

Prince
of the
Fallen Kingdom
(Arc Legends of Ellunon: Book 2)

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Chapter 1

The swordsman looked so much like Kyen of Avanna that when Adeya saw him she stopped. She peered across the street, catching only glimpses through the passing crowd.

He leaned against the corner of a brick house with his arms crossed over a burnished breastplate. Tall, black-haired, and armed with a longsword, everything about his bearing echoed Kyen. His eyes—the gray eyes of Avanna but as dark as twilight—surveyed the thronged street and found Adeya staring. They narrowed.

“Kyen—” she reached out—“Kyen, look!” Her hand groped empty air. Looking over she found the spot beside her vacant.

Thunder rumbled. The first patter of drops fell from the dark clouds wheeling overhead. The crowd hastened its pace and began to disperse, clearing around another swordsman ambling further down the street. The real Kyen of Avanna—a man also with black hair and gray eyes but gangling in figure—hadn’t noticed the absence of his traveling companion. He walked with his head bowed, his unfocused eyes on the road, oblivious to the rain that was sending others running for shelter.

Adeya huffed when she spotted him. Flinging her golden ponytail over her shoulder, she trotted after him.

“Kyen!”

He didn’t respond when she arrived at his side.

“Kyen? ...Kyen!” She grabbed his arm.

“Hm? What?” He looked at her, blinking.

“Look!” She pointed up the street.

The corner stood empty; the townspeople passed it by, all of them hooded and cloaked against the oncoming storm.

“Look at what?” he asked.

“I saw a swordsman. He looked just like you. Like...” Her voice trailed off for a moment. “Like he was from Avanna.”

“So?”

“What do you mean ‘so’? What if he’s from Avanna!”

“Why do you sound surprised?”

“But—but, aren’t you the last?” she said. “When Avanna fell...”

“Did you think I was the only survivor of Avanna?” He smiled a little.

“But he carried a sword!”

“Everyone of Avanna carries a blade, Adeya.” He rubbed the back of his neck.

She pursed her lips. “I think he might have been staring at you.”

“I would have stared at him, too, if I’d seen him.” His smile faded. “It’s not everyday I meet with my own people.”

Thunder rumbled again, loud enough to tremble the ground. Wind rushed in over the red-tiled roofs, whistled between the chimneys, and whipped at their cloaks. The last stragglers in the street cleared away, hunkering down and leaving the two standing alone in the quickening rain.

“Let’s get under cover.” Kyen pulled up his hood and hitched the pack up his shoulder. As he set off down the street, Adeya hung back to give one last look at the empty corner. The cobblestones began to darken as a gray curtain of rain descended. Throwing up her hood, she hurried away.

While the two made for the shelter of an inn, a shape moved on the roof above where the swordsman had been standing. A bird, blacker than the night, emerged from a shadow cast by a chimney. Its long, swan-like neck curled as it watched Kyen and Adeya run underneath the inn’s porch. Without beak, eyes, or feathery crest, the bird’s neck ended on an empty nub—empty but for a mouth crowded with pointed teeth. A hideous grin split the nub-head from end to end as the rain began pounding down in force. The bird sank back into the shadows as Kyen and Adeya shook water off their cloaks and looked out from beneath the porch.

“You won’t be giving me my swordsmanship lesson tonight, I’m guessing?” Adeya, fingering the longsword strapped to her hip, looked to Kyen. He was staring out at the rain, frowning. When his silence stretched on, she spoke up again, “Kyen?”

His frown vanished as he looked at her. “Sorry. What?”

She leaned in to whisper. “Was *he* talking to you again?”

“It’s—it’s nothing.” He edged away from her, coloring and shifting beneath his cloak.

“What was he saying?”

“Nothing. I’m hungry. Let’s find something to eat.” Turning on his heel, he entered the inn. Adeya huffed a sigh and followed him.

Inside, the square tables—all empty but two at the afternoon’s early hour—crowded the room. A brick hearth stood cold on one wall. Savory smells wafted from an open door at the other. The rain streamed down behind them when they walked in, hiding the world beyond the doorway in a haze. An aproned man with a patchy beard approached.

“Welcome,” he said. “Will you be staying?”

