

KAREN FROST

DESTINY'S
CHOICE



CHAPTER 1

“Not all stories have happy endings, Lady Asher,” the nursemaid says.

“For me they will! I’ll make sure they’re always happy,” the small child replies, her chubby arms crossed.

“And what if you can’t, my lady? Hmm? Come to bed now.”

“I INHERITED A GRAVEYARD, BRONWEN.” Queen Alea looked out the window, her expression mournful. “Our spies in the north report Northmen are massing at the border. Tell me how I save my people. How do I pull us from the jaws of a giant beast? How do I push back invasion from the north without bringing about catastrophe in the south?”

Asher, tucked discreetly into a corner, winced. All her life, Ilirya’s capital had stood as an unchallenged bastion of law and order, but since the coup against the queen’s brother, King Hap, it was a pale facsimile of itself, half broken and limping as it tried to put back together the pieces that had been blown apart. Most of the city’s leaders, including the king, were dead, and the confidence of its people was shattered. Worst of all, Ilirya’s northern neighbor was expected to attack at any time, and Ilirya had nothing left with which to defend itself. Its troops were tied down on the southern border, fighting the same grinding war that had lasted forty years. Absent a miracle, Ilirya was helpless to stop its impending destruction.

Knight Commander Bronwen, the queen’s most trusted confidante, had an answer. “We have to recall the troops from the south. It is the only way.”

Her face was drawn and pale. To an outsider, she must have appeared an unlikely commander of Ilirya’s knighthood. More than half her body was paralyzed, and she was reduced to relying on others for all her most basic needs. But her injury was recent. Only weeks ago, an assassin sent

to kill her had cut her with a blade poisoned with insidious Dark Magic. According to a healer mage from Windhall, Lyse, the wound would never heal. Eventually, it would kill the knight commander. Yet one more casualty of the coup.

The queen frowned and crossed her arms, shaking her head gently. “But then we’ll be overrun in the south!”

Asher silently agreed with her. The Southerners, mortal enemies of her people since long before she was born, were like a team of draft horses, pulling with all their strength in a slow, unrelenting churn. All that kept them from overrunning Ilirya was the presence of the Iliryan army at the border. If the queen moved troops away now, the line would break almost immediately. It was not an option.

“We must find a way to end the war with the Southerners, and fast.” Commander Bronwen motioned with her head to Asher, whose duty it was that day to escort her.

Following her indication, Asher wheeled her chair to the window, next to the queen.

Queen Alea pinched the bridge of her nose. “Do you think the Southerners will agree to peace?”

“They must. We will send a delegation under a parley flag to negotiate with them. I will lead the delegation myself. We will find a way to bring peace to Ilirya.”

Although the commander’s voice was assertive and certain, Asher stifled a gasp.

The queen looked twice at Commander Bronwen, face full of disbelief. Surely the commander didn’t intend...

Commander Bronwen’s voice had a sharp edge when she spoke. “As Ilirya’s knight commander, it falls to me to carry out any negotiations for peace. So long as you see fit to keep me in this office, it is I who must lead the delegation.”

She paused for a moment as her words sank in. Then she continued, “You know that if peace is possible, I’m better suited than anyone else to win it. I’ll leave within the week, taking a small detail with me. We’ll travel as quickly as possible. Time will be of the essence. It will be a victory of ashes if King’s City has already fallen by the time peace with the Southerners is achieved.”

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Queen Alea nodded, but her face reflected her misgivings. "If that is the only way to save Ilirya, then so be it." She motioned to Asher, who stepped forward once more and took the handles of the knight commander's rolling chair. When she looked more closely at Asher, however, her eyes widened with surprise. "You!" She pointed to Asher. "Aren't you the daughter of the late Lord Chancellor Ivar? I remember your knighting ceremony."

"Yes, my queen." Asher bowed, her face flushing. She remembered having seen the queen, then Her Royal Majesty Princess Alea, in the crowd. It made sense that the queen remembered the event. After all, her father had been the king's most favored chancellor. Still, she shunned the attention. She was a knight, not a courtier.

The queen nodded, her expression grim. "Good. Then you understand better than anyone the need to protect the knight commander. She may be a stubborn, old battle-axe, but the kingdom needs her. There is no braver, more loyal soldier in all Ilirya."

Asher nodded, her eyes lowered. "Yes, my queen. On my honor."

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"It's a suicide mission." Erborn took a swig of his ale and then licked his thick lips. "Everyone knows it. Bronwen is going to the Southlands to die, and she'll take down with her anyone who goes. Peace? The Southerners will never agree to peace."

Asher's face flushed so hotly that the tips of her ears burned. How dare he say such a thing? "You're wrong! The commander knows what she's doing!"

"Does she?" Taz grimaced when Asher glared at him, then looked down at his mug. "Things have changed since the Night of the Long Swords, Asher. She's not...what she was before. You know that. She may not want to admit what's changed. Or she may think she can do something she can't anymore."

Asher seethed at the betrayal. There was no one like the knight commander in all of Ilirya, and both of them knew it. She was strong, she was brave, and she was smart. If she said peace could be achieved, it could be achieved. Who were they to question her? Hadn't she proven herself over and over again to the kingdom? Everyone agreed she was the finest knight commander in centuries.

What's more, as knights they had a duty to obey and defend her. She was their commander! Yes, she had been hurt, but that didn't diminish who she was or what she'd done. She was still the same person she'd been before, even if she wasn't physically the same. What right had they to question her now?

Asher forced herself to relax her hand gripping her mug. Her knuckles had gone white. "She's *different* from how she was before, but she's just as sharp. She knows what she's doing. She's listened to Ilirya's politicians for a decade; I'm sure she's learned a trick or two. And more importantly, she's still our commander."

"Not for long." Erborn cast his green eyes around the small tavern warily, then leaned forward. "Rumor has it Gandral is going to make a play to take command. The knighthood can't have a crippled commander, and everyone knows it. He has the backing of the new lord chancellor and a few others of the Queen's Council. This time next week, Bronwen could be out on the street."

A flush of white-hot anger washed over Asher. She balled her hands into fists against the table and ground her teeth together. It took all her self-control not to vault over the table and smack the mustache off Erborn's face. This type of talk was treason.

"The queen would never replace Commander Bronwen!"

She looked to Taz for agreement, but his face was studiously blank. Nor would he look at her. Asher's eyes widened. *Does he agree with Erborn? Does he think the commander deserves to be sacked for something that wasn't her fault?* She resolved to confront him about it later.

Erborn wiped froth from his brown mustache, which in the last year had started to sprout a few white hairs. "In any case, no one comes back from the Southlands, and that's a fact. Anyone who goes with Bronwen is riding to their death. That's why no one will do it. She can talk all she wants about a peace delegation, but she rides alone."

Asher rolled her eyes, caught between fury and disdain. "That's ridiculous! Of course people have gone and come back. What nonsense. Where did you hear that?"

She glanced at Taz, certain he would be equally dismissive of Erborn's falsehoods, but he nodded, seeming to agree.

"I've never heard of anyone doing it," he said.

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"I'll tell you something more." Erborn waggled a thick finger at her. "You won't find any news of the Southlands anywhere in Ilirya. Not a peep. Whatever lies on the other side of the border, no one knows."

Asher snorted. Now she was sure Erborn was misinformed. "Absurd. We've fought the Southerners for forty years. We must know plenty about them. The royal archives must be filled with information about the Southlands. Two coppers say I find at least two books about the Southland's geography alone by midday tomorrow."

Erborn grinned, showing his broken front tooth. Asher knew he could never resist a bet, especially one he thought he would win. He extended his large hand across the table. "Polish my armor too, and you have a deal. Naftar would welcome the reprieve from his squire's duties, I'm sure."

Asher reached out her smaller hand, and the two shook on it. Asher smirked. She would relish throwing his ignorance in his face when she proved him wrong. She could already see him with her cuirass, sitting on the step in front of the armory and sweating in the hot sun as he rubbed the metal to a brilliant shine. He could stand to learn some humility, and she didn't mind being the one to teach it to him.

Erborn leaned back in his wooden chair. The large knight took up most of it, his long legs sprawled out before him like a newborn foal. He drew a sliver of wood out of his pocket and picked at his teeth with it for a moment. Then in a drawling, almost professorial tone, he said, "I reckon the Southlands are the stuff of living nightmares. There are animals, *things*, living there for which we don't even have names, with teeth and claws longer than my hand's length. And the mages! There are magical affinities there that can't be found anywhere but in the Southlands. Affinities that would make your skin crawl. Terrible, sickening stuff. I say to you: the Southlands are a death trap for any Iliryan fool enough to venture into it. There's not enough gold in all Ilirya could convince me to go."

Asher crossed her arms, unimpressed. "If, as you say, no one has come back from the Southlands, then how do you know all this? How do you know about these so-called monsters?"

Erborn looked away from the table, his eyes haunted. He shuddered, his whole body twitching. "I've been to the border, haven't I? Seen things fighting against us there I can never unsee. If they're there, they're everywhere in the Southlands."

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Asher winced. Without wanting to, she saw Tayanna as she had last seen her, sitting astride her chestnut destrier Eveningsong, her armor gleaming in the morning light. Tayanna, for whom no words existed to describe what she meant to Asher. Tayanna, with her nose that hadn't healed right after being broken one too many times and her small mouth, smiling as she tossed her glossy black braid over her shoulder and squinted into the sun to gauge the time. She'd waved to Asher as she left for the southern front, so certain this was not goodbye but rather so long for now. So confident she could defeat anything. So certain she'd be coming home.

"I'll be seeing you, Ash," she'd said as she'd left.

It was what she always said when she rode away, but this time it had been an inadvertent lie. She hadn't come back. Had she encountered one of Erborn's monsters? Asher didn't know. She had refused to hear what had felled the bright star of Ilirya's knighthood, shutting her ears to any details about Tayanna's death. Knowing would have made Tayanna's death even more impossibly, insupportably painful than it already had been.

A stab of pain so sharp it took Asher's breath away landed in her gut. She forced the memory of that final view of Tayanna back into the box where she kept all of Tayanna's memories. She could live with a piece of her soul missing. She'd managed this far. She hadn't had a choice. She shook herself to bring herself back to the present and took a sip of her ale to wash away the bile that had risen in her throat, hoping that no one had noticed her momentary distraction.

Erborn, still ranting about the dangers of the Southlands, concluded, "That's why no one will go with the commander. Any knight who's been to the border and seen what's there would rather become a turnip farmer than cross that line."

