

As these doubts ate at me, I felt the cold sink deeper than ever. It was not just my ears and nose that felt like ice; the wind was sucking warmth from my core, draining me, and as I realized this, I began shivering.

Stay warm, I begged my friends. Stay safe.

Then I retreated to the warmth of the palace, my legs stiff and uncooperative on the way down the stairs.

Hola was still asleep, the Cheltish wing empty aside from the elderly lady-in-waiting reading on a chair outside Mellicante and Baridya's room. After a moment of indecision, I started toward the Forest wing. The blizzard was worse than I had expected, and I feared for my soldiers. It was time to stop the storm.

Not a single guard stood outside the Forest wing; their absence sent a prickle of worry up my neck. We had drawn almost every able-bodied fighter from Baylore Palace, leaving the palace completely undefended. If a spy reported our plans, Olleack might abandon his manor at the first sign of attack and instead set his sights on the palace.

I had never taken this route to the garden before, and I took several wrong turns, the emptiness of the Forest wing more disconcerting than ever. I felt better once I emerged onto the rooftop garden and caught sight of the Cloudmages. Unlike the rooftop courtyard in the Cheltish wing, which rose above everything except the two round towers, the Forest wing courtyard stood amongst rooms and corridors, far more sheltered from the storm. No part of this courtyard overlooked the city; it was easy to forget the garden was perched hundreds of paces above the streets.

The wind slammed the door closed behind me, and all seven Cloudmages turned.

"Your Majesty," one called. "How goes the battle?"

"I can't tell through the storm," I said, trudging closer. Since the snow was falling sideways, the only accumulation in this garden lay alongside the northern wall; the Cloudmages stood close to the opposite wall, sheltering behind its girth.

The Cloudmages shared a worried look.

"I hope I'm not distracting you?"

"No, Your Majesty. We've done our work. The storm is here, and we don't need to help it along now."

"Ah. And..." I didn't want to offend them, so I had to choose my

words carefully. “How difficult would it be to send the storm away?”

“Your Majesty?”

“I think we’ve accomplished what we needed to. Our soldiers are in place, and I doubt King Olleack’s guards saw a single one of them. Now I’m worried mainly about the cold. This snow is wetter than we expected, and I don’t want my soldiers dying of hypothermia.”

The oldest of the Cloudmages, a white-haired professor from Baylore University, rubbed her reddened, gnarled hands together. “A valid point, Your Majesty. We will do what we can. But do not expect too much of us. It often takes hours for our magic to take effect, even when many of us work in concert.”

“But, Professor—” a young man began.

“We will do our best,” the professor interrupted.

“Thank you,” I said.

As the Cloudmages began their work, I crossed the courtyard to a corridor running parallel to the space. Here, square, wood-framed windows overlooked the city below. To my dismay, snow had accumulated on the outside of the glass, obscuring most of the view, and condensation clouded what was left. I wiped the condensation with a sleeve of my coat, but even once it was clear, the window merely revealed a grey expanse of swirling snow.

If only I could have ventured out to fight alongside my magician army. Sitting inside, useless, while the lives of everyone I loved hung in balance...it was awful. My stomach felt weighted down with hollow, gnawing dread. My father was there, and Leoth, Cal, Mellicante, Baridya, and Deance. Even Viko had ventured out to fight; I had released him from his duties as my personal guard for the night. If anything went wrong...if my friends did not return...

And while kings and princes braved the snowstorm and the might of Olleack’s forces, I moldered away in the palace with those too old or too young to fight. The Weavers were here as well, of course, but they were too valuable to risk in combat. Their enchanted armor and flying cloaks were worth far more than an extra pair of hands in battle.

The first light of dawn was still at least two hours away, so I slunk back to the Cheltish wing, still chilled to the core and unable to sit still.

Back in my royal suite, I paced the length of the place as warmth gradually returned to my extremities. Once I was no longer chilled, I pulled on an oilskin cloak and slipped onto my balcony, accidentally letting a gust of snow billow into my bedchamber before I managed to close the doors. From here, I overlooked the Garden District and a portion of the Gilded Quarter—not at all the part of the city I cared about. Yet I could see immediately that the blizzard had, if anything, strengthened in the past hour. There was no point returning to the roof to watch for signs of battle around Olleack’s manor. All would vanish in the howling storm.

I retreated into the warmth of my room, which now felt suffocating. Unable to stay trapped in the palace any longer, I stripped off my uniform and bundled into as many under-layers as I could fit one on top of the other. This time, when I slipped on the deep blue pants and coat once more, I felt well-padded and comfortably insulated.

I strapped on my sword and a narrow dagger, fetched a helmet, and pulled on my boots.

Then I started toward the main palace gates.

A handful of guards had been stationed outside the palace, partly to keep up appearances and partly in case Olleack turned the attack on us; I found them sheltering inside the entrance hallway, arms crossed over their chests, stamping their feet for warmth.

“Is anyone still outside?” I asked sharply.

“Your Majesty!” They looked shocked to see me. “A couple guards are watching the steps. We’re taking it in turns, see.”

I couldn’t blame them for seeking shelter.

When I let myself through the side door onto the top step, the two guards standing outside stiffened in surprise. Both had uniforms caked with snow, and one was shivering uncontrollably.

“W-w-what’re you d-doing here, Y-Your Majesty?”

“Waiting. Any sign of archers in the main square?”

