

The Kingmaster

Arc Legends of Ellunon: Book 1

C. A. Doehrmann

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Chapter 1

Kyen of Avanna stood in the shadow of his own statue.

It smiled down at him, posing with an arm on his sword, with his cloak flared in the wind, with a confident lift to his chin. In the shade it cast, the living warrior drooped.

A arch of blazing light, curving from one rooftop-studded horizon to the other, split the washed-out sky overhead, casting the shadow over Kyen, bleaching the cobblestones, and glaring off the pale buildings that edged the city square. A man in breeches led three horses behind the statue, the clops of their hooves ringing through the empty space. He passed a woman with a grain basket balanced on her head going the opposite direction. A third figure appeared from a side street, another swordsman, carrying two paper-wrapped packets in hand. He ambled up to Kyen's side.

"Kyen!" When he saw the look on the other's face, his grin faded. "Kyen?"

The clapping of hooves receded.

"Kyen?"

With a growing scowl, the swordsman waved a hand in front of Kyen's face. He drew in a great breath. "I said, KYEN!"

A woman with the grain basket cast them a wary glance and hurried away.

Kyen blinked. His stormy gray eyes drifted to the other swordsman. "Oh. Hello, Finn."

"Don't you 'hello' me. Are you going deaf or what?"

Kyen's eyes, finding the two packets in Finn's hands, lit up. "Sandwiches? I'm starving!"

Finn passed him a packet and sat on the statue's pedestal with a huff. Kyen joined him. Tall, skinny, and black-haired, he cut a sharp contrast next to Finn, a younger, shorter, brawnier redhead.

Ripping the paper off his sandwich, Kyen stuffed it into his face.

"I called your name like ten times," said Finn.

"Yoo ih'?" he replied with his mouth full.

"Yeah, I did." He jerked his sandwich's paper off. "Right in your ear."

Kyen swallowed to say—"I'm sorry"—before chomping another bite.

"I think it's getting worse."

"Wha's geh'ing worse?"

Finn fixed him with a serious frown.

He stared back, oblivious. “What?”

With a shake of his head, Finn frowned on his sandwich.

“You don’t want to go back, do you? Is that it?” Kyen poked the last third of his sandwich into his mouth as one bite.

“No.”

He chewed while he waited for Finn to say more. When he didn’t, Kyen swallowed and nudged him. “Then what? You’ve been out of sorts all morning.”

“It’s just—trade counsels, treaties, grain accounts, nobles, etiquette, dances—argh!” He buried his hands in his red hair. “How am I going to stand it, Kyen?”

“You’re smart. You’ll do great.”

“I’d rather be doing this—” He waved his sandwich at the city square; a piece of tomato flopped out and splatted on the paving stones. “Eating sandwiches. Wandering the wilds. Hunting bandits. Living among my people. I’m not... I’m not going to be able to do that anymore once I’m king. It’s the end, Kyen.”

Kyen stooped, picked up the tomato, wiped off the street grit on his pants—most of it—and popped it in his mouth. He chewed thoughtfully.

“You’ll get to be with your father, though, and your sisters.”

Finn snorted. “All ten of them! I know I’m just being stupid, but...” He gazed sullenly at a cart entering the square; it tottered under its load of hay. “My life is over.”

“Can I?” asked Kyen, staring at the other’s sandwich.

“I’m not hungry.” He passed it over.

Kyen stuffed the entire half in his mouth and chewed with a look of bliss on his face while Finn glowered across the city square.

A castle wall of beige sandstone dominated the far side. Two life-sized griffins, carved in marble, flanked the gatehouse: a square-ish tower with battlements and turrets. Two guards in red livery stood at attention beside the drawbridge. Above them rose the castle keep, an imposing block of a fortress standing several stories high.

Hopping from the pedestal, Finn turned his back on the castle and started across the square. Kyen, still picking crumbs from his tunic, hurried after him.

“Eh, Finn? We need to go that way.” He pointed over his shoulder.

“I know, but I want one last night as a free man.”

“That doesn’t sound like a good idea...” Kyen replied. “I promised your father, the king, I’d have you back by sundown. Today!”

“Relax. A day late won’t make any difference. I refuse to end my career as a wanderer without one last hurrah!” Finn brandished a fist at him.

Kyen looked dubious. “Does this mean we’re staying at an inn?”

He nodded.

“Stale bread. Bad ale. Hard beds. Fleas and rats. That’s going to be some hurrah,” said Kyen.

“Not just an inn. Thee inn.”

Finn stopped. At the far end of the square, a pale building with oak shutters sprawled out in both directions. Wheatberry Inn: read the golden lettering painted beneath a wheat stalk heavy with

grain. Beside it, an arch opened into the stables where carriages lined up—carriages coming, going, hitching, loading.

“Isn’t this where the grainbarons and nobility stay when they visit your father?” asked Kyen.

Finn grinned and rubbed his hands together.

From the nearest carriage, a footman helped a man of large, velvet-wrapped girth to the ground. Two young ladies alighted after him; their amber tresses hung in curls, their soft slippers sparkled, the deep poof of their skirts swished. Their whispers and giggles carried over the neighs, clops, and wheel creaks to the two swordsmen.

Kyen froze at the sight of the ladies.

“Time to make my impression,” said Finn.

“No,” he said. “We are not staying here. No.” He turned to leave.

“Kyen.” Finn caught his arm.

“Do you know what those are? They’re princesses!” Kyen said in a fierce whisper.

“That’s the whole point!” Finn whispered back. “My coronation is set for the end of next harvest. Do you know what happens after that? I have to marry. If I’m not ready to choose, I’m gonna get arranged to some princess I’ve never met. She could be a fiend underneath!”

“Your father—” Kyen wagged a finger at him— “charged me to keep an eye on you. I don’t approve of this.”

“I’m just scoping out my options. Nothing more.” He smiled, shrugged, and slipped away towards the inn.

“Finn!” Kyen hurried after him. “Finn! Just promise me—if they find out who I am, we’re in big trouble.”

“Relax.” He tugged at his tunic and smoothed his hair. “They won’t even notice you.”

He ducked through the doorway before Kyen could get another word in.

With a groan, Kyen slunk in after him.