Instantly, Tayanna was in Asher's memories again, her small, dark eyes sparkling. She seized Asher by the shoulders, brimming with barely contained energy and grinning from ear to ear. "No one becomes a knight who's afraid of riding into danger head-on." There was no challenge Tayanna wouldn't face. To Tayanna, life was a mountain waiting to be climbed by those with the daring to do it. Her fearless spirit was one of the things Asher loved best about her.

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The memory stirred something in Asher. Tayanna wouldn't have accepted Erborn's pessimism. She would have been the first to volunteer to go to the Southlands. She would have been proud to represent her kingdom.

Asher glared at Erborn. "I will. I'll go."

Taz and Erborn exchanged a look.

She glowered at them, needled by their skepticism. "Don't you see? We're running out of time. The kingdom is disintegrating around us. The king is dead and half the King's Council with him. The Northmen could invade at any moment and, frankly, the war in the south has been going poorly for years. We need this peace. We need it more than anything right now, and Commander Bronwen's mission may be our only chance to get it."

Her voice rose, impassioned. "This is what we're meant to do: defend Ilirya. Why become knights if you won't defend your country when it's most in danger? Would you rather spend your days dodging the pitchforks of angry farmers rioting against high taxes? If we can't secure peace with the Southlands, there may not *be* an Ilirya in a few months!"

Taz had the decency to look embarrassed, but Erborn was recalcitrant. "I'll take the farmers, thank you." He drained his mug in one gulp and rose from his seat. He arched his back, pressing against it with his palms, then cracked his neck. "Going to the Southlands is a fool's errand, and besides, a week from now, someone will think of a way to stop the Northmen, and all this hubbub will have been for nothing. I don't have many years left with the knighthood. I'll happily live 'em out in peace patrolling Qarys and say 'good riddance' to this hero business. You young'uns are welcome to it if that's what you want." He flipped some coins onto the table with a practiced hand, then nodded to Taz and Asher before heading for the exit.

Once he was gone, Taz looked at Asher and sighed. "You're right about how dire the situation is, but volunteering to go to the Southlands with Commander Bronwen? I can't decide if you're brave or crazy." He bit his lip, squirming in his chair. "I hate to say it, but Erborn is right: everyone who goes will almost certainly die."

Asher shook her head. She'd thought about the problem from every angle and had found no other solution. The only way to save Ilirya was to convince the Southlands to give up on forty years of war. And even if no one else would go with the commander, *she* would go. She just wished Taz

understood. “Commander Bronwen needs us. *Ilirya* needs us. If not us, then who? This is our duty.”

Asher paused, then gave him a cheerful smile. “Besides, don’t you want to be the first Iliryan to see the Southlands and come back to tell about it?”

Taz shook his head, his blond hair falling into his deep-blue eyes. “Haven’t you had enough of adventure lately?”

Asher reflected on the last few months. She’d tracked down the father of a girl who had been kidnapped by evil mages. She’d run into a burning city guard garrison and pulled people to safety. She’d fought her way through Northmen hiding in the city to reach the castle in time to watch a rogue god trying to Gate into the king’s Great Hall. But none of that made her wish for peace and quiet. It had been worrisome, true, but it had been exhilarating at the same time.

She waved her hand. “You can’t help when duty calls.”

The Boar’s Tusk Tavern serving girl came to take Erborn’s empty mug, and Asher winked at her when she caught her eye. The girl’s face reddened, and she scuttled away, peeking back over her shoulder shyly as she did so. Asher smiled, her gaze following the girl’s retreat. No one would ever replace Tayanna, but lately she’d found some enjoyment in casual flirtations. She still had needs, after all.

She looked back to Taz. “This is a diplomatic mission. If all goes well, there won’t be any fighting. It will be quiet and boring, just how you like it. Doesn’t that sound appealing to you? Just a nice ride through the countryside.”

Taz licked his lips, his eyes troubled. “Do you really think the Southerners will agree to peace? After forty years, maybe all they know is war.”

Asher had thought a lot about that question. It was the looming, unanswerable question that likely would determine Ilirya’s entire future. She shrugged. “If anyone can get them to agree to peace, it’s the knight commander. And if not, we’re all in trouble anyway. Whether it’s fighting in the north or fighting in the south, we’re all going to fight one way or another.”

“I only want to make sure you’re not...going for the wrong reasons.” Taz dropped his voice and eyed her significantly. His meaning was clear. He wanted to make sure Asher wasn’t on a suicide mission of her own.

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Asher bristled. "Taz." She didn't need to say anything more. The warning in her voice was enough. She didn't need him second-guessing her motives.

He raised his hands. "Fine. I'm convinced. When do we leave?"

Asher grinned, delighted. "You'll come?"

He smiled back at her, his grin askew. "Someone has to make sure your recklessness doesn't get you killed."

Asher clapped him on the shoulder. She knew he'd eventually come around. The two had been almost inseparable since they'd met as pages when they were seven years old, getting into playful fistfights in the stable and stealing cakes from the kitchen. Taz wasn't always brave and definitely wasn't the best fighter, but he was loyal. He had Asher's back, and she had his. Always. If Asher said they needed to go to the Southlands, he would go to the Southlands. There was no one else with whom she'd rather have gone...except Tayanna.

"Strength and honor," Asher said, citing the first half of the Knight's Creed.

"Duty and queen," Taz finished.

"Just don't make me carry your body home." Asher wagged a finger at him. "You're getting fat."

* * *

"Commander Bronwen, no!" Lyse gasped. Her hand flew to her mouth.

The young healer looked to Asher for support, but Asher only shrugged, her expression neutral. If Lyse didn't know by now how determined the knight commander was, she would soon find out without any help from Asher.

Commander Bronwen's face was set. Asher knew from experience there was no changing her mind now. "I must go." The words were simple, but final.

Lyse shook her head, her hands moving to her hips. "I can't allow it. You're too ill to travel outside the *city*, much less all the way to the Southlands. It's out of the question."

Commander Bronwen stared her down with icy calm. "I appreciate your concern, but the decision is not up for debate. Do whatever you can, but we set out tomorrow."

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Lyse looked beseechingly at Asher. Asher shook her head. It was out of her hands. Only the queen could stop Commander Bronwen now.

Lyse knelt before the knight commander, her soft brown eyes serious and pleading. "Commander, there is a good chance you will die if you leave the city. While you're here, I can keep the Dark Magic that's poisoning you from spreading too quickly, but once you leave, I don't know how fast it will spread. You could die within weeks for all we know. Please, you must stay. Let someone else go."

Asher's heart skipped a beat. In all the talk of the commander's immediate condition and the Southerners' willingness to parley, she hadn't considered what the journey would mean for the Dark Magic's poison. If going to the Southlands was so dangerous to Commander Bronwen's health, then Lyse was right, she should stay. Let someone else take her place. That arrogant Gandral, for one.

Asher wished, not for the first time, they knew more about Dark Magic. A few months ago, only a handful of people in all of Ilirya had heard of it. Even now, all anyone knew was that this secret, illegal magic based on pain and death had been strong enough to tear a hole between the mortal and divine realms and that its poisoning of the knight commander's body was irreversible. Why couldn't she be healed?

Commander Bronwen's face was impassive in the face of Lyse's dire warning. "My injuries do not define who I am. I am the knight commander, and matters of war and peace are for the knight commander to negotiate."

Lyse squirmed. "Yes, but—"

Commander Bronwen looked her straight in the eye. "A soldier fulfills her duty, no matter the cost. Every day, I send my knights to die at the border. They go willingly because they believe in fighting for Ilirya. In the face of their sacrifice, how could I shirk my duties out of a fear of death? If I am not willing to face the same danger they do, I am undeserving of my title."

Lyse bowed her head.

"I am not afraid to die. But you know, life is a stubborn thing. I have seen soldiers with swords stuck through them to the hilt keep fighting long after they should have fallen. A doe with an arrow through her heart will still stagger on for miles. I may surprise you with my tenacity for living."

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Lyse nodded, but her eyes were sad and uncertain. At the commander's signal, pale-indigo magic flowed from her hands, covering Commander Bronwen in a gentle healing magic like a blanket that could alleviate but never entirely remove the knight's pain. The commander closed her eyes and let out a deep breath. Moments later, her head lolled to the side as she fell into a light sleep.

Lyse stopped the flow of her magic and, standing, caressed the knight commander's head the way a mother would a child. Then she turned and fixed Asher with an accusatory stare. "She will die if you let her go to the Southlands." Her voice came out as an angry hiss.

Asher took a step backward, grimacing. She didn't know what to say. She hated the thought that the Dark Magic's poison might kill the commander, but how could she contradict the commander's will? "Are you sure?"

Lyse rubbed her hands together, looking away. "I wish we knew more about Dark Magic's effects. I don't know how fast it will spread away from the city." Reaching down, she removed the brown leather pouch she carried at her side and handed it to Asher. "Take this. You can give it to her when she wakes. It's a combination of herbs that will help dull her pain and allow her to sleep. The longer the journey, the worse her pain will get. If she insists on going, she must travel as fast as possible."

Asher hung the pouch from a cord around her neck, her stomach roiling. There was always a danger in being a knight, but it should have been from an enemy's sword, not from poison. She regretted once more the events that had led to the commander's injury. When would the repercussions from the coup finally end?

Lyse sighed. "I wish we could send a mage healer with her, but we don't have a single mage to spare. The war has decimated our ranks."

Asher nodded. Forty years of war had cost Ilirya dearly.

Lyse looked back at the knight commander slumped in her chair, her eyes soft with pity. "I hope you know what you're doing."

Asher wasn't sure whether Lyse was addressing the knight commander or herself. Changing the subject, she asked, "How is Aeryn?"

Aeryn was Lyse's partner, a war mage in training who had been the first to discover the conspiracy to topple the king and help a rogue god—called the One God—cross from the divine realm into the mortal plane using Dark Magic. Asher considered her a friend. The two of them had worked

together to find the Dark mages involved in the plot, although they'd been too late to stop them from killing the king. In the process, Aeryn had almost died. Asher hadn't seen her since that night, busy as she'd been in the aftermath.

Lyse pressed her lips together, a shadow falling across her face. "Aeryn has been...different lately. I thought in time she would recover from everything that happened, but something is off. I can't imagine how it feels to have been so close to death. Sometimes I still can't believe she's alive. I...I was so sure she was dead." Her voice cracked.

"I know she still has dreams about it. She wakes up screaming in the night. Then she disappears for days at a time and won't tell me where she's been. I wish she would tell me what's wrong. I feel like I'm losing her."