“N-no, Your Majesty. But we c-can’t see much.”

I took pity on them. “Go inside to warm up. I’ll pound on the door if I need help.”

The two guards stared at me, as though afraid I were testing them. Then, looking ashamed, they slunk back into the entrance hall.

I settled my helmet over my hair, which I had braided and secured in a spiraling knot behind my head. Then I pulled on my gloves and straightened my spine, taking on the rigid stance of our palace guards. Both my coat and pants were enchanted with Weavers’ magic, hardening them against attack until they were as effective as full plate armor; unless an archer managed to aim for the eye slit in my helmet, I was safe from any unexpected assault.

Not long after I took up my position, a group of my soldiers hustled up Market Street into the main square. They dragged nearly a dozen white-clad city guards between them, gagged and bound with ropes, and they forged through the blowing snow toward the city prison, which lay behind the cathedral. None spared a glance in my direction.

The pressure in my chest eased slightly at this sight. It appeared all was going according to plan—I had given orders to capture rather than kill as many guards as possible, and to keep the attack quiet for as long as we could manage. From what I could tell, news of our attack had not yet spread through the city. My soldiers could work swiftly and efficiently, subduing each group of soldiers one by one, the keening wind ripping away any sign of the fight that raged on in isolated pockets of the city.

As the morning wore on, group after group of soldiers appeared in the square while the sky began to lighten in barely perceptible increments. A few times, my soldiers were still fighting the city guards as they drove them into the square, but each time this happened, the guards were quickly subdued. Olleack’s guards had been given no warning and no chance to organize, so my army was picking them off one by one. And if they had sent a call for reinforcements back to the manor, they would have stumbled across a full battle, with no guards

to spare for the rest of the city.

This was it. I didn't want to grow overconfident, but I could feel success within my grasp.

I did feel a twinge of guilt that I had betrayed my promise to watch Ilola, but how could I remain trapped away in the palace while so much unfolded around me? Though it was cold, I hardly noticed, warmed by my dense padding of layers and by a growing undercurrent of excitement.

What felt like hours passed, grey light infusing the low clouds. The snowflakes grew smaller, the wind's bite easing, and gradually the city revealed itself to me. Snowdrifts lay piled high alongside buildings, filling doorways and plastering over windows, and a thin layer blanketed the cobblestones.

With visibility restored, my soldiers began looking my way as they hauled their prisoners to the cells, and a couple broke off to bring me a report. I descended the stairs to speak with them through the gates; they did not seem to recognize me.

"Is all well at the palace?" one asked.

"All is quiet."

"We can't find the Makhori. We've searched half the Warehouse District, but the guards are heaviest there. We need a larger force to fight past them. What are the orders from Queen Kalleah?"

Unease curdled in my stomach. "With any luck, the battle at King Olleack's manor will be over soon. I will send my Makhori forces to the Warehouse District as soon as they capture Olleack and his most powerful Truthbringer allies."

The two soldiers took a hasty step back and stood up straight.

"Your Majesty! Begging your pardon, I didn't recognize you."

I waved a gloved, half-numb hand dismissively. "Pass on word that reinforcements will make their way to the Warehouse District as soon as possible."

"Yes, Your Majesty. Of course, Your Majesty."

The clouds had begun to rise, and as they did, I saw a dark, colorful

plume of smoke rising from the direction of Olleack's manor. A thrill ran through me. After so many days of playing out this battle in Deance's story world, to finally see it brought to life...it felt unreal.

Another thirty minutes passed. The snow finally tapered out, though the wind still flung small gusts of snow through the streets, picking drifts off rooftops and scattering them. A guard cracked the door open and peered out, as though making sure I was still alive.

Then I heard it. The cacophonous pounding of hundreds of feet approached the main square from the direction of the University. They were taking the most direct route between Olleack's manor and Baylore Palace, which had to mean...

Yes.

When the crowd spilled into the square, triumph surged through me.

Soldiers in deep blue uniforms crowded the square, vastly outnumbering the nobles, Truthbringers, and city guards they held captive. Leoth led my magician army, and just behind him, two of my soldiers dragged Olleack along by his arms. He was red-faced and bleeding from one cheek. Several nobles appeared unconscious, carried on blankets held like stretchers; when I saw Deance nearby, I realized they were trapped in the thrall of her Minstrel's story.

I descended the steps as they approached, pulling off my helmet.

"Your Majesty," Leoth called out when he saw me. He dropped to one knee. "I bring you the false king and his court."

Olleack was shoved forward and forced to his knees, the Master beside him. The Truthbringer looked unfazed despite the blood that had crusted over a chunk of his greying hair.

"Unhand us at once!" Olleack shouted. "We've given orders to kill every one of the Makhori we've captured. Until you release us and surrender, our soldiers won't stop murdering them!"

I felt as though he had punched me in the chest. It seemed he had no idea that my army had already subdued half his force, yet if he killed the Makhori we sought to save, our fight would have been for nothing.

Leoth leapt to his feet and clamped both hands around his father's throat. "You're a monster. You're as bad as they are."

Olleack grunted, his face going redder than ever.

"Tell us where they are," Leoth spat. "I'll kill you either way, but it's your choice whether you go quickly or suffer."

"They're—" Olleack gasped.

"Fool!" the Master shouted. "Your flesh is worth nothing. Your suffering is a small price to pay for the cleansing of our earth. Are you a weakling, or are you a king?"