Subtle conversation, sweet perfume, and savory kitchen scents enclosed the two swordsmen the moment they stepped into the common room. A long table accommodated a montage of patrons: navy, burgundy, cream, and brown silks; swathes of delicate lace; curls of ribbons in cascading ringlets; hats with towering crowns or enormous feathers.

Kyen looked pale.

Finn swaggered up to the innkeeper’s counter. Leaning against it, he rested a hand on the pommel of his sword and surveyed the room. A nearby brunette with rows of bows down her dress looked up at them.

He winked at her.

She stiffened and looked away.

Kyen buried his face in his hand.

“One room, please,” Finn said to the innkeeper, setting down a stack of gold coins.

The innkeeper stared. “The charge for a single night is only five coin.”

“Oh. Forgive me.” He cleared his throat. “I shouldn’t forget the tip.” He set another stack of coins—this one twice as big—next to the first. “Have our rooms ready by sunset. And a meal. Good man!” Patting the innkeeper on the shoulder, Finn sauntered back out the door.

“Sorry.” Kyen winced at the innkeeper then darted out after him.

The innkeeper stared as his door swung closed behind the two swordsmen.

Outside, Finn ambled to the stable archway. He beamed and nodded as a young noblewoman and her handmaiden walked past. The two gave him uncertain looks before hurrying away.

Kyen turned his face to the wall as they passed. Once they’d gone, he came up next to Finn.

“Do you realize how ridiculous you’re being?” he asked in an undertone.

“I’m not a war hero like you. I have to compensate with a little extra charisma.” Finn winked at another young lady staring at them through the window of her carriage. Kyen blocked the view of his face with his hand.

“You want my reputation? Take it. Please,” he said. “We’re supposed to be back at your father’s!”

A crash of glass and a muffled scream burst out overhead. Both swordsmen covered their faces as broken shards rained down.

Finn frowned as the last splinter shattered at their feet. “What the—?”

He and Kyen looked up.

The rear half of a lion scrambled through a broken window on the second floor. Its plumed tail snaked in after it.

Kyen and Finn looked at each other.

“That wasn’t just a griffin,” said Finn.

Chapter 2

More screams pierced the air overhead.

The two swordsmen drew their blades and dashed together into the inn. Every head turned as they burst into the common room, but only for a moment. A rumble, a thud, and a crash from overhead drew alarmed glances towards the ceiling. Kyen dashed for the stairs, but Finn paused at their foot.

“Everyone out! Out!” he yelled.

Noblemen and women abandoned their chairs, hurried towards the door by another high-pitched scream that joined the racket from above.

The two swordsmen sprinted for the second floor. As they reached the landing, a door in the corridor banged open. A handmaid ran past them and down the stairs, shrieking and sobbing.

Kyen and Finn pressed themselves against the wall and took turns stealing a glance through the doorway.

The griffin inside sniffed at the four-poster bed. Its coppery wings crowded the bedroom, brushing against a dresser, knocking candlesticks from the mantle, and bumping against an armchair.

Finn looked down at his blade. “What I wouldn’t give for a good spear right now. Will swords even work on that thing?”

“A thrust will cause a mortal wound,” whispered Kyen. “But if we don’t hit its heart or head, we’ll be meat ribbons before it drops.”

“What if we barricade it in? Hope it flies away?”

“Outside?”

Finn swore and smacked his forehead. “And I just told everyone to get out of the inn! They’re all going to be gathered around like gaping idiots on the street! What are we going to do?”

“You’re the strategist,” said Kyen. “Think!”

A scream issued from the bedroom.

“Someone’s still in there!” Finn dashed past him.

“Finn!”

A young noblewoman was cowering in the corner, half-hidden beside the dresser. Running into the room, Finn leapt the four-poster bed and planted himself between them. The griffin, baring its teeth,

fastened its attention on him and stalked forward. Finn clutched his sword with both hands, edging away. The young woman behind him whimpered and covered her face with her hands.

The griffin growled, tail thwacking the wall as it swished back and forth. Its hindquarters bunched up, and its pupils narrowed on Finn.

With a yell, Kyen charged through the door. He plunged his sword in behind the griffin's shoulder. The blade barely penetrated its body, wedged in the ribcage.

The griffin roared and spun on him, its head and forepaws smashing through the end of the bed. Kyen stumbled backwards; his sword, still stuck in the griffin, ripped out of his hands. He dove out of the way of as the griffin snapped at him. Hitting the ground, he scrambled on his belly to the wall, snatched up a broken bedpost and turned to meet the griffin lunging at him. He braced the bedpost against the wall, and the blunt end caught the griffin in the chest, stopping it short. A swipe of its claws slashed inches from Kyen's face.

"Get her out!" He yelled, scrunching back as another swipe of claws breezed past.

Finn seized the woman's hand. Yanking her to her feet, he ran her behind the roaring, slashing griffin and shoved her out into the corridor. Her knees buckled as she hit the wall opposite the doorway, and she cringed to the ground.

"Stand up! Stand up!" Finn tried to help her up, but she hung like a dead weight, hyperventilating, so he hauled her upright, pressed her up beside the doorway, and propped her there. "You have to run!" He yelled at her, but she gasped and sobbed and hid her face in her hands.

Another roar shook the walls.

With a growl of frustration, Finn started back into the bedroom, but a loud crack like a lightning flashed out. He stumbled backwards, shielding his eyes as a thud shuddered through the walls.

Blinking and squinting, he told the woman, "Don't move!" and re-entered the room.

Kyen stood, pale and shaky, with the bedpost still clutched in his hand.

The griffin lay against the opposite wall, wings crumpled from an impact. Kyen's blade had been jammed through its chest up to the hilt. A single great breath shuddered through its body. Then, it lay still.

"Kyen! Are you alright?" Finn dashed up.

He nodded, swallowed.

Finn sheathed his sword. They both stood, regaining their breath, staring at the dead griffin. He looked over. "Did—was it—"

Kyen nodded.

"Why in all Ellunon would a griffin come in from the plains?" asked Finn. "They hunt horses, not people, and never in cities."

Stepping forward, Kyen gripped his sword. He set a foot against the body and pulled—pulled hard. The blade jerked free.

As Kyen wiped it off on the bedsheets, Finn stepped forward.

A welt the size of a black apple stood out on the griffin's feathered mane. At its center protruded a dart from a blowgun. Finn plucked it out and held it up to the light.