Asher made a sympathetic face. "Would you like me to talk to her?"

Lyse looked hopeful. "I would appreciate that. Maybe she'll talk to you."

She checked the knight commander one last time, feeling the temperature of her skin at her forehead and in the place where the assassin's blade had struck. Finished, she turned to leave. At the door, however, she stopped, her eyes troubled. "Will you go to the Southlands too?"

"Yes." Asher's stomach twisted as she remembered Erborn's suggestion that the knight commander intended the expedition to be a suicide mission. Was this proof he was right? She pushed away the thought.

"Stay safe."

Then Lyse was gone, leaving Asher alone in the knight commander's bedchamber. Asher wheeled the commander's chair to the bed, then carefully scooped her up, laying her out on the bed with her long red hair splayed around her head like a halo. In her debility, Commander Bronwen's body was wasted away, a husk of what it had been when it was full of vigor and strength. Without her armor, she was light as a child.

Commander Bronwen smacked her lips together but didn't open her eyes. "I imagine you are thinking I should not go on the expedition."

Asher raised her eyebrows. She had thought Commander Bronwen was asleep.

The commander opened her pale-blue eyes and looked at Asher.

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Asher squirmed, dropping her gaze. Well, it was true, wasn't it? The commander was too valuable to send to the Southlands. "Ilirya needs you here, Commander. Let someone else go in your place."

The commander's eyes bored into hers. "A petition for peace falls to the knight commander as the representative of the queen. As holder of that office, it is my responsibility to go. This illness doesn't change who I am or the duties that I must perform."

"But, Commander—"

"The office does not die when I do. If I should succumb to my illness, I will be replaced. The office of the knight commander will live on without me. Until such time as I no longer hold this position, I owe it to every citizen of Ilirya to strive to my utmost to defend their lives. Whatever the cost."

Asher shifted her weight from one foot to the other. There was no arguing with the knight commander. "Is it true that no one comes back from the Southlands?" Between Dark Magic and Southerner monsters, the expedition was looking increasingly like a one-way trip.

"You've heard that, have you?" The faintest of smiles traced across Commander Bronwen's pale face. "I knew some form of that rumor must have been circulating through the garrison."

"It can't be true! Someone must have done it. How could they not?"

"It's true that to the best of my knowledge, no Iliryan has crossed into the Southlands and returned to tell the tale."

"Why not? What happened to them?"

"It is likely anyone who tried to enter the Southlands was killed by the Southerners or the protective warding spells they've laid upon their side of the border. Eventually, people stopped trying."

"But we must know things about the Southlands!"

"Some things, yes. Not enough. Not nearly enough." She gave a rasping cough that racked her frail body. "Does it worry you to ride into such unknown territory?"

Asher stood taller, hand on her sword hilt. "Not at all."

"Good." She closed her eyes again. "Because no one knows what we will find on the other side of the border." She smiled. "I am glad you have decided to come. I see some of myself in you."

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Asher waited for her to say more, to explain what she meant, but the knight commander remained silent. After a minute, Asher decided she'd fallen back asleep. Asher quietly slipped out of the room, shutting the door behind her. She set off down the hall with a singular goal in mind. Although she'd never visited the royal archives before, she knew where they were located. And she was determined to prove Erborn wrong. There *had* to be information about the Southlands there.

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The castle, tall, rectangular, and made of brown stone imported from Rath, had been empty of its court since the night of the massacre, an abandoned beehive without a queen. Queen Alea had declared that there wasn't enough water in all Ilirya to wash the blood of her brother and his court from the Great Hall. Nor, for both superstitious and practical reasons, would it do to have Ilirya's new queen sit atop a throne in the very place where the previous ruler had been killed. Thus, a new castle was being built in another part of the city's northeast quarter, but until then, the archives were still housed next to the old castle in a long, one-story building annexed to the eastern wall.

Asher pushed open the heavy wooden door to the archives, then stopped to wait for her eyes to adjust before she entered. Thin, weak light trickled into the building through colorful stained-glass windows that ran along one wall, dimly illuminating wide wooden tables and rows of shelves containing various scrolls and parchment papers. Asher stepped across the threshold and was immediately struck with doubt. How would she find the information she needed to prove Erborn wrong? The royal archives were massive.

"May I help you, lady knight?" a kindly voice asked.

Asher jumped. To her left, a short, balding man stood next to her. A thin white ring of hair ran around his skull like a half diadem. His black tunic stretched to the floor, an older fashion that reflected a scholarly profession. Asher guessed he must be the royal archivist. Where had he come from? He'd materialized beside her like a ghost.

"I'm looking for information about the Southlands."

He frowned, rubbing his chin. "The Southlands? Hmmm. No one ever asks about the Southlands. What in particular would you like to know?"

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Asher peered down the long rows of scrolls. "Anything, really. Perhaps a merchant went and wrote about his travels? Or a long-ago trade mission reported its findings?"

The archivist tapped his thick lips with his index finger. "No, I'm afraid I've never heard of any such thing. You know, the Southlands have always been very reclusive. A hermit kingdom, if you like. Iliryans were prohibited from traveling there even before the war began, and since the war began, well, you can imagine there's been no contact between our two peoples."

Asher's face fell. This wasn't at all what she'd imagined. "There's nothing? But surely there's something about the magic there? Or the terrible monsters? There must have been a soldier who strayed across the border and lived to tell the tale. Just one?" Her hopes sank as she pictured going back to Erborn empty-handed and having to polish his armor in the yard while he gloated. She didn't mind the work, but she couldn't bear the thought of Erborn winning.

The archivist shook his head, eyes mournful.

"There's really nothing at all about the Southlands here?" Asher tried to keep disappointment out of her voice. How could Erborn be right? How could the archives have nothing to say about the Southlands? They had been at war for forty years. There should be half a library's worth of material at least.

"No, I fear not." The archivist unexpectedly brightened, his hands flying into the air. "Oh my, how could I forget? There is one thing. We have the royal exchanges!"

"The what?"

"Follow me."

He led Asher through the long room, passing stacks and stacks of information collected from throughout Ilirya over the centuries. Asher was curious about what sorts of knowledge the archives held, but she didn't have time to stop and look. The archivist took a sharp left and dove down one of the stacks, stopping midway down the row to peer at a shelf of tightly rolled scrolls.

He touched them with his fingertips. "This collection of scrolls is all the communications of Ilirya's rulers with neighboring monarchs. Obviously, we can't see what our own rulers wrote since their missives are in the hands

of our neighbors, but generations of archivists have found that these letters lend a keen insight into historical events. Now, let me see..."

He pulled scroll after scroll from the stack, checking the seals on each of them and then putting them back. As he worked, he talked. "As I said, the Southerners are a very isolated people, but I seem to recall a letter from the Southerner regent. Yes. Here it is."

He pulled a lily-white scroll from the bottom of the pile. It had a broken, blue seal on it stamped with what looked like a common housecat.

The archivist unfurled the scroll and scanned the writing. "This letter was sent by the Southerner King Izmar approximately forty years ago. I think he would have been near the end of his rule by then, based on the announcement of his coronation. In fact, I am certain this letter is the last letter we have ever received from the Southlands. Since then, there has been only silence." He handed Asher the scroll.

The highly stylized, looping black text was so ornate she couldn't read it. She sighed. Even her first writing tutor would have been hard pressed to understand the words, and he could read anything. She handed it back to the archivist. "What does it say?"

"Oh! We archivists are used to all kinds of writing. It comes with the job. Let me see. Well, it seems that King Izmar and King Savin were having a bit of a disagreement. In short, King Izmar warns that King Savin can't take the 'Death Stone' and would be foolish to try. And here you'll see that he finishes with his signature, that quite large bit of writing there."

He sighed mournfully. "I'm afraid this letter isn't much help to you. It has nothing like what you were looking for."

Asher stood stunned for a moment. An argument between Ilirya and the Southlands forty years ago during the reign of Queen Alea's father? The timing couldn't be a coincidence. "Is this dispute what started the war?" But how? The war began with a sneak attack by the Southerners. An unannounced land grab that the Iliryans had barely resisted in time. What would this "Death Stone" have to do with it?

"I don't know. Why are any wars begun?" Asher ignored his baleful look.

"Do you know what the Death Stone is?"

The archivist shook his head. "No. I don't believe I've seen it mentioned elsewhere. It sounds quite dramatic, doesn't it?"

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Asher frowned, puzzled. The information wasn't adding up. "If there's no record of it, then how did King Savin know about it?"

"Ah, about that. I have a theory." The archivist held up a finger. "I've noticed there are some records missing in the archives. You understand, as an archivist, it is my responsibility to know what our library does and does not contain. I said that the Southerners were reclusive, but no neighbor can be completely invisible, unseen and unheard. Yet no records at all seem to exist. This absence of information is quite glaring, in fact. This deficit can only be explained if the records—however many or few there were—were expunged."

Asher cocked her head. "Expunged?"

"Destroyed."

"Why would someone destroy all the records about the Southlands? And why has no one noticed before?"

"That I cannot answer. My predecessor was long dead before I noticed the gap, so I have no one to ask. All I can say is that the destruction could only have been carried out by another archivist at the request of the king. Exactly which archivist and which king, I do not know. Nor do I know why the destruction was ordered or what, exactly, was destroyed. Perhaps once we had much, much more information about the Southlands. There is simply no way to know."

"But that scroll wasn't destroyed."

"An oversight, I'm sure. The archivist evidently forgot about it. It would be easy to forget a single scroll."

Asher ran her hand over her light brown hair, thinking. "Could King Savin have obliterated all the archive's information about the Southlands when they attacked? But why? Out of spite? Wouldn't we need that information to fight them?"

The archivist craned his neck and looked around, then whispered, "*Did* the Southlands attack first?"

"What?" Asher took a full step backward. "Of course they attacked us! Everyone knows that."

"Forgive me, lady knight." The archivist bowed deeply. "It's only...I was born near the border, where my family still lives. Early in my training as an archivist, I happened to be home when the first salvos of magic were launched. Although King Savin claimed it was the Southerner army

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that attacked first, I think you'll find there are many still living in the borderlands who have a different recollection of events.”

Asher gaped at him. This was not at all what she'd been taught. But the archivist had no reason to lie. The hairs on her arms stood up. “Why would we attack the Southlands? Why would King Savin lie? Does Queen Alea know?”

CHAPTER 2

“Pay attention, Lady Asher!” Mal says, flustered.