“Two for tonight, if you will. And a meal.” Kyen pushed back his hood.

“It’s three coin.”

Both Adeya and Kyen looked at each other.

“I don’t have any coin,” he said.

“Oh... I forgot my purse back at Isea Palace,” she said. “But, no matter...” She drew herself up, folded her hands on her skirts, and addressed the innkeeper. “I am Adeya, Princess and Sole Heiress to the Throne of Isea. You may send all expenses to my parents, the King and Queen of Isea.”

The innkeeper stared for a moment then threw back his head and laughed. “I’m sure you are, dearie, but I don’t run tabs. Coin before food and bed, that’s my policy. Even for King Velda himself.”

Adeya glared and opened her mouth, but the innkeeper spoke first.

“I’m not above bartering, dearie, if you’ve other valuables. Such a necklace fetches a high price up north.” He eyed the aquamarine pendant at her neck. “Pass me that, and I’ll give you room, board, and then some for your journey onward.”

Her hand leapt to the pendant. “My summoner’s amulet? How dare you! My nana gave me this! I’d never—”

“Could we barter a service for room and board instead?” Kyen cut in.

The innkeeper rubbed a bare patch on his chin until his fingers found a whisker to pluck at. “Well...my cook’s short a scullery maid. Keep up on evening dishes, and you can help yourself to leftovers and kip the night in a bed, if there’s one spare.”

“I—don’t—wash—dishes!” Adeya swelled.

“Pardon us a moment.” Kyen grabbed her elbow and, after a few tugs, pulled her aside.

She made little “Ah!”s of indignation in her throat and cast a black look at the innkeeper. Kyen opened his mouth to speak, but she ran him over with a furious undertone.

“How dare he! How can he be so rude? Doesn’t he know who I am? My parents are going to hear of this.”

Kyen waved her down with both hands until she stood, huffing and glaring at him, but silent.

“Adeya, most innkeepers wouldn’t offer half so much.”

“Why don’t you have—” She stopped and leaned forward to whisper. “Have *him* make us some? Just enough coin for tonight.”

He shook his head.

“Why not? I know arcangels can,” she said. “Creation is one of their three powers. Will you at least ask him?”

Kyen looked up at the ceiling as if for help then, with a sigh, he returned his attention to Adeya. “You should’ve remembered to pack your purse.”

“But—”

“He said it, not me!” Kyen held up his hands. “Besides, he can’t. Well, he can, but he won’t. He can only do so much on his own power. He prefers to save himself for when he’s needed. Fiends could find us at any time, remember?”

“He’d just let us sleep outside? In the rain?”

“It wouldn’t be the first time,” he said. “A little damp doesn’t hurt.”

“Damp and cold! We could get sick!”

“Dishes here for a bed and a meal. Or a stable loft elsewhere—maybe. And if not that, then...” He cast a look out the window at the pouring rain. She followed his gaze and slumped.

“I’m in favor of a bed and a meal,” he said. “But what do you want to do?”

“Oh, very well.” Adeya sighed. “But I don’t know how to wash dishes.”

Chapter 2

Kyen and Adeya stood together in the steamy kitchen. Behind them, the cook and her two maids shouted and clattered around pots bubbling over a long hearth. Before them, a table supported stacks of batter-crusting bowls, greasy kettles, and food-smearing ladles that nearly buried a couple empty tubs. One of the maids added a tottering pile of plates to the collection.

“I’ve never washed a dish in my life,” said Adeya.

“I usually lick my plates clean.”

“You what?”

“What?” He shrank under her look. “Water’s for drinking in the wilds, not washing.”

“Well, they’d better give us water here. I’m not licking all these. Ah!” A smile melted away Adeya’s disgust as the cook approached carrying a steaming kettle. She shuffled them both aside to dump hot water into the tubs.

“You’d better hurry up. We need them dishes!” She pointed at a couple pails beneath the table before hurrying back to the hearth.

The two exchanged glances. Kyen picked up one of the pails; fine gray powder filled it to the brim. “What’s this, do you think?”

“It looks like ash. What’s this one? Sand?” She peered into the second pail. “Where’s the soap? The sponges?”

Kyen looked bemused.