Dark metal composed a thin shaft, short and needle-like, with a plume of feathers as a tail. The tip had broken off.

"Who in their right mind would hunt a griffin with a Nalayni blowgun? How stupid!"

Kyen sheathed his sword and came for a look. Seeing the dart, he frowned, and his brows drew together.

“They must have made it mad.” Finn chuckled. Handing it to Kyen, he walked to the hallway where the woman still whimpered.

“It’s alright. You’re safe now.” He took hold of her hand as she straightened away from the wall. When she saw the dead griffin, she turned the color of the sheets. Her breath began to squeak in and out as shallow gasps.

“Don’t look at it. You’re safe now.” Finn, taking her elbow, tried to pull her away. She wouldn’t move. “Help me with her, Kyen! She looks like she could faint!”

“Coming!” Kyen ripped a piece off the bedsheets, wrapped up the dart, and stuck the bundle in his pocket. He hurried to take the woman’s other elbow as the next moment she fell in a faint, suspended between them.

“I got her. I got her.” Finn scooped her up in his arms. He staggered under her weight and straightened with an effort. Kyen eyed him dubiously starting down the stairs ahead of him as he carried the woman to the common room.

“She is so—heavy!” Finn said through gritted teeth.

Kyen held open the door for them, and Finn brought the woman out on to the street where a crowd had gathered. The velvet-girthed man hobbled out to meet them, sweating and puffing, with the handmaid on his heels.

“Oh no! Aliza!” he cried. “Is she dead?”

“She’s unhurt.” Finn lowered the woman to the ground. “Only fainted.”

The handmaid fell to her knees, gathered the woman in her arms, and, weeping, stroked her brow.

“Oh! Thank you! Thank you, young sir!” The man wrung Finn’s hand up and down.

He flushed and, resting a hand on his hilt, grinned broadly. “You’re welcome! Ah, and don’t forget to thank—Where’d he go?”

The spot at Finn’s side where Kyen had stood was empty. Not a single black hair could be seen among the many redheads of Valeda crowd.

“Argh! Excuse me!” Finn extracted his hand from the man’s and pushed his way through the spectators. From the edge of the crowd, he scanned the empty street.

Kyen stood several stone-throws down the road. His head turned this way and that towards the empty roofs and clear skies.

Finn dashed down the road to join him. “Kyen, what is it?”

He’d stopped, his vacant eyes straying further down the road.

“Kyen? I said, ‘Kyen!’”

“Hm...?” His gaze drifted over. “Oh. Hello, Finn.”

“What are you looking at?” He gazed up at the rooftops.

“What? Are we looking at something?”

“You were looking at something.”

“I was?”

“What did you see?”

“I don’t know.” Kyen squinted up with Finn. “What are we looking at again?”

“Oh, never mind! Come on.” He walked off.

They headed back up the road, skirting around the crowd outside the inn, ignoring the whispers and stares that followed them. Finn walked past them all and re-entered the city square.

“Where are you going? The Wheatberry is that way.” Kyen pointed over his shoulder.

“I don’t want to go back there.”

“Too much charisma?” He grinned. “You probably won yourself a wife with that rescue. That woman will be sweet on you forever.”

“Shut up. I’m not in the mood.”

The two friends crossed the city square to where the castle’s gatehouse waited. The yellowing Arc hung low over the rooftops behind them, and Kyen’s statue threw a long black prong that jabbed towards the gatehouse’s tunnel. As they entered it, the two guards nodded to them. Kyen nodded back, but Finn slunk past without meeting their eyes.

Beyond the tunnel, a drawbridge met them, spanning a moat to a second gatehouse in the castle’s inner wall. With the deepening shadows, the second tunnel seemed a gloomy mouth, the teeth of the portcullis protruding above and the drawbridge extending out like a tongue. Chill vapors rose off the moat, and their boots clunked on the wood as they walked.

Finn stopped in the middle.

Kyen, when he noticed, looked back.

Finn was staring up at the tunnel. Desperation shone bright in his eyes. “Can’t you tell dad the griffin ate me?”

Coming back, Kyen said, “Your father is aging. If you don’t accept the crown, it will pass to one of your sisters. Do you really want that responsibility to fall on them?”

“Well, thanks. That lightens my burden.” He skulked over to glower into the moat. Kyen followed him as Finn mumbled under his breath, “My sisters would do a better job ruling the kingdom than me anyway.”

Kyen stooped. Picking up a pebble from the drawbridge, he offered it to Finn.

He took it and hurled it with a violent snap of his arm.

They watched it sail through the air.

It plunked into the water.

“I just don’t want to screw up!” Finn buried his hands in his hair. “I screwed up today. I sent everyone outside into danger. I engaged the griffin without an effective weapon—or even a plan. Talk about being an idiot! People could have died. You could have died!”

“Nobody did, though.”

“Only because you had my back.”

“Exactly,” said Kyen, putting a hand on Finn’s shoulder. “You won’t be doing this alone. When you’re king, I’ll still have your back. As often as you like. You’ll have your father—may he live many long years—at your side, to train you, counsel you, and guide you. And you have your sisters so you’ll never be short of counsel.”

“And my chief duty as king will be to argue with them all,” said Finn. “My sisters have differing opinions on everything!” He bent to snatch up another pebble.

“Much of it full of wisdom and insight,” replied Kyen.

Finn, arm upraised for another throw, halted. He lowered it instead, turning the pebble over in his fingers. After a moment, he let rock drop back to the drawbridge.

“You’re right.” With a sigh, he turned back towards the castle, walking with his head still hung.

Kyen followed and together, they passed under the arch of the last gatehouse and came out into the bailey—the courtyard between the walls and the castle keep. The setting Arc cast the height of the keep in orange while leaving the rest of the courtyard in a cool, dim twilight. The road at their feet cut across a wide, grassy lawn before meeting the broad steps and the double doors of the castle. One of the double doors stood open.

At the foot of the steps walked a man not much taller than Finn but twice as broad. Age had faded his red hair and wiry beard to a dull, brick red. He wore rich, velvet robes with a griffin—King Veleda’s Crest—embroidered on the corners. Clinging to his fingers, a little girl with flaming red hair walked with him.

“Dad!” Finn’s face broke into a grin when he saw them. He ran to meet them while Kyen hung back, smiling a little.

Another red-haired girl poked her head around the open door.