“But it’s boring,” the young child whines, drawing out the long vowel. She wants to be outside playing. She’s always been more interested in play fighting with the stable boys than in learning. “I don’t care about politics. When I grow up, I’m going to be a knight, not a chancellor.”

TO ASHER, POSSESSIONS WERE MERE encumbrances—anchors that would only weigh her down if she tried to carry them with her. The things most worth keeping were memories, and those were heavy in a different way. So when she packed up her room in the knight’s garrison in preparation for the journey south, almost everything she owned in the world fit into a small pack that could easily be affixed to her horse Stormcloud’s saddle.

The only thing she couldn’t pack was a small wooden chest that was too large and bulky to carry on Cloud’s back. Asher sat before it on the floor, fighting the urge to open the lid and look inside. She wanted nothing more than to see its contents one last time, but she knew it would bring her as much pain as it would bitter sweetness. She had only opened the chest a few times in the last year. Doing so was like grabbing the blade of a sword barehanded and refusing to let go. But this was the last time she would ever see the chest. She had to open it.

Of its own volition, her trembling right hand reached out and unlatched the lid. Her left hand joined it, and the two hands slowly lifted it open. She unconsciously stopped breathing as she looked inside. The chest itself was no piece of art. It was roughly made and basic, the type of practical thing a soldier would use. Moreover, it was half empty. A pair of soft brown lambskin slippers, Tayanna’s one indulgent vanity, lay on top of a soft white

tunic. A silver necklace lay beside the slippers, carefully arranged as though the owner would come at any moment and reclaim it.

Asher lifted the necklace out of the chest carefully, weighing it in her hand. It was light as a breath of air. She couldn't remember Tayanna ever having worn it, but it was Tayanna's and that was all that mattered. Asher undid the clasp and laid the necklace against the hollow in her neck, reclasping it behind her neck. The metal was weightless against her skin. She took a breath and closed her eyes, letting the memories come.

"Come on, you're going to be late!"

Asher jumped, her eyes flying open, as Taz burst into the room behind her. She should have heard him coming, but she had swum too deep into the pool of her memories to hear the sounds above the surface. She instinctively slapped the chest's lid shut, protecting Tayanna's last link to the world of the living. As though if Taz saw the chest's contents, the fragile link would disappear and be forever lost. The things in the chest were for Asher alone to see and no one else, at least for now.

It was too late. Taz saw the closed chest behind her and paused, pity filling his face.

She glowered at him, angry at his unwanted empathy and angry he had intruded on her final moments with these pieces of Tayanna. "I'm coming!" she snapped.

Taz's mouth twitched.

"Don't say it," Asher growled. She hated seeing the sadness in his eyes whenever he thought of Tayanna. Both of them knew that with Tayanna's loss, Asher had lost a part of herself forever. She didn't need to see her bereavement reflected on his face. She latched the chest, then picked it up, cradling it in her arms. "I'm sending this to her family in Qarys."

"Are you sure?"

Asher clutched the chest more tightly. As few things as were in it, they were all she had left of Tayanna. But Tayanna herself was not in the chest, and had Tayanna been alive to see it, she would have chastised Asher for her foolishness. "I'm not my shoes, Ash," she would have said, smiling. "You don't have to keep them forever."

Besides, if Asher didn't come back from the Southlands, as Erborn had direly predicted, it wouldn't matter anyway where the chest was. "The Majordomo will see that the chest arrives safely."

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Taz took an interest in his boots. "The border...I just want you to know I'm here for you."

Asher knew what he meant. They were going to the place where Tayanna had fallen, and he was worried how she would handle it. But she wouldn't fall apart. Not again. She had a job to do. And anyway, they would only be at the border long enough to cross through.

She gave him a weak smile to show that she appreciated his support. "Are you ready?"

He puffed his chest out. "Strength and honor."

Asher grinned slyly. "Ah, so you already said goodbye to that girl you think I don't know about?"

Taz looked startled. "You know?"

"What?" Asher shrugged smugly, pleased with herself. "It's not like you were getting fat off the garrison cooking. Besides, you're not as clever as you think you are, Sir Tazamine of Parvel. I know everything about you."

Taz smiled ruefully and hefted her traveling pack to his shoulder. "Speaking of, I hope you packed food. Who knows what we'll find to eat in the Southlands. It could be lizards and tree bark for all we know."

"Still better than the garrison slop. I might have found a roach in it the other day." She chuckled, then remembering something, sobered. "The Southerners attacked *us* first, right?"

Taz blinked. "What? Of course they did!"

"Yeah," Asher said, half to herself. "I know."

But did she? If the archivist was telling the truth, then the entire war was based on a lie. One that Queen Alea's father King Savin had tried to hide. What did it all mean? What had they been fighting for the last forty years?

Taz turned to the door. "Come on. We're going to be late."

* * *

The other members of the expedition had already gathered in the courtyard in front of the stables when Asher and Taz made it outside. Commander Bronwen, mounted on her palomino paint destrier Everbright, was resplendent in her full armor. She wore intricately detailed steel greaves and bracers, black leggings, a long blue coat edged in gold trim, a shining cuirass, and large spaulders imprinted with the crest of the queen. Although

she could no longer wield it anymore, she wore her longsword strapped to her side. Her red hair had been woven into a thick, long braid that traveled along the left side of her head and down her back. She made an impressive picture, and if the observer didn't know better, they might not even notice she only carried the reins in her left hand, and her legs were cinched to the saddle with thin leather straps, her torso held in place by a wide strap from the back of Ever's saddle.

It had been no small feat to return Ilirya's knight commander to riding after the attack. The knights' chief saddle maker had spent weeks perfecting a saddle that would keep her erect, while Ever had been retrained by Ilirya's Master of the Horse Ironbar himself to respond not to Commander Bronwen's legs, but to rein pressure on his neck. But there had been no question of doing it.

"A knight," Commander Bronwen had declared, "is not a knight if she cannot ride," and she'd made it clear she intended to remain a knight regardless of her physical condition. But although she could ride with help, there was no magic or device that would return her ability to fight. That was gone forever. She would never again ride into battle, a fact Asher knew pained her deeply.

To Commander Bronwen's right, Sir Henrek and Lady Jazmen readied their horses with the help of their squires, who would not be coming with them to the Southlands. Asher knew the two by reputation as experienced knights who had spent years fighting on the southern front. They would be solid additions to the group.

Asher was grateful they had volunteered to come. In the days it had taken to prepare the expedition, word had circulated in the knights' garrison that no knights would willingly accompany the knight commander to the Southlands. Too many knights shared Erborn's opinion that the journey was a suicide mission, a belief not helped by whisperings probably originating from Gandral's supporters about the mission's hopelessness. It infuriated Asher. Didn't the other knights see Ilirya couldn't afford to continue fighting in the south in the face of a possible Northman invasion? How did they expect to repel an attack from the north when the entire Iliryan army was concentrated hundreds of miles way in the south?

Asher squinted at the sixth and final member of the party. She didn't recognize him. He stood apart from the others, tightening his black

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gelding's girth without help from an assistant. The man was tall and lanky, with short red hair and a short beard. Although she didn't know him, she recognized his black armor, black horse, and black tack. He was a member of the King's Regiment.

Nudging Taz in the side, she said, "Who's that?"

"That's Great Mage Marandir." He didn't elaborate.

Henrek mounted his thick brown gelding Morningstar and steered him to Commander Bronwen's side. Looking toward Marandir, he grunted in a voice low enough the mage wouldn't hear it but everyone else could, "We should be bringing war mages, or at least Arvin Mage Bane. We need as much help as we can get. Could the Mages' Council spare no other mages than this one Regiment mage?"

"This is a peace delegation, not an invasion." Commander Bronwen's voice was sharp. The rebuke made even Asher wince. "Marandir is the best scout in the kingdom and, if it should come to it, a fierce fighter."

Henrek seemed to accept her answer at first, but after a beat, his voice dropping so that Asher had to strain to hear, he asked, "Can he be trusted, Commander?"

Pain and sadness rippled across the knight commander's face. The conspiracy to kill the king had reached to the highest levels, including the former Captain of the King's Regiment Vardan Ironwill, rumored to have once been a lover of the commander herself. Since he and at least two other members of his Regiment had been involved, the entire Regiment—considered the most elite of all Ilirya's fighting forces—now lived under a cloud of suspicion. Asher was glad that no knights had participated in the coup. She would have hated for the reputation of the knighthood to have been damaged by the actions of a few rogue members.

"Sergeant at Arms Gamiel assures me that he can be trusted." Commander Bronwen shut her eyes for a moment and sighed. When she next spoke, her words were quiet. "But keep an eye on him, Henrek."

"Yes, Commander." His eyes settled suspiciously on Marandir.

"Lady Asher, will you mount?"

Pip the stable boy was standing next to her, holding Cloud's reins out to her. The tall bay eyed her curiously. She patted him on the neck, telling the vain creature how handsome he was, then threw the reins over his head, checked the girth, and mounted. Pip secured her traveling pack to the

back of the saddle. Asher looked around for Taz and found him waiting for his gray gelding Fleetfoot. As Jazmen's squire led him from the stable, Fleet skittered and shied from the shadows that fell across the courtyard, dancing behind the squire on light hooves. Taz settled him, cooing softly, then checked his girth and mounted. Their group of six was complete.

Asher tried not to notice how small the number was. If they were lucky, six would be more than enough to carry the queen's petition for peace to the Southerner ruler. But it was a far smaller group than it should have been. Anger competed with hurt in her chest. The knight commander deserved more loyalty from her knights. Any knight who didn't volunteer to accompany her to the Southlands was a coward, and Asher hated cowards.

As Asher gathered her reins, a small group of people entered the courtyard. She was surprised to see it was a gaggle of courtiers led by Queen Alea herself. The queen, who wore a deep red gown whose color matched the ruby in her diadem, stopped in front of Ever and patted him on his white nose. He whuffled and bumped her dark hand. The queen squeaked in delight and kissed him.

Then she raised her deep-brown eyes and looked around the group. "Danger. Uncertainty. These are the things into which I send you. Your journey will be long and challenging. You will sleep below uncharted stars far from home and your families. But you go with great purpose. If we are to save Ilirya from the peril it faces, it will only be possible through your efforts. You carry the hopes of this kingdom on your shoulders. I pray you are successful."

"We will not fail you, my queen." Commander Bronwen's chin was high and proud.

Queen Alea smiled at her. "I know you will not. I have full faith in you. Travel safely and swiftly. Come back to me."