Leoth released his father's throat and stepped back. For a moment I thought he had given up; then he drew back his fist and slammed it into Olleack's nose.

Olleack screamed, tears leaking from his eyes. Blood poured down his chin, dripping onto his rich coat.

"Tell us!" Leoth's face was almost inhuman in his rage. He scared me a bit—I had never seen him lose control like this.

"They're in the warehouse closest to the slums," Olleack said in a rush. "The one where they cut stones for—"

He gave a sharp intake of breath, and his head dropped backward.

For a moment, I didn't know what had happened. Then I saw the arrow protruding from his throat.

A Truthbringer had fired at him from a distance, silencing him before he could give away any more secrets. I shoved my helmet on—that arrow could have come for me.

Before anyone gave the orders, my soldiers swarmed the Truthbringer and wrestled away his bow.

"You'll never save the Makhori bastards in time," the Master taunted breathlessly.

But he didn't realize my army already controlled the city.

"Go. Save them," I said. "Run!"

All who were not busy restraining captives took off at a sprint down Market Street.

Leoth stood as though frozen, his face still twisted with hatred, hand

speckled with blood from his father's nose. "I wanted to kill him myself," he muttered.

Then he looked at me. "Kalleah—" His eyes were still burning with anger, but he seemed to catch some of the wariness in my expression.

"Go," I said softly. "Your army needs you."

Bells in the Night

Leach broke into a run, chasing after my Makhori soldiers. Only a few scattered soldiers remained, dragging their captives across the cobblestones toward the city cells. Deance walked behind them, still narrating her story in a soothing monotone.

Before long, only the churned-up snow gave any indication that an army had passed through. Nothing stirred in the main square.

I retreated to the palace steps to watch and wait once more. Little by little, clusters of my soldiers appeared in the square with captives. Each time a new group arrived, I called out, "Secure your prisoners and make for the warehouse nearest the slums! Our army needs your help freeing the captives!"

As morning gave way to afternoon, the clouds thinned further, until I could make out a halo of grey light around the sun. Eventually I was joined by the guards who had sheltered inside; they brought a simple lunch of millet cakes and jam, which I had to force down.

With each hour that passed, my uneasiness grew. Where was my army? The stream of soldiers leading captives had died off, yet I had not seen more than two hundred of Olleack's guards escorted to the

cells. Were the remainder scattered along the length of the city wall? Or was the bulk of his force guarding the warehouse full of Makhori?

At one point, I turned to the guard standing beneath me on the stairs and asked, "If we rustled up every able-bodied soldier in the palace, including Weavers, how many would we have?"

"Your Majesty?" He looked confused by my question.

"It wouldn't be more than fifty, Your Majesty," another guard said, glancing over her shoulder. "Why do you ask?"

I shook my head. "Just curiosity." For a moment, I had imagined gathering the last of my forces for a sweeping attack on the Warehouse District, turning the tide of the battle. But fifty soldiers would accomplish nothing at all.

Anxiety hummed within me, until I could hardly stand still. I wanted to run, to abandon my responsibilities and dash down to the Warehouse District, because even fighting a desperate battle would be better than this.

Sooner than I expected, the sun sank below the horizon, the light fading quickly behind a veil of clouds.

My army still had yet to return.

I forced myself to retreat into the palace, though it made my skin itch with uneasiness. I had completely neglected Ilola, and I wanted to share the news with Mother. She would be awaiting my father's return as anxiously as I.

The halls were empty and silent, eerily so. No distant talk rose from the wings; no clatter of dishes sounded from the dining hall. The heat radiating off the enchanted tapestries felt suffocating after the crisp air outside.

When I reached the Cheltish wing, I found Mother sitting in the common area, embroidering a handkerchief, surrounded by noblewomen and elderly men. I had never seen Mother embroider before.

As the faces of the palace residents turned to me, it struck me that they, too, were awaiting the return of loved ones. They must have been

counting the hours as fretfully as I. Saniya was among them, and Ellarie; I gave them both tight smiles.

“Any news?” Mother asked, setting aside her embroidery.

“Nothing. Olleack’s residence has fallen, and we’ve captured his entire court and most of the Truthbringers, but it seems the city guards haven’t given up the fight. I haven’t seen our army since they made their way to the Warehouse District to free the captive Makhori.”

“Did you see Calden?” Ellarie asked in a low voice.

“He returned safely from the battle at Olleack’s residence.”

She let out a long breath, nodding. “Then I still have reason for hope.”

Next I visited Mellicante and Baridya’s room, where I found Ilola cradling a delicate cloth doll as gingerly as if it were made of glass. Her mess of dark curls spilled into her eyes, and she didn’t seem to notice me as I stood watching from the doorway.

“Is she well?” I asked the elderly lady-in-waiting in an undertone.

“She keeps asking where her aunties are, Your Majesty. But I’ve told her they’ll be back soon. With any luck, I can put her to bed before she starts to worry.”

I watched Ilola for another long minute before retreating. My presence would make the continued absence of Mellicante, Baridya, and Cal no easier for her.

Back in the common area, I settled into the only unoccupied chair. But the tightly-strung silence was too much for me. After a few minutes, I rose and left the Cheltish wing, wondering if anyone would protest if I spent the night standing on the palace steps. I certainly could not sleep while my army remained at battle.