Her face lit up with a cry of: “Finn’s here!” She bound down the steps to meet him. A stream of young girls poured from the open door behind her. Finn skidded to a stop in the dust when he saw them.

“Finn!”

“It’s Finn!”

“He’s back!”

The girls’ cries rang through the courtyard as they swarmed him. Each had long, flowing locks in various shades of red: from deep auburn to strawberry blond and every hue in between.

“Did you find a princess to marry?”

“Will you play dolls with me?”

“Have you missed us?”

“Did you bring me any presents?”

“You look taller. Did you grow an inch?”

“No, he looks the same to me!”

“It’s brother! He’s back!”

“Finn! Finn! Finn!”

Finn looked from one sister, to the next, to the next, opening his mouth, but not a word escaped before the next question assaulted him. He gave up trying to talk and began doling out hugs.

King Veleda, smiling on them, walked up to Kyen. Finn’s tenth sister kept hold of her dad’s fingers. She stared at Kyen with wide eyes.

“Welcome, Kyen of Avanna,” said the king.

“Thank you, your majesty.” He dipped his head respectfully.

“Can you welcome our guest, Adelaide?” King Veleda smiled down on his youngest daughter. Half-hiding behind the king’s leg, she waved her fingers.

Kyen made a gallant bow. “Thank you, Princess Adelaide.”

The girl hid her face in the king’s hand. The king chuckled at her then looked to the others.

Finn stood, blushing in embarrassment, as his many sisters chattered away around him. They'd begun arguing over whether or not he'd found a princess to wed while the two youngest demanded piggyback rides.

"You've returned my son whole and unscathed by the looks," said King Veleda.

"As you charged me, your majesty," replied Kyen.

"I feel a deep gratitude for your service to him," said the king. "Touring the land, experiencing life beyond the castle, benefiting from your friendship and experience—you've done all Veleda a great service. My boy will become a better king because of it. Ah—"

"Come on! Get off! Enough's enough!" Finn attempted to shoo off his sisters and part a pathway through them. They crowded closer. One jumped on his back.

King Veleda chuckled and smiled on Kyen. "That is, you have my thanks."

"You're welcome, your majesty."

Finn, extracting himself from his sisters and narrowly escaping their catching hands, dashed over. A chorus arose behind him.

"Look, Kyen's come with him!"

"It's Kyen of Avanna!"

"Kyen!"

Kyen paled. "Oh no."

King Veleda chuckled, watching the warrior back away as the gaggle of red-headed maids stalked forward.

Finn, slightly out of breath, stopped next to his father as Kyen bolted. He fled onto the lawn with a stream of little girls on his tail. They spread out, circling around, closing in on him.

Kyen turned back, jogging a few steps backwards, watching the girls surround him. They dove, chased, and lunged, but he ducked, weaved, and dodged each attempt to tag him. Their voices carried across to where Finn and the king stood watching.

"Hold still!"

"That's alright. I'm quite fine as is."

"You're too fast!"

"No, thank you, I don't need a hug."

"It's not fair!"

"You don't receive welcomes very graciously, Kyen!"

Little Adelaide left her father's hand and ran out to join the game.

"It's good to have you home, son," said King Veleda.

"It's good to be back," said Finn, with a genuine grin.

They both turned their attention to Kyen. One of the older girls snuck up and tried to grab him from behind. Without a backwards glance, he jumped aside at the last moment, leaving the girl to clasp empty air.

"How is he?" asked King Veleda.

He sighed. "It's getting worse."

The king nodded.

"I'm afraid for him," said Finn. "Especially if he wanders back into the wilds alone."

“A swordsman of his talents never lacks usefulness. Would he stay on at Castle Veleda if I asked him?” asked the king.

“No...” Finn shook his head.

“Perhaps I’ll offer just the same. We are the closest thing to family left to him now.”

“You can try...”

“Ladies!” King Veleda called.

All the red-headed girls paused the chase to look to their father.

“Come along!”

They trotted back, regrouping around Finn and king.

Twilight was deepening into night in the bailey. Still out on the lawn, Kyen slumped over to prop himself on his knees. He grinned at them as he tried to get his wind back.

The king herded his flock of maids towards the doors of the keep while the girls chattered incessantly.

“Are you and Kyen here to stay, Finn?” asked Clarissa, the next oldest to Finn.

“How long? How long?” chimed in the twins—Elenora and Lionora.

“I’m here to stay for good this time,” said Finn.

A chorus of “Yay!” and hand-clapping rose around him.

“Will you play dress-up with me and my dollies?” Adelaide tugged at Finn’s tunic.

“Uh... sure,” he said, looking embarrassed.

“And tea! Tea parties!”

“Inside, ladies, inside!” cried King Veleda. “Run ahead and see the servants prepare to accommodate Kyen as our guest.”

Finn stood at the door as his family mounted the steps. He allowed his father to pass in first then waited patiently as his many sisters streamed in behind. He started to walk after them but stopped. He looked back.

The lawns and roadway stood empty in the twilight.

Finn growled in frustration. “Argh! I’ll be right there, dad!” He called through the doorway then dashed off down the path.

Ahead, the gatehouse guards were already lowering the outer portcullis for the evening. The clang of steel on stone rang out as Finn sprinted across the bailey and over the drawbridge. He pushed past a surprised guard, bounding up the steps to the rampart of the outer wall. On the wall top, Finn leaned out between the merlons—the stone teeth—that rimmed the top of the outer wall.

“I hate it when he does this.” He scanned the empty city square below.

Beyond the square, down the main highway Kyen stood like a miniature warrior on a distant street corner.

Cupping his hands to his mouth, Finn yelled, “KYEN!”

Kyen turned and waved back.

Finn swung his arm over his head in response as Kyen, in the next moment, disappeared around the corner.

Slumping against the merlon, he huffed a sigh and dangled his arms out over the wall.

“Ow!” He flinched.

A tiny black dart protruded from his forearm.

Frowning, he plucked it out of his skin and held it up to the failing light.

As he did, all expression drained out of his face. His auburn eyes grew cold. Clenching the dart in his hand, he turned to descend the steps.

On the far-away road, Kyen walked with the cloth bundle unwrapped in his hand. In it nestled the black dart taken from the griffin. He looked at it long and hard with a grim set to his stormy eyes.