“Why are you looking at me like that?”

“You are a princess, through and through.”

“And I will figure out how to wash dishes. Don’t you dare think I can’t!” She snatched the pail of ashes from him and stuck her nose in the air.

He smiled and winced away, putting his hands up as if in surrender, and edged around her to the tub. They plunged in: he washed, scrubbing with sand and rubbing ash for the grease. She dried and stacked plates, cutlery, and kettles on the counter beside them. The maids visited to leave dirty plates and to carry away what they’d cleaned.

Adeya, wiping perspiration from her forehead, grimaced at the sweat on the back of her hand. “I sure hope we get a bath out of this.”

Kyen dabbled his hands in the water as he waited for the next dirty stack to arrive.

Lightning flashed through the windows followed by a loud bang of thunder that shook the walls.

Adeya jumped, clutching the amulet at her neck. As the rumble faded, she stared wide-eyed out the window. “Goodness! How is it so loud? We don’t have lightning like this in Isea.” She looked at him; he was trying to grab a bubble in the water between two fingers and failing.

“It—it can’t hurt people, can it?” she asked.

“Only if it strikes you, but you’d be more likely run over by a wagon. Well, unless...” His face fell.

“Unless what?”

“He could...” Kyen shrugged a little, glanced at the cook and maids. “You know.”

Adeya dropped her voice to a whisper. “Arcangels can use lightning?”

He nodded.

She watched a flicker through the window with wide eyes. Thunder rumbled in its wake. “Did he...?”

“No.” Kyen smiled a little. A maid dropped off a pile of pots, and he sunk the first into the dishwater with a sigh.

Adeya watched him scrub, looking thoughtful. Her stare grew intense, and she edged up next Kyen. “So, when are you going to tell me?”

“Tell you what?” He leaned away from her, frowning as color rose to his cheeks.

“Nana said you’d tell me. About what she wrote in her letter, remember?” She sidled closer to him, dropping her voice to a whisper as she watched the maids hang up their aprons and leave. “All the arcangels vanished on the Feast of Restoration. Nobody has seen or heard of an arcangel in years. Until him. With you.”

“Your grandmother wrote about me?”

“Look, see.” She dried off her hands, pulled a paper from her pocket, unfolded it and held it out to him. Kyen, up to his elbows in greasy dishwater, leaned in to read. She waited while his eyes scanned through the lines. His eyebrows drew together.

“‘Thin?’ ‘Battered?’ ‘Half-crazed?’” he repeated. “She says I’m half-crazed! Are you sure this is me?”

“Look, there’s your name. Right there.” She prodded the bottom of the page. “Kyen of Avanna. Don’t tell me you don’t remember meeting my nana?”

“I don’t know. Maybe? It was years ago.”

“My nana said you know what happened to the other arcangels. When are you going to tell me? She said you would!” Adeya stuffed the letter away and put her hands on her hips.

“Not so loud!” he whispered. “You’re not even supposed to know about him. After his big display with the Kingmaster, every fiend from here to Nalayni is going to be on my tail—like marauders after a peasant on a midnight road. We need to get somewhere safe, lose ourselves for a while.”

“Where do you plan to do that?”

“I don’t know. Maybe Eope. Prince Hepilaeus is good at hiding things.”

“Well, you might be intent on hiding, but I’m here to find the other arcangels. They’re hunting you, not me, after all,” she said. “Tell me what happened!”

“Sh!”

They both fell silent as the cook deposited the last dirty pots. Kyen eyed her until she walked away.

“This isn’t the best place to talk about this,” he said, dunking a kettle into the rinse water.

“All you ever do is put me off, Kyen. Every summoner who left to search for the arcangels has disappeared, and I want to know why.” Adeya grabbed the kettle from him and wiped it with such force, her towel squeaked against the metal. “My nana said in her letter that you know—that ‘he has the answers!’”

“It’s really... I don’t know what words to even use...” He sighed as he laid hold of the next encrusted pot. “He thinks it best to show you.”

“He—*He* wants to show me?” she repeated. “How?”

“‘Words are too slow. I’ve not the patience for them,’ he says.” Kyen smiled but then turned his serious, stormy gray eyes on Adeya. “He will, if it’s alright with you?”