I had barely made it down the first flight of stairs when running footsteps echoed across the stones toward me. My hand flew to my sword. Were we under attack? Had assassins crept into the palace while we were virtually undefended? I turned down a side corridor and pressed my back against the wall, watching from around the corner as the footsteps drew closer.

At last, four figures barreled up the stairs, and my chest swelled in relief.

Leoth and Viko were dashing toward me, trailed by two soldiers, all four red-faced from running. They skidded to a halt when they saw me, breathing hard.

“We need reinforcements,” Leoth gasped. “We can’t get through.”

“What’s happening?” I demanded. “Why is the fight taking so long?”

“We don’t have enough soldiers. Most of our force hasn’t joined us, and what looks like the vast majority of my father’s guard was staked out around the warehouse when we arrived. They’ve set up blockades and pikes—we can’t even get close. We used up most of our potions in the first attack, and now we have no way through the blockades aside from throwing ourselves against the full brunt of the city guard. It’s like the shield wall they formed outside the palace, only a hundred times worse.” Leoth looked behind me, forehead lined with worry. “Where is the rest of our army?”

“They’re not here,” I said. “I’ve sent everyone who returned to join you at the warehouses. They must still be rounding up pockets of Olleack’s guards.”

Leoth hissed in a sharp breath. “So we have no reinforcements.”

I shook my head bleakly.

“I bet they’re on the wall,” he said. “Several hundred city guards were still stationed on the wall before the blizzard, and our soldiers would have been at a major disadvantage trying to attack them there.”

“What are we going to do?” I asked. The itching feeling of anxiety had increased tenfold at Leoth’s words—I wanted to storm the Warehouse District myself, reinforcements or no.

“I have no idea. Plagues, I thought we’d already won this fight!”

“As did I.”

“Did we really not leave any soldiers behind to guard the palace?” Viko asked.

“Just the ones at the gates,” I said.

He grimaced. “What if the city guards turned around and attacked you here? What would you do then?”

“Thankfully it sounds like they’re all tied up fighting in the Warehouse District,” I said. “But if they swarmed the palace...I don’t know how well we could defend ourselves.”

Leoth turned to the soldiers who had accompanied him. “Pass on the word that no reinforcements are coming. I’m going to stay here in case the palace is attacked.”

“I really don’t think that will happen now,” I said, though I did not object to his company.

“I’ll stay too,” Viko said.

* * *

Midnight found the common area almost empty. Viko stood warming his hands by the fire—his face was still red and chapped from the cold—while I sat gazing blankly at the flames. Leoth had disappeared, though I would be surprised if he could sleep knowing the battle still raged on.

When the clock struck one, I rose and went in search of Leoth. I hadn’t forgotten the way he had almost lost control when confronting his father, the unrestrained hatred in his eyes.

I was not surprised when I found him on the rooftop, cloak rippling around his ankles in the stiff breeze. He leaned against the southern balustrade, gazing over the palace rooftops toward the darkened Warehouse District. With the wind whistling across the courtyard, he did not appear to notice my approach.

“Leoth?” I called softly.

He straightened, folding his arms across his chest. “What are you doing here?” The wind whipped his soft black curls about his face, dashing them against his cheeks and catching them on his arched nose.

“Leoth. I wanted to see you.”

He took a step back, spine pressing against the balustrade. “That’s

a lie. I saw your face earlier. You were disgusted with me.”

The scene flashed before my eyes again—Leoth slamming his fist into his father’s nose, hatred burned across his face. “No. I was surprised, that’s all. I didn’t know you held such anger.”

“You’re frightened. You should be.” His face twisted in an ugly smile. “That’s who I am, Kalleah. I’ve hidden it beneath teasing and gallantry and all the other masks I’ve worn over the years, but inside, there’s nothing but hatred and vengeance. Once you strip away everything I’ve pretended to be, there’s nothing left.”

“No, Leoth.” I approached cautiously, as though he were a wild animal, and pried one hand from beneath his folded arms. “I don’t believe that. You felt that way about your father because he deserved it. He pretended he wanted to keep you safe, but instead he twisted you to hate yourself. To support the Truthbringers when they pledged to murder people like you.”

Leoth was shaking his head. “I can’t blame that on him, not now. I know how it feels to be tortured. It’s a pain worse than death. Yet I was willing to do the same to my own father.”

“If I had been in your position, I probably would have done the same.” I met his look of surprise with a sad smile. “There’s a reason people call me a tyrant. Maybe it’s true—maybe I am as ruthless as they say I am. But does that make what I’ve done wrong?”

Leoth just stared at me, his cold hand limp in mine, and I could see both sides of him warring—the confident, handsome, capable leader who deserved the trust and love of his people; and the frightened, broken young boy who had never found the love or acceptance he craved.

“Leoth, I need to tell you something.” I felt that this was the right time, though so much was still uncertain. “I didn’t think it was possible, but...I think I’m carrying your child.”

He went rigid. “No. It can’t be.” He stared at me. “I assumed—I mean, won’t your power kill the child before it’s born?”

“I thought so too. Maybe the child has my curse. Or maybe it will

be stillborn. But if it survives..."

Leoth shook his head. "No. I can't—I mean, I don't—"

I took a step back, releasing his hand. My heart felt as though it was breaking, but I tried not to let it show in my eyes. "I understand. You didn't want this. I'm happy to raise the child alone, Leoth. I don't want to force you into something you don't want."