Chapter 3

Kyen stared, brows pinched together, at the sign above the smithy. Built of river rock and reed shingles, the blacksmith's lean-to shaded forge, anvil, and hammering smith. The clang-clang clank of hammer on steel rang through the rural village.

"Can I help you?" The blacksmith paused his hammering to eye the hot wedge of metal in his tongs. He dunked it into a bucket, and a hiss of steam burst up.

"You've been standing there nearly half an arcquarter," he said. "Is your head on straight, son?"

Kyen blinked. "Hm...? Oh! I'm sorry. I mean—"

"Can I help you?"

"Yes, I—" He stepped under the lean-to. "I'm looking for a friend. Ewin. I could have sworn this was his smithy."

"Aye. Ewin's the person as sold it to me before last harvest."

"He left? Did he say where?"

The blacksmith shrugged. "Word has he's set up near the river. What customers he meets out there, I'll not know. Seems as nobody can quite find him."

"Thank you."

The blacksmith stoked his coals in response so Kyen ducked out to the street. He rubbed his forehead with the heel of his hand and sighed. A handful of houses, all of river rock and reeds, flanked the road. An inn lifted a second story above the other roofs, but Kyen passed it by. He walked the road that led out of the village and into the grasslands. The clang of the smithy faded, replaced by the prairie music of songflies, prattling beetles, and lowleaf warblers. In the distance, the river ran like a glittering ribbon underneath the afternoon Arc.

Kyen heeded none of it. As he walked, he searched the roadside. He ruffled through the grasses, peered under bushy pasture flowers, and scrutinized the dust. A pair of horsemen eyed him and crossed to the opposite side of the road to trot past.

Kyen, sweeping apart a stand of grass taller than himself, discovered a footpath. His eyes traveled down its length, half-hidden in thick prairie.

"Ah, I knew it," he whispered.

He stepped off the road to follow it and within moments was swallowed up by the high grasses.

The path wove back and forth with the low of the land, skirting the rises and running in the dips. The Arc sank towards evening as he walked. The murmur of the river unseen joined the beetles and birds. Stands of river reed, their tops a dark ridge against the orange sky, came into view over the grasses ahead.

A few more steps and the prairie yielded to a sandy hollow backed by the reeds. A massive, river-rock chimney stood in the center with a house and lean-to on either side, cobbled together with reed-mats and propped up with boards and hay bales.

Kyen walked up, looking around at the smithy. Rods, ore chunks, pinchers, chisels, and hammers of a hundred sizes lay strewn over the workbenches and the ground. He bent to pick up an abandoned glove at his feet.

“Ewin?”

The prattling beetles crackled at each other in the grasses.

A cow lowed in the distance.

Kyen hung the glove on a nearby peg and walked to the chimney. In its hearth, dusty gray coals lifted a thin strand of smoke. He held his fingers over it for a moment before withdrawing his hand.

“He never lets the forge go out.” Kyen looked around, perplexed. Hurrying around the lean-to, he pushed open the door to the house and stopped. Inside a cot lay flipped, a fallen bucket splayed ore chunks across the floor, and a workbench stood knocked askew.

Kyen frowned as his eyes swept the mess. He left the doorway to begin searching the ground pacing back and forth, sometimes bent double to look at the dirt. His search widened and widened until, coming to the edge of the river reeds, he stopped.

A reed hung broken.

Scuff marks marred the sandy soil where the clearing met the grove, but then footprints emerged. Three sets, two barefoot. They led towards the murmur of the river.

Kyen bound into the reeds. The thicket became higher and denser as he pressed into it until the reeds rose twice his height and thick as trees. He moved like a shadow flitting between them, keeping a hand on his sword hilt. An undergrowth of waterweeds arose, revealing the trail that’d been smashed through their midst and led over increasingly sandy ground. Night fell fast in the thicket, and as darkness closed in, it slowed Kyen down. The rush of the unseen river filled the cool air.

A light glimmered out of the night from the depth of the reeds, and Kyen’s eye caught it. He snuck through the copse and parted the waterweeds to gain a clear view.

An ancient weeping willow sheltered a cove in the river, its trailing leaves curtaining the mast of a boat. Barge-shaped with a stubby sail-mast, the boat squatted low in the water. Its front half lay beached in the sand. The glimmer was shining from a lantern hung beside a gangplank. Under its light stood a broad-shoulder, burly man with his arms crossed, with a red bandanna tied around his bald head and a bronze, leaf-bladed sword at his hip. Another like him but with hair guarded the door to the boat’s only cabin.

Kyen frowned. Ducking into the weeds, he snuck away behind the ship. Portholes glowed yellow above his head as he reached the hull. He eyed them for a moment. Then, hurrying to the willow’s trunk, he hauled himself up into its branches until he came level with the porthole. He leaned out to look inside.

In the cabin, three more pirates sat at a table. Their hands lay limp beside their forks, knives,

and tankards. They stared with empty eyes and blank faces at their full plates. Across from them, a scraggly man hunched on the floor by the wall. He wore an over-sized leather apron, a crooked cap, and soot dusted every inch of him. A dirty sling wrapped one arm against his side, and a rope bound his other to his ankles.

Kyen edged towards the end of the branch. It bowed under his weight, but he kept hold of the dangling leaves above for balance and, leaning out further, grabbed the rim of the porthole. He took out his dagger, slid the blade underneath the edge and shimmied the latch up. He pulled the glass open and peered at the pirates, but none of them moved.

“Ewin!” He whispered to the scraggly man.

His head snapped up. Ewin stared at Kyen for a long moment, then his sooty brows drew down.

“You!” His whisper came out as an angry hiss. “This is all your fault! I knew it!”

“What?” Kyen blinked.

“Things like this happen every time you show up, Kyen of Avanna!”

“But I don’t even know what’s going on.”

“These pirates are trying to threaten me into making black weapons.” Ewin shot them a glance; they hadn’t moved. “Some sort of dart, it looks like and—”

“That’s what I came here to ask you about—”

“You always bring trouble! Always!” Ewin cut in. “It used to follow behind you, Kyen of Avanna, but now it goes before you!”

“Ewin. I need you to look at something. I think it’s a—”

“Get me out of here, ash-for-brains!” Ewin growled through clenched teeth.

“Oh right, right. How many are there?” Kyen eyed the pirates still sitting at the table. “Three?”