“Really? You mean it this time?” She handed him the towel. “What do I need to do?”

“Nothing.” He wiped his hands and held up his palm. “But, uh, you’re sure?”

Adeya grabbed his hand and stared him in the face. “I’m ready!”

“No, no, not that.” Kyen tugged his hand free. He wiped it on his tunic, looking uncomfortable, then after a moment of seeming to steel himself, he raised his palm to her forehead. “Here.”

Adeya clasped the amulet at her neck, waiting.

He cast one cautious glance at the cook, the last one in the kitchen besides them; she stood at the far end, untying her apron. He pressed his palm against Adeya’s forehead.

Her eyes widened. With a gasp, she clasped both hands over her mouth.

Chapter 3

A cosmos of light and darkness flowed through Kade.

Six fluxes of aura—like rivers bright, deep, and tingling with energy—splayed out in different directions and divided his world. They flowed from the Nadir, a blazing orb at the heart of Ellunon; it emanated a relentless stream of power that filled the universe, coursing out as the fluxes, flowing to the edges of existence, and dissipating. Each flux spread a fan of smaller tributaries, many feeding into little orbs or fading into a whirl of eddies tinged with pinks, yellows, or periwinkle blues. From Kade's vantage point, it seemed a vast net, studded with stars, breathing with color, light, and potential.

He hung afar and above the Sixth Flux, clear of the strong currents and most of the eddies. A pinkish one washed over him. It made him itch to plunge into it, to do something, anything. As the eddy drifted away, the itch faded. It left behind a thinness, and Kade shuddered in it.

In the distance across the Fifth Flux (mortals considered it Varkest), a gloom marred the cosmos. It swirled slowly, a dark maelstrom amidst the stars and rivers. The flux nearest to it, the Fourth, bent off its course to drift into the maelstrom's eye where it was sucked down. Its aura vanished from Kade's awareness as the maelstrom absorbed it, draining the light, pulling in the eddies.

Those nearest Kade shuddered again.

A little ping of light flared below, and he grabbed the distraction gladly. It carried the call of a summoner. As he caught it up, the mortal's thoughts burst into him: blood, hot water, a dim bedroom; a mother with a heavy belly screaming in bed; a midwife mopping her brow; the tight eyes of a scar-faced man and the little boy hiding behind his knees. The scenes tugged at him, but he resisted.

He'd help soon.

Stretching out his senses, he searched. Surely, they must be coming? He felt the pull of the gloom at the edge of his consciousness, but he tugged his attention away and focused on mortals instead.

Creatures so feeble, so... separated. Kade wondered at the Great Keeper—what could he have been thinking when designing them? They could not see for any great distance at all and felt even less. Small wonder Kade and his brethren had been sent to look after them. Mortals needed the help. Especially against such an enemy.

The pull of the distant gloom crept into his mind again, ever rotating, ever drinking. Even from so far, he could sense its subtle draw in the eddies around him.

The summoner's call flared below again. Kade snatched it. He let the thoughts slide through him:

the mother laying pale and weak on the pillow; the midwife looking to him helplessly. The desperation wrapped in the summoner's call tugged at him harder.

A ripple spread out through the energies around him. Childbirth—speaking of the strange and incomprehensible! Why didn't the Great Keeper create enough mortals from the beginning? Why do they need to procreate? Why did they die so young? So easily? Not for the first time, Kade settled in himself: how glad to be an Arkian and not a mortal!

Kade let the summoner's call fade into the eddies.

What was keeping them?

A handful of sparks swirled up from the Nadir as if in response to his thoughts. As he saw them, he felt the jolt: "We come!"

The sparks cut through the eddies and plunged through the rivers before soaring up to join him. Maer the Gentle; Lode the Steady; Liel the Eager; Miel the Mighty; Fael the Quiet: their greetings all buzzed through him as they neared.

"Kade the Questioner."

"Always thinking."

"What's he thinking of now?"

"You've called us, and we've answered."

"Share with us your thoughts."

If his summoner were near, he'd be demanding Kade to painstakingly parse out who said what. Why did it matter so much? Such boundaries were a hindrance. All Arkians heard, all often spoke, together as one. Individual thoughts blended into a collage of images and ideas. Kade, not for the first time, wondered if his summoner thought him incomprehensible, just like he found mortals incomprehensible.