"No, it's not that at all. It's just—" His eyes were glistening, whether from the sharp wind or from emotion I couldn't tell. "Plagues. My parents were awful, and I'm—I'm not a good person, whatever you think. I just don't think I would be able to raise a child properly. I don't want to ruin its life."

"Why do you think I'd be any better a parent than you?" My vision blurred as well, and I wiped furiously at my eyes. "There's something wrong with both of us. Maybe that's why we found each other. But that doesn't mean we can't give our child a better future."

Leoth pulled me into his arms, and I pressed my damp eyes into his coat.

"Why haven't you given up on me yet?" he muttered.

"Because you haven't given up on me."

We clung to each other, the wind howling around us, and I almost thought I could feel the warmth inside where our child was nestled.

"Leoth," I said tentatively. "I don't want our child to be a bastard. Would you be willing to marry me?"

He gave a watery laugh. "And here I thought you couldn't stand to be in my presence. Of course I'd be willing. I'd love nothing more."

We stood there for a long time, the cold wind no longer registering. As long as I clung to Leoth, I could pretend the battle was over, the city restored. With so much wrong in the world, at least one thing had gone right.

Then a new sound rose over the hissing roar of the wind.

It started off low, and as it gained in volume, I recognized it for what it was.

The cathedral bell.

Again and again the bell tolled, each clang louder than the one before, resonating throughout the city.

Leoth and I broke apart, leaning over the balustrade and staring out toward the main square.

“You haven’t sent someone to ring the bell, have you?” Leoth asked blankly.

I shook my head.

Then, as we watched, lights began spilling onto the streets in every quarter of the city. Civilians emerged from their homes, carrying torches and lanterns, and all began converging on the city center.

On the palace.

The Uprising

Sharing a look of panic, Leoth and I turned and broke into a run. We dashed down the steps into the Cheltish wing and flew through the corridors, knocking on doors as we went.

“The palace is under attack!” Leoth bellowed. “Hide yourselves or prepare to make a stand!”

By the time we returned to the common area, a group of nobles in dressing-gowns had gathered, all trying to talk over one another.

“If you want to fight, dress in practical clothes and collect a sword from the ballroom,” I called over the babble. “If not, keep out of our way. The townspeople are rising up against us.”

While the nobles stared at me, Mother with pride in her expression, the others with blank-faced disbelief, I fetched my helmet. Then I turned and raced across the elevated corridor to the Historic wing. Leoth and Viko dashed after me, still armed and dressed in their reinforced coats.

Voices rose from the Darden wing when we approached, and we found the common area packed with Weavers.

“What’s that bell?” one of the elderly professors asked. “Is it your

signal?”

“No,” I said breathlessly. “Oleack must have given orders to everyone in the city while we were preparing for battle. Townspeople are flooding the streets, all heading in the direction of the palace.”

“You think they plan on attacking us, then?”

“I’m certain of it.”

The Weaver professor turned to the common area and barked, “You know what to do! Her Majesty has need of an army!”

“Arm and armor yourselves as best you can,” I said. “You’re the only soldiers I have left to defend the palace.”

We left the Weavers running in every direction as they fetched clothes and weapons. As we neared the palace entrance, I heard a low roar rising beneath the tolling of the cathedral bell.

The same guards who had stood watch over the door all day were still there, now with swords drawn. They looked haggard and grey-faced from lack of sleep.

“Your Majesty,” one said grimly. “Do you have orders?”

“Are any guards outside?”

“No, Your Majesty.”

Sliding my helmet into place, I slipped past the guards to open the side door.

A wave of noise crashed into me, so intense I staggered back a pace.

Thousands upon thousands of townspeople packed the main square, shouting and chanting and pounding on the cobblestones. Torches burned away the darkness, casting a haze over the whole square.

I emerged onto the top step, acrid smoke from the torches filling my lungs.

“I am not your enemy!” I shouted. “The Truthbringers have deceived you!”

But my voice was lost beneath the roar of the crowd. And as the mob caught sight of me, the yelling and screaming wound up to a feverish howl.

“It’s her! The demon queen!”

The mob surged forward. Faces pressed against the bars of the palace gates, and people climbed on one another’s backs in their eagerness to storm the palace.

“Back me up,” I called over my shoulder. “We don’t want them getting through the gates.”

Leoth, Viko, and the palace guards emerged from the doors to flank me. We might have been ants for all the difference we made against the oncoming tide.

As we started warily down the palace steps, a man half-fell over the gates. His torch rolled out of his hand, and he pushed himself back up with the broom he held.

I drew my sword, but I couldn’t bring myself to fight him. Not armed with a broom as he was, looking fearful and disoriented now that he was no longer surrounded by the clamoring mob.

Yet behind him, the crowd continued to surge forward, lifting another two civilians over the gates.

“What are we supposed to do with them?” I asked Leoth. Before long we would be swept over by a growing wave of civilians, armed or not.

“They’d kill you if they got the chance,” he growled. “We can’t show them mercy. Not now.”

I gulped. It was rare for Leoth to be pushing me to act more ruthless.

Glancing behind, I saw a handful of Weavers joining us, swords raised.

Before us, another three civilians leapt down from the gates. They formed a tight knot at the foot of the palace steps, torches held aloft, brooms and kitchen knives and rakes brandished like spears.