Her blessing of the journey given, the queen bowed to the expedition, then filed out of the courtyard with her royal retinue in tow. Gandral, who had accompanied her, stayed behind for a moment. Asher stifled the urge to glare at him.

Commander Bronwen nodded to him. "Stand the watch, Gandral. In my absence, you are the acting knight commander. Strength and honor."

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Gandral saluted her smartly. "Duty and queen. Safe travels, Commander. I'll keep your seat warm for you." He pivoted on his heel and marched out of the courtyard, taking long strides to catch up to the queen.

Taz maneuvered Fleet to stand beside Cloud. He muttered under his breath, "There's one person who hopes we don't return."

Asher ground her teeth together. "If we don't return, it won't matter anyway. He'll be knight commander of a kingdom of ashes. We'll have no way to stop the Northmen. Surely Gandral knows that. He needs this peace, just like everyone else."

"Riders!"

Asher and Taz stopped talking and looked to the knight commander.

She stared at each of the members of the expedition in turn, her face fierce and determined in the morning light. "It will take a week of hard riding to reach the southern front. After that, who knows how long it will take to reach the capital of the Southlands, Nyara. We have no maps, no clues to the city's location. Only a name passed down through generations of border dwellers. When we reach it, we will be the first Iliryans to set eyes on the city.

"You will all have heard the rumors. I deny none of them. They are likely all true and more. Once we reach the border, I can promise nothing. There will be hardship at best, death at worst. But we represent Ilirya's last hope. The Northmen lie in wait on our northern border. If we cannot achieve peace, Ilirya will fall. Only this is certain."

"Aw, go on, Bronwen," Jazmen scoffed. Her voice was gruff. "No need to make a speech about it. We know what we're about. I've got a tenner on Henrek being the first to get offed. Let's be off then, yeah? Before I get any more gray hairs."

Asher stared at her, aghast. How dare she disrespect the knight commander? How dare she make light of the danger they faced?

Unexpectedly, however, Commander Bronwen began to laugh. "Your point is taken. And I'll take your bet, too. You attract trouble like flies to offal, Jazmen."

Jazmen snorted. "Ain't dead yet, am I?"

The Knight Commander turned Ever toward the gate, and the expedition began to trail out of the courtyard single file. Asher fell in behind Jazmen and in front of Taz, with Henrek behind him and Marandir bringing up the

rear. As they left the garrison completely, Asher took one last look. It might be the last time she ever saw it. And if their expedition failed, there might be no city to which to return home.

* * *

At first, Asher thought they were heading into a massive thunderstorm. From miles away, she could see the flicker of lightning through clouds of purple, yellow, and green, colors she'd never seen before in the sky. It was as though a giant bruise was slowly spreading over the land, exactly and unavoidably on their path. She pulled her traveling cloak tightly against her, grimacing at the prospect of riding for hours in soggy clothing.

Henrek, who rode beside her, snorted. "That's not rain, youngling."

She gave him a confused look. "What? What do you mean?"

"Can't you smell the death from here? There's no smell in the world like it. Gets in your nostrils, doesn't it?"

Ahead of them, Jazmen began to cackle, leaning forward in her saddle. "There! We're almost at the front!"

A mile later, Asher began to recognize the signs of war around them: broken wagons that once carried supplies, deep ruts in the road from the tread of thousands of boots, and the waft of smoke in the distance that might either have been from cooking fires, mage fire, or both. Asher realized that what she had assumed were storm clouds full of lightning were actually spells and mage fire, thrown almost constantly by battling war mages. Magic of every color arced across the sky, a terrible and deadly rainbow at whose end lay death. She shivered. She couldn't imagine the devastation that the magic must be causing.

Farther down the road, white tents began to line their path, populated by soldiers sleeping and resting between rotations at the frontline. As Asher and her group rode past them, tired and dirty men and women, many of whom had limbs wrapped in bandages, peered out. Asher couldn't look away from their hollow faces. This was where Tayanna had slept. These were the people with whom she'd fought side by side. She could have been any of these soldiers, sitting on a small, crudely fashioned tripod and poking at a pot of stew over the fire, watching the road for reinforcements that never came. After forty years, there were none left to send. The forest had been cut down. There was no more wood to burn.

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Asher tamped down visions of Tayanna being dragged from her horse, her helmet removed, and her throat cut by Southerners. Eveningsong stumbling and falling as Tayanna was incinerated by mage fire. Asher had imagined hundreds of deaths for Tayanna over the last year, her mind filling in the gaps she had purposely refused to fill. No matter how she imagined it, however, Tayanna had never given up. Had always fought until the end. Tayanna never lived a day in her life that wasn't a brave one.

Asher swallowed the lump in her throat. Though her hands shook, they were still steady on Cloud's reins. She could be here on the frontline without crumbling. She would not be sucked down into the morass of despair. She would push through the painful memories. It was her duty.

Halfway through the heart of the dusty camp, the delegation had picked up an informal honor guard as knights recognized their Knight Commander and gathered to escort her. They pushed through pockets of loitering soldiers, clearing a path all the way to the tent of General Oran. His tent, which was Illyrian blue and flew pennants bearing the queen's crest from all four corners, was situated far enough from the front line that he was in no danger of being hit by the enemy's war mages and archers but still close enough that he could issue orders for immediate execution. The way the tent swarmed with couriers relaying messages and commands to and from the battlefield reminded Asher of an anthill. She wondered how much General Oran slept each night between receiving input from the day's battle and planning for the next day. Although commanders rarely fought at the frontlines, they burned out faster than their soldiers. It was hard work managing an army of thousands.

One of the knights entered the tent to alert the general to the knight commander's presence, and Henrek and Jazmen took the opportunity to dismount, stretching their legs after hours in the saddle. Asher, Taz, and Marandir stayed mounted, unsure of what would happen next.

The tent flap opened moments later, and General Oran stepped out. He smiled broadly when he saw them, hands on his hips. "Well now, I assume you've come with the reinforcements I requested?"

The delegation members looked at each other, confused. Asher's heart sank.

"No, General. Did you not receive notice of our delegation?" There was a note of unease in Commander Bronwen's voice.

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The general's face fell. "We've not received any correspondence from King's City for weeks. Surely you don't mean to tell me it's only you? No reinforcements?" He looked around the knights as though an army might be hiding behind them.

Asher glanced at the men standing near Cloud's head. The soldiers who had started to gather around them looked rough and battered. They wouldn't take the news well that no reinforcements were coming.

Commander Bronwen said, "General Oran, could we perhaps speak inside?"

The general nodded, his lips pressed firmly into an unhappy line, and retreated back into his tent. Jazmen and Henrek sprang into action, hastening to Ever's side to unbuckle the commander from her saddle. Gently, they lifted her off, then carried her between them into General Oran's tent. Taz, Marandir, and Asher followed a moment later. Asher and Taz exchanged glances. The miscommunication between King's City and the front was unsettling. Asher hoped it wasn't a sign of things to come.

General Oran sat behind a large wooden desk in the middle of the tent. Its surface was covered by a huge map on which the opposing units of the queen's army and the Southerner army were depicted as small pieces. Asher knew that in forty years, the line hadn't shifted more than a league in either direction. The pieces didn't move far. He ran his hands through his short salt-and-pepper hair and rubbed his temples as Jazmen and Henrek set Commander Bronwen in a chair in front of the desk. Henrek stayed beside her while Jazmen retreated to the side of the tent where the others stood.

"What is it now, Bronwen?" General Oran's voice was tired. "We've just lost another several dozen fighters. If I can't hold the right flank, the whole line might cave, and then the Southerners will have a direct shot to King's City. We'll be helpless to stop them, and you tell me you've brought no reinforcements."

"Is it that bad?" The commander's voice was troubled.

General Oran balled his right hand on the table. "It's been this way for months! We're one push by the Southerners away from total collapse. I've sent message after message to the capital, but there's no response. It's worse than *bad*. If we keep taking losses like we have, we won't last another month."

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Asher sucked in a breath. Disintegration of the Iliryan line. An unstoppable Southerner invasion. Things were so much worse than she'd ever imagined. The Northmen weren't the only danger.

The general's face was weary. "If you haven't come with reinforcements, why are you here?"

"Peace, Oran. We're going to Nyara to sue for peace."

"Peace?" General Oran barked incredulously. "You think the Southerners want *peace*? We've been at war since you and I were holding wooden swords in our hands pretending at soldiers. Now they're a sword's breadth from finally defeating us. Why would they want peace now?"

"I'll find a way to convince them."

The general stood and paced. His boots made a soft hissing as they passed over the tent's carpet. Asher couldn't help but notice how threadbare it looked. How many generals had preceded General Oran? "If you cross that line, you will all die, every one of you. It's suicide. You won't make it five feet into the Southlands, trust me. And you, Bronwen? Look at you! How can you possibly—?"

"Enough." Commander Bronwen's voice was cold and hard as ice. "It's true we may all die tomorrow, but if we don't at least try, then Ilirya is lost. We'll be facing the Northmen at our gates soon enough, if not the Southerners too. Peace is our only hope."

The general peered at the knights in his tent. "Very well, I will have a parley flag raised, but I promise you nothing. As well you know, no one has ever tried to parley with them before. The Southerners might slaughter you all on the spot and use your teeth as jewelry."

Commander Bronwen smiled. "Have a little more faith. I'm sure they would torture us first."

* * *

The next day, Asher left their tent before the sun rose. She had hardly slept the night before, wedged between snoring Henrek and restless Taz. Her mind was filled with thoughts of Tayanna. While she waited for the camp to awaken, she walked silently among the tents full of sleeping soldiers, trying to imagine Tayanna there. Tayanna would have helped any way that she could, whether it was bandaging wounds or repairing tack. She would have listened to the soldiers' stories of home, providing a sympathetic ear

in an unsympathetic place. She would have seen the camp not as a grim reminder of death, but as a reminder of the beauty of life. Could Asher ever see life with those optimistic eyes?

She caressed the necklace she wore under her tunic, feeling in some small way close to Tayanna. Tayanna would have had no doubts about the success of their mission. Asher wanted to believe in it, too, but General Oran's words had rattled her. How close was the Illyrian line to falling? Would the Southerners really kill them on the spot? What were they getting into?

"Couldn't sleep?" Taz asked when Asher returned to the tent.

She pulled a sour face. "You kick in your sleep."

He snorted. "Here." He held out a bowl of cooked oats to her. "This will make you feel better."