"You did not call us here to contemplate mortals, Kade."

"Speak to us."

"You said it was a matter of great concern."

"We cannot spare long from our duties."

"You are troubled."

He answered them, the thoughts of the other Arkians whirling in between his own:

"Sair the Young no longer answers. I am concerned for him—"

"He is too young for such a charge."

"It was not wise to put him over the Fourth Flux."

"—he has been too long near the Consuming Dark, I fear. I sought him out. He will not let me draw close nor find him out—"

"The Consuming Dark's hold is too strong."

"—I am concerned he is taken—"

"We should bring this before the Great Council."

This last thought echoed from several of his brethren at once, even as he himself thought it. Everyone's mind quieted to a soft hum; none of the thoughts or ideas Kade heeded as they digested this information together. Fael the Quiet, who'd not yet struck out strongly, filled the space.

"I saw Sair the Young. He was coming as I joined the others at the Nadir. Perhaps he is already

repenting as we are here now speaking of him?”

Kade doubted this. Sair had out-stripped him when he'd given him pursuit; but he couldn't hide the flickers of his thoughts. Dark weavings. Unsteady conversations with shadows. A breaking. And strongest of all—pulsing through Sair—the Consuming Darkness' hatred for the Arkians. Hatred and hungry shadows closing their grip.

A wave of ripples cascaded through the others as they caught the flow of his thinking. Liel the Eager and Miel the Mighty shot away as one, speeding back for the Nadir, winged by their united thoughts of haste and care. They carved through the cosmos, eddies curling in their wake.

Below, another summoner's flare materialized: the birthing mother dying; please; soon. The visage rattled him, but he shook it off.

Before his aura settled, the thud of a distant impact trembled through them all and drew their attention to the Nadir. A huge pulse exploded out of the glowing orb. It roiled out as a giant shock wave, spreading like a ripple in the universe, the fluxes bucking and twisting, the eddies disappearing into seething whorls. Shock drew Kade tight together with Maer, Lode, and Fael. They watched Miel the Eager and Liel the Mighty near the shock wave. Neither arcangel balked, but fixing their course for the Nadir, the two dove into the shock wave head-on. They vanished for a moment into the brightness of its power. When they reappeared out the other side, both plunged into a spiral and dissolved from Kade's awareness.

His aura shuddered with Maer and Lode, but Fael the Quiet darted away. The sharp tingle of her concern radiated against Maer's shiver of warning in her wake.

The tidal wave of power bore down on them, spreading and roaring as it neared, until it filled all their awareness with blazing energy. Kade hunkered together with the other two. They braced each other as the wave struck.

A vicious mind burst through Kade's consciousness. With a jolt, his body of aura responded and began working without his bidding. He struggled against it, but he couldn't regain control. He felt the invading willpower surge through Maer and Lode beside him, locking them together, forcing them down. The three of them plummeted.

Kade wrestled against his rebelling aura, bending all of his willpower toward it, but his fall accelerated. The harder he tried, the more of his body burned away. The efforts of Maer and Lode beside him fizzled against the strength of the mind. He felt it working his aura, weaving through unfamiliar patterns, burning through him hot and fast.

Alarm flashed first from Maer, then inside himself.

Whoever's mind had a hold of them could drain them to death.

Lode gathered Maer and Kade to himself.

The world around them dimmed as they hurtled down. The cosmos began fading into shadows that were rising up on every side. The darkness was swallowing them.

Lode shared a thought with Maer; they both exploded into action before Kade could cry back.

They angled what little aura they could still grip towards Kade. Their desperate purpose swept him along—“Guide it, don't fight it!”

Kade sensed them weakening. The darkness smothered him, yawning up overhead. His senses grew numb. He was falling away from Maer and Lode.

Maer winked out.

The fading light swirled far overhead, the darkness closing over it faster and faster.

With a flash, Lode vanished. Kade caught his dying intent and threw every last ounce of himself behind it. Block it! Block the darkness! Block it! Block! He launched the last of his aura at the shrinking circle of light.