As they barreled up the steps, I lost my hesitation. This was just another battle; I had only to go through the familiar motions. I rushed forward to meet them, splintering the end of the first man’s broom with a sweeping sword blow. He recovered quickly and jabbed the sharp broken end at my shoulder, where my thick layers of winter clothes

muffled the impact.

While he pulled the broom handle back for another attack, I struck the side of his head with the flat of my blade. He staggered back a step and fell into the knot of other attackers.

As I stepped back to survey the scene, Leoth pulled his blade from the stomach of a burly man with a knife. The man choked and dropped to his knees, blood bubbling from his lips. A wave of nausea swept through me, and I glanced at Leoth's face—his mouth was set in a hard line, his eyes cold.

More Weavers had joined us on the steps, nearly twenty now, and as we finished off the first wave of attackers, we pressed forward to the gates. The crowd continued to shove against the gates, until I wondered if they would give way under the weight of tens of thousands of bodies. From behind the nearest wall of bodies, people began hurling broken cobblestones at us; one glanced off my helmet, and another slammed against Leoth's chest.

"Maybe we should retreat," I muttered as Viko narrowly dodged a rock aiming for his forehead.

"And then what?" Leoth said. "If enough of them make it over the gates, they'll easily break down the palace doors. This place wasn't designed to withstand siege."

So we held our ground, pebbles and broken cobblestones raining down on us, as the tide of bodies surged ever forward. The roar of the crowd drowned out all thought; I wished I had a shield so I could push back against the dropping civilians rather than meeting them with my sword. I still could not bear to hurt them, so I aimed for makeshift weapons and torches, disarming where I could and striking them with the blunt side of my blade where they continued to press their attack.

But the bodies kept coming, until I had no choice but to slash and stab at any who got too close, and still the townspeople forced us back step by step. We had formed a solid wall between the gates and the palace doors, Weavers fighting shoulder to shoulder with me, but the townspeople were growing bolder.

Then, just as I took another step back, nearly tripping over the stair, a scream rang from within the palace.

“What was that?” I asked Leoth fearfully.

Before he could say anything, more screams joined the first.

Leoth cursed. “I think they’ve gotten in through the servants’ gate.”

My mind blank with panic, I turned away from the mob and dashed up the stairs. “Inside! Now!” I shouted at the Weavers and palace guards.

While screams continued to resound through the palace halls, my soldiers surged up the steps and through the side door. We slammed it shut on the oncoming crowd, the roar of voices dropping to a distant hum.

“Watch the door, and come get us if they break through,” I told Viko. Then I took off at a dead run in the direction of the screams.

As we drew near, the sounds of harsh laughter and thumping footsteps rose to greet us.

Then we rounded a corner to see townspeople pouring from one of the doors that led to the servants’ tunnels. When they reached the main hallway, they scattered, some dashing back toward the Cheltish wing, others charging down the stairs to the ballroom.

The screams were coming from the Mountain wing. I careened through the door, shoving a gangly man out of my way, and burst into the common area to see Saniya restrained by three men, one yanking at her frizzy black hair, the other digging a knife into her throat.

“Don’t touch her!” I bellowed.

These were no innocent civilians. My vision clouded over with red, and I charged at the man whose knife bit into Saniya’s throat, sword sweeping down to cleave open his shoulder.

He jumped back just before my blade connected, but I still sliced a deep gash into his upper arm.

As he howled in pain, the second man shouted, “Why d’you care about the little bitch? She don’t even look Itrean!”

“Get your filthy hands off her,” I growled.

The first man had recovered himself, though blood was pouring down his sleeve, and he made a clumsy lunge at me with his knife.

I struck his knife aside, sending it skittering across the stone floor. Then I buried my sword between his ribs.

He swayed, the movement wrenching my sword from my grip. Then he collapsed backward. As he lay there, twitching, I put a boot on his chest and yanked the blade free.

The second man had gone pale. He yanked Saniya's head backward, stumbling away from me, but I was too fast. I slammed my sword down on his arm, severing his tendons. His wrist gave a satisfying crack, and his limp fingers dropped from Saniya's hair.

The third man had already fled.

As soon as she was free, Saniya sagged back onto a sofa. She was breathing too fast, her eyes glassy.

"Are you hurt?" I asked, dropping to my knees beside her.

"I—I don't think so," she wheezed. A thin line of blood seeped from her neck, where the man's dagger had broken her skin.

"What happened?"

"I had—just heard we were under attack—when people started running into the Mountain wing with torches." Saniya massaged her throat. "They grabbed me before I could hide. They've already dragged some of the others away—I don't know where they're taking them."

More shouts rang through the palace, and I flinched.

"Go lock yourself in your room," I said, jumping back to my feet. "That will give you a bit more time at least."

"Stay safe," Saniya whispered.

I nodded and turned back to the door just as another dozen townspeople surged through.

Leoth and three of the Weavers had been fighting another clump of townspeople, but they returned to my side, forming a line to fend off the new attackers. I heard Saniya's feet retreating into the Mountain wing as I focused my attention back on the fight.

These townspeople slowed when they saw five swords pointing

their way. One fainted forward, but the others hung back.

“Go!” I snapped. “Back where you came from!” I stalked forward, waving my sword threateningly in the direction of their faces.

As Leoth and the Weavers followed suit, we closed ranks around the townspeople, forcing them down the corridor and back into the Historic wing.