Asher took it and began eating, watching as the camp slowly came to life. Without magic to stain the sky, the sunrise was beautiful. The pink-red hues reminded her of the sky over the sea the morning of a storm. Henrek emerged from the tent carrying the commander, followed by Jazmen and Marandir. They all sat to eat, the air heavy with their silence. There was much to think about. Would they survive the day?

As they finished, General Oran approached, dressed in full battle armor. "The Southerners have accepted our parley request. Come now before they change their minds."

The members of the expedition swung into action with practiced ease born of a week on the road together. The horses were loaded with their traveling packs while Asher and Taz helped buckle Commander Bronwen into her saddle. The knight commander's face was determined as she took up the reins with her left hand, but blood pounded in Asher's veins. Depending on how the Southerners responded to their request to cross into the Southlands, she might have only a few hours left to live. And then Illyria would be on borrowed time until the Northmen or the Southerners breached Illyria's borders.

As the group commenced its march to the front line, the air was heavy with the gravity of their task. Weary soldiers who'd spent the night watch staring into the darkness on the other side, hoping not to see enemy soldiers surging forward in surprise attack, watched them with wary, uncertain eyes. Slowly, a gap opened in the line for the delegation to pass through.

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General Oran stopped at the edge of the line. "You're on your own. If the parley flag is taken down on the Southerner side, we'll have to fight, whether you're still there or not. I hope you're not."

Asher's stomach lurched.

"I understand," Commander Bronwen said.

General Oran's face was grim. "Good luck."

The small group crossed the wasteland between the two armies slowly. In the quiet light of dawn, the land was still and peaceful. Asher knew when the sun rose higher, however, the space would be filled by soldiers striving tooth and nail against each other, the dead and wounded lying at their feet. Forty years of war and nothing had changed. What had it all been for? What had the lives of so many soldiers bought? Now that she knew it might have been Ilirya that attacked first, she no longer knew. She had meant to ask Commander Bronwen about what she'd learned in the archives, but she hadn't found the opportunity yet.

The closer they came to the enemy line, the more Asher's heart fluttered in her chest and her stomach twisted into a knot. They were truly on their own now. Too far away to be protected by the Iliryan army, too few to fight their way free if necessary. If they couldn't convince the Southerners to let them enter the Southlands, they would likely be killed. She looked at Taz. His eyebrows were drawn together, and he was chewing on his lower lip. *You're a knight*, she admonished herself. *Knights don't get scared! Get a hold of yourself.* But still her legs quaked.

The Southerner soldiers watched the approaching Iliryan delegation with sullen hostility and suspicion. Like the soldiers of the Iliryan army, they looked tired yet determined. In fact, but for their armor, Asher wouldn't have been able to distinguish the soldiers of one army from the other. Where were the monsters Erborn had promised? These were just men like any other.

The Southerner line parted to allow them to enter, then closed again, sealing the group in with no way to go back. Asher tried not to think about it. A tall soldier in red armor grabbed Ever's reins and led the knight commander's horse to the left. The rest of the delegation followed as dozens of pairs of curious Southerner eyes watched. Their escort led them to a large red tent and then dropped Ever's reins, ducking into the tent to alert

whomever was inside to their presence. A moment later, he re-emerged and waved for them to enter.

Taz murmured, "Here we go." His voice was pinched.

Her heart pounding in her chest and her breath shallow, Asher dismounted, leaving the reins over Cloud's neck. If things went south, they might not be able to ride to freedom, but if it came to it, she would still try. Henrek and Jazmen carefully slid Commander Bronwen from Ever's back, cradling her between them. If the knight commander was scared, she didn't show it. Asher wished she shared Commander Bronwen's confidence, but at that moment General Oran's words came back to her. Did the Southerners really use the teeth of their enemies for jewelry?

* * *

Whatever Asher had expected to see when she walked into the Southerner general's tent, it wasn't a half-human monster. The creature inside was a good seven feet tall, with brown, hooved legs like a goat, a massive, muscled human chest, and huge black ram's horns that sprouted from the sides of his human head and curled around his ears. Small white tusks jutted from his lower lip and curled up toward his flat nose. Although he wore no armor at all, a massive two-headed axe was strapped to his bare back.

When Asher saw him, she froze, causing Taz to walk into her. She gasped and resisted the urge to back out of the tent. It was a primal instinct, the type a prey animal might have when encountering a predator.

"It must be an illusion to scare us," Taz whispered into her ear, his voice nervous. "Probably he's short and fat beneath the illusion."

"He's a fleshsmith." Marandir's low voice beside them was full of awe. "I've only read about them in books. His affinity hasn't been seen in Ilirya for centuries. It was assumed that affinity had died out."

Trying to be subtle and not draw the monster's attention, Asher asked him out of the corner of her mouth, "What's a fleshsmith?"

"His magic enables him to change his body at will. In this case, it appears he has taken on some of the qualities of a ram."

Asher swallowed. That didn't sound good. "Not an illusion. Can he change *us*?"

"No. Just himself." Marandir made a sound. "Well, at least that was the case in Ilirya. It's possible his magic works differently here."

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Asher didn't like that answer at all. It was bad enough the creature—the fleshsmith—could crush a skull with one blow of his fist. What if he gave them all horns too? Could he turn them into rabbits? Just what could a Southerner fleshsmith do? She didn't have the opportunity to ask.

"Please be seated," the fleshsmith said. His voice was deep and powerful. It reverberated from his chest like the rumble of thunder. It set Asher's teeth on edge.

Because there were no chairs in the tent, only brightly colored pillows, Jazmen and Henrek set the knight commander down on a pillow. Jazmen sat behind her to keep her in a tolerably straight sitting position while Henrek took up a defensive position next to her, his hand ready on the pommel of his sword. Marandir, Taz, and Asher arrayed themselves slightly farther away from the knight commander, keeping as far from the fleshsmith as possible. He watched them with his head cocked to the side but said nothing. Asher noticed that the pupils of his tan eyes were oblong, like the eyes of a goat, and she shivered at how inhuman they were.

Now settled, Commander Bronwen said, "I assume you are in charge here?"

"I am." The Southerner general watched the commander curiously but without judgment.

"Thank you for granting our parley. I will get straight to the point: I am requesting safe passage through your lines for myself and my five companions. We have been sent by Queen Alea to discuss terms for peace with your regent."

"Peace?" The general smiled, emphasizing his small tusks. "Hmm. Now the Rann seek peace with the Sarsen? Have you finally given up after all these years?"

"Who are the Rann and the Sarsen?" Taz whispered to Asher.

"I think we're the Rann and they're the Sarsen." It was a guess. She had never heard either term before. Was this what the Southerners called them? Why?

"Both sides can benefit from an honorable end to these long years of war. It is hard to prosper in times of strife," Commander Bronwen said.

"So many years of war. So many Sarsen dead." The general was no longer smiling. He narrowed his eyes at the commander. "What will the

Rann give for peace? What will the Rann pay for all the lives they have taken?”

Commander Bronwen clenched her teeth briefly. “The terms of peace are for our rulers to decide. We soldiers are merely the instruments of their will.”

The general smiled again, his eyes creasing at the corners. “So the Rann will beg for peace from the King of Cats?”

Asher found it hard to look away from him. How could a human be so inhuman?

Commander Bronwen held her chin high. “We beg for nothing. We come as equals.”

The general grunted, turning away, and Asher worried that Commander Bronwen had angered him. What would he do if he was upset with them? Her hand unconsciously went to the hilt of her sword, ready to fight if necessary. She didn’t intend to sit idly by should he use his magic on them.

“General, you know the terrible cost of war. Surely you would prefer to see it ended. Let your soldiers return to their families. Will you promise us safe passage to Nyara to present our petition for peace to your king?”

The general turned back to them and laughed, the enormous muscles in his chest and stomach rippling. Asher was taken aback by the unexpectedness of it. His smile stretched wider than ever. “Safe passage to Nyara? General Zadan can promise the lady nothing beyond these lines. Not even the King of Cats can control the five tribes of the Sarsen. But I will not stop you. Follow the road south, and you will find the King of Cats. But be warned: many things can happen on the road to Nyara.” He laughed again. “And beware the dragon.”

CHAPTER 3

The boy is bawling when the girl finds him. His face is puffy and red, his cheeks shiny with tears. She sits down next to him and puts her thin arm around his shoulders.

“What am I going to do now that he’s gone, Asher?” the boy asks.

“Don’t worry, Taz,” the girl replies. “We’ll always have each other. You and me, forever.”

“WHAT DO YOU THINK HE meant by ‘the dragon’?” Taz scrunched his face together. His blue eyes scanned the skies around them, but there was nothing to see in them, not even a cloud.

The small group had finally stopped for a rest after hours of riding, sprawling out on the ground in a stand of trees beside the road while the horses grazed nearby. Asher was sweating heavily in the Southland sun, but like everyone else, she refused to remove any of her armor during the day. A knight had to be ready at all times. It wouldn’t do to be caught in only a tunic and leggings. That was how knights died. It was better to sweat and be ready for anything than to be as defenseless as a turtle with no shell.

She lay back on the grass, putting her head in her hands, and considered Taz’s question. Dragons, as everyone knew, were a myth. Probably once upon a time someone had seen a lizard and thought, “Wouldn’t it be scary if this lizard had wings and was large enough to carry off a full-sized horse?” She attributed the idea that this imaginary creature should also breathe fire to the ingenuity of storytellers, who never missed a chance to make a tale more dramatic. What could be more dramatic than a creature with teeth like knives, skin like plate armor, and the ability to burn down an entire village with one breath? It was ingenious, really.

“Maybe ‘the Dragon’ is a person, like the King of Cats.”

Taz stuck out his lower lip. “That would be a funny thing to call a person.”

“So is the King of Cats. Why do you suppose he’s called that? Wouldn’t a king want to be called something more regal? A cat is small and unintimidating. They eat mice and sleep all day.” Asher didn’t particularly care what the Southerner king was called. All that mattered was that when they arrived in Nyara, he granted them the peace treaty they sought. If he wanted to be called the King of Pigs, that was his business.

Taz shook his head. “Who knows?” He pulled up blades of grass and threw them back down carelessly. “That general—I think he said his name was Zadan—wasn’t very helpful. He should have provided us an escort. Or at least a map. He didn’t even tell us how long it would take to get to Nyara. We still don’t know anything about the Southlands.”

Asher shrugged. “At least he didn’t kill us on the spot.” They might not have learned anything about the Southlands, but they had left with their lives and, she considered with a shiver, all their limbs still human.

“I wonder why we don’t have...what did Marandir call him? A fleshsmith. I wonder why we don’t have fleshsmiths in Ilirya.”