The darkness slammed in complete around him.

Kade reeled.

Emptiness and stillness filled everything.

Trembling, he re-gathered what he could find of himself. His body was his own again, the little left of it.

Kade reached out and met—

Nothing.

He grasped for Maer, for Lode. His reach floundered through the void. Their minds had vanished.

Grief turned him cold inside. He could feel nothing but himself, his own form and aura shivering. Everything else was gone. Is this what it's like for mortals?

Oh, how he hated it.

He'd never felt such cold.

He'd failed. Had the Consuming Shadow won? Was Ellunon destroyed by the surge from the Nadir?

He'd never known an Arkian to die from cold. But if it could kill him, he felt he might be dying of it now.

The shivers refused to stop.

Then, the tiniest speck of warmth touched him, made him itch. Whirling around, he launched himself towards it. He searched where the last of the light had disappeared and found—the shadow hadn't swallowed it all.

The tiniest pinprick punctured his dark surroundings. A little eddy of light—a bare trickle—flowed through the hole. Kade drank it in. He tried to press himself through, but he stuck fast.

Shimmying up close though he could feel—abnormal sensations. As if echoing from a great distance, they carried faint and difficult to make out. Only the strongest he caught when he focused hard.

Another mind. A young one—so young.

He called out and reached to touch it, but it did not answer him. The mind's thoughts drifted over him from a distance.

Death.

Stinging eyes.

A keening wail, frail, gasping.

A heavy hand in his hair.

Relentless sobs raw in his throat.

Mama's gone.

Kade shuddered away. It couldn't be. He knew something of mortals secondhand through his summoner. He knew of things like eyes, wails, hands, tears, and hair. But he'd never—he'd never—*felt them.*

A mortal's mind. He'd become trapped inside a mortal's mind.

Kade tried to quell a rise of alarm before he lost his grip on himself. Body-sharing, much less mind-linking, was absolutely forbidden. Trapped though, isolated, he couldn't do anything about it. Not yet. Whatever had trapped him hadn't completed its work.

He, Maer, and Lode had wedged the collapsing darkness. Through that wedge came the mere trickle of aura, but enough to sustain, enough to strengthen, given time. He may yet gain the strength to open the wedge further. Maybe escape. Though how long that could take, Kade trembled to guess.

Pressing himself to the hole, Kade reached out again. He stretched towards the mortal's mind. The grief that poured over made him flutter, but he steeled himself. He searched. If he could discover the name of this mortal, it may come in helpful; especially if he could break out enough to share his thoughts.

Sifting and riding the waves of grief, Kade tried to find it. What was the mortal called? He could sense something (Is this what mortals call sound?) coming to him over and over again. Speaking? Hearing? Is this it? This must be it. He could feel the mortal's mind—just a boy!—associating itself with this sound. It must be the mortal's name. Kade tried to make it out.

Kyen.

They called him Kyen.

Chapter 4

Kyen lifted his palm from Adeya's hair.

The cook hung her apron on a peg. The door creaked open and clacked shut behind her as she left the kitchen.

"Oh..." Adeya stared with unfocused eyes, looking pale. She grabbed out at Kyen as her knees unhinged. He caught her by the elbows and helped her to a chair.

"I'm sorry," he said. "Maybe I should have warned you. It's a little jarring."

Adeya sat down, gripping his arm with a shaking hand. "I've never... That was incredible!" She looked up at him. "Kade was trapped... in you?"

He nodded.

"Did you know?"

"Not until years later," he said. "Kade started breaking out. I thought I was going crazy at first."

"Then the others? Maer, Lode, and Fael?"

His face fell. "Kade says it's hard to know. Whatever befell the arcangels never finished its work on Kade because of Maer and Lode. He has no hope that either of them survived. We've looked for Fael and the others."

"Is he free now? Kade?" she asked. "Or is he..."

"He broke out completely just before the fall of Avanna."

"Yet he's still with you? After all this time?"

"Mortal bodies somehow mask him, particularly against fiends. He asked for my help. To hide him while we searched for the other arcangels. I agreed."

"And that's all you know?"

He nodded.

"Finding the other arcangels is going to be harder than I expected." She rubbed her forehead where Kyen's palm had lain.