Ewin shot them a glance then scooped closer to the porthole. “Three. One on deck and—”

“The one at the gangplank.”

“There could be more. I don’t know.”

“Five on one. That’s not very good odds.” Kyen looked pensive as he withdrew. He was about to crouch and jump down when Ewin’s voice floated from the porthole.

“Wait! Give me your dagger!”

“Oh, right. Here.” Kyen turned back and dropped the dagger into Ewin’s lap. He swung down from the branch, and let himself drop to the sand with a soft thump.

“Kyen! Kyen!” Ewin face appeared at the porthole.

He looked up.

“Don’t do anything—” Ewin hesitated. “Anything stupid. A dark power is at work here.”

“I won’t.” Kyen smiled a little.

The blacksmith looked incredulous for a moment before his face disappeared back inside.

Rising, Kyen jogged around to the front of the ship and slowed as he reached the curve in the hull. When he leaned around it, he saw the pirate still on guard at the gangplank. Not a foot had shifted nor an arm twitched out of place. The pirate could have been a human statue but for the steady rise and fall of his chest.

Kyen slipped his sword free of its sheath. Padding softly through the sand and keeping to the

shadow of the hull, he crept up on the pirate. The moment he left the shadows, the pirate's face turned, and he drew his sword. Kyen lunged in like a blur as the pirate prepared to slash.

Two loud clangs rang out as one. Kyen deflected the slash to the side and flicked out a following blow that knocked the sword from the pirate's grip. Before he could regain his balance, Kyen smacked his hilt into his face.

The pirate dropped to the sand.

Kyen stepped back at the ready, but the pirate lay stunned. He lowered his sword. As he looked down the sprawled man, his eyes narrowed.

A black welt stood out on the pirate's neck.

Kyen turned and hurried up the gangplank at a crouch, slowing to peer on deck.

Another pirate, unmoved by the sounds of battle, guarded the cabin doorway. Neither did he respond to the thunk of Kyen's boots as he stepped onto the boat. A black welt had swollen his wrist in the lamplight.

Lifting his sword, Kyen edged towards the pirate.

The man stared into space, his face blank.

Kyen frowned, hefting his sword as he moved in.

At the glint of the blade, the pirate finally moved and drew his sword, but Kyen struck first. He lunged in, the pirate moved to block, but Kyen pulled a feint; his sword slashed wide only to whip back in underneath the pirate's defenses. It caught him in his sword's cross guard and ripped the weapon from his hand. The pirate stumbled sideways from the force of the blow. Kyen grabbed him and slung him over the side of the ship. His body hit the water with a splash.

Walking up to the door, Kyen threw it open with a bang.

The three pirates at the table looked up simultaneously. They rose as one. Ewin paled and stared as they approached Kyen. With a start, he fumbled with the dagger and sawed at his bonds.

Kyen backed away from the door as the pirates drew their swords on him. He trained his sword-point on the first, the lantern light glinting off the edge of his blade. As he stepped over the threshold, Kyen lashed out, low and hard, striking the pirate's ankle out from under him. He fell forward into the deck.

Stepping up, Kyen stabbed at the second pirate, but he jerked back, stumbling up against the one behind him.

The floored pirate started to get up between them.

Kyen aimed a kick at him, but he caught his foot, gave it a nasty yank, and Kyen went down. His head smacked against the deck as he fell over backwards. He rolled away, scrabbled for a moment as if about to get up but collapsed back, holding his head. He fell limp to the deck.

The two pirates came out of the cabin to join the first. Together they approached Kyen's prone form.

"Kyen!" Ewin, shedding his bonds, ran out of the cabin. He jumped onto the first pirate's back, grabbed him around the neck in a headlock, and tried to get his dagger to his throat.

The pirate shrugged this way and that.

Ewin clung on until the pirate's two companions seized him from behind and wrenched him off. One kept a firm grip on his dagger hand as Ewin squirmed. Twisting, he bit the arm that had seized him, but the pirate didn't let go, even as Ewin ground his teeth in.

The first pirate stopped over Kyen, gripping his sword.

Kyen stirred. Slowly, with head hung, he rose to his feet and straightened. He wobbled backwards a few steps and stood there, his sword dangling from his limp arm.

“Kyen! Look out!” shouted Ewin.

The pirate raised his sword to strike.

When Kyen opened his eyes, the sight made Ewin go pale, and all the pirates hesitated. His eyes had changed to a brilliant gold. His gaze lifted to regard the pirate holding the blade over his head.

The two holding Ewin dropped him and moved to surround Kyen.

The first slashed down, but Kyen flicked it aside with his sword and ran him through the belly. As he shoved his body off the blade, the second and third came at him from both sides.

Kyen swung his bare palm out against the blades.

The ship’s timbers shuddered as a flash of light sent the pirates stumbling backwards. Green corrosion bloomed over their blades. They dropped their swords with a start, and when the metal hit the deck, the blades burst into dust.

Kyen lunged between them. In a single fluid movement, he took the head off one and whirled to stab the other up under the ribcage. The bloody sword point punched out of the pirate’s back only to vanish as he let the him drop. His blade slipped free as the body collapsed.

Rising to a crouch, Ewin stared at Kyen.

With his sword-arm falling limp to his side again, Kyen lifted his face to Ewin. The fierce, golden-eyed gaze pinned him in place.

Without warning, the golden color flickered out. Kyen’s gray eyes returned only to roll up into his head. He crumpled to the ship’s deck, his sword clattering out of his hand.

Chapter 4

Kyen lay unconscious on Ewin's cot. The workbench stood back in place, and Ewin crawled about on his knees, collecting fallen ore and throwing them into a bucket. Each one hit the bottom with a tinny clank.

Groaning, Kyen opened his eyes. He tried to sit up but, putting a hand to his head, laid back on the pillow with a grimace.

"Ow... What happened?"

"You're an obtuse blockhead, Kyen of Avanna. That's what happened," said Ewin. "By the Arc heights, I don't know why I didn't just leave you on that deck." He threw the last ore into the bucket with a clang that made Kyen wince.

"I'm sorry," he said.

"Keep your apologies," Ewin snapped. "I've smelting to finish, and I'm not sharing my cot tonight. Clear out before you bring down more trouble."

Kyen began to sit up again. He swung his feet over the bed where his boots waited below and pulled them on with sluggish hands. Then he sat, staring at the wall with a faraway look in his eyes.