Asher flicked a bug off her leg, watching it cartwheel away. “I’m glad we don’t! We don’t need fish-tailed women or bull-headed men in our daily life. People are complicated enough without having animal parts. Can you imagine walking down a dark alley in King’s City and running into General Zadan? He’s exactly the type of monster a parent makes up to scare children into behaving.”

She fished a golden-brown honey oat cake out of her satchel and munched on it, contemplating her companions. Henrek was laid out on the ground, his dark cloak over his face as he snored loudly. Jazmen and Marandir were also dozing, their backs against trees, while Commander Bronwen kept a vigilant eye over their small camp. Asher considered taking a quick nap herself. Who knew how much longer they would have to ride before they found a suitable place to bed down for the night?

A twig somewhere in the forest around them snapped. Asher was on her feet in an instant, her sword half-drawn.

The commander glanced at her and motioned with her head for Asher to stop. Then her eyes returned to the tree line in the direction from which

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the sound had come. "You might as well show yourselves. Unless you'd like to continue following us as you have been since we crossed the border."

Asher grimaced, flexing her hand on the hilt of her sword. They'd been followed since the border? How had she missed that?

A young man, his brown patchy beard indicating he was barely out of boyhood, stepped out of the forest. He was dressed plainly in a rough brown tunic. As far as Asher could tell, he was unarmed. Marandir and Jazmen rolled to their feet and moved closer to protect Commander Bronwen, their hands on their sword hilts. To Asher's annoyance, Henrek continued to snore, oblivious to the interloper.

Commander Bronwen indicated the woods around the young man impatiently. "And the others."

From among the trees, long gray and white noses tipped with black appeared, followed by small amber eyes. There was no mistaking the creatures to which they belonged. Wolves. The animals watched the knights intently, their ears pricked forward. Asher froze, her senses screaming. The instinctive fear of a pack of dangerous predators made her body buzz with energy. Danger! She quickly assessed the odds. There were at least twelve wolves. Although they might be able to fight the pack off, it would be a bloody, deadly confrontation, and they had neither healers nor medicine with them.

Behind her, Taz drew his sword slowly. In the quiet air, the sound was loud as a bell ringing. One of the wolves growled. It lowered its head, its ears pressing back into its skull and its lips curling to reveal long, sharp white teeth. This prompted the other knights to draw their swords as well, and in an instant all the wolves were growling. The sound was awful. It echoed and built on itself in the heavy air, making the hair on Asher's arms stand up.

Asher stepped back into a defensive stance, sword held out in front of her. Her muscles were so tight they were almost shaking. If the wolves attacked, she wouldn't have much time to react. She would have to slice quickly and move even faster to avoid being dragged to the ground, where she would be helpless.

The barking and snarling finally woke Henrek. He jumped to his feet, looking with bewilderment between the wolves and his companions. "Where did *they* come from?"

To Asher's surprise, Commander Bronwen seemed unconcerned by the escalating standoff. Fixing her eyes on the stranger, she asked him calmly, "What do you want?"

The young man motioned subtly with his hands, and the wolves stopped growling, although they continued to stare down the Iliryans. In an instant, the clearing became so quiet Asher could hear Taz breathing hoarsely behind her. She shifted her weight uneasily, unwilling to lower her blade. Had the man tamed the wolves? Was it possible to domesticate an entire pack?

He said, "You are to come with me."

"We won't go a step with you! Who do you think you are?" Henrek spat, eyes narrow. He stood with his legs planted wide apart, his sword in his left hand and a dagger in his right.

One of the wolves near him stepped forward, issuing a low, tense growl. The skin around its nose wrinkled to reveal its sharp teeth and bright pink tongue. Asher's palms began to sweat. She *really* didn't want to have to fight wolves. Although she'd fight tooth and nail if it came to it.

"What if we do not come with you?" Commander Bronwen asked, ignoring Henrek's outburst.

The young man's face twisted with confusion. "But you must! The Magus has ordered it."

The knight commander stared him down. "Listen to me, young man. We are traveling to your capital on behalf of Queen Alea of Ilirya. We do not have time to deviate from our mission, not for you or anyone. You may relay that message to this Magus person. If they wish to see us, they will have to come to *us*."

"Are all Rann this obstinate?" a new voice asked.

A muscular man with midnight black hair and a fulsome mustache stomped out of the trees, glaring at the commander. He was followed by another man and two women. Surprised, Asher turned to orient her sword to them, uncertain whether they or the wolves were the bigger threat. How many people were hiding in those trees, and how had she not noticed them?

All four of the newcomers, who wore brown outfits similar to that of the young man, had called magic to their hands. It glowed with an identical green light. Asher's eyes widened. She had never seen four people with the

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exact same color magic. Was this another peculiarity of the Southlands? In Ilirya, every mage's magic was a shade unique to them alone.

The mustached man raised his hands, showing magic gathering there. "Will or nil, you're coming with us. The Magus demands it."

"And who is this 'Magus,' eh?" Henrek demanded.

The four mages released their magic at the same time. It formed into ropes in mid-air and then, faster than the Iliryans could move, fell upon the members of the delegation. Asher watched helplessly as her wrists were bound fast by the pulsing, deep-green magic. She heard a yelp of surprise and protest from Taz and knew the same thing was happening to him. Henrek unleashed a string of colorful curses, fighting the magic wrapping around his hands with all his strength, but to no avail. A second tendril of magic pulled fast against his ankles, and he toppled to the ground.

"Untie me, you brigands!" Henrek bellowed, rolling onto his side and wriggling his body like a fish in a net. "Or I will tear you limb from limb! You had better hope I don't get free of this confounded magic!"

Commander Bronwen's mouth quirked into a tight frown of disapproval. Of all her party, she was the only one whom the magic had not touched, but she was just as helpless as her companions. "I suppose we're your prisoners now?"

"Perhaps." The mustached man crossed his arms over his broad chest. "That is for the Magus to decide."

"This 'Magus' is your leader?"

The man motioned to one of the mages, a woman of about fifty with deep-brown skin and wavy black hair, and she released a green thread of magic that wove itself into a floating chair for the knight commander. Invisible hands lifted Commander Bronwen into the air and placed her gently into it. *So they know about Commander Bronwen*, Asher thought. Had General Zadan alerted them, or had they realized from watching the Iliryans?

Commander Bronwen growled. "If this is how it's to be, please see that the horses are taken care of at least."

The wolves turned and disappeared back into the trees. Asher was furious at herself for not noticing they'd been followed. What if their captors had been attackers instead? They had let their guard down and now they were prisoners. They were lucky things hadn't turned out worse.

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“Damn mages!” Henrek roared. “Marandir, do something to stop them!”

The other Southerner woman was roughly hoisting Henrek to his feet while Henrek tried to butt her with his head like a goat. Asher shook her head. It was clear they had no hope of escaping in their present circumstances. The best they could do now was follow along until an opportunity for escape or negotiation presented itself. Henrek continued cursing until he abruptly went silent. Irritated by Henrek’s ceaseless insults, the mage had created a gag that cut off his ability to make a sound.

“Ha!” Jazmen cackled. “Someone finally shut you up, you old git.”

Henrek’s eyes burned furiously as they glared at her. When the gag was removed, it was clear he would have things to say about it.

* * *

Their captors led them west from the road through alternating patches of field and forest. If they hadn’t been prisoners, Asher might have found this part of the Southlands to be soothingly reminiscent of the Illyrian barony of Prabst, which lay immediately to the north of King’s City. Instead, she focused on carefully noting everything around them. Once they escaped—or were released—they would need to know how to return to the road to Nyara, and that meant remembering key landmarks that would enable them to retrace their steps.

They walked for an hour before reaching the first signs of habitation Asher had seen since they’d crossed into the Southlands. It was impossible to guess how many people lived in the area because their houses had been built in a small forest, where they were camouflaged by the trees and the falling dusk. Even so, she could tell it was a surprisingly large settlement, likely populated by hundreds of people.

Their captors led them between the small, thatch-roofed houses and straight to a long, low building. It was a modest, unadorned hall with square holes for windows. Inside, several men and women sat on rough wooden benches along the walls, wearing the same brown clothing as the Illyrians’ captors. At the far end of the hall, an old woman with a shock of white hair tied in a loose bun at the top of her head sat on a wooden throne on a small dais. As they approached her, Asher noticed with alarm that the throne moved. Thick green and brown vines slithered over and around its

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arms, legs, and back. Asher blinked, thinking it might be a trick of her eyes, but it didn't stop the leaves from sprouting and shriveling before her. The chair was alive.

"Magus, we have brought the Rann trespassers to you," the mustached man told the old woman, bowing to her.

"Thank you, Boaz."

The Magus fixed her captives with a fierce, penetrating stare. Her face was lined by years of exposure to the wind and sun, but her hazel eyes were sharp and clear as an eagle's.

Commander Bronwen returned the Magus' gaze. Without waiting to be addressed, she said, "We are representatives of the Iliryan government on official business. I demand that you release us and return our horses."

The Magus stood, stepping closer to them. "You are in no position to demand anything. What are you doing in Sarsen lands?"

"That is between us and your king."

The Magus waved a wrinkled brown hand. "The King of Cats has no power here." She smiled, revealing several missing teeth. "Your business is with me now."

Commander Bronwen stared at the Magus defiantly, but she was at a clear disadvantage. As the Magus had pointed out, the Iliryans—bound, outnumbered, and in a strange land—were in no position to demand anything. She nodded, then said in a clipped voice, "We have come to sue for peace."

The Magus leaned forward, peering at the knight commander with narrowed eyes. "Oh, *now* you want peace, do you? After what you've done?"

Commander Bronwen began, "Both sides have done things in this war—"

"I'm not talking about your stupid war!"

Commander Bronwen blinked. "What?"

"You fustilugs! Your mages opened a box they shouldn't have! They let all the monsters out, and now *we're* the ones stuck cleaning up your mess!"

Commander Bronwen's face was a mask of confusion. She looked to Marandir and to her knights, but none of them understood what the Magus meant either. She shook her head slowly. "I'm afraid I do not understand."

The Magus waved her hand agitatedly, her face sour. Behind her, the vines twisted and writhed over her throne like agitated snakes. "Weeks ago,

some of you Rann summoned a veritable storm of Dark Magic, didn't you? Tore a hole in our world, and now we have all sorts of things traipsing around that shouldn't be here, wreaking havoc."

"But—but how could you possibly know about the...about what happened?" Commander Bronwen's face was ashen.