Both of them fell silent until a growl from Kyen's stomach interrupted.

"Do you think we can eat yet?" He looked at the last couple of dirty pots.

"We'd better finish, I suppose." She rose with a sigh.

Lightning flashed through the window, and thunder cracked. Adeya jumped in fright onto Kyen's arm, staring wide-eyed out the window.

“It can’t hurt you in here.” He laughed a little and, wiggling out of her grip, draped the damp towel on her head. “Come on. We’re almost done, and I’m starving!”

* * *

At one of the common room tables, Kyen perched on the edge of his seat while Adeya examined her pruney fingers. Patrons lingered over mugs of ale, their conversation a low mumble in the stuffy atmosphere. The innkeeper, watched eagerly by Kyen, carried a platter to their table. On it sat two heels of bread and a tureen of cold peas porridge lumpy with burnt scrapings from the pan. Kyen pulled the platter over as the innkeeper walked away.

“I’m so hungry.” He sliced one of the heels in two and spooned on porridge.

Adeya laid her hands in her lap with a sigh. “When I’m home, I will summon the scullery maids to my chamber every night to thank them personally. I never knew eating created such a mess!”

Kyen balanced his second slice of bread atop the first. He held up the peas porridge sandwich to admire it. She shook her head at him and pulled the platter over. As she spooned porridge into a bowl, the door to the outside opened, catching her eye. Her spoon halted mid-scoop.

The swordsman who looked like Kyen had entered the common room. Dripping and leaving wet boot prints behind, he approached the innkeeper and spoke, his low tones indistinguishable through the murmur of the room’s conversation.

“Kyen. It’s him.”

“Him who?” Kyen, about to take a bite of his sandwich, followed her gaze. When he saw the other swordsman, his eyes grew wide. The color drained from his face, and he wilted in his seat. “Oh no.”

“What is it?” She whispered, watching the innkeeper lead the swordsman to table a span away from them. “That’s the man I told you about in the street—” She looked over; Kyen’s chair was empty, his sandwich abandoned. “Kyen? Where—what are you—?”

“Sh!” He said from where he crouched beneath the table.

“What are you doing?”

“Don’t give me away!”

Adeya straightened. She pretended to stir the tureen.

“I’m going to retire. Excuse me.” His whisper floated up. He crawled away, slinking from under one empty table to another. Darting out, he hid behind a couple patrons headed towards the stairs, walking with them until they stopped to give him irritated looks. Then, he dashed the last stretch to vanish up the steps.

Adeya, glancing to see him gone, shook her head at the tureen. She swirled the porridge around and fixed her attention on her bowl, watching the swordsman from the corner of her eye.

He took off his sopping cloak, hung it on an empty chair, and settled down to his table. When a servant girl placed a tankard in front of him, he thanked her without warmth. He took a deep drink. Resting a hand on the pommel of his sword, he looked around the common room but offered no conversation to any of the nearby patrons.

Letting him be, Adeya finished her meal by herself and without incident. She tied up Kyen’s untouched sandwich in a napkin for him. As she rose, she stole one last glance at the swordsman. She

tensed.

His dark gaze watched her, a gaze callous, calculating. She locked eyes with him for a long moment. Shaking herself, she whirled away and hurried towards the stairs. She collided with the innkeeper at the bottom in her haste.

“Oh! I’m so sorry!”

“Where be you off to?”

“Will you show me where I can sleep?”

“Aye that, follow me.” He led her up upstairs.

The swordsman’s eyes followed her out of the room. He set down his tankard and rose to leave.

Chapter 5

“Here you are.” The innkeeper opened the door, then moved back to let Adeya enter. She took one step in and stopped.

Six enormous beds flanked the walls of the room. A fire crackled in its hearth on the far wall, casting deep shadows in flickering orange. A half dozen men, all in various states of undress, some even down to their smallclothes, stood about the room. Several already snored underneath sheets, two or three to a bed. The two nearest, both unshaven and dark, eyed her.

“You can’t be—” Adeya turned, but the door clicked shut in her face. She swallowed and looked back at the room while her hand crept up to her amulet.

The two men nodded to her.