Ewin stood, glaring. He slammed his bucket on the table, marched over, and slapped Kyen upside the head.

"I told you to leave!"

Kyen gripped his head in his hands and whimpered. "Ow..."

Ewin's expression softened, but he whirled away to his work table before Kyen could see. "You said you needed me to look at something? If it's a fuzzy animal or another cheap trinket, I'm going to finish bashing your head in."

Blinking back tears of pain, Kyen lifted his face. He dug into his pocket, pulled out a wad of cloth, and unwrapped it.

"Is this what I think it is?" He held up the black dart.

Ewin shot the dart a brief glance only to give it a double-take. Pushing aside the bucket, he strode over to frown into Kyen's hand.

"Where did you get that?"

"It's a black weapon, isn't it," said Kyen.

“Tell me something I don’t know.” Ewin snatched up the dart and eyed it. He wandered to his work table, pushed his cap out of his eyes, and took out a large magnifying glass on a stand. He examined the dart under the lens.

“This isn’t from the vaults,” he said under his breath as he tweaked the knobs of the glass.

“Really? But—”

“I inventoried the Vaults of Varkest, Kyen. I know every black weapon locked away there,” said Ewin. “This is not one of them.”

“Then someone in Ellunon is making black weapons again.” Kyen sighed.

Ewin’s face fell grim. Shaking his head, he leaned against the table, propping himself up on his good arm.

“We swore the strictest oaths,” he said to the tabletop. “After the Black War, all the Guilds of Denmont swore it! We burned our books. We dismissed our apprentices. We took what we could not forget to die in exile with us.” He looked over to meet Kyen’s eyes. “You fought in the Black War. You remember, don’t you?”

Kyen held his gaze, saying nothing

“Whoever is making them, stop them,” said Ewin. “What you saw in the Black War, what these weapons can do to their victims, that’s the least of your troubles.” He touched his arm, bandaged uselessly to his side.

“What do you mean?”

“Every black weapon has its own mind, Kyen.” Ewin shook his head again. “A type of sentience. Faint. Unnoticeable. But it seeks entrance and influence over its wielder constantly. It can turn the flow of their thoughts, cultivating, suppressing, until the wielder becomes the wielded. Left under the influence of a black weapon long enough, and a man will become consumed.” He held Kyen’s gaze for a moment. “Whether it’s a child toying around or a remnant of Varkest still plotting. Stop them. Stop them before they fall in the black weapon’s grip. Because whoever is wielding it will not be his own master for long.”

Ewin held the black dart out to him, but Kyen hesitated to take it back.

“You can hold onto this given your . . . benefits,” said Ewin. “But don’t let anyone else handle much.”

Kyen took the dart, re-wrapped it, and put it back into his pocket. When he looked up, he smiled. “Thank you for your help, Ewin. You are a good friend.”

“And you, a wretched one.” He glowered back. “Become a good friend by leaving before your problems swoop down on us both. I have to move again because of you.”

“I’m sorry,” said Kyen, his smile fading. “I’ll go now.” Getting to his feet, he made his way to the door while using a hand on the wall to steady himself.

“Kyen.”

At the sound of Ewin’s voice, he stopped on the threshold and looked back.

“If anyone is struck by that black dart, whatever effect it may have, it will be irreversible,” he said. “Have a care with it.”

“I will,” Kyen replied. “It’s probably a child playing around without realizing it.”

“That’s not comforting.”

“Goodbye, Ewin.”

“Good riddance.” A look of concern rose on Ewin’s face as he watched Kyen tread out the open door and down the footpath. As the prairie grasses began to swallow the swordsman up, Ewin turned away, muttering under his breath: “Arc’s mercy on us. All of us.”

* * *

The Arc blazed down from high noon as Kyen stepped out from footpath and onto the highway. He started down it, paying no heed to the horseman galloping up, until he reined to a hard stop next to him.

“Kyen of Avanna?” asked the horseman, breathless. He bore the Valeda coat of arms on his surcoat.

“Yes?”

“A message for you, sir.” The horseman handed Kyen a folded paper sealed with wax. The stamped insignia bore a rearing griffin.

Popping off the seal, Kyen unfolded the letter. He smiled at the unwieldy scrawl that filled the page. He skipped to the bottom of the sheet where the letter had been signed: Prinsezz Adelaide of Valeda

Chuckling to himself, he narrowed in on the rest of the letter. His smile faded as he read.

Deer Sir Kyen of Avanna,

Plees cum back to Valeda Castle. Sumthing iz wrong with Finn. He iz grumpee all the tiem. Finn and daddy fiet all the tiem. Finn duzzant talk too me. He duzzant play with me aneemor. I’m afrayd. Pleese cum back and help uz.

Thank u.

Prinsezz Adelaide of Valeda.

Chapter 5

The iron-gridded portcullis barred Kyen's way into Castle Velea. Two guards stood at attention inside the gate tunnel, eyeing him as he walked up.

"Kyen of Avanna here to see the king," he told them.

One guard turned his head to say, "Raise the gate!" and it began to ascend, the bars rising past their grave faces.

"So glad you've come, sir," said the guard. "I'm supposing you've heard?"

"Heard what?"

"An assassination attempt has been made on the king."

"What? How?" Kyen ducked under the still-rising portcullis.

At a wave from the other guard, the gate began to lower again.

"Finn, sir," the first continued. "He attempted to murder the king. There's a great tumult in the castle about it. Finn's been—"

Kyen left before the guard could finish his sentence. He trotted across the bailey and shoved open one of the double doors into the castle keep. Without waiting for a footman, he mounted the nearest staircase and bound up the flights, taking the steps three at a time. He drew stares from a couple maidservants as he passed. The staircase ended at the solar, the royal family's private sitting room, where doors to their bedchambers lined the walls. Finn's younger sisters sat in high-backed chairs, gazed idly out the windows, or wept together in the corner.

At the sound of Kyen's footsteps, all the redheads turned to him. They stared at him for a moment, wide-eyed and open-mouthed.

"Kyen?"

"It's Kyen!"

Tears glimmered in Clarissa's eyes as she rose from her chair.

"Oh, it's terrible!" The girl threw herself on Kyen and sobbed into his tunic. One after another, the other sisters gathered around him until a chorus of sobbing and wailing echoed around the room.