Asher was just as flummoxed as the knight commander. How could the Southerners know about the plot to kill King Hap and bring the One God into the mortal realm? How could they know about the Gate between the two worlds through which the god had tried and failed to pass? How could they know that Dark Magic had been the catalyst for opening that Gate? Come to think of it, how could they know about Dark Magic at all? It was an Illyrian invention, a perversion of magic by a few rogue Illyrian mages. Did the Southerners have spies in King's City?

The Magus snorted. "The Isenii know all that happens in Ilirya. Just because you Rann act like you live on an island doesn't make it so. We're your neighbor. And every time you try and use Dark Magic, it's the Sarsen who deal with the consequences. Last time you tried to use Dark Magic, it took us years to put our lands to right again!"

What? Asher blinked. The last time? Could she be referring to the original discovery of Dark Magic in Ilirya decades ago? Asher had only just found out about that months ago. How was it the Magus seemed to know more than she did?

Commander Bronwen shifted in her chair, grimacing. "I'm sorry. We didn't know. No one in Ilirya was aware of this problem. Obviously, you have a much better understanding of the effects of Dark Magic than we do. It seems we have much to learn from you."

A flicker of hope flared in Asher's chest. Do they know how to stop the Dark Magic poisoning her? Can they cure her?

Commander Bronwen pushed forward. "And yet surely you see that we must continue on to Nyara to speak to the king. We must put an end to the war that has drained the lifeblood of our two kingdoms for four decades. All else can be handled once peace is achieved."

The Magus boggled at her. "Lady knight, I have a dragon on my hands, threatening to decimate my people. Every week, it kills more of them. Peace? Your peace means nothing to me! The Isenii will be wiped out by this dragon long before the war will bleed us dry! A dragon, you understand,

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caused by you Iliryan fopdoodles. I don't need peace; I need someone to kill this dragon!"

An uncomfortable silence ensued while the Magus stared at her. Commander Bronwen stared back, bewilderment on her face.

"A dragon?" she said at last.

The Magus nodded. "A very large one."

"But dragons aren't real!" The commander protested weakly. "They're just stories!"

"Balderdash! I suppose you might as well go and tell *it* that it doesn't exist. I suppose it hasn't quite gotten the message yet."

"And you...desire *us* to kill the dragon?"

"Well, it's your fault," the Magus huffed.

"How does one kill a dragon?"

"The usual way: cutting off its head or spearing it through the heart."

"Oh."

"But you must take care of its ichor." The Magus waggled a finger. "And its fire, of course. Both will melt armor. Dragons are bloody hard to kill, which is why it's a good thing they only appear every few decades when you bloody Rann accidentally summon them."

"Why can't *your* mages kill the dragon?" Jazmen piped up. "They know how to create binding spells and all, don't they? Can't they tie up the dragon so it can't move, and then one of your warriors can cut off its head or spear it or whatnot? It seems an easy thing for you to do."

"Oh no!" The Magus's voice suggested the answer was obvious. "Dragons are immune to magic. They're natural mage banes."

"So you are asking us to help you kill the dragon because you cannot," Commander Bronwen said.

"Oh goodness no! No, I'm *ordering* you to try to kill the dragon. Better you than I lose more of my people." The Magus sat back down heavily on her seat, and the vines wriggled away.

"We're hardly prepared to fight a beast that until this moment we didn't even know existed!" Marandir protested. "It would take us time to study and learn more about it. We would have to observe it in its habitat and track its movements..."

"This will be a distraction from the task Queen Alea has set us to." Commander Bronwen frowned deeply. "And we don't have time to spare."

What's more, we are, as you see, a very small delegation. We are not well equipped for the undertaking you ask."

The Magus's hazel eyes hardened. "Let me express this in a way you will understand. You desire peace. The Isenii are one of the five tribes of the Sarsen. If you kill the dragon, we will support your petition for peace. If you try to shirk this duty, however, not a one of you will live to set foot outside Isenii lands. Clear?"

The knight commander pressed her mouth into a tight line. "Very."

"We're not monsters," the Magus said, looking to the knights and holding her hands up in supplication, "but fair is fair. It's your problem. You clean it up."

Without warning, Commander Bronwen gasped and doubled over. The muscles in her jaw clenched as her body shuddered, racked by a spasm of pain. Her left hand balled into a tight fist, and she slumped onto her right side. Asher's heart jumped into her throat. The Dark Magic. She remembered Lyse's words. Away from the city, the Dark Magic would spread much faster.

The Magus, who had instinctively risen at the knight commander's gasp, stepped off the dais and moved closer. She held up her right hand, and the same green magic shared by the other mages reached out and wrapped itself around Commander Bronwen's chest. "You're dying. You carry Dark Magic inside you, and it's killing you." There was an unexpected note of sympathy in her voice.

Commander Bronwen didn't answer. She was breathing heavily, her face gray.

"Can she be healed?" The words jumped out of Asher's mouth.

The Magus shook her head, pulling back her magic. "I'm sorry. No mage in the world can pull Dark Magic out of a body. It's nasty stuff."

"Why?" Marandir asked. "Why can't our magic stop it?"

Asher wanted to know too. What made it so different from the other magic?

"I don't know."

The knight commander said through gritted teeth, "Tell us how to kill the dragon."

The Magus retreated back to her throne and sat on it while vines twisted and snaked around her. "I'll send a healer with you. That will be of some

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help against burns. Other than that, get your pokey bits into its fleshy, soft bits and you'll be fine."

* * *

"We should slip out at night while they're sleeping." Henrek waved his hand at the door. "We can steal back the horses and be gone before they've noticed."

The group had been left alone together in a small hut with only some scratchy, thin brown blankets to lie on and a few rounds of flat, tasteless bread to eat. Dim, flickering torchlight feebly illuminated the room, creating grotesque shadows that danced on the walls. Although their magical bindings had been removed, Asher was not fooled. They were prisoners of the Isenii, not guests.

Commander Bronwen sat against a wall while Henrek paced. Everyone was tired and disheartened. Between their capture on the road to Nyara and discovering that the use of Dark Magic in Ilirya had resulted in the appearance of a dragon in the Southlands—one that now they would have to fight to the death—Asher was having trouble processing everything that had happened. How had things fallen apart so quickly? They hadn't even been in the Southlands a day.

"Oh right, that's it," Jazmen retorted. "We'll just nip off, will we? Ta, lads."

"The Isenii will have sentries around the village, no doubt, not to mention the guards encircling this hut to prevent exactly such a flight," Marandir said, ruffling his red hair with his hand. "We wouldn't make it ten feet before we were caught. Even if we managed to make it back to the road, their territory could run for days. We would be easily recaptured, and what then?"

"We fight!" Henrek said, brandishing his fist.

Commander Bronwen sighed. "There is neither utility nor dignity in running, Henrek. If what the Magus says is true and we are the cause of this dragon, then we are honor-bound to kill it."

"We don't owe them anything! They kidnapped us and brought us here against our wills, the scoundrels!"

"Could we send word back to the front?" Asher asked. "We're still close. We could ask for a combined platoon of archers, knights, and pikemen to

be sent. Maybe the Isenii would let us go if they knew a larger fighting force was on its way. Then we could continue on to Nyara.”

“It’s a good idea, and we could offer such a proposal to the Magus,” Commander Bronwen agreed, “but she has no reason to trust us. She would most likely make us wait until the platoon arrived before allowing us to leave, and that could take weeks. General Oran would need time to prepare the platoon—staffing it, equipping it, perhaps even training it—followed by negotiations with General Zadan to allow it to pass through the Southerner line. And that’s *if* General Oran agreed to send a platoon at all. The army has no platoon to spare. No, we can’t risk waiting.”

“Do it ourselves then. Is that what you’re saying, Bronwen?” Jazmen asked, watching the knight commander closely.

“I don’t see an alternative. We don’t have time to spare. Every moment, the Northmen draw closer to invasion.”

“It’s a *dragon!*” Jazmen exclaimed. “They shouldn’t even exist, hey? You heard the Magus: they’re more than dangerous. Giant fire-breathing lizard with skin like armor and blood that melts metal, yeah? Sound like something we should be charging at with our little swords? We’re only six. We can’t afford to lose anyone.”

“I know.” There was stress in Commander Bronwen’s voice. She looked tired. Her face was ghost-white and her red hair, starting to come loose from her braid, hung limply over her shoulders. “I don’t like the risk, but we have no choice.”

“I’m not afraid.”

The others stared at Asher in surprise. Taz’s mouth even fell open a little.

Asher held her chin high. It wasn’t exactly the truth. She was concerned about the idea of fighting a dragon—blood and fire that could melt metal?—but she was a knight, and knights didn’t run from danger. They had come this far. They couldn’t stop now. “I’ll fight the dragon.”

“I’ll do it, too.” Now all eyes turned to Taz. Asher knew him well enough to recognize the brief flicker of uncertainty and doubt that flashed across his face, but it quickly passed, leaving in its wake gritty determination. She nodded at him.

Jazmen threw up her hands. “We can’t let the children show us up, Henrek. Fine, I’ll go, too.”

DESTINY'S CHOICE

"As will I," said Marandir.

"Thank you." Commander Bronwen looked around at her companions. "You honor me with your bravery."

"I'm no coward!" Henrek protested. "I've faced plenty of danger in my time! I was merely saying that it would be faster not to waste our time fighting the cursed lizard, that's all. I didn't say I wouldn't do it."

"No, you shall remain with me, Henrek," Commander Bronwen ordered. "I will need someone with me."

It took Asher a moment to realize what the commander meant, and when she did, her stomach gave a lurch. In the event the dragon killed the other four, the commander would need a companion with whom to either push on to Nyara or limp back across the front line and into Ilirya. She was hedging her bet.

Jazmen said, "That's it settled then! Go on, to bed with everyone. Tomorrow we fight a dragon."

She plopped down onto one of the blankets and started to pull her armor off. Slowly, the others followed. Asher pulled her blanket next to Taz's. He was struggling to unclasp his cuirass, so she brushed his hands aside and did it herself.

He gave her a half smile. "Who would have known we'd end up fighting a dragon in the Southlands?"

Asher smiled. "Just think: You'll have been the first Iliryan knight to fight a dragon and all Erborn will have to talk about is his angry farmers."

"Do you think it will be like in the myths? Teeth like daggers and wings that can block out the sun?" Taz's eyes were uncertain.

Asher snorted. "Of course not! Don't be ridiculous. You'll see. That dragon will be smaller than Cloud."

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DESTINY'S CHOICE

BY KAREN FROST

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