Shouts and the sounds of fighting rose from every direction. I didn’t have time for these people. Sword raised, I rushed at them, and this time they scattered. I gave chase for a few paces, but as long as they were fleeing in panic, I sensed they were less of a threat than the others still spilling from the servants’ tunnels.

In their wake, our stretch of hallway stood empty. Most of the new arrivals were dashing toward the ballroom or the rear of the palace, away from the Mountain wing.

“What’s your plan?” Leoth asked, pushing his hair out of his eyes.

I turned toward the ballroom, where most of the sounds of fighting were coming from. “I don’t know. But I can’t leave them undefended.”

“You know we’re going to lose as soon as the rest of that mob breaks through the doors.”

“What would you have me do?” I snapped. “Surrender, after all we’ve done? Leave my people to die at the hands of this mob?”

Leoth opened his mouth and closed it again.

I turned and started jogging in the direction of the ballroom, and he quickly fell into pace beside me. “I’ll follow you. No matter what happens.”

I glanced at him, my vision still narrowed by the slit in my helmet. Selfishly, I felt a rush of gratitude that he had returned here, rather than staying in the Warehouse District with the rest of the army.

Then we reached the steps descending into the ballroom, and I slowed.

Pandemonium reigned on the floor below. Dozens of crazed townspeople flooded the space, swarming around the palace residents they had taken captive. There were nobles and Makhori refugees and

Weavers too young to fight, some screaming, others standing in stoic silence. The mob dragged their captives roughly across the room, tearing out Weavers' hair and groping noblewomen still in their nightgowns. I caught sight of Mother in the grip of two towering men, blood crusting her chin. Amidst the screams and wails, she stood calmly.

"Mother," I whispered, unable to tear my eyes from her.

As I hesitated, more Weavers joined me at the top of the stairs. We could never fight off so many.

Even though I knew it was futile, I started down the steps into the ballroom, my feet picking up momentum as I went. Leoth and the small cluster of Weavers charged after me. I couldn't think about the other captives yet. I had to get to Mother.

As we reached the foot of the stairs, the crowd parted just enough for us to slam our way into the midst of the chaos. Even slashing at every townsman who fell into my path, I could hardly make progress through the press of bodies.

Halfway across the room, I heard a child crying, and I glimpsed Ilola being restrained by a hard-faced woman.

"You promised! You promised!" Ilola wailed.

A wall of bodies hid her from view, and when I caught sight of the woman again, it was just in time to see her jump back as a snake dropped from her grasp.

I could not worry about Ilola. I would never find her in this mess.

I pressed my way forward again, shoving more than fighting against the crowd. Then a nearby voice rose over the clamor—"That's Prince Leoth!"

All around us, townspeople turned, walling us in with torches and rakes and hatchets.

"That must be the demon queen!" another voice shouted.

I lowered my head and charged at the wall of townspeople, but this time, instead of breaking through, I found myself trapped. Hands grabbed at my arms and shoulders, and someone wrenched my sword

from my grip. My helmet was wrenched roughly off my head, and a storm of yells and jeering rose from the mob.

“It *is* the queen! We’ve got her!”

I was dragged backward into the press of bodies, suffocating as the mob closed around me. My heartbeat pounded in my ears. Was this it? Would our battle end at the hands of a rabid mob?

Then the crush of bodies opened up, and I glimpsed Leoth shoving his way forward, slashing and chopping at civilians with brutal single-mindedness. The Weavers followed in his wake, until the crowd parted around me.

I didn’t realize I had fallen until Leoth pulled me back to my feet.

“We need to get out of here,” he said tersely.

“But my mother—”

“There’s nothing we can do.”

My legs didn’t want to work. I stood as if rooted in place, unable to comprehend the destruction all around me. I couldn’t abandon Mother. I couldn’t. I—

Leoth grabbed my arm and tugged me away from Mother, back toward the rear of the ballroom. The Weavers closed in around us, protecting us from the fighting all around.

When we reached the steps, the crowd thinned. Townspeople surged after us, but they couldn’t break through the line of Weavers. I stumbled up the stairs, unable to look back. My own helplessness crashed down around me, and I staggered, clutching at Leoth’s arm.

I had failed. I had lost everything.

We reached the top of the stairs ahead of the mob. Viko was waiting there, openmouthed as he watched the chaos below.

“What’s happening at the gates?” I asked weakly. “Have they broken through the doors?”

“Not yet,” Viko said. “But did you hear that, earlier?”

“What?”

“It was a battle horn.”

All the air escaped my lungs.

No. Not now, not while the city was torn apart with fighting.
The Whitish army was here. And they would march straight through
our gates.

The Army at the Gates

“We’ve lost,” Leoth said blankly. “This is it. Should we run for it?”

My mind was racing. All along, I had been desperate to convince my people I was telling the truth about the Whitish army. Here, at last, I had proof—and it was too late to do any good.

“We have your mother,” one of the townspeople shouted. “You’d better surrender, or she dies!”

I blinked hazily over the crowd. I couldn’t focus on my mother, not now.

What would it take to convince this mob that their true enemy waited just outside the gates?

I no longer cared for my own safety. But if our enemies overran Baylore, that was the end. How could I make them see?

Then it came to me. It was a dangerous gamble, but I had no other options left. I had to confront my people with the truth, and this was the only way I could see.

I drew in a deep breath.

“I will surrender,” I said.

The room stilled around me, the shouts and clash of weapons receding.