Kyen, looking grieved, patted at the various heights of heads and shoulders. Only Adelaide, the littlest sister, stood at a distance gazing forlornly at the group. Once the crying spent itself out, Kyen gently pushed them away and looked into their tear-stained, puffy-eyed faces.

“What’s happened?”

“Oh, it’s terrible!” Clarissa said again. “Daddy and Finn got into an argument. Finn—Finn—” She burst out in a fresh wave of sobs.

Taking her by the hand, Kyen helped the girl back to her seat. She took out a handkerchief and buried her face in it.

Elenora and Lionora, the eldest set of twins, looked up at Kyen with identical, red-eyed expressions. The group of sniffling girls clung to one another behind them.

“How is King Veleda?” he asked.

“Come and see.” Elenora and Lionora led him to one of the side doors and knocked. The castle apothecary admitted them into the bedchamber beyond. King Veleda lay unconscious, groaning and shifting with fever. His face looked pale beneath his wiry, red beard, and broad bandages swathed his chest. Returning to his side, the apothecary dabbed at his brow with a damp cloth. The girls gathered into the room behind Kyen when he entered.

“How bad?” he asked.

“He’s still in danger until the fever breaks,” replied the apothecary.

Fresh tears rose to Elenora and Lionora’s eyes.

Lionora sniffed.

Kyen shook his head, gazing on the wounded king.

“What happened?” he said. “I can’t imagine Finn ever arguing with his father, much less acting out of violence. What happened?” He looked to the twins.

They both shook their heads, too.

“Finn seemed sad when he returned,” said Lionora.

“And moody.”

“But he’s always had his moods.”

Kyen watched King Veleda muttered incoherently under his breath. The apothecary laid the cloth over the his brow.

“Where is Finn?” Kyen looked to the twins.

“He’s—” Eleanor swallowed hard, tears threatening.

“He’s being held in one of the storerooms.” Lionora finished for her.

“May I see him?”

They both nodded.

* * *

In the basement of the keep, a guard stood posted before a solid oak door. He came to attention as Clarissa, Elenora, and Lionora brought Kyen to him. At a word from the eldest, the guard unlocked the door and opened it.

Kyen stepped inside. The guard shut him in, and the turn of the key clicked behind him.

A lantern hung from the ceiling and lit the crates and boxes pushed to the back of the room. Under its dim light, Finn paced. He strode to one wall, turned, strode to the other, turned. Fury clouded his features. His fists clenched and unclenched at his sides. A black welt stood out on his forearm—the first thing to catch Kyen’s eye. Finn lifted his head at the sound of the door, cast him a single dark glance, and kept pacing.

“Finn?” Kyen took a cautious step forward.

Finn brushed past him.

“What happened Finn?”

Not answering he met the wall, turned.

“What’s wrong with you?” asked Kyen.

“Nothing.” Finn crossed the room.

“I don’t believe that.”

He reached the opposite wall, turned.

“Finn?”

“Go away.”

“Not until we talk,” said Kyen.

His boots clunked against the floorboards as he strode back again, and his fists clenched tight.

“Finn.”

With a yell of rage, he lunged at Kyen, swinging a fist at his head. It breezed past Kyen’s face as he sidestepped, and Finn collided with the door.

The slithering zing of metal sounded as Kyen drew his sword.

“Don’t fight me.” He pointed it at him.

Finn spat on the ground.

Kyen’s frown deepened.

The lock rattled, and the guard put his head inside.

“Everything alright?” He eyed the drawn blade.

Finn returned to pacing.

“I’m finished.” Kyen returned the sword to its sheath with a clank.

Clarissa, Elenora, and Lionora looked up as Kyen stepped out, the guard re-locking the door behind him. Clarissa was biting her lip while the twins clutched each other’s arms for support.

“See?” said Elenora.

“He won’t speak to anyone,” said Lionora.

“What do we do?” Clarissa’s voice broke over the question.

Kyen stood for a long moment gazing at the door.

The three young princesses watched him, waiting.

“I need to speak with Adelaide,” he said at last.

Eyebrows rose.

“Adelaide?”

“Yes.” He walked past them and mounted the steps back to the solar.

* * *

Adelaide sat at the bay window apart from the rest of her sisters. When Kyen approached, Clarissa, Elenora, and Lionora crowded behind him. He looked back, shifted uncomfortably for a moment, before saying, “If...If you would?”

The twins exchanged perplexed looks, but Clarissa’s mouth rounded in a silent “Oh.” She

walked to the table, waving the two other girls along, before taking up her sewing. Elenora and Lionora followed, and the three sat together, stealing glances at them over their embroidery.

Kyen seated himself next to Adelaide.

The girl clutched her doll and gazed up with doleful eyes.

“I received your message, Princess Adelaide,” he said.

She nodded.

“Can you tell me what happened?”

“Something’s wrong with big brother.” Adelaide lowered her eyes. “He won’t play with me anymore. He hurt daddy.”

“When did he stop playing with you?” asked Kyen.

“He promised he’d play dress-up with me and my dollies, and he always keeps his promises, but now he just says go away when I ask him.” Tears bubbled up in the girl’s eyes. She gave a great big sniff. “I think big brother got stung.”

“Stung?”

“He’s got a big, black sting.” Adelaide pushed up her sleeve and rubbed her arm. “Right here.”

“Adelaide, which one is Finn’s room? Can I see it?”

She nodded. Hopping off the cushions, she took two of Kyen’s fingers in her whole hand and pulled him forward. Kyen stooped as he crossed the solar with her. Clarissa, Elenora, and Lionora stared, needles forgotten.

Adelaide opened the door next to the king’s room and led Kyen inside.

The bed, the desk, the longsword mounted on the wall, the cloak on the door peg: everything stood in high order as Kyen’s gaze swept the bedroom.

“Let me look around.” Slipping his hand free, he went to check out the window, to survey the view of the grounds. He opened the desk drawer—a neat stack of parchment, an ink bottle, quills—and closed it again.

Kyen turned to leave, but when the bedside table caught his eye, he paused. It was bare except for a candle-holder and beside its base a black dart.

He picked it up. Taking the cloth bundle from his pocket, he unwrapped it. In its folds lay the other dart—the dart from the griffin—a twin of the one in Kyen’s hand.

* * *