She pointedly ignored them as her eyes searched the room. In a dim corner, next to the only empty bed, Kyen sat on the floor underneath one of the windows. She hurried over to him.

“Kyen!”

He lifted his face to her.

“Where’s our room?”

“Room?”

“I thought the innkeeper said we’d get a room for washing the dishes!”

He looked confused.

“I always get my own room when I travel. My own bed.”

Kyen’s confusion grew into wonder.

“You’ve not actually slept like this, have you?” Adeya lowered her voice. “Slept in the same bed as—as strangers! They don’t even look like they’ve washed.”

“You’ve never been to the north, have you?” He smiled a little.

With a huff, she plopped down on the bed and held out the napkin-tied sandwich. “Here.”

His face lit up. “Thank you!” He unfolded it and stuffed it into his face.

While he ate, Adeya took off her longsword, her healer’s pouch, and her cloak to pile them on the bed. She began unlatching her linen armor vest, but her fingers slowed to a stop halfway. Her eyes lingered on Kyen, still in his own vest, cloak, and sword. She stroked the aquamarine amulet at her neck and watched him finish his sandwich in silence. The low voices in the room quieted as more of the travelers took to sleep.

As Kyen neared the crust, she said, “We’re not staying, are we?”

He paused mid-bite.

“That swordsman. Who is he?” she asked

“He didn’t see me, did he?”

“I don’t know. But he saw me. He saw me in the street, too. He’s the one I asked you about.”

Kyen lowered his sandwich, staring off into space.

“So who is he?” she repeated.

“Emnyen, son of Madiryen, of the House of Dearthart,” he replied. When his silence stretched long, Adeya frowned.

“And?” she said. “Why did you run when you saw him?”

“He nearly killed me once. If he sees me, he’ll probably try to kill me again.”

“But he’s from Avanna.”

“Exactly.” He stuffed the last bite in his mouth.

“I don’t understand.”

Kyen rubbed the back of his neck while he chewed and swallowed, then said, “Eh, how do I explain? You’re not of Avanna. It’s—It’s like this.” He edged forward. “In Isea, if two people have a disagreement, they sit down and talk, right?”

“Or have my father, the king, judge the matter.”

“In Avanna, the two would talk with their swords instead.” He fell grim. “The one still alive is the one who’s right.”

“Whatever did you and Emnyen fight about?”

“I did about the worst thing anyone could do to a swordsman of Avanna,” said Kyen. “Short of crippling him.”

Adeya’s eyes grew wide.

“I refused to kill him after I defeated him.”

“How is that bad?” she cried. “Did he want to die?”

“I shamed him in front of all our people,” he said. “And that with the worst of shames, returning alive from a lost battle.”

Adeya stroked her necklace in thought.

“Killing me now would restore both his victory and his honor,” he said.

“Even though Avanna is gone?”

“I’m of Avanna, and I don’t really understand it, either.” Kyen laughed and winced at the same time. He dusted crumbs from his pants, stood, and shouldered their pack.

“I’d rather not risk staying here because he might see me. It’d be an ugly fight.” Kyen opened the window. “If I refuse to kill him again, the shame would probably drive him to kill himself.”

“But the rain.”

“Look, it’s just about stopped.” He put his hand outside; his palm caught a drip or two.

“After all those dishes? And it’s still damp. And we’re two floors up. Are you really going to climb down?”

He put a foot on the window sill. “I’d trade a damp night of sleep for a man’s life any day.”

“Well, I’m taking the stairs, at least.” Adeya tossed her hair over her shoulder. “I didn’t want to

sleep in a room full of grubby strangers anyway. I'll meet you on the ground." She latched her vest back up, collected her sword, cloak and pouch.

Kyen clambered out the window, clinging to the frame. A two-story drop into a narrow alley waited below him. The rough wall—stone slabs and mortar—offered few grips or handholds, but he still lowered himself down, moving with care from one handhold to the next. Drips from the eaves splatted on his head and arms as he descended. Silent lightning flickered through clouds hanging heavy overhead. He leapt the last stretch and landed hard on all fours in the alley. A few empty stable stalls blocked the end, so Kyen, lifting his hood against the drops, hurried towards the street.

As he did, Ennyen stepped around the corner.

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