“But only if you take me to the city gates. I wish to stand on the wall and announce my surrender from there. You must promise not to harm any of the people within the palace. Follow me, and witness as my reign of terror ends at last.”

After a momentary pause, a renewed wave of shouting and cheering swept through the room.

The townspeople swept up the stairs to surround me, wresting swords from Leoth and the Weavers who had fought by our side. Even as they carried me forward in a wave of bodies, I felt that I was the one leading the mob.

“What are you doing?” Leoth muttered out of the corner of his mouth.

“If they see the Whitish army...”

He grimaced and allowed a stocky man to grab his shoulder, marching him like a prisoner beside me.

When we reached the palace entrance, the mob threw open the great double doors and shoved us onto the steps. The sky was already growing lighter, a faint glow hovering over the eastern horizon.

I had expected to see townspeople battering at the doors, but instead they were flooding toward the easier entrance to the tunnels. Even now, bodies packed the main square, churning like a turbulent river as they fought for their chance to pass through the gates.

“The queen is about to surrender!” one of our captors shouted across the square. “If you follow us to the city gates, you’ll get to witness her disgrace!”

A guttural cheer rose from the square. Somehow the solid wall of bodies managed to draw to either side, enough to create a path across the square to Market Street. As our captors led us through the watching mob, whispers and jeers followed us. Someone spat on my cheek, and I wiped it away with my sleeve. The reek of sweat tinged the air, laced through with smoke from thousands of torches.

When we started down Market Street, the bulk of the mob fell in behind us, weaving along the curving street like the body of a monstrous serpent. I held my head high, praying that my father had at least managed to free the Makhori, that the entire battle had not been in vain.

As we walked, the sun began to rise, clear and pale in a cloudless sky. The hazy light of sunrise washed the walls and roofs of the city in silver.

Then, as we neared the city gates, a thin, high note rang out from afar. The keening note of the battle horn split the air, piercing the rumble of footsteps and voices.

The sound seemed to squeeze the last remaining air from my lungs. Even the voices of the townspeople around me fell quiet as the battle horn sounded once more.

Finally the gates rose before us. I pushed my way to the front of the column and turned to face my people.

“Come with me onto the wall. Witness my downfall.”

The crowd drew back in expectant silence as I approached the gatehouse. The door stood unlocked, the stairs dark. Leoth had shaken off his captor, and he followed me into the stairway, squeezing my hand as I climbed. Only when we were near the top did I hear the patter of footsteps following us. Up here, arrow slits let in a biting wind, pale sunlight striping the walls. The stairwell rose for nearly four stories—this was a wall built by people who had expected attack.

I hoped it would stand.

At last I emerged onto the top of the wall. From up here, a rhythmic sound like drumming rose above the gale.

I turned to the plains, eyes slitted against the wind. My heartbeat sped up as the scene unrolled before me, limned in the pale glow of sunrise. Far below, marching toward us in a vast, unbroken line like a frothy wave—the Whitish army was here.

Townspeople appeared at the top of the stairs and spread out along the wall, staring in blank-faced horror at the approaching army. As they

continued to spill up the stairs, I turned back to the street below.

“The Whitish army marches to Baylore,” I said, and this time I did not have to raise my voice. The watching crowd had fallen silent, even their footsteps muffled. “Twenty thousand soldiers are here to capture our city and claim Itrea as an outpost of the Whitish Empire.”

I allowed the silence to stretch out another minute, faces turning up toward me, still more townspeople joining me on the wall.

“Would you still have me surrender? Would you hand your city to our ancient enemy? It is not just Makhori who will suffer at the hands of the Whitish. If we cannot secure the gates in time, our city is lost.”

A heavy silence settled over the street once more. I waited, the rhythmic marching of the Whitish army swelling to fill the quiet.

Then a man on the wall dropped to his knee and bowed his head. “I pledge my loyalty to you, Your Majesty, and swear to protect Baylore from the Whitish army.” Though he did not speak loudly, his voice carried in the silence.

Around him, others began dropping to their knees. Some looked resentful, yet they knelt and swore loyalty to me nonetheless.

Down in the street below, hundreds upon hundreds of townspeople knelt, the ripple of movement spreading outward like a shock wave.

Then, from the direction of the Warehouse District, my army began descending on the main street. They stopped short at the sight of the kneeling crowd, and my father’s voice shouted, “We heard the battle horn. Has the Whitish army arrived?”

“It has,” I shouted back. Countless city guards were mixed in with my soldiers, and behind them all trailed a string of ragged Makhori. With the Truthbringers and Olleack’s court captured, the city guards had no one to take orders from. They might yet bend to my cause.

“Let us set aside our differences,” I called out. “We are all Itreans. Together we still have a chance. Together we can withstand the Whitish army.”

Silence greeted my words. Moving as though in a daze, I turned back toward the plains.

Far below, the Whitish army continued to march toward us in tidy columns. The early morning light glinted off their armor, nearly blinding me. I could never have imagined a force so vast. And still they came, emerging over the crest of the hill in an unbroken line. My breath caught in my throat, fear warring with inexplicable awe. The Whitish army truly was the greatest the world had ever seen.

This was the end of Baylore.



R.J. VICKERS

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All the best,
Rebecca

Acknowledgments

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My cover was brought to life by the very talented team at Deranged Doctor Design, and I am once again making use of the two gorgeous maps of Itrea and the Kinship Thrones created by Cornelia Yoder.